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## Editorial 2/2022

*Essi Varis, Hanna-Riikka Roine, Michael Godhe,  
Elizabeth Oakes & Dennis Wilson Wise*

Esteemed readers and colleagues,

Welcome to this double-thick, extra-diverse edition of *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*! Although we must apologise for releasing this second issue of 2022 on the wrong side of New Year, we hope you will find it the most colourful reading package our Nordic dragon has carried to the halls of Academia to date.

The long and varied table of contents has partly resulted from the upheaval taking place backstage. In the past twelve months, the majority of our current editorial staff has either been going out the door or settling in. We badly needed more hands on deck, so we borrowed some from *Fafnir*'s international circle of friends. With their expert help, we have put together not just one, but two exciting theme sections: “The Speculation Tool Kit”, co-edited with *Fafnir*'s former editor-in-chief Hanna-Riikka Roine from Tampere University, and “Specfic 2021: Time and History”, produced in collaboration with Michael Godhe from Linköping University.

“The Speculation Tool Kit” opens with author-researcher Malka Older's thought-provoking prefatory “Predictive Fictions and Speculative Futures”. It is based on the keynote speech she gave last summer, as the academic Guest of Honour in Finncon, one of the largest science fiction conventions in Europe. Older discusses science-fictional narratives from the perspective of future and uncertainty, suggesting that while uncertainty can be frightening, it also fosters hope. Finncon 2022's other Guests of Honour, authors Magdalena Hai and Marko Hautala, take the floor in the Finnish interview feature written by Essi Varis. As the title suggests, “Kuinka kirjailija spekuloi?” (“How an author speculates?”) collates Hai's, Hautala's, as well as Anne Leinonen's and Emmi Itäranta's reflections on the professional imagining they conduct as authors of speculative fiction. Itäranta's latest novel is also the focus of Elise Kraatila's

article “World-Building as Grand-Scale Speculation: Planetary, Cosmic and Conceptual Thought Experiments in Emmi Itäranta’s *Moonday Letters*”. Kraatila argues that novels modelling imaginary worlds can function as vehicles for grand-scale thought experiments, ranging from explorations of global ethics to conceptual reflections on speculative world-building itself.

It is only fitting to close the tool kit with an even more novel approach to speculation: in the very first research comic ever published by *Fafnir*, Essi Varis muses on the metaphorical guises of speculation and imagination. The accompanying metatext, “The Skeleton is Already Inside You: A Metaphoric Comic on Speculation”, explains why mindful use of drawn images, metaphors, and speculation could open new prospects for creative, innovative research.

The second theme section, “Specific 2021: Time and History”, collects expanded versions of some of the best papers delivered in the conference of the same name, which was organised by The Swedish Network for Speculative Fiction in Karlstad, on December 1–3, 2021. The purpose of the conference was to explore the role of temporalisation and history in a range of speculative narratives, and Michael Godhe’s prefatory acts as an introduction to the theme. Godhe links the speculative temporalities of SFF particularly to the genre’s utopian and dystopian tendencies – topics that are also reflected in the featured articles.

Anna Bark Persson explores the queer temporalities and power dynamics of gritty fantasy, or grimdark, in her article “Notes Towards Gritty Fantasy Medievalism, Temporality, and Worldbuilding”. By analysing Joe Abercrombie’s First Law novels (2006–2021) and Seth Dickinson’s *The Masquerade* (2016–) in particular, Persson demonstrates that seemingly medievalist fantasy can also connect to contemporary and future discussions on social issues. Similarly, the Chinese SF stories discussed by Erik Mo Welin may be looking to the past – but in a way that widens the reader’s perspective on present and future. His article “Time travel, Alternate History, and Chronopolitics in the ‘The New Wave’ of Chinese Science Fiction” demonstrates how time travel stories “Watching the Boat at the South Lake Together” by Baoshu (2011) and “Shanghai 1938 – a Memory” by Han Song (2017) challenge the teleological temporality imposed by the official discourses of the Chinese government.

The tension between collective and individual temporal experiences is also the focus of Sarah Lohmann’s article, “‘Wheels turning in opposite directions’: the Utopian Dynamics of Individual and Collective Temporality in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* and Sheri S. Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country*”. As the title summarises, Lohmann compares Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974) to the quasi-utopian, post-apocalyptic feminist novel, *The Gate to Women’s Country* (1988), and concludes that utopian scenarios are only sustainable if they are based on ongoing, self-correcting change and an inclusive perspective that takes into account the rights and needs of the entire more-than-human sphere.

Finally, in the article titled “Human–Other Entanglements in Speculative Future Arctics”, Maria Lindgren Leavenworth and Van Leavenworth discuss three novels that speculate on the effects climate change may have on the Arctic: *The Ice* by Laline Paull (2017), *Blackfish City* by Sam J. Miller (2018), and *Always North* by Vicki Jarrett (2019). The analysis demonstrates how the settings and temporal structures of speculative climate fiction, as well as the ever-popular figure of the polar bear, affect our understanding of the thaw threatening the Far North.

Although not an offshoot of the Karlstad conference, Martijn J. Loos's article "The Story of Intrusion: Time, Life/Death, and Representation in Ted Chiang's 'Story of Your Life' and Jean-Luc Nancy's *L'Intrus*" is also invested in speculative time. Loos argues that the simultaneous alien temporality depicted in Chiang's SF story brings a more life-affirming tone to Nancy's observations about intrusion and death. Thus, this cross-reading of speculative fiction and speculative philosophy also acts as an unexpected post scriptum to "The Speculation Tool Kit". Lisa Fletcher and Caylee Tierney, likewise, engage in a transtemporal comparative analysis in their article, "The Ancient Roots of Children's Fantasy Fiction: From *The Odyssey* to *Artemis Fowl* and *The Laws of Magic*". It lists the many parallels between the coming-of-age journeys of criminal mastermind Artemis Fowl, the magically talented Aubrey Fitzwilliam, and Odysseus, the original trickster hero.

For those who cannot spare the time to read a full-length article, the tail end of the issue offers tasty, topical tidbits. John Kendall Hawkins interviews Professor Emeritus Robert Crossley, who has published extensively on SF over his 40-year career. Markus Laukkanen reports on Finncon 2022's Academic Track, and Amy Bouwer on The London Science Fiction Research Community's annual conference. Lastly, this massive *Fafnir* tapers off with ten timely book reviews reflecting the diverse, rebellious, and posthumanist slants of contemporary speculative fiction. Brent Ryan Bellamy, Reba K. Dickinson, and Steven Mollmann contribute to the first theme by reviewing the new monographs by Joy Sanchez-Taylor, Isiah Lavender III, and Sami Ahmad Khan, which discuss SF authors of colour, Afrofuturism, and Indian SF respectively. Joel Evans and John MacLoughlin dig into the rebellious sides of SF by reviewing Annika Gonnermann's monograph on 21<sup>st</sup>-century dystopian fiction and Mike Ashley's study on SF magazines. The more-than-human potentials of SF are explored, in turn, by the anthology *Images of the Anthropocene in Speculative Fiction: Narrating the Future* (edited by Dědinová et al.) as well as by Tom Idema's book on SF, biology, and environmental posthumanism, reviewed for us by Paul Williams and Shelby Brewster. In addition, C. W. Sullivan III reviews Kathryn Hume's latest book, *The Metamorphoses of Myth in Fiction since 1960*, Daniel A. Rabuzzi joins Peter Grybauskas on his exploration of the "Edges of Tolkien's Literary Canvas", and Adam McLain discusses Brent Ryan Bellamy's diagnoses of post-apocalyptic depictions of the USA. A few of our Swedish friends also make a reappearance in Michael Godhe's review of *Annorstädes*, a Swedish essay collection on SFF research edited by Anna Bark Persson.

If speculative fiction research is, indeed, gaining more ground in Sweden, as Godhe hopes, perhaps we can look forward to collaborating with more of our Scandinavian colleagues in the future. That gives us another hopeful scenario to speculate on, as we enter into the New Year. Yet, as ever, *Fafnir* is happy to open its wings and its pages to all SFF enthusiasts across the planet. We wish you many happy returns for 2023, and encourage prospective contributors to get in touch before Midsummer, when our current Call for Papers closes!

Essi Varis and Elizabeth Oakes, Editors-in-Chief  
 Hanna-Riikka Roine and Michael Godhe, Guest Editors  
 Dennis Wilson Wise, Reviews Editor  
*Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*



## Predictive Fictions and Speculative Futures

*Malka Older*

The future is all around us. We are constantly planning for it, making decisions based on our ideas of what it will look like, borrowing its imagined aesthetic. Often the future is so integrated into the mundanity of our lives that we forget we're dealing with the future at all: planting, ordering deliveries, putting aside savings, going to the gym, paying a mortgage. These implications of known future start to accumulate a sheen of certainty, even when we *know* they're not necessarily true.

Take meteorology. It is an inexact science, and we all know that; we joke about the weather report being wrong. But it's still treated like non-fiction: the weather forecast often appears on the news, and not just as percentages, but with statements like "Tomorrow will be sunny!" or "Bring your umbrella!" A little sociology, like the excellent article "Ground Truth" by Gary Alan Fine<sup>1</sup>, shows just how fragile the scientific veneer is. Inexact measurements for one location are treated as precise data for an entire city; percentages are cannily used to reduce errors that can be tracked.

This sort of quantitative uncertainty masked as certainty is repeated throughout our society: economic forecasts, profit projections, election and policy polling, cost-benefit analyses for new construction projects, safety analyses. These predictions are reported with the news or presented as practically fact. We may, as savvy media consumers, take them with a grain of salt, but they are still considered an entirely different category from science fiction. Yet, that's exactly what they are: fictions with a greater or lesser degree of scientific basis.

The cumulative effect of so many futures that are assumed to be unassailably true is often a sense that the future is predictable, that science and

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<sup>1</sup> Fine, Gary Alan. "Ground Truth: Verification Games in Operational Meteorology." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2006, pp. 3–23

probability, big data and math, or ultimately authority and wealth, can tell us with a reasonable degree of certainty what's going to happen, and that we should trust them. It's easy to forget that nobody knows the future.

Most of these types of predictive fictions-masquerading-as-facts are quantitative. They use probabilities or careful data selection or any number of other tricks to make the results look the way we want. All of this works mainly because of our societal delusion that numbers are true.

Numbers are great: I'm particularly fond of minimum and maximum benchmarks, quantitative data visualizations like graphs, and that surprising number that is so much higher or lower than expected. Numbers can be a tool of liberation as easily as they can contribute to oppression or retrench existing power. But numbers, inevitably, are incomplete. Quantitative data, in the sense that it is usually used today, requires simplification and standardization. Estimates — since we have neither the observational nor the computational power to be exact about anything reasonably complex — are used to approximate some impersonal kind of truth or rationality.

In fact, even more so than the reliance on the quantitative, it's the impersonality of these predictions that seems to give them the aura of fact in our socially constructed evaluations. The weather forecast typically includes narrative as well as numbers, but it's always a narrative about an abstract, uniform "you" who prefers umbrellas to getting wet and enjoys going outside in the sunshine. If humans appear at all in these predictions, they appear as stick figures or stock photos, tiny placeholders in a maquette or B-clip videos of people walking through weather. In his book *Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster*<sup>2</sup>, Lee Clarke documents the ridiculous, sense-defying contingency plans composed by dangerous industries — such as oil shipping or nuclear power plants — to justify the investment in such objectively risky enterprises. These are typically narratives, but narratives populated by categories rather than individuals: "City bus drivers will navigate into the fallout zone to evacuate residents"; "Parents will wait for their children at the meeting point".

People are weird and individual. They act in unexpected ways. This happens all the time and has frequently impacted history, from the flopping of products expected to be hits to wars started in a fit of pique or negotiations that concluded successfully because of sudden personal sympathy. People decide to migrate because of love or dreams, make economically irrational decisions because of family or affection for a municipality or affinity for a job or a group of friends. Leaving human idiosyncrasies out is always, *always* going to leave gaps and misapprehensions, sometimes crucial ones, in predictions of the future.

Narrative predictions like science fiction can, if they're done well (and this is an important caveat that I'll come back to), imagine futures that take into account humans as individuals. They may not predict the precise variety of weirdness correctly (although they can and have, sometimes with startling accuracy). But at the very least, such stories can remind us that the future will be weird, that it will be composed of many individuals interacting and, perhaps

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<sup>2</sup> Clarke, Lee. *Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster*. U of Chicago P, 1999.

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most importantly, that its unfolding will *affect* real humans (and other species), not only “consumers”, “residents”, or “the economy.”

Of course, it’s not always done well. Just as science fiction has varying degrees of rigor or understanding of the underlying science, it may be more or less plausible in its depiction of human beings, their actions, and relationships. We’ve all read or watched stories in which characters seem as empty of personality as mannequins, or in which a character is developed only to do something completely uncharacteristic for plot reasons, or in which the characters are only stereotypes. Sometimes this is obvious to anyone with a critical approach to media; other times it’s more subtle, or requires specialized knowledge. There’s a long-running trope of mass panic and violence in disaster movies (and many other disaster stories), even though all of the factual disaster literature as well as my own personal experience working in multiple disasters agrees that this does not happen. Taking fictional narratives seriously as futurist thinking also means we need to find ways to evaluate their rigor across a number of axes, just as we need to scrutinize the methodology of scientific papers.

Another advantage of science-fictional narratives is that, unlike many of the supposedly non-fictional predictions mentioned earlier, they rarely try to present themselves as certain. Science fiction is explicitly fiction, and such an explicit attitude of uncertainty is also important to maintain in our relationship with the future. Too many of the predictions we encounter pretend that the future is certain and, in its vastness and impersonality, *out of our hands*. According to projections, the economy will go up or down, consumers will or will not shop, likely voters are likely to vote, and the housing development will bring a profit for investors. Despite the fact that none of these things will happen without individual actions, the individuals are erased from the prediction as though the result was inevitable.

Uncertainty may be frightening, but it can also be hopeful. Most importantly, it brings agency. Science fiction narratives remind us, in the face of calculated corporate certainty, that the future is ours to make and make again.

*Biography:* Malka Older is a writer, aid worker, and sociologist. Her science fiction political thriller *Infomocracy* was named one of the best books of 2016 by Kirkus, Book Riot, and *Washington Post*. She created the serial *Ninth Step Station* on Realm, and her acclaimed short story collection *And Other Disasters* came out in November 2019. Her novella *The Mimicking of Known Successes*, a murder mystery set on a gas giant planet, will be published in March 2023. She is a Faculty Associate at Arizona State University, where she teaches on humanitarian aid and predictive fictions, and hosts the Science Fiction Sparkle Salon. Her opinions can be found in *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *Foreign Policy*, and *NBC THINK*, among other places.



## Kuinka kirjailija spekuloi?

*Essi Varis*

Kun spekulatiolla aletaan spekuloida, spekuloinnin ammattilaisten on tietysti lyötävä pilviä hipovat päänsä yhteen ja kerättävä aiheesta viimeisin kokemuksellinen tieto. Espoon Aalto-yliopistolla heinäkuussa järjestetty *Finncon 2022* -tapahtuma antoi minulle, mielikuvituksen tutkijalle, täydellisen tilaisuuden jututtaa mielikuvituksen huippuharjoittajia, eli kotimaisia scifi-, fantasia- ja kauhukirjailijoita. Haastateltavien listalle suostuivat jo etukäteen tämän vuoden kunniavieraat Marko Hautala ja Magdalena Hai sekä kotimaisen genrefiktion pitkäaikainen puolestapuhuja Anne Leinonen. Sattumoisin sain hieman lyhyemmän haastatteluun myös Emmi Itärannalta, joka oli conissa kertomassa muun muassa esikoisromaaninsa tuoreesta filmatisoinnista.

Kirjailija Hain haastattelu jouduttiin kiireisten aikataulujen vuoksi toteuttamaan conin jälkeen sähköpostitse, mutta muut keskustelut käytiin kasvotusten ja niistä otettiin haastateltavien suostumuksella ääninauhoite. Haastattelut olivat luonteeltaan teemahaastatteluja, eli kaikki kirjailijat vastasivat jotta-kuinkin samoihin kysymyksiin, mutta olen vaihtanut kysymysten järjestystä ja kysynyt tarkentavia kysymyksiä tilanteen mukaan. Haastateltavat ovat myös antaneet hyväksyntänsä alla julkaistuille koonneille, jotka tähtäävät enemmän keskustelujen sisältöjen kattavaan, johdonmukaiseen esittämiseen ja kontekstualisointiin kuin tarkkaan litterointiin. Olen säilyttänyt haastateltavien sanavalinnat suorissa sitaateissa niin lähellä alkuperäistä kuin mahdollista, kuitenkin luettavuus ja oikeakielisyys huomioiden. Alkuperäiset haastattelumateriaalit ovat tallessa pilvipalvelussa salasanan takana ja luovutettavissa tutkimuskäyttöön pyydettyäessä.

### ”Sen tuntee luissaan”

**Magdalena Hai** (s. 1978) on tutustunut kirjailijanuransa varrella kaikenlaisiin genreihin: vuodesta 2012 alkaen häneltä on ilmestynyt muun muassa fantastisia, karmivia ja steampunk-maailmoihin sijoittuvia novelleja, romaaneja ja

kuvakirjoja niin lapsille, nuorille kuin aikuisillekin. Yksi piirre kuitenkin kulkee punaisena lankana koko tuotannon läpi: täydelliseen arkiseen maailmaan hänen sankarinsa eivät eksy.

Ei ihme: Hai kertoo, että hänellä on ollut lapsesta asti vilkas mielikuvitus. “Spekulatiivinen tarinallistaminen – ylikuonnollisen lisääminen luonnolliseen – on tapa, jolla mieleni hyvin syvällä ja intuitiivisella tavalla toimii. Se on minulle ominainen tapa tulkita maailmaa, ei valinta.” Tämän vuoksi juuri spekulatiivisen fiktion on hänelle mieluisa kattokäsite: sen alle mahtuu jos jonkinlaista “entä jos?” -tuotantoa.

Kapeampia alagenrejä Hai puolestaan kuvaa hyödyllisiksi “työkaluiksi” tai “askelmerkeiksi”, joita kohti kirjoittamalla – tai joita pakenemalla – tarinat jäsentyvät. Samalla genreajat toimivat “lupauksina lukijoille”. Kun kirjoittamisella on yleisö, jolla on tekstistä erilaisia, esimerkiksi lajityyppiin liittyviä odotuksia, kirjailijalle syntyy vastaavasti velvollisuus suitsia luontaista mielikuvitustaan lajityypin mukaiseksi. Tämä on Haille yleensä positiivinen haaste. Hän haluaa ajatella itseään “varmana kertojana” ja “kirjailijana, jonka tekstin kyytiin on turvallista lähteä”, oli genre mikä hyvänsä. Kaiken kaikkiaan taipumus spontaaniin kuvitteluun vaikuttaa kirjoituskokemuksen



Magdalena Hai. Kuva: Juha Törmälä.

myötä jalostuvan hallitummaksi kirjalliseksi mielikuvitukseksi: “Lempileikkini lapsuudessa olivat nimenomaan eläytymis- tai maailmanrakennusleikkejä. Kirjailijuuden myötä kuvittelu on muuttunut voimakkaammin tarinallistamiseksi. Mieli harjaantuu löytämään tarinoiden siemeniä arkisistakin asioista.”

Esimerkiksi tapaamiset toisten ihmisten kanssa, uudet kokemukset ja maisemat ovat mielikuvituksen “ruokaa”. Hai huomasi, että hänen oli vaikea keksiä uusia ideoita koronapandemian aikana, kun elämästä katosivat normaalit virikkeet. “Mielikuvitus vaatii myös tankkaamista, se voi kuivua”, hän toteaa. Menneisyydestä ja muistoista voi “louhia vain tiettyyn pisteeseen asti”. Tässä lienee kuitenkin myös kirjailijakohtaisia eroja: Ray Bradbury (79–81) puolestaan ajatteli, että juuri lapsuuden peloista ja kaipauksista tiivistyy ajan mittaan

voimakkaimmat kuvat ja vetoavimmat fantasiat – valmiiksi kypsänyt “voikkukaviini”.

Arkielämän lisäksi Hai kertoo joskus etsivänsä innoitusta tarinoihinsa tutkimuksesta ja tiedekirjallisuudesta, mikä vaikuttaisikin olevan yleinen strategia juuri generajoja rikkoville spekulatiivisen fiktion kirjoittajille niin Suomessa kuin muuallakin (ks. esim. Mankkinen; Pullman 98, 145, 211). Toinen tärkeä apuväline mielikuvituksen suuntaamiseen on musiikki: Hai luo jokaiselle työstämälleen kirjalle oman soittolistan, koska se auttaa pitämään mielessä rönsyilevät tarinamaailmat erillään toisistaan. “Kun yhden romaanin soittolista on modernia pop-musiikkia ja toisen raskasta konemetallia, tunnelmien sekoittumisesta ei ole vaaraa.”

Hai kirjoittaa muutenkin herkällä korvalla: myös kielen soljuvuus ja sanojen äänneasu ovat hänelle tärkeitä. “En tiedä, vaikuttaako tässä se, että kirjoitan paljon lapsille. Erityisesti pienten lasten tarinoidenhan pitää olla miellyttäviä myös ääneen luettuina”, kirjailija pohtii. “En kuitenkaan aina pyri kielen kauneuteen, vaan esimerkiksi “Gigi ja Henry” -sarjan ihmissudet halusin kuvata sekasikiöinä ja ylikuonnellisina petoina. Mongertava, muriseva puhe tapa tukee osaltaan niiden lajikuvausta.”

Toisaalta Hai kokee kuvittelunsa ja kerrontansa olevan hyvin visuaalista, ja hän käyttää apunaan myös piirtämistä. Prosessi vertautuu “meditaatioon”: “Piirtäessäni olen kirjan maailmassa, mutta en aktiivisesti mieltä sen kirjoittamista. Tällöin mielen on mahdollista harhailla vapaasti. Tyypillisesti piirränkin hahmoja sellaisessa kirjoittamisen vaiheessa, jossa minulla on ongelmia juonenkuljetuksen kanssa tai minusta tuntuu, että jokin tarinassa kaipaa syventämistä.” Samantapaista strategiaa, jossa piirtämistä tulee kirjoittamisen ja maailmanrakennuksen jatke tai liukaste, käyttää myös Margaret Atwood (16) ja, kuten seuraavasta haastattelusta käy ilmi, Marko Hautala.

Joskus Hain piirrookset päätyvät julkaisuun asti: “Gigi ja Henry” -kirjojen sisäkansiin painetut kartat ovat kirjailijan omasta kynästä. Hän kokee tarinamaailman visuaalisen esittämisen olevan eduksi erityisesti nuorten ja nuorten aikuisten kirjallisuudelle. Siksi “Royaumen aikakirjat” -sarja, jonka toinen osa *Isetin solmu* (2021) voitti vastikään Suomen Tolkien Seura Konnun Kuvastajapalkinnon, on poikkeuksellisesti saanut oheistuotteikseen myös tarra-arkkeja ja T-paidan. Hain mielestä nuorten kirjasarjoista voisi tehdä vastaavia fanituotteita enemmänkin. Se voisi parantaa genren näkyvyyttä, ja houkutella enemmän nuoria lukuharrastuksen pariin. On oikeastaan aika erikoista, että kustantajat eivät ole kovinkaan kiinnostuneita oheistuotemarkkinoista, vaikka esimerkiksi Leigh Bardugon ja Maggie Stiefvaterin nuortenkirjasarjojen ystävät ovat innostuneet myymään jos jonkinlaisia itse valmistamia fanituotteita esimerkiksi Etsyn verkkomarkkinoilla ja erilaisten tapahtumien taidekujilla. T-paidat ja tarrat ovat vain jäävuoren huippu. Etsivä löytää mitä tahansa tuoksu-kynttilöistä käsintehtyihin koruihin – mutta harvoin virallisesti lisensoituina.



Grafiikka, jonka Nina von Rüdiger laati erityisesti ”Royaumen aikakirjat” - T-paitoja varten.

Kuvakirjansa Hai on tehnyt yhdessä ammattikuvittajien, Teemu Juhanin ja Saana Nyqvistin kanssa. Tällaiset jaetut luomisprosessit kirjailija kokee “mielikuvitusta virkistäväksi” ja silmiä avaaviksi. “Toisen näkemys haastaa omaa tapaa kuvitella ja rikkoo mahdollisia ajatusluutumia. Tarinan maailma, hahmot ja juoni saattavat muuttua paljonkin matkan varrella, kun huomaamme, ettei joku asia toimikaan kuvituksen kanssa niin kuin olin pelkän tekstin kautta suunnitellut.” Esimerkiksi lastenkirjojen päähenkilö Mörkö Möö muuttui mustasilmäisestä keltasilmäiseksi, koska se näytti kuvituksessa paremmalta.

Joskus myös kansitaiteilijoiden näkemykset hahmojen ulkonäöstä vaikuttavat kirjailijan omiin mielikuviin. Näin kävi esimerkiksi ”Gigi ja Henry” -sarjan kohdalla, kun kansigraafikko Sára Köteleki antoi Gigille aiottua punaisemmat hiukset ja Hai totesi niiden sopivan hahmolle todella hyvin. Kuvittajan ja kirjailijan mielikuvitukset käyvät siis kirjan tuotannon varrella eräänlaista

dialogia. Hain mielestä erityisesti kuvakirjan tekstiin on tärkeääkin jättää aukkoja, jotta kuvittajille jää vapautta omaan tulkintaan.

Totunnaisten ajatusmallien kyseenalaistaminen ja uusien näkökulmien etsiminen on Hain mielestä spekulatiivisen fiktion ytimessä muutenkin. “Kirjoittaminenhan on aina pohdintaa, kyseenalaistamista, analyysia. Ajattelen, että spekulatiivinen fiktio ja fantasia auttavat sekä kirjoittajaa että lukijaa nousemaan eräänlaiselle ihmisyyden yleistasolle, jossa on mahdollista pohtia ihmisyyden syvempiä puolia arjesta irrotettuna. En tarkoita, että tämä aina onnistuisi. Mutta spekulatiivinen fiktio on yksi työkalu siihen.”

Lopuksi Hai kuitenkin toteaa, että fiktion kirjoittamiseen liittyy aina myös jotain kehollista ja intuitiivista – jotain mitä on, ironista kyllä, vaikea puheke sanoiksi. “Tunnistan tekstini julkaisukelpoiseksi siitä, että se alkaa laulaa. En osaa kuvata tunnetta muutenkaan. Muutos on hyvin hienovarainen, mutta vahva. Sen tuntee luissaan.”

### “Kauheinta olisi, jos mielikuvitus katoaisi”

Pohjoismaiden pienillä kielialueilla on aina ollut vaikea tehdä itselleen nimeä valtavirrasta poikkeavalla kirjallisuudella. Kauhu on tässä mielessä erityisen haastava lajityyppi, sillä suuri osa ihmisistä välttelee tietoisesti sen lukemista. Konservatiivisessa Norjassa ei haluta varata kauhukirjallisuudelle omaa osastoa edes kirjastoista. Viime vuosikymmeninä tummempien vesien tulvaportit ovat kuitenkin alkaneet murtua Pohjola-lassakin: ruotsalainen John Ajvide Lindqvist löi kansainvälisesti läpi vampyyriromaanillaan *Låt den rätte komma in* (2004), ja Suomessa vaasalaista kirjailijaa **Marko Hautalaa** (s. 1973) on hiljattain alettu nimittää “kotimaiseksi Stephen Kingiksi”. Vuonna 2020 hän oli ehdolla myös Shirley Jackson -palkinnon saajaksi.



Marko Hautala. Kuva: Veikko Somerpuro/Tammi.

Kun Hautalan ensimmäinen teos *Kirottu maa* ilmestyi vuonna 2002 Porvoon Julmapainon kustantamana, hänen nykyinen kustantajansa Tammi ei vielä julkaissut kauhukirjallisuutta lainkaan. Myös Hautalan vuosina 2008, 2011 ja 2012 julkaistut romaanit – *Itsevalaisevat*, *Torajyvät* ja *Unikoira* – luokitellaan Tammen sivuilla edelleen vain “nykykirjallisuudeksi”. Siksi tuoreen novellikokoelman, *Kuolleiden valssin* (2022) kansikuva hymyilyttää: verenpu-naista taustaa vasten tanssivat luurangot edustavat jo häpeilemätöntä kioski-kauhuestetiikkaa. Vaikka Hautala tiedostaa, että tiettyyn genreen sitoutumalla “maalaa itsensä tiettyyn nurkkaan”, hän määritteleeekin itsensä epäröimättä kauhukirjailijaksi. “Tiedän, että se karkottaa tiettyjä lukijoita, mutta tarinani nyt vain tuppaaavat olemaan hyvin tietyn tyyppisiä.”

Yhtäältä Hautalan kauhuun kallistuminen on siis vaistonvaraista, melkein sisäsyntyistä. “Jos genreasioita miettii liikaa, ne käyvät vaikeiksi”, hän tuu-maa. Toisaalta Hautalalla on psykologisen ja yliluonnollisen välillä häilyviin kokemuksiin varsin ainutlaatuinen näköalapaikka: hän on aiemmin työskennellyt psykiatrisessa sairaalassa, ja hänen vaimonsa Tiina Hautala kerää aave-tarinoita Haamu-kustannukselle. Kirjailija kertookin tavoittelevansa teksteil-lään sellaista “välitilaa”, joka jättäisi lukijan epäröimään, tapahtuiko tarinassa oikeasti jotain yliluonnollista, vai onko henkilöhahmo vai järkkynyt mieleltään. “Olemme aina kahden maailman rajalla, mutta hiljennämme tarkoituksella tiettyjä taajuuksia.”

Tällainen rationaalisten ja yliluonnollisten selitysten välillä häilyminen on tuttua Edgar Allan Poen tarinoista ja lähestyy myös Tzvetan Todorovin käsitystä *fantastisesta*. Hautala toteaaakin, että kauhua ja fantasiaa voi joskus olla vaikea erottaa toisistaan. Siksi Finneonin kaltaiset spekulatiiviseen fiktion keskittyvät tapahtumat tuntuvat hänestä kodikkailta. Spekulatiivisia genrejä yhdistää Hau-talan mielestä ”metaforien tekeminen konkreettisiksi” (vrt. Chu; McHale, ”Spe-culative Fiction”), mutta se, mitä nämä metaforat edustavat, vaihtelevat genrestä toiseen. “Scifi-kirjailijat tietysti spekuloiivat eniten, mutta siinä missä scifi katsoo tulevaisuuteen, kauhu katsoo taaksepäin. Mikä meiltä jäi huomaamatta? Mikä meidät saa aina kiinni, vaikka kuinka yrittäisimme päästä sitä pakoon?”

Hautalan teoksissa tällaiset häiritsevät asiat pukeutuvat usein arkiseen asuun: pimeisiin kellareihin, upottaviin mutelikkoihin, pimeisiin ikkunoihin ja maan tuoksuun. “Haluan tuoda näkyviin kaikkea sitä kummallista, mitä mielessä pyörii ja mitä arkeen liittyy – asioita, joille ei ole mitään kategoriaa. Yksi lempi-kirjailijoistani on Ramsey Campbell, joka osaa kuvata tylsiäkin kohtauksia, vaikkapa vain lammen rannalla kävelyä, niin että siihen liittyy selittämätöntä uhkaa.”

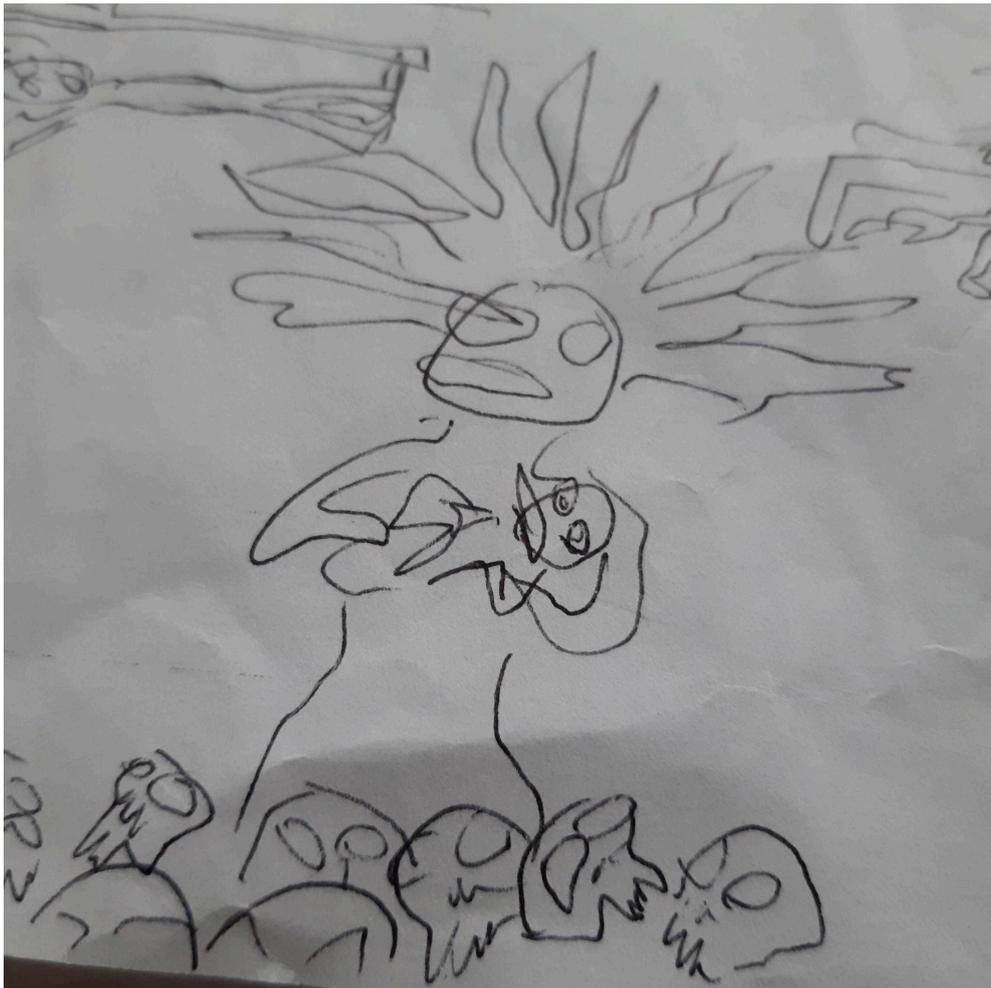
Erityisesti Hautalaa kiehtovat juuri “primitiiviset kokemukset”, jotka ei-vät tarvitse seurakseen sen enempää järkeviä selityksiä kuin uskoa yliluonnol-liseen. “Olen itsekin nähnyt kerran aaveen. En edes tiedä uskonko aaveisiin, ja pystyn näin jälkikäteen rationalisoimaan tapahtuneen monellakin eri tavalla. Mutta siinä itse kokemuksessa oli jotain todellista ja vastaansanomaton-ta. Koko iho nousi kananlihalle.”

Hautala kertoo metsästävänsä tällaisia kokemuksia joskus tietoisestikin, esimerkiksi menemällä asuintalonsa kellarikerrokseen ja odottamalla valojen sammumista. “Sitten tarkkailen, että mitä oma pää tekee. Se on varmaan joku lajityypillinen ominaisuus, että sellaisessa tilanteessa alkaa kuvitella kaikkia mahdollisia uhkia, vaikka on ihan tavallisessa, arkisessa ympäristössä.” Myös mökkeily pimeään vuodenaikaan ja synkkä instrumentaalimusiikki, vaikkapa

Lustmordin pahaenteinen ambient, auttavat pitämään yllä “matalan tason hermostuneisuutta”, joka on kauhukirjailijan mielikuvitukselle erityisen hedelmällistä.

Vaikka Hautalan teosten miljööt ovatkin näennäisen arkisia, arkisia mielentiloja hän siis välttelee. Ajatukset eivät voi olla liikaa vaikkapa uutisissa ja jokapäiväisissä rupatteluisissa tai kirjoittaminen ei suju. “Sellaisina päivinä, kun tuntuu, että kaikki asiat ovat jotenkin banaaleja, kun kirjaimet ovat vain kirjaimia, tekstille voi tehdä enemmän harmia kuin hyvää. Silloin mielikuvitus on väännetty liian hiljaiselle.”

Joskus Hautala avaa tällaisia kirjoittamisen “lukkoja” ja “sanallisia solmuja” piirtämällä spontaanisti outoja, hieman pelottavan näköisiä hahmoja. “Joskus kun alkaa kirjoittaa, tuntuu kuin istuisi flyygelin ääreen. Se on liian mahtipontista, mailaa puristaa liian lujaa. Mutta piirtämiseen minulla ei liity mitään kunnianhimoja. En ole hyvä piirtämään, joten voin vain antaa mennä. Vähän kuin meedio, joka kanavoi automaattikirjoitusta.” Hautala ei osaa selittää piirtämiensä olentojen alkuperää tai tarkoitusta sen tarkemmin, mutta samat hahmot ja piirteet – lonkeromaiset ulokkeet ja koko kasvojen yli repeävät suut – tuntuvat toistuvan. “Joku psykologi voisi tietysti analysoida näitä, mutta minä en halua niitä analyysyjä kuulla”, hän nauraa.



Esimerkki Hautalan piirtämistä pelottavista hahmoista. Kuva: Marko Hautala.

Kuten Magdalena Hai, myös Hautala toteaa kuvittelutyönsä olevan kaikkiaan hyvin visuaalista: ensin on mielikuva, joka on jotenkin puettava sanoiksi – ei päinvastoin. “Kirjallisuushan on oikeastaan hirvittävän outoa. Elokuviissa meille näytetään valmis illuusio, jonka tuottamiseen käytetty koneisto on piilossa. Kirjallisuudessa on päinvastoin: meille näytetään vain kirjaimia, ja meidän on itse luotava se illuusio. Kuin menisit teatteriin katsomaan näytelmää ja sinut vietäisiin siellä vain takahuoneeseen.”

Tästä huolimatta – tai ehkä juuri tämän vuoksi – Hautala ajattelee, että kirjallisuus tavoittaa kokemusten täyteyden paremmin kuin tieteellinen tutkimus. “Koska kirjallisuuden ei tarvitse väittää tai todistaa mitään, se voi keskittyä nimenomaan kokemukseen itseensä. Yksi runo voi muutamalla rivillä ilmaista kokemuksen, jonka selittämiseen tarvitaan tuhat psykologista tutkimusta. Mutta molemmilla on tietysti paikkansa; ne ovat eri kieliä.”

Psykologeista Hautalaan vetoaa eniten Carl Gustav Jung, vaikka hänen teorioitaan arkkityypeistä ja kollektiivisesta alitajunnasta ei enää tätä nykyä pidetäkään uskottavana kognitiotieteenä. Hautala uskoo Jungin kuitenkin “tavoittaneen jotain oleellista”, ja tunnustaa itsekkin olevansa enemmän lateraalinen kuin looginen ajattelija: yllättäviin suuntiin lähtevät assosiaatiot kiinnostavat enemmän kuin määrätietoinen eteneminen. “Monet minun romaaneistanihan ovat todella epäloogisia. Minulle on tärkeämpää muunlainen jatkuvuus kuin logiikka”, hän pohtii.

Luova tapa ajatella yhdistyy Hautalan elämässä myös henkiseen hyvinvointiin. Siinä missä masentunut tai stressaantunut ihminen näkee maailman korostuneen kapeana ja kaksikulotteisena, vireä mielikuviutus luo kokemukseen “syvyyttä”. ”Tuntuu, että kaikki on jotenkin elossa, värit ovat kirkkaampia ja voi kuvitella, että mitä tahansa voi tapahtua. Kun näkee paljon yhteyksiä asioiden välillä, silloin voi hyvin.”

Hautala siteeraa myös itselleen tärkeää taitelijaa, William Blakea: “Mielikuviutus on enemmän totta kuin mikään muu.” Samaa ajatusta kaiuttivat myös monet romantiikan ajan kirjailijat, erityisesti John Keats, jonka mielestä “se, minkä mielikuviutus tunnistaa kauniiksi, on totta” (Forman, 68). “En minä sitä kauhean filosofisesti ajattele, vaan sekin on tunne, intuitio. Mielikuviutus on kaikki kaikessa. Kaikista kauheinta olisi, jos mielikuviutus katoaisi. Silloin kaikki menettäisi merkityksensä”, Hautala tiivistää.

## “Ei ole rajoja”

**Anne Leinosta** (s. 1973) ei tarvitse kahdesti kehottaa pohtimaan spekulatiioon liittyviä teemoja. Sen lisäksi, että hän on julkaissut genererajoja rikkovaa fantastista kirjallisuutta koko 2000-luvun ajan, hän on pohtinut spekulatiivisuuden luonnetta myös toimittajan, kustannustoimittajan ja opettajan näkökulmista. “Olin itse ajamassa läpi spekulatiivisen fiktion käsitettä silloin, kun väiteltiin, onko tällainen laaja kattokäsite hyödyksi vai haitaksi genrekirjallisuudelle. Keskustelu oli vuoden 2005 paikkeilla niin vilkasta, että käsite poimittiin jopa äidinkielen oppikirjoihin”, Leinonen muistelee.

*Spekulatiivinen fiktio* on 2000-luvun aikana yleistynyt fantasian, tieteiskirjallisuuden, kauhun ja niiden lähigenret yhdistäväksi kattokäsitteeksi myös kansainvälisillä foorumeilla. Aiemmin samasta tekstijoukosta on puhuttu

“fantastisena” fiktiona, ja ilmaus on pitänyt sisällään vahvan oletuksen jonkinlaisesta lapsellisuudesta ja eskapismista (Oziewicz). Kuten useimmat alan tutkijat, Leinonen katsoo spekulatiivisen fiktion olevan pikemminkin ei-mimeettistä: “Se on kaikkea, mikä nyrjähtää johonkin suuntaan tiskirättiproosasta.” Itse taas olen nimennyt spekulatiivisen fiktion vastakohtaan “näkkileipärealismiksi”. “Ehkä totuus on sitten jossain tiskirätin ja näkkileivän välissä”, Leinonen naurahtaa.

Spekulatiivisen fiktion arkiseksi metaforaksi puolestaan valikoituu “mielikuvituksen hiekkalaatikko”, sillä sen piirissä saa tehdä mitä haluaa. “Olen vähän kaikkien genrejen kirjoittaja ja myös genrerikkoja”, Leinonen myöntää. Hänelle lajityyppien ominaispiirteiden rikkominen ja sekoittaminen on nimenomaan tietoinen kuvittelun strategia. “Olen tietyllä tavalla myös kärsinyt siitä kirjallisella urallani, koska tekstini eivät mene niihin lokeroihin, joita kustantajat haluaisivat myydä. Joillekin lukijoille voi tietysti olla pettymys, jos tarina päättyy johonkin aivan toiseen lajityyppiin kuin mistä se näytti alkavan. Toisille se taas on nautinnollista – on jännittävää saada selville, mitä kultamunan sisältä paljastuu!”



Anne Leinonen. Kuva: Sami Funke.

Leinonen tunnistaa myös spekulatiivisen fiktion fandomilla olevan omat mielityksensä ja kliseensä: “On niin sanottu ‘Portti-kaava’.” Tällä kirjailija viittaa siihen, että tietynlaiset tekstit tapaavat menestyä tieteisfiktioon keskittyvän *Portti*-lehden vuotuisessa kirjoituskilpailussa, kun taas toisenlaiset, muuten ansioituneet tarinat jäävät usein ilman sijoitusta. Näiden kaavojen tiedostaminen ja niitä vastaan kapinoiminen vaikuttaa olleen Leinoselle voimaannuttava kokemus. Hän toteaa, että hänelle on ylipäätään tärkeämpää kirjoittaa “tarinan ehdoilla” kuin yleisön ehdoilla.

Toisaalta Leinonen ei ole jäänyt yksin taistelussaan generarajoja vastaan. Vuonna 2006 kirjailija Pasi Ilmari Jääskeläinen julkaisi (sittemmin yksityiseksi muutetussa) blogissaan manifestin, jossa hän määrittelee arkitodellisuuteen pohjautuvan mutta eri lajityyppien konventioita vapaasti hyödyntävän fiktion *reaalifantasiaksi*. “Reaalifantastikkojen koulukuntaan” ovat Jääskeläisen itsensä lisäksi kuuluneet alusta asti myös J-P Koskinen, J. Pekka Mäkelä – ja Anne Leinonen. Näiden kirjailijoiden keinovalikoimassa sekoittuvat esimerkiksi maagisen realismin, scifin, fantasian ja jännityskirjallisuuden troopit (Ollikainen 45–46). Leinonen kiirehtii kuitenkin tarkentamaan, että reaalifantasia ei ole genre, vaan tietynlainen ajattelun ja luomisen tapa. “En kutsu tekstejäni reaalifantasiaksi, vaan työskentelen reaalifantastisesti tuottaakseni spekulatiivista fiktiota. Se tarkoittaa nimenomaan sitä, että minulla on vapaus sekoittaa eri genrejä toisiinsa. Ei ole rajoja.”

Tietoisien genreanarkian lisäksi Leinonen tukeutuu alitajunnastaan kumpuaviin “alkukuviin”. Hän ei osaa tarkalleen sanoa, mistä ne tulevat, mutta uskoo niiden “poksahdelevan” esiin, kun jokin idea tai ajatus on “muhinut” mielessä riittävän monta kuukautta. “Näen mielessäni tilanteita, ihmisiä tai kohtauksia ja lähdän tutkimaan niitä kirjoittamalla: yritän selvittää, miksi nämä ihmiset ovat tässä tilanteessa tai miksi näen tällaisen maiseman.” Leinonen tähdentää, että vaikka visuaalisuus ja liike ovat näissä visioissa etusijalla, niihin voi liittyä muitakin aisteja. Lisäksi kuvia syntyy kuvittelu- ja kirjoitusprosessin aikana vähitellen lisää. “Kerran mietin, löytäisinkö uuden näkökulman tarinaan, jossa henkilö on menettänyt muistinsa. Ajatus mylläsi päässäni jonkin aikaa - ja sitten näin sen tyyppin [henkilöhahmoni] kadulla. Siitä tarina lähti kerrytymään auki, ja mieleen tuli lisää kysymyksiä: Miksi hän menettänyt muistinsa? Miksi hän on *halunnut* menettää muistinsa?” Leinonen havainnoi, että hänen pohtimansa kysymykset ovat pikemminkin juuri “miksi?”-kysymyksiä kuin spekulatiivisen fiktion peruskivenä pidettyjä ”entä jos?”-kysymyksiä.

Joskus alkukuvat eivät “toteudu” tai pääse mukaan tarinaan, mutta se on Leinosen mielestä täysin luonnollinen osa luomisen prosessia. “Joskus nautusta vain tulee kalukukkaro. En koskaan tavoita sitä, mitä olen kirjoittamassa. Riittää, että on heijastuksia tai varjostuksia, jotka ohjaavat kirjoittamista johonkin suuntaan.”

Yksi kuva tai idea ei kuitenkaan riitä tarinan pohjaksi, vaan Leinonen törmäyttää mieluiten kolme eri ideaa. Hän toteaa, ettei niiden tarvitse olla scifistisiä “novumeita”, eli fiktiivisiä keksintöjä, jotka tuntuvat nykytiedon valossa mahdollisilta (Suvin 7–8). Hänen mielestään tarina voi olla spekulatiivinen, vaikka sen “juju” tai “kivijalka” olisi jossain muualla, vaikkapa kielellisessä koikeilussa. Esimerkiksi Leinonen nostaa novellinsa “Toisinkainen”, jossa hän halusi kuvata elämänmuotoa, jonka keskeisin selviytymisstrategia on muiden mielistely. Tähän yhdistyi idea puhetavasta, jossa ei ole minä-pronominia, sillä parvesta riippuvaisella olennolla ei välttämättä olisi selvärajaista minuutta.

Tällaista tietoista ideoilla leikittelyä voisi nimenomaan kutsua spekulatioksi puhtaimmillaan. Se mahdollistaa “toden ja epätoden sekoittamisen eri suhteissa”. Toisaalta Leinonen huomauttaa, että spekulatio voi kohdistua myös tuntemattomaan – johonkin sellaiseen, “mitä ei vielä nähdä”. Klassinen esimerkki tästä ovat kauhutarinoiden hirviöt, jotka ovat usein sitä pelottavampia, mitä vähemmän niistä tietää. “Lukijan ja kirjoittajan pitäminen arvailun tilassa venyttää, heruttaa spekulatiota. Niin pitkään, kun et kerro, mistä on kyse, kaikki on mahdollista. Mutta heti, kun paljastat jutun juonen, musta

aukko romahtaa.” Leinonen toteaa, että erityisesti novelleissa on mahdollista leikitellä rivien väleillä, jotka pakottavat lukijan katsomaan uudelleen, ja piilotetuilla asioilla, jotka kannustavat ihmettelyyn.

Spekulaatiosta erilliseksi ”työvälineeksi” Leinonen erittelee vielä ekstrapolaation, eli sen, että jotain olemassa olevaa ”korotetaan potenssiin kolme”. Siihen ei liity samanlaista mysteeriä kuin spekulaatioon, vaan se on pikemmin ”liioittelua, suurentelua ja pullistelua”, jonkin ilmiön nostamista ”mikrotasolta makrotasolle tai päinvastoin” (vrt. Landon). Leinonen nostaa esiin novellinsa ”Pienen rasian jumala”, jonka maailmaan kuuluvat salaperäiset, taivaanrannassa hämmöttävät jumalolennot. Ne eivät varsinaisesti kommunikoi ihmisten kanssa, mutta vaikuttavat silti hienovaraisesti heidän elämäänsä olemalla jatkuvasti läsnä. Näitä ekstrapolaation suurentamia, spekulaatioon houkuttelevia hahmoja Leinonen pitää niin kiehtovina, että aikoo kirjoittaa vielä samaan maailmaan sijoittuvan romaaninkin.

Leinonen toteaaakin, että hänen tarinansa vuotavat usein toisiinsa, ja monen eri tekstin työstäminen samaan aikaan on hänelle tyypillistä. Usein se myös helpottaa luomisprosessia. Esimeriksi samaan aikaan kirjoitetut *Metsän äiti* (2017) ja *Kirjanoita* (2017) hyödyntävät samaa äitiyteen liittyvää tematiikkaa. Näin Leinosen teoksista syntyy eräänlaisia ”kirjaperheitä, jotka kuuluvat yhteen ja keskustelevat keskenään”. Mieleeni muistuvat Neil Gaimanin pohdinnat siitä, että jokaisella tarinalla olisi paitsi sukupuu myös sukupuoli (67–72), mutta näin pitkälle Leinonen ei omien teostensa inhimillistämässä halua mennä. Tarinat ovat vain sukua, eivät äitejä, setiä, isosiskoja tai isoisia.

Leinonen on kiinnostunut myös käsitöistä ja sanoo epäröimättä käsillä tekemisen olevan osa ”ajattelua”. ”Olen hyvin impulsiivinen kirjoittaja. Energiaa on purettava jotenkin, ja jos se ei tule ulos sanoina, sen on tultava liikkeenä”, hän kuvaa. Myös tiskaaminen, siivoaminen tai kävelylenkillä käyminen ajaa asian. ”Jopa bussin tai junan ikkunasta ulos katsominen stimuloi aivoja ja vapauttaa ajattelua jollain tavalla, koska siihenkin kuuluu liikettä”, Leinonen pohtii.

Kaikkiaan näyttää selvältä, että luominen ja kuvittelu kietoutuvat monin tavoin osaksi kirjailijan arkitodellisuutta. ”Mielikuvitus on olemisen peruselementti. Kaikilla ihmisillä on mielikuvitus, ja sitä tarvitaan yksinkertaisissa ja tylsissäkin asioissa. Esimerkiksi toisista ihmisistä tekee automaattisesti päätelmiä, vaikka heistä ei tietäisi yhtään mitään.” Tätä kutsutaan kognitiotieteissä mielen teoriaksi, ja se tosiaan lienee yksi arkipäiväisimmistä ja automatisoituneimmista spekulaation muodoista (Zunshine).

Kuvittelu on Leinosen mielestä ylipäätään jotain sukua päättelemiselle. Onhan molemmissa kyse asioiden yhdistämisestä. ”Kuvittelu on sarja pieniä oivalluksia ja yhteentörmäyksiä – sitä, että yllättävistä asioista pokahtaa uutta kukintoa.” Leinosella nämä oivallukset liittyvät tyypillisimmillään ihmisenä olemiseen, ihmissuhteisiin ja tunteisiin, mutta ne tuovat myös huumoria elämään. ”Kaikista hassuista törmäyksistä ei välttämättä kannata avata suutaan”, hän myhäilee. Toisaalta hän huomauttaa, että spekuloidulla voi tutkia myös sellaisia asioita, jotka olisivat liian vaikeita tai epäeettisiä testattavaksi vaikkapa tieteen puitteissa. Skaala on siis laaja.

Lopuksi Leinonen toteaa pitävänsä sanasta ”luovuus”, koska se muistuttaa häntä sanasta ”luovia”. ”Savolaisena tykkään kiemurtelevista ja monimutkaisista ilmaisuista. Luoviminen tuo mieleen sellaisen venkuloinnin, mutkittelevan, käärmemäisen etenemisen, joka on kuitenkin etenemistä.” Sana on kielämättä osuva kuvaamaan luovia prosesseja, jotka harvemmin ovat erityisen

suoraviivaisia. Leinonen arvelee, että hänen luomisprosessinsa ovat itse asiassa muuttuneet uran edetessä jatkuvasti kaoottisemmiksi, kun kokemuksen tuoma tyyneys on vallannut sijaa aloittelevan kirjoittajan kurinalaisuudelta. “Kun on luottamusta prosessiin, kaaoksesta voi alkaa nauttia ja siihen voi luottaa”, hän sanoo.

### “On päästävä jonnekin muualle”

Sen jälkeen, kun **Emmi Itärannan** (s. 1976) esikoisromaani *Teemestarin kirja* ilmestyi vuonna 2012, hänen ympäristötemaiset dystopiakertomuksensa ovat keränneet mainetta, palkintoja ja palkintoehdokkuuksia niin Suomessa kuin maailmalla. On ehkä kuvaavaa, että kun pyydän häntä istahtamaan Aaltoyliopiston Kandidaattikeskuksen pihaan, hän on juuri sijoittunut vuoden 2022 Atorox-kilpailussa novellillaan “Maailman iho”. Tarina on ilmestynyt osana Suomen itsenäisyyden juhlarahasto Sitran alulle panemaa kokoelmaa *2040: Tarinoita demokratian tulevaisuudesta* (2022), mikä sopiikin teemoiltaan hyvin Itärannan profiliin. Hän kertoo spekuloidensa mieluiten erilaisilla tulevaisuuksilla ja maailmoilla, jotka poikkeavat jollain lailla nykytodellisuudesta.



Emmi Itäranta. Kuva: Liisa Takala/Teos.

“En usko, että spekuloidamalla voidaan varsinaisesti tuottaa uutta tietoa, mutta sen kautta voidaan simuloida kokemuksia ja kokeilla erilaisia skenaarioita. Fiktio on ikään kuin turvallinen tila tai simulaattori, johon voi astua kokeilemaan sellaisia asioita, jotka todellisuudessa ovat vaikeita tai tavoittamattomissa”, Itäranta pohtii. Hän tunnistaa kuvittelunsa olevan pääasiassa melko synkkää, tieteiskirjallista ja maailmanrakennukseen perustuvaa – hän kertoo luoneensa itselleen “laajoja leikkimaailmoja” jo lapsena.

Toisaalta Itärannan dystooppisiin maisemiin sekoittuu usein myös hieman kevyempiä, lyyrisiä ja fantastisia elementtejä. Tästä syystä spekulatiivinen fiktio on hänelle hyödyllinen kattokäsite, jonka alla realismista voi poiketa mihiin suuntaan hyvänsä. Juuri spekuloinnin luoma esteettinen etäisyys näyttäisi olevan Itärannan ajattelulle erityisen edullista: “En pysty rationaalisesti selittämään, miksi kirjoitan spekulatiivisia maailmoja. Ne vain kiinnostavat minua. Mielikuvitukseni ei lähde liikkeelle, jos yritän kirjoittaa jotain tähän todellisuuteen sijoittuvaa. On päästävä jonnekin muualle.” Pohdinta tuo mieleen Philip Pullmanin esseen, jossa hän vertaa realistista kuvittelua “lyijysaappaissa kulkemiseen” (18). Hän väittää, ettei varsinaisesti edes pidä fantasiasta, mutta vain se antaa hänen ajattelulleen ”siivet” (ibid.).

Itäranta toteaa, että kirjoittaminen ei ole hänelle koskaan helppoa, mutta myös ulkoiset olosuhteet, kuten aikataulut ja suorituspaineeet voivat asettaa esteitä mielikuvitukselle. *Teemestarin kirja* oli varsinkin esikoisromaaniksi poikkeuksellinen menestystarina: se sai Kalevi Jäntin palkinnon, Nuori Aleksis -palkinnon ja oli ehdolla Arthur C. Clarke -palkinnon sekä useiden muiden kansainvälisten scifi-palkintojen saajaksi. Teokseen perustuva, Saara Saarelan ohjaama elokuva *Veden vartija* tuli teatterihin syksyllä 2022. Niin hienoja kuin nämä virttanpylväät ovatkin, Itäranta myöntää, että ne tekivät toisen romaanin, *Kudottujen kujien kaupungin* (2015) kirjoittamisesta poikkeuksellisen vaikeaa. “Sen kirjan suurin ansio on se, että se on ylipäätään olemassa. Joillain stressi saattaa jopa aktivoida mielikuvitusta, mutta minun kohdallani asia on kyllä päinvastoin.”

Kirjoitusprosessin vaikeudesta kertoo sekin, että *Kudottujen kujien kaupunki* näyttäytyi kirjailijan mielikuvissa “pimeänä luolana, josta täytyi kulkea läpi”. Itäranta kuvaa, että hänen kirjoitusprojektinsa ottavat tyypillisesti jonkin visuaalisen hahmon hänen mielessään. “Kolmas kirja näyttäytyi minulle puuna”, hän jatkaa. *Kuunpäivän kirjeissä* (2020) esiintyy kyllä kvittenipuu, mutta kyseessä ei ilmeisesti ole ainakaan kokonaan sama puu. Pikemminkin kuvitteellisen kvittenipuun sisältävä kuvitteellinen prosessi otti kirjailijan mielikuvituksessa myös puumaisen muodon. Itäranta kertoo ylipäätään olevansa paitsi kielellinen myös visuaalinen kuvittelija. Hän käyttää Anne Leinosen tapaan alkukuvia kirjoittamisen lähtökohtana, ja mikäli kirjoittaminen takkuu, keskittyminen kielellisen kerronnan sijasta visuaaliseen kuvitteluun voi joskus auttaa eteenpäin.

Toinen keino, johon turvautuminen voi vauhdittaa Itärannan mielikuvitusta, on kielen vaihtaminen. Hänen kirjoitustyönsä on sikäli epätavallista, että hän laatii romaaniensa suomenkielistä versiota ja englanninkielistä versiota rinnakkain. Kaksikielinen työskentelytapa syntyi vahingossa, kun Itäranta työsti Isossa-Britanniassa asuessaan englanninkielistä opinnäytetyötä Kentin yliopistoon, mutta halusi käsikirjoitukselleen palautetta myös suomalaiselta kirjoittajaryhmältä. “Kahdella kielellä kirjoittaminen on tietysti todella hidasta ja vaivalloista, mutta huomasi, että se sopii minulle. Usein kielestä toiseen vaihtaminen auttaa näkemään tekstin eri näkökulmasta. Totta kai ajattelen helpommin ja luontevammin suomeksi, koska se on äidinkieleni, mutta englannin kielellä ajattelemisen auttaa ottamaan tekstiin hieman enemmän etäisyyttä. Joskus siitä on etua.”

Etäisyys on haastattelussa toistuva teema. Itäranta kertoo, että myös taide, elokuvat, televisiosarjat ja kollegoiden kirjoittama fiktio auttavat hänen mieltään “lähtemään kaukaisiin paikkoihin”. Mielikuvitus on aina ollut hänelle tärkeä osa elämää ja hän pitää sitä vielä tärkeämpänä työvälineenä kuin kieltä. “Vaikka ei niitä välttämättä pysty täysin erottamaan toisistaan”, hän pohtii. Ainakin mielikuvitus on vielä kieltäkin alkuperäisempää käyttövoimaa: Itäranta

uskoo päätyneensä kirjailijan uralle nimenomaan siksi, että hänellä on vahva sisäsyntyinen taipumus kuvitteluun.

## Johtopäätöksiä

On mielenkiintoista huomata, että vaikka spekulatiivinen fiktio ei vielä ole vaikiintunut termi tutkimuksessa (Oziewicz), alan kirjailijoiden keskuudessa vaikuttaisi vallitsevan tyytyväinen yksimielisyys siitä, mitä termillä tarkoitetaan. Se on avara ja salliva kattokäsite luovasta, intuitiivisesta, rajattomasta “entä jos?” -ajattelusta kumpuavalle fiktiolle. Vaikka juttuun haastattelemieni kirjailijoiden tuotannot eroavat toisistaan paljonkin – tieteiskirjallisuudesta ja genrehybrideistä kauhuun ja lasten fantasiaan – heidän spekulatiiviseen fiktion liittyvistä käsityksistään on vaikea löytää merkittäviä eroja.

Useimmat haastateltavat halusivat määritellä genrensä negaation kautta: spekulatiivinen fiktio on kaikkea sitä, mitä realistinen fiktio ei ole. Äkkiseltään tämä saattaa vaikuttaa ongelmalliselta ajattelutavalta, sillä se asemoi spekulatiivisen fiktion riippuvaiseksi tai jopa alisteiseksi realistiseen fiktion nähden. Käytännössä kirjailijat kuitenkin näkevät asetelman täysin päinvastaisesta kulmasta: heille spekulatio ei ole virhe realismissa, vaan tarjoaa vapautuksen sen kahleista. Genrefiktio fantastisine maailmoineen nähdään siis avaimena laajempaan, etäännytetymmään kuvittelun tilaan – turvalliseen “hiekkalaatikkoon” (Leinonen) tai “simulaattoriin” (Itäranta) – jossa saa tehdä sellaisiakin asioita tai kokea sellaisiakin “primitiivisiä kokemuksia” (Hautala), joita realismin piirissä ei saa tehdä tai kokea.

Toisaalta myös realistinen fiktio on keinotekoinen rakennelma, jonka raja-tolppia on pystytelty ja siirrelty aina antiikin *mimesis*-keskusteluista viime vuosikymmenen *epäluonnolliseen narratologiaan*. Genrerajojen häilyvyyden saa helposti näkyviin vaikkapa pienellä kielellisellä ajatuskokeella: jos yllä mainitun negaation lähtökohdaksi otettaisiin arkitodellisuus eikä sitä jäljittelevä mimeettinen fiktio – jos spekulatiivinen fiktio olisikin sitä, mitä *todellisuus* ei ole – termin koko absurdi tautologisuus paljastuisi. Sana “fiktio” viittaa jo itsessään kuvitteelliseen. Kaikki fiktio on siis jossain määrin spekulatiivista (vrt. McHale 2018, ”Speculative Fiction” 329) ja kaikenlaisen fiktion tuottaminen ja lukeminen vaatii mielikuvitusta. Erityisesti Leinonen ja Hautala toivatkin esiin, että mielikuvitus on myös arkinen asia, joka ulottaa lonkeronsa kaikenlaisiin toimiin ja tilanteisiin, huomasimme sitä tai emme. Joskus – esimerkiksi reaalfantasian tai Hautalan kauhutarinoiden tapauksessa – emme voi edes olla varmoja, luemmeko fantasiaa vai jotain “realistisen” outoa. Realismin ja spekulatiivisuuden välillä vallitsee siis myös jonkinlainen implisiittinen jatkuvuus, vaikka niitä avoimessa genreretoriikassa helposti asetellaankin toistensa täydellisiksi vastakohtiksi.

Sama jatkuvuus toimii toiseenkin suuntaan. Fantastista fiktiota on perinteisesti syytetty eskapistisuudesta, mutta sikäli kun spekulatiivinen fiktio nähdään nimenomaan ei-realistisena, pikemminkin kuin ei-totena, tuomio on selvästi ylimitoitettu. Viime vuosikymmeninä niin kirjailijat (esim. Atwood; Gaiman; Le Guin; Pullman) kuin tutkijat (esim. Kraatila; Oziewicz; Roine) ovatkin alkaneet korostaa, että spekulatio ei suinkaan irtaannu todellisuudesta, vaan etsii siihen uusia tulokulmia ja avauksia. Samoin ajattelevat selvästi myös Hai, joka katsoo spekulatiivisen fiktion nousevan jonkinlaiselle “ihmisyiden

yleistasolle”, ja Itäranta, jolle tieteiskirjalliset tulevaisuudet antavat riittävää “etäisyyttä” vaikeiden asioiden käsittelemiseen.

Kaikki haastateltavat kokivat spekulatiivisen toimivan teksteissään juuri tällä tavoin: niin fantastiset, tieteiskirjalliset kuin hirviömäisetkin kuvitelmat auttavat katsomaan maailmaa ja ihmisyyttä uudenlaisista, kysyvämmistä, yllättävämmistä ja vieraammista näkökulmista. Itäranta tahtoo jonnekin kauas ja muualle, Hautalaa kiinnostaa jokin arkea syvämpi ja primitiivisempi, Hai rakentaa kielestä uusia leikillisiä maailmoja, ja Leinonen tietää tutkivansa teksteillään jotain, mitä ei voi tavoittaa. “Kognitiivinen vieraannuttaminen” ei siis alan kirjailijoiden mielestä ole yksinomaan ”onnistuneen ja oikeanlaisen” tieteisfiktion ominaisuus, kuten tietyt tutkijat ovat olettaneet (McHale, ”Afterword”; Suvin), vaan paljon laajemmalle levinnyt tapa työskennellä ja ajatella. Toiset spekulatiiviset alagenret voivat korkeintaan tuottaa tai ilmaista kognitiivista vieraannuttamista avoimemmin ja korostetummin kuin toiset – tai kuten Hautala asian ilmaisee, jokainen spekulatiivinen alagenre “konkretisoi metaforansa” hieman eri tavoin.

Kaikkiaan vastakkainasettelu realistisen ja spekulatiivisen fiktion välillä vaikuttaa siis yleiseltä ja jossain määrin perustellulta tavalla jäsentää kuvittelutyötä: vaikka genreillä on myös yhteistä mielikuvituksellista pohjaa, spekulatiivinen fiktio etualaistaa nimenomaan spekulatiivisen tai kognitiivisen vieraannuttamisen prosessia ainutlaatuisella, tunnistettavalla tavalla. Tätä metakognitiivista ulottuvuutta voisi pitää tärkeänä – tai jopa tärkeimpänä – lajia määrittävänä piirteenä (vrt. Varis 256). Osaltaan rintamalinjoja syventävät kuitenkin myös kustantajat, arvostelijat ja muut kirja-alan toimijat, joilla on taipumus tehdä jakoa realistiseen “korkeakirjallisuuteen” ja fantastiseen “populaarikirjallisuuteen”. Erityisesti Hautala ja Leinonen olivat hyvinkin tietoisia kirjoittamiensa genrejen marginaalisesta asemasta kirjamarkkinoilla ja totesivat sen asettaneen uralleen esteitä.

Miksi siis kirjoittaa juuri spekulatiivista fiktiota? Useimmat haastateltavat korostivat, että he eivät varsinaisesti ole “valinneet” genreään, vaan heillä on aina ollut vilkas tai vieraita maailmoja rakentava mielikuvitus (Hai, Itäranta), jonka seurauksena heidän teksteistään “tuppaa tulemaan” tietynlaisia (Hautala). Kenties ainoa poikkeus tähän on Leinonen, joka kuvasi sitoutumisensa spekulatiiviseen varsinkin tietoisesti, jopa ohjelmalliseksi. Hänenkin haastattelussaan voi kuitenkin lukea varsinkin perustavanlaatuisia ja laaja-alaisia tarvetta nähdä ja tehdä asioita “toisin”, rajoista välittämättä.

Huolimatta mielikuvitustensa sisäsyntyisestä lennokkuudesta, haastateltavat tunnistivat “ruokkivansa” sitä melko jokapäiväisillä toimilla ja virikkeillä, kuten lukemisella, kävelemisellä tai ihmisten tapaamisella. Tämä viitanee siihen, että spekulatiivinen kuvittelutyö sijoittuu jonnekin tavanomaisen ja tavoittamattoman välimaastoon. Kyseistä maaperää ei kuitenkaan vielä ole onnistuttu täysin kartoittamaan, sillä kaikki haastateltavat myönsivät vähintään kerran, että heidän kirjoitus- ja kuvitteluprosessiinsa liittyy myös jotain sellaista, mitä he eivät osaa kunnolla sanallistaa tai selittää.

Tämä tuskin johtuu metakognition puutteesta, sillä kaikilla neljällä kirjailijalla oli myös tietoisia strategioita kuvittelunsa hallinnointiin. Strategioissa oli odotetusti henkilökohtaisia eroja ja mieltymyksiä, mutta myös huomattavia yhtäläisyyksiä. Lähes kaikki haastateltavat kokivat hyödylliseksi muiden teosten ja taiteenlajien kuluttamisen sekä jonkin ei-kielellisen käsillä tekemisen. Erityisesti jälkimmäiseen liitettiin myös meditatiivisuuden ja tietoisien läsnäolon (*mindfulness*) piirteitä (Hai, Hautala, Leinonen).

Kaikki neljä kirjailijaa kuvasivat kuvitteluaan myös huomattavan moniaistiseksi. Vaikka jokainen heistä käyttää pääasiallisena työvälineenään kieltä, eikä kukaan esimerkiksi kuvita omia teoksiaan, rajat kirjoittamisen ja muiden luovuuden alojen välillä vaikuttavat heidän mielissään siis yllättävänkin huokoisilta. Ennen muuta haastateltavat kertoivat olevansa todella visuaalisia ajattelijoita, ja erityisesti Hai ja Hautala toivat esiin myös musiikin ja äänen vaikutuksen työskentelynsä. Toisaalta sanoilla ja kielillä leikittelyä ja kokeilua sivuttiin myös Leinosen ja Itärannan haastatteluisa, joten on luultavaa, että jonkinlainen pseudo-auditiiivinen sisäinen puhe on osallisena myös heidän kirjoitusprosesseissaan.

Taiteidenvälisyys oli selvästi esillä myös monissa kielikuvissa, joita haastateltavat käyttivät kuvittelutyöstään. Esimerkiksi Hautala hyödynsi toistuvasti äänentoistoon liittyviä metaforia – “taajuuksia” sekä “hiljaisemmalle” tai “kovemmalle” kääntämistä – kun taas Itärannan metaforat olivat pääasiassa hyvin tilallisia maailmoin ja mielikuviin “astumisia”. Spekuloitavaksi jää, onko tällainen kuvittelutyön moniaistisuus leimallista juuri fantastista fiktiota tuottaville kirjailijoille, vai onko kaikkien kirjailijoiden haasteena tiivistää sisäisen maailmansa rikkaus yksinomaan kielelliseen asuun.

Toivon, että näistä spekuloinneista kehittyä tulevaisuudessa myös jatkotutkimusta – että kyselystä siirryttäisiin kokeiluun ja tieteisfiktiosta voitaisiin taas kerran tehdä tiedefaktaa. Selvästi kuvittelutyöhön kätkeytyy vielä paljon sellaisia mekanismeja ja mahdollisuuksia, joita sen paremmin tutkijat kuin taiteilijatkaan eivät täysin ymmärrä, mutta joiden lähemmästä tarkastelusta molemmat ammattikunnat voisivat hyötyä. Yllä esittämäni yhteenvedon suurimmiksi aukoiksi jäävät kenties erot ja yhtäläisyydet realistista ja spekulatiivista fiktiota tuottavien kirjailijoiden kuvitteluproessien välillä, mielikuvituksen moniaistiset ja taiteiden väliset ulottuvuudet, sekä sellaiset kuvittelun tasot, joita on vaikea tai mahdoton sanallistaa. Siinäpä haaste tutkivalle mielikuvitukselle: kuinka löytää ja analysoida jotain sellaista, mistä edes kirjailija ei osaa kertoa?

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# World-Building as Grand-Scale Speculation: Planetary, Cosmic and Conceptual Thought Experiments in Emmi Itäranta's *The Moonday Letters*

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*Abstract:* Speculative fiction is commonly associated with highly involved artistic world-building. Indeed, speculation itself as an artistic practice often involves creation of detailed, grand-scale imaginary scenarios that come across as worlds the reader is invited to interpret as coherent systems. By analysing such grand-scale speculation in Emmi Itäranta's *The Moonday Letters* (2020/2022), I demonstrate how such focus on modelling an imaginary world makes the novel a vehicle for various kinds of grand-scale thought experiments ranging from exploration of global ethics and meditations on cosmic order to conceptual reflection on speculative world-building itself as a manner of engaging with reality. This analysis offers a view to world-building in speculative fiction as a means for going beyond the everyday scale of human life, viewing the imaginary world as a heuristic model for interpreting our own reality.

*Keywords:* speculation, world-building, modelling, scale, Anthropocene

## 1. Introduction

In scholarly accounts of speculative fiction as a (super)genre (e.g., Oziewicz), the defining feature its various (sub)genres are most commonly considered to share is their drive to imagine alternatives for our “consensus reality” (see Hume; Chu). Speculation itself as an artistic and cognitive practice, from this vantage, is all about leaving the known and familiar behind and heading toward

unknown or uncertain territory (also Roine 10; Varis 254; Karkulehto et al. 5). Often, this imaginative exploration of the unknown in SFF takes the shape of constructing a whole alternative vision of a reality that is systemically different from our everyday one: an imaginary world, or a speculative scenario on a grand scale. In this article, I discuss the potential of such *speculative world-modelling* to enable storytelling beyond the usual human-scale perspective on worlds that narrative representation is usually thought to entail (e.g., Fludernik 13; Clark 178; Caracciolo 18). Using Emmi Itäranta’s latest cli-fi novel, *The Moonday Letters* (2022),<sup>1</sup> as a case study, I also examine this grand-scale speculation as a means for narrative fiction to confront challenges that define the so-called Anthropocene epoch.

While world-building in and of itself is commonly considered “part of the very definition of fictionality” (McHale, “Speculative Fiction” 327) and a basic effect of narrative discourse in general (see, e.g., James 186–190 for discussion), a focus on particularly elaborate world-building is rightly considered a genre-distinguishing hallmark of both fantasy and science fiction. The idea goes back to classic theories of these genres such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s idea of “sub-creation” of “secondary worlds” as the storyteller’s art (131–132) and Darko Suvin’s theory of science fiction as “literature of cognitive estrangement”, which defines the genre in terms of its ability to relocate the reader’s cognition into an “imaginative framework” that allows them to view the real world from a new perspective (15). Both the pleasure and the purpose of speculative fiction have, following these influential accounts, been commonly understood as a matter of getting immersed into alternative worlds (e.g., Wolf) and reviewing our own reality critically from that new vantage point (e.g., Rayment). Literary speculation itself, by this line of thinking, can be defined as an artistic and readerly practice of interrogating our world via imaginative engagement with an alternative, experimental one.

While this kind of dialogue between an imaginary world and our reality can be taken for a basic principle of interpreting any fiction, it seems clear to me that speculative fiction involves a heightened focus on the role of world-building itself in that interpretive process. It is, as Brian McHale has put it, “an ontological genre par excellence” (*Postmodernist Fiction* 59) in the sense that it puts its efforts at “scale-modelling” alternative realities into spotlight (“Science Fiction” 23) and invites the reader to examine the imaginary world itself as a *system* – to ask, “what is this world and how does it work?”<sup>2</sup> The world in SFF, in other words, comes across as *the focal point* of interpretation (see McHale, “Science Fiction”; Ryan 25–26). In fantasy scholarship, it has also been a recurring refrain to consider the world the “protagonist” of an epic-scale story (Attebery, “Epic” 1) or something “analogous” to that (Clute and Grant), or at least “a character in and of itself” (Mendlesohn 34). The story that captures the reader’s interest, by this line of thinking, is above all else the story of the world and its fates. Therefore, the speculative thought experiments enabled or prompted by such ontologically oriented storytelling are also liable to revolve around the world and its constitution: they are concerned with global-scale

<sup>1</sup> Published in Finnish as *Kuunpäivän kirjeet* in 2020.

<sup>2</sup> McHale originally included only SF in this discussion of ontologically oriented fiction, broadening his approach to cover speculative fiction in general later (“Speculative Fiction”).

phenomena, world-historical developments, or even the cosmic ordering of the universe and the nature of reality itself.

My analysis of *The Moonday Letters* will demonstrate that exploring world-modelling in speculative fiction can shed light to the genre's potential to engage with real-world, grand-scale phenomena such as climate change and global inequality. Lying outside the immediate life-world amenable to human perception, such phenomena famously resist narrative representation (see James for an overview) – but they can, I find, be *approached as a matter of speculation* via modelling of imaginary worlds. Itäranta's novel illustrates this potential of SFF for such grand-scale speculation in at least three ways. Firstly, its vision of a possible future where humankind has started colonising the Solar System constitutes a model of an alternative reality that provides an estranging vantage point to review global-scale inequalities, class struggles, and oppressive structures. Secondly, the novel's model of a cosmic order, with numerous planes of existence traversed by its shamanistic healer-protagonist, involves a speculative exploration of the very fabric of reality and the capabilities and failures of human beings to make sense of it. Thirdly, the overarching story of planet Earth – and especially how it is saved in the end – amounts to a metafictional, conceptual examination of imaginative world-building itself as a means for productive rethinking of our world.

What I intend to demonstrate with this analysis, then, is that the grand-scale speculation involved in SFF world-building is not just a matter of representing long temporal spans, vast planetary spaces, or the cosmic ordering of the universe – although these do certainly play a significant role in it. On a more fundamental level, such speculation works to *estrangle and redefine "world" itself as an ontological concept and a cognitive metaphor*. Instead of coming across as a mere setting for human-scale stories, the world in this sort of grand-scale thought experiment is conceived of as both an entity with its own story and an artistic device for modelling global or cosmic-scale phenomena and developments. Speculating on a grand scale, in other words, amounts to questioning, rethinking, and experimenting with "worldness" itself – asking, "what do we mean by worlds and what can be done with them?" (cf. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 10) Next, I take a closer look at world-modelling and this conceptual rethinking in practice.

## 2. Theorising the World: Speculative World-Modelling

The potential of fiction, and especially SFF, to confront grand-scale phenomena – such as climate change, global inequality, or actions of humanity on the species-level – has recently been much discussed in the conversation about the place and purpose of narrative fiction in the so-called Anthropocene epoch (e.g., Clark; Heise; Raipola; Karkulehto et al.; Attebery, "Anthropocene"). Some accounts are fairly optimistic about that potential, others less so. Ursula K. Heise, for instance, finds that "telling stories of entire species, on a planetary scale of space and on a geological scale of time" has always been a genre-distinguishing ability of SF (282), and that its various narrative strategies for "scaling up the imagination" lead the way for other genres of fiction as they seek ways to confront the Anthropocene (300–301). On the other hand, Timothy Clark has expressed scepticism over the very notion that any cultural

representations can truly allow for perception of our world beyond the narrow limits of “the familiar ‘life-world’ that gives us our immediate sense of orientation and of significant context in our lives” (39; cf. Chu 85). Juha Raipola has similarly pointed out that the narrative form itself, when imposed on the “unnarratable matter” of “more-than-human world”, reduces that world into a fundamentally anthropocentric pattern (266–267). Marco Caracciolo, in his take on “cosmic narratives”, splits the difference by focusing on the feeling of “wonder and awe at the sheer scale of the cosmos” (171) elicited by literary engagements with the universe, rather than the possibility of representing that scale. Indeed, it can be the very *failure* of imagination when trying to grasp a world together at a cosmic level that affords the reader an opportunity to reflect on “the parochiality of our own species” (ibid., 203) – a prerequisite, as he sees it, for “tempering” the inevitably anthropocentric orientation of human thinking.

From this discussion on literary confrontation of the Anthropocene, and limitations and failures thereof, emerges a suggestion of a tension between an ethical imperative to reimagine the world in its grand, “more-than-human” scale (e.g., Karkulehto et al.) and the impossibility of truly capturing such a world in writing. *The Moonday Letters* itself also showcases and reflects on this tension. The novel effectively establishes itself as part of the conversation about the Anthropocene from the very beginning by evoking one of the most iconic symbols of the epoch (see Clark 30–31): an image of the whole Earth seen from space.

In silence Earth seems to climb higher, a flawless, rounded drop of water that contains everything: each day, past and future. From this distance, not a single scar is visible on it. It seems to me that if I reached out my hand, I could stroke its surface, stroke it back to sleep. (Itäranta 9)

Despite its play with scale, this particular evocation of the planetary perspective on Earth is likely to be deeply familiar for the reader, rather than estranging. It effortlessly recalls two famous images of the planet: the 1968 Apollo 8 picture “Earthrise” and the 1990 Voyager 1 photograph of a “pale blue dot” on which, in Carl Sagan’s memorable words, “everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives” (6). As Clark has noted about the significance of these famous representations of the planet, “to contemplate the sight of the whole Earth is to think the disjunction between individual perception and global reality” (36). By evoking the symbolism, *The Moonday Letters* effectively announces its intention to examine that disjunction. In the following analyses, I will demonstrate how the novel’s world-modelling involves a stark look at humans’ limited ability to understand or take care of the world – and how the novel confronts its own limited ability, as narrative fiction, to achieve these same goals as well.

Considering world-building as a practice of building grand-scale speculative thought experiments – or theories about worlds – can provide a useful analytical perspective to ways in which novels like *The Moonday Letters* negotiate the limitations of human perception and narrative form in their attempts to grasp a bigger-picture view of the planet and the universe. As I noted earlier, the key function of the sort of intricate world-building typical to SF is to focus attention on the world *as* a model in a dual sense: as a grand-

scale vision of an alternative reality and as a means for addressing grand-scale phenomena in our own reality (cf. McHale, “Science Fiction” 23). Erin James, for one, has suggested that the “sense of worldmaking” fundamental to narrative can, in fact, help us grapple conceptually with the human “rewriting” of the real world involved in the idea of the Anthropocene (187–188). In other words, the sense of worldness in fiction models a grand-scale perspective similar to that needed to come to terms with the real planet Earth as a global entity – as well as human agency in relation to it. With its explicit conceptual engagement with the Anthropocene, *The Moonday Letters* makes its own world-modelling efforts particularly conspicuous as a matter of such renegotiation of human and “more-than-human” versions of reality.

The modelling of an alternative world, then, does not just offer an estranging departure from known reality or even, as McHale has it, empower us “to think of the [real] world as *otherwise than it currently is*” (23, emphasis original). It also constitutes a means for refocusing our perspective on our present reality *as it is*, expanding our capacity to imagine what might be real or possible at this very moment (also Roine 13). The unknown territory that speculative experimentation gropes toward is not something inexistent, either possible or impossible, but rather the grand-scale reality that lies beyond everyday human perception. Since such scales of reality are, as noted in the above-cited discussion on Anthropocene fictions, incomprehensible as such (e.g., Clark 29–30) – and certainly impossible to represent accurately in a form as fundamentally human-scale as narrative fiction (see Fludernik 13; Clark 178; Raipola 263) – SFF world-building orients itself towards the next best thing. It creates experimental models about what that reality *might be like* or how it *could be fruitfully understood* that readily come across as such models, rather than representations of an already-known reality.

Speculation, after all, is an activity that hinges on both a drive to know something and an inability to know it for certain. As a means for interpreting our world, a speculative thought experiment trades the confident yet rigid certainty about how this world works that realist forms of fictional representation adhere to (cf. Oziewicz) for a more questioning and playful outlook. It is conspicuous in both its fictional artifice (cf. Elgin 7) and its ultimate open-endedness. In this outlook, literary speculation is an interpretive activity that is openly oriented towards *provisional and tentative knowledge*. The imaginary worlds built in speculative fiction can, then, be understood as models in a similar sense as the concept is used in scientific discourse: they are *heuristic tools*, or knowingly imperfect yet potentially useful representations (see Frigg and Hunter xvii–xix for an overview; cf. Grishakova et al. 118). Philosopher of science Roman Frigg, for one, has suggested an analogy between such modelling practices in science and fiction: neither relates to the real world per se, but to some simplified, idealised, or otherwise curated and designed version of it, and “competent readers” on either field are expected, however tacitly, to be fully aware of this (257). Catherine Z. Elgin, in her turn, elaborates that instead of depicting our reality as it is,

[m]odels, like other fictions, can simplify, omitting confounding factors that would impede epistemic access to the properties of interest. They can abstract, paring away unnecessary and potentially confusing details. They can distort or exaggerate, highlighting significant aspects of the features they focus on. They can augment, introducing additional elements that focus attention on properties of interest. They can insulate, screening off effects that would otherwise dominate. (8)

In terms of speculative world-building, this means simply that the grand-scale reality the reader can be invited to engage with or experience via fiction is not the universe itself in all its overwhelming scale and complexity (cf. Caracciolo 171), but a visibly designed and hypothetical model of how that universe could be fruitfully understood (cf. Elgin 2). Built to be relatively easy to grasp, such a model of a world therefore offers itself up to be evaluated not in terms of its tenuous credibility or plausibility – never mind its accuracy – as much as its potential explanatory power (as well as, of course, its aesthetic appeal as an artistic object).<sup>3</sup>

Speculative modelling of worlds is in this sense, to put it succinctly, an art of grand-scale *theory-building*. As a heuristic activity, it is oriented towards consolidating some valuable or at least interesting understanding of our own reality, its constitution and possibilities – but in the face of the impossible task of representing the world itself on a grand scale, it approaches that goal via hypothetical models of that world explicitly framed as such. It can therefore provide “epistemic access”, to borrow Elgin’s expression, to phenomena that elude everyday human-scale perception, knowledge, and even comprehension. The world presented in *The Moonday Letters* functions in my following readings as such a heuristic tool: a model that, regardless of its resemblance to any possible reality or lack thereof, is nevertheless geared towards building grand-scale theories about the universe and humanity as part of it.

### **3. A Planetary Experiment: Global Inequality Writ Large**

On the most tangible level of its world-modelling, *The Moonday Letters* presents a vision of an ostensibly possible future where scientific advancement has facilitated relatively fast interplanetary travel, colonisation of the Solar System, and some limited terraforming of other planets, especially Mars. The resulting colonies are prosperous, although it is pointed out that their “wealth and wellbeing are based on systematic long-term exploitation of Earth’s natural resources” (Itäranta 47). Earth itself has been left to degenerate into a poverty-stricken wasteland plagued by environmental disasters. In the grand-scale thought experiments suggested by this model of a world, the ravaged planet plays a dual role. Firstly, it serves as a future-projection for examining great changes brought about by unmitigated climate change. Secondly, it works as an allegorical stand-in for our own world’s global south and exploited working classes in a fairly obvious analogy the novel builds about real-world global politics. Both the vision of a possible future and the analogy of real-world

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, a lot of the above can be – and has been (e.g., Grishakova et al.) – rightly stated about any fictional scenario (cf. Chu 7; McHale 25). The specificity of SFF, in this matter, may in fact lie more in the scales of its speculations than its speculativeness in itself.

politics are, then, readily approachable as models for making sense of planetary-scale phenomena in our present reality: climate change on the one hand and global inequality on the other.

The scenario of a future Earth, with its submerged continents, trash-clogged seas, and impoverished citizens, is designed to model consequences of global warming in a world-historical perspective: what the planet might look like 150 years into the future? The timespan between our present and the novel's present is left as an ellipsis – a common narrative strategy of science fiction for affording readerly engagements with *longue duree*, according to Heise (284–285). As world-historical timescales in SFF go, this one is relatively short, yet it does serve to prompt the reader to fill the gap with their informed speculation. What happened to this world? What has humankind been up to in the intervening decades and centuries? In other words, the omitted span serves to focus readerly attention on grand-scale questions about the world itself, its past and its fate – and because such omission also involves lack of narration that would involve any singular human perspective, the story itself is framed as one about the world as a whole and the collective deeds of humankind as a species within it.

A simple answer to those questions about the world could be found via viewing the scenario as just extrapolation from current circumstances (cf. Landon 25), conceiving of it as a model of a plausible future if climate change continues unhindered on its currently expected trajectory. The presence of commercial interplanetary space travel (for the wealthy) in this world, however, introduces a complicating “what if” factor to the scenario. It raises the possibility that in this world's history, global warming was allowed to run rampant precisely because the affluent classes of the world society, who would have had the most power to mitigate it, instead got to have the proverbial “planet B” after all. Indeed, the plight of Earth is shown not only to be of little concern to the wealthy inhabitants of the colonies, but also to directly benefit them in many ways. It provides them a highly commodified tourist destination as well as a convenient source of cheap immigrant labour to toil in their farms, kitschy holiday resorts, and space ports (Itäranta 85). This “what if” side of the modelled world therefore redirects focus from climate change per se towards the global-scale inequality and exploitation that, the model suggests, is intrinsically tied to it. The model thus augments (cf. Elgin 8) the link between global inequality and global warming, focusing attention on the stark contrast between the lives of the wealthy ruling classes who benefit from the overexploitation of the planet's natural resources and the global poor who bear the consequences.

This thought experiment on planetary-scale injustices ties the future scenario together with another salient theory of the world modelled by *The Moonday Letters*: the analogy of the exploitation of the global south by the global north, blown up to the scale of the Solar System. In this model, Earth is also set up as a stand-in for the former via frequent references to Martians' callous attitudes to its plight, their reluctance to provide humanitarian aid (46–47), and xenophobia towards the Earth-born (100). The relationship between Mars and Earth is depicted in a manner that regularly evokes daily headlines on global politics. For example, there is a mention of “[y]et another vessel left on the orbit by human smugglers ..., this one no larger than a capsule and bursting at the seams with people running from Earth's famine. No survivors”

(94). This readily brings to mind the news about the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015, and desperate people drowning while trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe in packed inflatable boats. Estranged via its expansion to the scale of the Solar System, the scenario is stripped from any connotations of racism or religious prejudice that may accompany our habitual thinking around this humanitarian disaster. The scaling up of global inequality results, then, in an estranging “othering” of all the Earth-born as a homogenous group.

In this play with scales, the common humanity of the desperate refugees is highlighted and their ostensible differences are downplayed. With the habitual divisions and categorisations pared away, any justifications Martians offer for closing their ports from those refugees – “Shouldn’t Mars put its own population first?” (47) – ring conspicuously hollow in their familiar echoes of real-world populist nationalism. In this grand-scale speculation on global inequality, the disregard one faction of humankind holds for the other comes across not only cruel but downright absurd, based as it is on the failure to recognise the obvious common humanity shared by people of Earth and Mars. This world modelled by *The Moonday Letters*, in short, not only pares planetary-scale issues like global inequality and anthropogenic environmental destruction down to their fundamentals, but also makes an urgent case for human unity in the face of planetary-scale challenges. This case is further emphasised by the “pale blue dot” symbolism I noted earlier, which evokes Sagan’s famous notion of Earth as humanity’s only home “in the great enveloping cosmic dark” (7). Next, I take a closer look at how Itäranta’s novel builds a model of this cosmic dark and the place of humanity within it.

#### **4. A Cosmic Experiment: the Unknowable Universe**

The word “cosmos”, as Caracciolo points out in his account on cosmic narratives, refers to a principle by which the universe can be understood as a coherent system (19): an ordering pattern of the universe as a whole. Narratives, understood as fundamental human sense-making devices, can provide such patterns, imperfect as they are (cf. Raipola 267); and providing heuristic tools for comprehending the universe is what both myths and scientific models of the cosmos are commonly considered to do. Kathryn Hume has suggested (121) that the “mythic outlooks” of fantastic narratives “let one view the universe in terms that relate it to a human scale of values”, imposing sense into something unknowable and making it legible (cf. Chu 3). In contrast, Caracciolo sees the point of engaging with cosmic-scale narratives in the poignant consciousness they can invoke of the limitations of human-scale reality – a rebuttal of “human exceptionalism” (200). In its own modelling of the cosmos, *The Moonday Letters* can be seen to test out both of these outlooks. On the one hand, the novel casts mythic imagery and narratives as means by which human beings navigate the incomprehensible vastness of the universe; on the other hand, there is an emphatic suggestion that those narratives fall far short of actually capturing any true understanding of that universe.

In the protagonist Lumi’s narration, there are recurring explicit reflections on the precariousness of human existence within a vast, uncaring universe: “we all know that just outside the fragile sphere of light the dark lays its heavy fingers onto the thick glass. It was here before us and will remain long

after we are gone, hungry, untamed, uninterested in anything but itself” (Itäranta 22–23). For the Earth-born Lumi, even the well-established settlements at relatively close reaches of the Solar System, like the Moon, Mars, and Jupiter’s moon Europa, bring about acute awareness of this fragility. Staring into this incomprehensible cosmic dark gives the protagonist both a thrill – “this was how far I had made it” (19) – and a profound sense of homesickness for the “pallid blue dot” (18) she can, like Voyager 1, just discern in the distance. In the model of a cosmos built by the novel, then, the dark presence of the vast unknowable universe is set to envelope the narrow limits of all that is instinctively familiar and naturally amenable for human perception, represented in Lumi’s narration by the planet Earth:

People who were born and grew up on Mars long for Earth. For the horizon, the open sea, the sky and the sun. Science believes it is because evolution has not caught up with the changes. As a species, we evolved in Earth conditions and for them, not for underground artificial light. (193)

The narration, then, constructs a model of the universe as a whole where Lumi’s personal perspective as she attempts to navigate it and the vast cosmic darkness lying always just outside that perspective are constantly contrasted with each other. With more universal statements like the one quoted above, Lumi’s way of perceiving the world is also generalised on the level of humankind as a species. This, in my reading, suggests a possible grand-scale thought experiment about the relations and disjunctions between human perception of the universe and the reality of that universe in all its incomprehensible vastness (cf. Clark 36) – a contrasting of a human-created cosmic order and the unknowability of the universe itself.

This interplay between human perception and the universe is explored in the novel via Lumi’s efforts to impose workable order to the universe that, despite those efforts, remains mostly dark and unknowable. The disjunction is most thoroughly emphasised in her shamanistic travels to other planes of existence. Through these travels, Lumi has gained an understanding of the cosmic order of this world that is explicitly contrasted with that of her scientist spouse Sol: “Your world is built from science, from what can be proven and measured. My world looks toward that which can be sensed but not shown to others” (139). In this opposition of two “worlds”, the limits of Sol’s version of the cosmos are emphasised, its positivist scientism cast as both naïve and hubristic. In contrast to their<sup>4</sup> conception of the world, where everything that cannot be known for certain gets rejected, the cosmos as Lumi experiences it consists mostly of unknowable matter. It is stated that the spirit realms she traverses “will take the shape the mind gives them” (122) – the only thing she can perceive of that universe is her own attempt to make it legible.

What that attempt mostly consists of is shown to be a matter of constructing narrative patterns in reference to various world mythologies. For example, what Lumi calls a path to other worlds takes a shape that is familiar from several Eurasian mythologies: a world tree (141). A spirit guiding her through the phantasmagorical landscapes of this shamanistic world appears as a “soul-animal” (122), reminiscent of various Indigenous religions, and on one

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<sup>4</sup> Sol is nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns.

trip to an unknown world, she borrows the spool of thread from the Greek Minotaur legend to find her way back (266). Familiar mythic imagery and narratives are thus cast as means for Lumi to impose workable cosmic order to a universe that, in reality, lies entirely outside of her comprehension. Her attempts to bend the spirit realm to her will are also eventually cast as abusive; after badly hurting her soul-animal, she eventually realises that herself (335). In the cosmic order suggested by the novel's world-modelling on the whole, this non-human world is not for the human minds to command by organizing it into anthropocentric patterns.

The grand-scale speculation about a cosmic order in Itäranta's novel, therefore, sets the realm of human existence against the unknowable, fundamentally non-human universe as a matter of humility and wonder, rather than of the former extending its control over the latter (cf. Caracciolo 171). The model of a cosmos it builds highlights the narrow limits of the world that can be related to human scale of perception and values, and also proposes certain serenity before those limits; the protagonist, at least, eventually finds some peace in the acceptance that "[i]t meant nothing to the universe where you walked, or I" (Itäranta 303). Rather than suggesting nihilism or apathy, this emphasis on the indifference of the universe is ultimately framed as another Sagan-esque evocation of "our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known" (Sagan 7; cf. Caracciolo 203) – or the only corner of the universe that readily lends itself to human sense-making efforts, with its horizons, seas, and skies. The novel's grander narrative, implicitly overarching the story of Lumi searching for her missing spouse, is indeed one about saving Earth. To conclude this article, I will briefly discuss how this storyline of *The Moonday Letters* can be read as conceptual experimentation with the potential of SFF world-building itself to serve as a means for utopian thinking.

## 5. A Conceptual Experiment: World-Modelling as Utopian Thinking

In terms of confronting the Anthropocene, speculative fiction is often lauded by scholars and authors alike as a potential vehicle for imagining possibilities for a better future (e.g., Roine 8) or fostering a less anthropocentric world view (e.g., Caracciolo 203; Attebery, *Anthropocene* 24). As Clark notes (18), it is a habitual line of thinking in ecocritical thought to "trace environmental degradation to mistaken knowledge, a false world view" that can ostensibly be altered via engagements with ecocritical writings – fictional, speculative, or otherwise. This "faith that environmental destruction can be remedied by cultural means" (ibid., 19), which Clark regards with some scepticism, is evidently also embraced by Itäranta's novel – or at least its narrator, who justifies her own epistolary writings with a belief that "[s]tories brighten the reality and bring out something unforeseen, they make a little less broken that which bears a fracture upon it" (61). With its overt partaking in the conversation about the Anthropocene, *The Moonday Letters* also positions itself as a participant in a utopian project of imagining the world a little less broken.

Utopia is most usefully understood here, following sociologist Ruth Levitas (xi), as a method rather than a goal: it lies in *the act of imagining*

possibilities for a better future, rather than that imaginary future itself (also Jameson 416; cf. Suvin 60–61). To that end, it is immaterial whether that future is plausible or closely tied to present reality; or, as Lumi puts it, “Sometimes imagination is more important than the truth. Not because it covers the truth, but because it expands it and makes its potential bigger” (78). In its utopian modelling of a future, *The Moonday Letters* explores this importance of imagination by building a scenario of saving Earth that is explicitly framed as implausible, and yet offered up as a vehicle for fostering environmental awareness – and, most crucially, hope. With its story, only slowly emerging from the background of Lumi’s oblivious narration, about a group of activists and scientists dreaming about “a politically, economically and ecologically free planet, purified of its past” (348), the novel casts such dreaming as a fundamental means for humanity to achieve more harmonious coexistence with the rest of the universe.

It is repeatedly pointed out in the course of the story that “[t]here is no magical quick way to fix Earth” (179) and that scientists “are not capable of miracles” (184). Lumi directly evokes the world-historical scale of the challenge with her assertion, “What matters is that we are willing to do slow and tedious and frustrating work in order to improve things bit by bit. Even when we know we’ll never see the results” (180). The “idea of solving ecological problems with one stroke of a magic wand” is thus explicitly framed as a pipe dream a reasonable person could only wish to believe in “for just a while, until the reality hits again” (184). Yet for all this sensible realism, a miracle is exactly what Sol and their group of activists end up performing at the climax of the novel. They introduce to Earth’s oceans a genetically modified fungus which forms a symbiotic relationship with certain seagrasses, stimulating their growth. These seagrasses form a huge carbon sink that is projected to cool the planet’s climate and allow its ecosystems to heal in a relatively short time, and since the fungus would devastate food crops in the colonies, it also forces Earth into a decades-long quarantine, ending its exploitation.

This modelling of a utopia thus blatantly exaggerates the potential of human action to impact the planet’s biosphere and climate. As humans “started a new geological epoch”, the activists in the novel reason, they can also finish it and create a new one, “the Biocene” (347). Something that is conventionally seen as a matter of long-term collective action by humankind is here simplified into a single act by a few individuals – and the sudden collapse of the scale is quite jarring, heavily underscoring the sheer implausibility of the whole scenario. The utopian solution is thus conceptually positioned in this thought experiment into stark tension with its sceptical framing as a “magical quick way to fix Earth.” This contradiction within the utopian scenario can easily come across as a simple, frustrating failure of imagining a true possibility for positive change: the utopia turns, in a cynical reading, into a deconstruction of itself.

However, I find this very failure can also serve its own purpose: it highlights the heuristic quality of the modelled world itself, focusing attention on its limitations as a means for projecting an accurate or actionable vision of the future. This, in turn, enables a conceptual thought experiment about the very purpose and potential of speculative world-modelling for confronting the Anthropocene. The apparent failure of the utopian scenario as a credible thought experiment foregrounds the novel’s practice of grand-scale speculation as an artistic attempt to imagine a hopeful future for the planet – an attempt

which, while failing on the credibility front, still manages to make a case for the importance of that hope. In a subtly self-reflective way, *The Moonday Letters* thus focuses attention on its world itself as a model for imagining such a future: a narrative device and a heuristic tool which, while incapable of producing true actionable knowledge, can still perhaps evoke some vision for aspiring towards a better world. Even in the face of the inevitable failure of its attempt to project such a world, the novel conceptually makes a case for the potential of speculative storytelling itself to engage with the Anthropocene in a provisional yet productive manner.

In fact, the various grand-scale thought experiments I have found premises for in *The Moonday Letters* – be they about global-scale politics, cosmic ordering of the universe, or world-modelling itself as an artistic practice – all share this same sense of a failure of knowledge, or of coming across the limits of imagination. More importantly, however, they also share a striving for understanding despite that failure. In its scenario about climate change and global inequality, the novel comes to emphasise the importance of trying to overcome habitual failures of empathy and recognition involved in human-scale attempts to engage with global challenges – and sets itself up as an almost didactic, if imperfect, means for doing that. In its cosmic experiment, it turns the unknowability of the universe into a case for cherishing the small corner of that universe which does lend itself to human-scale sense-making. Finally, the conceptual thought experiment *The Moonday Letters* builds about speculative world-modelling itself uses the failure of the novel's own utopia to examine the potential such modelling still has to imagine a better future – or at least evoke hope for one.

Itäranta's novel, in conclusion, strives to confront global-scale phenomena, represent a cosmic order, and imagine a post-Anthropocene future – and ends up reflecting on its own limitations as a heuristic tool for accomplishing those things at every turn. As such, it constitutes a fruitful case study for examining how SFF can negotiate the tension, integral to the Anthropocene discussion, between the ethical imperative to confront the grand-scale, more-than-human world and the impossibility of putting such a world in narrative. The models for making sense of our world I have found in *The Moonday Letters* are all, in the end, conspicuous as imperfect heuristic tools, yet still offered up as attempts to gain some understanding of the world, the universe, or human nature on the whole. Producing and entertaining provisional and imperfect knowledge about ultimately unknowable things is, after all, what speculative thinking and writing is all about. Reading *The Moonday Letters* in terms of the grand-scale thought experiments involved in its world-building sheds some light into where the value of such knowledge can lie: its potential for fostering not only critical awareness of the limitations of human-scale thinking, but also wonder, humility, serenity, and hope.

*Biography:* Elise Kraatila, PhD, is currently working on a post-doctoral project (funded by Ella and Georg Ehrnrooth Foundation) concerning global-scale poetics in 21<sup>st</sup>-century speculative fiction. Her work grapples with the ethos and cultural uses of contemporary SFF, especially in relation to scholarly attempts to periodize the 21<sup>st</sup> century and confront challenges Anthropocene poses to narrative fiction. Kraatila's doctoral dissertation (Tampere University, 2021) concerns the potential of fantasy to respond to the sense of an impossibility of realistic representation in contemporary literature. She has

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also previously published peer-reviewed articles on literary speculation as a means for confronting the current post-truth discourse (2019) and for reaching beyond postmodernist suspicion of master narratives (2021).

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AS A RESEARCHER, I DON'T WANT TO SPECULATE...

IT'S TOO LATE!  
THE SKELETON IS ALREADY INSIDE YOU;

IN RESEARCH, SPECULATION IS CALLED THEORIZING OR HYPOTHESIZING.



**SPECULATION**  
YOUR HONOR!

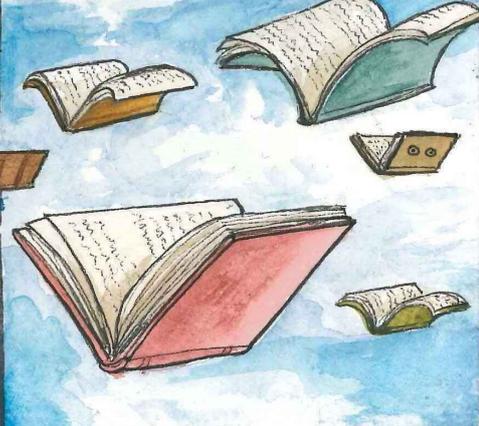
AND IF THE COURT DID NOT SPECULATE ABOUT PEOPLE'S THOUGHTS AND INTENTIONS, COULD THERE BE ANY EMPATHY-OR JUSTICE?



**OVERRULED.**

'SPECULATIVE FICTION' IS OFTEN CONSIDERED SYNONYMOUS WITH 'LOW-BROW' GENRE FICTION

IN FACT, ALL FICTION IS SPECULATIVE BY DEFINITION. IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW CLOSELY IT MODELS REALITY. IT WOULDN'T BE FICTION IF IT DIDN'T ALSO DEPART FROM REALITY...



← YOU'RE ALREADY SPECULATING.

SOMETIMES WE CAN ONLY DISCOVER REALITY...

... BY DEPARTING FROM IT.

YOU CAN ONLY ARRIVE TO KNOWN BY APPROACHING UNKNOWN

FOR SOME, THIS IS HORRIFYING...

We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was never meant we should voyage far.



...WHILE OTHERS VIEW THE UNKNOWN AS A SEA OF POSSIBILITIES.

EXPLORING IT REQUIRES SPECULATING: IMAGINING SOMETHING COULD BE FOUND, AND DEVICING THE MEANS OF FINDING IT.

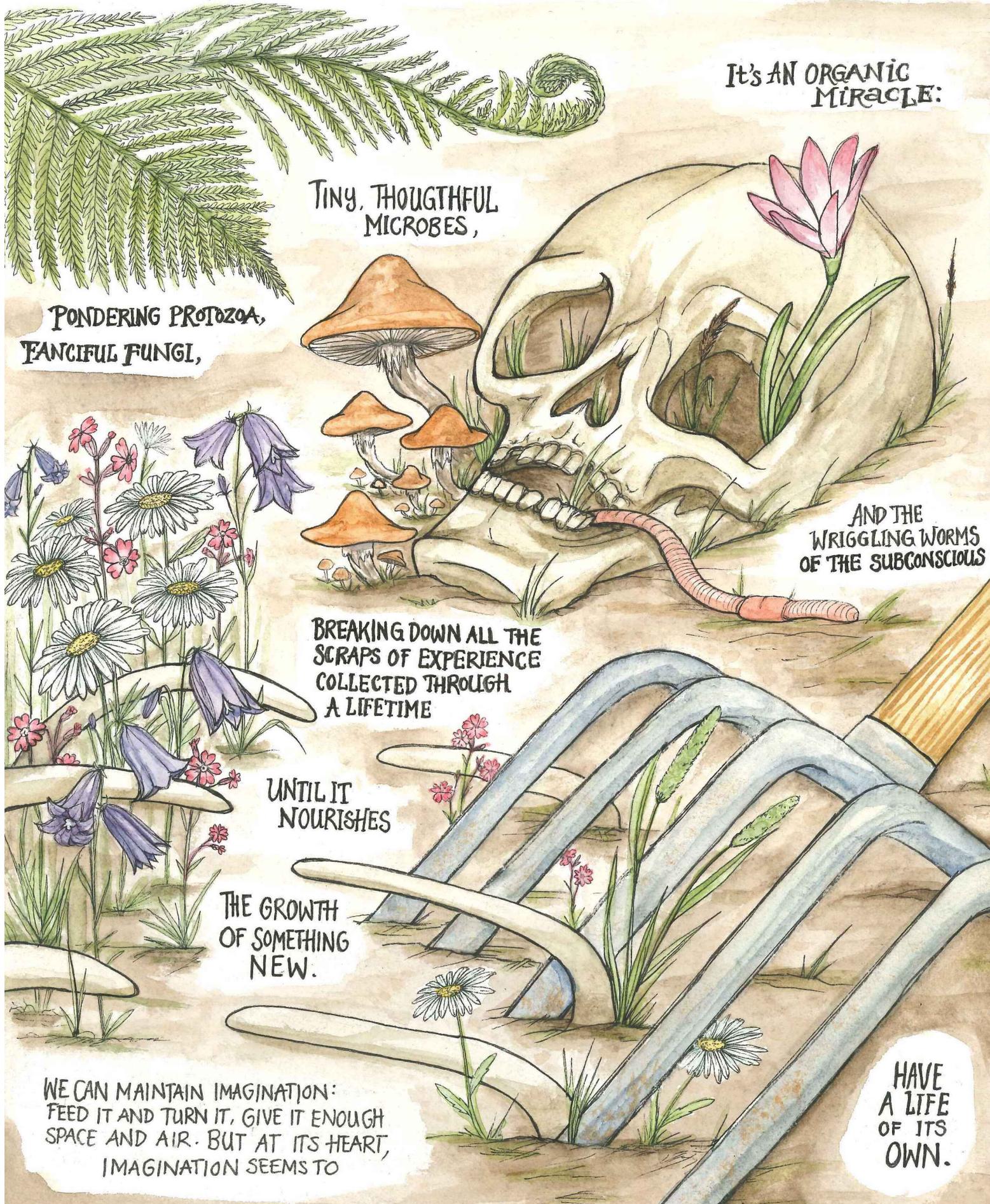


IN OTHER WORDS, ONE MUST GAZE SIMULTANEOUSLY TO THE HORIZON AND SOMEWHERE DEEP INSIDE.



A SPECULUM IS, AFTER ALL, AN INSTRUMENT FOR PEEKING INSIDE.

HOWEVER, MANY OF THE PROCESSES GOING ON INSIDE US REMAIN UNSEEN AND UNPREDICTABLE, STRANGELY TRANSFORMATIVE AND RATHER MYSTERIOUS. PERHAPS THIS IS WHY SO MANY PROFESSIONAL SPECULATORS - AUTHORS AND RESEARCHERS - FAVOR THE METAPHOR OF COMPOST.



IT'S AN ORGANIC  
MIRACLE:

TINY, THOUGHTFUL  
MICROBES,

PONDERING PROTOZOA,  
FANCIFUL FUNGI,

AND THE  
WRIGGLING WORMS  
OF THE SUBCONSCIOUS

BREAKING DOWN ALL THE  
SCRAPS OF EXPERIENCE  
COLLECTED THROUGH  
A LIFETIME

UNTIL IT  
NOURISHES

THE GROWTH  
OF SOMETHING  
NEW.

WE CAN MAINTAIN IMAGINATION:  
FEED IT AND TURN IT, GIVE IT ENOUGH  
SPACE AND AIR. BUT AT ITS HEART,  
IMAGINATION SEEMS TO

HAVE  
A LIFE  
OF ITS  
OWN.

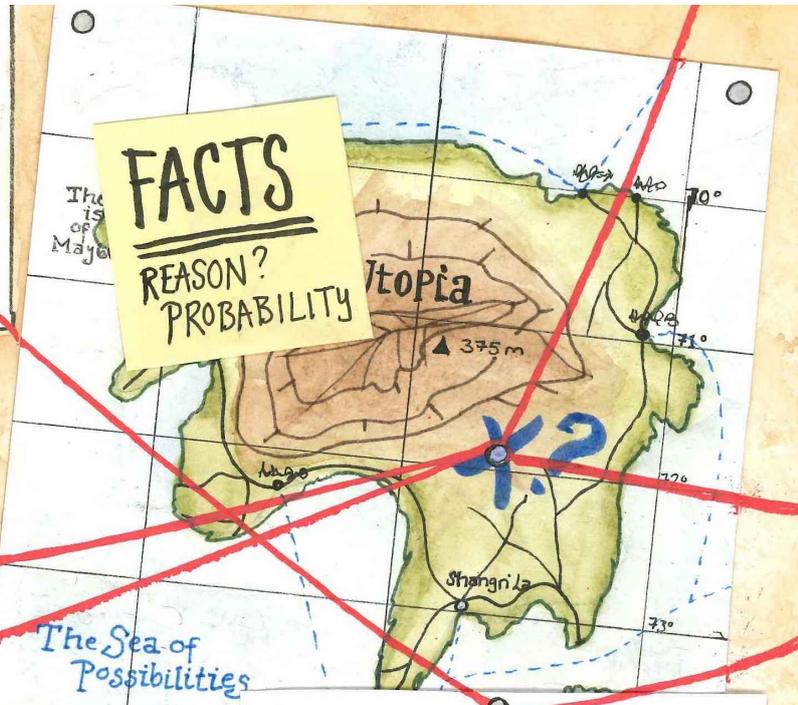
In speculation, the fruits from this fertile soil are consolidated with other types of knowledge and cognition...

LIKE WHAT?



FACTS

REASON?  
PROBABILITY

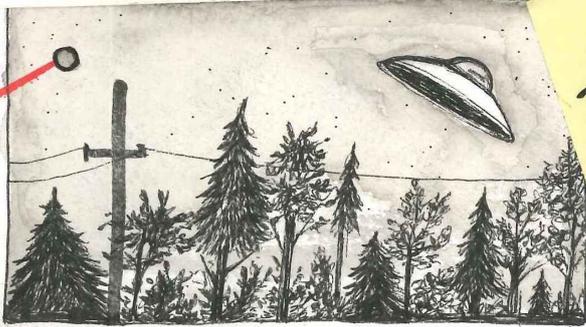


IT'S ABOUT  
CONNECTING  
THE DOTS!!

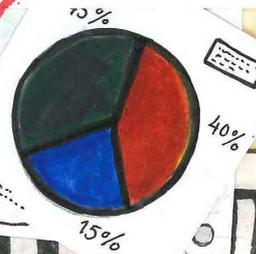
In research, speculations are

- systematic
- careful (Conservative?)
- tested against data etc.

EMOTION??



SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS  
IN THE FACE OF UNCERTAINTY.



POST-TRUTH ERA

Excessive speculations can lead to Conspiracy theories



SPECULATION  
HAS A DARK SIDE

INTENTION

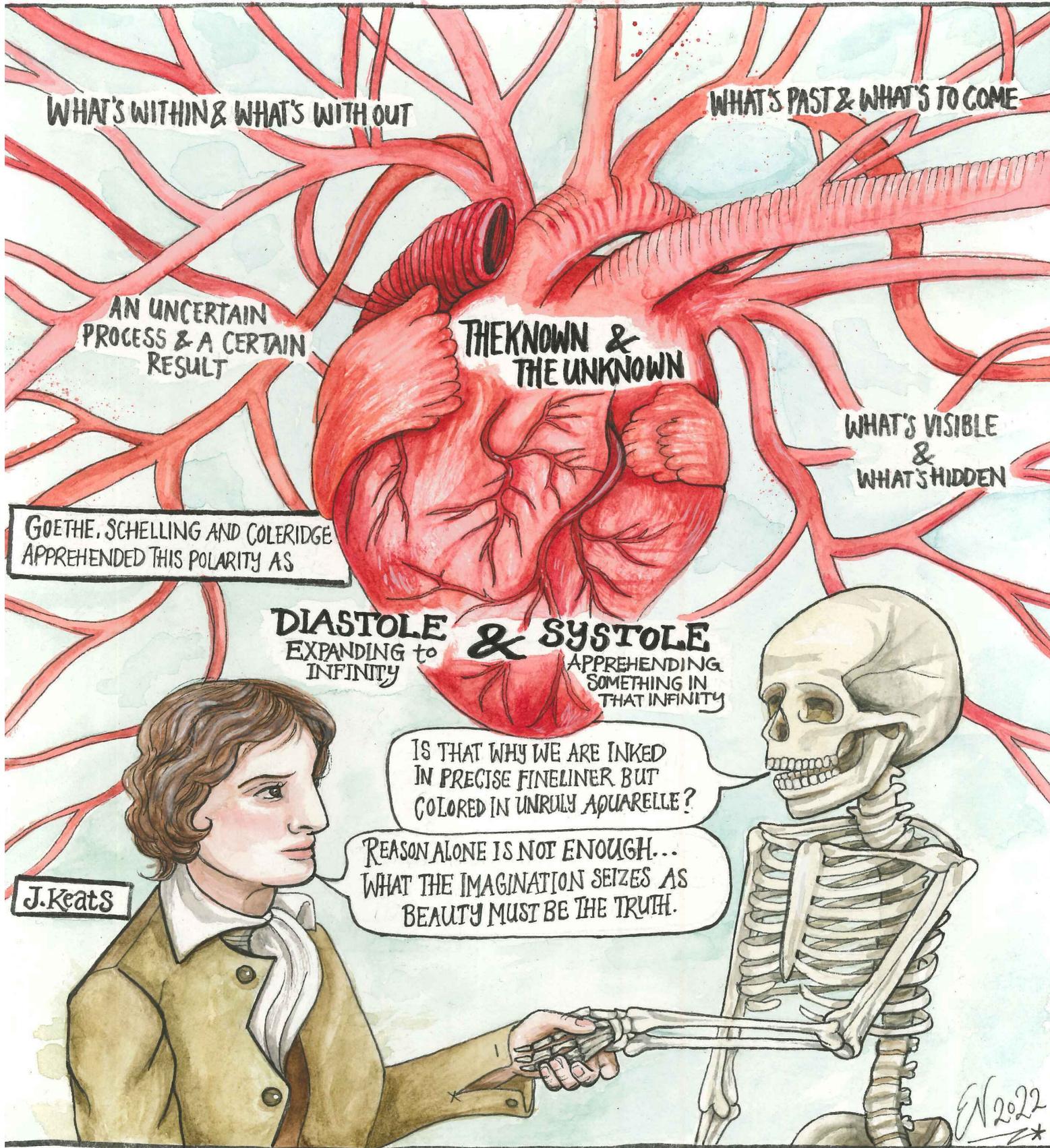
UNCERTAINTY = FEAR  
↳ ANY/ALL ANSWERS  
ALLIATE FEAR



Like any powerful resource, speculation can be used to serve various interests in various appropriate or inappropriate contexts. It can also draw from valid or invalid information.

This is one reason why recognising and understanding speculation matters.

SO, IT SEEMS THAT SPECULATION IS, IN FACT, A COMPLEX COGNITIVE BALANCING ACT.  
IT REQUIRES RECOGNIZING AND RECONCILING



GOETHE, SCHELLING AND COLERIDGE APPREHENDED THIS POLARITY AS

J. Keats

IS THAT WHY WE ARE INKED IN PRECISE FINELINER BUT COLORED IN UNRULY AQUARELLE?

REASON ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH... WHAT THE IMAGINATION SEIZES AS BEAUTY MUST BE THE TRUTH.

THE ROMANTICS UNDERSTOOD THAT NO MATTER HOW MUCH FACTS AND REASON ARE NEEDED AND APPRECIATED, WE CANNOT ESCAPE THE IMAGINATIVE BONES IN OUR BODIES. WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF CONTEMPORARY THINKERS AND ACADEMICS STOPPED BEING AFRAID OF THE SKELETON AND LEARNED INSTEAD TO DANCE WITH IT? PERHAPS IT IS WORTH SPECULATING.



## The Skeleton is Already Inside You: A Metaphoric Comic on Speculation

*Essi Varis*

Did you read the comic yet? If not, go read it now! It is about skeletons, so you will probably find it quite exciting! Then, you can come back here and read this accompaniment, if you like.

Alright, for those of you who have made it this far, I can now reveal that the comic is not really about skeletons at all. It is about speculation, which I have researched, primarily in the framework of cognitive literary studies, for the past couple of years.<sup>1</sup> That probably sounds a little less exciting than skeletons, and the project is still ongoing, so I cannot say exactly how speculation works yet. However, I hope to have highlighted some of the reasons why we speculate and demonstrated that we often do so by engaging with texts and images, narratives, concepts, and metaphors.

Because our imaginative activities are so intertwined with imaginative texts and pictures, I did not want to write just another article; I wanted to publish something that would force both me and the readers to think about the mysteries of speculation in a more creative and unexpected way – in a way that encourages further speculation and interpretation. After all, one of my main motivations for researching speculation is my conviction that the creativity fueling artistic endeavors and the creativity required for innovative research are, at heart, the one and the same cognitive force. They are both intertwined with imagination and work through many of the same mental habits, like curiosity, flexibility, intuition, and reflection. However, they have to be aimed towards very different ends – such as Truth or Beauty<sup>2</sup> – and pushed through

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<sup>1</sup> This comic was made as a part of my postdoctoral research project, *Metacognitive Magic Mirrors: How Texts and Images Enable and Extend Imagination* (2020–2025). The project is funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation and carried out in the Universities of Jyväskylä, Helsinki, and Oslo.

<sup>2</sup> Although, as John Keats would maintain, these two may also be the same thing (Forman 68–69).

very different socio-cultural moulds – such as peer-reviews or newspaper critiques. This ultimately produces very different end results.

I have often felt that both my artistic and academic outputs leave behind some unspoken, unseen, underutilised residue that would have been brought to the forefront if only the same ideas had gone through the other creative pipeline – if only I had been able to make art instead of doing research, and if only I had been able to do research instead of making art. It is precisely this residue that the present publication aims to salvage: the comic enacts my artistic, metaphoric understanding of my research topic, whereas this text you are reading now attempts to explain and analyse some of the conceptual and procedural insights gained from creating it. Each reader will likely need or appreciate one type of understanding more than the other, but as far as I know, presenting both together is also quite rare, and therefore, hopefully helpful or interesting to some.

## Thinking through Comics, Metaphors, and Speculation

In short, this project aims to highlight three methods, modes or tools of thinking that are rarely used in academia with any overt or serious intent: comics, metaphors, and speculation. Admittedly, all three are at odds with the positivist ideals of science. Images and figurative language can appear vague and subjective compared to the precise, operationalised parlance of lab reports, and speculation is something that ventures beyond empiric evidence by definition. I would argue, however, that no great discoveries or innovations were ever achieved by precise and objective measurement of evidence alone; research and science also call for creative, flexible, lateral, and expansive thinking (cf. Leavy 5–16). As Patricia Leavy writes, “metaphor, symbolism, and imagination already guide qualitative ‘scientific’ practice, although within the shadows” (264). Perhaps this all too often neglected side of the inquiring mind could be engaged, fostered, and facilitated better with the kind of materials that definitive, linear, and logical lines of thinking reject – such as the visual, embodied, and playful affordances of comics, metaphors, and speculations?

Comics have already proven themselves quite effective in communicating both abstract concepts and empirical research findings. Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (1993) is a classic in the field of comic studies in spite of being a comic, and the works of Joe Sacco have sketched compelling outlines for a new form of inquiry dubbed “comics journalism” (El Refaie). Yet, comics by researchers, comics for researchers, and comics as an integral part of the research process remain few and far in between. Some of the rare pioneers include Matteo Farinella, Uta Frith and Chris Frith, who explain central concepts of neuroscience in their comics, as well as Nick Sousanis, who managed to earn a doctorate in education with his comic-form dissertation, *Unflattening* (2015). Sousanis’ work explicitly presents the medium of comics as a powerful research and teaching tool that does not aim for closure in the manner of natural sciences, but promotes more open, imaginative understanding of the world and the human mind (71–97; cf. Leavy 12–15, 264–265). He also notes that excluding pictorial thinking and expression from academic contexts is a waste, because even if drawn images would not meet the positivist standards of precision or objectivity, they could

be used in other ways, to widen, deepen, and perhaps even test the validity of language-based research writing (Sousanis 31–67). Moreover, as the Friths' and Farinella's works illustrate, drawn images have the power of communicating research findings in a way that is exceptionally concrete, immediate, and relatable.

The drawbacks of creating research comics are that the process is, of course, fairly time-consuming, and it requires skills that are typically not part of researchers' professional training. So, thankfully, metaphorical thinking affords some of the same benefits as comics – it makes the abstract and the invisible more concrete, embodied, and memorable – and it is something the human mind does almost automatically. As per George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's classic theory, conceptual thinking is "fundamentally metaphorical by nature": we understand the semantics of various concepts by mapping them on embodied experiences or by relating them to each other in virtual space (3). Similarly, Terence Cave maintains that metaphors are not "just" metaphors but an integral part of our cognitive ecology (142); they organise our behaviour and open new paths for thought and action (Lakoff and Johnson 7–9).

Traditionally, metaphors have been understood as vague semiotic signs, where the connotative vehicle simultaneously stands for and obscures the denoted tenor. While this is, perhaps, detrimental to the precision expected from positivist language, the mutable connections that metaphors suggest between concepts also leave space for speculation and exploration. That is to say, metaphoric association is an effective way of finding new, creative connections between various concepts across various domains, which in turn can lead to heightened understanding or innovation (Lakoff and Johnson 139–146). In this sense, metaphors do not necessarily obscure the denotative meaning, but rather, add to it in terms of depth and nuance, and even in terms of embodiment and movement (Cave 67–69). They are a concise linguistic strategy for inviting imaginative, associative "as if" thinking, "an economical short-cut to a virtual expansion" (ibid. 77), or a device that "unites imagination and reason" (Lakoff and Johnson 193).

In my experience, metaphors can be used to think through (narratological) theories in a surprisingly systematic manner (Varis *Graphic Human Experiments*). An apt, novel metaphor provides something of an alternative mould for the existing theory. This allows deconstructing the traditional way of thinking and testing its components against the new metaphor through rearrangement: what fits, what doesn't, where the conceptual gaps and seams lie, and is there something everyone has overlooked so far? Of course, just like every theoretical approach, every metaphor makes some aspects and issues of the target theory more salient than others, but this partiality can be counteracted, for example, by employing several alternative metaphors, as I have done in this comic.

All in all, both comics and metaphors afford multimodal and embodied, associative and open-ended ways of thinking. Therefore, they might prove especially valuable for the investigation of such complex topics that traditional positivist methods have struggled to explain. Perhaps it is no coincidence that so many of the few pioneers of research comics have been neuroscientists, as the study of cognition has been undergoing a seismic paradigm shift. In the past few decades, more and more researchers across disciplinary boundaries have questioned the cognitivist idea of the mind as a symbol-crunching brain-

machine and have, instead, started to view cognitive action as an embodied process that extends into various tools, environments, and creaturely relations (Varela et al.). Navigating this wider, interwoven landscape of consciousness requires radical redefinition of many cognitive processes, especially such complex activities as creativity, imagination, and speculation (ibid. 147–148).

As stated above, this comic focuses on the smallest of the three: speculation. It is by no means a popular research term (yet) – on the contrary, I have heard numerous colleagues to either apologise for speculating or even flat-out refuse to speculate. In many contexts, this is commendable; recognising and labelling speculation as speculation is important in the so-called post-truth era. Yet, for the same end, I believe it is helpful to define and investigate speculation further, rather than look away from it. Here, my working definition for speculation is: “a cognitive or artistic act of approaching or exploring an unknown or uncertain area or phenomenon in terms of possibility, through the playful or strategic use of imagination, as modified by one’s own perspective and the known circumstances”.<sup>3</sup>

As one might gather, this definition covers a rather large area of grounded, intentional imagining – the kind of imagining that creative research demands. This suggests that in some contexts, speculation could be embraced as a useful method, rather than rejected as an unscientific error. This is certainly how it is viewed among creative writers: fantasy and horror authors “simply” fabulate or make things up without explicit methodical limitations, whereas science fiction authors are considered to speculate or extrapolate – that is, to approach the realm of possible in a rational, systematic manner (see Varis “Kuinka kirjailija spekuloi?” in this issue). Thus, if metaphors can be considered “imaginative rationality”, as Lakoff and Johnson suggest (193), speculation could perhaps be dubbed rational imagination. Moreover, as the comic indicates, some limited forms of speculation – such as mind-reading or projecting the future – may be just as unavoidable as thinking through conceptual metaphors. Thus, if everyone is going to have to speculate either way, even scientists prioritising precision and objectivity might prefer to speculate openly and mindfully, rather than covertly or unwittingly.

Yet, the main benefit of speculation is the same as that of comics and metaphors: it creates openings, not closures. When used responsibly, it asks, guesses, and hypothesises, rather than claims, proves, or declares, thus reserving space for uncertainty, where new creative connections and discoveries can be born. This is, perhaps, where research and science often begin – but it is typically erased from the finished results and reports. Comics are the complete opposite of this kind of research writing, where every term is carefully defined, and every gap closed so tightly that all that remains is the certainty of new knowledge, and only an expert reader could possibly step in to question anything. Comics’ primary way of meaning-making, by contrast, is simply juxtaposing different elements: there is rarely an explicit “however”, “therefore” or “and” between two panels. Instead, it is ultimately the reader’s task to find the logic, cohesion, or “closure” (McCloud). In this sense, comics narration, much like metaphoric language, is ultimately an invitation to

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<sup>3</sup> We arrived at this definition with my colleague Hanna-Riikka Roine following a concept workshop organised at the University of Oslo in May 2022. I would like to thank all the participants of the workshop for helping us refine our understanding of speculation.

associate, compare and connect – to reside in the potentials of complex meaning (Lakoff and Johnson 192–194; Sousanis 61–63). Thus, one could say it is also close akin to speculation and its open exploration of possibilities within given parameters.

All this considered, it is quite clear that metaphoric comics will never replace analytic research writing as such; they will always be more ambiguous and more open to interpretation. However, these qualities should no longer be considered flaws that disqualify comics or metaphors as forms of academic communication. On the contrary, they could also be seen as strengths that have the potential of energising an entirely new kind of research writing – a kind of writing that does not aim to provide final, definitive answers for the reader but, rather, invites them to participate in the process of wondering, searching, and speculating. Alternatively, as the field of research comics expands, we could start dividing them into different genres, each with slightly different aims and advantages. Science and research could well benefit, for example, from schematic summaries resembling conference posters or infographics, from talking-head comics explaining established science (e.g. McCloud, Frith et al.), from comics and sketches documenting field research, as well as from comics produced in the process of exploring some abstract topic (e.g. Sousanis and this comic).

Yet, as long as academic comics remain a relatively unexplored frontier, making one is also an experiment in and of itself. So far, there are no guidebooks for approaching your research with the help of comics, so every attempt at something like this is very much a speculative cycle of trial and error. Crossing this uncertain sea can lead to failure – indeed, I find it quite impossible to assess whether the finished comic can give anything of value to anyone else – but it also fosters genuine creativity – which always entails some degree of learning and discovery. That is to say, even if the end product fails to engage its readership, the process has already given me some new insights into the topic of speculation and taught me many things about creative thought and the composition of comics. In order to share some of this understanding, I will next indulge in a bit of “shop talk” and explain how this first comic I have ever published came to be.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes on the Creative Process

All five pages of this comic were created with Winsor & Newton watercolour, white Winsor & Newton drawing ink, Sakura Pigma Sensei markers, and Sakura Pigma Micron fineliners on Hahnemühle Bamboo Mixed Media paper (24 x 32 cm, 265 g/m<sup>2</sup>). Admittedly, watercolour is not a particularly popular medium for creating comics, because it does not provide very practical means of achieving the qualities that comics usually aim for: simplified, legible images that are speedy to create and easy to reproduce. On the contrary, the subtle tones and slightly unpredictable effects, which are the hallmarks of watercolour painting, are somewhat at odds with the clean linework that usually forms the backbone of a well-executed comic. However, as the skeleton remarks on page

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<sup>4</sup> For context, it should be noted that I have not received any professional training for visual arts, but have attended art classes for about 15 years as a hobby.

5, this tension between the fluidity of watercolour and the preciseness of the fineliners is the main reason I chose this somewhat impractical technique.

Comics tend to be especially impactful and irreplaceable when their material or pictorial forms either reinforce or add new layers to their narrative meanings. Prominent examples of this include David Mazzucchelli's graphic novel *Asterios Polyp* (2009), where the variance of colours and line qualities provides arguably stronger characterisation of the protagonists than the narration or the dialogue, and Mari Ahokoivu's *Oksi* (2019), whose folk-artsy, highly simplified graphic style underlines the mythical quality of the creatures depicted in the story. While I do not claim this 5-page experiment to be on the same level artistically, the motivation behind its material genesis is the same. If speculation is a logical fantasy, a rational daydream, or an educated guess, what better way to meditate on it than by bringing together definite, unerasable lines and paints that unavoidably live a life of their own within and beyond those lines? Just like speculation, the ink and wash technique is a compromise between control and flexibility.

Page 4 is slightly different from all the other pages, because it is also a collage. That is, many of the elements "pinned" to the board are assorted pieces of scrap paper that I glued on the thicker mixed media stock. The assemblage also incorporates a quartered post-it note and a very low-resolution picture of George Orwell, which I cut from an 1984 issue of *Image*, University of Oslo's English students' culture zine. I found the issue laying around at a university copy room and wanted to make use of it because – again – this is exactly how creativity and imagination work. We gather bits and pieces, little morsels of material and inspiration wherever we go, and incorporate them – sometimes quite haphazardly – into whatever we happen to be creating at the time, or years and years further down the line.

All told, creating this comic took almost one semester – about four months – and looking at the entire process step-by-step, it becomes clear that my habitual artistic processes and research processes entered into a sort of dialogue where each took the lead in turn, usually when the other did not know how to continue. First, I started outlining the script the same way I would outline any research paper: by compiling a list of keywords and themes and looking for ways to group or connect them. Second came the sketching of the storyboards, which in turn resembled my regular drawing process. That is to say, I put logic and argumentation on hold and concentrated only on imagery and composition, laying out my chosen metaphors across four pages in a way that felt interesting or aesthetic. I also scribbled some initial notes for the textual elements straight between the sketches, without thinking about them too much. Third, I turned back to my researcher's playbook again: I prepared cleaner versions of the storyboards and typed out a script, so that I could seek feedback from my colleagues.<sup>5</sup> Their thoughts and reactions really helped me to reassess the script and its readability. Most importantly, I understood, on the one hand, that mixing several metaphors on one page confused the concepts

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<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Karin Kukkonen, Merja Polvinen, Hanna-Riikka Roine, and the participants of *The Northern Star* symposium 2022 (October 17–18 in Nord University, Bodø) for all their helpful suggestions and encouraging comments. I hope you can see how big a difference your input made!

behind them, but on the other hand, I also needed to add some recurring elements for the sake of cohesion.

As I often do in my processes of both academic and artistic creation, I let these thoughts rest – or indeed, compost – for some weeks in the back of my mind, until the vision for the revised storyboards started to emerge. I decided to leave the first and the final page – both of which featured a skeleton – more or less intact, but re-drew the pages in between them, so that each page would focus on one type of metaphor but also feature the skeleton in some shape or form. Separating the metaphors from each other like this required adding one more page, and the comic thus expanded from four to five pages in total.

For most of this revision stage, I was thinking almost entirely in pictures again, and inked and coloured each page as I would any other painting. However, while I was rendering the shapes and textures, I noticed I had to reconsider each of the metaphors in a more careful, personal, and embodied way than before: I had to remember how being on an open sea feels like and find out how composts work, for instance. This ultimately helped me to rewrite all the verbal components, page by page. First and foremost, I wanted to avoid explaining and keep the language quite concrete and evocative – so that the words would also show more than tell. Finally, once all the pages were done, I still decided to recreate the entire page 2, because its colour palette and lettering were too different from those of the other pages. One might consider such attention to aesthetics unnecessary when it comes to research publications, but personally, I believe constant reassessment and revision to be vital for all kinds of professional creativity, whether academic or artistic.

Overall, it is clear that my experience as a professional researcher and my experience as an amateur artist both shaped the process and the product in equal measures, and for the most part, I felt that these previously separate reserves of procedural knowledge complemented each other surprisingly well. There is no question that utilising the academic practice of analytical feedback helped to deepen and sharpen the ideas the comic aims to communicate, but the embodied, meditative process of painting also shaped both the script of the comic and my more general understanding of speculation. Overall, this new hybrid mode of creating was an eye-opening and successful metacognitive journey that I would happily take again.

Yet, the feeling remains that logic and revision always inevitably chip away at something – the rawness and fullness of the original vision – whereas the material and aesthetic flourishes distract from something else – perhaps some pseudo-Platonic idea of what I think I “actually” mean. After several hours of wordless painting, I would often find it difficult to pin down the conceptual structures I wanted to communicate, let alone to rephrase the textual elements. The argumentation, the writing, and the painting – while somehow converging in the same process – are such different modes of thinking that I could not immerse myself in them completely simultaneously. I usually needed to physically step away from the desk, take a break, and re-approach, if I wanted to think of the material I was working on in a different way – as concepts, as images, or as text. Thus, as the step-by-step breakdown of the process also suggests, bringing together different aims, modalities and skills in a complex creative project is something of a relay race, where one’s attention and working memory must be tuned to different levels and components alternately. In other words, bringing together artistic and academic creativity likely hinges on one’s

ability to control one's attention and cognitive resources – one must learn which mode to “switch on” at each juncture and how to do it.

## **References and Explanations (for Those Who Want Them)**

All I can hope is that I juggled these modes well enough to create some sort of a balance between them. If not, there is a danger that the words and images do not communicate much, or conversely, that one or the other seems unnecessary for expressing the ideas discussed in the comic. Yet another challenge is presented by the fact that comics are something of a niche medium; some read them voraciously and others scarcely at all. So, in the following, I have compiled some additional page-by-page notes for those who might feel lost in the gutters. However, these are not meant to explain the entire comic away or contradict any other interpretations the reader might have. If these modest five pages inspire any new ideas in any readers at all, I have achieved what I set out to achieve.

### **Page 1: The Skeleton**

The first page nudges the reader to notice how much they already speculate, whether they like it or not. The word “speculation” has gained a negative ring in contemporary culture, because it is most often used to label instances where someone departs egregiously from facts, evidence, or consensus. In such cases, it can become almost synonymous with falsification, manipulation, or escapism. Yet, if speculation is defined as departure from certainty, it is necessary for our very survival.

We come face to face with uncertainty every day: the future eludes us, as do the minds of other people and creatures. Our knowledge, understanding, and perspective are limited. So, how could we possibly plan, dream, socialise, or empathise without employing some cognitive strategies for grappling with the unknown? Speculation could be construed as something of an umbrella term for such strategies, which include, for instance, the theory of mind or “mind-reading” (Zunshine), and science fiction's large-scale speculations of the future (see Kraatila in this issue). All kinds of theories and forecasts, which are often accepted at face value, are also speculations in disguise (cf. Older in this issue). It does not matter how likely or unlikely, tangible or intangible the discussed possibilities are; as long as they are virtual, unrealised, or unverifiable, they belong to the purview of speculation – for the time being. After all, many of the uncertainties out there will turn into certainties sooner or later, and speculation can act as the scout or the vanguard that helps us to prepare for them.

A skeleton seemed like the perfect figure for guiding the reader through the comic because skeletons and all the speculations we must perform against all the uncertainty are unsettling for the same reason: they remind us of our own limits and mortality. Yet, as the “2spooky4me” internet meme jokingly points out, they have been inside us all along, completely inescapable. So, rather than trying to forget them, would it not be more beneficial to acknowledge and

accept them? In the case of skeletons, this is usually accomplished by evoking the phrase “memento mori”, remember you are mortal. Perhaps a similar phrase should be linked to speculation as well, to keep us awake to our own imaginations?

## **Page 2: The Sea**

The second page stages uncertainty with the help of a familiar spatial metaphor: an uncharted sea, where weathers change unpredictably, and something is always hidden just behind the horizon. Describing imagination through the metaphor of a vast, mysterious space is extremely common among speculative fiction writers, possibly because it marries well with the kind of world-building that is central to the genre (see Kraatila and Bark Persson in this issue), or because it feeds into an embodied understanding of speculation as exploration. Margaret Atwood, for example, talks about going beyond the edges of maps, towards more unstable “cartographies” (67); Philip Pullman describes the “wild wood” of imagination, through which a writer must pick a path (89); and Emmi Itäranta explains she needs to “take distance” or “go to a different place” in order to get her imagination working properly (see Varis “Kuinka kirjailija spekuloi?” in this issue). The page also incorporates a rather famous quote from horror author H. P. Lovecraft’s short story “The Call of Cthulhu”. His stories, overall, continue the old maps’ “Here Be Dragons” tradition by populating the vast, unknowable depths of the ocean and outer space with unimaginable monsters. The edges of charted space thus approximate the edges of consciousness and imagination in speculative fiction.

Scientists and researchers, for their part, tend to approach the unknown more methodically, little by little. They usually manage their affordances – make invisible visible or extend their reach – with the help of various tools and instruments (cf. Varis “Strange Tools and Dark Materials”). This is represented by the boat, the spyglass, and the speculum, and contrasted by (the infamously racist) Lovecraft, who only sits on his island, unwilling to engage with his surroundings.

## **Page 3: The Compost**

The third page concretises another group of metaphors that has been used to describe imagination almost as frequently as the uncharted spaces. Authors and researchers alike have repeatedly compared imagination to a natural phenomenon that lives and grows organically, transforming memories and experiences into something new, like a cocoon changes a caterpillar or a season a landscape. Neil Gaiman likens imagination to a garden (47) and myths to a compost (55); Ray Bradbury muses on a mysterious subconscious process that ferments his memories into fictions, which he in turn compares to dandelion wine (79–81); and Donna Haraway states no more or less than that “we are all compost” (161).

It has been generally believed, at least since Samuel Taylor Coleridge, that imagination must simply be a matter of recombining remembered ideas and experiences in new ways (ch. 13; cf. Lachman 121–122). Gaiman, likewise,

quotes Lord Dunsany saying that “Bricks without straw are more easily made than imagination without memories” (54). Of course, on some level, we understand that this must also be how a compost works: it transforms scraps into rich, new soil by allowing their structures to break down and reassemble. But when this happens on minuscule, unseen, molecular scales, the process becomes so difficult to predict, record, or understand that it might as well be magic. Indeed, there are still many mechanisms and elements about the imagination itself that remain unexplored, uncertain, or unknown – and hence, a matter of speculation. This is why asking authors – professional speculators – to describe imagination may still be one of the best leads to understanding its functioning (see Varis “Kuinka kirjailija spekuloi?” in this issue).

### **Page 4: The Conspiracy**

In contrast to the perceived naturalness of imagination, the speculations drawing from it – whether theories or works of fiction – are typically considered intentionally crafted, and thus, more artificial or less real. Indeed, defining speculation as a “cognitive or artistic strategy” implies that it can be used for altruistic as well as malicious ends, in moderation as well as in excess, in appropriate as well as in inappropriate contexts. Thus, the purpose of page 4 is to caution the reader of the potential risks and dangers of speculation.

As I have argued, speculation is a powerful, necessary component in creativity, and it can connect the fabrications of artists and the inquiries of researchers in various fruitful ways. However, if the lines between these domains are crossed blindly, uncritically, or with ill intent, the results can be more harmful than beneficial. That is to say, the cognitive procedures of speculation are so familiar from the valid scientific and philosophical theories that they might feel unduly convincing in the context of conspiracy theories as well. Conspiracies seem alluring partly because they offer alternatives to uncomfortable realities and convince the believers that by subscribing to such unpopular versions of the events, they are finally thinking for themselves – listening to their own reason. These illusions only make sense because creativity also requires connecting the dots and finding combinations that are not obvious to others, and academia also encourages the Socratic method of questioning everything. These are not inherently bad or wrong things to do, nor should speculation or its products be considered inherently suspicious. However, it is important to stay alert and aware of the limits and contexts of speculating, so that its products would not be mistaken for something that they are not.

### **Page 5: The Heartbeat**

So, how should researchers balance between reckless, uncritical speculation and the equally unhelpful rejection of speculation? The final page summarises some helpful suggestions offered by 19th-century poets and philosophers, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Friedrich von Schelling. These Romantic thinkers understood the relationship between knowledge and imagination quite differently from their positivist predecessors and contemporaries. The speech bubble attributed to Keats, for

example, is a paraphrase from a letter he wrote to Benjamin Bailey on November 22, 1817. In it, the poet states that he has “never been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning [sic]” and that he is “certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination”. “What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not – –” (Forman 68–69).

Most scientists living today would probably dismiss these thoughts as an overly sentimental opinion of a long-dead poet, but on the flip side, the aforementioned Romantic thinkers would equally lament a positivist, late-capitalist worldview where everything needs to be tangibly measured and valued in order to be acknowledged at all. At the same time, one thing that connects the Romantic poet and the positivist scientist is that they both must speculate. The difference is that the former is much more likely to be aware of it – and as I have already noted, awareness is the key ingredient that stabilises speculation, making it more beneficial than dangerous.

This is also reflected in the Romantic thinkers’ suggestion that, ideally, the search for truth and knowledge should employ both reason and imagination in turns, and in more or less equal measures. Schelling named these modes of thinking “contraction and expansion”, while Goethe used an even more overt cardiovascular metaphor and talked of “diastole and systole” (Lachman 79, 117). In other words, they believed that the kind of thinking that seeks to seize the universe with singular and immutable logics and definitions is just as dead as the kind of thinking that only interrogates and observes details and possibilities without ever establishing any hierarchies between them. Rather, in order to arrive at true understanding, one must flow or oscillate between these two tendencies, alternatively considering everything and grasping for something.<sup>6</sup> My suggestion is that finding this heartbeat may become easier with the mindful utilisation of speculation and metaphor, their rational imagination and imaginative rationality. The skeleton is, after all, already inside you, listening and waiting for you to notice it.

If reading this comic led you to entirely different insights or you would like to see more of this type of content in *Fafnir*, we encourage you to send feedback to: [submissions@finfar.org](mailto:submissions@finfar.org).

*Biography:* Essi Varis is currently working on her own postdoctoral project *Metacognitive Magic Mirrors* (2020–2025), which explores how different types of texts and images shape and expand speculative and imaginative thinking. The project is funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation and carried out in the Universities of Helsinki, Oslo, and Jyväskylä. Varis specialises in 4E cognitive narratology, which she has previously applied, among other things, to comics and fictional characters. She is also one of the reigning editors-in-chief of *Fafnir*.

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<sup>6</sup> I have argued elsewhere that fantasy author Philip Pullman describes literary imagination and creativity as having similar polar phases or tendencies (Varis “Strange Tools and Dark Materials”).

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## Some Notes on the Conceptions of Time and History in Speculative Fiction

*Michael Godhe*

*And I confess unto You, O Lord, that I am as yet ignorant as to what time is, and again I confess unto You, O Lord, that I know that I speak these things in time, and that I have already long spoken of time, and that very long is not long save by the stay of time.*

St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, chapter 25.

On December 1–3, 2021, the post-apocalyptic rebirth of the first international conference arranged by the *Swedish network for Speculative Fiction* (inaugurated in 2015) took place at Karlstad University.<sup>1</sup> The conference was first planned for November 11–13, 2020, but due to the Covid-19 outbreak, it was postponed. The theme for the conference was *Time and History* – and it was a timely theme. In the gap of time when the conference took place, the pandemic had become ghastly historical past, was still omnipresent in the present, but would also become the not yet undesired future. A few days after the conference, the rapid spread of the Omicron variant prompted further lockdowns. Nevertheless, over 30 papers were presented at the conference, most of them in person.

To give a brief overview of the importance of time in speculative fiction is an almost impossible task within the limited space allotted for this prefatory, but suffice it to say that time has always been an essential feature of speculative fiction. As the CfP for the *Specific 2021* conference stated, “speculative fiction looks into both the past and the future in its attempts to make sense of the bewildering clutter of events, phenomena, and ideas which constitute the present” (Bokne, Ekman and Nyström).

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<sup>1</sup> The organising committee consisted of Saga Bokne, Stefan Ekman and Andreas Nyström from Karlstad University, and Michael Godhe from Linköping University.

In the shadow of our contemporary crises prompting dystopian representations of the future, the mixing of temporalities or layers of time has been one of the most essential features of recent speculative fiction narratives. In numerous recent scholarly works on speculative fiction, time has also been an essential analytical tool for analysing temporalities in speculative fiction (see, e.g. Gomel; Chattopadhyay; Polvinen). However, the prevalence of this theme has not been limited only to studies on speculative fiction. In fact, Staffan Bergwik and Anders Ekström argue that in the last two decades there has been a “shift of temporal perspectives ... in an increased scholarly engagement with multiple historical time frames and temporalities” (2). For example, researchers have become more and more interested in

how anthropogenic climate change creates a different understanding of the relation between a variety of time frames, for example by asking to what extent geological and historical timescales merge in the course of the Anthropocene, or how climate change temporalities are different from the time frames of geological epochs. (Bergwik and Ekström 3)

Indeed, speculative fiction often frames its narratives with an overtly dystopian (and maybe covertly utopian) setting, looking backwards or onwards, or mixing timescales when referring to present conditions. As the CfP for *Specific 2021* stated, we have usually regarded SF as the genre that extrapolates into the future and pointed to fantasy as the domain of the past. “However, fantasy can take place in the present, as testified by the increasingly urban fantasy genre” while “subgenres such as alternative history or steampunk may be said to constitute science fictions of the past” (Bokne, Ekman and Nyström). That is to say, traditional conceptions of how time and history work in speculative fiction are being renegotiated among scholars, which is prompting exciting developments in the broad field of speculative fiction studies.

From a historical point of view, time has been an essential element especially to speculative fictions framed with dystopian/utopian settings. Utopian writings before the modern age were often looking backwards, and the present was conceptualised as a degradation from a mythic Golden Age or paradise (Manuel and Manuel 64–92). From the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Utopia was projected to distant places like the unknown southern island, Terra Incognita Australis (Ambjörnsson), as in such seminal works as Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), which “set the dominant mode of modern utopias” (Forsström 12), and Francis Bacon’s *The New Atlantis* (1627), where science and progress are interlinked. In the context of the 18<sup>th</sup> century’s emerging evolution theories and the Enlightenment’s flagship idea of progress, Utopia was for the first time projected into the future: *L’An 2440* by Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1770) envisions a progress from the flawed contemporary society to the social and political perfection of the future. Future-oriented, perfect, rational, and sometimes technocratic visions of society dominated 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian writing, and even prompted a few attempts to create small utopian communities in the US and elsewhere (see e.g. Claves 129–139).

The dystopian turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a critique directed to these ideas of perfect rational societies as blueprints for utopias. The idea of progress had become questionable against the backdrop of, e.g. the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the Second World War (see e.g. Kumar), and the first

atomic bombings. To simplify matters, these crises marked the end of sketching utopian narratives as societal blueprints (although there were, of course, a few exceptions), but not the end of utopian narratives as a whole (although Utopia would never be the same again).

While some of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Utopias already featured many generic tendencies of science fiction, it was the Luxembourgish-American inventor, writer, and editor Hugo Gernsback (1884–1967) who finally gave the genre of science fiction its name in the 1920s (after initially talking of “scientification”). For Gernsback, SF was not only an “idea of tremendous import”, as he wrote in an editorial of the June edition of the magazine *Amazing Stories* in 1927. He also believed that SF was important for “making the world a better place to live in, through educating the public to the possibilities of science and the influence of science on life which, even today, are not appreciated by the man on the street” (Gernsback, qtd. in Landon 52). Thus, SF was future-oriented in its initial approach but certainly not always as utopian as Gernsback wished it to be.

Dystopias or anti-utopias, such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), contested the idea of progress and technocracy and pictured totalitarian nightmare societies disguised as utopias (cf. Kumar). However, at the end of the 1960s, the feminist turn of speculative fiction, which was also shaped by ecological concerns, the New Left (Moylan) and social protest movements, further reinvented utopian and dystopian writing as well as science fiction and fantasy (cf. Godhe 2010). With its “postmodern attitude of self-reflexivity” (Baccolini and Moylan 2), the feminist turn transformed speculative fiction in many ways. The concepts of linear development and various socio-technical imaginaries (Jasanoff), such as the idea of progress and unlimited growth, were contested, along with the Eurocentric experience of linear time, which had been dominant in previous Western speculative fiction. Feminist speculative fiction contained generic elements from both science fiction and fantasy as well as other speculative genres. This provided scholars with alternative approaches and new concepts that, rather than differentiating the genres, allowed tying them together. Anne Cranny-Francis coined the concept “literature of estrangement”, which refers to “literature concerned primarily with the alienation experienced by individual subjects, realized textually by a setting displaced in time and/or space” (26). According to Jane Donawerth and Karol A. Kolmerten, this concept “is an especially useful category, because it draws together the several genres that women have used to talk about a better place, and because it exposes the ways in which a text’s working embody its politics” (3). By dropping the word “cognitive” from Darko Suvin’s famous definition of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement, feminist utopias, dystopias, science fiction, and fantasy were brought together by settings displaced in time and/or space, regardless of any other generic tendencies of the narratives. The concept also makes it easier for feminist speculative fiction scholars to create a genealogy of feminist thought in speculative fiction from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to our times, and by doing so, contest the traditional phallogocentric academic works concerning the history of utopian and dystopian writings (cf. Godhe 2010).

Furthermore, later literature of estrangement – or what I have labelled a feminist turn – became a part of the group of texts that Tom Moylan has called “critical utopias”. These texts display an “awareness of the limitations of the

utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream” (10). These utopias are less perfect and static than such traditional blueprint utopias as *Looking Backwards 2000-1887* by Edward Bellamy (1888) or *News From Nowhere, or, Being an Epoch of Rest* by William Morris (1889: revised 1890) – novels that were seminal and influential in their time. Some of the authors working in the tradition of critical utopias mentioned by Moylan are also staples in the history of the feminist turn (Godhe 2010): Ursula K. Le Guin, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, and Samuel Delany, just to name a few.

According to Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, the critical utopias declined in the 1980s, “in the face of economic restructuring, right-wing politics, and a cultural milieu informed by an intensifying fundamentalism and commodification” (2). To cut a long story short, this also revived the dystopian genre. Although some works are gritty and nihilistic (including some of the cyberpunk of the 1980s), Baccolini and Moylan use the concept of critical dystopias to refer to “texts that maintain a utopian impulse”. Critical dystopias, unlike the classic dystopias of *Brave New World, 1984* and the like, “maintain utopian hope *outside* their pages” (7). This encourages the readers to consider the dystopic vision as a warning of a future they can still escape (cf. Chattopadhyay) – a fragile hope that I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Godhe 2019). Dystopias can thus be conceptualised as anticipatory knowledge, or as Frédéric Claisse and Pierre Delvenne claim,

a successful dystopia aims at making itself obsolete: once the world it depicts is identified as a possible future, it seems to empower its readers again, restoring a ‘sense of possibilities’ that eventually makes alternative pathways thinkable. (156)

According to Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, this applies, for example, to climate change fiction, where the fictionality “does not lend itself by default to apocalypticism, but to the shadow of warning and hope of the otherwise” (7).

There would be much more to say about recent developments in speculative fiction, especially when it comes to conceptions of time and history, and how scholars are addressing these changes. The vivid posthuman turn in the humanities and social sciences has, indeed, been successful in spurring academic interest in speculative fiction that contests human exceptionalism in the face of, e.g., climate degradation. All in all, there are many futurisms in play. This is what Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay has termed “Cofuturism”:

These [futurisms] are stealing the centre of gravity from science fictional imaginaries of the future that are associated with a more singular Anglo-American view of the world and turning towards alternative modes of representation that nonetheless retain science-fictional characteristics. (9)

The developments of speculative fiction in all its representational forms are promising, as are the developments in the academic study of speculative fiction. Previously, together with Luke Goode, I have argued for the need of Critical Future Studies (CFS), a new scholarly approach that

investigates the scope and constraints within public culture for imagining and debating different potential futures. .... CFS aims to contribute constructively to vigorous and imaginative public debate about the future – a futural public sphere – and to challenge a prevalent contemporary cynicism about our capacity to imagine alternative futures while trapped in a parlous present. (109)

Indeed, the recent developments briefly stated above contribute to a futural public sphere by contesting the cultural, social, and socio-technical imaginaries that have too often been taken for granted. By discussing how conceptions of time and history have been recontextualised and renegotiated in recent speculative fiction as well as by re-reading and reinterpreting older works of SFF, scholarly works can demonstrate how speculative fiction might work as an engaged and open-ended social critique of our current historical juncture (cf. Goode and Godhe).

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## Notes Towards Gritty Fantasy Medievalism, Temporality, and Worldbuilding

*Anna Bark Persson*

*Abstract:* This article discusses gritty fantasy, a fantasy subgenre, which was established in the early 2000s and has since gained a lot of traction. In previous research, gritty fantasy has often been understood as a deconstructive form of fantasy that draws on the barbaric Middle Ages and subverts fantasy tropes as a reaction against earlier forms of popular fantasy. I examine, rather, the genre's relation to the medieval and its depictions of power. Drawing on queer temporality and theories on fantasy literature and worldbuilding (Mendlsohn; Roine), I approach gritty fantasy first and foremost as a form of fantasy literature, placing it within the context of speculative fiction and asking what it does as a fantastic literature.

*Keywords:* gritty fantasy, medievalism, queer temporality, speculative fiction

Gritty fantasy, also known as grimdark, emerged as a major turn in popular epic fantasy in the early 2000s. Taking inspiration from works like Glen Cook's *The Black Company* (1984) and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–), gritty fantasy exploded as a new wave of epic fantasy fiction with authors like Joe Abercrombie, R. Scott Bakker, and Richard Morgan. In short, gritty fantasy reacts against earlier forms of mass market, post-Tolkienian fantasy and deconstructs conventional fantasy tropes, such as good vs. evil morality and nostalgic medievalism, often through emphasizing the brutality of the pseudo-medieval fantasy world and the toll it takes on the people living in such “historical” circumstances. Among fans, discussions on what gritty fantasy is, what it means, and its relation to genres of speculative fiction has abounded, but it has received less critical, academic attention. Research has been

primarily focused on the idea of the barbaric medieval and its implications for popular understandings of history (Larrington; Polack; Carroll), race and Eurocentrism in fantasy literature (Young), or the deconstruction of post-Tolkienian fantasy tropes (Sedlmayr; Petzold). These are important contributions, but research on medievalism has tended not to take gritty fantasy into account primarily as fantasy, while research on the deconstruction of fantasy tropes has focused rather narrowly on gritty fantasy's relation to previous fantasy texts. In this article, I want to consider gritty fantasy foremost *as fantasy*, looking not only at the ideas of history it makes use of or how it interacts with certain past works of fantasy, but considering, instead, how we can understand it as an important and popular subset of contemporary speculative fiction. More specifically, I examine gritty fantasy in relation to its representations of power and power structures, arguing that gritty fantasy makes the idea of power meaningful in specific ways.

In the following, I present gritty fantasy in relation to earlier research on fantasy literature, most notably Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) and narratologist Hanna Riikka Roine's work (2016) on the notion of speculative fiction as means of providing a specific literary framework for making sense of the world through the practices of worldbuilding and literalisation of metaphor. My aim is to contribute research to what Steven Erikson has called the "gaping hole in the middle" of fantasy research (Erikson 5; see also Young 3) – that is, epic fantasy – by reading contemporary gritty fantasy through theories of speculative fiction, medievalism, and queer temporality.

## Gritty Fantasy

Gritty fantasy is a subset of what today is often referred to as epic fantasy, which Brian Stableford defines as commercialised fantasy that mimics J.R.R. Tolkien's use of a secondary fantasy world and draws inspiration from the epics: "the primary model of commodified fantasy retains and exemplifies many of the pretensions as well as the narrative formula of the epic .... they gradually build up detailed historical and geographical images of secondary worlds, within which elaborate hero myths are constructed" (Stableford 130–31). Gritty fantasy has generally been understood in terms of its focus on grit, violence, nihilism, and masculinity as well as its deconstructive approach to the mass market form of popular fantasy that followed the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* – a subgenre often referred to as post-Tolkienian fantasy. Examples of well-known authors of the genre include Robert Jordan, David Eddings, Robin Hobb, and Terry Brooks. Adam Roberts defines gritty fantasy as

the standard way of referring to fantasies that turn their backs on the more uplifting, Pre-Raphaelite visions of idealized medievaliana, and instead stress how nasty, brutish, short, and, er, dark life back then 'really' was. [It] has very little to do with actual historical re-imagining and everything to do with a sense that our present world is a cynical, disillusioned ultraviolent place. (Roberts 39)

Helen Young understands gritty fantasy as "marked by low-levels of magic, high-levels of violence, in-depth character development, and medievalist

worlds that are ‘if not realistic, at least have pretensions to realism’ in their depictions of rain, blood, and mud” (Young 63). She prefers “gritty” to “grimdark” since she understands grit as fundamental to the subgenre (83). I use “gritty fantasy” to signal that I understand it as a broader shift in popular fantasy heralded by certain authors – such as the aforementioned Abercrombie, Bakker, and Morgan – but not limited to them. Rather, I conceptualise gritty fantasy as a wider trend that gained foothold through the early grimdark authors, but has now been disseminated into a standard, recurring part of contemporary epic fantasy.

The initial wave of gritty fantasy authors was male-dominated and often criticised for being misogynistic and for perpetuating racist and Eurocentric understandings of the medieval (see Young). However, recent noteworthy gritty fantasy works have been feminist, queer and/or postcolonial in theme, and written by authors like Kameron Hurley, Seth Dickinson, R. F. Kuang, and C. L. Clark. These more recent texts have emphasised similar themes of disillusionment, violence, and powerlessness as the earlier examples, but focused instead on female, queer, and non-Eurocentric perspectives as well as the historical oppression of these groups. In this article, however, I am more interested in the similarities between these two waves. I discuss gritty fantasy in a broader sense, but take a closer look at Abercrombie’s *First Law* novels (2006–2021) and Dickinson’s *The Masquerade* (2016–) as examples. I have chosen these texts because they have helped me to elucidate my thoughts on gritty fantasy most clearly. Furthermore, I believe they offer interesting individual case studies of the subgenre while also providing access to its more general patterns.

As we can see from the definitions of gritty fantasy, some of the most central features of the subgenre include a turn away from the post-Tolkienian fantasy as well as a particular relation to the medieval, which entails not only replacing the romantic medieval with the barbaric medieval (cf. Eco), but also in insisting on the “realism” of the latter. In other words, the relationship to the past and the medieval is central, but needs, I argue, to be understood in a more nuanced way than simply as an example of popular history. As Roberts writes, gritty fantasy is not really about the past, but rather about the (disillusioned) now (39). In order to read the temporality of gritty fantasy, I turn to queer perspectives on time and history, or queer temporality.

## Queer Temporality, Medievalism, and Worldbuilding

Queer temporality is a growing field of research that attempts to grapple with and deconstruct normative understandings of time and history. Foundational to the field is Michel Foucault’s genealogical approach, which stresses the construction of history and its relation to the present – in opposition to a view of the past as something given and settled – and challenges the idea of history as progressive and linear. Queer theorists have been particularly interested in this denaturalization of the linearity and supposed progression of Western history as well as in Foucault’s own affective relation to history. Through queer affect theory, scholars like Elizabeth Freeman and Heather Love have moved towards regarding history as an affective endeavour that is just as much about the present as it is about the past, while also queering our relation to history

and the past. Literary historian Carolyn Dinshaw has been interested in precisely the relation between queer temporality and the medieval as well as Foucault's use of the medieval. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault operationalises a distinction between medieval and modern in order to understand and illustrate changes in the operation of power and knowledge over time. In Foucault's writings on sexuality, Dinshaw writes, the medieval functions at once as "a period that produces our modernity, and as a period quite separate and different from our own" (200; cf. Eco). She points to a "utopian ... elegiac ... nostalgic" (200) note in Foucault's use of the medieval and argues that Foucault is "fictioning history" (205) as part of his radical project in the present for the future.

In "Retrophilia and the Desire for the Past", gender scholar Kristina Fjelkestam argues, drawing on queer temporality, that Western culture is obsessed with "touching" or getting close to the past, as evidenced by the current massive interest in historical fiction, the focus on writing forth lost histories (such as queer history or 'herstory'), and discussions about what should be remembered and how (Fjelkestam 10–11). She understands this desire for the past to be not only about history itself, but sees it as something that responds to a desire in the present for a better or different future.

Simply put, gritty fantasy medievalism can be understood in Umberto Eco's terms as a turn from the "Middle Ages of *Romanticism*" to the "Middle Ages as a *barbaric age*" (Eco 69, original italics). Most research on gritty fantasy has focused on this shift, in particular on questions of historical realism and what these barbaric fantasy worlds have to say about contemporary understandings and uses of the Middle Ages (Larrington; Polack; Young; Carroll). Drawing on queer-theoretical approaches to time and history, which instead stress the use of and desire for history in the present, I show that the medievalism of gritty fantasy cannot only be understood as a recourse to the past, but rather as a way of grappling with the present. Gritty fantasy needs to be contextualised as a subgenre of fantasy and speculative fiction, not only as a form of literature that seeks to represent history. To do so, I discuss the medieval in gritty fantasy primarily in terms of worldbuilding and temporality, rather than in terms of uses of history or the medieval. Here, I rely on Roine's understanding of worldbuilding as a central rhetorical practice of speculative fiction.

Roine's argument is grounded in an understanding of worldbuilding as a narratological element that is specific to speculative fiction and distinct from plot. According to her, "speculative fiction, in particular, relies on literalisation of metaphorical expressions" (Roine 18), which means that

The true power of speculative fiction lies not in the invention of a speculative premise or speculative beings, but in the way the abstract premise (or a model of world) is concretised in the framework built for working it through. In this, it is a form of communicating ideas, or bringing new ideas up for discussion. .... I see speculative worldbuilding as a way of turning abstract and general thought experiments (or ideas) into a particular and therefore communicable form. (Roine 16, 19)

Referencing Brian McHale, Roine understands the speculative world as a "scale-model", a world that is set up in certain ways to work through certain

problems, discussions, or ideas. Here, “worldbuilding is a distinct way of putting the user’s imagination at work. From a rhetorical viewpoint, it offers a specific way for emphasising ideas” (Roine 31). Speculative fiction is not a way to construct new information about the real world, but rather, it works to make this information meaningful in specific ways, as related to the specific form of the speculative premise. Like the epic and the fairytale, speculative fiction is more concerned with the static and eternal, rather than the mundane or the everyday. Meaning is conveyed through the construction of a world, rather than, as more commonly in the novel, the subjective experiences of characters (cf. Bakhtin). Roine stresses that she is not “suggesting that speculative fiction would expand our knowledge of the mundane reality as such but rather our meaning-making processes” (Roine 160). In other words, speculative fiction is a particular literary way of conveying meaning through the rhetorical practice of worldbuilding. It is through worldbuilding and the way the narrative and the world interact as much as through the narrative progression and characterization (cf. Mendlesohn 2008) that speculative fiction works through ideas, by the means of literalising the metaphorical. In other words, what I analyse here is how the medieval and temporality, as defined by my queer-theoretical perspective, function in the worldbuilding of gritty fantasy more generally.

## The Mode and Temporality of Gritty Fantasy

In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Mendlesohn categorises four modes of the fantastic, in addition to the fifth category of “The Irregulars”. The modes of portal-quest fantasy and immersive fantasy are the most relevant to epic fantasy and to my discussion here. According to Mendlesohn, these modes have not only narrative but also ideological effects (Mendlesohn 17). The portal-quest and immersive fantasies also have very different temporalities, and thus, different relationships to the medieval.

The portal-quest fantasy is the most classic form of fantasy stories: a character steps through a portal into another world, either between worlds or out into the secondary fantasy world, and goes on a quest to save that world, most commonly by restoring the status quo through vanquishing an evil opponent and reinstalling a rightful sovereign. According to Mendlesohn, time and history are static and unchanging in the portal-quest fantasy – knowledge of the world and its history is “downloaded” to the reader via the protagonist, from sources that admit no variations or alternatives. The future is equally unchanging: the restoration of the world is a return to a status quo found in the past. The world is thus stuck in a loop, or rather, frozen in place completely outside the movement of history (6–16).

The immersive fantasy, on the other hand, “is a fantasy set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world .... The immersive fantasy must take no quarter: it must assume that the reader is as much part of the world as are those being read about” (59). The immersive fantasy results in a more complex and antagonistic fantasy world where different interpretations of the world may exist at once. Mendlesohn compares it to the worldbuilding of science fiction. Compared to the portal-quest fantasy, it has a different relation to temporality. “Where the portal-quest fantasies emphasized recognition and

healing, the restoration of the grandeur of previous days, the immersive fantasies are overwhelmingly concerned with the entropy of the world” (60–61). Mendlesohn quotes a discussion with critic John Clute who adds, “in an immersive fantasy, what is storyable is not the discovery of the world (in which we are immersed) but its loss” (ibid.). Immersive fantasies are not frozen in time, but like the portal-quest fantasy, they are in some sense oriented towards the past and thus “rarely tell of building, because building is a venture into the unknown. Instead they start with what is and watch it crumble” (113).

While gritty fantasy has elements of the portal-quest fantasy, of characters moving from the well-known into the unknown, it is predominately set in the immersive mode, with its characters firmly immersed in their settings. As in science fiction, the reader has to put the world together with the help of contextual clues, rather than through the “guidebook” narrative of the portal-quest fantasy (cf. Jones 2006). What we see in gritty fantasy is, as Mendlesohn writes, the world as it is known crumbling away. What is noteworthy about this is that in gritty fantasy, the crumbling away of the world is directed *towards* a very specific temporal location. In *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. writes of the futuristic temporality of science fiction: “The SF novum trails its future behind it, transforming the reader’s present from just another moment continuous with the past into the prehistory of the future. In that move it also initiates a new past” (81). According to him, science fiction at once constructs a vision of the future and, implicitly, the history of that future – the history which has led to the science-fictional now. Unlike science fiction, fantasy – particularly epic fantasy – has generally had very little temporal continuity with the present. As Mendlesohn shows, the time of the portal-quest fantasy is that of a static once-upon-a-time-temporality that places the unchanging fantasy world outside history. In nihilistic gritty fantasy, however, the world is crumbling away, but this entropy is not, I argue, directed foremost at the loss of a glorious past, which Mendlesohn describes to be typical for the immersive fantasy. Gritty fantasy, rather, constructs a temporality that lies closer to that of science fiction. If a science fictional text “trails its future behind it”, gritty fantasy *anticipates its future* – that is, the present – *before it*, bringing the contrast between the past and the future/present into focus through worldbuilding.

## Gritty Fantasy Worldbuilding

In Abercrombie’s *First Law* novels, the reader starts off in a typical medievalist fantasy world, but during the course of the story, the fantasy world moves towards an industrialist, capitalist society, which is perhaps best illustrated by the cover of the penultimate novel *The Trouble With Peace* (2020). It depicts the pommel of a richly decorated sword against a background of factory chimneys spewing black smoke. While the first novel, *The Blade Itself*, opens with an epigraph from *The Odyssey* – “The blade itself incites to deeds of violence” (*The Blade* 5) – *The Trouble With Peace* instead opens with Nietzsche: “In times of peace, the warlike man attacks himself” (*The Trouble* 1). This marks a clear change from the time of the epic to the time of modernity. The world of gritty fantasy is not crumbling away from a glorious past to which it struggles to return; rather, it is crumbling *towards* the present, irrevocably

progressing towards the horrors of industrial capitalism. This is hardly new for fantasy. Kim Gordon understands what she calls fantastic medievalism precisely as a critique of Western late modernity: many stories of epic fantasy work through the creation of an Edenic, escapist medieval realm where “good and evil are clearly delineated” (Gordon 2). The horrors of industrialism, as opposed to the pastoral idyll of the medieval, goes back to Tolkien and has played a large part in fantasy medievalism since. In gritty fantasy, this “anti-modern’ impetus” (3) plays out on the level of the temporality of worldbuilding, of the realm moving from a “medieval” past towards an irrevocable future. In gritty fantasy, the use of the medieval doesn’t separate the fantasy world from the present. Rather, it is a medievalism where, in the words of Eco, “all the problems of the Western world emerged ... Modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy (along with banks, checks, and prime rate)” (Eco 64). In gritty fantasy, it is also often precisely the economy that becomes not only representative of modernity, but also the main villain in a subgenre where supposedly everyone is a villain.

In *The First Law*, this is best represented by the character of Bayaz, the antagonist of the series. Unlike in post-Tolkienian fantasy, Bayaz is not an evil, dark lord. He is a wizard (an obvious deconstruction of the Gandalf-like figure), a manipulative mastermind that gains control of the world and its power players through his bank, Valiant & Balk, as well as economic and other forms of leverage. For Gerold Sedlmayr, Bayaz represents a shift in the portrayal of power in epic fantasy, which ties in with Abercrombie’s deconstruction of traditional fantasy.

What Bayaz stands for [is] a power that is both invisible – you rarely become aware of the strings around your wrists – and decidedly material. His actions illustrate, to borrow a phrase from Judith Butler, “the productive and, indeed, materializing effects of regulatory power” ... the idea of power that the wizard Bayaz incorporates is one that strictly depends on an economics of power that is both beyond traditional moral distinctions and beyond the comprehension of the individual *actant*. (Sedlmayr 172, original italics)

Bayaz is a character that lies beyond the traditional good vs. evil morality of fantasy and represents power not as absolute nor as something that can be found in any individual, but rather, power as regulatory – what Foucault refers to as disciplinary power (*Discipline and Punish*). Where post-Tolkienian fantasy has tended to portray and make meaningful not only the world itself (Mendlesohn) but also power in absolute terms – as embodied in the figure of the king, the noble hero, the mighty magician, or the strong body of the warrior – a different conceptualization of power is central to gritty fantasy.

Rather than understanding the use of the medieval in gritty fantasy as a different sort of medievalism compared to earlier fantasy, I want to emphasise the *contrast between the medieval and the present* as central in the texts and their worldbuilding. In a corollary to how Foucault used the distinction between the medieval and modern to describe the formation of disciplinary power, gritty fantasy enacts the difference between the alterity of the pastness of the medieval and the familiarity of present on the level of worldbuilding. Through its use of a pseudo-medieval world moving towards the future and the contrasting representations of power involved in these two worlds (the absolute

power represented by kingdoms, empires, monarchs, warriors, and heroes *contra* the disciplinary, less visible forms of power represented by Bayaz and the economy), gritty fantasy makes power meaningful in different ways in its worldbuilding. In other words, gritty fantasy works to make different forms of systemic power meaningful in a very particular way. Through the temporality of the fantasy world, the differences between power as absolute and as something enacted directly upon the body *versus* power as disciplinary and something productive is made visible. Following Roine, I understand gritty fantasy worlds as a scale-models that work through and contrast different understandings of power, not foremost as a comment on the historical development of power and subjectivation, but rather, in a way that engages with questions and anxieties regarding agency, self-determination, and sovereignty in the present moment.

## **Deconstructing the Fantasy Hero(ine): Fantasies of Sovereignty**

The overarching theme in Abercrombie's work is the futility of change and the impossibility of agency, which is played out through his deconstruction of the fantasy hero (Sedlmayr; Petzold). Most of his characters are larger-than-life figures (kings, warriors, master swordsmen), but unlike the righteous, triumphant heroes of the post-Tolkienian fantasy, their actions are all ultimately circumscribed by their circumstances – or by Bayaz's manipulation representing the unseen force of disciplinary power (Sedlmayr 172). These themes recur in much of gritty fantasy, not in the least in feminist, queer and postcolonial reworkings of the subgenre. Works like Dickinson's *The Masquerade* (2015–), Kuang's *Poppy War* trilogy (2018–2020), Hurley's *Worldbreaker Saga* (2014–2019), and C. L. Clark's *The Unbroken* (2021) all deal precisely with the question of systemic power and (heroic) agency: a powerful, special protagonist comes up against systems of power they cannot overcome, and being righteous and willing to sacrifice for a cause is not enough to change the world.

This is perhaps most clearly exemplified by *The Masquerade*, where protagonist Baru Cormorant is trying to climb the technocratic ranks of the colonial power Falcrest, in order to topple the empire from within. Throughout the series she agonises over whether she can oppose the very system that has, not only through the violent occupation of her homeland but also through such measures as education, medicine, and trade, created her. By playing Falcrest's game, she seeks to gain enough power to dismantle the empire, which means not only advancing through its oppressive system, but also becoming an agent of it. Elsewhere (Bark Persson) I have argued that *The Masquerade* seems to pose the question of whether a fantasy world and story that is based around absolute rather than disciplinary power can function as fantasy. Particularly salient is the way Baru's moral dilemma paralyses her within the text. Instead, it is through her lover, the duchess and swordswoman, Tain Hu, that Baru is capable of acting. Hu is described as physically strong and a fearsome fighter and leader. Next to the technocrat Baru, who has risen to her position through her exceptional head for numbers, Hu represents the very feudal system of

absolute power that Falcrest – a power, like Bayaz, of economy and social measures – comes to oppose in the text.

Reading the fantasy heroine, Jane Tolmie argues that her main adventure is patriarchy; that is, the traditional heroine works to overcome patriarchy on her own terms by and for herself. She does not affect change, but rather challenges the patriarchal norms, which dictate that she is good for nothing but childbearing and embroidery, by forcefully choosing her own way, often as a warrior (Tolmie 151, 155). The main struggle for the heroines of Dickinson, Kuang, Hurley, and Clark, by contrast, is not patriarchy opposing them on their path towards empowerment, but rather, the questions of what empowerment means, what it costs, and whether it is even possible to achieve. Whereas older fantasy heroines could fight their way to freedom with a sword, there is seemingly no way out of the constraints of systemic power for Baru and the rest. Power is no longer absolute and, therefore, it becomes impossible to stand outside of it.

Sedlmayr understands *The First Law* to be defined by circularity; there is “no proper development” within the text (Sedlmayr 176). He takes the character Glokta, a disillusioned torturer, as an example, writing that the only thing that changes about him throughout the trilogy is that he gains an even more disillusioned view of “the workings of this kind of world – a thoroughly modern world” (ibid.). Not only do the (anti-)heroes of gritty fantasy fail to triumph over evil, whatever that may be, but the only development they are provided is an insight into the limits of their agency and the hopelessness of bettering the world or even their own circumstances. Furthermore, this lesson is intimately tied to the threatening spectre of modernity. Coming up against the way the world works means understanding the world as changing into the future/present. As I understand it, in these texts, the experience of subjecthood and the invi(nc/s)ibility of power typical of late modernity or neoliberalism are dramatised on the level of temporality and worldbuilding.

In “Cutting Off The King’s Head: The Self-Disciplining Fantasy of Neoliberal Sovereignty”, Peter Bloom argues that neoliberalism, defined here as a change from the traditional rule of the state towards the self-disciplining of subjects in accordance to a “rational” market logic (9), is not a turn away from the idea of sovereignty, but rather, it builds from the affective fantasy of sovereignty. “The appeal of a sovereign fantasy lies in its promise of granting individuals a sense of ‘sovereign’ agency perceived to be lacking in their existence as ‘agency-less’ disciplinary subjects of neoliberalism”, he writes (10). Bloom understands neoliberal subjectivity to be formed in a system where power is decentralised and, thus, both everywhere and nowhere, giving rise to the fantasy of sovereignty. Furthermore, this fantasy is generally represented by charismatic, powerful, “self-made” people, like rich entrepreneurs or strong leaders: “the perceived presence of sovereignty provides a sense of ‘self’ to neoliberalism, personalizing power and allowing it to ‘make sense’ as more than just a heterogeneous collection of regulative norms and social technologies” (18).

Following Roine’s understanding of speculative worldbuilding as a specific rhetorical practice for working through or modelling problems, gritty fantasy worlds offer an interesting take on the fantasy of sovereignty, which is played out in the worldbuilding and through (anti-)heroes. I see these texts as attempts to grapple with the “desire for sovereignty” (Bloom 24), as they focus

on the circumcision of the heroes' agency and ability to act in response to disciplinary forms of power, even if this form of power always has to be embodied in a character to make sense. In *The First Law*, it is embodied through the character of Bayaz and in *The Masquerade* through Baru's mentor and antagonist Itinerant, in addition to which the supposedly dispersed power of the empire's throne is enacted through a powerful cabal of secret agents. Paradoxically, gritty fantasy simultaneously works through the anxieties of being an "agency-less" subject under neoliberalist system while also providing an affective fantasy of sovereignty by embodying neoliberal disciplinary power in distinct figures that can be, if not ultimately defeated, at least made visible and marked as villains.

## Conclusion

Science fiction has long been recognised as a literary tool for grappling with and making sense of late modernity (e.g., Haraway; Jameson), for dealing with the here and now and anticipating how it extends into the future (Csicsery-Ronay Jr.). Fantasy, on the other hand, has mainly been understood in terms of nostalgia, escapism, and backwardness (Miéville). This has been especially true for critical accounts of gritty fantasy medievalism, which is often based on fantasies of a white European past and traditional gender relations (Young; see also Kaufman). It is important to acknowledge that the images of the past presented by gritty fantasy are also used to mobilise racist and sexist imaginaries in the present, by manufacturing dreams of a past where racial homogeneity was the status quo and "men were men and women women". At the same time, gritty fantasy is a popular and widely read subgenre that also seems to readily lend itself to queer, feminist, and post-colonial reworkings, as evidenced by the works of Dickinson, Kuang, Hurley, and Clark.

The appeal of gritty fantasy cannot, in other words, be understood only in terms of reactionary nostalgia, even if this certainly plays a part. I argue that gritty fantasy might also provide specific ways of envisioning and working through the concepts of power and agency, and interrogating the relationship between these concepts in the here and now where power is supposedly nowhere and everywhere. The worldbuilding of gritty fantasy works through the dichotomies of the medieval/the modern, absolute/disciplinary power, and agency/powerlessness. It is also triangulated through the construction of past/present/future where the medieval past represents alterity *as well as* linearity in relation to the present, which, in turn, comes to represent an undesirable future. This temporality is central to understanding these texts – not foremost as a way of popularising history, but as attempts to make sense of historic changes and their relations to the present in particular ways. In this way, gritty fantasy functions as something of a double-edged sword. It offers up affective fantasies of sovereignty through its empowered heroes as well as through incarnating supposedly disseminated, invisible forms of power in specific (villainous) characters, making them reassuringly concrete and possible to oppose. At the same time, it is precisely this literalisation of metaphor (Roine) that also offers the possibility to symbolically and critically conceptualise systemic and disciplinary forms of power in the here and now

where power is increasingly disseminated and difficult to grasp and comprehend.

If science fiction has traditionally supplied a vocabulary for discussing and grappling with phenomena like technological change, futurity and progress, networking and globalism, and the corrosion of supposedly given categories like the natural, the body, the subject, the artificial, and the organic, epic fantasy may in parallel turn to the past, and offer a vocabulary for understanding time and historic change in a neoliberal now, where the future is growing increasingly unstable and undesirable.

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# Time Travel, Alternate History, and Chronopolitics in the “The New Wave” of Chinese Science Fiction

*Erik Mo Welin*

*Abstract:* The focus of this article is a small body of texts within “The New Wave” of Chinese science fiction, which emerged in the 1990s and 2000s. More specifically, I discuss two texts which can be regarded as variations of time travel and alternate history, and which challenge the still hegemonic, unilinear, teleological time of the Chinese nation through time travel and the construction of multiple historical timelines. Through analysing the alternate histories and time travel stories “Watching the Boat at the South Lake Together” and “Shanghai 1938 – a Memory” by contemporary writers Baoshu and Han Song respectively, I explore how fictional texts can challenge the homogenous unidirectional temporality of national teleological time by introducing a contingent temporality into historical metanarratives.

*Keywords:* alternate history, chronopolitics, Chinese science fiction, time travel, Han Song, Baoshu

## **1. Introduction**

In Baoshu’s “Watching the Boat at South Lake Together” (2011), a time traveller from the year 2051 travels back to the year 1921 to witness the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in Jiaying, outside of Shanghai. During his visit, however, he unexpectedly runs into another time traveller from a parallel universe, whose timeline contains a different history: it is revealed to the reader that the protagonist is, in fact, travelling from a timeline in which Mao Zedong never became the founder of New China.

Although such variations of time travel narratives featuring alternate histories and timelines are common in Anglo-Saxon science fiction, in the Chinese SF-tradition, known examples are relatively few and they have not had a prominent presence in the genre until quite recently. In fact, even though time and temporality were significant elements during the genre’s emergence in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>, often featuring future narratives of a stronger and more prosperous China (D. Wang, “Fin-De-Siècle” 301–12), SF engaging with historical difference almost completely disappeared during the Maoist period (1949–1976) (Baoshu, “Foreign Lands” 135–37). Likewise, although the brief boom of science fiction during the “Post Mao Thaw” (1976–1983) included some examples of time travel,<sup>2</sup> the SF published during this period mostly featured stories focused on development of new technology in near-future settings (Li 127), and more radical experimentation with temporality was not a significant feature (Baoshu, “Foreign Lands” 135–38).

The fact that time travel narratives and narratives of radically other futures (or pasts) are relatively underrepresented in much of the Chinese SF-tradition can be explained by the close relationship between time and politics in 20th century China. During the Late Qing-period (1849–1911), the old cyclical notion of time represented by the dynastic histories was challenged and eventually replaced by a dominantly linear conception of time (Kwong 157–90). This teleological notion of historical time was tied to the nation building project of catapulting China into a utopian future (Duara 4). As Wang Fansen has shown, “the future” (weilai) emerged as a dominant temporal concept in Chinese political discourse and became increasingly politicised during the first decades of the 20th century (64–71). During the Maoist period, teleological time was represented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the future was monopolised. In practice, the CCP enforced a time regime on its citizens by cultivating a “time-consciousness”, where the value of time derived solely from devotion to the revolutionary enterprise (Kan 556), and by imposing teleological time through chronopolitical campaigns, such as “The Great Leap Forward”, where China was to “surpass England within fifteen years and to catch up with America within twenty years” (Y. Wang 28). In this context, visits to alternate futures (or pasts) become politically problematic, since they risk destabilising the already determined future (Baoshu, “Foreign lands” 136–37).

Although Chinese politics began loosening up after Mao’s death in 1976 and during the period of reform and opening up in the 1980s, it was not until the 1990s that Chinese science fiction began yet again experimenting more widely with radically different temporalities. Time travel narratives became a prominent feature of the genre, including Liu Xingshi’s ground-breaking “Wuzhongshan chuanqi” (“The Legend of Wuzhong Mountain”, 1991), in which an archeologist travels back to the premodern past and directly interacts with various historical personages, leaving his mark on the historical records

<sup>1</sup> During this period, works of SF were labelled “science novels” (kexue xiaoshuo). For a discussion on the genre in the context of Late Qing China, see Isaacsson, *Celestial Empire: The Emergence of Chinese Science Fiction* (2017).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Zheng Wenguang’s 1983 novel *Zhanshen de houyi* (“The Descendants of Mars”, 1983) included time travel from the future year of 2083 back to the present of 1983. For a discussion on the time travel aspect of this novel, see Li (44–53). See also: Baoshu, “Foreign Lands” (137–38), which argues that the novel, while employing time travel as a narrative device, still registers little historical difference between “the future” of 2083 and the present of 1983.

(Baoshu, “Foreign lands” 139). Most significantly, there was the emergence of what Mingwei Song has called “The New Wave” of Chinese science fiction, which included writers such as Liu Cixin, Han Song, Wang Jinkang, and Baoshu, among others (Song 8).<sup>3</sup> Time travel, future histories, and apocalyptic narratives are common in this body of work, and authors also began experimenting with alternate histories and counterfactuals. Particularly the latter form had attracted little (if any) previous attention in China, including in the Late Qing period (D. Wang, “When History Declines” 8).

The re-emergence of this multiplicity of temporalities in the science fiction of the 1990s can be explained by a variety of cultural and political factors. Although Mao died in 1976, it was not until the crackdown on Tiananmen Square in 1989 that the legitimacy of state-sponsored socialist utopianism was more widely questioned (Song 8). Following Deng Xiaoping’s “Southern Tour” in 1992, the economic reforms initiated in the 1980s were more widely and thoroughly implemented across all strata of society, which cultural theorist Jason McGrath points to as a major turning point (ch. 1). In particular, the emergence of entertainment media contributed to the emergence of private temporalities in general discourse, “thus fragmenting and dispersing the national space and time created by the official media” (Sun 26). These changes also opened for wider political and ideological debates from the 1990s (Huters 23–24), which continued throughout the 2000s.<sup>4</sup> The emergence of the internet, importantly, allowed for more spaces of publication and circulation of texts (Feng).

In such a “post-socialist” context (McGrath ch. 1),<sup>5</sup> the CCP could no longer completely dominate the field of temporal discourse. However, the CCP continued to enforce its hegemonic temporal order of linear teleological time, which remained the source of its legitimacy, and continued to police temporal discourses through an immense propaganda apparatus.<sup>6</sup> Above all, the regime has kept imposing teleological time in the form of narratives of national modernisation, which “assume ... unshakable authority and subsume ... all rhythms of the society into one uniform pace and tempo” (Y. Wang 35). In other words, also in the post-socialist context, as Kehoe notes, temporality in the form of teleological narratives still “represents a powerful political resource that reduces heterogeneous temporal experiences to a single, shared trajectory of unilinear progress in order to consolidate order and control” (1135). The official narrative of Chinese modern history and the history of the CCP have been laid out in a political document from 1981, which remains a central and unquestionable version of history (Barme 31). More recently, propaganda films

<sup>3</sup> Song writes: “I have borrowed the concept of the “new wave” from Anglo-American SF history to point to the subversive, cutting-edge literary experiment that characterises the works of those new authors who have become the main voices in Chinese science fiction since the beginning of the twenty-first century” (8).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the ideological debates inside China during this period, see Cheek et al., *Voices from the Chinese Century: Public Intellectual Debate from Contemporary China* (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Post-socialism is the term McGrath employs to describe the transition from state socialism to a market society. To McGrath, this transition is characterised by the processes of *shichanghua* (marketisation), *duoyuanhua* (pluralisation), *gerenhua* (individualisation), and *fenhua* (division, differentiation, disaggregation) (ch. 1).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the Chinese propaganda apparatus, see David Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy.”

like *Jian guo da ye* (*The Founding of a Republic*, 2009) and *Jian dang wei ye* (*Beginning of the Great Revival*, 2011) continued to enforce this version of history (Veg 42) and its underlying conception of teleological time. Notably, the sensitive nature of time travel narratives and the political importance of maintaining control over temporal discourse became explicitly clear when China’s State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) decided to ban the popular time travel sub-genre “chuan yue”<sup>7</sup> from television, after a surge of such dramas during the 2000s (Rojas 1). In brief, the Chinese case aptly illustrates Helge Jordheim’s claim that “time is also a question of power, the power to control movements, to decide about beginnings and endings, to set the pace, to give the rhythm. In other words, how to organise time ... is intrinsically linked to questions of power and government” (510).

In this context, time travel and alternate histories can be regarded as potentially chronopolitically subversive. The presence of alternate histories and counterfactuals are perhaps the most radical element. Above all, as Elana Gomel notes, alternate history narrates a contingent temporality, “which presupposes the endless malleability of history, the radical distinction between the future and the past, and the unlimited human agency to effect change” (17; cf. Older’s prefatory in this issue). Rather than a unilinear, homogenous temporality, the contingent temporality of the alternate history tends to narrate a plural, multidirectional temporality, which is in direct opposition to the unilinear (highly deterministic), teleological temporal order. Moreover, alternate histories are also genetic in the sense that they tend to gravitate towards the genesis of history (Hellekson, “Introduction”), often depart from a “moment of divergence”, and explore an alternate historical trajectory that stems from this origin (Duncan).

Alternate history is often combined with time travel; however, in the cases of these texts, time travel is not merely a means for the characters to access alternative pasts or timelines, but it also functions as a narrative strategy. In *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, David Wittenberg notes that although narrative jumps in time occur in all kinds of narratives, time travel manages to bring these jumps to the reader’s attention by literalising them, making them into a machine or a device (9–10). For the purposes of the present investigation, this is particularly important in terms of how time travel is related to the past and pre-existing metanarratives; more specifically, time travel narratives can bring attention to the way the past is reconstructed and manipulated from the present. Wittenberg points out that “In time travel fiction, the fundamental historiographical question – how is the past reconstructed by or within the present? – becomes a literal topos, is told as a tale, or is enacted by a real person seated in a vehicle or machine” (18). Although these observations might first and foremost seem to be of interest to narrative theorists, they become highly political when applied in the Chinese context where historical narratives are tightly controlled and manipulated by the political regime. In addition, time travel as a narrative strategy is significant in the sense that it reveals how an individual subject relates to collective temporalities. Fredric Jameson has noted science fiction’s tendency to explore tensions between collective and individual temporalities, which he calls “existential time” and “historical time” (7). As already noted, in the period

<sup>7</sup> Literally: “crossing over” (Rojas 1).

following 1989, the private sphere and individual temporalities have re-emerged in the Chinese cultural sphere. Considering that “contingency is central to the way we understand our own life-choices” (Gomel 83), I am also interested in exploring not merely the collective temporalities in these texts, but also the ways individual subjects relate to these temporalities in the post-1989 context.

In the following, I will engage in the close-reading of two texts, both of which feature variations of time travel and alternate history. They are authored by the writers Han Song and Baoshu respectively. Han Song is a journalist by trade, and employed at China’s central news agency *Xinhua* (Isaacson, “Han Song” 4). He has made himself known for writing “intensely political” dystopian allegories of Chinese contemporary reality (Liu, “Han Song” 111–12), as in his novel *Ditie* (*Subway*, 2011). Although he has gained plenty of attention from critics (Song; Healey), less attention has been paid to the way his texts engage with temporality, in particular through his use of time travel and alternate history. Baoshu belongs to a younger generation of writers that emerged in the late 2000s and early 2010s. After gaining his breakthrough with the fan fiction novel *Santi X* (*The Redemption of Time*, 2010),<sup>8</sup> Baoshu has written numerous works in the time travel and alternate history sub-genres. In 2014, he won the Chinese *Xingyun Award* for his *Shijian zhi xu* (*Ruins of Time*) (Liu, “Baoshu” 149), in which the whole world is caught in a twenty-hour time-loop (Baoshu, *Ruins*). Although Baoshu has sometimes denied that his writings have any political intention (“Author’s Note” 222), some of his best works, as the present investigation will show, traverse (chrono)political terrain.

In the subsequent analysis, I will read Baoshu’s short story “Yiqi qu kan nanhu chuan” (“Watching the Boat at South Lake Together”), which was originally published in the online magazine *Xinhuanjie* (“New Magic World”) in 2011 and has never been published in print. Next, I will read Han Song’s “Shanghai yijiusanba de jiyi” (“Shanghai 1938 – a Memory”), which was originally published online on the author’s own social media platform and later published in print in 2017 (Baoshu, “Essential”, 402–4).<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Time travel, narrativity, and narrative manipulation in Baoshu’s “Watching the Boat at South Lake Together”

Published shortly after the release of the propaganda film *Beginning of the Great Revival* in 2011, Baoshu’s “Watching the Boat at South Lake Together” centres on the protagonist Lu Ming, who travels from the year 2051 back to 1921 to witness the founding of the Communist Party in Jiaxing, outside of Shanghai. During the trip, he unexpectedly runs into another time traveller, a young woman named Xiaoyou, who has come to witness the event from the year 2081. Although the two time-travellers initially assume that they are coming from the same timeline, it is eventually revealed that they are from different timelines. Whereas Xiaoyou comes from the implied reader’s timeline, the protagonist Lu Ming comes from a timeline with a different historical trajectory. Most

<sup>8</sup> This novel was written as a sequel to Liu Cixin’s *Three Body Problem* trilogy (2008–2010) and originally published online.

<sup>9</sup> All quotations from the two texts in this article are my own translations.

importantly, in Lu Ming’s timeline, “the great founder of our republic” (2) is not Mao Zedong, but the less known Communist leader Zhang Guotao.

To begin with, the story employs time travel to illuminate how the teleological temporal order is imposed by narratives. As noted, David Wittenberg points to how time travel narratives tend to literalise narrative devices and plots that normally reorder the storyline only in terms of its narrative structure. Baoshu’s text employs this strategy to bring attention to the regulation of historical narratives by pointing to the “regulation” of time travel within the narrative. In the story, different “points in time” (shidiandian) in the history of China become a literal topos, which the characters are able to “visit” (zaofang). In the story, the protagonist Lu Ming has been granted the opportunity to travel back in time, to the founding of the Communist Party outside of Shanghai in 1921 since “the nation had a favourable policy, a few outstanding students are selected to travel in time free of charge, as a special encouragement” (1). However, significantly, the time-travellers are only allowed to travel to destinations that serve the purpose of “nationalistic education” (aiguo jiaoyu), including, for instance, “the heroic undertaking of our nation’s taikonauts when they first put the national flag on the moon”, “the unification of China by Qin Shihuang”, or “the founding ceremony of the State” (kaiguo dadian) (1). These references to both factual and fictional national glories and feats are a reference to the glorification of the nation in historical narratives, official discourse, and education. The story brings attention not only to how historical narratives are employed to enhance nationalist sentiments, but also to how certain historical events and periods are excluded from such narratives in official discourse. As the narrator-protagonist points out,

The early history of the Party and the Republic had a large number of restricted zones. The Department for Management of Time exercised strict control over it, and even used methods from physics to close off certain contact points in time. The places ordinary people like us were allowed to visit were certain to be without any political problems. (6)

As we can see from the quote above, politically sensitive periods in the Chinese history are here literalised and made into actual topoi that time travellers are stopped from visiting by a government authority; the access is literally manipulated by political actors. Wittenberg suggests that time travel can be regarded as a “narratological laboratory”, in which narrative configurations are literalised and made visible (9–10). Baoshu’s story is an example of how such literalisation can take on a political dimension in the Chinese context; in other words, it points to the way “the past is reconstructed by or within the present” (18) and serves to expose the use of narrative practices and manipulation for political ends.

### **3. Contingency and national teleological time in “Watching the Boat at South Lake Together”**

Baoshu’s text not only reveals how narratives are manipulated for political reasons, it also subverts the teleological time of the nation by introducing contingency. As noted, alternate history gravitates towards the origin of history,

and the text utilises this to challenge the temporal order by exposing and subverting the relationship between telos and origin. Qingxin Lin has pointed to the relationship between origin and telos in the imposition of teleological time in 20<sup>th</sup> century China. As the author points out, in this context, “the construction of the myth of origin and the myth of telos is essential. A lofty origin justifies the beauty of the telos and a beautiful telos, in turn, justifies the loftiness of the origin” (102). In this way, a dialectic between the origin and telos is constructed: the origin inaugurates a “new time” whose complete significance will be fulfilled in the future, as one approaches the telos.

Baoshu’s story also repeats this scheme. In the story, as noted, Lu Ming travels back in time to witness the founding of the Communist Party in Jiaying, outside of Shanghai, in 1921. The overlapping of the narrative of the CCP and the teleological time of the nation is evident from the fact that the narrative makes clear the protagonist has returned not only to the founding of the CCP but also to the origin of “modern China”. This was the time when the “ancient dynasty had already been completely shattered by modernity” and when “the iron heel of great powers constantly tread[ed] on this ancient Eastern nation”(1), and China was plagued by famine, warlords, and disunity. It was also a time when “all kinds of new ideas and political campaigns were coming from the West, providing this ancient nation new hope” (1). To finally connect the origin of the CCP to the origin of modern China, the narrator points out that “this little lake was the *birth-place of new hope*” (1, emphasis added). The fact that the narrator here points to the event of the founding of the CCP as the “birth-place of new hope” clearly suggests that this is not merely the birthplace of the CCP, but also the beginning of the national teleological time. In sum, by allowing the protagonist to return to the origin of the national teleological time, as conceived by the revolutionary narrative in the official discourse, the story positions itself firmly within the teleological time of the nation.

Nonetheless, the narrative subverts this teleological time by configuring an alternate timeline and introducing contingency. The “moment of divergence” turns out to be when Mao Zedong is captured by a local militia in the Chinese countryside in the late 1920s and killed while attempting to escape; as a consequence, Zhang Guotao rises to prominence within the Communist Party in Lu Ming’s timeline and becomes the founder of the “Chinese Socialist Republic”, instead of the “People’s Republic of China” (14). To explain the presence of the alternate timeline, the narrator-protagonist builds on the “many worlds hypothesis” in quantum physics and concludes that “because of the uncertainty of quantum particles, the occurrence of one event could produce many different results, and all possible results would form its own universe” (14). This notion of contingency changes Lu Ming’s perspective on the historical event. Lu Ming realises that even though the founders of the Communist Party are right before their eyes, “they [the founders of the CCP] *could have not been here*” (15, emphasis added); in other words, the sacred “origin” in the scheme of the configuration of teleological time dissolves. In the newly introduced contingent temporality, time appears as a “never ending network of branches” with “an unlimited number of directions and points of divergence to choose from” (17). For these reasons, “there was actually no such thing as a fixed fate” and in fact, for these individuals, “there was still an infinite amount of possibilities ... the future was open for them” (17). Hence, Lu Ming also sees a “tragic element” in the Communist leaders’ commitment to teleological time.

Indeed, they still firmly believed that there was “only one future of the world ... one direction” and were convinced that they “already grasped the direction history had taken – society evolves along a single line of progression, through millions of years, from one stage to another, while finally inevitably reaching Communism” (17). In this way, the story narrates a conflict between a contingent temporality and the teleological time of the nation, where the unilinear, teleological time is undermined by the introduction of a contingent timescape.

However, the narrative not only subverts teleological time through its introduction of an alternate timeline; it also serves to re-negotiate the individual subject’s relationship to historical time after the teleological temporal order has been undermined. In fact, Lu Ming is initially a staunch subscriber to the revolutionary narrative and the teleological temporal order. The protagonist’s attachment to the temporal order is, first and foremost, visible from how excited he is about being able to go back to the founding of the CCP and the origin of the teleological time. Lu Ming describes himself as a “hobby historian” (*lishi aihaozhe*) (2), and he takes great pleasure in spotting the different historical figures on the boat. Among the students granted the time-travel grant, he is the only one who has chosen this event to travel to, and his excitement over returning to the origin of the teleological time is explicitly pointed to as he exclaims how “history would be changed by them, would be changed by what happened on this boat. And history had proven them right, *I thought with great excitement*” (5, emphasis added). Even more significantly, Lu Ming’s attachment to the teleological time is also evident from the fact that as soon as it is revealed that there is not just one History, but innumerable *histories*, his interest in history, initially, completely evaporates. He feels that his profound interest in history has become “utterly meaningless” in the context of the plurality of historical times because “from the point of view of the universe, there was no such thing as a single History” (14). Suddenly, all the “sacred grand narratives” are no longer part of a greater plan but merely “products of accident” (14). As a result, the disillusioned Lu Ming concludes that “what we call history does not exist” (15); instead, time and history are nothing but “rootless change, from nothingness to nothingness” (15). In other words, as the teleological temporal order is replaced by the plurality of historical times, history dissolves into nothingness for the narrator-protagonist. Significantly, he uses the word “rootless” (*wugen*), which again points to the dialectic between the telos and the origin in the construction of teleological time, and in this case, to the individual subject’s own psychological need to return to the origin. The protagonist’s attachment to the revolutionary narrative points to the “abiding allure” (Barme 40) that the narrative and its version of teleological time still hold in contemporary China.

Nonetheless, Lu Ming is eventually transformed from a staunch subscriber to the teleological temporal order to someone who embraces the multiplicity of times. In the story, the motif of romance clearly plays a significant role in negotiating the protagonist’s loss of faith in teleological time. After the young woman argues that the plurality of historical times does not extinguish all meaning, Lu Ming changes his mind. As he puts it, “happiness is still happiness, suffering is suffering, and choices are still choices” (15). In fact, Lu Ming starts considering whether the reason he could not accept the existence of more than one history perhaps had less to do with the pursuit of truth and

more to do with the “masculine desire for power”, since by “possessing history, we could possess time, and in turn possess the future” (15). In this way, the narrator-protagonist’s initially quite innocent interest in history as a “hobby historian” and his desire to go back to the genesis of modern Chinese history is linked to the darker motive of “possessing” history and also, explicitly, to masculine desire. Indeed, it is notable that much of the narrative consists of Lu Ming lecturing the much less historically knowledgeable woman about the various historical personages on the boat, and he is seemingly deriving great pleasure from “possessing” the narrative. As the story develops into a budding romance between the two time-travellers and ends in a climactic embrace seconds before they are sent back to their own times, it could be argued that Lu Ming’s supposed masculine desire to “possess” is transferred from history to his romantic interest in the young woman.

The fact that it is the young woman Xiaoyou who helps Lu Ming to renegotiate his relationship to historical time points to cultural and political developments in post-1989 China. In a thought-provoking essay on the most famous novel of the Maoist era, *Qingchun zhi ge* (*Song of Youth*, 1958), literary scholar Ban Wang notes that the novel’s romantic motif and its depiction of private dreams and desires are sublimated into the love of the revolution. As Wang argues, the novel engages the reader in “a process of rechanneling one’s desire, impulse and affection into politically acceptable outlets”. Ultimately, it “shows how crucial it is to get involved in history and how one can, in [the] process, transform oneself into the ‘subject of history’” (241). In Baoshu’s text, we see this process reversed, as Lu Ming’s initial commitment to the revolutionary narrative and its notion of teleological time is rechannelled back into private dreams and desires. This corresponds to McGrath’s observation that “after the merging of the public and private spheres under the totalising ideology of communism”, the post-socialist context has witnessed the return of private subjectivity in cultural representation and “the rise of romantic love to, in a sense, replace the political in popular cultural representations” (ch. 1). In brief, Baoshu’s story reveals how individual subjectivity remains in tension with the national teleological time also in the post-socialist context, and here, contingency functions to liberate the individual subject from “the burden of history”.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the romantic motif and its focus on private desires also risks reproducing the status quo, as the shift from teleological history to individual romance might entail abandoning commitments in the dimension of historical time altogether.

#### **4. National teleological time, contingency, and nostalgia in Han Song’s “Shanghai 1938 – a Memory”**

In Baoshu’s story, the introduction of an alternate history and the contingent idea of time is ultimately a liberating experience for the protagonist. But is the subversion of the teleological order always liberating for the individual subject in the context of post-1989 China? In Han Song’s “Shanghai 1938 – a Memory”, the relationship between the individual subject and the teleological time of the

<sup>10</sup> I borrow this phrase from Hayden White’s essay “The Burden of History.” *History and theory*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1966.

nation is problematised further. Originally published on the author's social media platform and later published in print in 2017, the story is set in the Sino-Japanese War, in Shanghai of 1938, and focuses on an unnamed student who frequents a shop that sells “video-discs”. Following his lover Xiaoping’s disappearance, the student is acquainted with the shop-owner, who introduces him to a mysterious “time-disc”, with which one can turn back time and begin again in another timeline.

Much like in the previous story, contingency is introduced into a linear, national metanarrative, but this time through the novum of the time-disc. As the owner explains the function of the time-disc, she points out that the time-disc is not an ordinary video-disc; “it [is] a disc that could make time flow backwards, as well as make time start all over again” (350). Applying the disc to a projector, the shop-owner shows the narrator how the disc works by displaying the flow of Suzhou river on a screen, and “every time, the newly formed paths of the river were different, the scenery at the banks of the river changing, new worlds were born and paraded before my eyes one after another” (350).

However, despite seemingly providing a way out from the dire historical situation, contingency is not depicted as liberating in the story and is, instead, associated with uncertainty and instability. The application of the time-disc does not guarantee one finds oneself in a more auspicious position in historical time. Rather, it is only an “opportunity” (351). Furthermore, it is compared to the act of “throwing a die” (356); it all depends on “luck” (355). Possibly, one will find oneself in an even worse “period of disruption” (luanshi) (351). The contingent idea of time – of “throwing a die” – is further consolidated by linking it to the motif of gambling. The inventor of the time-disc is repeatedly referred to as “that mysterious gambler” (355, 358); it is revealed that he gambles away his fortune (made on selling time-discs) in various casinos in Macao and Las Vegas. In other words, while the motif of romance made contingency a liberating idea in Baoshu’s story, the motif of gambling makes it more threatening.

In fact, rather than taking a chance on another timeline, the narrator clings to the original timeline all the way till the end of the narrative. His choice of doing so is clearly rooted in his aversion to contingency and his attachment to the teleological time of the nation. As he himself puts it,

I was still stubbornly hoping that the place where I would meet Xiaoping again someday – in life or in death – would be of this world. In the only possible future. Not in innumerable, intangible pasts. *I also believed that the war would end one day, and that we Chinese people could survive, following an already fixed path ahead, and out of the ruins begin life anew*” (352, emphasis added).

To further consolidate his determination to stick to the original timeline, the protagonist has a vision of a future, prosperous Shanghai, which is reminiscent of the contemporary Shanghai. He narrates: “On the eastern side of the Huangpu River, there appeared what seemed like a mirage”, and he sees “tall, tower-like buildings that did not really exist, reaching for the sky”; these buildings “seemed like ancient fortresses haunted by ghosts, but yet they overflowed with colours while beautifully reflecting the moonlight. They were

magnificent and dazzling to the eye” (363–64). Baffled by the vision, he asks himself: “Could this be China after its destruction?” (364). Needless to say, the implied reader knows that this is, in fact, the future of China; it is quite clearly the contemporary Shanghai intruding into the narrative, and the vision of its splendour serves to consolidate the narrator’s temporal commitment to the linear, teleological time of the nation, despite the chance to “begin anew” in another timeline. Hence, the narrator-protagonist concludes that “no matter what, the people with time-discs left too early. After all, even though it was at death’s door, the nation was still struggling – and could perhaps even survive for another 5,000 years, just in one stretch” (364).

The protagonist’s commitment to his timeline and the national teleological time can be understood in relation to discourses of nationalism and nostalgia in the post-socialist context. By setting the story in the Sino-Japanese war, the story evokes national trauma and the legacy of colonialism; in fact, the shop-owner tells the protagonist that the time-disc was originally invented to “save China” but was rejected by the nationalist government. The time-disc is sold to “nations with no hope for the future”, considering that “the distance between them and the first-rate countries was just growing bigger and bigger, and these countries had absolutely no way of catching up” (359). In this context, abandoning the timeline would also mean abandoning a particular narrative of national trauma and the subsequent liberation. In fact, at one point the narrator-protagonist even muses on what it would be like if all Chinese people employed the time-disc and disappeared from the timeline, except for himself and the shop-owner (358).

Perhaps even more significant in problematising the relationship to national teleological time is the spatiotemporal setting of pre-revolutionary Shanghai. The setting imbues the story with a kind of nostalgic gaze that cultural critic Dai Jinhua identifies as a cultural tendency in post-socialist China (206), and in it, Shanghai plays a central role (217–218). Indeed, Han Song’s short story is replete with a sense of nostalgia for the “old Shanghai”. The famous 1930s singer Zhou Xuan’s “Si ji ge” (“Song of the Four Seasons”) is played, and there are multiple references to well-known films of this period, including *Mulan congjun* (*Mulan Joins the Army*, 1939) and *Luanshi fengguang* (“Heroes in the Turbulent Days”). Dai notes that nostalgia is not a re-creation of the past as it was, but rather a selective reminiscence from the perspective of the present (207). Indeed, in Han Song’s story, the nostalgic vibe is enhanced by the fact that the historical narrative is not entirely reliable. In fact, as the title suggests, it is merely “a memory” (jìyì), and the story also contains multiple anachronisms: the latter film, for instance, was not released until 1941, and the presence of a shop selling “video-discs” can, of course, not be regarded as a natural part of the temporality of 1938’s Shanghai; it belongs more to the Shanghai of the 1990s or 2000s, when the story was written. The protagonist’s vision of a future, prosperous Shanghai, reminiscent of the contemporary Shanghai, further enhances this entanglement of past and present and the importance of the spatial category of Shanghai for the protagonist’s commitment to linear, teleological time.

To further argue the point of the importance of nostalgia for the “old Shanghai” in the story, the shop-owner even points to some individuals who returned to the original timeline after having used the time-disc to begin anew in other timelines. She muses that even though their reappearance in the

timeline could have been unintentional, she also speculates that “perhaps they regretted [choosing to use the time-disc]?” and that they had, in fact, returned because they were “nostalgic” (liulian) “about the glorious Shanghai of the past” (354). In this way, Han Song cleverly constructs a narrative that undermines the linear, teleological time of the nation by introducing a contingent notion of time while at the same time problematising the very same deconstruction of the national teleological time and the idea of contingency and multiple timelines. In other words, the narrative suggests – by its unfolding in the pre-revolutionary Shanghai and allusions to national humiliation and nostalgia for the Shanghai of the past – that for the individual subject, the teleological time of the nation might not be so easy to give up after all.

## 5. Conclusion

In her study of temporality in Western science fiction and postmodernism, Elana Gomel writes: “As the dream of progress is being buried deeper and deeper in the rubble of World War II, the Holocaust, the collapse of Communism and 9/11, time becomes an enemy” (2). However, what Gomel leaves out from her account is that China – despite the crackdown at Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the end of the Cold War – has remained dominated by an unwavering notion of progress in the form of the national teleological time. Hence, in 2021, at the centennial of the founding of the CCP and ten years after the publication of “Watching the Boat at South Lake Together”, the chairman of the CCP and the president of China, Xi Jinping, could speak with confidence when he encouraged the Chinese people to “put conscious effort into learning from history to create a bright future”. Moreover, he reminded the population of 1.4 billion people that “the 100-year-long history of the Party, and the more than 70-year-long history of the People’s Republic of China all provide ample evidence that without the Communist Party of China, there would be no new China” (6).

The Chinese case encourages us to move away from merely focusing on “agentless processes of change” (Clark 35), and to acknowledge that “time is also a question of power, the power to control movements, to decide about beginnings and endings, to set the pace, to give the rhythm” (Jordheim 510). However, as this analysis has shown, there are many forms of time present in the post-socialist context. These texts both probe the national teleological order by exposing its reliance on narrative, and challenge it by introducing conflicting temporalities, both collective and individual, which reveal a temporal flux and tension beneath the official discourse. The presence of a contingent chronoscape in post-1989 Chinese science fiction – a chronoscape where historical time in the form of alternate histories branches into multiple timelines – indicates that collective temporalities can no longer be entirely contained within the unilinear teleological time of the nation. “The New Wave” of Chinese science fiction has been praised for its subversive qualities (Song 8), and as this analysis has shown, much of its subversive potential lies in its engagement with temporality and temporal regimes. Whether it can remain vital in this respect in the present age of Xi Jinping is for the Chinese writers, and SFF researchers, to find out.

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# “Wheels turning in opposite directions”: the Utopian Dynamics of Individual and Collective Temporality in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* and Sheri S. Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country*

*Sarah Lohmann*

*Abstract:* Einstein may deem objective temporality an illusion, but temporal relations of self and other still strongly shape our lived experience. I explore how individual and communal temporality function in two apparently “ideal” societies, Anarres in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Women’s Country in Sheri S. Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country* (1988). While both quasi-utopias are founded on long-term egalitarian communality, I argue that anarcho-communist Anarres successfully combines progress-orientation with holistic cyclicity to pursue sustainable inclusivity against the odds while Women’s Country fails to do the same through separatist feminism and performative group identity: it succumbs to the tragic temporal trajectory at its core. However, I ultimately suggest that the novels still serve as complementary testimonials to the utopian potential of sustainably integrative temporality if we consider the utopianism negatively encoded in *Gate*’s performativity.

*Keywords:* utopia, feminism, community, individuality, sustainability, temporality, Ursula K. Le Guin, Sheri S. Tepper, *The Dispossessed*, *The Gate to Women’s Country*

## 1. Introduction: Reinventing the Literary Utopia on Temporal Terms

Utopia was famously given its last rites by many in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the cited reasons for its decline including everything from the fact that “utopia itself [had] become the enemy” after World War Two (Elliot 241) to Francis Fukuyama’s conviction that we had arrived at the “end of history as such” and utopia was no longer necessary (4; see Godhe’s prefatory of this section). However, it has now become apparent not only that history is far from over, but that part of the problem with traditional literary utopias was their lack of sustainability, which was also in large part due to their lack of inclusivity. In utopian classics, such as Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (1887), marginalised groups such as women experience utopia differently from the supposed norm, for instance by being largely excluded from public life and made subservient to their husbands.<sup>1</sup> The golden “eternal present of utopianism”, as Eduardo dos Reis terms it, is thus only accessible to privileged members of society. In turn, this arguably contributes to the danger of utopian stasis in these texts, which Erin McKenna terms “end-state models”: lack of possible development is particularly treacherous when it functions through oppression, and can ultimately unleash totalitarian terrors from “nuclear destruction” to “sophisticated genetic engineering”, as McKenna points out (1).

However, Samuel Delany, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, and Ursula K. Le Guin’s “critical utopias” of the 1970s (Tom Moylan) addressed this danger in their basic organisation: they made utopia accessible to all, including women and other marginalised individuals. In doing so, they created not only “more recognisable and dynamic alternatives” to the “systematising boredom of the traditional utopia” in Moylan’s terms, but fundamentally reinvented the utopian project as something that could not only survive diversity and change, but thrive on it (10). Specifically, rather than sacrificing individuals to oppression or eternal stasis, these texts highlighted the importance of both dynamic, inclusive communities and individual agency across time in sustainably bringing about alternative futures – thereby complicating the traditional utopian idea of ahistorical perfection and the concept of linear, one-size-fits-all progress that the Fin-de-Siècle utopias (such as Bellamy’s) espoused.

In this article, I will take a closer look at one of these critical utopias, Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), in order to show how the integration of these collective and individual temporal experiences plays a vital role in the text; as Mikhail Bakhtin notes, the “inseparability of space and time” means that utopia is also always “uchronia” (15).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, I will read this text alongside Sheri S. Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country* (1988), a post-apocalyptic, quasi-

<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps even more clearly the case in these utopias than in the non-utopian “zero worlds” (Suvín) giving rise to these texts, given the often brutal regulation underlying these communities and the resulting vast discrepancy of utopian experience between individuals.

<sup>2</sup> My reading assumes the Einsteinian premise that every object and person’s experience of time is unique due to their specific spatiotemporal placement and movement; however, it is primarily interested in how these experiences can also be further divided or aligned through changes in personal or cultural perceptions of self and other.

utopian successor to the critical utopias that is predicated on the same collective-based inclusive consciousness as Le Guin's novel, yet ends up taking a radically different utopian direction. Ultimately, however, I will suggest that these directions are complementary, offering up challenging impulses for truly inclusive and sustainable future-oriented thought – something we are currently in dire need of.

## **2. *The Dispossessed* and *The Gate to Women's Country* as Examples of Inclusive Utopian Sustainability**

### **2.1 *The Dispossessed*: “To be Whole is to be Part”**

Both *The Dispossessed* and *The Gate to Women's Country* (henceforth referred to as *Gate*) feature utopian societies in which old patriarchal systems of dominance have given way to attempts at long-term utopian sustainability grounded in feminist awareness. In *The Dispossessed*, the planet Anarres, located far from Earth and far in the imaginary future, was colonised seventy years prior by settlers from the planet Urras, after their female leader, Laia Odo, instigated a successful anarchist communist revolution. The resulting utopian society of Anarres, an “experiment in nonauthoritarian [i.e., anarchist] communism that ... has survived for a hundred and seventy years” (282), is imperfect but deeply egalitarian in its set-up: there are no centralised government or authoritarian institutions, and the resulting flat hierarchy disregards sex and gender in contributions to social maintenance, with jobs assigned by a system called Divlab solely on the basis of personal ability and social requirement. As the protagonist, Shevek, remarks, “a person chooses work according to interest, talent, strength – what has the sex to do with that?” (17) Moreover, voluntary partnership replaces marriage while anti-proprietary sentiment forbids any inclination of ownership within relationships, and optional full-time day care supports both parents' careers, freeing up both men and women to participate in the long-term utopian advancement of Anarres.

Indeed, besides equality, long-term thinking is an essential part of Anarresti Odonian philosophy, whose guiding works, such as Odo's *The Social Organism*, centralise paucity and the thereby required conservation of resources as the new society's guiding principle: one of the mantras of Anarresti life is “excess is excrement” (127–8), which leads to what Christine Nadir describes as “the penetration of functionalism and organicism into all facets of life” (39). Moreover, this long-term planning is in large part environmental: for example, many job placements assigned by Divlab require the cultivation of the previously barren planet through the planting of thousands of trees, following global heating that led to “millennia of drought” (59). As such, *The Dispossessed* appears to fulfill Lisa Garforth's designation of a “green utopia” as typically depicting a “dramatic reduction in material wants as the basis for ecological security and an expansion of human well-being”, which in turn allows “the replacement of nature's taken-for-granted domination and exploitation with a utopia of environmental collaboration and caution” (405). Sustainability, then, is achieved on Anarres through a collective commitment to

this long-term endeavour of disciplined self-restraint, eschewing private property in favour of “I use this one and you use that” (75) and with “profiteer” serving as “the most contemptuous word” (293) in the Anarresti vocabulary.

Thus, the long-term cultivation of Anarres places its utopia not in the unreachable Not-yet that Ernst Bloch famously deems utopian, and which Darko Suvin calls “less significant than the *orientation* toward a better place” (77), but in the Anarresti’s daily communal commitment to keep the forward momentum of communist anarchist revolution alive. This, in turn, is only possible when everyone, regardless of gender, can contribute to the cause – an egalitarian process-orientation that thus resists the stereotypical identification of women, in particular, with temporal cyclicity, grounded in rhythms of fertility and childbirth.<sup>3</sup> And yet, cyclicity is still clearly present within this progress: the natural cycles of all beings and the re-awakening landscape are reflected through the Odonian symbol of the green “circle of life”, which adorns all official publications and symbolically “encloses all individuals within the group” while “emphasiz[ing] a holistic approach to life” (517). Clearly, this circle is an open one, supporting collective forward movement that is nevertheless supportive of all its members. Shevek’s partner Takver, for example, demonstrates this progressive holism within her cutting-edge marine biology research: Shevek notes that “it was strange to see Takver take a leaf into her hand, or even a rock. She became an extension of it: it of her” (154). Moreover, vignettes like these show the crucial role of *every* element in the utopia’s cyclical progression: Takver and Shevek’s scientific work and community labour provide important communal services, but so do all the other human and non-human members of the system. Against the environmental odds, the Anarresti are attempting to create a more livable future together, thus incorporating both individual and communal temporality into their utopian ideal.

Notably, the anarchist communist nature of Anarresti society plays a big role in this sustainable and egalitarian valuing of both individual and community: elsewhere, Le Guin explains that the novel’s “political theory” was “formulated” (“Interview”, 166) on ideas “prefigured in early Taoist thought, and expounded by Shelly and Kropotkin, Goldman and Goodman”, which she found to be “the most idealistic, and ... the most interesting, of all political theories” (“Quarters”, 285). This is significant on feminist terms due to the significant contributions of women like Goldman to communist anarchist thought and Marxism: as Bonnie G. Smith writes, “Marxian time” has been “of interest to women since the nineteenth century” as it “presents temporality as the medium for the ups and downs of women’s condition, showing an egalitarian society deep in the human past and a deterioration of that society with the advent of private property” (986). As such, Marx’s socialist future showed feminist promise, and several women writers and artists contributed to their own “hoped-for liberation” following the Communist Revolution (986). As Dan Sabia notes, moreover, “a key attraction of the ideology has always been its stress on the equal and paramount value of both individualism and community, personal autonomy and social solidarity, individual freedom and responsibility

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as Bonnie G. Smith notes, the cyclical “temporality of the female body” has led to women not only being “associated with the phases of the moon or with instability and insanity” but equated with “those devalued animals whose estrus cycles seemed similar to menstrual ones” (982).

to others”; theory and practice thus attempt to show “why and how self and society, or individuality and community, can be reconciled or harmonized” (112). After all, as D. Novak writes, “anarchist communism views the individual as essentially a social being who can achieve full development only in society, while society can benefit only when its members are free” (Sabia 113): societies support and protect, while individuals innovate and adapt. As such, the mutual aid systems of anarchist communism support Anarres’ inclusive sustainability, grounded in the belief that “*To be whole is to be part*” as Odo’s tombstone reminds the Anarresti (108).

## 2.2 The Gate to Women’s Country: Farsight and Ritual

*Gate*, meanwhile, features a post-apocalyptic world that is likewise focused on long-term utopian development on egalitarian principles and even more obviously designed as an apparent feminist utopia. On our world, 300 years in the future, neo-Classical city-states run by unelected all-female Councils have emerged following a nuclear devastation. Indeed, the towns only hold women and boys up to the age of five, at which point they are brought to the all-male garrisons outside the city gates, to be trained by the warriors in “defending” the city – otherwise warriors and women only come together for supervised “assignments” during regular festivals. However, young men may choose to return to the city through the “gate to Women’s Country” after they turn fifteen years old, up until they see active duty at 25; if they return, they live and work with specific families as “servitors”. Accordingly, women live their lives in relative autonomy and freedom from patriarchal structures: they may pursue any career path (as long as they select a science, an art, and a craft, to speed up societal redevelopment) and have reclaimed all aspects of governance and administration. Stavia, the protagonist, notes that the “women’s studies” at her school include “management, administration, sexual skills” as well as special electives (31). In fact, some gender-based stereotypes have become inverted: male children’s age is kept track of, instead of that of girls, in Stavia’s family (10), and schools teach that all women are kin, without any mention of men (30). Similarly, vanity is accepted in men but frowned upon in women: “‘If you’re going to raise a child, wouldn’t you rather it was good-looking?’ ‘But suppose it’s a daughter, and it grows up to be like him?’ ‘Yech. A crowing hen! Cock-o-doodle-doo!’” (59).

Moreover, as on Anarres, long-term thinking plays an important role in the governance of Women’s Country. In fact, in terms of temporality, a strong distinction is drawn between the temporal perception and experience of the garrison warriors and that of the women and servitors in the cities, on whose terms this utopia functions: while the women oversee the long-term maintenance and growth of the cities as well as the allocation of resources, the warriors focus on short-term martial victory and accumulation of military honour. We are shown this specifically in the discrepancy between Stavia and her warrior lover, Chernon: while Stavia carefully follows in her Councilwoman mother’s footsteps in supporting the city as a doctor, Chernon is uninterested in education and only cares about gaining the respect of his garrison officers. His favourite fantasy is “imagin[ing] himself as Odysseus, leaving the battlefield after victory”, “wounded just enough that his bloodstained bandages showed

everyone he had been in battle”(148). Chernon is not interested in the actual experience of the battle, but the imaginatively extended moment of glory to follow. This temporal discrepancy is also evident in Stavia and Chernon’s attitudes towards eating and love-making: Stavia takes her time with both, while Chernon is preoccupied with momentary pleasure, gulping and “not even bothering to taste” his food (75). Indeed, Stavia realises that for Chernon, “everything was now. Nothing was later” (242), and she compares him to a “small child” in this regard (248). Other warriors mirror this near-sighted, immature temporality, with Chernon himself noting that their lives are mostly defined through the cyclical anticipation of fleeting pleasure in military parades and battles: “the splendor of it was spasmodic, brief orgasms of emotion separated by long periods of calm, almost of depression” (183–84). The women of the cities, on the other hand – the actual citizens of “Women’s Country” – join Stavia in acting with the farsight of adults. They look beyond the present to continually gather information, both long-lost and new, about the world around them and lead long-term projects of exploration as well as ecosystem restoration like that of the Anarresti, thus partially situating their extended temporality in environmental care. Moreover, this care bears fruit: nearly-extinct deer are released and multiply, to Stavia and her mother Morgot’s delight (102), hatcheries release more fish every year (12), and forests gain ground as reforestation crews “drop ... feathery tree seedlings into shovel slits” (102). The women thus hope both for a greener future and for an expansion of their civilisation beyond the radioactive devastations that currently trap them.

However, as in *The Dispossessed*, this long-term utopian project comes with the price of disciplined commitment on the part of the women. There is not as much material deprivation as on Anarres (besides the lack of such pre-devastation goods as foreign spices), but the women are expected to study and work diligently, learning their sciences, arts, and crafts to the highest possible level, even if they also choose to pursue motherhood. Moreover, they must maintain strict self-control, for example in reining in their romantic feelings for individual warriors: as Stavia recites to Morgot, “infatuation makes otherwise reasonable women behave in unreasonable and illogical ways. It is a result of biological forces incident to racial survival” (52). This statement is, in fact, part of the “ordinances”, a set of rules governing life in the cities just as anarchist communism implicitly governs Anarres. Adherence to the ordinances is the strictest requirement of the women in Women’s Country, who must memorise them at school and henceforth follow them religiously, as enforced by the Councilwomen. Underlying this custom is the belief that the cities’ inhabitants were “robbed” by their ancestors who brought about nuclear war, “which is why we must obey the ordinances, so we don’t rob our own descendants”, as Stavia’s friend Beneda quotes (62). However, this is not always easy: Morgot ominously tells Stavia and Beneda that “we all have to do things we don’t want to do. ... All of us here in Women’s Country. Sometimes they are things that hurt us to do. We accept the hurt because the alternative would be worse.” Moreover, Morgot adds, “we have many reminders to keep us aware of that. The Council ceremonies. The play before summer carnival.” Eventually, she says, “the pain will pass” (11–12).

Indeed, these “reminders” introduce temporal cyclicity into the forward-looking utopianism of Women’s Country, just as the “circle of life” mentality does on Anarres. Most notably, the women are all required to memorise the

play Morgot mentions – *Iphigenia at Ilium* – at school, alongside the ordinances, and it is performed every year by the Councilwomen, thus weaving through the novel as a leitmotif. The play is a reworking of the Greek tragedy *The Trojan Women*, and it is performed, as even Stavia’s obstinate sister Myra knows, as a “commentary on particular attitudes of preconvulsion society” (37): symbolically, it focuses deeply on the pain and grief that Iphigenia and her female kin (dead and alive) feel after the Trojan War, where several of them were killed. The significance of the play, beyond its general critique of pre-apocalyptic society and the accordant justification of new utopian ways, is not immediately apparent, and it is, in fact, paradoxically advertised as a comedy. However, its performances evidently play a large role in the women’s social cohesiveness and group identity over the cycles of years and generations. This recalls Judith Butler’s dictum that identity is performatively constituted, with particular reference to gender identity. The play’s performance, likewise, appears as a “stylized repetition of acts” (519) forming “a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (520).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the repetitive performance appears to align with Northrop Frye’s suggestion that “the behavior of the [utopian] society is described *ritually*”, whereby “a ritual is a significant social act, and the utopia-writer is concerned only with the typical actions ... significant of those social elements he is stressing” (324). Clearly, the utopian identity of Women’s Country rests on this play’s performance as a “significant social act” of identity-formation.

By contrast, somewhat oddly for a utopian society but with great significance that is later revealed, the men of the garrisons are not treated as citizens of Women’s Country, and thus, they are not subject to this particular performance of group identity formation, nor to any other ideological adherence to the ordinances or any long-term organisational responsibilities supporting the ideology. In fact, one might say that, due to thereby effectively lacking a government, the men’s lives are quite literally “nasty, brutish and short” (89), in Thomas Hobbes’ words, if they remain in the garrisons: it is, in fact, part of the ordinances that warriors are not to be given life-extending healthcare by Women’s Country as “they choose battle” and thus “have to live with the consequences” (129). Yet, they appear quite happy with their restricted temporality, supported as they are by the women’s labour, and as they are given certain freedoms, such as access to prostitutes regulated by Women’s Country. The warriors do occasionally launch rebellious attempts at conquering the cities, but the women seem oddly non-reliant on the garrisons when it comes to defending themselves; besides, as Wendy Pearson points out, “[the warriors’] desire to subjugate and rule the women seems impractical even in terms of serving their own interests” (208).

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<sup>4</sup> Although this performance is not exactly about gender identity in Butler’s terms, the subject matter is essentially the same: here, the focus is not on individuals performing a certain gender, but on an entire gender performing its apparent role within a strictly regimented social play.

## 2.3 Becoming Utopian

Overall, then, it is primarily through the juxtaposition with their non-utopian foils – Urras in *The Dispossessed* and the warrior men’s garrisons in *Gate* – that Anarres and Women’s Country demonstrate their utopianism. By creating group cohesion through their anarchist communist principles and their gender-based identity performance respectively, both Anarres and Women’s Country are able to construct an egalitarian/feminist temporal utopian trajectory that appears to successfully combine ongoing progress-orientation with supportive cyclicality, and draw on disciplined self-restraint and ordinance-following to do so. They are thus seemingly able to sidestep both the stagnant ahistoricism of classical utopianism and the exclusionary progress fetishism of the Fin-de-Siècle utopias, while also avoiding the sacrifice of individual temporality to the utopian collective that tends to characterise their utopian predecessors, at least in regard to marginalised individuals. Instead, both societies employ cyclical holistic solidarity or ‘reminders’ to reassure each utopian citizen of their essential role in the functioning of the utopia. As such, they appear to propose something akin to Elizabeth Grosz’s perception of feminist temporality as neither abstract clock-time nor immediate consciousness but a sense of *becoming*. Grosz writes that “this becoming infects not only beings in/as duration but the world itself”, which is clearly the case here (1019). However, Grosz dismisses deliberate policies and political activism as “the stuff of linear time” and thus “more or less a dead end”, whereas the worlds in these novels are committed to disciplined ideological co-creation of utopia (988). Another possible analogue is Julia Kristeva’s “women’s time”, which applauds second-wave feminism for making linear temporality accessible to women; however, Kristeva seems committed to traditionally gendered temporality, which makes Grosz more attractive in terms of inclusive temporal utopianism.

## 3. Trouble in Paradise: The Trials of Utopian Temporality

### 3.1 *The Dispossessed*: “True Voyage is Return”

Yet, the apparent utopian temporalities of both *The Dispossessed* and *Gate* are subjected to severe trials within the narratives. At the beginning of *The Dispossessed*, utopian progress appears to have stalled as innovation and creativity fall prey to increasingly rigidifying social and academic conventions; Shevek, a respected physicist, feels that his academic work is severely compromised, as he cannot publish his research independently of powerful academics. Power has begun to “inhere in [the] centre”, Shevek’s mentor Mitis warns him before he goes to study with leading researcher Sabul. Indeed, Shevek is soon in danger of becoming “Sabul’s man” (50), as he loses his intellectual independence. Moreover, his work on a “simultaneity theory” of physics is systematically discouraged, as it is apparently in conflict with the established “sequency principle”. Sabul tells Shevek his work is anti-Odonian, as it represents “a certain disaffection, a certain degree of privatism, of non-altruism” (200); however, this rejection actually appears to indicate that the values of the inclusive Odonian “circle of life” are in danger of succumbing to

pressure to conform to the collective. In other words, individual temporality is once more being subsumed by that of the community – this time through the perversion of the Anarresti’s scarcity-based discipline, which discourages intellectual freedom and paradoxically enables egotism. Shevek’s friend Bedap observes that “The circle has come right back round to the most vile kind of profiteering utilitarianism. The complexity, the vitality, the freedom of invention and initiative that was the centre of the Odonian ideal, we’ve thrown it all away” (146–47). As Sabia points out, this is not a natural consequence of communist anarchism – in fact, it can be attributed to a few circumstantial factors in Anarres’ development, such as the planet’s barren landscape, which does not lend itself to the kind of decentralisation originally planned by the Odonian settlers. The reader is told that “on arid Anarres, the communities had to scatter widely in search of resources, and few of them could be self-supporting, no matter how they cut back their notions of what is needed for support” (81). Sabia notes that the resulting centralisation and coordination brought with it “the need for bureaucratic ‘expertise and stability’ and hence new sources of power, based on proficiency, knowledge, information, and strategic position” (121), which in turn gave “scope to the authoritarian impulse”, in Bedap’s words (140). Moreover, in a society in which “social conscience, the opinion of others” is the “most powerful moral force motivating the behaviour of most Anarresti” (95), as the reader is told, lines between “conviction and conformity”, “self-interest and selfishness”, “tend to blur”, as Sabia adds, and “the maintenance of community ... solidarity and cooperation ... become indistinguishable from the suppression of individuality, freedom, and difference” (122). To make matters worse, Shevek tells us that, after a series of emergency measures, “five years of stringent control may have fixed the pattern permanently” (271), so that innovative individual freedom seems a distant memory: as Bedap laments, “we’ve made laws, laws of conventional behaviour, built walls all around ourselves, and we can’t see them, because they’re part of our thinking” (272).

Shevek is trapped by these walls as if by a physical restraint, and is even contemplating suicide. However, he eventually escapes by returning to Urras as a visiting scholar – the first Anarresti visitor the planet has seen – to exercise his intellectual freedom there, attempting to combine sequency and simultaneity theories of temporality into a General Temporal Theory. Shevek thus demonstrates to other Anarresti that their walls *can* be broken down: as Takver says, “if you talk about it and nobody goes, you’ve only proved that custom is unbreakable” (309). On Urras, Shevek is surprised to experience a society which appears to exist in a flourishing eternal present recalling traditional utopias, and indeed, the lushness of the landscape appears utopian to him, symbolising what Anarres longs to achieve at the end of its utopian strivings: a world in which collective labour bears fruit for all. Moreover, even the inclusivity of the Odonian “circle of life” seems to have been realised on Urras: Urras’ fertile ecosystems boast far more animals than still-barren Anarres does, and Shevek gets a glimpse of possible trans-species connection and utopian integration when he makes eye contact with a horse, wondering “what that deep, dry, dark gaze out of the darkness would have meant to Takver ... Takver would have known how to look back at that eye” (22). And yet, Shevek soon realises that extreme hierarchical social division in fact limits any actual progress to that of the ruling classes on Urras, which switches his perception of

Urras from utopian to almost entirely dystopian. This is in keeping with Odo’s experience that sparked her revolution. In fact, Shevek comes to realise that he himself is a prisoner on Urras, almost as Odo was – he is being held so that the government may exploit his research in order to gain martial advantage through faster-than-light travel. “Evidently if it’s in anybody’s pocket ... Dr. Shevek, it’s in yours” (111), Urrasti scientist Oegeo tells him. It turns out, then, that rather than supporting individuals (like Shevek) and grounding their quality of life in the end point of collective advancement, Urrasti leaders conversely value exploitative individualism, or the misuse of individual potential for profit – as symbolised by the possibility of objective temporality in faster-than-light travel – so highly, in fact, that it precludes the basic communality of Anarres, which has likewise tipped the scales towards “profiteering utilitarianism”, although not quite to this extreme. In other words, the balance has swung too far from individual freedom to exploitation, meaning that neither Urras nor Anarres represents a livable, sustainable society at this point – let alone a functioning utopia. Yet, it is ironic that Urrasti leaders rely specifically on the work of Shevek – born of the relative freedom of thought on non-hierarchical, anarcho-communist Anarres – to make progress in their own repressive society; this speaks volumes of these worlds’ relative merits.

Shevek’s breakthrough in coming to understand utopia in temporal terms, then, ends up taking a very different form: not an embrace of Urras’s exploitative individualist progress over the compromised cyclical communality of Anarres, but the *merging* of the positive aspects of both, as exemplified by the General Temporal Theory he finally arrives at. Shevek realises that his theory will only work if temporal movement is perceived as having two complementary sides – sequency and simultaneity – a finding that is, in fact, described in terms of both cyclicity and linear progress. As Shevek explains to a Urrasti,

Time has two aspects. There is the arrow, the running river, without which there is no change, no progress, or direction, or creation. And there is the circle or the cycle, without which there is chaos, meaningless succession of instants, a world without clocks or seasons or promises. ... A true chronosophy should provide a field in which the relation of the two aspects or processes of time could be understood. (185-6)

Given this duality, Moylan criticises that in *The Dispossessed*, “utopian matter is locked into a series of binary oppositions” (109), while Nadia Khouri speaks of a “reduction of the dialectic to binary oppositions with points of gravity congealed in static equilibrium” (51). However, Shevek’s actual breakthrough lies in positing that these two aspects necessarily *support* one another, rather than needing to be proven independently – just as, by extension, both individual and collective temporality, and thus individual freedom and social responsibility, are necessary elements of a functioning utopian society. He notes that

We don’t want purity, but complexity, the relationship of cause and effect, means and end. ... A complexity that not only includes creation but duration, not only being but becoming, not only geometry but ethics. It is not the answer we are after, but how to ask the question... (187)

Shevek's temporal theory thus supports his understanding that a sustainable utopian goal must essentially represent the irreducible temporal complexity of life itself, which by necessity includes both forward movement as well as the cyclical maintenance of interpersonal connections and of that which has already been achieved. Accordingly, he understands more deeply that communitarianism can only function successfully if it also incorporates and values the lives and contributions of its individual members. After all, forward movement may at times be driven by the individual, who requires the support of the community and its cyclical rhythms, while at other times, the individual may be stuck in cycles and require the forward drive of the community to help them thrive. Shevek's personal temporality is forward-facing and impatient, but his return to Urras and then again to Anarres has helped him to grasp the complementary value of community and its cyclical connectivity – despite, or indeed because of, the way the community previously complicated his personal creative trajectory on Anarres. Anarres' communal dynamics must be reintegrated into Shevek's and others' personal trajectories, and vice versa. However, this is a process which may include a few steps forward and a few steps back, as symbolised by the reader's journey through the alternating chapters, and as alluded to by the remainder of Odo's gravestone inscription: “*True voyage is return*” (108–109). Ultimately, then, we have once more arrived at something like Grosz' sense of *becoming* to describe Anarres' utopian temporality.

In light of this, then, it appears that rather than representing a “regressive dialectic”, the text interrogates and *challenges* the very dialectics that are at odds with true utopian temporality: it is not a question of either/or, but a question of sustainable cohesiveness. In moving between binary oppositions, in order to incorporate their energies into a complex whole, *The Dispossessed* actually generates a compelling image of such a sustainable, inclusive utopianism. This is beautifully illustrated by the temporal dynamics of a canon sung by revolutionaries on Urras, whom Shevek joins:

The melody seemed always to be lagging and catching up with itself, like a canon, and all the parts of the song were being sung at one time, in the same moment, though each singer sang the tune as a line from beginning to end.  
(246)

Moreover, this image highlights that this temporal complexity is not the final goal of anarchist communist Anarresti society, but once again, a constant process of becoming: as Sabia points out, in an anarcho-communist society committed to autonomy and liberty, “some degree of conflict and instability is likely ... to be both ongoing and inevitable” (124). In fact, “the ideal of complete harmony implies the death of freedom, and of life” (125), Sabia suggests, similarly to McKenna's warning of the traditional utopias. Bedap, too, asserts that “change is freedom, change is life — is anything more basic to Odonian thought than that?” (139). The antidote to communal stagnation and individual suppression is not a final integration into a settled, if complex, whole, but an integration into a whole that is constantly being re-evaluated, both by “lasting vigilance” (82) and by “permanent” revolution, “an ongoing process” (147). It is also worth noting that this applies to both Anarres and Urras – on the latter, Shevek's presence ignites contemporary activists, who are likewise inspired by

Odo’s revolution. Indeed, Chris Ferns points out that another uprising on Urras would further aid Anarres’ return to Odonian values, since “once Urras is shown to be susceptible to change ... there is no longer a fixed point of reference by which the Anarresti can determine their difference” and rest on their revolutionary laurels (259). Moreover, Ferns notes that a global economy including Urras could help to alleviate the scarcity of resources on Anarres, thus also helping to eliminate the “principal source of the recurring emergencies ... producing an increasing tendency towards conformity” (259). Overall, however, Anarres is already on solid utopian ground: making the revolution sustainably and integratively permanent is simply a return to its most basic anarchist communist values of social equality and individual freedom, reinforced through an ethic of mutual aid.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.2 The Gate to Women’s Country: Tragic Temporality

In *Gate*, however, the stumbling block on the road to utopia is not something that is ultimately subsumed in a gradual back-and-forth movement towards a more sustainably integrative utopian society. In fact, any unease the reader may have felt about this utopia defining itself in exclusion to the city-adjacent garrisons – and thus establishing a performative group gender role, whose long-term utopianism contrasts with the warriors’ short-term temporality – is affirmed and rewarded with a major plot twist. It is revealed that this temporal rift is even greater than first assumed, and that it even negates the warriors’ one long-term goal: the siring and raising of warrior sons. In truth, the Councilwomen are conducting a centuries-long project of eugenics, whereby the men who remain in the garrisons as warriors – as opposed to returning through the gate to Women’s Country – are bred out of the gene pool through sleight and misdirection. Instead, the women are procreating with the genetic material of the servitors, who – based on their self-selection – do not appear to exhibit the same tendencies for dominance and violent control over the women. The eventual goal is to not have “any more wars ... no wars at all” (295), as Morgot eventually tells Stavia, who had in the meantime run off with Chernon and must now be told the secret of Women’s Country in order to decide whether to keep his baby. By fully taking control of their reproduction, the women hope to deal the final death blow to the patriarchy, for as Shiloh Carroll notes, “patriarchy’s commodification of women is based, for the most part, on the ownership of a woman’s reproductive ability, not the woman herself” (30). It is a project of deception on a vast scale, but the Councilwomen leave “clues here and there, for those with the wits to see them” (52) – not least in their cyclical reminders, which turn out to be far more than innocuous encouragements to disciplined progress towards a better life.

This also explains the eternal recurrence of *Iphigenia at Ilium* as a central reminder on a deeper level: the pain and grief of the women in the play – the singular figures of specifically patriarchal violence and of the abuse taking

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<sup>5</sup> This return to community-based values is also confirmed through the eventual invention of the “ansible”, an instantaneous interplanetary communication device, which is made possible by Shevek’s General Temporal Principle and enables a radical alteration of the relations between Anarres and its neighbouring planets.

place in Classical Mythology – is due to the senseless violence of their men, whose desire for pleasure and glory brings them misery and death. The play is intended to strengthen the memory of this misery in the minds of the women of Women’s Country, whose foremothers suffered and died at the hands of (in their minds) predominantly male violence, which culminated in the nuclear apocalypse. These men apparently believed themselves to be living in an eternal present like that of the traditional utopias, paying no heed to their treatment of others, including women and the planet itself; this complete lack of equality and long-term thought, therefore, led to its extreme opposite, the minutely planned long-term control of society by the remaining women themselves. The deeper value of the play, regarding identity as performatively constituted in Butler’s terms, is this control through appearance: as Morgot tells Stavia, “half of what we do is performance. Ritual. Observances. If we are seen to be in control, the people are calm and life moves smoothly ... Learn to perform, Stavia. I have” (127). Ritual, then, becomes more than a “significant social act” (324), in Frye’s words. For this utopia, it is the very glue holding it together. Moreover, it is meaningful that *Iphigenia at Ilium* is a reworked Greek tragedy. As Victoria Wohl notes, Greek tragedy had a disproportionate number of female characters, yet still tended to “actively reproduce the unequal gender relations of Athenian society”, thus “reinforc[ing] the ideological status quo” (157). Indeed, Froma Zeitlin adds that Greek drama employed female-coded aspects of tragedy to merely “achieve ... a broadened understanding of what it meant to be a man” (Wohl 151). Iphigenia is thus the ideal figure to subvert this injustice and finally give women a voice: she, whose “pathetic murder symptomized the violence of the old order even as her enforced silence presaged the violent exclusion of the female from the new order” (152), in Wohl’s words, has returned not only to “haunt men’s imaginations, dreams, and nightmares”, as Sarah Pomery suggests of the disproportionately female tragic figures (229), but to seek revenge on the men who have wronged her – *all* men. The Councilwomen thus employ tragedy as an “ideological state apparatus”, much like the tragedies were employed in antiquity (Wohl 155), yet in complete inversion of gendered Athenian power relations. As such, they attempt to “organise and manipulate reality [through a] continuing reciprocity ... between individual psyche and collective ideology”, as Zeitlin says of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* (119). Indeed, Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor notes that the novel thus “recalls rather frighteningly the power of theatre and ideology alike to conceal”, as it suggests that “no utopian conception can hope to get beyond ideology even as it creates a new one” (129).

Moreover, unlike the performances of *Iphigenia at Ilium*, this ideology, the eternal performance of social deception that Morgot speaks of, is aimed at both women and the warriors: even simple-minded Chernon notes that “none of them in Women’s Country show us their real faces” (216). In fact, he is not far from guessing the reason. Realising the conflict between the women’s stated aim of keeping the garrisons strong and the simultaneous longing for their sons to return through the gate to Women’s Country, he says: “whenever I think about it, I think of two wheels, turning in opposite directions” (217). Indeed, some of the other warriors also suspect a secret of some kind. However, their short-sighted martial focus only allows them to imagine it as some form of weapon, which is only partially the case. In truth, the warriors – those lacking the courage and the abhorrence of martial violence to return – are

systematically ground to death between these wheels of Women’s Country: Stavia finds out that rebellious commanders are secretly put to death by Councilwomen and servitors (by using a special weapon indeed), and regular battles between garrisons are arranged to thin them out, particularly if rebellious propaganda has flourished there. Incidentally, the weapon used to quell dissident commanders appears as a “silver wheel”, which turns out to be “a curved blade at the end of a chain, whirled by a short handle” (304). Fittingly, the women know it to be a deceptively simple instrument – one that gains force through subterfuge and brilliant technical ability, like the women’s eugenics project – while the doomed commanders perceive it as a wheel, possibly symbolising the men’s sexist misjudgment of the women’s temporality as cyclical, when it is actually fatally long-term. With this set of deadly tools, which are both directly and indirectly lethal, the women thus plan to eventually “rid Women’s Country of those who are not and will not be part of it” (303), justifying their violence with the principle that they “never kill except in self-defense”, which however encompasses ‘the defense of ourselves and our cities .... The defense of Women’s Country’ (303). To protect their carefully curated community, and in their quest for “no [more] wars at all” (295), the women are fighting their own “war to end all wars”,<sup>6</sup> which Adam Roberts also specifically interprets to incorporate the warriors’ and women’s different temporalities: “In this novel the men plan to seize the city for short-term and hedonistic goals. The women are also fighting, but for long term goals to do with the larger social good. The women are winning.” (xi)

However, it is not clear that the women are truly “winning”. More and more men return through the gate to Women’s Country every year, that is true, but there is also a deep tragedy that comes with this long-term project of secretive, selective exclusion: the Councilwomen who hold the knowledge and facilitate the process call themselves the “damned few” (290), given the high price they pay for a future free from patriarchal violence and control. This price includes not only the guilt over the ongoing deception of both the warriors and their fellow citizens, but the accordant impossibility of true friendship, as seen in the relationships between Stavia and Beneda, or their mothers, Morgot and Sylvia. Further price is also paid with the loss of individual psychological coherence, as the mental dissociation required of the Councilwomen is immeasurable, and the unattainability of trusting and genuine romantic partnerships, as those between women and warriors remain forcibly childless, while those between women and servitors are kept hidden. Moreover, here violence is not only averted but embedded in the very system of Women’s Country itself – it thus ultimately renders the apparently utopian temporal project of Women’s Country a dystopian downward spiral, unravelling into an uncertain future clearly shaped by coercion and subterfuge rather than inclusive collectivity. The Councilwomen hope for some kind of eschatological redemption at the end of their descendants’ long journey towards utopia, when there are “no [more] wars”, and thus, no more need for the women’s gendered violence. Yet, it is difficult to imagine a future founded on systemic violence that does not end in tragedy. This fear is foreshadowed in *Iphigenia at Ilium*, by Cassandra who cries: “I have seen blood, but not this blood here today. I have

<sup>6</sup> This term is historically used to describe World War One, and it originates from H. G. Wells’ *The War That Will End War* (1914).

seen bodies broken, but not these! I see a desolation yet to come! In time! At the end of time” (169).

In fact, it appears that this fear is not unfounded. Even if the eugenics programme is successful, there are cracks in the system. For instance, assumptions rooted in gender essentialism are preventing the Councilwomen from being as rigorous about the elimination of violent or unruly tendencies in women as in men: Myra is permitted to have three children before her involuntary hysterectomy. Moreover, the genetic selection seems to be based not necessarily on the aversion of violence, but on the pomp and peer pressure of the garrisons. Additionally, it may select for a certain kind of telepathy, which several of the servitors exhibit and which may simply have given them the knowledge that returning through the gate to Women’s Country ensures their survival, as showman Septemius also guesses in the text: “perhaps because they had it, they chose to come back” (289). Incidentally, this telepathy, known as the “the long-feel or the time-feel” (98) by the servitors, aligns nicely with the Councilwomen’s long-term eugenicist planning, but it is odd that they themselves do not have this ability – another sign that their survival after the elimination of the warriors is hard to predict. In any case, the readiness to commit violent acts is still clearly present in the servitors. For example, Stavia’s biological father, Joshua, decapitates several bandits who attack their camp, and in another scene, he kills Michael, the man purporting to be Stavia’s father. Joshua himself admits that jealousy forced him to do so, despite previously claiming that “in Women’s Country, we learn not to have jealousy” (205).

Overall, the tragic totalitarian temporality of Women’s Country seems to have systematically sacrificed any chance of a sustainable utopian trajectory. Its long-term utopian vision – seemingly non-patriarchal individual freedom supported by group identity – is, in fact, not a Groszian feminist *becoming*, but, one might say, a *coming undone*. Just as Stavia sees herself as a “smaller version of Morgot” (83) and has taken on her “damning” duties by the end of the text, the dystopian downward spiral of cyclical re-damnation in Women’s Country appears inescapable, trapping the women between the imagined polarities of being either “dead or damned” (315), to use Hecuba’s words from the play; they are either killed by male violence or forced to pre-empt this violence. However, it is not this dichotomy, imagined or not, that dooms Women’s Country, but the fact that this belief leads to its temporality being neither inclusive or supportive of individuals nor collectively sustainable – our two established hallmarks of individual and communal utopian temporality. Inclusivity and individual support are lost, for one, when the women are coerced to participate in the eugenicist project, knowingly or not, to say nothing of the men being systematically eliminated in their very lineage. Moreover, whereas individual temporality is integrated into the collective ideal on Anarres, in Women’s Country it has been fully overridden by that of the collective: while the warriors’ lives and genealogies are cut short in cruel exaggeration of their already short-sighted martial temporality, the utopian citizens’ lives are dedicated to a long-term plan that most are entirely ignorant of. As such, both men and women are ultimately sacrificed to the “wheels turning in opposite directions” in Women’s Country – sometimes quite literally. While men are killed by cyclical battles and the Councilwomen’s deceptive “silver wheel”, it turns out that the women’s lives are also entirely expendable

in the framework of the eugenicist plan.<sup>7</sup> After being prematurely let in on the secret upon her return, Stavia is informed that had she not sworn an oath of secrecy, she would have been eliminated by the Council: “You would never leave this room, Stavia. Because you’ve broken the ordinances and endangered us all” (294). Finally, on the other hand, utopian sustainability fails in Women’s Country because what is made permanent is not a progressive, change-embracing revolution resting on solid ideological ground, as on Anarres, but a systematic, all-consuming, and tragically exclusionary violence. Women’s Country fundamentally defines its feminist, sustainable, utopian temporality in repudiation of the short-term focus of its garrisons, but the dystopian experience of the warriors is paradoxically also the very thing that spells the damnation and extended downfall of Women’s Country. By eliminating or effectively neutering individual warriors, the women are ultimately euthanizing their own sons, their own blood, whether ‘defective’ or not; it is this fundamental act of self-directed violence that tears apart not only Women’s Country as a whole, along gendered lines, but also the Councilwomen themselves, as they cannot perform this violence without likewise cauterising part of their own conscience. Their violence against the warriors returns to haunt them eternally, just as they had resurrected Iphigenia’s wrath with the intention of haunting all men who had wronged her and womankind.

Consequently, it appears that these deeply unsustainable temporal dynamics of Women’s Country are at the heart of the systemic tragedy that Roberts terms a “rue-topia” (vi) and Peter Fitting describes as a “politics of despair” (44): the ideological spiral of doom that replaces sustainable inclusivity in this utopia ensures that repeated violence breeds violence from which there is no escape. Moreover, Wohl portrays tragedy as an ongoing struggle whose “conclusions [are] always provisional”; it is “not the victory of one position over the other that constitutes ideology, but the struggle itself”, and ultimately, Wohl states that “ideology always contains both hegemonic and subordinate positions” (156). Perhaps the utopian project of Women’s Country can, in any case, only survive in the struggle of creating new hegemonic positions and must fall apart once its eugenicist telos is reached, if it ever is. After all, its entire ideological and logistical apparatus rests on this project being performed. Finally, even in the case of its unlikely success, it seems that the system would succumb to crisis and self-destruction once its ideologically embedded violence has lost its mark. Again, in Wagner-Lawlor’s words, “no utopian conception can hope to get beyond ideology”, and the ideology of Women’s Country is all-consumingly destructive. The “damned few” may be acting in “self-defense” of utopia, but they appear to be thereby constructing something much like McKenna’s “end-state models” – having, indeed, already

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<sup>7</sup> Beyond the women, warriors, and servitors, there are other groups in and around Women’s Country who are not as affected by this spiraling tragedy: for example, the inhabitants of the “Holyland”, a regressive patriarchal community that Stavia and Chernon come across on their excursion, have no future at all due to inbreeding, and their misery helps to convince Stavia of the Councilwomen’s utopian project. Moreover, there are itinerants like the showman Septemius, who has always moved through life in a “floating” fashion (161), using intuition and indirection to navigate. This provides an interesting utopian impetus to the text, as it appears to represent the flexibility Women’s Country has lost, but not much is made of it, and Septemius and his nieces eventually settle alongside Stavia’s family.

unleashed the “sophisticated genetic engineering” that she envisages in the totalitarian utopian tool kit.

#### 4. Conclusion: Darkness and Light

It appears that in our comparison of *The Dispossessed* and *Gate* as sustainable utopian constructs arising from critical feminist awareness and based on the integration of collective and individual temporalities, *The Dispossessed* succeeds where *Gate* fails. Accordingly, *The Dispossessed* is generally read as a true utopia, despite the original title self-describing it as “ambiguous” – possibly due to the shifting dynamics of its “permanent” revolution – while *Gate* occupies a more difficult position as a possibly dystopian “battle of the sexes” amid the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s. In fact, Fitting describes *Gate* and some of its contemporaries as downright regressive compared to critical utopias such as *The Dispossessed*. He writes that “in contradistinction to the critical utopia, which was an attempt to give the utopian dream new direction by liberating it from past mistakes and misdirection”, these novels present “not only ... a vision of a world on the *verge* of being born, but as a retreat, the doorway through which the authors are backing away from the utopian hopes and dreams of the 1970s in a movement which effectively repudiates earlier utopian energies” (44-5).

However, it is often said that every dystopia contains a utopia in its negative image and vice versa, and one could argue that if *Gate* was read as being *aware* of its own tragic trajectory – which it quite plausibly is, given its emphasis on theatricality and appearances – then the two texts together actually offer a deeply complementary suggestion of the temporal dynamics that a truly inclusive and sustainable utopia must feature. Once again, such a utopia must ultimately align the temporalities of individuals and the collective, along with forward-movement and cyclicity, telos and process, present and future – and all this must be balanced in an organic manner that is not only founded on inclusive and sustainable cooperation but is always in the process of internal renewal and self-examination, to ensure that these goals continue to be met. Only thus might one circumnavigate the fatal internal destruction that Anarres possibly avoids and Women’s Country will most likely meet in the darkest possible terms. Specifically, in lamenting its tragic fate, *Gate* seems to tell us that the values perpetuated in the utopian process are as vital to its aim as the outcome, while the redemptive political journey of *The Dispossessed* highlights the importance of continuously ascertaining that these values are still upheld in the utopian system. On this basis, one might even argue that *Gate* is as much a critical utopia as *The Dispossessed*, showing the dark side of why sustainability and inclusivity must be central to utopia: their lack spells doom, while their presence is critical for reforming without stagnation.<sup>8</sup> Collective hope, these texts thus seem to suggest, is fully possible, desirable, and even

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<sup>8</sup> One might also propose the text to be a “critical *dystopia*”, a category more recently introduced by Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini. However, these “break through the hegemonic structure of the text’s alternate world” to “maintain a utopian impulse” (7) within dystopia, and this does not entirely seem to be the case here, since the tragic hegemonic structure is the very thing showcasing utopian criticality, as I suggest.

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imaginable through shared temporality – but only if we all imagine together, on the basis of sustainable values.

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# Human-Other Entanglements in Speculative Future Arctics

*Maria Lindgren Leavenworth & Van Leavenworth*

*Abstract:* Migrating from the periphery into the global consciousness, the vast Arctic is central to discussions about anthropogenic climate change. The spatio-temporal scope of environmental changes poses complexities for scientific and cultural debates but also allows for imaginative responses in fiction. Speculative climate fiction is generated by real-world anxieties and aspirations but imaginatively and productively explores the effects of accelerated change. In this article, we apply Stacy Alaimo's and Donna Haraway's theoretical concepts, which assert entanglements between humans and others in the more-than-human environment, in our analyses of Laline Paull's *The Ice*, Sam J. Miller's *Blackfish City*, and Vicki Jarrett's *Always North*, three novels that engage with climate change and its effects in the Arctic. Entanglements find different forms depending on the level of speculation in the works examined, but they all demonstrate the detrimental centrality of the human in past and future paradigms.

*Keywords:* Arctic, speculative fiction, entanglement, polar bear, more-than-human, climate change

## 1. Introduction

Migrating from both a literal and a figurative periphery into the global consciousness, the vast Arctic is central to contemporary discussions and tendentious debates about anthropogenic climate change. Although the Arctic is traditionally viewed in ways that highlight its frozen immutability, requiring hardy characteristics from both its inhabitants and visitors, in actuality, the fastest changes on the planet are now taking place in the Arctic areas, in the form of two cyclical processes. Firstly, in what is known as Arctic amplification,

human-driven accelerated warming resulting in the diminishing of sea ice means that temperatures are increasing two to three times as fast in the Arctic as in the world at large, and the rapidly melting polar ice cap will, like its southern counterpart, profoundly affect not only nearby areas but also distant shorelines (Previdi, Smith, and Polvani). Secondly, despite being at the furthest distance from sites producing various kinds of pollution, ocean currents propel toxins northward, affecting people living in and off the Arctic, its flora and fauna, and even geological structures, which, in turn, has global consequences. This phenomenon is called the Arctic Paradox (Cone). As both processes illustrate, complex entanglements between humans and nature find a particular expression in the world's far north.

The spatial and temporal scales of anthropogenic climate change introduce complexities into both scientific and cultural debates. In these contexts, as well as when authors of fiction attempt to depict the vast ramifications of climate change, there are, as Astrid Bracke notes, "representational and imaginative challenges" to contend with ("Flooded Futures" 280). Still, as attested to by what is growing into a robust genre, climate fiction constitutes a "productive space in which to imagine and think through climate crisis" (280). In a similar vein, Adam Trexler argues that "Fictionalizing climate change is not about falsifying it, or making it imaginary, but rather about using narrative to heighten its reality" (75), and Frederick Buell demonstrates that speculative fiction in particular "acts as an imaginative heuristic for exploring today's omnipresent, fundamental, multiple risk space" (277). Contemporary speculative climate fiction is generated by real-world anxieties and aspirations but remains unrestricted by the realism of the everyday; in many imaginative ways, these works provide spaces for reflections around the causes and effects of the accelerated change and may also illustrate the effects of profound changes in human and other-than-human habits and behaviours.

The far-reaching consequences of climate change, both in time and space, highlight a vast web of entanglements between humans and the other-than-humans, whether the latter denotes other living organisms, climatological systems, or geological structures and events. As a response to theories of constructivism that bloomed in the late 20th century, and that enforced a separation between nature and culture, critics active in the interdisciplinary material turn encourage the blurring of boundaries between previously discrete categories and propose new lines of thinking and new terminologies that no longer privilege the human. Instead, other-than-humans and humans are seen to co-exist in webs of relationality within the more-than-human world. For our purposes, environmental feminist scholars Stacy Alaimo and Donna Haraway provide especially fruitful frameworks for exploring such entanglements. Alaimo foregrounds trans-corporeality, or "material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world" (2), and Haraway's inclusive, multispecies philosophy calls for a "thinking-with" in fiction as well as in real-world practices (39). Alaimo allocates agency to "flows of substances ... between people, places, and economic/political systems" (9), with toxins circulating through extended networks as a central example. Although the human body's enmeshment with various material forces is the focus of Alaimo's discussions, she avoids a return to or maintenance of anthropocentrism, instead pursuing her inquiries from "a more uncomfortable and perplexing place where the

‘human’ is always already part of an active, often unpredictable, material world” (17). In a similar but also terminological move, Haraway proposes the “Chthulucene” as a more productive term than the Anthropocene.<sup>1</sup> While the latter has gained traction among many scholars because it highlights how enmeshed humans are with planetary systems, it is nonetheless a temporally bound concept that homogenises humanity into a singular Anthropos at the top of a competitive hierarchy – all of which are aspects that Haraway criticises (49).<sup>2</sup> Instead of working vertically, radiating from a human centre or reflecting a specific time period, the Chthulucene is “lateral and tentacular” (53) and it “entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages – including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus” (101).<sup>3</sup> For both Alaimo and Haraway, speculative fiction contributes imaginative possibilities that can enable perceptual paradigm shifts.

In this article, we provide a comparative, thematic analysis of three recent works of speculative climate fiction: Laline Paull’s *The Ice* (2017), Sam J. Miller’s *Blackfish City* (2018), and Vicki Jarrett’s *Always North* (2019). These novels engage with anthropogenic climate change and its effects in the Arctic, in tandem with explorations of human entanglements with the other-than-human. This parallel exploration proves narratively challenging because of the competing conceptual foundations: human against (and thus outside of) nature *versus* the indivisible entanglements between all life (and non-life) forms.

*The Ice* is set in a near future and depicts a slightly accelerated temperature rise, with Svalbard at the centre of its consequences. *Blackfish City* takes place a hundred years from now, in a multicultural society established in the now-open waters of the Polar Sea, and the environmental collapse is already in the past (the contemporary reader’s present). *Always North* features two temporal settings – one in 2025, the other twenty years later – and addresses the questions of responsibility and agency in climatological issues in both contexts. The differences between the novels regarding the extent of the futurity depicted allow us to examine climate change as a process that is actively discussed in the narrative present and as a catastrophe that resides in the distant past, but which nevertheless concretely impacts the fictional world. In Paull’s novel, a connection to real-world worries is easily established, whereas the far futures and more elaborate speculative elements presented in the novels by Miller and Jarrett may seem to divorce their depictions from the changes we begin to see around us. However, the anchoring of the latter texts in the Arctic establishes links to present concerns.

Various intricate entanglements between humans and other-than-humans, specifically polar bears, are featured in all three novels, but the works

<sup>1</sup> Like Haraway, other critics have suggested the geological term Anthropocene be replaced by conceptual terms that more precisely, sometimes more locally, describe how humanity has transformed the planet. Among these are the Capitalocene (Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital* 2016) and the Plantationscene (Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* 2015), both of which emphasise oppressive socioeconomic structures.

<sup>2</sup> See *Anthropocene Feminism* (ed., Richard Grusin 2017) for a more comprehensive discussion about feminist theory in relation to the Anthropocene.

<sup>3</sup> The final term links to Haraway’s metaphor of the Chthulucene as a “compost pile” in which humans are not discrete but part of the mix: “We are humus, not Homo, not anthropos” (55).

also illustrate complexities inherent in attempts at decentring the human and envisaging new paradigms for thought and behaviour. In regard to *The Ice*, we discuss how the function of polar bears, restricted to representing primal emotions and victimhood, productively aligns with the near future perspective employed. *Always North* depicts corrupted science dividing humans and other-than-humans in the 2025 timeline and then rejoining the two in 2045. Both processes uncomfortably reflect the human need for and exploitation of concrete entanglements. Our reading of *Blackfish City*, finally, focuses on depictions of a both material and metaphysical connection between animals and humans that can be read as a comment on a harmful severing of ties between humans and nature in the past. Entanglements thus find different forms depending on the level of speculation in the works, but they all demonstrate engagement with the detrimental centrality of the human in both past and future paradigms.

## 2. Future Climates in Future Places

While depictions of changing climate also appear in works that are more readily (if oxymoronically) categorised as realist fiction, climatological instabilities are illustrated especially effectively in speculative fiction: fires, floods, droughts, and global freezing become agents on par with characters when the destruction we see beginning around us in real life is extrapolated. With current attention focused on the polar areas, which “function as symbolic canaries in the mine of climate change” (Bracke, *Climate Crisis* 106), it is also clear that while melting glaciers and starving fauna may influence onlookers’ emotions rather than their everyday lives, warmer temperatures will have global consequences in a longer perspective: Arctic melt will become a concern for people living at a distance from the world’s far north as well. The coupling of the Arctic with climate change was already established in the 19th century, especially following 1816, the year without a summer, when fears of a cooling world oscillated between being attached to the uncontrollable northern ice and the less comfortable acknowledgement of local practices that changed microclimates.<sup>4</sup> Siobhan Carroll remarks that this debate constitutes “an uncanny reflection of our own struggles to discern the nature of, and decide on the proper response to, alterations in the global climate” (225). Speculative responses to real-world ideas of artificially changing the Arctic climate – in turn harkening back to hypotheses about an open polar sea – are present in such works as Mark Twain’s *The American Claimant* (1892), in which the controlling of sunspots is expected to reverse climate zones with the end result that “the entire Arctic Circle [will be] in the market as a summer resort next year” (272). Geoengineering is also featured in Jules Verne’s *Sans dessus dessous* (1889, translated as *The Purchase of the North Pole*), in which the idea is to tilt the

<sup>4</sup> The year without a summer followed the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia in 1815. In addition to devastating Sumbawa Island and causing great loss of life in the nearby areas, volcanic ash in the atmosphere also had global ramifications with heavy rainfalls, cold temperatures, and associated effects, such as failing crops. In his analyses of administrative, political, and fictional narratives that responded to the eruption in various ways, David Higgins demonstrates how this, “and other such catastrophes, are productively understood as processes in which the material and the discursive are intertwined” (2).

axis of the globe, thereby putting an end to the changing seasons and moving the Arctic southward. The resultant thawing would allow access to the coal deposits under the ice. In his reading of the novels, Steve Asselin notes that “anthropogenic climate change is not the inadvertent effect of capitalistic ventures but the very goal of such enterprises” (443). Although the plans in both novels come to naught, the climate is depicted as a commodity and the Arctic ice as an obstacle to progress.

Anthropogenic climate change replaces geoengineering in contemporary speculative climate fiction, but differing perceptions of the consequences of the melting northern polar ice cap still find their way into the works, functioning to identify the loci of agency and to establish the antagonists. In Paull’s *The Ice*, the newly opened “TransPolar Route” (3) through the ice-free Arctic waters has enabled faster trading – a development that underscores the area’s heightened global economic importance but also introduces tensions between legal and illegal practices. The novel’s protagonist, Sean Cawson, is a businessman who, together with his friend Tom Harding and a shady benefactor, has built Midgard Lodge, a retreat in an isolated Svalbard bay. On the surface, the retreat serves as an exclusive destination for environmentally-minded visitors who come to see the “fragile, sublime, vulnerable environment” before it is lost (70). However, it hides a small military unit that enables the running of illegal goods and weapons through the Arctic. An inquest into the death of the die-hard environmentalist Tom structures the plot and brings the competing functions of the melting ice into focus.

Tourists flock to Svalbard to see the vulnerable Arctic while it can still offer immediate experiences thought to be unreachable elsewhere and, while less troubling than the gunrunning, there is a pronounced business side to this practice as well. “They were rich, they were ready, they were ravenous for bear”, the first sentence of the novel reads. It describes passengers aboard a luxury cruiser off the coast of Svalbard, who “still believed in the natural law that wealth meant entitlement” (1). They expect “sparkling ice [and] sightings of live ice-obligate mammals”, with the apex predator as the main prize (1); their money is expected to raise them above the effects of climate change. However, catching sight of this ideal Arctic setting and polar bears is complicated precisely by the warming temperatures and the increased access to the Arctic. A persistent drizzle makes the passengers stay in the common room and watch footage filmed by previous tourists, while the heavy boat traffic in the fjords keeps the bears at a distance. When a photo opportunity at last presents itself, with a large bear appearing on a glacier close to the cruiser and looking straight at the passengers, they experience what they have come for. For a short moment, the Arctic is what they have envisaged: cold, clear, and inhabited by a creature whose stare gives them the desired “euphoric jolt of fear” (5). The bear’s pelt shines white, which the passengers feel is in keeping with how things should be, but the omniscient narration clarifies that it appears white because of the “greyish tinge” of the snow; when the bear was young and “the snow fell clean and white”, its pelt showed as “pale yellow” (4). In this way, pollution contributes to creating a perfect photo-op, which serves as the starting point for further interrogations of environmental concerns. Human corruption infiltrates and affects a vulnerable place: Svalbard snow, greying over a couple of decades, becomes a local symbol of the longer history of anthropogenic impact on the planet.

This wider perspective is incorporated in the novel via references to the flooded Maldives, European ski resorts with no snow, and Saharan desert dust covering London, and it raises questions about global responsibility. Linkages between biosystems are also foregrounded in connection with Tom's death. A calving iceberg has dislodged his body from a cave (an event that is incidentally also caught on film by the up-to-this-point enthused tourists), and at the inquest, a scientist forcefully argues that all lives on the planet are "in a burning building together" and the ice-cave collapsing around Tom is "a direct consequence of climate change" (260). Human impact on the planet makes the more-than-human react, and the threatened ice becomes particularly agentic – early in the novel, the calving is described as "a tiny stitch in a larger pattern ... [an] apparently synchronised new behaviour of the ice" (11). In Paull's future, which is described on the novel's dust jacket as "the day after tomorrow", the real-world destabilisation of climate and ecosystems is slightly exaggerated, providing the foundation for the tensions between those who press on for monetary or experiential reasons and those who want to protect the Arctic. As Tom tells potential investors in the lodge, "You can only lose it once" (Paull 70). The Arctic is thus depicted as being at the cusp of an irreparable change, but the atonement Sean seeks throughout the narrative gestures towards a slightly more hopeful future, a chance to avoid the moment separating before from after.

Such a moment is often concentrated in postapocalyptic novels, reflecting Haraway's preference for considering "the Anthropocene [as] a boundary event [rather] than an epoch", an event that "marks severe discontinuities; what comes after will not be like what came before" (100). On the first page of Jarrett's *Always North*, and distinct from the narrative proper, there is a description of a terrible sound emanating from the north, which "cleav[es] this moment from everything that went before" and creates a present suspended between what is known and "this new thing, this irredeemable thing" (1). This moment is later contextualised in the journal of the protagonist, Isobel, or Izzy. As a seismologist, she is sent to the Arctic in 2025 by a company looking for the last oil reserves on the planet. Thus, the survey team's infractions in the ocean bed are the last of their kind in a long history of resource extraction. Their ship, *Polar Horizon*, has lost all communication with the icebreaker that precedes it and is forced to turn back, as enormous amounts of pack ice are flowing rapidly in the wrong direction. The sound – now described in terms that unequivocally establish it as a signal of the end of the world, "Not a bang or a whimper" – becomes intimately connected to linear time. There is "a rending, a tearing of this time, this now from everything that will follow – the infliction of a wound that can never heal" (108). The sound comes from the Arctic that is breaking, and with it, the world. The event in *Always North* thus represents the more-than-human environment's final reaction to the long history of anthropogenic thought and action.

This radical destruction negates any possibility of reassuming environmental responsibility, and its global ramifications are depicted in the dystopia of 2045. Survivors of flooding, fires, and diseases are eking out an existence in elevated towns – "What will happen", Izzy wonders, "when we run out of up?" (136) – and in great camps spreading out around them. Previous power structures have been dismantled, communications have broken down, and human life, which is in focus, has become violent and unsafe. In this

temporality, Jarrett relocates the action to Scotland, which reflects a tendency in climate fiction to depict the effects of climatological catastrophes on sites with which the reader is familiar, if only through representations. As Trexler notes, “polar novels always struggle to connect change to more familiar and affective places” (82). Although the starkness of the Arctic initially makes Izzy see it as “a vital piece of the engine that drives the world along” (Jarrett 15), suggesting that human infractions, therefore, are likely to have global consequences, the devastated landscape of Aviemore in the Scottish Highlands as well as references to the destruction of well-known landmarks across the globe – among them London’s Canary Wharf and Dubai’s Burj Khalifa (259, 260) – seemingly become more effective in depicting concrete destruction than the stereotypically empty northern periphery.<sup>5</sup> The sound in the north is substituted with concrete imagery of the collapse: climate change becomes visible to a greater extent south of the Arctic.

Human agency in Jarrett’s bleak futures thus results in landscapes that are progressively more hostile, and although there is no textual return to the Arctic, the global collapse radiating from the area likely renders it uninhabitable as well. In contrast, Miller’s *Blackfish City* belongs to a body of climate fiction in which the Arctic functions as the last outpost and is or becomes a permanent home for the characters.<sup>6</sup> In the far future depicted in the novel, climate change is a potent background for the formation of a new Arctic, and the responsibility for the global destruction is thus placed in the hands of past governments and behaviours. Decades before the starting point of the narrative, soaring temperatures have led to conflicts over inhabitable land and collapsed nations and cultures south of the Arctic, which are now referred to as “the Sunken World” (Miller 10). Along with the attendant cultural and economic changes creating new power nexuses, the Arctic has moved from the periphery to the centre in a process that started with the resource extraction enabled by the glacial melting and ended with the construction of Qaanaaq, a new city floating “East of Greenland, north of Iceland” (5).<sup>7</sup> When seen as an extended refugee camp, Qaanaaq becomes a microcosm of the past world, gesturing towards new forms of stewardship and accountability. Although the city was initially constructed as a perfect ecosystem, in the novel’s present it is crumbling under corrupt systems and lawlessness, and the inhabitants are segregated into wealthy and poor areas in the arms growing out of the central hub. The refugees’ home cultures are replicated on a small scale – a houseboat’s interior “could still be Cambodia” (215) – and people from the rich southern arms come to witness the “desperation or rage” of the poorer arms as tourists (10). In this way, irreversible climate change and the chaos that followed have necessitated

<sup>5</sup> Aside from the ship leaving from and returning to Svalbard, the 2025 timeline is set on the Arctic Ocean, where the victims of the disrupted nature are animals: “each in their own *savssat*, singing their own songs of death, there’s whale, seal, walrus. Everything that could live here is dying” (234, original italics).

<sup>6</sup> Among the other contemporary examples are Marcel Theroux’s *Far North* (2009), Tobias Buckell’s *Arctic Rising* (2012), and Julie Bertagna’s *Savage Earth* trilogy (2006–2011), which is targeted at a young adult readership.

<sup>7</sup> The name of the city connects to the history of appropriation in the Arctic, specifically to the events of 1953, when the Inuit inhabiting the real-world West Greenland villages of Pituffik and Dundas were forcibly relocated to a new constructed village to give room for the construction of the American Thule Air Base. This real-world Qaanaaq has in the past of the novel “just been swallowed up by the sea” (44).

the building of a new world, and around Qaanaaq, the ice continues to melt. However, since the novel's focus is on the reunification of a family and on re-strengthened bonds between humans and other-than-humans, it gestures towards a future in which distributed responsibility still gives an inkling of hope, and stories and memories are central to avoiding the repetition of past mistakes. People fleeing their home nations for Qaanaaq have "brought their ghosts with them. Soil and stories and stones from homelands swallowed up by the sea" (8). With these stories come both the good and the bad of the past cultures, and there is also a "need [for] new ones" (31). The call for new stories comes from an underground broadcast called *City Without a Map* – "An elliptical, incongruent guidebook" (5) – told in different languages and voices. As well as effectively highlighting the multicultural make-up of the city, *City Without a Map* also works to incite protest and revolt, calling for a future in which all agents are accountable.

The radically redrawn map of the world and the invention of a city which in our real world is a location in the Arctic uninhabited by humans may risk decentring the issues related to climate change. As Trexler's analysis of other polar novels suggests, both the Arctic setting and a wholly imaginary city may present "global warming [as] more remote" (82). But *Blackfish City* draws out the implications of real-world instabilities and exemplifies what Ursula Heise terms "deterritorialization", a resistance to previous spatial-political hegemonies which "implies possibilities for new cultural encounters and a broadening of horizons" (*Sense of Place* 10) that may "become the basis for cosmopolitan forms of awareness and community, both ecologically and culturally" (210). Deterritorialization is commonly, and as Heise points out "especially when it is imposed from outside" (10), seen as detrimental to the fostering of responsibility for both local and global processes.<sup>8</sup> However, like the novels and films Heise addresses, Miller's speculative fiction underlines how the destruction of previous places, nations, and cultures leads to emphasising interdependence and interconnectivity in the building of a better world.

### 3. Entangled Bears

Speculative fiction's unique affordances for imagining more-than-human entanglements are foregrounded in several recent publications that also attest to cultural inflections. Dunja M. Mohr uses Heise's call for "multispecies justice" in her analyses of contemporary Canadian fictions – among them Margaret Atwoods' MaddAddam-trilogy (2003–2013) and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) – and demonstrates how the "perforation of species boundaries renders the human-inhuman divide obsolete and provides a speculative foil to rethink human singularity and social justice along a

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<sup>8</sup> Heise draws on multiple theories to distil her view of cosmopolitanism as "a shorthand for a cultural and political understanding that allows individuals to think beyond the boundaries of their own cultures, ethnicities, or nations to a range of other sociocultural frameworks" (*Sense of Place* 60) and further enlarges it to include environmental concerns.

pluralistic bioform continuum” (61).<sup>9</sup> Sanchar Sarkar and Swarnalatha Rangarajan make Jane Bennett’s notion of the affective quality of vibrant matter a starting point for their explorations of the forms of embodied entanglements of marine life, Nigerian culture, and contamination in Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon* (2014).<sup>10</sup> Speculative environmental fiction (or “eco-speculation”), in their reading, crucially contributes to the “rethinking [of] tropical materialisms” (183). Addressing South African author Charlie Human’s *Apocalypse Now Now* (2013) and *Kill Baxter* (2014), Olivier Moreillon and Alan Muller interpret Sarah Nuttall’s political formulation of entanglements as a form of spatio-temporal “intimacy”, however “resisted, or ignored, or uninvited” it may be in the post-apartheid social and economic structures (Nuttall 1). Moreillon and Muller conclude that the “non-realist potential” of speculative fiction enables Human, in these two novels, to re-entangle previously separated “spaces, histories, and mythologies” in the projection of a more promising future (94).<sup>11</sup> To these examples, we now add particular Arctic entanglements.

Considering media representations of the melting Arctic, it is hardly surprising that all three novels in our study feature representations of polar bears and what Alaimo refers to as a “literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature” (2). Again, because of the varying levels of speculation in the works, the “ethical and political possibilities” that emerge in the contact zone (2) carry different implications. Paull gestures towards a slow realisation of the deep history of entanglements, whereas Miller and Jarrett explicitly engage with “the constitution of the category of the human” (143) and her place in various networks. However, the dismantling of hierarchies inherent in the notion of the more-than-human is a complex process in both theory and fiction. While both *Blackfish City* and *Always North* foreground the necessity of connections between humans and other-than-humans across time and space and use the imaginative space of speculative fiction to literalise these, human needs and perspectives continue to be privileged.

While climate change enables a brief contact between the photographing cruise passengers and the bear in Paull’s novel, the humans prefer not to see the predator as entangled with their own lives, but instead view it as a living, moving, but temporary connotation to the primal emotions that are perceived to be lost in the modern world. Even characters on less temporary visits to the Arctic perceive polar bears in this way but eschew any ethical consequences that can follow from their one-sided view. When Sean returns to Svalbard after Tom’s death and embarks on a solitary canoe trip in the waters he knows very well, he becomes aware that a large polar bear is tracking his movements. Sean

<sup>9</sup> Heise’s notion in itself cautions against blanket definitions of “ethically responsible relationship[s]” between cultures and between these cultures’ understandings of “species and kinship boundaries” (*Imagining Extinction* 200).

<sup>10</sup> See Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Two recent anthologies illustrate that entanglements can also be used to explore surreal speculative fictions’ ways of illustrating how entangled lifeforms navigate an increasingly defamiliarised landscape and how human and non-human nature are entangled via gendered, racial, and economic ideologies. See Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford (eds.), *Surreal Entanglements; Essays on Jeff VanderMeer’s Fiction* (2021), and Sladja Blazan (ed.), *Haunted Nature: Entanglements of the Human and the Nonhuman* (2021) respectively.

ascribes several human emotions to the bear: cynicism, premeditation, and manipulation. It is “willing [Sean] to panic and make a mistake” (Paull 51). But when the animal is driven off by approaching motorboats, the encounter mainly makes Sean “feel more alive than he had done in years” (52). Upon his return to London, a primitive sexuality re-awakened, he has sex with his partner. With wine poured over their bodies, the aftermath sees “the white sheets soaked red around them, like a kill” (58). The tourists and Sean alike take from the contact zone a new appreciation for life, which has little to do with the precarious situation of the wild predator but is rather intimately tied to stereotypical representations.

Other references to polar bears in *The Ice* are more explicitly linked to the myriad instabilities that result from accelerated climate change. A dead polar bear found in Svalbard, for example, is tattooed with a symbol showing it has come from East Greenland and traversed an immense distance. It is thought that the bear has either come “around the North Pole clockwise, or the polar currents are already so disrupted by climate change that it came counter-clockwise” (271). This dead bear cannot be untangled from the trans-corporeal networks as easily as the camera-friendly bear: its death raises ethical questions related to the past, present, and future responsibility for the planet. With its only slight temporal shift, *The Ice* thus restricts the great predator to two real-world functions: it is a reminder of the powers of the supposedly uncorrupted nature, distinct from human culture, and, effectively, it is a victim of anthropogenic impact. However, both functions underline the flaws and complexities of human behaviour and action, and they slot into the novel’s overarching emphasis on the detrimental effects of seeing the human and the other-than-human as distinct.

In Jarrett’s novel, an environmental protester dressed as a polar bear, who hopes to hinder further commercial ventures in the Arctic of 2025, carries a placard that reads: “*Homeless, please help*” (21, original italics). Together with Izzy’s childhood memories of an apathetic female polar bear at a zoo, the protester’s actions and message highlight how the species has been displaced or relocated by humans, and while these instances may not illustrate the ethical possibilities of meetings in the contact zone, they at least point to the ethical consequences of such meetings. When Izzy first sights a wild bear in the Arctic, she expects the encounter to be “a privilege”, since so few specimens remain, but she is instead deeply unsettled by it: “The bear is terrible in his whiteness” (54).<sup>12</sup> Encountering it in its natural habitat highlights that Izzy and the crew have moved into a territory where they do not belong. She thinks: “I doubt he will forgive us our trespasses” (55). The bear inspires awe also because of its impossible life span: the captain on *Polar Horizon* recognises it from an attack several decades previously, an act that is repeated as the predator comes aboard the ship while the crew still reels from the sound of the breaking Arctic. Together with the swiftly moving ice, the polar bear in this timeline is agentic and has human-like intentions ascribed to it: it reacts to incursions into its domain, seemingly intent on vengeance and deterrence.

<sup>12</sup> This formulation and repetition of the phrase “*Call me Isobel*” (e.g., 152) link the novel to Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), with the commercial interests of humanity replacing Ahab’s monomaniacal quest for the whale.

Izzy is both figuratively and materially entangled with this specific bear and polar bears generally. Already from the start of her Arctic journey, she has experienced moments of “disassociation” (99), exhibited animal characteristics during lovemaking, and had dreams filled with “ice and teeth” (78). When the bear is captured post-attack, it is confined to the deck above Izzy’s and often settles directly above her bunk. The concrete similarity between their postures – “His shape mirroring mine” – is reflected in less tangible correspondences: “Our dreams drifting down like snow and settling in stratified layers” (234).

These entanglements find an uncomfortable concretisation in the 2045 timeline, when scientists are trying to find ways to return to and prevent the moment of the ecological collapse. Experiments are built around the hypothesis that bears and other animals have no sense of or use for linear time. “Everything is now. Everything that happened, is happening, will happen, is always happening” (245–246). This idea links figuratively to the ongoing temporal entanglements of Haraway’s unfinished *Chthulucene*, which is made up of “stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake” and where nothing is “confined to a vanished past” (55), but the novel diverges from this by distinguishing between humans and other-than-human bears. With Izzy’s journal – the sections of the novel set in 2025 – as the starting point, the scientists develop an idea to meld human and animal minds in order to isolate the precise moment when a reversal is still possible.<sup>13</sup> The same bear Izzy encountered in the Arctic has been cryogenically suspended and experimented on through the years. The stimulation of a range of responses is designed to “forge a connection” (Jarrett 249) that will enable humans to “change the past” (249). The bear’s brain has been materially connected to those of members of *Polar Horizon*’s crew without a successful outcome. Izzy, whose brain scans have revealed her as eminently suited to meld with the bear but also highly vulnerable to damage, decides to make a final attempt at achieving the “temporal transfer” (305) at the very end of the novel, when the world is literally burning around her. She climbs onto the table and arranges the bear’s limbs around her, mimicking the sleeping postures they had aboard the ship but no longer being separated by a deck. “We stay where we are, where we were, where we never were and will always be, curled together, spines nestled one within the other, floating on a frozen sea” (308). Although this description may seem to signal a form of equilibrium, and the potential effects of the experiment are indicated to be beneficial to all life, human desires and desperation lie at the root of both past and future corrupted science, and the physical and psychological proximity to the bear is born from human needs. Jarret’s distorted material entanglements thus play a central role in the dystopias she depicts in near and far futures.

Science plays a questionable role also in *Blackfish City*, but it leads to results that can, on some levels, be read as more hopeful. The narrative indicates that in the past, experiments had been carried out on indigenous Arctic communities, and nanites introduced into the bloodstream enabled humans to form exceedingly strong physical and psychological bonds with

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<sup>13</sup> As Octavia Cade remarks in her review of *Always North*, a certain amount of “handwavium of quantum physics and mind mapping” is required to justify and explain the scientific process, but hypothesised differences between animal and human conceptions of time are introduced early in the novel.

animals. The Inuit family in focus in the novel were all nano-bonded to animals as children, a process where “community need and availability” determined the choice of species (Miller 228), and a powerful link to the ancestors ensured that the process did not completely obliterate human identities and result in madness. This link with the past is not represented as unique to Inuit and other indigenous peoples; rather, it is represented as something “the Western world had lost sight of, a lesson they forgot but we relearned” (144). The almost symbiotic relationship between human and animal points to a web of entanglements that promises redistributed responsibility for the present and future. However, the process was also seen as demonic, or a sign of political conspiracy, prompting acts of violence that are later labelled “nanobonder genocide” (183). Just such an act of violence fractured the Inuit family in the past: when one of the mothers, Masaaraq, returns to her community after a hunting trip, most of its human and other-than-human members have been killed and her wife and children are gone.

The nano-bonding experiments follow on the global collapse of ecosystems, which invites reading them as a reaction to an injurious and longstanding separation between humans and nature. Together, human and animal become “Something that behave[s] completely differently” (187), a being that is more than the sum of its parts. The symbiosis is fragile, however, and breaking the bond has dire consequences. At the beginning of the novel, Masaaraq arrives in Qaanaaq, the final destination on her quest for her family, with an orca swimming beside her boat and a “polar bear ... in chains” on the deck (2). The chained bear is bonded to Masaaraq’s son Kaev, and the long separation has had consequences for both: Kaev suffers from physical and mental tics, and the bear, uncontrollable in its fully animal state, is kept restrained or caged. When the polar bear and Kaev are finally reunited, the latter feels stabilised and whole once more. Together, they become “One thing, one organism. Acting in concert in ways that had nothing to do with language, planning, rational thought” (132). The reunification of the family thus works in tandem with the re-establishment of both physical and psychological ties.

While this theme seems to literalise the ideas of multispecies equality and kinship, Miller points to the complexities of entanglements and to the difficulty of deprivileging the human. This is particularly clear in the case of the polar bear, used by both Masaaraq and Kaev for purposes of protection and violence and, because of the strong link with Kaev, in part ruled by his jumbled emotions. At the end of the novel, the bear’s memories of years in chains and the “glorious moments of being unleashed, when [Masaaraq] was in peril” compete with Kaev’s assessment of the past: “*She was trying to bring you to me*” (317, original italics). In this situation, Kaev’s own emotions are in turmoil, and he lacks the calm that could influence the bear. Instead, the two meld to the point of Kaev seeing his own hands as “huge, thick with white fur, capped with long black blade-claws”, poised to descend on Masaaraq’s prone body (318). As an unavoidable response, Atkornatok, the killer whale to whom Masaaraq is bonded, defends her human “Other” (228) and drags the dead body of the bear into the sea. While nano-bonding radically fuses the human and other-than-human and can help prevent further environmental destruction, it is thus simultaneously a process that puts everything at risk. Marie Stern-Peltz argues that it at once illustrates “the potential power of an extreme form of vulnerability” and imagines “a form of community which goes beyond the

human, where the risk to animals and the natural world cannot be as easily ignored as it is today”. Becoming something that transcends both human and animal highlights how separations between these categories limit new ways of understanding and changing processes in the world, but there is also the ever-present risk of losing individuality, which is needed to actually effect change.

#### **4. Conclusion**

To the paradoxical environmental processes mentioned at the beginning of this article, in which the Arctic is at once distant and central, a third process can be added: one that incongruously sees the accelerated warming of the Arctic and polar bears as conceptually opposed. In their examinations of the persistent denial of climate change, Anna Westerstahl Stenport and Richard Vachula note that although the starving polar bear is the foremost emblem and an affective carrier of connotations of accelerated change, it competes with the traditional representation of the Arctic, which is still upheld in media. They argue that this clash results in a view that “anthropogenic climate change, most evident in the Arctic, can be still purportedly refuted, as the perception of that region is one as frozen and unchanging for eternity” (284). This perception of the Arctic seems to have extraordinary staying power, despite ample evidence that it must change if ramifications of climate change are to be adequately dealt with. The speculative fictions we have addressed in this article highlight the vulnerabilities of the vast area and replace the perceived immutability with images of rapid and profound change. The Arctic that Paull depicts is only incrementally removed from contemporary conditions, with speculation residing in the polar ice melting slightly ahead of predictions. The fragile environment becomes a backdrop for conflicting interests, with the characters representing attitudes that mirror real-world climate anxiety. The dystopic tendencies in Jarrett’s novel are produced by humanity pressing on despite signs that the Arctic is on the cusp of destruction, reflecting a lack of ethics in processes of violent resource extraction and a disregard for the connections between ecosystems. In Miller’s far future, the map of the world has been significantly re-drawn and the Arctic figures as one of few places that are still liveable. In this new construction of the Arctic, the microcosm of Qaanaaq illustrates the consequences of displacements caused by a global environmental collapse. In various ways, the authors thus maintain a dynamic connection to the real-world Arctic and extrapolate on the effects of contemporary climate change, while simultaneously adding needed speculative visions to the networks of meaning surrounding the Arctic.

Haraway states that, when attempting to think-with others, “it matters what stories tell stories” (39), and speculative fiction can enable committed questioning of paradigms relayed elsewhere. However, envisioning interconnected networks in which the human and the other-than-human participate on equal terms against the backdrop of climate change is still a complicated process, and even widely speculative novels struggle to decentralise the human in productive ways. Heise argues that climate fiction, “requires the articulation of connections between events at vastly different scales” (*Sense of Place* 205), and Trexler notes that “the character-driven novel” engaging with anthropogenic change needs to make room for “wider groups of

human beings, plants and animal species, geophysical events, weather, and technology” (74). The novels analysed in this article tell different stories about entanglements, ranging from an acknowledgement of the human as a node in a network to dystopic representations of violent and exploitative material connections. Yet, although these stories reflect aspects of the kinds of thoroughgoing, more-than-human entanglements and multispecies coexistence Alaimo and Haraway call for, the tensions of anthropocentrism remain: the human is not fully dislodged from her privileged position in any of the texts, and perhaps a complete dislocation is not the point. In Paull’s novel, given its proximity to real-world discourses, human interaction with the bears illustrates contemporary commodification of the Arctic, and the agency of polar ice is just beginning to be noticed. Jarrett and Miller depict far more radical interconnections but, respectively, privilege human needs and perspectives. In *Always North*, the attempt to meld the minds of a human and a bear is yet another sign of corrupt ethics, and although *Blackfish City* is more hopeful about human-animal coexistence, it upholds a somewhat stereotypical division between human rationality and animal instinct. Still, even when distorted or risky, entanglements can work as reminders of how extended lateral networks are needed to build or recreate a more hopeful future.

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# The Story of Intrusion: Time, Life/Death, Affirmation, and Representation in Ted Chiang’s “Story of Your Life” and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *L’Intrus*

*Martijn J. Loos*

*Abstract:* Bringing Ted Chiang’s SF novella “Story of Your Life” (1998) into conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy’s autobiographical philosophical text *L’Intrus* (2002) sheds new light on both of these texts’ central concerns. This enables three arguments: 1) Nancy’s central notion of “intrusion” can be critically expanded by considering Chiang’s simultaneous time perception, 2) this expanded notion can help to reevaluate Nancy’s original sombre conceptualisation of life/death, as instantiated in some scenes of “Story of Your Life”, and 3) “Story of Your Life” is therefore a literary representation of intrusion, something that Nancy believed to be impossible. These three points show how speculative philosophy and science fiction can inform, enhance, and represent each other, going beyond what these fields can do separately.

*Keywords:* Ted Chiang, Jean-Luc Nancy, time perception, affirmation, representation, posthumanism

*“From the beginning I knew my destination, and I chose my route accordingly.”*

Chiang 172

## 1. Introduction

In 2002's *L'Intrus*, French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy relates his experience of receiving a heart transplant and the medical and philosophical complications that arose alongside that procedure. Central to his experience is the notion of "intrusion", not only the intrusion of the transplant, but also of his "own" heart, death, the immune system, medication, the resulting cancer, previously dormant shingles and cytomegalovirus, and more. He ultimately concludes that "it is thus myself who becomes my own *intrus* in all these combined and opposing ways" (10), later extending himself to humankind generally: "the *intrus* is no other than me, my self; none other than man himself" (13). These sorts of considerations make *L'Intrus* both an "intimate" (Adamek) autobiographical work and a text of speculative philosophy postulating intrusion as a speculative critical tool with which to deconstruct a multitude of binaries, such as healthy/unhealthy, life/death, and self/other. For if many of these things intrude upon one another, what does that mean for the self?

In their 2009 essay on *L'Intrus*, historian of ideas Stefanos Geroulanos and medical anthropologist Todd Meyers claim that "it is imperative to read *L'Intrus* as an intervention in recent debates regarding the medical positioning of the body" (83); yet, I maintain that intrusion's implications reach farther than that. I am not alone in this: intrusion has been put to work in relation to many other fields. Most famously in relation to "touch" by Jacques Derrida, but also in relation to, for example, political communities (Blacker), Neill Blomkamp's 2009 SF film *District 9* (Harbaš), and nursing practices (Wynn). That is not to say that Geroulanos and Meyers' reading is incorrect, only that little-analysed aspects of *L'Intrus* can help to expand the speculative power of its key concept far beyond the scope of the medical positioning of the body. This article will analyse exactly such an aspect: temporality.

Temporality is a central theme in Ted Chiang's 1998 SF novella, "Story of Your Life". Chiang has been trained as a computer scientist at Brown University, and his Nebula and Theodore Sturgeon Award winning novella incorporates fundamentally posthumanist themes, such as the decentring of anthropocentrism and the questioning of the divide between the self and the other (Shang). "Story of Your Life" is narrated by linguist Louise Banks, who simultaneously recounts the past, when aliens visited the Earth and she deciphered their language; the present, in which she conceives her daughter (Chiang 111, 172); and the future, in which she raises her daughter, who ultimately dies young in a mountain climbing accident. Louise's gradual understanding of the aliens' language leads her to start perceiving time as the aliens do: simultaneously, rather than sequentially. This simultaneous temporality has major consequences for epistemology, ethics, and, as this article will argue, Nancy's concept of intrusion. Bringing *L'Intrus* into conversation with "Story of Your Life" might seem arbitrary at first, but they actually share an affinity which goes far beyond mere surface similarities.

First, "Story of Your Life" can be read as an instantiation of *L'Intrus*' theoretical concerns. For Nancy, intruders are the likes of transplants, medication, and death; for Chiang, intruders are the likes of aliens, language, and time (amongst others). Viewing the aliens – or heptapods, after their seven limbs (Chiang 117) – as intruders is uncomplicated: they could have come to invade, after all. Nancy's very first formulation of intrusion could be an apt

description of alien arrival on Earth: “the intruder [*l'intrus*] enters by force, through surprise or ruse, in any case without the right and without having first been admitted” (1). Simultaneous time perception is a bit more troublesome to interpret in this way, but it can be conceptualised as the past and the future intruding on the present. The way in which this perception is transmitted is an intrusion of non-human language on human language. This article will explore these instantiations of intrusion in “The Story of Your Life”. This will not only show literature’s power to represent theory in imaginative and affective ways, but also controverts Nancy himself, who deems intrusion unrepresentable (Geroulanos and Meyers 92; Nancy 3, 4, 7). In this way, literature goes beyond the surface similarities, not only instantiating difficult concepts theorised in a poststructuralist text, but also expanding the scope and possibilities of that text by doing what the text’s author presumed to be impossible. Hence, bringing speculative philosophy into conversation with speculative fiction can demonstrate the former’s claims in ways non-fiction itself cannot.

Second, “Story of Your Life” not only instantiates and represents issues presented in *L’Intrus*, but the latter’s central concept – intrusion – can also be expanded by incorporating the novella’s central concept of simultaneous temporality. This expanded understanding of intrusion can then be used to re-explore Nancy’s exploration of life/death, shedding new light on it. Rosi Braidotti’s seminal work on posthuman subjectivity and affirmative ethics (2010; 2018) will help to rethink life/death. That is, when viewed through the expanded notion of intrusion that incorporates simultaneous temporality, the embrace of life/death can be reframed in an affirmative manner. This is in stark contrast to Nancy’s own, rather sombre (Fynsk 32) view on the matter. Yet, I maintain that Chiang shows us how literature can transform an apparent tragedy into a life-affirming practice. This affects the reading of “Story of Your Life” in turn, too: simultaneous time perception is expanded in a similar way.

It is important to note that both Nancy and Chiang work on a posthumanist basis. Nancy’s text radically decentres humanist binary demarcations; deconstructing self/other, healthy/unhealthy, and man/machine are fundamentally posthumanist concerns (Herbrechter 8–9). His “becoming like a science-fiction android” (13) refers much more to Donna Haraway’s cyborg (7) than to the classic science fiction trope. Chiang’s central themes of non-human/human interaction and the decentring of the human speak volumes to posthumanist thought, but I maintain that the exploration of simultaneous time is where an unthinking of humanist time perception takes place and, hence, where the posthumanist potential of “Story of Your Life” shines most strongly. Sequential time is concerned with classical humanist notions, such as progress and causality; Louise’s gradual rejection of this time can thus be read as discarding “the traditional self as the center ... as an illusion, a product of old time” (Shang 67). It is at the intersection of both of these texts’ posthumanist concerns where my inquiry begins. It is from this intersection that Nancy and Chiang diverge into different directions: the former in the direction of speculative philosophy, the latter into science fiction. I aim to bring these two directions together again.

Hence, this article’s main concern is postulating an expanded notion of intrusion incorporating simultaneous time perception to envision alternative, speculative, posthuman ways of thinking about topics such as life/death. It is no coincidence that I borrow from Braidotti, a posthumanist scholar, to

conceptualise these issues. Her work on posthuman subjectivity postulates an affirmative approach to suffering and even death. Inspired by Spinoza and Deleuze (Thiele 26–8), affirmative critique initiates a “belief in the world, as it is” (Deleuze 172), that is, a refusal to look “beyond” for answers and solutions, and a radical insistence that “we are in *this* mess all together” (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 141)<sup>1</sup>. I maintain that this insistence on the world as is enables an affirmative, life-embracing, ethical response to intrusion and the trauma of losing one’s daughter.

By bringing *L’Intrus* and “Story of Your Life” into conversation, I argue three distinct but entangled points: 1) “Story of Your Life” shows how the notion of intrusion can be expanded by considering simultaneous temporal perception, 2) this expanded notion of intrusion leads, by way of Rosi Braidotti’s work, to a less sombre re-evaluation of Nancy’s conceptualisation of life/death, as envisioned in “Story of Your Life”, and 3) “Story of Your Life” successfully represents intrusion, something that Nancy himself struggles with in *L’Intrus*. This last point shows how science fiction, as “high-intensity realism” (Chu 74), can be brought into conversation with speculative philosophy in order to go beyond the representative possibilities of philosophy itself.

## 2. The past and the future as intrusions on the present

Over the course of “Story of Your Life”, Louise becomes more fluent in Heptapod B, the aliens’ calligraphy-like writing. Its semasiographic<sup>2</sup> nature enables it to be a simultaneous, teleological language; it has no sequential understanding of time, just like the heptapods themselves. Following the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Hojjer 92–105), as Louise comes to understand more of the language, “Heptapod B [started] changing the way I thought .... As I grew more fluent, semasiographic designs would appear fully formed, articulating even complex ideas all at once” (Chiang 151). As such, she starts to perceive time simultaneously, like the aliens she is conversing with.

It is important to note that non-humans teach Louise to think differently; because of this, the posthumanist concerns of Chiang’s story can be activated. One of the central concerns of posthumanist thought is the critique of anthropocentric humanism (Herbrechter 9), often brought up while opening an inquiry into non-human life (Ferrando, “Towards” 9). The heptapods teaching Louise their language and, accordingly, their perception of time, enables the story to represent a decidedly non-human way of thinking through a human character. This could be seen as a posthumanist attempt at rethinking anthropocentric notions of being – in this case, human language and sequential time perception. This is starkly contrasted by the approach the United States military takes: they refuse to view the heptapods as potentially embodying – and, most importantly, thinking as – something other than strictly human (Chiang 115, 123, 152–53, 165–66). This blocks their posthumanist

<sup>1</sup> This strand of thought has many similarities to Haraway’s notion of “staying with the trouble”, signaling another connection to Haraway’s thoughts, besides posthumanism and the cyborg.

<sup>2</sup> Meaning it is only written, not spoken. Chiang never elucidates the heptapods’ spoken language, if they have one (Sampson 29).

understanding of the heptapods on their own terms, leading to faulty communication and misinterpretation of the heptapods' intentions. A representative of the State Department, Hossner, cannot help but believe the heptapods must have reasons akin to those of humans: "they must have had some reason for coming all this way" (152).

The degree to which Louise embodies a posthumanist ideal is nuanced, however. Louise's "mind was cast in the mold of human, sequential languages, and no amount of immersion in an alien language can completely reshape it" (Chiang 166). This means that her "worldview is an amalgam of human and heptapod" (166), which is important to my argument in two respects. First, as an "amalgam", Louise represents a being that is neither human nor heptapod, but perhaps more tellingly human/heptapod. This is in line with posthumanist thinking, which deals more often with entangled categories and flattened ontologies than with becoming something completely different from human (Pettman 5).<sup>3</sup> It is also in line with Nancy's thought: the *intrusion* of Heptapod B on Louise's perception of time, or on her "worldview", makes her realise that she is of no singular species, neither essentially human nor essentially heptapod. Instead, this amalgam is her "self", and the intrusion of Heptapod B on her human perception makes that intrusion fundamental to her subjectivity. Therefore, Louise's self is "one of *polymorphic* and interlinked states of being, rather than a unitary, bound one" (Nayar), a fundamentally posthuman subject. Second, a *complete* immersion in Heptapod B would entail inhabiting the other extreme of the human/heptapod binary, instead of the intruded amalgam:

But occasionally I [Louise] have glimpses when Heptapod B truly reigns, and I experience past and future all at once; my consciousness becomes a half-century-long ember burning outside of time. I perceive during those glimpses that entire epoch as a simultaneity. (Chiang 167)

This would be *contra* Nancy's understanding of the self – or, in this case, perception and worldview – as "disrupted singularity" (Geroulanos and Meyers 83). This would close off a reading of the past and the future as intruding on the present; Louise's amalgamation, however, makes her still perceive the present as the seat of consciousness, which enables such a reading. The present as an anchor point from which to perceive simultaneous temporality is hence only enabled by Louise's becoming a posthumanist amalgam, instead of a transhuman or non-human entity. This enables the posthumanist potential of Chiang's story to shine, and the theoretical power of the concept of intrusion to expand.

In this way, "Story of Your Life" shows us how the understanding of time as simultaneous, instead of sequential, can expand Nancy's notion of intrusion to also be applied to time. The heptapods – and by extension, Louise – perceive time not as sequential, causal, and linear, but instead, as boundaryless, open-ended, and non-sequential. Nancy's description of "his" body and self now become analogous to temporality: simultaneous time is best described as "a

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<sup>3</sup> This marks an important distinction between posthumanist and transhumanist thought and, consequently, demarcates "Story of Your Life"'s speculation as a critical gesture concerned as much with the now as with a utopian, yet intangible, future. This, in turn, shows Chiang's connection to Braidotti's affirmative ethics, which also insists on the now in this world. See also Ferrando's "The Body".

void already open [*déjà ouvert*]” (Nancy 3). Simultaneous time has no beginning and no end, just like Nancy’s self. When replacing Nancy *himself* in *L’Intrus* with simultaneous time, the analogy readily shows itself:

The *intrus* is no other than [simultaneous temporality] .... No other than the one, the same, always identical to itself and yet that is never done with altering itself ... intruding upon the world and upon itself: a disquieting upsurge of the strange, *conatus* of an infinite excrescence. (Nancy 13)

If anything, the more the analogy shows, the stranger it seems that Nancy himself does not tackle the temporal aspects of intrusion more comprehensively. This is where this article makes an intervention, by incorporating temporality in Nancy’s notion of intrusion.

There are some passages in which Nancy hints toward an understanding of time as intrusion. He makes a special note of the specific historical moment in which his heart transplant takes place: “here personal contingency crosses with contingency in the history of technology. Had I lived earlier, I would be dead; later, I would be surviving in a different manner” (2–3). Geroulanos and Meyers call this a “play[ing] on problems of timelessness” (92), but I maintain the opposite in light of simultaneous time perception: Nancy’s understanding of life/death is fundamentally sequential, and “Story of Your Life” can show us how to conceptualise it differently, leading to a less sombre interpretation than Nancy’s.

### 3. Life/death in simultaneous temporality

Considering intrusion, Nancy sees himself becoming “living-dead” (Nancy 13), expanding on Derrida’s notion of “life death”.<sup>4</sup> Nancy asserts his “life” is intruded on by death, “or rather, life/death, a suspension of the continuum of being, a scansion wherein ‘I’ has/have little to do” (Nancy 7). Because his singular body is at stake, life/death is a more productive view on his “life” than the idea of death entailing the end of the body: intrusion leads to “an undoing of the finitude and ends that define the discourse of ‘embodied death’” (Geroulanos and Meyers 92). Herein lies an implicit understanding of temporality, an extension of Nancy’s life/death between distinct historical moments, as briefly discussed at the end of the previous section. What has not been considered yet, however, is the understanding of life/death in the light of this article’s expanded notion of intrusion.

The notion of “a suspension of the continuum of being” (Nancy 7) takes on a different meaning in the context of simultaneous temporality. Life is nothing *but* a continuum of being when perceived in simultaneous time; it is simply that the concept of “continuum” changes. Continuum in this sense, albeit experienced from the present, simultaneously includes its beginning in the “past” and end in the “future”. Or, as Shang Wanqi notes, “there is no cause and effect, the cause and effect are already present at the same time at the beginning of its emergence, or the concept of beginning does not exist at all” (69). This leads to a far more intuitive understanding of life/death, which

<sup>4</sup> First posited in Derrida’s seminar “La vie la mort” in 1975–76 (McCance).

becomes hard to envision only as either “life” or “death” in simultaneous time. In simultaneous temporality, one is already simultaneously alive, dead, and alive/dead. Thus, Nancy’s somewhat obscure “living-dead” (13) becomes the only way of properly understanding life/death in simultaneous time. His articulation of life/death – “life cannot but impel life; but life also moves toward death” (6) – also takes on an essentially different meaning because “moving toward” becomes fundamentally different; it is no longer sequential. This more intuitive understanding of “continuum”, “living-dead”, and “life/death” is the first instantiation of “Story of Your Life” representing and making imaginable concepts that are hard to grasp by the way of *L’Intrus* alone, and this is something on which the following section will expand further. But first, an exploration of the implications of life/death in simultaneous time perception is in order.

The story of Louise and her daughter is a tragic one, though perhaps only from the point of view of sequential understanding of time. “Story of Your Life” revolves around Louise deciding to have a baby, despite knowing, due to Heptapod B, that her daughter will die at the early age of 25. However, her understanding of life/death in simultaneous time changes this story from tragic – from a story “mov[ing] toward death” (Nancy 6) – to life-affirming instead. Or, perhaps more accurately, it is life/death-affirming. Louise notes how the heptapods, because of their being in simultaneous temporality, “act to create the future, to enact chronology” (Chiang 163). This notion of action, enaction, or performativity is central to understanding life/death in simultaneous time: heptapods live *to die*, and Louise must have her baby to *enact* the chronology of her daughter’s life/death.

In a poignant passage taking place during the heptapods’ visit on Earth, Louise comes across a salad bowl in a gourmet shop, which she knows will hurt her daughter in the future:

My gaze wandered over the shelves ... and stopped on a wooden salad bowl. When you [Louise’s daughter] are three, you’ll pull a dishtowel off the kitchen counter and bring that salad bowl down on top of you. I’ll make a grab for it, but I’ll miss. The edge of the bowl will leave you with a cut, on the upper edge of your forehead, that will require a single stitch. (Chiang 158)

Most would not hurt their own child willingly. If you knew *your* purchase would lead to your child getting hurt, would you buy it? Not in sequential time perception: you would be the *cause* of your child’s hurt. Yet, in simultaneous time, with its teleological experience of reality, you *would*, because you “create the future, to enact chronology” (163). Hence, you would not be the cause of your child’s hurt, but you would need to purchase the bowl in order to make sure there is a future at all, a future which entails your child getting hurt. Thus, Louise purchases the bowl:

I reached out and took the bowl from the shelf. The motion didn’t feel like something I was forced to do. Instead it seemed just as urgent as my rushing to catch the bowl when it falls on you: an instinct that I felt right in following. (Chiang 158)

Louise’s feeling of urgency and the “instinct that I felt right in following” bring us back to Nancy’s intrusion as “*conatus* of an infinite excrescence” (13) and his

notion that “life cannot but impel life” (6), only reread into simultaneous life/death. Urgency, instinct, *conatus*, impelling, all point toward “creat[ing] the future, to enact chronology” (Chiang 163) in simultaneous temporality. In this way, Nancy’s phrase can be reread as “time cannot but impel time”: purchasing the salad bowl is an act of *actualisation* of the future in which Louise’s child gets hurt, but it is not the *cause* of her child getting hurt.

Yet, the salad bowl only leads to a cut and a stitch, which is obviously different from death. Can the logic described above also lead to an understanding of the death of Louise’s daughter? Yes, it can, as a comparison to the heptapods’ language will demonstrate. Because “if the heptapods already knew everything that they would ever say or hear, what was the point of their using language at all?” (Chiang 164). Or, following the comparison, why give birth – bring life – only for it to die? Louise retorts: “a reasonable question. But language wasn’t only for communication: it was also a form of action” (164). Hence, life/death becomes affirmative: in contrast to Nancy’s somber understanding of life/death as “a suspension” (7), life/death is now reframed to be about action, enaction, and affirmation, about embracing life.

The falling away of binaries, caused by the embracing of simultaneous temporality and the resulting revaluation of life/death, can be postulated to lead to what Rosi Braidotti has dubbed an “ethics of joy” (“Ethics” 221). According to Braidotti, the falling away of differences – differences coded as “different from” or “less than” – can lead to an ethics that “does not postulate subjectivity along the binary oppositional axes ... On the contrary, [this] subjectivity is nomadic, distributed, relational and process-oriented” (221). The subjectivity of which Braidotti speaks sounds familiar: nomadic, or perhaps “displac[ing] and reorganiz[ing]” (Geroulanos and Meyers 83); distributed, or perhaps simultaneous; relational, or perhaps “exteriority and excessivity ... infinite exposition” (Nancy 13); process-oriented, or perhaps “a form of action” (Chiang 164). According to Braidotti, this posthuman subjectivity allows for a negation of negativity because it revalues difference.

In this way, “negative relations and passions can be transformed through an engagement in collective practices of change. This implies a dynamic view of passions and affects, even those that freeze us in pain, horror or mourning” (“Ethics” 222). Thus, coming back to “Story of Your Life” by the way of Louise’s simultaneous perception of temporality – and her consequent revaluation of life/death – she enables the action to create and affirm by enacting the future. In this way, “new ways of dying” (Braidotti, “New Ways”) are possible, but they are fundamentally different from those envisioned by Nancy.

Although Nancy does not fall into the trap of “taking mortality or finitude as the transhistorical horizon for discussions of ‘life’” (Braidotti, “Politics” 211) – as evidenced by his notion of life/death – he still holds a rather sombre view. He wonders “why, and how, is there no longer for us ... a ‘right’ [*juste*] time to die?” (Nancy 5). Although this is a very valid question, it is sombrely answered by the way of life/death as a “suspension of being” (7), which has led Christopher Fynsk to call *L’Intrus* a “testimony to suffering” and “a protest” (32). Indeed, Nancy’s vocabulary includes the likes of “unwelcome” (1), “break[ing] in” (2), “my feeble, winded life” (7), and, of course, “intrusion” itself; it does not feel very positive. Yet, Nancy’s questions remain valid: “What does it mean ‘to survive’? Is it even a suitable term?” (5).

“Story of Your Life” answers these questions in the affirmative, and so, it provides an instantiation of, but also a positive alternative to, *L’Intrus*’ conundrums. The “right” time to die is irrelevant when perceiving time as “*déjà ouvert*” (Nancy 3); one simply enacts chronology. Hence, it is *always* the right time to die. “To survive” is *not* a suitable term, nor is “to die” or “to live”; under simultaneous temporality, life/death is the answer, the affirmative, joyful answer. Perhaps it is best to let Louise’s daughter explain for herself. When Louise reads “Goldilocks” to her when she is still a child, she catches Louise reading it wrong. “You have to read it the right way ... That’s not how the story goes”, the girl says, causing Louise to respond, “well if you already know how the story goes, why do you need me to read it to you?”, to which her daughter life-affirmingly responds: “cause I wanna hear it!” (Chiang 164). There is no “right” way of hearing it, nor a “right” time; there is only the actualisation of the future in the present, a life-affirming actualisation. Louise’s daughter already knows what the heptapods do, and the actualisation of her life/death is Louise’s ultimate life-affirming embrace of simultaneous temporality.

#### 4. Representing the unrepresentable

I have shown how Louise’s life-affirming choice instantiates theories brought to the fore in *L’Intrus*. Yet, this is only one example of the capacity of “Story of Your Life” to represent the complex matters of intrusion and then go beyond them. Nancy appears to consider intrusion primarily impossible to represent. On multiple occasions, he notes that intrusion “exceeds my capacity to represent it” (7), or that “there is nothing to know, nothing to understand, nothing to feel” (4). As demonstrated above, “Story of Your Life” shows us the opposite, but there are even more instances of “Story of Your Life” succeeding in representing intrusion where *L’Intrus* cannot.

Ted Chiang must have found himself in a difficult predicament when he decided to tell a simultaneous story in a sequential medium, but a careful reading of “Story of Your Life” reveals certain passages that can be interpreted as meta-commentaries on this problematic. The key to circumventing the problem of medium is the semasiographic nature of Heptapod B:

I [Louise] understood why the heptapods had evolved a semasiographic writing system like Heptapod B; it was better suited for a species with a simultaneous mode of consciousness. For them, speech was a bottleneck because it required that one word follow another sequentially. With writing, on the other hand, every mark on a page was visible simultaneously [like in “Story of Your Life” itself] .... Semasiographic writing naturally took advantage of the page’s two-dimensionality; instead of doling out morphemes one at a time, it offered an entire page full of them all at once. (Chiang 161)

Although we humans, unlike Louise, still read sequentially, this meta-commentary reflects on an attempt to produce a simultaneous text for a sequential species. I argue that Chiang mostly succeeds, primarily because of two techniques, incorporating his own meta-commentary in the process.

First, Chiang juggles grammatical tenses throughout the story, primarily in the scenes where the “future” is interspersed amidst the main narrative about the heptapods’ visit. As such, “Chiang deliberately depicts the linguist’s

memories as not chronological, [depicting the] present the past and the future in a seemingly equal way, to mimic the mindset of an alien as well as leave a hint for readers” (Wanqi 69). When Louise addresses her unborn daughter, constructions such as “I remember one afternoon when you are five years old” (Chiang 121) or “I remember one day during the summer when you are sixteen” (125) are commonplace. Note that the moment where these utterances take place in the storyline is *before* the birth of Louise’s daughter. There is also a moment in which Louise is “remembering” something she will say in the “future”, reminiscing: “I’m actually going to say that, aren’t I?” (155). During these grammatical tense-juggles, the past and the future of the story intrude on the present of reading. As such, they do not create a sense of timelessness, but an approximation of a simultaneous perception of temporality.

Secondly, the turning point where Louise realises the effect that Heptapod B has on her – and realises she can use this mode of consciousness – is an effective way of representing the expanded notion of intrusion incorporating simultaneous temporality. In the “future” – “I remember when you’re fourteen” (Chiang 149) – Louise’s daughter asks her for help with her homework; she needs the term “non-zero-sum-game” for a social studies report. Louise cannot remember. A bit later in the story, the term is mentioned during the time when Louise is investigating the aliens (152–53), about sixteen years before the homework situation. Once she hears it in “that” time, Louise “remembers” the term sixteen years later, and can now help her daughter by suggesting the term “non-zero-sum-game”. She smugly tells her daughter she “just remembered” (153).

This moment of temporal simultaneity does not only occur in the narrative, but also on the page. Chiang deftly jumps from “past” to “present” to “future”, all on the same page. In this way, a sense of temporal simultaneity is also achieved in the literary medium. In addition, this is a clever, oblique reference to Chiang’s own meta-commentary later in the story: “semasiographic writing naturally took advantage of the page’s two-dimensionality” (Chiang 161). Here we are, with Louise’s eureka-moment presented in a two-dimensional medium: a moment of the intrusion of the past and the future on the present, of temporal simultaneity successfully represented to a sequential reader. As such, Chiang employs “conceptual and narrative recursivity” (Glazier and Beck 268), representing simultaneous time both in-story and meta-narratively “outside” the story.

Hence, “Story of Your Life” succeeds in representing something Nancy did not consider possible to represent. A last, subjective argument for the proceeding thesis is that “Story of Your Life” succeeds in upholding its narrative tension despite the reader knowing what will happen; the reader is in on the simultaneity after all, as explained above. Yet, the story remains gripping until the very end, where Louise and Gary walk inside “to make love, to make you [Louise’s daughter]” (172). The reader already knows from the first page that Louise’s daughter will die, yet this moment retains its full affective impact. Again, this argument is subjective, but as Louise herself says, “sometimes it’s good to wait”, even if one already knows the “ending” in a simultaneous story, because “the anticipation makes it more fun when you get there” (134).

## 5. Conclusion

“Story of Your Life” stands as a shining example of science fiction not only representing but also expanding on complicated posthumanist and poststructuralist theory. This process also transforms itself, and as such, bringing “Story of Your Life” and *L’Intrus* into conversation is a speculative critical endeavor, which produces something more than what its parts are separately capable of. Not only do both works shed new light on each other, but they complement each other in ways that both broaden and deepen the scope of both, and one succeeds in representation where the other expects representation to fail.

Nancy astutely remarks that “to isolate death from life, not leaving each one intimately woven into the other, with each one intruding upon the other’s core [*coeur*], this is what one must never do” (Nancy 6), and *L’Intrus* is a more or less successful demonstration of this. Yet, when brought into conversation with “Story of Your Life”, Nancy’s life/death – by the way of considering simultaneous temporal perception as an intrusion of the past and the future on the present – is transformed into an affirmative, potentially even joyful notion. Although speculative theory – *L’Intrus* in this case – highlights and theorises extremely important issues, it can become stuck in a quagmire of sombre deconstruction. Bringing it into conversation with speculative literature, however, shows the possibilities of reconstructing (Huber) this negativity in an affirmative way.

Shang notes how “as a literary genre, science fiction often forms an extension of contemporary humanities” (68), but I hope to have shown how science fiction can go *beyond* that, too, as I have postulated that “Story of Your Life” is not only an extension of *L’Intrus*, but the relationship works the other way around as well. As such, I maintain that it is at the *intersection* of the two where the conversation between science fiction and contemporary humanities is at its most productive. Literature, as a site of knowledge production, acts as representation. Science fiction, as “high-intensity realism” (Chu 74), can represent the unrepresentable, as it often has. The posthumanist basis of “Story of Your Life” “force[s] us to reconceptualize the place of the human being in the world and in reality” (Shang 68), which makes it such a tantalizing counterpart to *L’Intrus*. Speculative philosophy and speculative fiction alike can and will show us alternate ways of being: “Story of Your Life”’s conversation with *L’Intrus* does not only demonstrate this excellently, but also goes beyond.

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# The Ancient Roots of Children’s Fantasy Fiction: From the *Odyssey* to Artemis Fowl and The Laws of Magic

*Caylee Tierney & Lisa Fletcher*

*Abstract:* Critics of fantasy fiction stress that its roots lie in ancient mythology. This article offers a case study that tests the currency of this assumption for children’s fantasy. It investigates how the contemporary subgenre recycles characters and narratives from ancient tales through two series and the *Odyssey*. We demonstrate striking parallels between the series and the *Odyssey* and reveal how key features of contemporary children’s fantasy – including quest structures, the character trait of cunning intelligence, and particular patterns in father/child relationships – have their roots in and continue to follow the logic of this fundamental ancient text. The article concludes that reading contemporary children’s fantasy through its classical antecedents reveals the persistence of ancient narratives in the subgenre. Children’s fantasy fiction is not impoverished or limited by its ongoing dependence on ancient tales. Rather, the deeply adaptive sensibility of fantasy is generative of new opportunities for storytelling.

*Keywords:* Children’s fantasy fiction, popular fiction, *Odyssey*, ancient mythology, Artemis Fowl, Laws of Magic

## 1. Introduction

Critics writing about the fantasy genre consistently stress that its roots lie in the mythical stories of ancient peoples. For Richard Mathews, “as a literary genre, modern fantasy is clearly related to the magical stories of myth, legend, fairy tale, and folklore” (1). Brian Attebery asserts that “modern fantasy draws on a number of traditional narrative genres” (2; see also Mendlesohn and James 7;

Armitt 13–15; Dickerson and O’Hara 16). Fora such as *Tolkien Studies*, the *Journal of Inklings Studies*, and the Mythopoeic Society consider elements of ancient narratives in contemporary fantasy fiction through the framework of popular fiction studies or genre studies. However, most critics who consider ancient Greek mythology in contemporary fantasy fiction tend to focus instead on the implications of their findings for the study of ancient myth, or propose no significance for what they uncover beyond enhancing understanding of their selected fantasy texts (Kleczkowska; Foster; Groves; Knorr; Rogers and Stevens). We employ close and comparative textual analysis to test how contemporary children’s fantasy fiction in particular recycles elements of a specific ancient Greek text – the *Odyssey* – and consider what this means for the subgenre. We find that themes of the *Odyssey* are reappropriated and adapted in the selected texts, and this provides a launch pad to argue that narrative elements inherited from this fundamental ancient text – specifically quest structures (explored through katabatic journeys and internal quests), the trait of cunning intelligence, and particular patterns in father/child relationships (especially for male protagonists) – are an inherent part of the children’s fantasy subgenre.

The scope of our work for this article is necessarily limited to allow very close examination of the breadth and variety of ways texts in the subgenre might borrow from and redeploy elements of the *Odyssey*. The immensity of charting the intertextual weave between the *Odyssey* or other ancient texts and children’s fantasy across a vast literary history led us to narrow our focus to ask if and how a given contemporary children’s fantasy novel reaches back to a text at the heart of the ancient canon. Our approach is to test how a frequently made generalisation applies to a contemporary subset of fantasy through a specific ancient text. Our findings are definitive: key features of the *Odyssey* are freely adapted by the texts we discuss, providing concrete evidence that contemporary children’s fantasy continues to effectively reappropriate characters and narratives from its classical antecedents.

We compare two contemporary (post-2000) series and the *Odyssey*, one of the fundamental mythic narratives of Western culture. Scholars routinely single out the *Odyssey* as preeminent (Dickerson and O’Hara 100; Hall). John Clute labels the *Odyssey* the “earliest external quest tale in Western literature”, and states that it “underlies much modern Genre Fantasy” (“Quests”). Mary Economou Bailey Green calls it “the archetypal quest story”. Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James contend that the *Odyssey* is “a precursor for much later fantasy fiction” (7). More specifically, Ortwin Knorr compares Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* to the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* is therefore an intuitive thread through which to investigate how two contemporary children’s fantasy series retain links to their classical roots.

The two children’s fantasy series we focus on are Eoin Colfer’s *Artemis Fowl* (2001–2012) and Michael Pryor’s *The Laws of Magic* (2006–2011). These series are visible, conventional examples of children’s fantasy. As we show below, our findings would hold were we to substitute other series. Focusing on the ways children’s series continue to follow the logic of the *Odyssey* is a deliberate choice. Children’s fantasy enjoys a prominent position at the forefront of the genre commercially and critically. This is especially evident in the context of the post-Harry Potter “fantasy revival” (Levy and Mendlesohn 167), but the link between children’s fiction and the modern fantasy genre runs

back through the genre's history to J.R.R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, George MacDonald, and E. Nesbit. The link between fantasy and children in the contemporary book market is bolstered by the common assumption that "children read fantasy; adults read realism" (3). The view that fantasy is childish pivots on the understanding that fiction for a juvenile market is necessarily simple and derivative, both descriptors that are levelled routinely at popular fiction more broadly (Gelder 18–19; Levy and Mendlesohn 3). If children's fiction distils conventions and reveals their barest bones, then our analysis of children's fantasy stands to offer a springboard for further research that explores – through the perspective of popular fiction – how ingrained elements adapted from Greek myth persist in the structures of the broader fantasy genre.

Artemis Fowl is a best-selling, eight-volume series about a teenage criminal mastermind who, in the first volume, is determined to capture for ransom one of the fairies his research tells him live under the ground. Over the course of the series, he attempts to intimidate, outwit, and ultimately assist the fairies with his wealth and resources. The series overtly draws on its national context with use of Irish folklore, which in itself demonstrates children's fantasy's continued and close engagement with narratives adapted from its ancient roots. Scholarly interest in the series focuses on its use of Irish cultural elements and combination of magic and technology (Keenan; Doughty) or discusses the books in relation to posthumanism and gender (Pugh; Skelley; Chanda).

The Laws of Magic has received practically no scholarly attention. The five-volume series follows the adventures of Aubrey Fitzwilliam, the magically talented son of a prominent politician, who struggles to overcome his self-induced health condition and thwart the nefarious plans of Dr Tremaine. We include an Australian-authored series in line with David Carter's assertion that "the transnational nature of popular fiction networks is best appreciated from the perspective of one of their more remote nodes" (349). If contemporary children's fantasy as a subgenre continues to recycle narrative elements of the *Odyssey*, we should be able to trace these in texts authored at the anglophone fiction industry's periphery.

While both the Artemis Fowl series and The Laws of Magic do contain direct references to Greek myth, these are not major plot points across the series. Our discussion covers the major references in the Artemis Fowl series. In The Laws of Magic, Adonis (*Blaze* 304), Stymphalian birds (*Blaze* 117), Odysseus and the Sirens (*Word* 124), and caryatids (*Hour* 394) appear. The fact that Greek myth is not central in a direct way sets these series apart from series that foreground their mythic roots, notably Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson and the Olympians series. We began our research with the hypothesis that ancient stories influence contemporary children's fantasy systemically and intrinsically. We are interested, therefore, in texts that do not foreground their use of Greek mythic elements, that do not have overarching plots explicitly based on adaptation of ancient narratives. We are influenced here by Erling B. Holtmark who evaluates the mythic episode of *katabasis*, the journey to the underworld, in various genres of film, deliberately discussing films with "no overt relationship to the mythic background which informs them" (25). Just as Holtmark discusses how mythic patterns "have worked themselves into the very marrow" of film (24), we are concerned with resonances of myth in the structures, narratives, and characters of children's fantasy.

Richard A. Spencer's *Harry Potter and the Classical World* is one of the most detailed studies on the links between children's fantasy and Greek myth to date. However, Spencer's treatment of fantasy runs against the grain of the approaches to contemporary popular fiction studies with which we are sympathetic. Spencer seeks to legitimise Harry Potter by highlighting features that align the series with high literary values and, in his view, elevate the series above the rank-and-file of fantasy fiction. Spencer makes comparisons between themes, type-scenes, and characters in Harry Potter and classical mythology, including a character comparison between Harry and Odysseus. However, he prioritises advancing "the cause of education in classics" (4) and gives credence to arguments that attempt to raise Harry Potter above fantasy and popular fiction due to its allusions to the classics (9). Our motivation in tracing the influence of the *Odyssey* on selected children's fantasy texts is not to elevate them to the status of literary fiction. Rather, as popular fiction researchers, we were excited to discover what examining the link between the two can add to the understanding of fantasy fiction.

## 2. Throwing Hooks Back to the *Odyssey*

Stories of coming-of-age are common in many genres but are fundamental to both ancient mythical stories such as the *Odyssey* and contemporary children's fantasy novels. Children's stories are nearly always about their protagonists' personal growth (Trites 10), and in fantasy, the quintessential quest or journey is "usually interpreted as a metaphor for a coming of age" (Mendlesohn 7). The first four books of the *Odyssey* are a coming-of-age narrative; they tell of Telemachus's journey to adulthood and the forging of his identity (Knox 9). Telemachus travels to the courts of prominent kings where, under the guidance of the appropriately named "Mentor" (Homer, *Odyssey* 2.301), he learns how to conduct himself in the world. While Odysseus's experiences in the *Odyssey* do not constitute a coming-of-age, they do facilitate his growth as Peter Toohey argues. He learns the folly of angering the gods and the value of hiding his identity after hubris leads him to reveal his name to Polyphemus, which allows the Cyclops to call on his father, Poseidon, for retribution (Toohey 53, 56–58). Odysseus subsequently disguises his identity to return home, showing restraint that he previously lacked, thereby demonstrating his growth.

Artemis Fowl and *The Laws of Magic* exemplify the centrality of coming-of-age to contemporary children's fantasy. Artemis develops from a boy who is so evil that his hostage Holly cannot "even find the words" to describe him (*Artemis* 122) to a responsible and emotionally stable young man. In the first volume, Artemis takes on the role of breadwinner in his father's absence, but goes about things in an immoral and risky way. He cheats the fairies out of their gold to restore the family fortune and nearly loses the respect of his bodyguard/father figure Butler (*Artemis* 16), who initially trusts him "implicitly" (*Artemis* 67). However, he shows signs of moral decency and emotion, particularly in his final deal with Holly when he trades half the gold back for her to restore his mother's health. In subsequent volumes, Artemis works together with Holly and the fairy authorities in an alliance that sees him making ever more moral choices. Colfer explains, "this kid is the most evil kid in the world. By the end of the eight books he saves the world" (Blumson).

Artemis's personal journey from criminal to hero is a key strand running through the series.

Over the course of *The Laws of Magic*, Aubrey navigates adolescence and attempts to position himself in relation to his father and the world. He also struggles to cope with the disastrous results of a magical experiment that he performed in a moment of arrogance and overconfidence, which leaves him battling to stay alive and keep his soul and body together. In the first book, *Blaze of Glory*, Aubrey and his friend George investigate a series of mysteries. Although Aubrey undertakes these adventures because of his desire to solve puzzles, he is also driven to create an identity separate from his father's and by the need to find a magical cure for his condition. These internal motivations are paramount for Aubrey, who cannot achieve maturity and integration into adult society until he has navigated the struggles that plague him.

An element that traces the structural and thematic legacy from our selected children's fantasy series to the *Odyssey* is katabasis. We examine katabasis as a form of the quest – a quintessential feature of contemporary fantasy (see Kleczkowska for analysis of katabasis in *His Dark Materials*). Katabasis is a stock episode in coming-of-age narratives. In a symbolic sense, katabasis is a cycle of initiation that can be understood to involve a death of the child, who is reborn as an adult. Holtsmark writes that katabasis “seems inevitably to entail at some level a search for identity”, which results in the hero assuming “roles of increased responsibility and leadership ... on the basis of his experience underground” (26). Growth and learning are explicit in Odysseus's literal journey to the underworld (and in his multiple symbolic katabatic experiences). He travels to the underworld to “consult the ghost of Tiresias” (Homer, *Odyssey* 10.541) and converses with past heroes who instruct him on how to get home and the importance of life. Both Artemis and Aubrey experience death and rebirth through katabatic episodes that create dramatic changes. Artemis dies in volume eight, *The Last Guardian*, and his disembodied soul drifts like a ghost for six months until a clone body is ready for him to inhabit (298–300). When he returns to the body, Artemis has lost his memories – he is born anew and cleansed of his past crimes. Aubrey is pulled to the brink of “true death” by his failed magical experiment before managing to bring himself back (*Blaze* 30), and this is the catalyst for much of his development over the series.

Symbolic katabatic experiences also permeate Artemis and Aubrey's coming-of-age journeys. Artemis's engagement with the People (the fairies) has katabatic resonance, as they literally live “underground” (*Artemis* 32). Artemis interacts with the People both in his world and theirs, and this experience changes him so profoundly that he wonders, “am I not Artemis Fowl?” (*Atlantis* 42). Anna Bugajska notes that the Gnommish words along the bottom of each page of *The Atlantis Complex* (volume seven) read, “I thought I knew everything. Now I think I know too much. This new knowledge, these compulsions are taking me over” (196). Aubrey's trip to the Mire is a similarly transformative, symbolic katabasis. His associate Jack is a Charon figure, guiding Aubrey and his companions through the dark and dingy streets of the Mire to the ruins of a church and graveyard (at midnight). Aubrey and his friends are captured at the church and taken down to the “crypt” (*Blaze* 324). In that space, Aubrey has one of his closest brushes with true death. Before ascending the ladder out of the crypt, he is forced to take drastic magical action,

which invigorates him and makes him feel “stronger than he had for some time” (*Blaze* 334). In both cases, katabatic experiences are catalysts for change that move each boy towards adulthood.

Cycles also represent growth more generally in both series and in ways that throw hooks back to the *Odyssey*. The Artemis Fowl series cycles back to where it started. The final novel ends with a slightly altered version of the opening paragraph of the first book as Holly relates Artemis’s tale to his clone to bring back his memories (*Last* 306). The notable difference is that Artemis is not perpetrating these deeds in the final book, but rather hearing about them as though they are the actions of a third party. At the end of *Blaze of Glory*, Aubrey retakes the physical test that he fails in the opening pages. In his first attempt, Aubrey focuses on his handicap and how “much harder” things are as a result of his condition (*Blaze* 1). At the end of the novel, he tells himself that it is “only a physical struggle” and that he can “cope” and “succeed” (*Blaze* 392). Similarly, Spencer identifies cycles at all levels of Harry Potter, including in the meeting of eyes that marks Harry and Professor Snape’s first and last contact in the series (282). Bruce Loudon suggests that the entire *Odyssey* consists of a narrative pattern that is repeated three times, in which Odysseus arrives on an island, receives divine help to approach a powerful female, and comes into conflict with a group of men (6–7). The first two instances of this pattern are significant as they act as models, preparing Odysseus for his final homecoming. Cycles therefore emphasise the growth of the protagonist by drawing attention to the gulf between the person he was and the one he has become. The echoes of the *Odyssey* are especially loud in such moments of repetition and return.

### 3. Finding Odysseus in Children’s Fantasy

Male protagonists in contemporary children’s fantasy often display what Claudia Nelson describes (in relation to Victorian children’s literature) as “androgynous” masculinity, as opposed to representing a “self-consciously masculine” ideal (525). Widespread perceptions of childhood and the typical plot structures of children’s fantasy offer two explanations as to why. According to Susan Honeyman, many adults posit children as “neuter” or “genderless” (169) due to the possibilities childhood offers for putting “the oppressive gendering of sexual maturity temporarily on hold” (168). Additionally, by virtue of being children, the protagonists of children’s fantasy are physically smaller and weaker than the often-adult antagonists they face and are therefore incapable of matching these antagonists in combat (Tierney 77–78). Characters such as Artemis and Aubrey must find alternative methods than physical strength if they are to have any chance of besting the villains they pit themselves against. Magic or supernatural abilities play a role in many cases, and these are typically interwoven with inventiveness and cunning.

Analysis of the characterisation of the male protagonists in our two contemporary children’s fantasy series finds a mirror held up to Odysseus, who shows signs of a more androgynous masculinity than his peers. Margalit Finkelberg argues that Odysseus differs from the typical heroic Greek man because he employs “*metis*, ‘cunning’, as opposed to the *bie*, ‘might’, of other Homeric heroes” (2–3). Odysseus’s disguises and use of the “unheroic” bow and arrow are specific features that set him apart (Finkelberg 2–3). According to

Finkelberg, the Iliadic notion where “being a hero amounts to readiness to meet death on the battlefield” is “the sense in which the words ‘heroism’ and ‘hero’ are used today” (12). Odysseus is rebuked by Achilles, who says “I hate that man like the very Gates of Death who / ... stoops to peddling lies” (Homer, *Iliad* 14.182-83). Odysseus is a tactician, a deceiver and a persuasive speaker (Knox 37) who is “never tired of twists and tricks” (Homer, *Odyssey* 13.332). He is characterised by “cunning intelligence” (Wanner 213), which Kevin J. Wanner argues is a trait typical of mythic characters with “fluid” (219) gender identities.

The dominance of intelligence over physical ability for Artemis and Aubrey traces a line from both protagonists through Nelson's androgynous masculinity to Odysseus. Similarly to how Odysseus is “known to the world / for every kind of craft” (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.21-22), Artemis is “a child prodigy” (*Artemis* 1). He is consistently described as physically inferior – “a pale adolescent” (*Artemis* 5) whose life in front of a computer screen has “bleached the glow from his skin” (*Artemis* 3). His “famously unsophisticated” motor skills earn him the nickname “*Left Foot Fowl*” (*Atlantis* 7). Holly, a three-foot tall elf, knocks him to the ground with one hit because Butler, his “giant” of a bodyguard (*Artemis* 5), is not around to prevent her punch from landing. Tison Pugh argues that Artemis's “masculinity is suspect” due to his “effete mannerisms” and resistance of puberty (132). Artemis sees puberty as something to be overcome and actively denies the interest in girls that emerges in him as the series progresses. Bugajska also discusses Artemis's androgynous features, noting a magical fusion with Holly that occurs in the series (195). This physical blurring of gender lines, and Artemis's name, which he inherits from Greek goddess of the hunt (*Eternity* 267), position Artemis as androgynous.

Aubrey's gender is similarly blurred. While “Aubrey” is a name of masculine origin, it is often considered feminine in contemporary times (Harper). Aubrey also relies on disguise to achieve his aims and admits that he has “dressed as a woman beggar” (*Blaze* 300). Physically, Aubrey is described as more poet than athlete (*Blaze* 2) and does not fit in with the hefty boys that populate Stonelea (a military school). Just as Butler provides physical backup for Artemis, George can “make fists drop simply by appearing on the scene” (*Blaze* 3). And like Holly, Aubrey's friend Caroline is far more physically competent than he is (*Blaze* 288). Both protagonists rely on qualities other than physical strength while alternative central characters in the series bring physical strength or prowess to the group.

The above pattern is familiar in contemporary children's fantasy more broadly. Cressida Cowell's Hiccup from the *How to Train Your Dragon* series is a physically unimpressive Viking (Tierney 76) who is consistently outdone by his female peer Astrid. Johnathan Stroud's Nathaniel (Bartimaeus Sequence) holds a similar position in relation to his enemy and occasional ally Kitty. John Flanagan's protagonists Will (Ranger's Apprentice) and Hal (Brotherband) are both expressly represented as cunning and witty while their friends or associates are brawny (Tierney 76). As a slightly different example, Knorr argues that Pullman's Lyra is comparable to Odysseus in terms of cunning intelligence.

Growth and plot resolution in Artemis's and Aubrey's case, as well as Odysseus's, are tied to overcoming ego or arrogance, a trait that Nelson positions as the antithesis to Victorian androgynous masculinity. Intelligence and arrogance are closely aligned for all three protagonists. Moments of

arrogance bred from overconfidence in their intelligence lead to many of Artemis's and Aubrey's problems. Aubrey is guilty of arrogance in the magical experiment that is only rectified at the end of *The Laws of Magic* series. He recognises as much after it all goes wrong, berating himself for "heedless bravado, for reckless posturing and for shoddy preparation" (*Blaze* 28). Artemis's arrogance comes back to bite him in volume three particularly when his carelessness leads to him being "hoodwinked" by Jon Spiro, the villain of the volume (*Eternity* 19). And as mentioned above, Odysseus's inability to leave Polyphemus believing his name is "Nobody" (Homer *Odyssey* 9.410) directly causes the hero's suffering. Overcoming the problems arrogance creates for both Odysseus and these contemporary protagonists requires them to "kill the masculine ego" (Nelson 537) and embrace their more androgynous and fluid qualities.

Odysseus, Artemis, and Aubrey achieve fluidity of identity with disguise. Aubrey relies on beggar's disguises both to rescue his father and to escape his identity as "Sir Darius Fitzwilliam's son" (*Blaze* 39), which allows him to explore his city without the "responsibilities of being Aubrey Fitzwilliam" (*Blaze* 298). According to Wanner, like gender fluidity, disguise and metamorphosis are essential to "metic actors" (219) or characters who rely on cunning intelligence (218). Odysseus dons disguises to avoid the risk of being recognised, particularly when he returns to Ithaca in his "beggar's" guise to slay the suitors (Homer, *Odyssey* 13.500). Artemis, too, uses disguise, which affords him fluidity of age as he turns to pseudonyms like "Malachy Pasteur" (*Time* 249) to achieve ends he is unable to as a child (Bugajska 199). These children's fantasy series draw on the patterns of the *Odyssey* to craft fluid identities, freeing protagonists from the constraints of childhood, social positions, or family ties.

#### 4. Tracing Shadows of Ancient Fathers

Family ties of the kind Aubrey seeks to escape frequently bind the young protagonists of children's fantasy. Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that family is central to stories aimed at younger children as those stories are concerned with "the child's sense of Self and her or his personal power" (3). Pre-teen protagonists are embroiled in issues of their "immediate environment, usually represented by family and home" (Trites 3). Artemis, Aubrey, and other children's fantasy protagonists wrangle with family – for male protagonists especially, they wrangle with their relationship with their father/father figure. Hiccup is one example: he must find a way to relate to his father and prove his worth when his father's notions about what makes a king are incompatible with Hiccup's abilities. Similarly, at the beginning of Holly Black and Cassandra Clare's *Magisterium* series, protagonist Callum believes everything his father tells him and is desperate to please him. The differences of opinion that emerge between father and son as the series progresses cause significant conflict for Callum. Morrigan Crow, from Jessica Townsend's *Nevermoor* series, is initially defined in relation to her father, a prominent public figure whose reputation is damaged by the curse on his daughter. He continues to influence Morrigan's sense of self-belief and worth once she is free of him and other father figures (such as her mentor Jupiter) take his place. The *Odyssey* provides a template

for genre tales in which fathers are key to the identities and internal conflicts of characters in story worlds of power and magic.

The paternal shadow looms large for Artemis and Aubrey. Artemis tries to account for his father's absence by taking on his role as "the man of the house" in the first novel in the series (*Time* 67). He succeeds to the point that, in one fit of madness, his mother mistakes Artemis for her father (*Artemis* 116). As Pugh notes, Artemis is a "hybrid figure .... mature in intellect yet immature in body" (132). He is forced to stand in for his father in the first novel, and only rarely does anyone see "the boy Artemis might have been" if his father was present (*Artemis* 72). Only once he has restored the family fortune and his mother's health can he let go of his role as father. When his mother hugs him at the end of the first book, he feels like "the boy" he is (*Artemis* 276).

However, this stability does not last. After his father's return in the second book, Artemis's identity issues worsen. In volume three, he struggles to adjust to the role of a child, subordinate to the will of his parents. In volume five, he and Holly become "a part of each other" when they exchange an eye while time travelling (*Lost* 379). In volume six, Artemis once again takes on the role of his father when his father enlists him to find a cure for his mother's illness. When he sees his sick mother, he thinks to himself, "I am the parent now .... She is the child" (*Time* 323). In this volume, he has a crisis of identity in that he pits himself against his younger self, who is distinctly more ruthless than he is. Through this, he realises that he is "running out of palatable crimes" when "not so long ago, nearly all crime had been acceptable to him" (*Time* 355).

The most significant challenge to Artemis's quest for identity comes in *The Atlantis Complex* when he is diagnosed with a psychological condition of the same name brought on by guilt about his past deeds. This condition manifests in a split personality called "Orion" (*Atlantis* 95), who takes over Artemis's consciousness. Orion is a chivalrous and gentle version of Artemis, with none of his intellectual powers and "no idea how to handle the actual world" (*Atlantis* 129). Artemis describes Orion as the "mortal enemy" of the Greek goddess Artemis (*Atlantis* 237). However, stories of the Greek Orion also represent him as a hunter who is temporarily blinded by an enemy and who the virgin goddess kills for attempting to rape her (Smith and Trzaskoma 4, 164). Like the Orion of myth, Orion is 'blind' to the problems around him and instead focuses his efforts on wooing "the lovely lady" Holly (*Atlantis* 96). Much like the goddess Artemis kills Orion to maintain her identity as a virgin huntress, Artemis must 'kill' Orion to regain his identity.

Aubrey can only progress towards maturity in *Blaze of Glory* as his relationship with and understanding of his father deepens. Aubrey feels pressure due to his father's public presence and achievements. During the physical test, other characters taunt him with comments, such as "you want to fail, like your old man?" (*Blaze* 4) and "your old man isn't here to help you now" (6). Many of Aubrey's decisions and conclusions are based on his father. He keeps the failure of his magical experiment to himself out of fear that it would "be exploited by his father's political enemies" (37). He also has "a chance to do something worthy" at a shooting party where his cousin Prince Albert is threatened by magical creatures (146), but considers the result a failure as his father "would never have allowed" matters to turn out as they did (147). The Percy Jackson series provides another example of an adolescent who seeks the approval of a great or powerful father figure. He and other "teenage demigods

resent their parents' absenteeism, covet their power, and seek to prove themselves by opposing their elders" (Morey and Nelson 235). The maturation of such characters relies on their eventual success in stepping out of the shadow of their fathers and discovering or creating a place in the world for themselves, a narrative trajectory that frequently takes the *Odyssey* as its model.

In the *Odyssey*, Telemachus provides a prototype for Artemis and Aubrey's journeys in search of identity. Telemachus's experience with his father is a mixture of the patterns Artemis and Aubrey experience (see Knox on father/son relationships in the *Odyssey*). Odysseus is absent, which leaves Telemachus to run the household and protect his mother from the suitors who urge him to "direct her to marry" (Homer, *Odyssey* 2.125). Athena tells him: "you must not cling to your boyhood any longer – / it's time you were a man" (1.341–42). In response, he acts by travelling to find out the fate of his father once and for all, so he can take the necessary steps as the man of the household. Telemachus feels uncertainty about his connection to such a hero as Odysseus, commenting that "mother has always told me I'm his son, it's true, / but I am not so certain" (1.249–50). Like Aubrey's father, Odysseus sets high standards to live up to. Telemachus finds his own identity and confidence when he fights with his father to expel the suitors near the end of the *Odyssey*.

The identity that Artemis and Aubrey eventually forge for themselves is closely tied to their intelligence, a trait that sets the two apart from their fathers. Artemis's father recognises his son's value in *The Time Paradox* when he urges Artemis to find a cure for his mother. He tells Artemis, "it's time for you to earn that reputation of yours .... Whatever we have to do, son" (*Time* 9). His father not only lacks a plan or strategy, but is a man to whom "the idea of harming another creature would be repugnant" (*Arctic* 120). He lacks the ruthless cunning that so often makes Artemis's plans conceivable and achievable. The "double share of Fowl guile" that Artemis is gifted with allows him to do whatever it takes mentally and morally (*Arctic* 7) when his father cannot. Like Artemis's father, Aubrey's mother hands him the responsibility of saving his father. She tells him: "find him, Aubrey. I don't care how, but go and bring him back home" (*Blaze* 295). Aubrey's capacity to do so depends not only on his position as one of "those few" lucky enough to have the "ability" to do magic (*Blaze* 13), but also on his intelligence and inventiveness in harnessing that ability. When Aubrey successfully rescues his father, Darius reveals his "envy" of Aubrey's magical ability and "resourceful" brain (*Blaze* 380), recognising Aubrey's distinct value. By rescuing their parent and making the family whole again, both protagonists successfully distinguish themselves from their fathers and eventually achieve full initiation into the sphere of adulthood as Telemachus does.

## 5. Conclusion

Our analysis of *Artemis Fowl* and *The Laws of Magic* finds that foundational plot and character features of children's fantasy at play in these series are generated from the *Odyssey*. Throwing hooks from our two series to the *Odyssey* reveals resonances of katabasis and cycles of growth in these contemporary children's fantasy narratives. Aubrey and Artemis also share features with the *Odyssey*'s characters – features that are tied to their specific

position as child protagonists, thus revealing a particular robustness to the strands that reach back from the subgenre of contemporary children's fantasy to the heart of the ancient canon. Through our selected case study, we have sought to offer a set of worked examples to show that the stories of contemporary children's fantasy fiction continue to be deeply and inextricably rooted in Greek myth. We hope that the analyses above describe a subgenre enlivened and enriched by its dependence on ancient tales such as the *Odyssey*. Fantasy's deeply adaptive sensibility is generative of new opportunities for storytelling, which the two contemporary children's fantasy series we discussed show in action through and in tandem with their appropriation of features from the *Odyssey*. The next step may be to add new lines to the chart of fantasy's essential intertextuality through wider and deeper textual analysis that explores how the storytelling conventions of children's fantasy integrate its multiple literary histories or that look beyond the subgenre to the distinct and overlapping ways in which elements adapted from Greek myth are ingrained in the structures of the broader fantasy genre. We are curious now to look up from the pages of fiction and text-based scholarship to ask whether the subgenre's status as a frontrunner in the fiction industry is related to publishers' confidence in the appeal of tried-and-true patterns of storytelling, to the attachment of writers to the conventions of their chosen genre, and to the concomitant demand from readers for the rewards of familiar reading experiences.

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## An Interview with Bob Crossley

*John Kendall Hawkins*

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## Conference Report: Finncon 2022 Academic Track

Hope and Resilience  
July 8–10<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
Aalto University, Espoo, Finland

*Markus Laukkanen*

It was a typical summer weekend, in July of 2022, when a multitude of authors, fans, cosplayers, and academics gathered at the campus of Aalto university in Espoo, Finland, to discuss and celebrate speculative genres of fiction. Finncon, Finland’s largest SFF convention, has taken place almost every year since 1986. The convention of 2020 was held virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic, whereas in 2021, the event was canceled outright. Finncon 2022’s Academic Track was, for many, the first in-person conference in years. Attendance was very high; the room was full during many of the sessions. Much of the programming in the fan convention side of the affair was at capacity, which led to many regular fans coming to enjoy the engaging papers presented in the Academic Track.

The conference presenters hailed from across the planet, and their papers approached the theme of the event, “Hope and Resilience”, from a notably wide variety of perspectives. Extrapolating from many of the presentations, it was clear that the seemingly optimistic theme implied another, less cheerful undertone. This conference was not just about hope and resilience; it was about hope and resilience in dark times. In retrospect, this addendum may have been inevitable. As many of the presentations convincingly argued, hope and resilience do not exist independently, but rather in opposition to something that must be endured. They are forces that arise to counteract desperation and ruin. They are the hobbits of our nature: when darkness threatens, hope and resilience set out on a seemingly impossible quest to deliver

us from everything that is sad and bad – “a fool’s hope”, as Elise Kraatila put it in her presentation.

The theme seemed to resonate with the attendees, perhaps because of that inescapable sense that we do, in fact, live in a dark time, one of cultural, geopolitical, and environmental distress – a time, it is often lamented, in which truth has no meaning and in which meaning can never be truthful. According to many of the presentations, living in such a time is one of the reasons, if not *the* reason, for the suffusion of speculative fiction into mainstream culture, the evaporation of genres as Gary K. Wolfe once famously put it (2011, 50).<sup>1</sup> Models for imagining futures, for navigating uncertainty and for finding hope are needed in what appears a hopeless time. Speculative fiction can, perhaps, act as a source and method for some of those models: a means of manufacturing hope.

The keynote lecture by the convention’s academic guest of honor, Malka Older, was very much on trend in its approach to this theme of speculation in the times of distress.<sup>2</sup> It focused on the relationship between hope and uncertainty, as well as on the potential impact of SFF in the contemporary society. According to Older, hope cannot exist without uncertainty: lack of hope necessitates a belief that there is no uncertainty. If there is uncertainty, things can change for the better. While uncertainty can lead to hope, it can also lead to worry and anxiety. One way to shift from that worry towards actionable hope, to better prepare in the face of uncertainty, is to imagine futures. Modeling futures may give us a semblance of control, of knowing the parameters. And so, we imagine futures, some of which are patently fictitious, and some of which seem like they are not.

Older asked the audience to consider how differently everyday predictions and SFF predictions are approached. We often weave the future into our lives effortlessly, without a thought. A weather forecast that promises rain with 52% certainty is interpreted at face value as a non-fictional model of the future, as are cost-benefit analyses. Some of these seemingly non-fictional models of the future are taken very seriously by very serious people: they are allowed to influence the actions of individuals, corporations, and nation states, often drastically. These are mundane predictions of the future. They usually involve numbers and deal with demographic groups rather than individuals. They are easily interpreted as being less fictional than predictions that focus more on particulars. We have been culturally trained to think of abstract and quantifiable models as scientific and objective. SFF lets us imagine the immeasurable, to key into future dimensions that are not so easily quantifiable, such as individual stories and experiences. These “softer”, more particular predictions are important for developing a workable understanding of the future – perhaps even more important than the quantifiable ones. In contrast to non-fictional future predictions, the models SFF can provide us are easy to see as just that: as models, as singular possibilities among countless others, rather than as representations of “one true” inescapable, inevitable future.

However, there is still a danger in placing too much faith in these softer predictions. Older described this danger as a “narrative disorder”, a condition in which the narrative model of understanding the world starts taking over the

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfe, Gary K. *Evaporating Genres: Essays on Fantastic Literature*. Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See also Malka Older’s prefatory in this issue.

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mind, holding more weight than reality. Based on studies and real-world experience, we know, for example, that when disaster strikes, people do not usually run around aimlessly, screaming in panic. Regardless of that knowledge, we tend to believe they do. This false belief arises from a mental model of disaster, which in turn is based on generic fictive representations in movies and other popular narrative media. In her keynote, Older advocated for “evidence-based creativity” as a safeguard against some of the dangers inherent in the narrative form. In the post-truth era, this cautioning seems necessary, especially when advocating for models of knowledge that are fundamentally based on affect and compelling stories. However, distinguishing between those imaginings of the future that are evidence-based and those that are not, remains an exceptionally difficult task. What tools does a layperson, or an expert for that matter, have for identifying that crucial difference, for untangling evidence-based fictions from those that merely appear as such?

Before returning to discussing the conference as a whole, I would like to highlight the exceptionally high-quality audience questions that followed the keynote lecture. Many experts in the audience offered thought-provoking comments and novel perspectives. This led to a fascinating, productive discussion. Audiences were very engaged in the regular academic sessions as well, but considering that the keynote took place in a large lecture hall, this level of in-depth interaction was downright impressive. This level of interaction and engagement highlights the strength and sense of community that often exists around SFF. Fandom spaces are known for this sense of community, which can extend, perhaps surprisingly, to the academic sphere as well.

There was a sizable Chinese contingent attending the conference, which laid the perfect groundwork for a fascinating discussion on the changing stories in Chinese SFF. Yue Zhou’s talk about Liu Cixin’s ecological stories touched on the importance of colonizing and exploring Mars in Chinese science fiction, which was particularly interesting. One of the most comforting lessons of the whole academic track to me personally was revealed in these discussions: if we were to colonize Mars, scholars of literature would definitely still be needed there.

There were excellent presentations in multiple panels that centered on contemporary uses of dystopian and, perhaps more prevalently, utopian modes of thinking, acting, and representation. I found that Paul Graham Raven’s presentation, titled “Utopias in the Making: Speculation as Co-Production, and a Praxis of Hope”, stood out as a particularly electrifying talk in the context of the event. This might have something to do with how practical the viewpoint was, and how different from the literary analyses that are the bread and butter of conferences like this. Raven’s work on making big ideas accessible to ordinary people appeared to be an exemplary case of Older’s evidence-based creativity. Performances like *The Museum of Carbon Ruins*, which estrange everyday objects, certainly seem to have a heart fueled by pure essence of SFF beating inside them.

The concept of resilience was also discussed by some, including docent Merja Polvinen, whose paper on Susanna Clarke’s latest novel *Piranesi* (2021) concluded the academic program in style. However, as Polvinen pointed out, it was the discourse of hope that attracted the most of attention in the majority of presentations featured in the Academic Track. While resilience was clearly a valuable addition to the theme of the conference, it was overshadowed by hope

this time around. Perhaps there is a drive to overcome, not merely to persevere. Yet, it seems to me that resilience, too, should be construed as a type of heroism.

*Biography:* Markus Laukkanen, M.A., is a doctoral researcher at Tampere University. He is currently working on his PhD thesis on changing communicative structures of internet age narratives. Laukkanen is the coordinator for Narrare: Centre for Interdisciplinary Narrative Studies at Tampere University. His research interests include online narratives, social media studies, reader-theories, interactive fiction, genre theory, depictions of climate change in contemporary fiction and poetics of post-postmodernism.



## Conference Report: London Science Fiction Research Community Annual Conference

SF + Extraction  
October 8–9<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
Online

*Amy Bouwer*

The London Science Fiction Research Community's (LSFRC) annual conference is a highlight for fans of speculative futures across disciplines and at any career stage. This year's theme of SF + Extraction blooms out of the group's robust focus in 2020 and 2021 on border-crossing and disruption, giving further shape to the spectres of capital, imperialism, and colonialism against which much contemporary SF stages its revolution(s).

Established in 2014 as a reading group for Birkbeck graduate students interested in SF, LSFRC is rapidly expanding into an international forum for lively academic engagement with speculative texts and theories. Their annual conferences, which began in 2017, have certainly sped up this process, although the group has demonstrated a commitment to traversing borders and dissolving barriers practically since its conception. Although this was the first year I had the opportunity to attend, the conference's reputation for provocative, passionate discussion preceded it; I was beyond excited for a weekend showcasing the kaleidoscopic arena of SF research and creative practice. The community provides a welcoming space for people of any background, institutional affiliation, or educational status to engage with SF in its myriad forms: its members explore new perspectives, delve into recent or recovered texts, and share ideas for further, expansive research. Diversity in SF research shapes LSFRC's mission and method. This was already clear from my brief interactions with its organisers before the event, but it was even more rewarding to see it in

action. As the directors explained, their conference is just one of the community's efforts to invite new perspectives and approaches into the realm of SF research. Reading and conversation converges around a core concept determined annually by participants, and later informs the theme of that year's conference: past years have explored organics, metaphysics, political economies, and empires as they are represented (and challenged) by SF texts and approaches.

"SF + Extraction" arose out of 2021's conference on activism and resistance, excavating the foundational structures of coloniality and human exceptionalism that continue to inform SF even as the genre responds to them. As last year's conference highlighted, SF's creative practice of imagining alternatives imbues the genre with radical potential; at their most revolutionary, SF texts enable vibrant and diverse disruptions of the status quo. This year's theme set out to explore how SF engages with contemporary capitalism's foundational practice of "extraction", with LSFRC encouraging participants to interrogate where the genre has covertly ratified its myths of "success-through-progress", expansion, production, control, and human exceptionalism. Extraction has been a tool of imperialist, (neo)colonialist practice for over five centuries, and it continues to inform the pillaging of labour, nutrients, knowledge, and fuel from nature, life-forms, and cultures. I was eager to see how, as a community dedicated to rejecting this practice and its associated ideology, conference participants would explore SF's revolutionary potential: how might its texts, research, and creative activism undercut extractive hegemonies, rooted as the genre is in the same discourses of modernity?

LSFRC's move to virtual conferencing in 2020 might have been out of necessity, but this year the organisers decided to continue hosting their highly anticipated weekend of SF play online. Controversial as this may be, I appreciated their commitment to adaptability and accessibility, which was further demonstrated in the moderators' sensitivity to the different needs or restrictions of attendees and presenters. Not only did their choice of platform, Blackboard, enable relatively seamless movement between virtual spaces for different panels, but the directors also thought through creative ways to facilitate the community elements of conferencing that many of us have sorely missed for the past three years. Moderators were present in every virtual space to tackle potential technical issues, but it was also clear that a lot of planning had gone into curating a vibrant, exciting, and stimulating experience for all involved. It is rare to have such engaging and lively discussion on a virtual platform; a thought-provoking weekend was made all the more enjoyable by the organisers' attention to detail such as slightly longer Q+A sessions, regular breaks, and attentive support members. In a dedicated slot at the end of each day to chat and wind down, Francis Gene-Rowe kept us entertained with SF soundscapes and friendly chatter as panelists and attendees discussed favourite papers.

This year's keynote speaker, Kathryn Yusoff, unfortunately pulled out of the conference due to health reasons. A Professor of Inhuman Geography at Queen Mary, University of London, Yusoff's presentation would have provided an intriguing glimpse into her research on materialities and futurity beyond the anthropocene. Her focus on the impact that "earth revolutions" such as extinction and abrupt environmental change have on social thought was an ideal choice for a conference on extraction and the politics of life. Although I

look forward to hearing Yusoff's paper at another time, it was fortunate that similar ideas of anthropocentric futurity were woven through a number of other presentations, so we did not miss out on the opportunity to start engaging with speculative representations of (in)humanity and climate change. Dr. Monali Chatterjee, for example, explored the potential of Adrish Bardhan's SF to inspire futuristic solutions for extractive practices, while Jamie Uy commented on SF cinema's role in critiquing and complicating the Singapore state's technoutopianism. Anthropocentrism came under close scrutiny in the very first panel of the weekend, with Iuliia Ibragimova's analysis of "space-faring animals" and Malgorzata Kowalcze's investigation into the "Areanthrop" in "The Man from Mars". In one of my favourite presentations of the weekend, Chiara Montalti drew these strands of thought about constructions of the "human" into dialogue with disability and environmental (in)justice. Drawing on Hanna Cormick's performance of *The Mermaid*, she argued for SF's unique ability to represent non-normative ways of being, to make them visible, and to demand a response from the otherwise passive viewer.

One of the most stimulating aspects of the conference was its effort to include papers that dealt with texts not yet fully translated into English, offering brief portals out of the Anglophone SF realm. Some texts under consideration included Han Song's *Hospital* trilogy, Chen Quifan's *Waste Land*, Lucas Bambozzi's *Ironland*, Adrish Bhardan's Bengali SF stories, and Singapore's first SF feature film, *Avatar/ 流放化身*. These explorations of work beyond the linguistic frontiers of mainstream western SF are essential for rethinking canonisation, normative linguistic power, and our own intellectual biases as we engage in a predominantly Anglocentric research culture. The attention paid to SF traditions beyond the USA, Canada, and England – including Brazilian, Chinese, Indian, Hawai'ian, Singaporean, Philippine, and Nigerian SF – felt like a tremendous step away from the genre's (and its research's) tendency to privilege western settings and authors. I found the emphasis on decentering Anglophone, western SF exhilarating, and left the conference challenged and excited to continue pushing past the boundaries of the "mainstream" in my own research and creative practice.

Many of this year's papers hinged on the speculative (and) fictional representations of extractive capitalism. Some papers such as Hugh C. O'Connell's "Extraction as Essence: SF and the Prehistory of Surveillance Capitalism" zoomed in on capitalism's mechanics of extraction, revealing their current manifestation in datafication (the "extraction, appropriation, and commodification of data from all aspects of life"). The vast majority of papers, however, drew on SF texts to consider capitalism's entanglement with other unjust structures, drawing a critique of value-making into dialogue with post-humanist, feminist, antiracist, and other liberatory discourses and theories. Extraction as pathology, for example, was a focal point for Diana Novacenu's presentation on visceral extraction, as well as in Lyu Guangzhao's reading of data surveillance and necropolitics in Han Song's *Hospital* trilogy.

I was particularly enthralled by those moments in which conversation lingered on the generic entanglements of SF and extractivism. Some papers, such as that of Frances Hallam, took a more direct approach in their analysis of texts that destabilise SF's generic conventions. Hallam examined the interplays of extractivist (neo)coloniality and oceanic Nigerian futurity in Nnedi

Okorafor's *Lagoon*, paying particular attention to the ways in which multi-species entanglements emerge as the text displaces the "first contact" trope. Katerina Genidogan's paper extended a similar critique to the dystopic mode and its overdeterminations of blackness for marketability. Perspectives such as that voiced in the Indigenous Anti-Future Manifesto, she argued, are capable of countering the despair that often permeates speculative disasters. Decolonial approaches to SF were afforded their own panel, and I was thrilled to present my paper on decoloniality in Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* alongside Dr Jasmine Sharma's reading of colonial extraction in Amitav Ghosh's "The Living Mountain" and Diane Hau Yu Wong's analysis of temporal and geological manifestations of Afrofuturism. Through anticolonial and Indigenous approaches to futurity and speculation, SF emerges as more than mere didacticism: it rejects the Eurocentric construction of a singular future in which imperialist whiteness survives the apocalypse it has created.

A highlight of SF + Extraction was its array of creative contributions and performances, each of which showcased the vitality of an ever-expanding, fundamentally interdisciplinary and unbounded speculative-creative perspective. In a panel dedicated to creative performances, Amy Cutler, Lorrie Blair, and Aily Chiu showcased their multimodal and expansive responses to the histories, realities, and threats of extraction. Cutler's current experimental project "7 Ways of Exploiting a Black Hole" formed the basis of her presentation, wherein she conceptualised the black hole as cinema's perfect antithesis, the inaccessible darkness to its science and play of light, the death to its bringing-to-life. It was a delight to engage with her creative practice not only as an example of research at the intersections of science and fiction, but also as a perfect encapsulation of what it means to envision new futures with, through, and about SF – in this case pertaining to cinema. Lorrie Blair's visual performance was equally stimulating and exciting, weaving together her childhood memories of a home devastated by extractivism, her experiences as a young art teacher, and photographs of the aftermath of a mine disaster. The acid mine drainage from abandoned coal mines is both the subject of Blair's performance and the medium through which it is expressed: her photographic palimpsests use paint that she sourced from the toxic-runoff found in streams that will never again run clear as they did in her childhood. Such a compelling testament to the violence of extraction was a perfect illustration of the conference's themes. It was a shame that Aily Chiu's presentation could not take place live due to VPN issues.

Chaired by Angela YT Chan – an independent researcher, curator, and artist as well as one of LSFRC's directors – Sunday's Creators Roundtable was set to feature Bint Mbareh, Shamica Ruddock, and Gautam Bhatia, but unfortunately the latter was unable to attend. Nonetheless, the roundtable offered a captivating insight into Ruddock's and Mbareh's creative practices, which both make use of sound as an evocative disruptor of temporalities, drawing history into the present moment to construct something new. Both artists engage with the idea that speculative practice – particularly the act of temporal blurring, collapsing historical fragments and hopes for the future into the immediacy of a performance – is inherently political. Ruddock explained how her interdisciplinary approach explores sound as narrative in black diasporas, which engage their own unified system of signifiers beyond traditional static forms of text and image. Their research occupies the nexus at

which sound, moving image, and text collide, but draws focus to the expansive possibilities of sound in its calling up of different times, cultures, and spaces. Rhythmically and technically grounded in the long history of Black sound culture and music production, Ruddock's work engages with a speculative perspective by tying in hauntology, Africa-centred space-time cosmologies, and black technopoetics. The samples they played in their brief introduction to their most recent project, "Deciphering a Broken Syntax", felt like samples of a sonic cosmos – techno harmonies, funk beats, and effervescent melodies rising as we imagined what it might have been like to experience it all in a calabash gourd-shaped listening dome.

Also inspired by the speculative potentialities of sound, Mbareh's research dwells on the musical practice of Palestinian rain-summoning. She described her interest in rain-summoning songs as an initiation into explorations of communal expression that, at its core, illuminates people's entanglement in the natural world. Song as evocation rather than remembrance remains an important focus in her current research into death and rebirth in landscapes and monuments. Tradition, Mbareh explained, provides her with a platform on which to question art as resistance, origin and immediacy, and the disjuncture between past and present. This final aspect is a critical element in her performance practice, which at the time was being showcased in "Stellar Footprints" at the "Call the Waves" group exhibition at the Chapter Gallery. Like Ruddock, Mbareh articulated the act of sonically seeking out traditions and histories, and combining these with natural and cosmic imagery to unravel her audience's perception of linear time. Chan picked up on this resonance early, expertly guiding discussion through each researcher's entanglement with personal and cultural histories. As the roundtable came to an end, I was struck by how effortlessly all three artists had swept us into the political momentum of their practice by simply describing it. The giddy inspiration to seek out those moments of temporal explosion remained with me for the remainder of the conference.

The creative performances reiterated a trend running through almost every conference paper: that SF is not simply an alternative vision of our world, but it is an *activity in visualising alternatives*. Imagining potential futures beyond, without, and as a result of extraction breaks its overdetermining hegemony: bearing witness to the violence of extraction helps us to envision modes of resisting it. SF, as Darko Suvin reminds us, is a "mirror to man" and a "mirror for his world" – a "reflecting" and "transforming" instrument for critical consciousness (17). SF + Extraction's carefully curated programme showcased the best of what speculative research has to offer the world, imbuing us each with a hope that extraction, reflected and refracted through the mirror-crucibles of our individual and collective imaginations, might transform into active resistance. In this, the LSFRC shared their vision for expansive, interdisciplinary, intersectional scholarly practice that simultaneously seeks out specificity, situatedness – much in the same way as SF seeks out new perspectives whilst reflecting, refracting, recreating the familiar. Conferences such as this one embody the disruptive possibilities of speculative research and intellectual communities, drawing individual threads and thoughts together and providing a catalyst for their vibrant explosion outward.

*Biography:* Amy Bouwer researches contemporary women's dystopian writing at the University of Nottingham. Her Midlands4Cities-funded PhD examines the crystallisation of feminist thought into speculative fiction from 2016 to 2020, particularly as it situates itself within (and reinforces) the tradition of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although she primarily studies the history of feminist utopianism, she is also interested in decolonial literary theory and women's anti-colonial writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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BOOK REVIEW:

*Diverse Futures: Science Fiction and  
Authors of Color*

*Brent Ryan Bellamy*

Joy Sanchez-Taylor. *Diverse Futures: Science Fiction and Authors of Color*.  
Ohio State UP, 2021. ISBN: 978-0814257975.

Joy Sanchez-Taylor's *Diverse Futures* celebrates, critiques, and discusses how people of colour can be found in "alternate and future worlds" (5), drawing on work being done by BIPOC Hugo-award winners such as N.K. Jemisin and start-up internet publications such as *Fiyah*. This project decentres whiteness by focusing on stories by and about Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, and other racialised people. Meanwhile, Sanchez-Taylor acknowledges the conceptual challenge of presenting this diverse material in a unified way. Sanchez-Taylor focuses on the North American context, and SF authors of colour tend to represent a "variety of races and ethnicities" in the countries currently known as Canada, Mexico, and the US due to histories of "colonization, immigration, and forced migration" (9). Overall, this book considers how to centre BIPOC SF authors in this scholarship without also making them solely emblematic or merely representative. Put differently, Sanchez-Taylor writes about race, ethnicity, and futurity within SF and which is by authors of colour without explicitly posing the problem of representation (as in a standing-in-for) in political terms. In this way, *Diverse Futures* tries presenting a formal solution to the critical problem implied by its title; diversity, which I read as both a critical concept and a methodology, brings together many SF writers and critics without making claims for a "unified" tradition of writing or for recommending a singular critical approach to Sanchez-Taylor's chosen texts.

Yet “diversity”, at least for most people studying or teaching in post-secondary institutions, also has a valence of administrator-speak. In the wake of ongoing police brutality, specifically sparked by protests following the murder of George Floyd in early 2020, equity, diversity, and inclusivity committees have been meeting to assess the systemic forms of racism lurking in plain view at their own university or college campuses. For example, in an anti-racist workshop presented by Chúk Odenigbo and Future Ancestors Services last spring at Trent University, my own institution, we learned how the concept of diversity requires a normative standard. Conversely, anti-racist approaches take aim at racism rather than centring whiteness. I add this here for several reasons: first, I simply think Future Ancestors is a group that many SF enthusiasts interested in *Diverse Futures* would be happy to know of. They are an “Indigenous and Black-owned, youth-led professional services social enterprise that advances climate justice and systemic barrier removal with lenses of restorative anti-racism and ancestral accountability” (<https://www.futureancestors.ca/>). Second, I take their point about anti-racism. How does their framing of the diversity concept work for the book under discussion? Is it meant as a code word? A Gramscian swap, like hegemony for ideology, in order to escape the censors? Or does it do a different kind of work here? Third, I am cognisant of being a white descendent of settlers writing from the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. I am cognisant of how it come across for me to engage critically with a book the centres diversity, even when I also admire it.

Alongside diversity as an organising concept, *Diverse Futures* promises to offer a critical metanarrative when it introduces the concept of “double estrangement” – a phrase that might have been another appropriate title for Sanchez-Taylor’s book. A tantalising critical formulation, double estrangement unites famous ideas from Darko Suvin and W.E.B. DuBois, and Sanchez-Taylor here proposes that science-fictional estrangement becomes the target of a secondary defamiliarisation, so that what was reified as the traditional extrapolative or analogical leap can now be read as an expression of whiteness, a normative assumption about the new or the strange. Double estrangement represents a defamiliarisation of the internal conflict experienced by racialised or colonised people within a critical inversion of science-fictional estrangement. What these BIPOC SF authors make legible is that to be true to the utopian impulse of SF, one has to submit it to its own narrative logics, and thus ... but here is where metaphors fail me. Blasting off into a whole new terrain? Seeking a new horizon? Exploring alien worlds? Such language comes from an unestranged SF. Sanchez-Taylor’s concept demands we find better language for an anti-racist SF.

In other words, BIPOC authors alter

established science fiction tropes to highlight the racial estrangement that DuBois describes ... as ... the knowledge that peoples of color are always forced to view themselves through a lens of whiteness .... For people who are more likely to identify with the alien “other” in traditional science fiction than with a white human narrator, science fiction becomes a space where authors of color (who are typically fans of the genre themselves) can employ recognizable aspects of science fiction – tropes like the alien, time travel, and immortality – yet also rework these tropes to make room for non-Eurowestern cultures. (7)

Double estrangement provides a possible throughline to connect and organise the book. Unfortunately, the work of explicitly *thinking* double estrangement is left to the reader. Instead of using this tantalising concept as a lens for each of the book’s four major tropes, Sanchez-Taylor offers vivid yet mostly individual descriptions of featured texts that demonstrate how diverse authors take up and rework the trope in question. Sanchez-Taylor’s book is critically minded, and yet readers will have to connect ideas from chapter to chapter themselves.

Overall, the book follows four key tropes or SF situations: first contact, genetics, apocalypse, and Indigenous knowledges. Each chapter addresses an impressive range of prose texts – the only film allotted space is Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer* (2008). These texts include criticism, novels, and short stories. “Space Travel and First Contact Narratives” includes works by Gina Ruiz and Celu Amberstone; “Race, Genetics, and Science Fiction” features work by George Schuyler and Larissa Lai; “The Apocalypse has Already Come” reads Sarah Vourvoulias and Gabby Rivera among others; and “Indigenous and Eurowestern Science” interprets works by Tananarive Due and Carlos Hernandez. Each chapter establishes the trope in question through criticism, analyses significant pairings of texts, and uses a second pair of texts to further discussion before finally drawing to a close with summative authority. These tropes gather texts not frequently considered together to demonstrate how the racialising subtext of SF can be made explicit and subsequently critiqued, embraced, or elevated. The chapters work well as case studies and would certainly be helpful to a lecturer as they prepare for discussion of the texts or tropes in question.

Focusing on the third chapter (and on post-apocalyptic settings) in particular, Sanchez-Taylor meaningfully pushes back against distinctions between state-dominated dystopia writing and post-catastrophe storytelling by centring the long-lasting impacts of colonisation, settlement, and slavery in the Americas. By titling her chapter “The Apocalypse has Already Come”, she centres the kind of double estrangement at work in BIPOC SF. The chapter opens with the criminalization of certain racialised characters in Vourvoulias’s *Ink* (2012) and Rivera’s “0.1” (2019). Later, Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011) and Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018) provide stunning examples of double estrangement. Whitehead and Ma adopt the post-apocalyptic mode – a way of writing SF to imagine a storyworld after a cataclysmic event – *not* in order to present exceptional everyday heroes who rise to the task of surviving, but to question the very notion of the genre from within. Both books feature racialised protagonists who are, as Sanchez-Taylor notes, unexceptional and think of themselves in that way. Here, the white survivor last-man trope (yes, they are typically last men), is doubly estranged: not only are two racialised characters centred in these stories, but both find ways to resist the exceptional. For Mark

Spitz in *Zone One*, this technique provides a way to be passed over in an education system where standing out as a black man risks safety. Meanwhile in *Severance*, Candace Chen, a second-generation immigrant from Fuzhou province known for manufacturing and industry, finds ways to blend into New York as a Bible product coordinator.

With every turn, Sanchez-Taylor demonstrates the real necessity for a paradigm shift in studying genre writing that could bring about fuller, richer discussions of SF across the critical field and the fandom. The book's conclusion, "How Long 'Till Black Future Month?", borrows its title from Jemisin's collection *How Long 'Till Black Future Month* (2018) and offers an exciting overview of recent developments in SF communities, fandoms, and publishing that showcase diverse futures for SF. Here the research and critical narrative come together to present a sense of the grassroots work being done by Asian, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Latinx authors, fans, and publishers to extend the reach and increase the visibility of such audiences and creators of SF.

Ultimately, *Diverse Futures* effectively breaks – and breaks with – genre-focused definitional struggles around SF. The definitional work so often pursued in SF scholarship is connected by Sanchez-Taylor with gatekeeping, and gatekeeping with the inertia (my words, not hers) of white supremacy. As such, her book implicitly periodises its archive around two formative grassroots movements: #racefail and Jemisin's Hugo Awards speech for *The Stone Sky* (2017). Despite the described failings of Elizabeth Bear's workshop, the anti-racist criticism that followed provided many people of colour, on Sanchez-Taylor's account, with the opportunity to recognise one another as SF people: "the use of Twitter hashtags and online threads can be a unifying experience for fans of color" (153). *Diverse Futures* responds to gatekeeping by admitting everyone. Though I applaud it, one worthwhile risk of this approach is that Sanchez-Taylor's book sometimes omits information for readers in the service of its horizontal politics: a SF canon still exists today, just in a new and more openly collaborative form. Here, *Diverse Futures* draws on as many voices as possible, making it a valuable resource with which to think. It's an invitation nearly out of breath in its earnestness: "here are the words I've read, please add to them!"

The book offers a rich, descriptive approach to its impressive archive. I think there is so much more to be discussed here, which nicely adds a layer to my understanding of Sanchez-Taylor's title. "Diverse futures" names SF storyworld futures full of Asian, Black, Brown, Indigenous, Latinx characters (and everything beyond or in between); it describes the experiences and life worlds of the authors of SF; and it characterises a goal for SF criticism as well. Because it is among the first of its kind, the book does impressive work to lay out its materials, introducing so many SF authors and critics (some of whom have never been written about in this way) and letting the texts speak for themselves along the way. It is an important index for SF scholars interested in thinking deeply about BIPOC SF authors, SF publishing, and SF criticism.

*Biography:* Brent Ryan Bellamy is a contract instructor at Trent University and adjunct professor at Ontario Tech University. He is co-editor of *An Ecotopian Lexicon* (U of Minnesota P, 2019) and author of *Remainders of the American Century: Post-Apocalyptic Novels in the Age of US Decline* (Wesleyan UP, 2021). You can get in touch about editing, teaching, or writing via his website, [brentryanbellamy.com](http://brentryanbellamy.com).

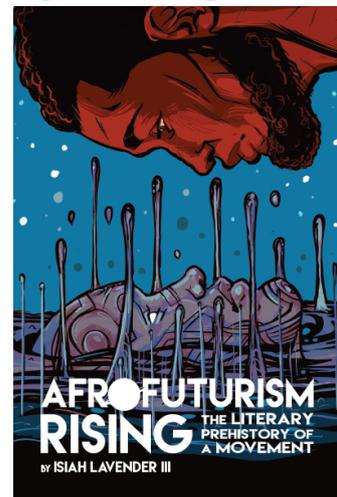


BOOK REVIEW:  
*Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary  
Prehistory of a Movement*

*Reba K. Dickson*

Lavender, Isiah, III. *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*. Ohio State UP, 2019. ISBN 978-0814255568.

In the case of Isiah Lavender's *Afrofuturism Rising*, one is tempted to "judge a book by its cover" because the cover art serves as such a stimulating visual precursor of its content: it depicts a funereal encounter where a departed Black man's face, wrapped in a vortex of water, is stretching to meet the face of a contemporary Black man, who maintains the gaze of the departed. This cover beckons the reader into Lavender's theme of voyage into the dark past of Black people, into deciphering the prehistory of Afrofuturism. In his introductory chapter, "On Defining Afrofuturism", Lavender acknowledges that despite the lack of consensus surrounding Afrofuturism's definition amongst its scholars and writers, it is regarded as a moment and movement. The genre's futuristic stories are all seasoned by the salt of otherness, wherein the respective authors explore the "optimisms and anxieties framing the future imaginings of black people" (2). Challenging prior work by Mark Dery, who coined "Afrofuturism" in 1993, Lavender argues that a lack of tangible technoculture – the utilization of scientific and technological devices in human interactions – does not prevent a text from being Afrofuturistic since Black lives themselves mirror the estrangement in SF texts (9). Indeed, Lavender's book provides a substantial contribution to the field in ensuring that techno-



culturally deprived, canonical texts are included within the field of Afrofuturism. As such, Lavender proposes to explore the prolepsis of Afrofuturism, which has a “literary pedigree that is much longer than Dery acknowledges”; Lavender accomplishes this by interpreting texts from the 18<sup>th</sup> through 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that highlight the African-American experience of slavery (108). In doing so, Lavender claims that typically non-Afrofuturist texts, like Henry Bibb’s autobiography (1848), are indeed Afrofuturistic: they include “science-fictional language” and “hope impulses”. However, as enticing as that seems, by incorporating these canonical texts into the field, Lavender also risks identifying *all* speculative fiction that highlights Black experience in America as Afrofuturism. This leads to the crux of the issue – can everything be Afrofuturistic?

In terms of style, Lavender continually coins new metaphors in order to motivate his central conceptual analogy, which is that race is a labour-based technology. Black bodies thus function as “living circuits” whose metaphorical circuitry is developed through a “black networked consciousness” that stimulates communication among their kinfolk via inherited traditional customs and generational trauma. When linked to the “black networked consciousness”, Lavender argues that each “living circuit” (that is, Black bodies) transmits “charges” of “hope impulses” into a “tranhistoric feedback loop” through which readers can navigate the historical grievances of White America (7). When this current is connected, the “living circuits” – again, Lavender is talking about Black bodies – simultaneously upload their nonfictional violent experiences with racial oppression into the “hyper violence loop”. This loop confirms the normalization and mythologization of endless violence on black bodies, regardless of the breakthroughs of Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter Movements (11). In other words, the inherited legacy of Black slaves allows modern-day Black Americans to acknowledge that the injustices they endure are rooted in the nation’s abhorrently monstrous past. However, in asserting that Afrofuturism’s foundations long predate Dery’s 1993 neologism, Lavender maintains that the “Literary Prehistory of a Movement” remains fundamentally located within African-American experience – a rhetorical move that sits uneasily, for example, with Lavender’s inclusion of Olaudah Equiano’s autobiography (1789) and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In other words, Lavender risks subsuming all Black diasporic experience into a single monolithic model.

In Chapter one, “Hope and Freedom Technologies”, Lavender begins by theorizing hope and freedom as technologies that stimulate the movement, and he supports his metaphor by reading Benjamin Banneker, Olaudah Equiano, and Phillis Wheatley as “Colonial Afrofuturists”. The scholarship of Vincent Carretta contends that Equiano was born in South Carolina, causing him to be African American (Carretta 2). This leads to the observation that Lavender does not explicitly identify the criteria with which the forementioned are classified as “Colonial Afrofuturists”, though one might infer that their eligibility is based on their time of publication. If such is the case, would Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, the first African slave to publish in Britain (1772), not be considered a “Colonial Afrofuturist”? Also, can characters such as Caliban from Aimé Césaire’s *A Tempest* (1969) or Ti Noel from Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World* (1957) be considered “Colonial Afrofuturist”? Since these texts are located within the Caribbean where the New and Old Worlds collided, their omission is

perplexing and suggests how scholars of Caribbean literature could usefully build on and broaden Lavender's work in the future. Additionally, Lavender argues that literacy and spiritual technologies were pivotal to initiating the hope impulse that implanted the seed of resistance in authors such as Frederick Douglass, Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Benjamin Banneker. While literacy technology seems more concrete and plausible, spiritual technologies require belief in fantastical and/or folkloric tales that (mystically) assure a better future without scientific explanation. However, the way that Lavender speaks about spiritual technologies might be considered potentially problematic – an implicit double standard, perhaps, that favours Christianity over traditional African religions by identifying the latter as “supernatural” and “magical”, though the same can potentially be said of the former. Lavender claims Phillis Wheatley's *On Being Brought from Africa to America* (1773) is Afrofuturistic because of its well-known embedded anagram and “double meanings” (40). However, this seems more of an attempt to redeem Wheatley because her poem's controversial nature, particularly for Black audiences.

In the second chapter, “Black Uprisings and the Fight for the Future”, Lavender contradicts the illusion of slave submission by tracing the influence and impact of slave rebellions, revolutions, and thwarted conspiracies of “Black Radicals”, both renowned – Toussaint L'Overture (1791), Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1791), David Walker (1829), Nat Turner (1831) – and omitted, such as Gabriel Prosser (1800) and Denmark Vesey (1822). In his third chapter, “Of Alien Abductions, Pocket Universes, Trickster Technologies, and Slave Narratives”, Lavender claims that hope impulses inspired former slaves to make use of pocket universes, trickster technologies, and skin technologies to transport and camouflage their bodies safely to freedom. It seems strange that Harriet Tubman was not given a prominent role in the subject of pocket universes based on her role in the Underground Railroad. He instead makes references to Henry Bibb (1837), William W. Brown (1853), and Ellen and William Craft (1848), all of whom utilised these technologies to escape enslavement, but who tend to be neglected and overlooked in Afrofuturism.

In Chapter Four, “Black Bodies in Space: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*”, Lavender relates that the novel is a “classic” Afrofuturist text because its “hope impulses” are an essential feature of Afrofuturism. Lavender coins terms such as “vernacular technology”, “literalized metaphors”, and “alternate worlds” to contextualise his argument that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is Afrofuturistic. The characters are committed to obtaining their own version of an American Dream by utilizing folklore to preserve their inherited traditions after being marginalised by colonialists. However, being that the text only becomes Afrofuturistic after the introduction of Lavender's terms, this implies that without Lavender's terminology, *Their Eyes* would not properly belong to the canon of Afrofuturism. It seems that Lavender's attempt to reaffirm the prestige and validity of the movement incites queries; since any fictional account can be regarded as speculative, there must be a demarcation of some kind that determines if a text is Afrofuturist. Without this, everything will be Afrofuturist, thereby equating the “movement” and “moment” into a mere genre – SF and fantasy written by black Americans.

In Chapter Five, “‘Metallically Black’: Bigger Thomas and the Black Apocalyptic Vision of Richard Wright's *Native Son*”, Lavender reflects on the

dangers that occur when African Americans are unable to access the trans-historic feedback loop and instead connect to the hyperreal violence loop. Bigger Thomas is unable to connect with the appropriate loop because he “literally cannot see hope” (141). Because of this, Bigger “shape-shifts” into a “primitive Negro” with the “metallically black” skin of a “devalued nonhuman” (148). As a “primitive negro”, Bigger is a failed mechanical experiment of sorts since he is unable to be reconfigured into a cyborg and function within society – as a driver for a wealthy family – so he reverts to his “natural form”. By denying Black men an opportunity to have hope, systemic racism serves as a laboratory where their “metallically black skin” is continuously subjected to forms of reconfiguring, despite the known dangers and results of such experiments. Wright’s novel manifests the result and dangers of Black men being stigmatised, segregated, and systemically oppressed. It is rather unfortunate that Bigger “cannot hope to survive against the burden of this nonhuman image”, and as a result, he – like many Black men – accept their fatalism (151). Lavender’s analysis of the “science-fictional language” utilised by Wright, as well as his terminology, is provocative as well as effective. In general, though, although the extreme broadness of Lavender’s definition of “Afrofuturism” might raise a few eyebrows, *Afrofuturism Rising* is sure to positively influence the conversation about the movement for a long time to come.

*Biography:* Reba K. Dickson (dickson.re@northeastern.edu) is a recent graduate of Florida Atlantic University’s Masters in English program and a PhD student at Northeastern University. Her research explores the “monster” figure associated with individuals of Black lineage and their altruicide in Caribbean, American, and African literature.

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BOOK REVIEW:

*Star Warriors of the Modern Raj:  
Materiality, Mythology and Technology of  
Indian Science Fiction*

*Steven Mollmann*

Khan, Sami Ahmad. *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj: Materiality, Mythology and Technology of Indian Science Fiction*. U of Wales P, 2021. ISBN 978-1786837622.

A few years ago at the Science Fiction Research Association's annual conference, I was on a panel about Indian SF; as I chatted with my co-presenter afterward, I remember bemoaning the lack of an entry for India in the *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* – there was no readily accessible broad overview of Indian SF, despite a tradition going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The last few years have seen attempts to alleviate this, with Suparno Banerjee's *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* (2020) and now Sami Ahmad Khan's *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj*.

Khan's monograph explores what he calls ISFE (Indian SF in English), largely from 1999 to the present. Though Khan protests that his book has no pretensions to being either comprehensive or exhaustive (xii), *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* nonetheless feels, at times, as if Khan were attempting to cram every work by every single writer of ISFE into the text; even individual short stories often receive multiple pages of discussion. This expansiveness drives the book's strengths and weaknesses alike. The task he has set out for himself is incredibly difficult as little unites these works except genre and country of composition. What kind of overall thesis or perspective can one have on decades of SF from across an entire country? Khan foregrounds this difficulty in his introduction, telling a story of two different approaches he *could* have taken if

he had been politically motivated. The right-wing approach would be to claim that Indian SF goes back thousands of years because the *Ramayana* is actually SF; the left-wing approach would be to reject religion and depict ISFE as something totally new and unprecedented. He sums up all political framings as simplistic: “The right wanted to reclaim a golden past, the left wished for a red future, and the centre did not know which colour it sought” (xii, italics removed). He concludes that his book is “aware that there can be no single -ism or any grand unified theory that can explain the divergences of ISFE – and hence [it] flits across vantage points that arise out of markedly different contexts” (xiv). The strength of Khan’s book is its avoidance of a single overall frame, letting each story operate in its own context.

Khan classifies different sets of stories into common approaches, usually based around how SF can serve as a metaphor for real-world political anxieties. For instance, he includes sections on clones and mutants as allegories for caste issues; gods depicted as extraterrestrials; India as a target of CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear) warfare; and Islamic terror in future-war stories. In each case, Khan successfully pulls three or more examples together, which provides a jumping-off point for exploring each concept in depth. For example, in Chapter 7, “Aliens < Gods: Gods as Extraterrestrials (from Other Planets),” Khan provides a strong take on why many ISFE stories consistently depict gods as highly advanced extraterrestrial beings: they allow the exploration of the divine in a genre grounded in hard scientific fact and where “science is killing God” (qtd. in Khan 109). Here, Khan’s clustering of texts allows a provocative reading to emerge – one that I can see being applied beyond the three stories highlighted in this chapter.

On the other hand, Khan’s seeming need to include and classify *every* ISFE text means that he also includes combinations of texts that produce much less striking analyses. Chapter 12, “Cyberistan: Digital is the New Real in *Domechild*, ‘Catatonic’ and ‘The Coward’” focuses on stories that emphasise technology. When discussing Payal Dhar’s “The Coward” (2007), Khan draws on ISFE writer Vandana Singh to argue that “while (capitalist) technologies can also be used for the greater good, it is ‘*despite* the original intent’” (167, emphasis original). But Khan feels the need to end his chapter by uniting all three stories discussed, and thus pulls away from anything provocative in the process. He banally concludes that “technology a value-neutral category and depends on the person using it” (170), which doesn’t say much about the use of technology in ISFE specifically, and it neglects those complications about capitalism’s role in technological development Khan himself had raised just a few pages prior.

A deep challenge for Khan is that he cannot assume his audience – mainly a scholarly one broadly interested in SF studies, judging by the criticism he cites – knows the texts he analyses, none of which have had wide reception outside of India. This means that *Star Warriors* needs to provide plot summary, and this often limits Khan’s available space for interpretation. For example, Khan’s discussion of Manjula Padmanabhan’s feminist dystopian duology, *Escape* (2008) and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015), spends about three pages summarising the stories, including some long quotations, before segueing into about a half-page discussion that only interacts with the text in broad strokes. Khan concludes that, through *Escape*, the “author makes an impassioned plea for the women in India – and indicts patriarchy, author-

itarianism and totalitarianism” (89). While this is true, it doesn’t bring much insight to Padmanabhan’s duology for anyone who *has* already read it. The paucity of textual analysis means that *Star Warriors* tantalises its academic readers, highlighting interesting texts but not always providing interesting interpretations. If less time had been spent summarizing, there would have been room for Khan to expand his analyses.

Earlier, I said the book’s strength was that it avoided a single, overall frame; it lets the texts speak for themselves within the clusters Khan has devised. This is largely true, but not entirely: the introductory chapters (there are three, plus an extended author’s note) posit what Khan dubs the “IN situ Model.” This is made of three theses: the

- (1) transMIT thesis;
- (2) the antekaal thesis; and
- (3) the neoMONSTERS thesis.

The transMIT thesis itself is made up of three parts: **mythology, ideology, and technology**. All of this is explained both textually and with a chart. To be frank, I found this apparatus more muddying than edifying. What actually *is* the transMIT thesis? Occasional explanations left me none the wiser: “While the transMIT thesis engages with the materiality, mythology and technology, it also wonders whether ISFE – while having multiple ‘distinctive features’ – can have one core or centre, in short, a ‘soul’” (34). Can a thesis wonder? The book says it focuses on just the transMIT thesis component of the IN situ Model, but the neoMONSTERS thesis is about mutants, clones, monsters, and more according to a chart in the book (23). Since all those *are* discussed in this volume, it’s not very clear what this demarcation is meant to achieve. This doesn’t harm the book very much as, once Khan gets through the introductory chapters, he rarely refers to the IN situ Model or the transMIT thesis, focusing instead on the stories themselves. But this does mean that Khan’s book gets off to a somewhat rough start with over forty pages passing before concrete discussion of actual works of ISFE appear.

Lastly, although Khan displays an admirably wide reading within ISFE, *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* nonetheless gives a poor impression of SF *outside* of India. Most of the times when the book compares Indian SF to SF from America or elsewhere, it references television shows: *Star Trek: Picard* (2020–present) and *The Orville* (2017–22) as examples of AI, or *Prometheus* (2012) as an example of humanity having an extraterrestrial origin. In contrast, the ISFE texts that Khan references are nearly all prose fiction. The effect gives an impoverished sense of what ISFE can do. American prose SF such as Ann Leckie’s *Ancillary Justice* (2013) and Martha Wells’s *The Murderbot Diaries* (2017–present), or even older works such as Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and David Gerrold’s *When HARLIE Was One* (1972), present a more thematically ambitious rendering of AI than *Star Trek: Picard*, but comparing ISFE to an interesting but SF-lite television show is more damning to Khan’s chosen texts than he perhaps realises. Maybe this was done deliberately to increase the book’s mass-market appeal. If so, it unfortunately seems to *reduce* the appeal of the book to scholars of SF, or even voracious readers of SF, who will find an unsatisfying representation of their favourite genre’s possibilities here.

As I said at the beginning of this review, there aren't really any strong overviews of ISFE already in existence. There have been some broad studies of postcolonial SF that include ISFE, such as Jessica Langer's *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (2011) or Ericka Hoagland and Reema Sarwal's *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World* (2010), but these works are largely aimed at postcolonialist critics. In contrast, Khan aims to open up the world of ISFE to SF scholars more broadly. *Star Warriors* is one of the first works to look at the level of India itself, to let us better see how the SF of this single country fits into the global whole of SF. Its strengths and its weaknesses both derive from this ambition, but Khan takes a necessary – and very useful – step. Almost a decade after my conference, the *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* still does not have that entry on India, but if any SF scholars want a way into ISFE, Khan's book will direct them to the works that will matter to and interest them. More work on this topic is necessary, but *Star Warriors* helps fill a frustrating gap in the field for SF critics.

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BOOK REVIEW:

*Absent Rebels: Criticism and Network  
Power in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dystopian Fiction*

*Joel Evans*

Gonnermann, Annika. *Absent Rebels: Criticism and Network Power in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dystopian Fiction*. Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2021. ISBN 978-3823384595.

What is neoliberalism? Is it a project of the ruling class in which the state forms a crucial part, or is it a phase of our current mode of production characterised by the withering of the state and its replacement by market forces? Any clear-cut answer to this question will be difficult to defend as, whilst it's clear that the state under neoliberalism does relinquish a minimal duty of care to its citizens, wrested from them after the golden years of capitalism, that same state nonetheless stands permanently ready to shore up the interests of the so-called free market; to legislate to maintain the grip of a technocratic elite; and to police a burgeoning and increasingly impoverished working class. Despite attending to some of these complexities from the state-driven side of neoliberalism, Annika Gonnermann's *Absent Rebels* still mostly advances a vision of neoliberalism in which market forces cleanly replace the state. But this vision isn't necessarily, or just, down to the author's own view of the economic system in question. It is, in fact, largely driven by a crucial development adeptly identified by *Absent Rebels*: namely, that depictions of the state in contemporary dystopian literature have disappeared and have been replaced by a view of potential corporate authoritarianism.

We might well posit, then, a schematic ideological function to the disappearance of depictions of the state as identified by Gonnermann: contemporary dystopia that foregrounds corporate power at the expense of state power smooths over the complex overlap between these two things under

neoliberalism, and it creates a view of a spontaneous flowering of domination on the part of corporations. If the totalitarian state of Orwell and Huxley no longer exists, this is attributable more to a particular worldview than any actually existing developments in this regard. Whilst Gonnermann doesn't really address the potentially ideological quality of the development she identifies, she does track a cluster of other developments within what now seems to be an – if not *the* – established mode of the genre. These include depictions of what she dubs “absent rebels”, waning democratic forms, networked power structures, and immanent forms of critique.

In each chapter of the book, we work through this cluster of concepts in turn, and the monograph soon settles into a recognisable pattern of detection and exegesis. This pattern is to Gonnermann's credit: *Absent Rebels* is systematic and thorough, and it convincingly demonstrates the case for the evolution of the dystopian form in relation to the shifting political terrain in the years in which neoliberalism became practically established – namely, the years following the Reagan/Thatcher era. Further, the monograph articulates well how each of its headline concepts works with the other; thus, the absence of rebellion in 21<sup>st</sup>-century dystopia is itself an effect of networked power structures seemingly without centres of command or control. And this form of network power is one which fits neatly with neoliberal ideologies of personal choice and the more hard-edged operations of a now fully global form of capitalism from which states opt out at their peril. If the waning of democratic forms, too, appears as a function of all the other concepts at stake, then this also opens up onto the way Gonnermann reads dystopia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as providing a form of critique. For the texts that Gonnermann tracks – from M. T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002) to Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) – don't hold forth on the disappearance of agential subjecthood and democratic norms in order to propose a new mode of society. Rather, a waning of agency and democracy is depicted with the goal of pointing out the flaws and contradictions from within the logic of the (dystopian) societies envisioned themselves. This immanent form of critique, we are told, is one the signatures of 21<sup>st</sup>-century dystopia, and it lends itself well to an emergent networked form of power. It also allows the reader to “comprehend the power mechanisms of 21<sup>st</sup> century neoliberal capitalism” (297).

The literary example that crystallizes Gonnermann's conceptual framework best is probably Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013), which Gonnermann analyses in Chapter 1. Readers familiar with Eggers's novel will likely already know the way in which his text depicts the rise of an all-encompassing multinational housed in Silicon Valley and based loosely on the likes of Google, Amazon, and Facebook. Gonnermann here demonstrates how the state is something largely absent in this novel and the way in which a subtle, “voluntary” coercion plays out in the text, thus making rebellion either impossible or undesirable amidst a network of willing participants in the digital economy. The Circle – the name of the novel's eponymous multi-national – thus takes the place of the totalitarian state common to older kinds of literary dystopias. It wields its power differently, though, more obscurely and subtly, whilst nevertheless curtailing the freedoms of the subject. The experience of Eggers's protagonist working within The Circle allows Eggers to expose some of the internal contradictions and quandaries engendered by neoliberalism. Again, this exposure is achieved via the creation of a more extreme version of

our own societies in the core neoliberal states. Gonnermann's framework fits well here, and something similar plays out in the chapters on Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) and M. T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002). These chapters ought to cement this book as a key study in contemporary dystopian fiction, and anything said after this is merely to draw out some further complexities raised by the rest of the book.

Moving on to these complexities, then, we might start by pointing out that Gonnermann's model less neatly fits books like David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). To take Mitchell's novel first, Gonnermann's reading in Chapter 5 only really substantially covers a portion of this text – namely, one dystopian section of the book, set in a future Seoul that exaggerates some of the aspects of contemporary neoliberalism. To an extent, her model works well here and brings to light some of the section's key themes, from thwarted and re-appropriated rebellion to the commodification of life itself. The issue with the reading advanced in this chapter, however, is in the model's application to the book as a whole. There is a more trivial aspect to this, which is that the majority of Mitchell's novel is not dystopian, and so Gonnermann's tight framework loosens somewhat. Apart from trivialities, though, there is the broader issue of the historical range of Mitchell's text. Whilst it is true in part to say, as Gonnermann does, that *Cloud Atlas* gives an overview of the history of capitalism and its apparently predatory nature, these different phases of course do not fit into a neoliberal viewpoint (Gonnermann doesn't explicitly suggest this, but it is a premise of the overall argument of the book). Whilst we might well read the novel in the light of its resistance to, or reproduction of, neoliberal ways of seeing, Gonnermann doesn't really stray into this mode of reading.

As noted, Gonnermann does identify an exaggerated version of neoliberalism in the chapter set in a future Seoul – but one wonders whether this society really is neoliberal in our current sense of the word. One aspect sticks out: this is a society that seems to rely predominantly on slave labour (in the guise of clones) rather than on workers selling their labour. Of course, actual global neoliberalism has not purged itself from a reliance on slavery, despite the received opinion to the contrary. But whilst this was a conspicuous part of liberal capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the neoliberal reliance on slavery is a hidden one, which takes place predominantly in the mines and the factories of peripheral states. That Mitchell's text depicts slavery as enmeshed in a high-tech metropolis is suggestive of something new – perhaps something worse – when compared with our own current configuration of capitalism. The centrepiece of Mitchell's text, set in post-apocalyptic tribal Hawaii, would seem to confirm Mitchell's interest in thinking beyond neoliberalism and beyond capitalism itself, but this doesn't really feature in Gonnermann's account. Something similar is going on in the chapter on *Never Let Me Go*, in which again we are presented with a society based around slave labour. As before, Gonnermann wants to make the argument that this is a neoliberal society. But Ishiguro's text mixes some of neoliberalism's hallmarks with disciplinary modes of power (figured through institutions like schools and hospitals), which we might more readily associate with the era of welfarism, plus the modes of labour now largely a thing of the distant past within core states. Again, these complexities are bent to fit Gonnermann's claim that the disappearance of agency and the figure of the rebel is a function of neoliberalism, but this claim

is difficult to accept without reservation when Ishiguro's text is about something at a slant to neoliberalism properly speaking.

The above is not to say that the readings in *Absent Rebels* are not productive or valuable or scholarly; they are. In fact, it is in some cases because Gonnermann has switched the focus on the reading of the genre that these productive deliberations come to light, and the reader is forced to consider much broader contextual issues. The book's major contribution is to highlight the disappearance of the state in dystopian fiction and the consequent disappearance of the rebel, that time-honoured figure of democratic and revolutionary spirit. Indeed, Gonnermann's argument is one of those that seems so crucial that it is strange that no one has made it before. This isn't a book focusing overly on form or technique, but it never claims to be. Whilst it makes some intriguing in-roads into developing a methodology adequate to tackling texts that depict networked forms of power, this doesn't always feel fully worked out. What the monograph does give us a glimpse of, though, in some cases unintentionally, is the ways in which neoliberal societies might be altered or become something else. The texts which Gonnermann brings together in *Absent Rebels* suggest ways in which this something else might be something significantly worse, and it is perhaps a mark of the trajectory of our current societies that these alternatives don't feel particularly far-fetched.

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BOOK REVIEW:

*Science Fiction Rebels:  
The Story of the Science Fiction Magazines  
from 1981 to 1990*

*John McLoughlin*

Ashley, Mike. *Science Fiction Rebels: The Story of the Science Fiction Magazines from 1981 to 1990*. Liverpool UP, 2021. ISBN 978-1789621716.

This fourth volume in Mike Ashley's comprehensive chronology of the SF magazines offers more of what came before it: a breath-taking depth and breadth of SF knowledge written in clear, comprehensible prose by an experienced and capable writer of encyclopaedias and anthologies. Ashley's own experience as an editor and the thousands of pages of practice producing his first three volumes allow him to hit the ground running, seamlessly blending the book's key goals into one tight narrative: a continuing chronology of the largest, most influential SF magazines; explication of the editorial policies and people which made those magazines successful and survivable; brief analyses of the high-quality stories which emerged from these processes; and a steady, continuous discussion of SF's larger creative development within the format. For the 1980s, this means the emergence and evolution of cyberpunk as a genre-within-a-genre and the experimental, rebellious publishing practices of the smaller presses. These developments occurred because of – and in reaction to – the efforts of the major SF magazines to avoid ossification, and Ashley takes care to make clear that the boundaries between publishing strata, just as those between genres, are far from stable.

While Ashley does a characteristically excellent job of cataloguing the broad spectrum of opinions from within SF, readers should not expect him to weigh in too heavily on cyberpunk's place in the genre. Instead, Ashley

characterises the subgenre's aesthetic development as just another evolutionary point in SF's growth, closely tied to the emergent technologies of the 1980s in the same way that nuclear and valve technologies dominated previous decades. Far from a crystallising moment for SF, cyberpunk "mutated and melded with the other forms of fiction" (51). While the emergence of a distinctive type of story was clear, those writers most closely associated with it – here Ashley lists names like William Gibson, John Shirley and Pat Cadigan, all regular contributors to *Asimov's* – moved on relatively quickly, refusing to be stereotyped (51). This may seem odd considering cyberpunk's enduring allure and resurgence in the modern day, but forward momentum and continual change are hallmarks of SF; thus, no movement – regardless of its impact – is free from the stagnation and contempt induced by familiarity.

As could be expected, one is continually confronted with a deluge of names in *Science Fiction Rebels*: editors, authors, publishers, critics, printers, and financiers. Many will already be familiar to SF audiences, and readers will be pleased to see SF luminaries and their most famous works appearing often in serialised or otherwise nascent forms. Greg Bear's ground-breaking biotech horror *Blood Music* (1985), for example, originated as a short story in 1983, and Ashley takes time out from his narrative's pace to pay special attention to its origins. That pacing is, at times, relentless, and despite the author's deft handling of his book's priorities, the size of the main text – combined with the broad remit and decade-long timeframe – means that events, names, and stories are often referenced in passing without sufficient exposition. By far the greatest criticism to be made of Ashley's history is that it isn't 7000 pages long as his familiarity with the SF world and his evident (and enviable) access to primary materials means an effectively unlimited potential for scholarly discovery. Of note is Ashley's continuous use of his personal correspondence with SF figures to ensure the accuracy of his history and to clarify the events described, which emphasises one of *Science Fiction Rebels's* emergent qualities: SF publishing is a close-knit field with considerable cross-contamination between publications and formats. The personal touch serves two purposes: showing us that SF is modern and alive in the minds of its community, and offering valuable clarification and context to events. Speaking about the role *Interzone* magazine played in fostering emerging talent, Ashley refers to personal correspondence with no less than three contributing authors in the space of two paragraphs (130).

Most of the names listed above – barring Pat Cadigan – are male, and Ashley repeatedly takes note of the largely male audience and contribution demographics for the SF magazines as observed in contemporary polls. Despite this, several the editorial stars of this volume are women, under whose stewardship important magazines like *Asimov's*, *Omni*, and *Amazing Stories* saw rejuvenation and renewal. Figures like Shawna McCarthy, Ellen Datlow, and Elinor Mavor are credited with the discovery of SF classics and, in many cases, some of the most daring acts of publication (91). Ashley's own attitude towards risky publications evidently mirrors that of trailblazing editors like McCarthy as he stands firmly behind their decision to publish difficult stories, even in the face of pushback from readerships and publishers.

Sexual politics reappears briefly in a discussion of *Interzone* and *Analog's* experiments with all-female rosters, including a subsequent backlash from – largely male – readers. Ashley provides some examples of this criticism

and pins the endeavour down to a “damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don’t” (133) scenario, not to be repeated by either magazine. This is one anecdote amongst several that seem a natural jumping-off point for further scholarship, though the section – perhaps through putting to use Ashley’s correspondence power – could have benefited from further women’s testimony.

Since not all names will be familiar even to SF scholars, the author does an excellent job in highlighting which individuals should be paid special attention and of framing the book’s chronological and narrative thrust around their career trajectories and (in most cases) editorial methodologies. For the major remaining SF magazines of the period, this means balancing historical excellence with the constant push towards novelty and experimentation characteristic of the genre; established magazines like *Amazing Stories*, *Analog* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* were, under the stewardship of editors like Edward Ferman and Shawna McCarthy, balancing traditionally appealing stories with cutting-edge work from unconventional writers. *Science Fiction Rebels* serves admirably in this way as both a linear narrative and a flat reference text; the book itself is split decidedly between both functions. The latter half constitutes the book’s appendix, which contains a brief flyover tour of world SF alongside a number of comprehensive directories: magazines, editors, publishers, and cover artists. If academic readers find themselves, like me, left wanting more of the narrative content in Ashley’s volume, then these directories are a tantalizing invitation for continued scholarship. The extraordinarily comprehensive list of SF magazine editors, provided with information about their affiliations and tenures, is another goldmine for budding SF scholars. Non-academic readers will find an interesting history of SF publication and a reading list beyond compare.

As with previous volumes in the series, a large part of Ashley’s sizeable appendix is taken up by rapid-fire briefs outlining the progress made by SF magazines in the non-Anglophone world. These insights into the larger SF universe are fascinating and they serve to provide a broader vision of SF’s progression, often intersecting with the history already tackled in the main text. This expedition in to the broader SF world is, however, where Ashley’s own scholarship is weakest, developed as it is – by the author’s graceful admission – with the considerable assistance of others; clearly, Ashley’s own strength lies in English-language SF. As with other chapters, the curse of Ashley’s evident devotion and scholarly rigour is that readers are left desiring far more than can fit in to one volume.

One thing sadly missing from *Science Fiction Rebels* are reprints of cover and midbook art. Despite repeatedly referring to the beautiful, strange, esoteric, and – sometimes – hackneyed art which helped to make the pulp magazines and their descendants so distinctive on shelves, Ashley’s volume fails to reproduce it, leaving the reader to rely on the author’s descriptions. This seems an odd omission considering the importance of cover and midbook art; it may simply be an issue of cost as Ashley is clearly aware of its importance, even using gorgeous, bizarre, and thematically relevant artwork from the periods being studied for his own front covers. After all, the sort of art which graced the front covers of the SF magazines deserves full-colour reprints – a prohibitively costly endeavour.

Ashley’s prose is precise, conversational, and uncomplicated, and he writes with an authoritative – but not overbearing – voice. It can be easy, amidst

the avalanche of names and events, for readers to gloss over the briefer moments of analysis and exposition, but it would be a mistake to do so as the author's summative remarks are insightful and concise, providing valuable context and creating a narrative to which the reader can tether their attention. For instance, Ashley ends his chapter on the British hard-SF renaissance with a neat summary of the lessons learned:

In the space of three years a mini-boom in British small-press magazines had come and gone, and the message was clear. A new magazine needed considerable initial planning, investment and time and could not be rushed. *Interzone* had followed what seemed to be the one successful route, allowing itself to set down its roots and grow thanks to the investment in time by the editorial collective and establishing a solid subscriber base before expanding. (145)

Speaking here is not just the voice of scholarship, but of experience; the first volume of Ashley's history saw initial publication in 1977 – four years before the events in the current volume even began. Some depth, granted, has been sacrificed for breadth and scope. Despite this, these books represent a supreme effort of scholarship and history-making, and they will be an invaluable tool to academics and fans alike.

*Biography:* John McLoughlin is a PhD researcher at Cardiff University studying the intersection between the *Exegesis* (2011) 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.



BOOK REVIEW:

*Images of the Anthropocene in Speculative  
Fiction: Narrating the Future*

*Paul Williams*

Dědinová, Tereza, Weronkia Łaszkiwicz, and Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun,  
editors. *Images of the Anthropocene in Speculative Fiction: Narrating  
the Future*. Lexington Books, 2021.

Anxieties related to the Anthropocene – the epoch of humans altering the individual and collective ecologies of planet Earth – have become a dominant topic in academic discourse. Today, more and more conferences and books are dedicating their energies to explore and respond to the increasing evidence of environmental degradation. *Images of the Anthropocene in Speculative Fiction*, an edited volume of twelve essays, enters into this conversation and proposes a shift in the ecocritical discourse of SFF. The collection is strongest for its fresh take on the Anthropocene, pivoting away from apocalyptic rhetoric and more towards coping with environmental changes already made. Additionally, the collection impresses with the variety of approaches it offers. Admittedly, the eclectic nature of the collection means none of the essays can dig too deeply into its argument, and the entire collection, for all its novelty, does more to suggest ideas for further scholarship than actually providing that new scholarship itself. Still, the strengths of the collection are real and effectively outweigh these flaws.

The editors' central premise is a familiar one – namely, that literature has a part to play in the Anthropocene because we must address the Anthropocene on the level of individual human experience and culture, not just as scientific fact. Literature's ability to project the consequences of human actions, they argue, empowers it to provoke a humane response to the climate crisis in ways that other environmental messaging cannot. Even more interesting is how

the editors wish to promote a necessary shift in environmental humanities discourse, focusing less on doom-speaking in the hopes of preventing the Anthropocene, as if it were still a future event, and instead accepting that we already live *in* the Anthropocene and must therefore learn to cope with our new circumstances. This is not to say that enormous and critical changes to stymie future collapse are unimportant, but while confronting that frightening future is necessary, we must not neglect the here and now. The editors offer an optimistic approach, suggesting that the “Anthropocene is yet another chapter – hopefully not the final one – in the grand story of humanity’s existence on Earth” (8). So while the Anthropocene is a calamity unlike any other humanity has faced in recorded history, it need not prove our destruction if we can learn to adapt.

However, survival – especially survival that is also just and equitable – will require a great deal of heavy lifting to bring about needed cultural changes. The editors contend that speculative fiction is one of the best tools available for inspiring and guiding such cultural work. They contend that speculative fiction is especially apt for analysing the Anthropocene because of its ability to “invent (semi)fantastic realities which can freely dismantle existing power structures, undermine established laws, and provide provoking scenarios of alternative history by pursuing the simple question: ‘what if?’” (12). For the editors, the central conceit of speculative fiction is its ability to project and depict the non-real, working out essential questions before we ourselves have to. In this way, speculative fiction may help us avoid the worst-case scenarios, work through the questions which underpin the Anthropocene, and respond accordingly. The essays collected in *Images of the Anthropocene* demonstrate various ways of exploring the editors’ claims. While they share the basic components in terms of discussing the Anthropocene through SFF, each shows a unique pathway into that conversation, verifying both speculative fiction’s versatility for engaging the crisis and certifying the raw complexity of the Anthropocene and the work needed to confront it.

The most surprising aspect of the book is the primary texts analysed. Ecocritical readings of speculative fiction tend to coalesce around an enduring locus of stories – *Lord of the Rings* for its indictment of industrialisation; *Earthsea* for its themes of harmony between humanity and Nature; and N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy with its geologic magic jumps readily to mind as a newer but frequently cited text. And while *Images of the Anthropocene* does interact with some of the usual suspects, the majority of texts analysed within the book are brand new – at least for me – for speculative fiction discussions of environmental studies. For example, in “The Fantasy of Wilderness: Reconfiguring Heroism in the Anthropocene, Facing the Age of Ecocentrism”, Lykke Guanio-Uluru looks past the many infamously problematic aspects of the *Twilight* books and focuses on the transhumanism of Meyer’s vampires. Identifying how these vampires function as hyper-consumers of resources, Guanio-Uluru notes that Meyer seems to have produced a veritable “global warming villain” (93). Other such surprises include Dariya Khokhel’s discussion of how climate change entangles with immigration in Patricia Briggs’s *Mercy Thompson* (2006–present) series and Anna Bugajska’s posthumanist reading of James Patterson’s *Maximum Ride* (2005–2015) series. I am not used to seeing these titles studied through an ecological lens (or any other lens, really). In this way, I find *Images of the Anthropocene* refreshing – even daring

– for how its essays defamiliarise my own sense of the Anthropocene and how its mark can be found in the most unexpected of places.

An important manoeuvre of the book is how the essays combine more traditional literary theories with the concerns of ecocriticism. This furthers ecocriticism's goal of not only identifying and understanding the cultural underpinnings of the Anthropocene, but also of signifying important remedies that challenge old traditions to change according to new understandings of our world and societies. One excellent example is Carrie Spencer's "Young Adult Fantasy to Save the World? Retelling the Quest in Maggie Stiefvater's Raven Cycle", which begins as a structuralist analysis of how the Raven Cycle deconstructs Campbell's monomyth, then expands to demonstrate how the Anthropocene necessitates that revision. Spencer argues that the traditional monomyth emphasises cyclical time and the human individual. These fuel the attitudes that disregard the future and promote human exceptionalism. In the Raven Cycle, Spencer contends, the monomyth is reorganised to advocate for the collective over the individual, uniting the human and non-human worlds without devolving into dystopia. The chapter is a productive fusion of both structuralism and ecocritical concerns, and it can be applied to studies in both disciplines while advancing the central claims of the present collection.

Another chapter that stands out is Maria Quigley's "Fantasy, Myth, and the End of Humanity in M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*". Quigley works from the stance that one of speculative fiction's most powerful abilities in working through issues relevant to the Anthropocene is the way it can manifest events and ideas not yet existent, but often unsettling. The chapter meditates on the powerful allure of the unparalleled catastrophe trope in speculative fiction. Quigley argues that the notion of some sort of apocalypse ultimately speaks deeply to humanity because we presume that the end times must give way to some sort of rebirth. However, she emphasises that while the end of the known world and society may not be entirely bad, an intrinsic reality that goes along with it is that humanity may not be able to retain its current identity: "For humanity to endure, it has had to evolve beyond what we think of as human" (132). It is uncomfortable to have to rethink humanness itself, and rather difficult to do in mimetic fiction, but this is one of the essential purposes for speculative fiction.

The most audacious entry in the collection would certainly be Dwight Tanner's "The Development of Realist Speculative Narratives to Represent and Confront the Anthropocene", which is bold on a few levels. First, because its chosen primary texts for analysis are *Flight Behavior* by Barbara Kingsolver (2012) and *Solar* by Ian McEwan (2010), two mainstream all-stars (and, at least in McEwan's case, pathologically averse to being considered writers of SF). Second, Tanner proposes a new generic label and set of hermeneutics, what he terms "speculative realism", meaning texts that present themselves as realistic narratives, but where the subject matter and presentation might seem like speculative rhetoric. For instance, in his chosen texts, Tanner highlights how scientifically rational happenings, such as extreme weather changes, are coded and received as fantastical, despite being natural. "These occurrences are neither uncanny nor require a shift in the laws of reality because they're scientifically proven as inevitable ... but these facts do not make climate change any less incredible" (236). Tanner's neologism will require further exploration and application to determine its usefulness, but it has the potential to enlarge

the scope of speculative fiction studies. At the very least, it provokes renewed discussions about how we understand the relationship between fiction and the Anthropocene by questioning whether or not we have dismissed very real warnings and examinations thereof as artistic hyperbole rather than accepting their mimetic representation.

Still, there are a few shortcomings in the collection. Most noticeable is how the essays trade depth for breadth. Many of the individual chapters read more like the starting point of much larger theoretical arguments. None of the essays fully flesh out the implications of their arguments, and that does make the book less satisfying on its own. Also worth noting is the mixed value of the book's diverse selection of primary texts. On the one hand, I am not aware of any significant scholarly work on many of the series analysed in the book (*Mercy Thompson*, *Maximum Ride*, etc.), and their inclusion does signal potential starting points for further analysis. On the other hand, it may be more difficult to make use of the essays which focus on these less-often studied texts in further scholarship without stronger ties to existing scholarship beyond the larger topic of the Anthropocene. Scholars in search of a new or definitive treatment of the Anthropocene or, at least, a thorough new theory of environmental humanities will not find it here.

That being said, these weaknesses do point to the greatest value of *Images of the Anthropocene*: it functions best as a gateway to the variety of ways readers can analyse and respond to the climate crisis through SFF. Seen from this angle, *Images of the Anthropocene* can strongly benefit scholars new to environmental humanities, and also those looking for new approaches applicable to their own favourite texts. All told, *Images of the Anthropocene* marks at least a dozen new potential pathways into the study of ecocriticism.

*Biography:* Paul Williams received his M.A. in English from Idaho State University in spring 2018. He has published original scholarship and several book reviews. A former high school English teacher, he is now completing his PhD at ISU, writing his dissertation on alternate histories and fantasy fiction. He served as Editorial Assistant for *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* from 2018–2020.



BOOK REVIEW:

*Stages of Transmutation: Science Fiction,  
Biology, and Environmental Posthumanism*

*Shelby Brewster*

Idema, Tom. *Stages of Transmutation: Science Fiction, Biology, and Environmental Posthumanism*. Routledge, 2019. ISBN 978-0415788229.

Tom Idema's compact volume joins the tradition of posthumanist theories that draw upon works of SF to interrogate the relationship between the human and nonhuman. According to Idema, environmental posthumanism is a necessary corrective to posthumanist theories that focus overwhelmingly on technology. Instead, environmental posthumanism captures the web of interrelations among humans and the environment, broadly construed, thus undercutting the illusion of the human as an autonomous and superior subject. Expanding this concept of environmental posthumanism through an analysis of a variety of SF novels, Idema offers two especially unique approaches. First, he draws on debates within the biological sciences demonstrating an admirable method of interdisciplinarity. Second, Idema turns to the language and concept of performance to illustrate how environmental posthumanism becomes more than a metaphor on the page. The novels in Idema's selected archive not only serve as "platforms staging an epistemological encounter between literature and science" but also invite readers to (re)conceive "*life as a dramatic performance*" (5, 166). That is, according to Idema, understanding environmental posthumanism in this way can spark both epistemological and ontological change. Still, while these two strategies offer both rich readings of SF texts and a model for other scholars to follow, Idema overlooks the intellectual tradition of performance studies scholarship that has long been engaged with similar issues.

Idema has the difficult task of entering several academic debates with long histories, including SF, ecocriticism, the relationship between science and culture, and the definition(s) of posthumanism. As Idema points out, the conversation around this last issue is “urgent and compelling but also parochial”, having become a “familiar posthumanist story” (1). Rather than opening up new possibilities for the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, posthumanism as a field of study is all too often reduced to concerns of technology. At the same time that he draws important threads from the tradition of posthumanism, Idema also expands the scope of the conversation in two ways. First, Idema shifts the focus to SF works that concern biological transformations, a “different kind of affront to humanism” (2), which Idema names “environmental posthumanism” – the volume’s central theoretical intervention. While sharing much with other ecocritical and posthumanist theories, including those of Rosi Braidotti (the necessity of interdisciplinarity), Stacy Alaimo (the permeability of bodies, which are always in relation to other bodies), Cary Wolfe (rejection of humanist conceptions of the human as rational), and Donna J. Haraway (the embeddedness of humans in the environment), Idema argues that environmental posthumanism represents a departure from these and others for several reasons.

First, Idema points out that environmental posthumanism overlaps with theories in biology – constructive interactionism (organism development as the result of complex, multi-system interactions); symbiogenesis (DNA acquired via symbiotic relationships between organisms); Gaia theory (the planet as a self-regulating, living system); and coevolution (organisms and species evolve together in complex relations) – which are played out in literary texts. According to Idema, stories of human transformation due to environmental interaction are rare in Western culture because they contradict two major pillars of biology: the neo-Darwinian tenet that nature does not include sudden transformations, and the genetic perception of the environment as external to life. Idema turns to a number of post-1970s biological theories – epigenetics, symbiogenesis, coevolution – that reject these concepts in favour of more expansive understandings of the nonhuman as a primary (rather than secondary) influence on the human. Second, works of environmental posthumanism, which are not always but are often SF, “figure life as *staged*: an environmentally mediated, dramatic, and largely inscrutable event *enacted* by human and nonhuman characters” (12, original emphasis). For Idema, this staging is in effect a new literary form in which both environment and characters are co-constitutive; the separation between character and environment is erased. Third, environmental-posthumanist SF departs from the dominant Marxist tradition of SF studies. This tradition of cognitive estrangement, as articulated by Darko Suvin in particular, limits the changes in an SF world to the social and economic. Idema rejects this premise throughout the volume, articulating the many ways SF can and does concern environmental metamorphoses.

Idema presents a number of examples of environmental-posthumanist SF where “literature becomes a stage on which the dramas of science and philosophy are performed” (27). In other words, novels become the space of encounter for scientific knowledge and investigations of the human experience. Only by direct interpolation with relevant biological discoveries, Idema argues, can the environment become a participant in, rather than background for, narrative. For each SF text Idema uses to articulate environmental post-

humanism, he provides a biological counterpart. For example, he pairs Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy (1992–1999) with psychologist Susan Oyama's theory of constructive interactionism to show how human and planetary transformations are interrelated and entangled. Oyama rejects the nature/nurture binary, arguing that organisms are not synonymous with their DNA and that evolution is the result of complex interrelations between the environment and organisms. Idema uses this theory to reconceive the *Mars* trilogy's story of terraforming as one of coevolution rather than human transcendence of a new planetary environment. Likewise, Idema rereads Greg Bear's *Darwin's Radio* (1999) through Lynn Margulis's understanding of evolution as a creative and collective process and Deleuze and Guatarri's nomad science. Bear's novel depicts a viral pandemic with disastrous effects on human reproductive capacities. Idema identifies the practice of nomad science among the novel's characters, who pursue alternative methods reminiscent of Margulis's theories of evolution as the result of symbiotic relationship. This contrasts with what Deleuze and Guatarri call "State science", which would search for a single, discrete cause of the pandemic.

In addition, like many other SF scholars, Idema chooses Jeff VanderMeer's *The Southern Reach* trilogy (2014) as a literary site of theoretical innovation. Idema demonstrates how the trilogy's hybrid narrative form portrays the nonhuman world as actant, a philosophical expression taken from James Lovelock's Gaia theory. Lovelock uses Gaia as a metaphor to emphasise the agency of the planetary living system; Idema sees this same metaphor at work in VanderMeer's Area X, which not only directly transforms individual human bodies but actively resists interpretation by any human epistemological framework. Finally, in Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* (1987–1989), Idema sees multiple forms of amalgamation – including evolutionary – that underscore the myriad relationships that compose life. Butler's tale of humans both being physically transformed by and learning to live alongside an alien race enacts Donna J. Haraway's concept of sympoiesis, the creation of novel interrelations for mutual flourishing.

Collectively, these readings capture the multiple dimensions of Idema's environmental-posthumanist proposal. One of the volume's strengths is the way Idema simultaneously acknowledges and surpasses perennial and "parochial" posthumanist debates in favour of a thoughtful expansion of the kind of work – theoretical and material – that a concept of posthumanism can do. Idema's analyses don't become mired in the specifics of techno-optimism or over-emphasise the role of technology. Instead, his readings of his chosen case studies offer ways to understand human and environmental transformation through SF.

In particular, Idema's readings of Bear and Butler stand out for their nuanced and reflexive analyses of SF. Idema acknowledges the problematic biological determinism of *Darwin's Radio* while moving beyond such critique to illuminate the ways Bear's novel helps "flesh out" theories of nomad science. He also questions the role of narrative in environmental understanding: "In unsettling habitual relations between the human subject, (molecular) embodiment, and environment, *Darwin's Radio* challenges the traditional humanist sense of the literary as a window to the human soul" (82). This line of thinking turns a discerning eye on the functions of narrative in attempting not only to comprehend, but also to reimagine, human-environmental relations;

such an approach is imperative to sustainable planetary futures. Similarly, in his analysis of *Lilith's Brood*, Idema resists the tendency to view such works as allegory, which “reduces them to dramas of human differences of race, gender, class, and so on”; instead, Idema argues that the novel understands life as “not the privilege of humans or human-like creatures but a result of ongoing relationships that are, first and foremost, sensorial and aesthetic” (138). As part of this reading, Idema makes the important point that science and technology studies are as “empirical as the natural sciences and [are] implicated in their most empirical questions, just as science is implicated in STS’s social and epistemological quandaries” (147). The productive tensions between science and STS will also prove to be vital to any serious (re)consideration of the place of humans in the biosphere.

Another strength of Idema’s argument is its focus on performance. Idema repeatedly asserts the role performance plays in his thinking: the environment triggers *staged* development of humans and others; the environment itself is a *stage* upon which life transforms; and novels *stage* encounters between literature and science. Even life itself is *staged*: an “environmentally mediated, dramatic, and largely inscrutable event *enacted* by human and nonhuman characters” (11, emphasis original). This line of thinking has the potential to shift conversations on the role of literature, the relationships between humans and their environments, and how we face the planetary future.

However, Idema does not engage with the rich scholarly tradition of performance studies that pursues similar lines of inquiry; his text would have been strengthened by concrete engagement with theatre studies and performance theory. In the book’s coda, “Bringing Literature to Life”, Idema sums up his approach as follows:

science fiction allows scholars to not only explore science as a kind of theater piece in which crucial epistemological and biopolitical tensions are fleshed out but also to think of *life* as a dramatic performance. (166)

Many works have drawn on performance to articulate and understand environmental questions, including but not limited to ecocritical works. Canonical works by Bonnie Marranca (*Ecologies of Theater*, 1996) and Una Chaudhuri and Elinor Fuchs (*Land/Scape/Theater*, 2002) thoughtfully interrogate the ways the environment becomes both stage and actor. Baz Kershaw (*Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events*, 2007) shows how performance theory can illuminate the ways humans and non-humans interact. Other performance theorists who have considered life as performance (Richard Schechner, Bruce McConachie, Diana Taylor, Rebecca Schneider, D. Soyini Madison) would have enriched Idema’s analysis as well. After all, what is theatre and performance studies if not an exploration of how to bring ideas to life?

Additionally, *Stages of Transmutation* embodies another wider issue in SF and literary studies: the absence of non-Western voices. Idema explicitly recognises this in his introduction, writing, “I limit myself to Western (and mostly Anglophone) literature, a major shortcoming that I hope will be compensated by others, if indeed the knowledge is not already available in other languages” (6). I find two significant issues in this claim. First, like much SFF

scholarship, Idema's project concerns the dismantling and/or deconstruction of dominant Western epistemologies, a task for which non-Western perspectives would be exceptionally appropriate. Attention to such texts will only enrich the field. Second, addressing the omission of non-Western views will take conscious effort on the part of individual scholars and the field as a whole. Having read similar disclaimers in several recent works of SF scholarship, it's apparent to me that if we all keep relying on others to address this absence, it will never be filled.

In sum, Idema's book proffers a number of ideas both intriguing and necessary for articulating the role of SF in our time of monumental environmental change. His interdisciplinary interweaving of narrative, empirical science, and STS provides a valuable springboard for wider interrogation of SFF. Scholars from any number of fields would benefit from remembering that "culture does not come after nature, and scholarly problems of the humanities cannot be reduced to scientific problems without impoverishing thought. Neither can humans be given the exclusive privilege of thought and consciousness without endangering life" (166). *Stages of Transmutation* is an example of how interdisciplinarity can instead enrich thought, an increasingly important exercise in light of the social, political, ethical, and environmental challenges we face.

*Biography:* Shelby Brewster is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Michigan State University and Associate Editor of *Public Philosophy Journal*. She received her PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Pittsburgh in 2021. Her scholarly interests include environmental humanities, theories of (post)humanism, and editorial theory and practice. Her work has been published in *Performance Research*, *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, and *Theatre Journal*, and multiple online venues.



BOOK REVIEW:

*The Metamorphoses of Myth in Fiction  
since 1960*

*C. W. Sullivan III*

Hume, Kathryn. *The Metamorphoses of Myth in Fiction since 1960*.  
Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. ISBN 978-1501359873.

The very first sentence of Kathryn Hume’s *The Metamorphoses of Myth in Fiction since 1960* – “Why should contemporary Anglophone writers use myths from ancient Greece and Rome, from Pharaonic Egypt, from the Viking north, from Africa’s west coast, and from Hebrew and Christian traditions?” (viii) – announces the focus of this book, and Hume delivers a challenging, almost 200-page study in which she examines this question in depth, drawing on a broad range of short stories, several plays, and a very wide variety of novels from over half a century of Anglophone fiction. But she does more than just announce her focus in the preface and describe her various chapters, she also sets the tone of the book and lets the readers know that she expects to engage them in a conversation of sorts by posing additional questions. Further down the same page, she asks, “What does myth permit writers of the contemporary era to do that they cannot achieve by other means?” (viii). Hume’s assumptions that “gods and immortals, certain kinds of heroes, mythological landscapes, and mythological situations seem to lend themselves in our culture to modeling certain kinds of problems” (x) orients the reader to consider, somewhat, authors as products of their cultural times. By the end of the preface, the reader knows that this book will not be just an account of authors who use myths in their fiction, though Hume does that as a matter of course along the way, but will examine and analyse writers in western culture – Anglophone culture for the most part – as they “use” mythic materials in their fiction. All of this and more Hume presents in these first five pages! Fasten your seatbelts.

In “Prolegomenon: Myth as a Tool in the Artist’s Toolbox”, Hume acknowledges the many ways “myth” has been defined, but she does not enter very far into that discussion; rather, she presents her overarching statement: “This study approaches *myth as an artistic tool*” (2, italics original). In this introduction, a chapter in and of itself, Hume does several things. She illustrates and defines “myth” using specific stories from the “Greco-Roman myths as examples”, and she then broadens the category to include Odysseus and the “Roman kings” whose stories “qualify as mythic during the European Middle Ages and later” (3). The term “Mythology” she defines as related stories that come together, and “Mythic Worlds” as a cosmology containing, usually, the realms of gods, men, and the dead (5). She includes Christianity here as an inherited myth because, while some people believe its stories true, others do not and feel free to use them in their fiction (5–6). This prolegomenon also includes “Invented Myth” and “Situational Myth”, categories that lack “religious roots and known gods” but have patterns similar to those in traditional myths, and both “Myth versus Fantasy” and “Mapping the Mythic” are categories that suggest various visual ways – concentric circles or points on a compass – to represent the relationship of the sub-genres Hume has previously identified. But anyone expecting a discussion of fantasy itself as a specific mythic genre will be disappointed as Hume shies away from generic approaches to centre on myth as an “artistic tool” in many if not all genres.

Six major chapters follow “Prolegomenon”, each of which has not only a specific title but a subheading listing the major authors on whom Hume will focus. In Chapter 1, “Multiple Selves in Egyptian Mythology”, she covers Norman Mailer, William S. Burroughs, Ishmael Reed, and Roger Zelazny, all authors who use myth to explore the possibilities of existence after death. For example, Mailer in *Ancient Evenings* (1983) and Burroughs in *The Western Lands* (1987) are drawn to the Egyptian concept of multiple souls or selves as ways of living on after death. In Chapter 2, “Mythological Worlds and Death”, Kathy Acker, William Gibson, Neil Gaiman, A. S. Byatt, William Kennedy, Thomas Pynchon, and James Morrow build their mythscapes, to some extent, on existing mythologies or comparable alternatives. For example, in *Neuromancer* (1984), Gibson presents cyberspace as a way of leaving this life while remaining aware and mobile, not unlike Mailer and Burroughs; and Byatt, in *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (2011), presents the Norse concept of Valholl (Valhalla) as the place where some people go after death – at least until Ragnarök. However, Morrow’s god is dead in the *Towing Jehovah* trilogy (1994–1999), and Hume asserts that its ending “pushes us to focus on life” (55). These first two chapters present various possibilities – perhaps to comfort of author and/or audience – for an individual’s continued existence after death.

In Chapter 3, “Orpheus and Eurydice: Variations on a Theme”, the main authors listed are Samuel R. Delany, Janette Turner Hospital, J. J. Phillips, Russell Hoban, Neil Gaiman, Richard Powers, “and others” [sic]. As the chapter title suggests, here Hume picks a single mythic story, that of Orpheus’s attempt to bring his wife back to the land of the living from the land of the dead, and illustrates the ways in which various authors have handled that story. In *The Einstein Intersection* (1967), Delany creates a future Earth populated by beings informed by the myths and legends of the past at the centre of which Lobey mourns his dead love, Friza, and searches for Kid Death to win her back. In *Orpheus Lost* (2007), Hospital reverses the story by having the Orpheus-figure

taken to an underworld and the Eurydice-figure be the one to try to free him, all set in a contemporary world. Hume finds the story a useful tool that can even appeal to zombie fans as well as those “angry at American intelligence operations abroad or at home” (76). In this chapter, death may be countered (reversed? rejected?) by an individual who has the talent or the power to attempt to bring back (a loved) someone from the place beyond death.

In Chapter 4, “Invented Myth: The Problem of Power”, Kathy Acker, Donald Barthelme, Russell Hoban, Alan Moore, Italo Calvino, and Neil Gaiman (again) invent their own myths as they examine the nature of power. Traditional myths and religions are all about power, usually the power of men over women that Acker so pointedly explores in *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978/1984) and many other pieces. Barthelme’s *Dead Father*, in the novel of the same name (1975), may be on his way to the grave, but he kills a number of his creations and performs other violent acts on the way. Hoban’s creation myth, in the far future of *Riddley Walker* (1980), resonates with Christian imagery and references the US and the atomic power that sent everyone who survived back to something like the Stone Age. Although the power that is important in Gaiman’s *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013) is female, the eternal female, perhaps, there is also the need to own one’s actions no matter who one is. These authors, by and large, present a main character with a specific power over or attitude toward death and dying that frees him or her from conventional attitudes and actions.

In Chapter 5, “Situational Myth: Posthuman Metamorphoses”, Vonda McIntyre, Anne McCaffrey, Dan Simmons, Cory Doctorow, Marge Piercy, Charles Stross, Rudy Rucker, and Lavie Tidhar invent a kind of mythology in which advanced technologies in the future allow humans to be transformed into something else. The title of this chapter is very clear: to survive dying or thwart death will require a person to transform from something recognizably human into something “beyond human” or “other than human”. The fact that many of these disparate novels examine similar futures, futures of technological posthuman metamorphoses, allows Hume to see them as a “network of related stories” just as myths can be (111). In Vonda McIntyre’s *Superluminal* (1983), some humans use viruses to enable them to live like dolphins in the oceans while others have mechanical hearts implanted to enable them to survive space travel. There is a three-way clash in Dan Simmons’s *Hyperion* series (1989–1997) among humans, human-derived beings, and AIs. Charles Stross starts out *Accelerando* (2005) with the idea that minds are “uploadable and downloadable” (122), and things get more complicated from there.

In Chapter 6, “The Contemporary Functions of Myth as an Artistic Tool”, Thomas Pynchon, Arthurian stories, Michel Faber, Philip Pullman, James Morrow, Rikki Ducornet, Ben Marcus, Margaret Atwood, Kurt Vonnegut, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, Klas Östergren, Jeanette Winterson, David Grossman, and Rudy Rucker illustrate various ways in which authors can use mythology to comment on and criticise contemporary Western civilisation or Anglophone culture. Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) tells an Arthurian story from the viewpoint of women and uses Celtic references to create a matrifocal story that stands alone and comments upon the patrifocal stories that preceded it. Michel Faber, Philip Pullman, and James Morrow use biblical stories and the story of Christ to, perhaps, criticise current religions’ claims to be Christian. The possibility that technology could

replace religion is explored by Thomas Pynchon and Rudy Rucker, respectively, in *Bleeding Edge* (2013) and *Postsingular* (2007). This criticism of contemporary civilisation is not absent from the novels dealt with in previous chapters, but it seems to be the main focus of the authors and novels treated in this chapter.

In the conclusion, Hume summarises the four important points she made in the previous chapters and continues with three overall comments:

- (A) “myth can be said to amplify certain literary effects”; for example, when the “myth is a known tale with known names, it focuses [the reader’s] attention” and can rouse the reader’s “expectations”;
- (B) myth can sometimes use “science (or postsingularity projections of science) to produce alternate realities”; and
- (C) myth can give a “bit of extra weight to the story” for the reader “who values tradition and values knowing about the past” (162).

And she finishes with a most interesting point:

- (D) “Myth as an artistic tool is not under the obligation to demand belief that religion is. Instead, it gives those who are willing to respond *a feeling of meaning*, a sensation that delicately gives us release, gratification, and inner satisfaction” (163, italics added).

I added the italics to the previous sentence because I believe that this “feeling of meaning” is one of the primary functions of mythology in literature and, perhaps because it treads closely to mysticism, the most difficult features of myth to defend. I would argue that this “feeling of meaning” comes, in part, from the reader’s awareness, conscious or unconscious, of the content and form of the traditional myth, legend, folk tale, or even fairy tale, and that when the modern novel, story, or play uses one of these sources conscientiously, readers feel a sense of “rightness” about the new work as a whole or are forced to re-examine the ideas or attitudes with which they began that work.

In the “Prolegomenon”, Hume hoped to provide an “explanation of how myth can satisfy certain desires (at least for some readers) without assuming that readers have a doctorate in philosophy” (3) – and, I might add, a doctorate in post-1960s Anglophone literatures. On one hand, some of the 46 named authors appear more than once, but it is for a different novel each time. On the other hand, Hume mentions, more-or-less in passing, quite a few more authors than those named in the chapter titles above, authors from Jane Austen to C. S. Lewis to J.R.R. Tolkien. But, astonishingly, she has managed to summarise the cogent aspects of the fiction so well that the reader unfamiliar with the works will understand the points being made.

Given this number and range of authors and novels, the summaries and examples I have included above by no means do justice to Hume’s analyses, and I can only hope I have done no serious injustices. That a study of this scope and depth existing in 177 pages, including end notes, could succeed at all is amazing; that Kathryn Hume’s *The Metamorphoses of Myth in Fiction since 1960* succeeds so incredibly well makes it a book that every scholar of post-1960s literature should read and every academic library should have on its shelf.

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BOOK REVIEW:

*A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the  
Edges of Tolkien's Literary Canvas*

*Daniel A. Rabuzzi*

Grybauskas, Peter. *A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the Edges of Tolkien's Literary Canvas*. Kent State UP, 2021. ISBN 978-1606354308.

Peter Grybauskas makes a compelling case that Tolkien's use of "edges, allusions, lacunae" (xvii) is an essential element of Tolkien's world-building, that "untold tales are nothing short of a defining feature of his subcreation" (xx). In so doing, Grybauskas undermines a perception common among many critics that Tolkien's legendarium depends for its narrative power on copious detail, on historical depth fully painted in. Building on work by Gergely Nagy, John D. Rateliff, Michael D. C. Drout, Namiko Hitotsubashi, and Rachel Scavera (and more generally that of Verlyn Flieger, with whom he studied), Grybauskas creates a tripartite taxonomy of untold tales that other Tolkienists – and other scholars of speculative fiction – will find useful as an interpretive framework: "faded traditions, allusive webs, and outright omissions" (21). These categories apply across a wide range of Tolkien materials from *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* to role-playing games. Grybauskas covers this vast terrain with efficiency, warmth, and wit in just 138 pages. He acknowledges fellow scholars frequently, and when he disagrees with the latter (for instance, with Tom Shippey on page 88), he does so in a measured, constructive way. Still, Grybauskas could have made his arguments even more powerful by mapping his taxonomy onto (or against) widely used schema such as Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), Mark J. P. Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), and N. K. Jemisin's popular webinar *Growing Your Iceberg* (2015). The book would also have benefited from more attention to the untold tales of the Orcs and the inhabitants of

Harad, Khand, and Rhûn, addressing the significant scholarship on the racist and orientalist tropes Tolkien deployed in conceptualizing and depicting these peoples. Even with such missed opportunities to connect with wider research, however, *A Sense of Tales Untold* has much to offer Tolkien scholars, medievalists, folklorists, and students of fantasy literature writ large.

Tolkien himself emphasised the importance of *not* spelling everything out, of creating the illusion of depth in order for Faerie to be real for his audience. Grybauskas reminds us of this by using Tolkien's own words as epigraphs, how it's the "untold stories that are most moving" (from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*). Grybauskas traces how consistently Tolkien maintained the primacy of what he called in a 1971 letter a "Frameless Picture ... surrounded by the glimmer of limitless extensions in time and space" (qtd. in Grybauskas xix) – from the injunction in "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" to not let the "glamour of Poesis" overcome the "seekers after history" (qtd. in 7) to the joy of "Eucatastrophe" described in "On Fairy-stories" and the vistas seen but not reached in *Smith of Wootton Major*. Further stressing the point, Grybauskas quotes Rateliff to great effect: "Dr. Humphrey Havard, fellow Inklings and family friend ... thought Tolkien had *only ten percent of his legendarium written down*. All the rest was in his head" (94, emphasis original). Ten percent aligns nicely with the well-known "Iceberg Theory" coined by Hemingway, discussed at length by Grybauskas, which posits that the great bulk of a story's meaning and mechanics should exist below its surface.

The chapter on the allusive web of the Last Alliance evidences how useful Grybauskas's approach can be. Consider this insight: according to Grybauskas, *The Lord of the Rings* is not "so much a story of war as it is about war stories: telling them, reading them, remembering and reflecting on them" (26). Grybauskas proceeds to unpack this suggestion, with references not only to Tolkien's wartime experiences but to those of novelist Tim O'Brien in Vietnam. War stories in *The Lord of the Rings* let characters ponder events that took place thousands of years prior, affording agency to the "lowly" characters like Sam, Gollum, and the Orcs. War stories are at the heart of Grybauskas's surprising argument that "Gollum's keen ear for story ... solidifies his role as a knowledgeable historian and – from a certain point of view – a hero" (29). For example, Gollum throughout the text avidly tells and consumes stories about the Last Alliance, and his knowledge on some crucial bits of lore surpasses that of the Wise. For instance, "Sauron himself only discovers 'where Isildur fell' through torturing Gollum" (32). Gollum's understanding of stories widely dispersed across the allusive web helps him remain undaunted as Grybauskas illustrates by noting Gollum's acquaintance with Sauron's Black Hand, which though an "undoubtedly menacing Hand, its fingers can be cut, as history and legend teach" (32). Grybauskas here leads readers back to the text under scrutiny, refreshing our own knowledge of the story and nudging us to cross-check what we recalled or thought we knew. As he foregrounds, records of the Second Age are a misty mess, yet understanding the Third Age depends on the web of allusions that a Frodo, a Gollum, or a Gorbag and Shagrat might reveal, infer, or discover. These characters are proxies for the reader, unlike, say, Elrond (whose reticence to elaborate on the history of the Second Age is, as Grybauskas says, frustrating). The Third Age characters are not antiquarians; what they learn is often necessary for their survival, and it helps drive the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The chapter on the Túrin cycle provides valuable (inter)textual analysis, not least given the inherent complexities within what Grybauskas calls Tolkien's "most-told tale" (50, emphasis original). Grybauskas draws attention to the *Kalevala* as the initial inspiration, underscoring Tolkien's speculation that already upon their transcription the *Kalevala*, the *Mabinogion*, and other oral tales include what Tolkien called "strange lumber" and a "thick dust of a no longer understood tradition" (qtd. in 69). Grybauskas contributes to our understanding of Tolkien's desire to complete or at least organise the underlying story-cycles in the Primary World and of his son Christopher's deep-delving editorial labours. Grybauskas buttresses his analysis with expositions of fragments, possibly dubious allusions, and other "strange lumber" in the Túrin tales, Mim's sack and its contents (70–71), the swords Anglachel and Anguirel (71–72), and the Dragon-helm (72–73). Grybauskas brings us back to the source materials such as the *Völsunga saga* and *The Battle of Maldon*. As Grybauskas suggests, Tolkien may have taken some inspiration from a "convoluted tradition. He seems to revel in the sheer confusion ... of the Völsunga material and the Sigurd-Brynhild-Gunnar triangle" (73); as such, a "weird feedback loop develops, whereby the Sigurd legend of the Primary World explicitly influences the subcreated Túrin Tur-ambar, who in turn exerts an influence on Sigurd in Tolkien's *New Lay*" (82).

Furthermore, Grybauskas emphasises what he calls Tolkien's huge influence on the development of role-playing games (110). Noteworthy is Grybauskas's use of the term "slow-gaming", based on the "slow food movement founded in Italy", as a good vehicle for Tolkienian untold tales and narrative depth (111); he then provides excellent case-studies on the games *Diablo* and *Dark Souls*, focusing on how these games create their immersive experiences, convey narrative depth, and develop the hero's journey slowly and elliptically. At the same time, Grybauskas's argument here would have benefited by including ideas from "In Praise of Slow Games", a classic 2019 manifesto by Artur Ganszyniec, lead designer on *The Witcher* and *Wolsung* games. Ganszyniec's desiderata include player-focused growth in assumptions and feelings, more grounding in relations to other players, and increased originality and authenticity of voice, all of which would have deepened the context of Tolkienian slow-gaming in *A Sense of Tales Untold*.

One of the most problematic untold tales is that of the Orcs, as Grybauskas acknowledges: "Tolkien wrestled with questions moral and metaphysical regarding the origin and nature of the Orcs, whose status as cannon fodder became increasingly untenable in his sub-creation" (38). Given the growing body of research into how Primary World ideas about race and ethnicity play out in fantasy worlds, the not-insignificant question about the origin and nature of the Orcs feels largely ignored in *A Sense of Tales Untold*. To help elucidate *why* stories about the Orcs (and the Haradrim, Variags, and soldiers of Rhûn) remain largely untold, *A Sense of Tales Untold* would have benefited from scholarship such as Dimitra Fimi's "Revisiting Race in Tolkien's Legendarium" (2012), Helen Young's *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (2016), and Matthew X. Vernon's *The Black Middle Ages: Race and the Construction of the Middle Ages* (2018). None of these, however, appears in Grybauskas's bibliography.

Likewise, because *A Sense of Tales Untold* fits nicely within the burgeoning field of research into world-building and subcreation, Grybauskas

would have been well-served to bring heightened attention to recent scholarship in this area. For instance, P. Djèlí Clark on his blog *The Musings of a Disgruntled Haradrim* ... (September 21st, 2018) explains in great detail the historical underpinnings and world-building techniques of his novel *The Black God's Drums* – his use of untold tales is both like and unlike the uses Grybauskas identifies in Tolkien's work, and our understanding of Tolkien would be enhanced by a comparison. Stefan Ekman and Audrey Isabel Taylor's "Notes Towards a Critical Approach to Worlds and World-Building", an article in *Fafnir* from 2016, presents a case for "world-architecture" that *A Sense of Tales Untold* might have used with profit, especially in the chapter on Túrin. In addition, Helen Marshall's "A Flare of Light or 'The Great Clomping Foot of Nerdism?': M John Harrison's Radical Poetics of Worldbuilding", an article in *TEXT* from 2020, juxtaposes Tolkien with Harrison (and Michael Moorcock, China Miéville, Timothy Morton, and Jeff VanderMeer). Marshall's reading suggests that Harrison and Tolkien are more alike than Harrison's well-publicised polemics might imply, which would have provided additional scaffolding for Grybauskas's thesis.

Still, plaudits to Grybauskas for aperçus that open doors to further reflection. For example, referring to *The Blade That Was Broken*, he writes that Orcs and Uruks are not "wholly ignorant of heroic legend either: perhaps this very blade figures prominently in their horror stories of the Great Siege and the bad old days" (48). He adds a footnote: "Proto-slasher films, perhaps" (130n45). I laughed out loud at this (a rarity when reading scholarly monographs), valuing the potential for nuance in his interpretation. There is also this: "Tolkien's terse summaries open up imaginative spaces for all manner of Túrin cycles: *Túrin in Love*, *Túrin Enraged*, *Túrin the Outlaw Swashbuckler*, *Túrin and Beleg: The Buddy Comedy*" (74). Here Grybauskas looks back to source traditions such as *Orlando Furioso*, *Tirant lo Blanch*, and *Amadís de Gaula* – and the multitudinous sequels and derivatives so famously satirised by Cervantes – and forward to the endless prequels, sequels and spin-offs of modern cinema and games (including, of course, the Tolkienian legendarium).

To close: Grybauskas succeeds in supporting his central thesis that "Tolkien's untold tales matter; [that] they are integral to the author's total vision" (79). Just as importantly, Grybauskas does this in part by reading Tolkien in the context of novelists such as Hemingway and O'Brien whose work is not speculative/fantastical, and likewise in terms of role-playing games. Tolkien Studies needs more such readings, to lodge its findings ever more firmly within wider rivers of literary, ludic, and media scholarship – and those wider rivers most definitely will benefit from Tolkienist eddies and currents. As Grybauskas makes clear, research on Tolkien's work and the underlying traditions have much to teach about meta-, inter-, and para-textuality; about point of view, aporia, diegesis, and unreliable narrators; about the reality effect and negative capability; transmediality; and many other topics that currently interest scholars across varied fields of literary inquiry. Perhaps Lit and Lang can be reconciled after all?

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BOOK REVIEW:

*Remainders of the American Century: Post-Apocalyptic Novels in the Age of US Decline*

*Adam McLain*

Bellamy, Brent Ryan. *Remainders of the American Century: Post-Apocalyptic Novels in the Age of US Decline*. Wesleyan UP, 2021. ISBN 978-0819580320.

In *Remainders of the American Century*, Brent Ryan Bellamy wants to unearth what remains after an apocalypse and what those remnants say about the present state of United States culture and hegemony. The “remainders” in Bellamy’s monograph are variously the things “left behind in the process of future reduction”; the “techniques of post-apocalyptic writing transmitted from text to text”; the “books that have gone unsold and unread [that] re-appear”; the “specific ideological leanings” of post-apocalyptic futures; and the rendering of “structures that make up the American century” (203). With these concepts of remainders framing his argument, Bellamy’s project has three components. First, he argues that post-apocalyptic novels form a literary mode that elucidates cultural tensions; second, he seeks to establish a critical dictionary to analyze that mode; third, he presents case studies on how that mode is present in various post-apocalyptic works. Bellamy accomplishes these feats with aplomb, deepening the political engagement that one can have with post-apocalyptic literature while providing generative critical tools that can be used by future scholars to analyze, critique, and examine the archive of the post-apocalypse.

Bellamy divides *Remainders of the American Century* into two parts: “The Post-Apocalyptic Mode” and “The Contested Politics of US Decline”. The first part establishes a critical toolkit of tropes, storyworld choices, and publishing decisions that constitutes the post-apocalyptic mode. The first

chapter uses four texts to establish four tropes – cataloguing, community formation, enclave building, and the last man – that have developed throughout post-apocalyptic literature published after the Golden Age of SF. In George Stewart’s *Earth Abides* (1949), for example, the protagonist, a PhD student, moves through a disease-ravaged America, cataloguing the changes of the world. This first trope allows Stewart to develop the world, but for Bellamy, cataloguing is also a technique that connects the post-apocalyptic world to the pre-apocalyptic world, thus signifying and determining what remains. The second trope Bellamy argues for is community formation. Using the various communities formed in Leigh Brackett’s *The Long Tomorrow* (1955), Bellamy asserts that collectives of people in post-apocalyptic novels signify the varied and disparate responses to apocalypse that can occur, from religious extremism to utopian collectivity. With Walter M. Miller Jr.’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), cataloguing *and* community formation by the monks synthesize into enclave building – the third trope. The final trope is the last man, which Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend* (1954) establishes and inverts through its ending that re-reads the last man – a remaindered human being – as the hunter rather than the hunted. This trope, then, provides writers with a way to easily enact the fears of living after an apocalypse, although Bellamy sees the application of this trope throughout the novels he analyzes as being mobilized in a “non-self-critical way” (49). These four tropes, then, are the building blocks that authors writing in the post-apocalyptic mode use to either critically or *non-critically* develop their characters, plots, and storyworlds.

In Chapter 2, Bellamy argues that post-apocalyptic novels build storyworlds based on destruction. Through stripping various pre-apocalyptic materials from the storyworld, post-apocalyptic novels develop a form of future that is based on reduction rather than creation. Bellamy introduces the phrase “reduced futures” to describe this authorial technique. In creating a storyworld that has less in it than the real world, authors remove superfluous, extraneous, or unnecessary parts of the world in favor of futures where reduction emphasizes what remains. Bellamy uses Sheri Tepper’s *The Gate to Women’s Country* (1988) and Stephen King’s *The Stand* (1978; 1990) as examples of future reduction. These novels reduce the future to gender or polity, and through that reduction, they exemplify the feminist turn and the fantasy resurgence that Fredric Jameson argues for in SF in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tepper’s world destruction focuses on creating a feudal society that is matriarchal rather than patriarchal, while King’s apocalypse favors an investment into the world of fantastical elements that provide for the salvation of those who remain and for a polarity of political activity. In comparing these two novels, Bellamy establishes that “future reduction”, or how a future is reduced through world destruction, is politically motivated, specifically with Tepper’s feminist or King’s Cold War influences. With this understanding, then, literary critics can use the storyworlds of post-apocalyptic novels as generative ground for understanding the contemporary politics of the authors.

Bellamy concludes the first part of the book with an assessment of the material culture of books as remainders of themselves. This argument is a step back from interpretation, pulling Bellamy’s argument into the material and cultural creation of popular books. While this chapter might seem tangential to the main argument, it is important for understanding the cultural creation of the archive of post-apocalyptic literature. Bellamy illustrates how post-

apocalyptic literature bolstered midlist author profiles in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, but these midlist collectives were shuttered after legal proceedings forced publishers to reduce their publishing output. Once the midlist was winnowed, self-publishing writers and bestselling, traditionally published authors turned to SF, producing varied takes on multiple forms of apocalypse, each trying to outdo the other as they fought for an audience and for monetary return on their investments. These books as material culture became remainders of a publishing industry that is still in the midst – depending on your level of optimism – of an evolution or a decline.

Overall, Bellamy's argument in Part I stands or falls on his distinction between literary mode and literary genre. Literary modes, for Bellamy, can be "critically organized by their effects", whereas literary genres are usually connected by their "web of resemblances", using a distinction forwarded by Veronica Hollinger (6). Post-apocalyptic novels are not simply engaging each other in a generic contest to see who can best depict the destruction of the world; instead, each novel written in the post-apocalyptic mode can determine "cultural tremors that signal and make way for hegemonic change" (9). In other words, Bellamy is far more interested in what post-apocalyptic novels say about their politics than the conventions by which they achieve the apocalypse or how humanity survives. This definitional differentiation between genre and mode, then, is important because it gives Bellamy the critical tools to argue that his chosen archive of post-apocalyptic novels is more engaged in political action than in literary provocation. If this archive were a genre rather than a mode, then the texts would be more focused on developing and subverting tropes and motifs; instead, post-apocalyptic novels read as a mode that say more about US culture – and, specifically, its hegemonical decline – than about US literary conventions. Bellamy utilizes this literary distinction well, developing the arguments of Hollinger and other critics and outlining how novels written within the post-apocalyptic mode comment on American cultural tensions. Even though Bellamy's book might use more engagement with what those cultural implications *are*, the implementation of mode over genre successfully builds a critical toolkit that can engage with post-apocalyptic literature.

Part II provides four case studies of texts that exhibit and bring out the nuances of Bellamy's foundational critical work from Part I. The post-apocalyptic mode becomes the legacy of the American frontier in Chapter 4. Bellamy uses David Brin's *The Postman* (1985) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Wild Shore* (1984) to show that the reduced and destroyed future of post-apocalyptic texts revitalize American hegemony on an untamed, imagined landscape. Bellamy argues that the "spatial configuration of post-apocalyptic storytelling nestles comfortably together with the remainder of the frontier myth" (129). In other words, post-apocalyptic texts utilize the myth of the frontier – from manifest destiny to the desire to tame the untamed – as a space in which to enact the story and its underlying politics. For example, in *The Postman*, this enactment is seen as the titular character crosses a post-apocalyptic America returning to the frontier mindset of grit, self-preservation, and adventure. The characters work to restore a United States that exhibits the alleged good in past America. The concept of the frontier is thus the path or landscape that allows this reconstitution of and reconciliation between old America and new post-apocalyptic America. Indeed, these connections between the frontier, manifest destiny, and the dream (or nightmare) of America

generate a strong beginning for scholars to look again at the use of the West in speculative fiction.

Tackling two books that centralize racial conceits in Chapter 5, Robert Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold* (1964) and LeVar Burton's *Aftermath* (1997), Bellamy argues that "post-apocalyptic novels have their own unique criteria to determine who survives and what persists" (134). These "unique criteria" are the cultural and racial assumptions that authors bring into their novels. Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold* attempts – and fails, according to Bellamy – to racially invert slavery. Black characters enslave white characters, but Heinlein fails because he does not target the questions of enslavement or race, but rather just victimizes his white characters. Burton, on the other hand, emphasizes a post-apocalyptic future that de-centers whiteness as the norm for its survivors. In *Aftermath*, Burton creates a eugenics-inspired world that favors the genes of darker-skinned people: the darker the skin, the greater rate of survival under the sun's more-powerful ultraviolet rays. Bellamy finds within this separation – the storyworld is segregated, but the characters are dedicated to a politics of diversity – a representation not only of a diverse cast engaging with the post-apocalyptic world, but also of the apocalypse itself fracturing from its definitive article ("the") into multiple apocalypses for various people depending on their race, class, social standing, or other identifying factor.

In the sixth chapter, Bellamy looks at Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Bellamy engages in a gendered critique that emphasizes the role (or, rather, the non-role) of the mother in the text. He reads the mother as a development of the "concept of the reproductive imperative" (155). The reproductive imperative is read through the image of the future child as argued for in Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004). The heteropatriarchal thrust toward reproducing a culture through the envisioned child of the future – a child who will never be born because they exist in the never-present future, but the concept of whom always guides political decisions. The mother figure in McCarthy's novel thus becomes a remainder as Bellamy sees the mother's narrative as aborted yet haunting the narrative. Without the woman's existence, the boy would not exist, but she is never fully realized within the plot of the text. This aborted mother becomes the political activism that Bellamy reads out of the remainders: *The Road* "narrativizes the impossible desire for a patriarchy without women or mothers" (169). In other words, *The Road* provides a post-apocalyptic setting that advances the concept of survival as the *raison d'être* for after an apocalypse, while removing the actual means for species survival: the womb.

The final chapter focuses on how energy and gas are removed from the storyworld in the post-apocalyptic mode. Instead of a future with flying cars, interstellar travel, or massive energy consumption, authors present readers with reduced futures in which mobility, power, and transportation are being minimized. In looking at four post-apocalyptic texts that utilize energy resources in different ways, Bellamy argues that energy should be seen as a social commodity rather than a material existence: how we use energy is constructed by the society in which we live. For example, in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), the detritus of the petrol regime persists as "memories or in the repurposing of old objects for new ends" (189). Bellamy cites three ways Mandel's storyworld creates remainders that help readers envision what the real world might look like in a post-petrol scenario: the

repurposing of an airplane hangar, the use of machines in innovative ways, and the loss of power and economic exchange due to a global pandemic that has wiped out most of the population. Within the texts on energy and gas, Bellamy goes further than in previous chapters by showing that the post-apocalyptic texts are offering possibilities of a post-capitalistic, post-petrol world, rather than just commenting on contemporary problems.

Even as Bellamy's engagements are generative and new, though, he seems to hesitate when making a specific argument regarding the regression of US hegemony. Although Bellamy highlights the decline of US political hegemony in his introduction and conclusion, this larger argument seems to fade in the rest of the book. In other words, his chapters provide excellent literary analysis, but they lack a clear, connective tissue that builds toward a larger argument. This hesitancy shouldn't necessarily fault the book, for *Remainders of the American Century* is a strong addition to the secondary literature, but it does leave the reader wanting more from each chapter. For example, in Bellamy's sixth chapter about *The Road*, he concludes by discussing how other post-apocalyptic texts, such as Octavia E. Butler's *Parables* duology (1993–1998), answer the gender questions he brings up, instead of connecting his analysis of *The Road* to what a patriarchy sans women means about the decline of US hegemony. That is, rather than interspersing his larger project into each chapter and drawing out his conclusion through his various smaller arguments, he prefers his readings to stand on their own. He does attempt to answer this critique in a footnote, acknowledging that "this book does not intend to settle" disputes about the decline of the American century (212n17), but a more detailed analysis of US decline throughout the book's case studies would have given this text a stronger cultural application.

In this way, the decline of US hegemony becomes itself a remainder in Bellamy's text. Instead of showing precisely what this decline is, he simply declares the decline as a decline, and post-apocalyptic novels as this unspecified decline's signifiers. Time will show how the decline occurs, perhaps, so Bellamy doesn't necessarily need to outline the specifics. He does not, after all, consider post-apocalyptic books prophetic, precisely, but instead reads them as fictional analyses of the consequences of contemporary crises (9–10). But the fact remains that the trope of US-in-decline is itself a remainder within Bellamy's text. Ultimately, Bellamy leaves it to readers to make their own connections about what this decline means. As such, the book's arguments stay with the reader, making them consider what a post-American apocalypse might look like and how they might survive it – if they haven't already.

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BOOK REVIEW:  
*Annorstädes [Elsewhere]*

*Michael Godhe*

Bark Persson, Anna. *Annorstädes*. Vendels förlag, 2021. ISBN 978-9198663655.

*Annorstädes* [English: *Elsewhere*; all translations my own] is a collection of essays written in Swedish, mostly on SF literature, but also on other speculative fiction genres such as fantasy and horror. The collection comprises no less than 22 brief essays with a preface by the publisher Johan Jönsson at Vendels förlag. The preface gives a brief suggestion of what SFF are genre-wise and how they work, probably for making the collection more accessible not only for the already informed reader, but also for a broader public. Furthermore, Jönsson states that SF studies in Swedish academia is still in its infancy compared to Finland – although I would argue that the situation has improved a lot the last two decades. Finally, Jönsson gives a short history of the Swedish fantasy and SF fandom, including Bark Persson’s involvement in these circles. According to Jönsson, Bark Persson – with one foot in fandom, and one foot in academia – combines the “enthusiast’s love to the books with the critic’s will to not just understand but also to disentangle and explain” when she analyzes speculative fiction (17).<sup>1</sup> This enthusiasm, I suspect, also explains why Bark Persson has chosen the essay format, which makes it possible to invite fans as well as academics to keep the conversation going on SFF from many perspectives. The essays can thus be read by a broader public without any generic competence in speculative fiction. With this in mind, Bark Persson provides her readers a fine and very well-written collection of essays that bridge the (sometimes alleged) gap between academia and other publics.

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<sup>1</sup> Original quote: “kombinerar entusiastens kärlek till böckerna med kritikerns vilja att inte bara förstå utan också att reda ut och förklara” (17).

However, it should be noted that the classic essay format or genre, in the Montaignean understanding of the word, is not often used in Swedish academia, let alone in writings on speculative fiction. Monographs and traditional scientific articles are the norm, while the essay format has been passed over with some suspicion for being not “academic” enough. And the essay format has its pros and cons, of course. On one hand, it allows Bark Persson to ask interesting questions on typical genre conventions in speculative fiction and discuss them in a limited text space. For example, on generation starships in the essay “Generations skepp och det stora tidsspannet” (“Generation Starships and the Great Time Span”): are generation starships really a good idea? What are the moral and ethical implications with letting generations of inhabitants on the spaceship die before they reach their destination? Is it possible from a psychosocial point of view to keep a population in a narrow confines for long time spans?

On the other hand, Bark Persson’s wide range of topics (e.g., family relations, robots and AI, queer escapism, post-apocalypse literature, and the planet Mars) and authors mentioned (Ann Leckie, Ted Chiang, Lewis Carroll, Catherynne Valente, Kim Stanley Robinson, Liz Williams, Jo Walton, John Kessel, Ada Palmer, and many others) may make one wonder if Bark Persson has enough page space to discuss them in some depth. However, this depends on how the questions around different topics are formulated, and mostly Bark Persson is careful enough to narrow her discussion down to a scale where she can do passingly good analysis (or at least make some interesting observations) in a quite limited space.

Bark Persson herself uses a theoretical toolkit borrowing perspectives mainly from Gender Studies, and many of the essays are interconnected through this toolkit but also through recurring themes such as generation starships (as already mentioned). The feminist and gender perspectives are outlined in the first essay, “Om feministisk science fiction och drömlaboratorium” (“On Feminist Science Fiction and Dream Laboratory”), which sets the tone for the collection. Rather than demand that feminist experiments in SF should function as blueprints for a utopian society, for example, Bark Persson argues that we should not act as a “kind of moral oracle or architect where the goal is to construct the most perfect or feasible vision of an equal future world” (23–24). Instead, feminist SF acts as a *dream laboratory*, a “space where feminism, at least in theory, has almost no limitations for what is possible to explore, discuss and test” (23).<sup>2</sup> It grants authors the opportunity to play with style, characters, gender conventions, counterfactual history, and more. One might also think of the sub-genres of critical utopias and critical dystopias here (see, e.g., Baccolini and Moylan; Godhe 2010). They conceptualize the development of social (especially feminist) SF in the 1960s and onwards in terms of abandoning blueprint utopias for more complex discussions of possible worlds and possible futures where essentialist notions of gender were contested, the Western belief in technological and scientific

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<sup>2</sup> Original quote: “som något slags moraliskt orakel eller arkitekt där målet är att konstruera den mest perfekta eller rimliga visionen av en jämställd framtida värld”; “ett rum där feminism åtminstone i teorin närapå helt saknar begränsningar för vad som är möjligt att utforska, diskutera och prova på” (23–24).

progress was deconstructed, and human exceptionalism was eventually contested as well.

Without acting as a moral oracle, Bark Persson both embraces and criticizes how representations in mostly SF literature work as a dream laboratory. In one essay, Bark Persson examines the pros and cons of matriarchal utopias in John Kessel's SF novel *The Moon and the Other* (2017) with references to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and other SF works. A common aspect of many matriarchal utopias is that since biology seems to be humanity's destiny, there is only one way to have equal societies free from violence, namely, to force men to be second-class citizen or simply abolish them. According to Bark Persson, Kessel indeed shows how matriarchal utopias and women separatist worlds emanate from a kind of biological determinism, but Kessel does not fully use the potential to investigate this problem. For example, biological determinism in matriarchal utopias poses a problem for an intersectional feminism that includes transgender issues. Nevertheless, stories on matriarchal utopias and women separatist worlds still have the potential to contest essentialist notions of sex and gender, of what is biologically "natural" for women and by extension for men.

Overall, there are an abundance of ideas and threads throughout this volume, but unfortunately I cannot discuss every essay. Particularly worth mentioning, though, are one of the two essays dedicated to Ursula K. Le Guin. In "Det finns ingen feminism på Vinter" ("There is no Feminism on Winter"), Bark Persson returns to the ambivalent reception of Le Guin's ground-breaking novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). In the novel, the male protagonist from a planet federation including Earth is visiting the planet Winter, a place where the inhabitants have only one sex. Bark Persson places the novel in the context of radical feminism. When it was published, the reception was more mixed, and Le Guin was criticized for reproducing patriarchal structures, something she later regretted. The societies on Winter portrayed by Le Guin, as Bark Persson points out, are masculine, and the characters are neither androgyn nor neuter, but rather just men able to become pregnant. Throughout the novel the protagonist uses the personal pronouns "he" or "him". So, *The Left Hand of Darkness's* feminist perspective may, for a modern reader, be somewhat outdated and a disappointment, according to Bark Persson, but, instead, the "anticipated radicalism is installed in the past" when the novel was first published (157).<sup>3</sup> Bark Persson works out a proposal for a sympathetic reading in her conclusion in the essay. Although *The Left Hand of Darkness* was maybe not as radical or confrontative as Joanna Russ's ground-breaking novel *The Female Man* from 1976, Bark Persson suggests that "maybe we should locate the novel's feminist potential somewhere else instead, to be able to do it justice" (158).<sup>4</sup> This is true, and maybe Bark Persson could have elaborated more on that "somewhere else". On the other hand, the essay's aporetic ending is also a way of asking readers to make sense of the novel themselves – and, once again, of refusing to position herself as a moral oracle or architect.

<sup>3</sup> Original quote: "Istället installeras den förväntade radikaliteten i dåtiden" (157).

<sup>4</sup> Original quote: "Kanske borde vi istället lokalisera romanens feministiska potential någon annanstans, för att kunna göra den rättvisa" (158).

Finally, the last essay “Science fiction vid världens ände” (“Science Fiction at the End of the World”) is maybe the most interesting piece in the collection. In the typical manner of the essay format, i.e., by starting with asking a question or by making an argument to evolve around and be discussed from different angles, Bark Persson states that she believes that “science-fiction literature had slowly but surely began losing its role as *Zeitgeist* literature” (218). This can also be interpreted as a rhetorical question: “Has it?” Considering the postmodern mistrust of the Enlightenment belief in the Modern Western project, particularly the notion of progress, and how SF and its subgenres have changed, as I read some the context for Bark Persson’s arguments, Bark Persson remarks that time has “caught up with the SF genre and its, and our, dreams”. The multifaceted vocabulary of the future offered by SF must make way for “another vocabulary, other ways of understanding the world, society, culture, and the systems, changes, and power shifts that shape and reshape them” (224–25).<sup>5</sup>

As Bark Persson herself points out, this is not the first time someone has proclaimed the pending death of the SF genre, and in any circumstance, I am not sure that the closing essay of the collection has convinced me of the end of SF. It is rather possible to see her essay as the beginning of an ongoing discussion on the reinvented SF genre, especially in times when non-Western SF is discussed more than ever in conferences, articles, and books. It is there the vocabulary has changed and where “other ways of understanding the world, society, culture, and the systems, changes, and power shifts that shape and reshape them” are explored. If this is SF per se or just genre hybridity, however, is another question.

All in all, *Annorstädes* is a vivid and fluid collection of often interconnected essays. Even if many essays could have benefited from more development, the page space allotted is mostly enough since the themes are so clearly outlined. From the beginning of the collection to the last thought-provoking essay, Bark Persson’s arguments are easy to follow. The language is lucid and eloquent, and Bark Persson’s theoretical toolkit nonetheless keeps the jargon to a minimum. This makes the collection available for a broader public without over-simplifying matters. A certain acquaintance with or knowledge of speculative fiction genres, the authors and filmmakers mentioned, and some of the theories used is, of course, an advantage, but in my opinion the collection has the potential to interest laymen as well as academics not usually concerned with speculative fiction genres.

Hopefully, Anna Bark Persson’s in many ways excellent collection of essays can also inspire more Swedish speculative fiction scholars (with or without one foot in fandom) to use the essay format.

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<sup>5</sup> Original quote: “tror att science fiction-litteraturen sakta men säkert har börjat förlora sin roll som *zeitgeist*-litteratur” (218); “har hunnit ifatt sf-genren, och våra, drömmar”; ”får stå tillbaka för en annan vokabulär, andra sätt att förstå världen, samhället, kulturen och de system, förändringar och maktskiften som formar och omformar dem” (224–25).

Future Studies” (co-written with Luke Goode) in the journal *Culture Unbound*, and the themed issue of *Culture Unbound*, on Critical Future Studies (co-edited with Luke Goode). ORCID ID 0000-0002-3259-9754.

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## Call for Papers: *Fafnir* 2/2023

*Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research* invites authors to submit papers for issue 2/2023. Research into any and all aspects of science fiction, fantasy, and other speculative genres is welcome from a range of disciplines.

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