# The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms

Edited by Taryne Jade Taylor, Isiah Lavender III, Grace L. Dillon, and Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay

# THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK
# OF COFUTURISMS

*The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms* delivers a new, inclusive examination of science fiction, from close analyses of single texts to large-scale movements, providing readers with decolonized models of the future, including print, media, race, gender, and social justice.

This comprehensive overview of the field explores representations of possible futures arising from non-Western cultures and ethnic histories that disrupt the "imperial gaze". In four parts, *The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms* considers the look of futures from the margins, foregrounding the issues of Indigenous groups, racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, and any people whose stakes in the global order of envisioning futures are generally constrained due to the mechanics of our contemporary world.

The book extends current discussions in the area, looking at cutting-edge developments in the discipline of science fiction and diverse futurisms as a whole. Offering a dynamic mix of approaches and expansive perspectives, this volume will appeal to academics and researchers seeking to orient their own interventions into broader contexts.

**Taryne Jade Taylor** is Advanced Assistant Professor of Science Fiction at Florida Atlantic University. Her research focuses on the politics of representation in speculative fiction, particularly feminist science fiction and diasporic Latinx Futurisms. She firmly believes science fiction and fantasy build paths to a better, inclusive future, which is why her research focuses on diversity, inclusion, and justice as presented in the secondary worlds of the fantastic.

**Isiah Lavender III** is Sterling-Goodman Professor of English at the University of Georgia, where he researches and teaches courses in African American literature and science fiction. He is the author/editor of six books, including *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement* (2019) and the interview collection *Conversations with Nalo Hopkinson* (2023). He is currently completing the first draft of *Future Pasts: Race and Speculative Fictions*. Finally, he edits for *Extrapolation*.

**Grace L. Dillon** (Anishinaabe) is Professor in the Indigenous Nations Studies Program at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate course on a range of interests including Native American and Indigenous studies, science fiction, Indigenous cinema, popular culture, race and social justice, and early modern literature. She is the editor of *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012) and *Hive of Dreams: Contemporary Science Fiction from the Pacific Northwest* (2003).

**Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay** is Associate Professor in Global Culture Studies at the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages at the University of Oslo. He is Principal Investigator of the European Research Council project "Cofutures: Pathways to Possibilities" as well as Principal Investigator of the Norwegian Research Council project "Science Fictionality" in addition to running the Holodeck, a state-of-the-art Games Research Lab at the University of Oslo.

# ROUTLEDGE LITERATURE HANDBOOKS

For more information about this series, please visit: https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Literature-Handbooks/book-series/RLHB

# THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF COFUTURISMS

*Edited by Taryne Jade Taylor, Isiah Lavender III,*
*Grace L. Dillon, and Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay*

# CONTENTS

Contents

Contents

# Contents

# FIGURES

*Figures*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been put together during three years of some of the worst things the world is experiencing in recent history. Rising fascisms everywhere that are posing a mortal threat to the marginalized, an ongoing deadly pandemic whose effects will be felt for decades to come, a war in Ukraine and Russian invasion that has brought humanity closer to the threat of nuclear annihilation once again. CoFuturisms are not just in the pages of this book and a reflection of what is going on in the world outside; they are a necessity for the time to come.

This work would not have been possible without the many long online meetings that we had as an editorial team over these years. Those meetings, which always lasted several hours, not only shaped how we thought about the book, but were a source of comfort. So I want to acknowledge my coeditors first, for making this possible.

I also want to thank our contributors, for sticking with the project over this long period of gestation. I hope the resulting *Handbook* justifies their trust in us.

*Acknowledgments*

Finally, I want to thank my CoFutures group, my family, and my love Tonje Anderson, for keeping me sane. They make me see through the pessimism and believe in better worlds every day.

—*Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay*

# NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Vanessa J. Aguilar** is a dual-degree PhD candidate in Chicano/Latino studies and English at Michigan State University. In addition, she holds a certification in Caribbean and Latin American Studies. In 2015, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English with an emphasis in rhetoric from the University of Missouri–Kansas City. In 2018, she earned a Master of Arts in English from Emporia State University. Her primary research centers on (Afro)Chicanx/(Afro)Latinx women's representations in literature. Her interests oscillate between bruja feminism, archival research, speculative fiction, and contemporary young adult literature.

**Arlie Alizzi** is a Yugambeh writer from southeastern Queensland, Australia, living and working between Narrm, on the lands of the sovereign Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung peoples, and Rubibi/Broome in Yawuru Country. He is a postdoctoral researcher and editor and writes essays, creative nonfiction, and critical art writing in addition to peer-reviewed publications. He teaches on Indigenous Futurisms, queer theory, and literature. Arlie was the coeditor of the 2018 volume of *Un Magazine* and coeditor of the *Archer Magazine* special First Nations issue in 2020.

**Márton Árva** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Hispanic Studies of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. His main fields of research include Latin American cinemas, postcolonial theory, decolonial thinking, and technological imaginaries. His edited volume, *Kino Latino— Latin-amerikai filmrendezőportrék* [Kino Latino—Latin American Filmmakers] was published in 2020.

**Stina Attebery** is Lecturer in Interdisciplinary Studies at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. Her research and teaching focus on the links between media technologies, pollution, and Indigenous Futurisms. She has published articles in the journals *American Quarterly*, *Medical Humanities*, *Extrapolation*, and *Humanimalia* and contributed to collections on *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture* (2018), *Gender and Environment in Science Fiction* (2018), *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (2020), and *Fifty Key Figures in Cyberpunk Culture* (2022). She serves as Division Head for Film and Television for the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts and as an external editorial board member for *Studies in the Fantastic*.

**Euan Auld** is Assistant Professor in the Department of International Education at The Education University of Hong Kong. He holds a PhD in comparative and international education and policy studies from the UCL Institute of Education. His early research focused primarily on the impact of international large-scale assessments and digital technologies on education, research, and governance. Recent projects include an inquiry into the role and perceptions of student leaders and campus culture during the 2019–2020 social movement in Hong Kong, and experimental studies of education futures.

**Eduardo Barros-Grela** is Associate Professor in the Department of English at A Coruna University (Spain), where he teaches American studies, film, and cultural studies. He is interested in urban spaces, popular culture, and the dialectics of representation and performance. Recent publications include studies on Latinx and Chicanx cultures, space, and contemporary fiction: "Corporeal Monstrosities and Teratological Grimaces. Monstrous Spaces in Twenty-First Century Cinema"; "Living the Neo-Noir Autopia: Cultural Spaces of Los Angeles in Drive and Nightcrawler"; "Narratives of the Post-Human in Post-Urban Environments"; and "Cultural Writings of the Fairy Tale".

**Kristina Andrea Baudemann** is an instructor and research assistant in the Department for English and American Studies at the Europa-Universität Flensburg in Germany. Her work has been published in peer-review journals such as *SAIL/Studies in American Indian Literatures*, *Extrapolation*, and *Transmotion*. In 2014, she was a Fulbright fellow at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Kristina is an affiliate researcher of Obx Labs and the Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF) at Concordia University in Montréal.

**Natasha Bailey-Walker** is Assistant Professor of English at Morehouse College. Her studies focus on literature of the diaspora with an eye towards Afrofuturism, pop culture, and spirituality. Walker began her study of spirituality in Nigeria, the Caribbean, and the Americas after researching her own Jamaican heritage. She also slated to release a podcast with author Dionne Irving Bremyer, *Second Place Is First Loser*, focusing on the experiences of second-generation Jamaicans.

**Sheetala Bhat** is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Ottawa. Her research engages with contemporary feminist and queer performance in India and Indigenous theater in Canada. She won the 2022 Robert Lawrence Prize from the Canadian Association for Theatre Research, the 2020 Helsinki Prize from the International Federation of Theatre Research, and the 2019 David G. Hartwell Emerging Scholar Award from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts. She has published articles in *Theatre Research in Canada*, the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, and the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. She is the author of *Performing Self, Performing Gender: Reading the Lives of Women Performers in Colonial India*, which is published by Manipal University Press, India.

**David Bowles** is a Chicano author and translator from South Texas, where he teaches Mexican American literature and Nahuatl as an associate professor at the University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley. His award-winning titles include *Feathered Serpent, Dark Heart of Sky: Myths of Mexico* as well as the speculative series *Garza Twins*, *Clockwork Curandera*, and *13th Street*. His work has also been published in venues such as *The New York Times*, *School Library Journal*, *English Journal*, *Strange Horizons*, *Apex Magazine*, *Translation Review*, and the *Journal of Children's Literature*. Presently, David serves as vice president of the Texas Institute of Letters.

**Patrick Brock** is a doctoral research fellow with the CoFutures group led by Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay and funded by the European Research Council at the University of Oslo. His research focuses on Latin American science fiction and futurism as engines of genre creation and social movements. Patrick holds a degree in journalism from the Federal University of Bahia (Brazil) and an MA in English literature from CUNY, and has worked as an editor, foreign correspondent, and translator. He has also published two books of short stories and been featured in literature anthologies in Brazil.

**Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay** is Associate Professor in Global Culture Studies at the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages at the University of Oslo. He is the Principal Investigator of the European Research Council project "Cofutures: Pathways to Possibilities" as well as the Principal Investigator of the Norwegian Research Council project "Science Fictionality", in addition to running the Holodeck, a state-of-the-art Games Research Lab at the University of Oslo. He is also a Fellow of the Imaginary College at the Center for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University. Chattopadhyay is the founding series editor (with Taryne Jade Taylor) of Routledge *Studies in Global Genre Fiction*.

**Gina Cole** is a Fijian European queer writer who lives in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), New Zealand. Her short story collection *Black Ice Matter* won Best First Book Fiction at the 2017 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards. Her short fiction, flash fiction, poetry, and essays have been widely anthologized and published. She holds an LLB (Hons) and an MJur from the University of Auckland. She has a masters of creative writing (MCW) from the University of Auckland, and a PhD in creative writing from Massey University. Her science fiction fantasy novel *Na Viro* (2022) is a work of Pasifikafuturism.

**Alyssa D. Collins** is Assistant Professor of English and African American Studies at the University of South Carolina. She was also the inaugural Octavia E. Butler Fellow at the Huntington Library (2021–2022). Her research focuses on Black life, humanity, and technology as represented in Black speculative texts. Her book project, *Cellular Blackness: Octavia E. Butler's Posthuman Ontologies*, explores moments of embodiment, human evolution, and posthumanity in the work of Octavia E. Butler, Nnedi Okorafor, and other black science fiction writers. Alyssa also engages her research through digital and public humanities methodologies and has contributed to several digital projects.

**Virginia L. Conn** is a lecturer at Stevens Institute of Technology. Her research interests are in socialist science fiction (particularly Mao-era Chinese, Soviet Russian, and East German science fiction), theories of the body in science fiction, and how speculation about human development shapes and is shaped by population management policies. She is currently finalizing her monograph on the development of the "new socialist human" in Sino-Soviet-GDR science fiction, which analyzes how SF authors utilized utopian ideals of technological advancement as blueprints for shaping individual citizens. She is the managing editor for the *SFRA Review*.

**Dustin Crowley** studies African literature, science fiction, ecocriticism, and geocriticism. He is the author of *Africa's Narrative Geographies: Charting the Intersections of Geocriticism and Postcolonial Studies* and has recently published articles on migration, Afropolitanism, and African science fiction. His current project, tentatively titled *(Un)Real: Contemporary African Science Fiction*, explores the genre's multiple relationships to "the real", and the ways it challenges exclusively rationalist technoscientific apprehensions of reality in mainstream SF, making

space for alternative world- and future-making. Crowley is Associate Professor of English at Rowan University, where he teaches courses on critical theory and global literature.

**Jalondra A. Davis** is a Black feminist artist-intellectual, merwomanist Melusine, and fierce warrior mama. Her articles on Black speculative culture are published and forthcoming in the *Museum of Science Fiction Journal of Science Fiction*, *Shima Journal*, and *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. Her book-in-progress, *Merfolk and Black Being in Water*, focuses on Black mermaid lore in conversation with Western modernity and the Anthropocene. She is currently Assistant Professor at the University of California, Riverside, where she teaches courses in speculative fiction and Black literary and cultural studies. She is also an amateur mermaid, swimming and performing under the name Mami Melusine, and podcasts about mermaids, fantasy, and Black aquatic life on *The Merwomanist* podcast.

**Grace L. Dillon** (Anishinaabe) is Professor in the Indigenous Nations Studies Program at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on a range of interests including Native American and Indigenous studies, science fiction, Indigenous cinema, popular culture, race and social justice, and early modern literature. She is the editor of *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012) and *Hive of Dreams: Contemporary Science Fiction from the Pacific Northwest* (2003). Her scholarship appears in a diverse range of journals including *Extrapolation*, *Foundation*, the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, *Journal of Fantastic in the Arts*, *Journal of Science Fiction Film and Television*, *Renaissance Papers*, and *Science Fiction Studies*.

**G.G. Diniz** is an Afrolatina author of speculative fiction and editor for "Corvus Editora" and "Revista Ignoto". She is one of the creators of Sertãopunk and has published many works in Portuguese, such as "O Sertão Não Virou Mar" and "Morte Matada".

**Damaris C. Dunn** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia's Mary Frances Early College of Education. She is a former New York City public school teacher and community school director. Her research examines the dialectical relationship between the neoliberal carceral state, the afterlife of Brown, and Black women teachers' refusal. She believes that Black women teachers' and Black girls' joy is their birthright.

**Vítor Castelõs Gama** is a doctoral student at University of Brasília, where he researches about the Amazon in Brazilian SF.

**Jesse A. Goldberg** is Assistant Professor of American Literature at New Mexico Highlands University and coeditor of *Queer Fire: Liberation and Abolition*, a special issue of *GLQ*. Previously, they taught at Longwood University and have worked with the Penn State Restorative Justice Initiative and the Cornell Prison Education Program. Their academic writing is published in the journals *Women's Studies*, *ASAP/Journal*, *College Literature*, *Public Culture*, *Callaloo*, *Women & Performance*, *MELUS*, and *CLA Journal* as well as the edited collections *Teaching Literature and Writing in Prisons*; *Unsettling Poetry Pedagogy*; *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*; and *Toni Morrison on Mothers and Motherhood*.

**Matthew David Goodwin** is a scholar, an editor, and a translator. His research is centered on the experience of migration, in particular how Latinx writers are using science fiction and

fantasy to explore migration. He is the editor of *Latinx Rising: An Anthology of Latinx Science Fiction and Fantasy* as well as the young adult collection *Speculative Fiction for Dreamers*. His study of Latinx science fiction, *The Latinx Files: Race, Migration, and Space Aliens*, was released through Rutgers University Press. He is Assistant Professor in the Chicana/o Studies Department at the University of New Mexico.

**Jenna N. Hanchey** is Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Critical/Cultural Studies and Senior Global Futures Scholar at Arizona State University. Her work is premised on a politics of decolonization, and she addresses the intersections of rhetoric, African studies, and critical development studies. Her first book, *The Center Cannot Hold: Decolonial Possibility in the Collapse of a Tanzanian NGO* is published with Duke University Press. She is currently working on a second book on Africanfuturism, which examines how speculative fiction can imagine decolonization and bring it into being. Her own fiction writing tries to support this project of creating better futures for us all. Her stories appear in *Nature: Futures*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *If There's Anyone Left*, among other venues.

**Omar Houssien** is a Cairo-based Egyptian Australian multidisciplinary visual artist and designer. With previous exhibitions in Cairo, Amsterdam, Milan, and Belgrade, his works rely heavily on research as well as on an experiential methodology of inquiry akin to "visual anthropology". Interested in the subjects of identity (and identity-making), storytelling, and its historicity as well as the ways in which we interpret and perceive the world, these themes are usually broached with consideration of their social, historical, anthropological, political, and philosophical attributes.

**Dr. Jacinth Howard**, originally from St. Vincent and the Grenadines, currently teaches at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, Barbados. She holds a BA in literatures in English with education and a PhD in the same field. Her critical work focuses on speculative fiction and has been featured in the *Journal of West Indian Literature*. Her work focuses on Caribbean authors such as Karen Lord, Tobias Buckell, and Stephanie Saulter. Locally, she has written award-winning poetry and she also enjoys writing prose. Additionally, she loves hiking, teaching, and spending time with her husband and young son.

**Casper Bruun Jensen** is an anthropologist of science and technology currently residing in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. He is the editor of *Deleuzian Intersections: Science, Technology, Anthropology* with Kjetil Rödje (Berghahn, 2009) and *Infrastructures and Social Complexity* with Penny Harvey and Atsuro Morita (Routledge, 2016). Among recent work on climate, environments, infrastructures, and speculative and practical ontologies is a special issue of *NatureCulture* on "Experiments in Thinking Across Worlds" with Asli Kemiksiz, and "Wound-Up Worlds and the *Wind-Up Girl*: On the Anthropology of Climate Change and Climate Fiction," published by *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology & Society*.

**Goutam Karmakar** is NRF Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. He is one of the editors of the Routledge book series on South Asian literature. His areas of research are South Asian literature and culture, women and gender Studies, postcolonial studies, and ecological studies. His forthcoming and recently published edited volumes are *Nation and Narration: Hindi Cinema and the Making and Remaking of National Consciousness* (Routledge, forthcoming), *The Poetry of Jibanananda Das: Aesthetics, Poetics, and Narratives* (Routledge, forthcoming), *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*

(Routledge, 2022), *The City Speaks: Urban Spaces in Indian Literature* (Routledge, 2022), and *Religion in South Asian Anglophone Literature: Traversing Resistance, Margins and Extremism* (Routledge, 2021). He has also published articles in over a dozen academic journals.

**Sheng-mei Ma** (馬聖美) is Professor of English at Michigan State University, USA, specializing in Asian Diaspora culture and East-West comparative studies. He is the author of over a dozen books, including *The Tao of S* (2022), *Off-White* (2020), *Sinophone-Anglophone Cultural Duet* (2017), *The Last Isle* (2015), *Alienglish* (2014), *Asian Diaspora and East-West Modernity* (2012), *Diaspora Literature and Visual Culture* (2011), *East-West Montage* (2007), *The Deathly Embrace* (2000), and *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (1998). Coeditor of five books and special issues, *Transnational Narratives* (2018) and *Doing English in Asia* (2016) among them, he also published a collection of poetry in Chinese, *Thirty Left and Right* (三十左右).

**Kasey Jones-Matrona** currently holds an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in Native American Studies at the University of Oklahoma. She completed her PhD in Native American literature at the University of Oklahoma. She is a settler scholar from the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and her research interests include Indigenous Futurisms, Indigenous feminisms, Anthropocene and climate literature, Indigenous digital storytelling and activism, and environmental humanities.

**Kenrick H. Kamiya-Yoshida**, a speculative fiction writer and filmmaker, is a third-generation immigrant of Okinawan and Japanese ancestry to the occupied islands of Hawai'i. Raised in lower Kalihi near Honolulu Harbor, his interest in speculative fiction was first inspired by the nightmare imagery of the film Gojira. Since then he survived his childhood on a diet of Japanese and American sci-fi TV. He is a graduate of the Clarion South Writers Workshop in Brisbane, Australia, and the Academy for Creative Media at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. His work is an exploration of his Okinawan identity through speculative media.

**Sami Ahmad Khan** is a writer, academic, and documentary producer. He is the recipient of a Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions Fellowship (University of Oslo, Norway), a Fulbright FLTA grant (University of Iowa, USA), and a UGC-MANF Senior Research Fellowship (Jawaharlal Nehru University, India). He holds a PhD in science fiction from JNU and has taught at the Indian Institute of Technology (Delhi), Jindal Global University, and GGS Indraprastha University. Sami's future-war thriller *Red Jihad* won two awards and his second novel—*Aliens in Delhi*—garnered good reviews. His creative and critical writings have appeared in leading academic journals (*Science Fiction Studies, The Journal of Popular Culture, Foundation*), university presses (MIT Press, University of Wales Press), and trade imprints. He has been translated into Czech and Marathi. His latest book is the critically acclaimed *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj: Materiality, Mythology and Technology of Indian Science Fiction*, which was longlisted for the BSFA Award (nonfiction).

**Isiah Lavender III** is Sterling Goodman Professor of English at the University of Georgia, where he researches and teaches courses in African American literature and science fiction. His most recent books include *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement* (2019) and *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, coedited with Lisa Yaszek (2020). Likewise, he recently coedited with Yaszek *Beyond Afrofuturism*, the special double issue of *Extrapolation*. His current projects include the interview collection *Conversations with Nalo*

*Hopkinson* and the monograph *Future Pasts: Race and Speculative Fictions*. Finally, he edits for *Extrapolation*—the oldest science fiction academic journal.

**Jason Edward Lewis** is a digital media theorist, poet, and software designer. He founded Obx Labs, where he explores computation as a creative and cultural material. His work has been featured at Ars Electronica, Elektra, ISEA, SIGGRAPH, and HIFF, and has been recognized with the inaugural Robert Coover Award for Best Work of Electronic Literature, two Prix Ars Electronica Honorable Mentions, several imagineNATIVE Best New Media awards, and multiple solo exhibitions. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, he is the University Research Chair in Computational Media and the Indigenous Future Imaginary at Concordia University, Montréal.

**Parker Alexander Miles** is a PhD student at the University of Michigan School of Education. His research interests include theories of the posthuman and Black kids' digital literacies. In his "spare" time, he binges science fiction and fantasy literature, contributes to the Afrofuturist STEM game *SpaceBox*, and bass fishes any body of water he can.

**Rhya M. Moffitt** is a PhD student in the Department of English at the University of Chicago. She holds master's degrees in English from Northeastern University and the University of Texas at Austin. Her work focuses on the intersections of Blackness, gender, (dis)ability/(un)wellness, and affect. Rhya is also an educator with experience teaching at the secondary through undergraduate level. Her curriculum design centers historically marginalized voices and prioritizes accessible pedagogies.

**Jasmine A. Moore** is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at the University of California, Riverside. Having completed her master's degree in English at the University of Huntsville in Alabama and her bachelor's degree at Howard University, Jasmine's interests center around Afro-diasporic speculative cultures and Afrofuturism. Her work focuses on the intersections of race, gender, class consciousness, and critical utopias inspired by adrienne maree brown's work on applied utopian strategy. The guiding questions in Jasmine's work ask, "Who are utopias for?", "What is a perfect world?", and "What happens when utopias leave people behind?"

**Graham J. Murphy** is Professor with the School of English and Liberal Studies (Faculty of Arts) at Seneca College (Toronto). His most recent works include "Feminist-Queer Cyberpunk: Hacking Cyberpunk's Hetero-Masculinism" for *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction* (2023) and coeditor for *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture* (2018), *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (2020), and the BSFA Award–nominated (longlist) *Fifty Key Figures in Cyberpunk Culture* (2022). He has previously written on Ambelin Kwaymullina's Tribe series for an *Extrapolation* special issue on Indigenous Futurism. He has also had articles/book chapters published on William Gibson, Kathleen Ann Goonan, Robert Charles Wilson, H.G. Wells, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and James Tiptree Jr., among others.

**Kenny K.K. Ng** is Associate Professor at the Academy of Film at Hong Kong Baptist University. His book, *Li Jieren, Geopoetic Memory, and the Crisis of Writing Chengdu in Revolutionary China* (Brill, 2015) studies cultural geography and historical memory in fictional narratives. His ongoing book projects concern censorship and visual cultural politics in Cold War Hong Kong, China, and Asia, a critical history of Cantophone cinema, and left-wing cosmopolitanism. He

has published widely in the fields of comparative literature, Chinese literary and cultural studies, cinema and visual culture in the United States, United Kingdom and Europe, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China.

**Dike Okoro,** a literary critic and editor of multiple anthologies of poetry and short stories, is Associate Professor of English at Harris Stowe State University. He is a recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including Senior Research Fellow at Ken Saro-Wiwa Foundation, a Newberry Scholar-in-Residence Award, and a Sam Walton Fellowship. He is the author of *Mazisi Kunene: Literature, Activism, and African Worldview* (2022), *Lupenga Mphande: Ecocritical Poet/Political Activist* (2020), and *Futurism and the African Imagination: Literature and Other Arts* (2021). He studied English and poetry, and he obtained his MFA from Chicago State University and his PhD in English from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.

**Shadya Radhi** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature at King's College, London. She attained her master's degree from the University of Warwick and her BA from the University of Bahrain. She conducts research on Arabian Gulf literature with a particular focus on Arabian Gulf women's writings. Her research interests include gender politics, Arabic science fiction, eco-criticism, and Gulf Futurism. She has published a review of Jokha A-Harthi's novel *Celestial Bodies* in the online publication *The Conversation*, a short story in the *Read Me* anthology titled "The Door", and an essay in *The Bridge Magazine* called "Deeper Meanings".

**Catherine S. Ramírez**, Professor and Chair of Latin American and Latino Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is a scholar of Latinx literature, visual culture, and performance, Mexican American history, migration, citizenship, and speculative fiction. She is the author of *Assimilation: An Alternative History* and *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory*, and she is a coeditor of *Precarity and Belonging: Labor, Migration, and Noncitizenship*. She has also written for the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Public Books*, and *Boom California*.

**Lysa Rivera** is a Professor of English at Western Washington University, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in Chicanx and Black U.S. writers. Her areas of interest include Chicanx cyberpunk, the literature of the Environmental Justice Movement, and Chicana feminisms. You can find her work in journals such as *MELUS: Multiethnic Literature of the U.S.*, *Aztlán: Journal of Chicano Studies*, and *Science Fiction Studies*. She lives in Bellingham, Washington, with her husband and their son.

**Channette Romero** is Associate Professor of English at the University of Georgia. She is the author of *Activism and the American Novel: Religion and Resistance in Fiction by Women of Color* (2012), as well as essays on Indigenous literature and film in *American Indian Quarterly*, *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, *Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literatures*, and *Visualities 2: More Perspectives on Contemporary American Indian Film and Art*, among others. Her current book project, under contract with the University of Nebraska Press, explores North American Indigenous filmmakers' growing appropriation of genre films—especially science fiction, horror, animation, Westerns, and sports movies.

**Alan de Sá** is an independent researcher, journalist, writer, advertising copywriter and cocreator of Sertãopunk.

**Sofia Samatar** is the author of five books, most recently *The White Mosque*, a memoir of faith, family, and border crossing. Her first novel, the epic fantasy *A Stranger in Olondria*, won the 2014 William L. Crawford Fantasy Award, the British Fantasy Award, and the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel, and was included in *Time* magazine's list of the 100 Best Fantasy Books of All Time. Samatar also received the 2014 Astounding Award for Best New Writer. A scholar of Afrofuturism and modern Arabic literature of Africa, she is Associate Professor of English at James Madison University in Virginia.

**Joy Sanchez-Taylor** is Professor of English at LaGuardia Community College (CUNY). Her research specialty concerns the intersections between science fiction, fantasy, and critical race theory. Her book *Diverse Futures: Science Fiction and Authors of Color* (2021), examines the contributions of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century U.S. and Canadian science fiction authors of color to the genre. She is currently working on a monograph project on diverse fantasy representations.

**Mykaela Saunders** is a Koori/Goori and Lebanese writer and teacher, and the editor of *THIS ALL COME BACK NOW*, the critically acclaimed, world-first anthology of Blackfella speculative fiction (UQP, 2022). Mykaela won the 2022 David Unaipon Award for their Goori Futurism collection *ALWAYS WILL BE: stories of Goori sovereignty from the future(s) of the Tweed* (UQP, 2024). Mykaela's short fiction, poetry, essays and research have been widely published and have won the Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize, the Oodgeroo Noonuccal Indigenous Poetry Prize, the National Indigenous Story Award, the Grace Marion Wilson Emerging Writers Prize and the University of Sydney's Sister Alison Bush Graduate Medal for Indigenous research.

**Cassandra Scherr** is Assistant Professor of African American and Ethnic American literature in the English Department at St. John Fisher College. Her research focuses on African American culture and literature, American literature, speculative fiction, and social justice. She received her PhD in English from SUNY Buffalo in August 2021. Her dissertation, *Human Pain, Monstrous Pleasure: Black Feminine Monstrosity and Its Potential for Black Pleasure Through Uses of The Speculative*, which explores her research interests in the use of speculative fiction when exploring questions of race, ethnicity, gender, and class in fiction, art, and activism.

**Frederike Schneider-Vielsäcker** is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Chinese Studies at Heidelberg University. She received her PhD in Chinese studies from the Free University of Berlin in June 2021. Her thesis focuses on sociopolitical discourses in contemporary Chinese science fiction literature written by authors of the post-1980s generation. She participated in international conferences and gave talks on Chinese SF at the MLA, ACLA, and SFRA Annual Conventions, Stockholm University, University of Geneva, and Lund University. In 2019 and 2020, she cohosted an event series with major Chinese SF writers in Berlin and organized panel discussions for the Frankfurt Book Fair. Recently, Frederike organized a workshop with filmmaker Fan Popo on anti-Asian racism and Chinese film at the Centre of Asian and Transcultural Studies of Heidelberg University.

**Somasree Sarkar** is Assistant Professor of English at Ghoshpukur College, Siliguri subdivision (affiliated with University of North Bengal, West Bengal, India). She is also pursuing her PhD from the Department of English, University of North Bengal, West Bengal, India. Her articles have been published in an edited volume, *Partition Literature and Cinema: A Critical*

*Introduction* (UK: Routledge, 2020). Her articles have also been published in *Journal of Gender Studies*, *South Asian Review*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, and *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*. Her areas of interest are environmental humanities, posthuman Studies, and gender studies.

**Daniel Schreiner** received a diploma in Social Work in 2006 and a master's degree in comparative literature, politics and Middle Eastern studies in 2009 after studying at the Technical University of Cologne, the Bosporus University in Istanbul and the University of Bonn. He taught German studies in Pakistan, Mexico, and Azerbaijan, at the University of Paderborn and at Middlebury College. For his PhD project, "Mexican-American and Turkish-German Literature in Comparison—Writing as a Tool of Political and Cultural Participation", he undertook extended research at the University of Texas at Austin. He is a DAAD representative and Assistant Professor in the German Department at the Ege University in Izmir, Turkey.

**Conrad Scott** holds a PhD from, and is Instructor at, the University of Alberta's Department of English and Film Studies, on Treaty 6 / Métis lands, and is Individualized Study Tutor for the University of Athabasca's Honours English course on "The Ecological Imagination". He researches contemporary sf and environmental literature, with current projects focused on plant and animal futures, as well as the spatial turn. His reviews and essays have appeared in *Science Fiction Studies*, *Extrapolation*, *Paradoxa*, *Transmotion*, *Environmental Philosophy*, *The Goose*, *UnderCurrents*, *Canadian Literature*, and *The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms* (2023), with a forthcoming chapter in *Animals & SF* (Palgrave 2024). He is also a coeditor for the forthcoming *Entangled Futurities* (Routledge, 2024) and is the author of *Waterline Immersion* (Frontenac House, 2019).

**Gabriele de Seta** is, technically, a sociologist. He holds a PhD from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and was Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica in Taipei. Gabriele is currently Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Bergen, where he is part of the ERC-funded project "Machine Vision in Everyday Life". His research work, grounded on ethnographic engagement across multiple sites, focuses on digital media practices, sociotechnical entanglements, and vernacular creativity in the Chinese-speaking world. He is also interested in experimental music, internet art, and collaborative intersections between anthropology and art practice.

**Patrick B. Sharp** is Professor of Liberal Studies at California State University, Los Angeles. His scholarship explores the complex relationships between colonial formulations of race, gender, evolutionary science, and the history of science fiction. His coedited anthology *Sisters of Tomorrow* (2016) recovered major contributions women made to pulp SF from the 1920s to the 1940s. His most recent monograph *Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction* (2018) shows how first-wave feminist SF was deeply influenced by evolutionary science, and the book was given the *Choice* Outstanding Academic Title Award from the Association of College and Research Libraries.

**Julia Siepak** is a doctoral candidate in literature at the Interdisciplinary Doctoral School "Academia Copernicana", Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland. Her current research project pertains to the poetics of space emerging at the intersections of the feminine and the environmental in contemporary North American Indigenous fiction in English and was awarded funding by the National Science Center, Poland. Julia's published and forthcoming

work focuses on Indigenous speculative fiction, Indigenous women's writing in North America, and Two-Spirit literature.

**ire'ne lara silva** is the author of four poetry collections—*furia, Blood Sugar Canto, CUICACALLI/House of Song*, and *FirstPoems*—two chapbooks—*Enduring Azucares* and *Hibiscus Tacos*—and a short story collection, *flesh to bone*, which won the Premio Aztlán. ire'ne is the recipient of a 2021 Tasajillo Writers Grant, a 2017 NALAC Fund for the Arts Grant, the final Alfredo Cisneros del Moral Award, and was the Fiction Finalist for AROHO's 2013 Gift of Freedom Award. ire'ne is currently a writer at large for *Texas Highways* magazine and is working on a second collection of short stories titled, *the light of your body*.

**Stephen Hong Sohn** is Professor of English at Fordham University and currently holds the Thomas F.X. and Theresa Mullarkey Chair in Literature. He is the author of *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* (New York University Press, 2014), *Inscrutable Belongings: Queer Asian North American Fiction* (Stanford University Press, 2018), and *Minor Salvage: The Korean War and Korean American Life Writings* (University of Michigan Press, 2022). He is the coeditor of *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits* (Temple University Press, 2006) and the editor of Karen Tei Yamashita's *Anime Wong: Fictions of Performance* (Coffee House Press, 2014).

**Claire Stanford** is Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Nevada, Reno. Her scholarship has been published in *Modern Fiction Studies*, and her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Electric Lit*, *Lit Hub*, *Black Warrior Review*, *The Rumpus*, and other publications. She holds a PhD in English from the University of California, Los Angeles, and an MFA in creative writing from the University of Minnesota. She is the author of the novel *Happy for You* (Viking, 2022).

**Anne Stewart** is a lecturer in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of British Columbia. She studies twentieth- and twenty-first-century U.S. fiction, with a focus on Indigenous literatures, critical theories of race and ethnicity, and the environmental humanities. Her work has been published in *MELUS*, *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, and *The E3W Review of Books*. She is the author of *Angry Planet: Decolonial Fiction and the American Third World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

**Taryne Jade Taylor** is Advanced Assistant Professor of Science Fiction at Florida Atlantic University. Her research focuses on the politics of representation in speculative fiction, particularly feminist science fiction and diasporic Latinx Futurisms. She firmly believes science fiction and fantasy build paths to a better, inclusive future, which is why her research focuses on the future as presented in the secondary worlds of the fantastic. She has published in such journals as *Science Fiction Studies*, *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, *Paradoxa*, *Label Me Latina/o*, and *Mythlore*. She is an associate editor for *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, cofounding editor (with Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay) of the Routledge book series *Studies in Global Genre Fiction*, and a juror for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. She is currently working on her monograph *The Future is Decolonial: Defining Latinx Futurisms*.

**Blaire Morseau** is an enrolled citizen of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians and Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Michigan State University. Her research interests are Indigenous science fictions and futurity, counter-mapping, traditional knowledge, and digital

heritage. Her most recent book project, titled *As Sacred to Us: Simon Pokagon's Birch Bark Stories in Their Contexts*, is expected in October 2023 from Michigan State University Press.

**Srđan Tunić** (1984) is a freelance curator and art historian based in Belgrade, Serbia. He is a cofounder of Trans-Cultural Dialogues (as part of Cultural Innovators Network), Kustosiranje/About and Around Curating and Street Art Walks Belgrade initiatives. He researches fields such as contemporary art, curatorial practices, street art and graffiti, science fiction, art appropriation, independent cultural scene, and self-management. His texts have been published in *the Kultura Journal, Transcultural Studies Journal*, *IJOCA—International Journal of Comic Art*, *SAUC—Street Art & Urban Creativity Scientific Journal*, *SEEcult*, and *Uneven Earth*, among others.

**Päivi Väätänen** is a recent doctoral graduate of the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her doctoral thesis *Narrating Alien Encounters: Race, Identity, and Generic Change in Science Fiction* (2021) focused on the changing parabola of the alien encounter in science fiction by black sf authors. She has published on the topics of Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and on the intersections between narrative ethics and science fiction. She is also a member of the Advisory Board of *Fafnir—Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*.

**Emily C. Van Alst** (Mackinac Bands of Chippewa and Ottawa Indians) is currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University. Her dissertation project focuses on Indigenous women's relationship to rock art (specifically images of elk), and how those images are related to cultural and environmental landscapes. Her overall research interests include rock art, gender, archaeological ethics, and methods related to Indigenous archaeology and community-based research practices.

**Regina Kanyu Wang** is a writer, researcher, and editor, currently pursuing her PhD under the CoFUTURES project at the University of Oslo. Her research interest lies in Chinese science fiction, especially from the gender and environmental perspective. She writes science fiction, nonfiction, and academic essays in both Chinese and English. She is coeditor of the Chinese SF special issue of *Vector*, the critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association; *The Way Spring Arrives and Other Stories*, an all-women-and-nonbinary anthology of Chinese speculative fiction; and the English version of *The Making of The Wandering Earth: A Film Production Handbook*.

**Marta Werbanowska** is a postdoctoral assistant in American literature and culture at the University of Vienna, Austria. She obtained her PhD from Howard University in 2019 and was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in 2014–2015. Her research and teaching interests include African American and Afro-Caribbean literatures with emphasis on poetry, literatures of social and environmental justice, Black studies, and environmental humanities. Her scholarship has been published in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE) and the *College Language Association Journal* (CLAJ), among others. Her first book, *Vital Necessity: Ecological Thinking in Contemporary Black Poetry*, will examine contemporary African American and Afro-Caribbean ecopoetry in the broader context of Black traditions of ecological thinking.

**Liam Wilby** recently completed his PhD in English literature at the University of Leeds. His thesis explored the disruptive and productive dialogue between critical posthumanism, Black

studies, and Black knowledges mediated through analyses of Black science fiction. He has previously published on George Lamming and Nalo Hopkinson. Currently, Liam is working at the BBC and plotting a route back to academia.

**Piper Kendrix Williams**, department chair and Professor of African American Studies, jointly appointed with the English department at The College of New Jersey, received a BA from Spelman College and an MA and PhD from Rutgers University. She is coauthor of *The Toni Morrison Book Club* (Wisconsin UP, 2020). Her book, *Representing Segregation: Toward an Aesthetics of Living Jim Crow, and Other Forms of Racial Division*, was coedited with Brian Norman (SUNY P, 2020). She is the editor of *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Toni Morrison* (MLA, forthcoming). She teaches various classes on topics in nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American literature and African diaspora literature.

# INTRODUCTION TO COFUTURISMS

*Taryne Jade Taylor*

## Defining CoFuturisms

CoFuturisms is a movement that is found both within science fiction and fantasy and also reaches past the boundaries of speculative fiction. The concept of CoFuturisms knits together work being done on the various forms of futurisms by people of color and Global South Futurisms, such as Afrofuturisms, Indigenous Futurisms, Latinx Futurisms, Asian Futurisms, and Gulf/Middle Eastern Futurisms. Each of these represent a clearly identifiable movement, mode, aesthetic, and subgenre. As creators and scholars of these futurisms have noted, CoFuturisms are more than simply subgenres of science fiction; they are also movements that offer us paths to internal and external colonization, modes that remind us that we belong in the future and of the importance of recovering our often suppressed pasts, aesthetics that coalesce these visions under a single, diverse umbrella, and also represent growing subgenres of science fiction. What all CoFuturisms share in common is the offering of a vision beyond the white supremacist future that permeates our collective Global North visions of the future—whether those are Campbellian Golden Age science fiction texts that excluded people of color and the Global South in their future imaginings, or the visions of politicians who lead with hate and fearmongering, drawing upon legacies of conquest and manifest destiny. CoFuturisms use science fictional thinking to build just, inclusive futures; to critique and bear witness to the injustices of the past and present; and, perhaps most importantly, to offer us all hope of extricating ourselves from the dire future we face as a species and that we inflict on other species and the earth, should we not urgently institute change.

As an intellectual framework, CoFuturisms offers us a way to bridge the connection between ethnic specific and regional specific futurisms. Thus, our goal with this collection is to showcase the emerging thinking about these diverse futurisms, while also illustrating that the very nature of CoFuturisms is interconnectedness and overlap. Despite people of color being the global majority, people of color and ethnic minorities share common histories and legacies of oppression. Colonization and imperialism are at the core of this shared history—when other groups of people structured by nation, race, religion, etc., aim to take territory and personhood through the suppression of other peoples and cultures for their own benefit. CoFuturisms narratives show keen awareness of the cost of colonization and imperialism—the legacies of genocide, slavery, displacement, and forced assimilation. For so many of us—and by us, we mean people

of color and peoples in the Global South—the apocalypse has already come, a century or more ago in the form of colonization, slavery, and genocide. CoFuturisms showcase the way that we, in the face of the postapocalpyse, engage in science fictional thinking to build a better tomorrow, to heal and rebuild ourselves and our communities, to look towards a more collaborative, collective way of being in the world. It is in this spirit that we, as the editors, undertook to build this handbook.

Of the various forms of futurisms represented under the umbrella of CoFuturisms, Afrofuturism was the first to be so named and theorized by scholars and creatives. First coined as a term in the 1990s, Afrofuturism in its initial, singular iteration was defined as the way African American musicians, artists, and writers were drawing on science fiction to assert that Black people belonged in the future—to contest white supremacist narratives of exclusion and technological illiteracy and to emphasize belonging. Afrofuturism in its early iteration was never just about Black people in science fiction, but even in its origin grappled with what it means to survive apocalypse—in this case, the forced enslavement of African ancestors and the legacies of that enslavement. The early iteration of Afrofuturisms was shaped by Mark Dery, Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, Tricia Rose, Alondra Nelson, and Kodwo Eshun. As more creatives and scholars engaged Afrofuturism, what was originally identified as a subgenre, mode, and aesthetic has become a movement. Afrofuturisms has expanded as scholars such as Ytasha L. Womack (2013), Reynaldo Anderson (2016), Mark Bould (2007, 2010), Lisa Yaszek (2005, 2006), and our own coeditor Isiah Lavender III (2011, 2014, 2019) engage with the movement. Now, we use Afrofuturisms in the plural form to showcase the diversity of Black thought and experiences represented by the global movement in terms of literature, music, art, cinema, and fashion.

Nnedi Okorafor has notably added an additional related futurism to the Afrofuturisms movement—Africanfuturism (2019). Okorafor's Africanfuturism is based on the premise that much of Afrofuturisms centers on the African diaspora, particularly the African American diaspora, and not rooted in the continent the way the futurisms of African creators or new arrivals to the diaspora would be. Okorafor is not the first to attempt a new coinage to replace Afrofuturism—Afrotopia (1998), Steamfunk (2012), Black Quantum Futurism (2015), and Speculative Blackness (2016), among others—but she is the most successful in terms of defining a term that satisfies her own sense of what her work represents to the African continent. And rightly so. We respect this authorial choice and know that others from the African diaspora will seek to define their own creations as well (for example, Cyberfunk is out there, courtesy of Atlanta-based Black writer Milton Davis). There is plenty of room for conversation, and we are thrilled to be part of it. With that said, Okorafor's example showcases how the movements of futurisms are always expanding and shifting as more engage with the broader movement of CoFuturisms.

The second form of CoFuturisms to reach prominence is Indigenous Futurisms, first coined by a member of our editorial team, Grace L. Dillon, in 2003. Indigenous Futurisms is a movement that encompasses Indigenous peoples across the globe. In the same way early iterations of Afrofuturism centered on African Americans, Dillon's early iteration of Indigenous Futurisms centered on Native Americans in the United States and Canada, who share similar experiences of colonization and genocide. Dillon and other scholars and creatives have shown how concepts of Indigenous Futurisms extend far beyond even the Americas, showing threads of connection between Indigenous peoples all over the world without effacing the diversity of nations and experiences. Indigenous Futurisms is at its core about decolonizing the future and survivance, about recovering the suppressed histories and practices of native peoples and honoring Indigenous science and knowledge. Like Afrofuturisms, it is not only a subgenre, but a movement that

extends to ways of being and thinking. Indigenous Futurisms is also about the "presencing" of Indigenous peoples. In much of science fiction, futures are imagined where Indigenous or Native American people no longer exist. They are not imagined in the futures of dominant culture. In North America, particularly Canada and the United States, there is a largely held misconception that Indigenous peoples no longer exist—that the genocides resulted in annihilation. While it is true Indigenous peoples were decimated by genocide, Indigenous people survive and thrive. As is true for many Black people engaging Afrofuturisms, for Indigenous peoples, the apocalypse has already come via the colonization and genocide.

Indigenous Futurisms are often "narratives of biskaabiiyang", which is to say Indigenous Futurisms entail a returning to the self, which involves decolonization, "discovering how personally one is affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native apocalypse world" (Dillon 10). Decolonization involves reshaping and/or rejecting colonial beliefs and concepts. One of the ways Indigenous Futurisms engage in biskabiiyan, which means to "return to ourselves" in Anishinaabemowin, is by utilizing Indigenous science and demonstrating Indigenous cosmologies that portray worldviews that depart from the narratives and beliefs of the colonizers. Our own Grace L. Dillon explains:

> Indigenous Futurisms typically return to an appreciation of Indigenous cosmologies that collapse time, space, and other elements that are distinguishable parts of "reality" in Euro-western Enlightenment thinking. Fundamentally, this is why Indigenous Futurisms look like science fiction, especially to those who equate "fiction" with "false" or "incredulous" or "unimaginable". In fact, these storytellings often portray a worldview in which human beings, animals, plants, spirits, even weather patterns possess agency and function as active characters in "true" stories. Additionally, because spirituality, cosmology, and story are all bound together in Indigenous science, CoFuturisms often function to preserve Indigenous scientific wisdom and spirituality in particular.
>
> *(3)*

Indigenous Futurisms overlap with many of the other CoFuturisms discussed; thus, a work can simultaneously be Africanfuturist and Indigenous Futurist.

The next form of CoFuturisms is Latinx Futurisms. As with Afrofuturisms and Indigenous Futurisms, Latinx Futurisms' early iteration was built from the specific. In 2004, Catherine S. Ramirez first coined the term Chicanafuturism in homage to Afrofuturism as a way to identify the unique way she saw Chicana or Mexican American artists engaging with science fiction. Scholars such as Cathryn Merla-Watson (2017, 2020), B.V. Olguín (2015), and our own coeditor Taryne Jade Taylor (2014, 2020, 2022) have since expanded this concept to include the Latinx diaspora. What is more, as you will see in this collection, Latinx Futurisms are not limited to the diaspora and are also being created in Latin America and the Caribbean. Latinx Futurisms are when creators use science fictional thinking as a method of decolonization that interrogates the colonial and white supremacist influence on Latinidades. Latinx Futurisms and other CoFuturisms question the way people of color and peoples from the Global South have been erased from the futures imagined in mainstream science fiction and Global North politics. Latinx Futurisms, first and foremost, are about presencing Latinxs.

Latinx Futurisms often meditate on what it means to be Latinx both in the diaspora and in the context of the racial and ethnic mixing in Latinx America, the very theoretical understanding of which, in the form of *mestizaje*, is rooted in the same kind of eugenicist, racist, colonial thinking that Latinx Futurisms disrupt and move beyond such thinking. For example, twentieth-century

Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos's theory of mestizaje in *La raza cósmica/The Cosmic Race* (1925), was rooted in the premise that the European element of racial intermixing was superior to the Indigenous element. The African ancestry of many Latinxs was completely effaced in Vasconcelos's theory. Of course, as we know, many Latinxs have mixed-race ancestry, particularly European, Indigenous, and African ancestries. As such, Latinx Futurisms themselves share many crossover connections with Afrofuturisms and Indigenous Futurisms, since Latinidades are intricately connected to indigeneity and Blackness. Taylor's 2020 essay on Latinx Futurisms asserts that Latinx Futurist works: (1) bear witness to the erased past and present, particularly colonization and racism; (2) expose and reject Anglo stereotypes about Latinxs; (3) redefine Latinidades (while rejecting the Anglo role in Latinx identity construction); and (4) unify Latinx cultures (Taylor 34). In keeping with these four tenets of Latinx Futurisms, we have intentionally included works from the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora in the Latinx Futurisms section in order to acknowledge how often pervasive anti-Black sentiments (and the inheritance of colonial domination) foreclose the Black Caribbean from discussions of Latinx America and its diaspora.

As with Afrofuturisms, Indigenous Futurisms, and Latinx Futurisms, conversations about Asian Futurisms began in the diaspora in 2016, with Dawn Chan coining Asia-Futurism and Lawrence Lek popularizing the term Sinofuturism. Much like Latinx Futurisms, Asian Futurisms are an emerging movement. Asian Futurisms differ from the other forms of CoFuturisms discussed here in that, rather than contesting narratives of technological illiteracy, Asian Futurisms contest narratives of techno-Orientalism, pushing against Orientalist visions of Asians in the future. In her 2016 article that coins the term "Asia-Futurism", Chan explains that Asians have been "othered across time", imagined only in a cliched future and never in the present. Further, "visions of Asia-futurism continue to be mirrored, magnified, and distorted in the Western world" (Chan 161). Similarly, Lek emphasized the importance of Sinofuturism in the present, noting "Sinofuturism has arisen without conscious intention or authorship, it is often mistaken for contemporary China. But it is not. It is a science fiction that already exists" (Lek). As Allison Hsu explains, Asian Futurisms ask "not how future imaginings of Asia and Asian identity are built from the West looking East, but instead, how they emerge from the East looking forward" (Hsu).

Given growing engagements with Asian Futurisms in both East Asia and South Asia, we are seeing more specific regional futurisms emerging. Our own coeditor Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay's 2016 essay on Kalpavigyan in South Asian science fiction is a critical work towards building South Asian Futurisms, as is Yudhanjaya Wijeratne's 2019 essay on Ricepunk. Though neither Chattopadhyay nor Wijeratne use the term South Asian Futurisms, we see these essays as integral to understanding this emerging conversation. Ryan A. D'Souza's 2019 article defines yet another form of CoFuturisms: Desi-futurism. Drawing upon conversations around Afrofuturisms, D'Souza defines Desi-futurism as "the application of a desi lens to interpret the past, present, and future" and as "a critical perspective that interrupts whitewashed imaginations of a technologized future with the experiences of the past-present to write desi versions of the past, present, and future" (D'Souza). Interestingly, in 2022, Desi-futurism and South Asian Futurisms have been embraced by South Asian diasporic musicians in a way that evokes early configurations of Afrofuturisms. Indian American musical artist Raveena categorizes her latest album as Desi-futurism, which she defines as "as a genre that South Asian underground artists are developing. It's about creating this beautiful framework and fabric and having all of us feel like we're part of something together" (Balram). Similarly, US-born, Indian-raised, London-based musician Sarathy Korwar characterizes his latest album as both "Indo-Futurism" and South Asian Futurism" (Clarke). It is our hope that this collection will add to this evolving conversation.

The final forms of CoFuturisms are those that refer to the experiences of the Near and Middle East, which are represented by the terms Gulf Futurisms and Arabfuturisms or, as Jussi

Parikka designates these CoFuturisms, Middle East Futurisms (2018). Filmmaker Sophia Al-Maria coined the term Gulf Futurism in 2007. Other noted figures shaping Gulf Futurisms include her frequent collaborators Monira Al Qadiri and Fatima Al Qadiri. In their 2012 conversation with *Dazed* Fatima Al Qadiri and Sophia Al-Maria outline the themes of Gulf Futurisms as

> the isolation of individuals via technology, wealth and reactionary Islam, the corrosive elements of consumerism on the soul and industry on the earth, the erasure of history from our memories and our surroundings and finally, our dizzying collective arrival in a future no one was ready for.
>
> *(Al Qadiri and Al-Maria)*

A related form of CoFuturisms is that of Arabfuturisms, first coined by Sulaïman Majali in 2015. As Majali explains, Arabfuturism must be decolonial:

> pluralised and in a state-of-becoming, Arabfuturism/s is a question and a movement forward that interrogates fictional historical narratives; a post-post-colonialist reflection on what actually is. Perhaps, as the text begins to propose, the ultimate hegemonic power is the power to define Arabfuturism/s could become an attempt to move towards a deco-lonial definition of the European-Arab (and beyond?).
>
> *(Majali)*

In addition to Majali, Palestinian artist and filmmaker Larissa Sansour is a central defining figure of Arabfuturism. Drawing on Sansour and Majali's work, Perwana Nazif defines Arabfuturism as "a new and necessary artistic movement for countering the xenophobia and racism of Europe and America" to present Arab-centered futures (Nazif). As with many of the other forms of CoFuturisms, early iterations of Arabfuturisms are tied to the diaspora, however, scholars have already expanded Arabfuturisms past the diaspora. As with all forms of CoFuturisms, these terms are still in flux, as more scholars and creators are still engaging the ideas of Gulf Futurisms and Arabfuturisms. Thus, we are particularly excited by the contributions in this handbook that add to the conversations of these emerging movements, hoping the definitions of Gulf Futurisms put forth by the contributors in this handbook will encourage further interest in this emerging movement.

## Why CoFuturisms?

Those who follow conversations around the futurisms described in the previous section are likely aware of the term Alternative Futurisms, which we ourselves used in the call for papers for this handbook. As the editorial team reviewed abstracts and discussed our vision for this book, we realized the term "alternative" sets up the works we are discussing here against both main-stream science fiction and futurist/futurology studies. While CoFuturist creations often do indeed offer alternatives, they are more than alternatives. We made the decision not to define CoFuturisms based on what they are not, but rather to define them based on what they are and can be. Thus, we argue the term Alternative Futurisms should be disregarded in favor of "CoFuturisms". The word "alternative" suggests that futures imagined by Black, Indigenous, and people of color are always or only in opposition to hegemonic futurism. We reject this fram-ing of CoFuturisms, as we believe that the term others ethnic Futurisms and Global South Futurisms when in fact we represent the global majority. That is not to say that considering the way CoFuturisms respond to and reject the futures imagined by white, European creators is

invalid, but rather that to see CoFuturisms only as a response to the problematic futures of the racist, capitalist Global North is to reify those values as well as unnecessarily restrict CoFuturisms, which are in fact expansive and diverse. We must here also acknowledge our debt to our coeditor Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay for his generosity of spirit in allowing us to use "CoFuturisms," a term which we developed out of his work on CoFutures (2020, 2021). We are also grateful for his creation of a database of research on CoFuturisms at biblio.cofutures.org, which we think will be of interest to readers of this collection.

### Handbook Structure and Theoretical Underpinning Explanation

In our initial vision for the handbook, we imagined its parts would be structured much in the way it finds you, by specific type of connected ethnic or regional affiliation. In our discussions, we realized this gave us some discomfort, as it replicates the very colonialist visions of identity, nationality, and place that we believe CoFuturisms disrupt and transcend. In the same way the borders between nations are in fact constructed and porous, so too are the borders of genres and subgenre categorization and the categories of CoFuturisms that shape this collection. For example, many works of Latinx and Caribbean Futurisms are also works of Afrofuturisms, thus making it difficult to decide where to place many of the essays contained in this collection. As such, we tried to let our vision of CoFuturisms as a theoretical concept guide our placement of the chapters. For instance, since the Black Caribbean is so often excluded from discussions of Latin America, we intentionally placed those essays in our Latinx Futurisms section, as the future we imagine is one of radical inclusion. Pragmatically, because many of these CoFuturisms are still emerging in the scholarly conversation, we also felt the regional grouping would be central in showcasing these emerging connected Futurisms.

More importantly, we have witnessed firsthand the dramatic impact the concept of Indigenous Futurisms has had on our field of science fiction studies in the past 15 years. Scholars have drawn on the work on Indigenous Futurisms to probe what we categorize as science and technological innovation and what forms of science and innovation are rejected. We believe we are witnessing a transformation of science fiction, not only in the scholarly arena, but also in the creative and fandom communities. As more and more scholars and creators engage Indigenous Futurisms, we see more people of color and people from the Global South realizing that we do indeed belong in the science fiction field, that our futures matter, that we matter. Not only that, but we also see a shift in what publishers believe is possible. While many creators of color have been and continue to be told that science fiction is for white men only and that their creations will not have appeal, many professional, scholarly, and creative science fiction organizations are loudly showing those publishers and naysayers that they are flat out wrong. The world *is* hungry for CoFuturisms, for science fiction and science fictional thinking that is decolonial. Indeed, the success of Ryan Coogler's 2018 Afrofuturist film *Black Panther* shows that global mainstream audiences are hungry for CoFuturist storytelling. As such, since we have seen the power of specificity as Afrofuturisms and Indigenous Futurisms have grown and flourished, we believe that since ours is the first collection of CoFuturisms, we must amplify the specific in terms of region and ethnicity of these newer forms of CoFuturisms, such as Latinx Futurisms, Asian Futurisms, and Gulf/Middle Eastern Futurisms. As you will see in this collection, many of our contributors further break down the specific to showcase and identify localized elements of this global movement. It is our deepest hope that this *Handbook of CoFuturisms* allows future scholars and creatives to continue pushing past such boundaries and categorizations as we work together to build a better future.

We are grateful to have included the voices of so many luminaries in science fiction studies to contribute fresh perspectives on the array of CoFuturisms that find expression in the

handbook. We would like to also note that we intentionally had four main coeditors, with no one single scholar as the particular lead editor in order to embody the CoFuturist movements represented here. Each member of the editorial team not only represents a significant voice in the study of one or more of the CoFuturisms considered in this handbook, but also are members of the historically marginalized communities that are producing these futurisms. We have aimed to approach the creation of this handbook from a CoFuturist, decolonial perspective, one that conscientiously acknowledges the ways in which we all engage in collaborative thinking. What is a handbook if not a true collaboration between the editors, contributors, and creators of the works being cited and discussed? In the future we wish to imagine and call into being, no one individual owns knowledge. Knowledge is meant to be shared, built upon, questioned, and improved. It is in this spirit we humbly present the *Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms*, acknowledging that we ride on the shoulders of our ancestors, and hoping that we can add to their seeding of the stars.

## Works Cited

Al-Maria, Sophia. "The Gaze of the Sci-Fi Wahabi." *The Gaze of the Sci-Fi Wahabi*, 2007, scifiwahabi. blogspot.com. Accessed 1 Dec. 2020.

———. *Sad Sack: Collected Writing*. 2015. Book Works, 2019.

"Al Qadiri & Al-Maria on Gulf Futurism." *Dazed*, 14 Nov. 2012, dazeddigital.com/music/ article/15037/1/al-qadiri-al-maria-on-gulf-futurism. Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

Anderson, Reynaldo. *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astroblackness*. Lexington Books, 2016.

Balram, Dhuvra. "Welcome to Raveena's Desi-Futurist Utopia." *Dazed*, 21 Feb. 2022, dazeddigital.com/ music/article/55505/1/raveena-desi-futurism-south-asian-musician-profile-ashas-awakening. Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

Bould, Mark. "Revolutionary African American SF Before Black Power SF." *Extrapolation*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2010, pp. 53–81.

———. "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2007, pp. 177–186.

Carrington, André M. *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*. U of Minnesota P, 2016.

Chan, Dawn. "Tomorrow Never Dies: Asia-Futurism." *Artforum*, vol. 54, no. 10, 2016, pp. 161–162.

Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva. "Kalpavigyan and Imperial Technoscience: Three Nodes of an Argument." *Journal of Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2018, pp. 102–122.

———. "Manifestos of Futurisms." *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2012, pp. 8–23.

———. "The Pandemic That Was Always Here, and Afterward: From Futures to CoFutures." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2020, pp. 338–340.

Clarke, Patrick. "Alternative Utopias: An Interview with Sarathy Korwar." *The Quietus*, 17 Nov. 2022, www.thequietus.com/articles/32363-sarathy-korwar-kalak-interview. Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

Davis, Milton J. *The City: A Cyberfunk Anthology*. MVmedia Publishing, 2015.

Dillon, Grace L. "Alternative Futurisms Proposal." Unpublished book proposal. 2020.

———. "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms." *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, edited by Grace Dillon, U of Arizona P, 2012, pp. 1–12.

———. "Indigenous Futurisms, Bimaashi Biidaas Mose, Flying and Walking towards You." *Extrapolation*, vol. 57, no 1–2, 2016, pp. 1–6.

———. "Indigenous Scientific Literacies in Nalo Hopkinson's Ceremonial Worlds." *Journal of Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2007, pp. 23–41.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 92, no. 4, 1993, pp. 735–778.

D'Souza, Ryan A. "Imagining a Desi Future." *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2019, pp. 47–59.

Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol, 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 287–302.

———. *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. Quartet Books, 1998.

Hsu, Allison. "Imagining Asian Futurity: History, Multiplicity, and Racial Solidarity." *ColorBloq: The Stories of Us*, Oct. 2020, www.colorbloq.org/article/imagining-asian-futurity-history-multiplicity-and-racial-solidarity. Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

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

———, editor. *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction*. U of Mississippi P, 2014.

———. *Race in American Science Fiction*. Indiana UP, 2011.

Lek, Lawrence. *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*, 2016, video essay, sinofuturism.com/. Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

Majali, Sulaïman. "Towards a Possible Manifesto: Proposing Arabfuturism(s) (Conversation A)." *Cost of Freedom: A Collective Enquiry*, edited by Clément Renaud. No costoffreedom.cc, 2015, pp. 151–153. Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

———. "Towards Arabfuturism/s Manifesto." *Novelty Magazine*, Issue 2, noveltymag.com/towards-arabfuturisms/. Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

Merla-Watson, Cathryn. "Latinofuturism." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, Oxford UP, 2020, doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.648. Accessed 25 Nov. 2022.

Merla-Watson, Cathryn Josefina. and B.V. Olguín, editors. *Altermundos: Latin@ Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*. U of California Los Angeles P, 2017.

Merla-Watson, Cathryn Josefina. "¡Latinx Futurisms Ahora! Recovering, Remapping, and Recentering the Chican@ and Latin@ Speculative Arts." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 40, 2015, pp. 135–146.

Moses, Wilson J. *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History*. Cambridge UP, 1998.

Nazif, Perwana. "Arabfuturism: Science Fiction and Alternate Realities in the Arab World. *The Quietus*, 22 Feb. 2018, www.thequietus.com/articles/24088-arabfuturism. Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

Nelson, Alondra. "Introduction: Future Texts." *Social Text*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2002, pp. 1–15.

Ojetade, Balogun. "What is Steamfunk? Exposing the Big Steampunk Lie!" *Chronicles of Harriet: The Very Best in Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Fiction!*, 5 Apr. 2012, chroniclesofharriet.com/2012/04/05/what-is-steamfunk-exposing-the-big-steampunk-lie/. Accessed 12 Nov. 2019.

Okorafor, Nnedi." Africanfuturisms Defined." *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*, 19 Oct. 2019, nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html. Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

Parrika, Jussi. "Middle East and Other Futurisms: Imaginary Temporalities in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture." *Culture, Theory, and Critique*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2018, pp. 48–58.

Phillips, Rasheeda, editor. *Black Quantum Futurism: Theory and Practice*, vol. 1. Afrofuturist Affair, 2015.

Ramírez, Catherine S. "Deus ex Machina: Tradition Technology, and the Chicanafuturist Art of Marion C. Martinez." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2004, pp. 55–92.

Sutcliffe, Jamie. "Letter from Honshu: Asia Futurism." *Art Monthly*, vol 403, 2017, pp. 42–43.

Taylor, Taryne Jade. "Latinxs Unidos: Futurism and Latinidad in United States Latinx Hip-Hop." *Extrapolation*, vol. 61, no. 1–2, pp. 29–52.

———. "Princess Nokia, 'Brujas' (2016) / Santería's Decolonial Futurisms." *Uneven Futures: Lessons for Community Survival from Speculative Fiction*, edited by Ida Yoshinaga, Sean Guynes, and Gerry Canavan. MIT Press, 2022, pp. 303–308.

———. "A Singular Dislocation: An Interview with Junot Díaz." *Paradoxa*, vol. 26, 2014, pp. 97–109.

Vasconcelos, José. *La raza cosmica/The Cosmic Race*, 1924, translated by Didier T. Jaén, Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

Wabuke, Hope. "Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and the Language of Black Speculative Literature. *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 27 Aug. 2020, lareviewofbooks.org/article/afrofuturism-africanfuturism-and-the-language-of-black-speculative-literature/. Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

Wijeratne, Yudhanjaya. 2019. "The Ricepunk Manifesto." *The Ricepunk Diaries*, 1 May 2019, www.yudhanjaya.com/2019/05/the-ricepunk-manifesto/. Accessed 15 Dec. 2022.

Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Lawrence Hill, 2013.

Yaszek, Lisa. "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future." *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2006, pp. 41–60.

———. "An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man." *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, vol. 9, no. 2/3, 2005, pp. 297–313.

# PART I

# Indigenous Futurisms

# 1

# THE FUTURE IMAGINARY

*Jason Edward Lewis*

**The Future Is Reaching for Us**

When you walk into my research lab you see, against the opposite wall straight ahead of you, a tall and wide filing cabinet. Affixed to it is a series of stickers:

Ne tá: we ne Onkwehonwehnéha
He wā maoli ke hiki maila
ᏢᏗᎮᏫ ᏴᎦ, ᎢᏟᎥᎱᏂᏓᏖᏫᏗᎫ, ᎠᏍ ᎤᏃᎪᎬᏒ ᎦᏫᎩ ᎬᏂᎨᏒ ᎥᏂᏎᎬᏫᎷ ᎤᏟᎬᎫᎫᏒᏔ
Da-anishinaabekaa ani-akiiwang
Hiŋhaŋna kiŋ ike wicháša

These are translations of "the future is Indigenous" into, respectively, Kanien'kéha, ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi, ᏣᏫᎩ ᏵᏫᏂᎫᏫᏗᎫ, Annishinaabemowin, and Lakȟótiyapi.[1] They invite visitors to shift frames as they transition from the university general into our Indigenous-led, Indigenous-focused space. Starting every workday with these words greeting me inspired the following short poem:

Future human beings
greeting us, reaching for us
suggesting subtle shifts in our first next step,
starting new trajectories
more likely to track out and through
into their embrace.

The future is reaching for us. How do we reach (towards) it? This question grounds the concept of "the future imaginary".

**Introduction**

A "future imaginary" is a vision of the future that is shared by a group of people and used to motivate change in the present. Future imaginaries provide groups with shared vocabularies for envisioning the future and strategies for getting to the future they desire. Such imaginaries

encompass both the macro—social configurations, political structures, technological infrastructure—and the micro—what we see, say, and do in the mundane day-to-day. Together, they create a field of "future facts", a fully realized reality that exists somewhere down the timeline, waiting for us to catch up to it. The concept of the future imaginary has been developed within the context of 25 years of research-creation and engagement within Indigenous communities, as a method for describing the futures we want and purposefully articulating the path(s) required to arrive there.

### *Genealogy*

The concept has its roots in technological and creative practice. I spent the 1990s working for several Silicon Valley technology labs, conducting research into and developing new technologies exploring digital media.[2] For a decade I learned from and collaborated with multidisciplinary teams that spanned science, engineering, social science, humanities, design, and art. These were, by and large, talented people turning their capable minds to the challenges of figuring out how to best harness computational techniques for human interaction. Many of them also dreamed freely of the future, fueled in part by a combination of post-1960s Silicon Valley technological utopianism, a funder with near-infinite resources, and, as I slowly came to understand, substantial privilege stemming from being (mostly) well-educated twentieth-century white Americans with front-row seats at the revolution. Participating in those Silicon Valley imaginaries left me in awe of the agency one can feel in such an environment, including the conviction that one can and is shaping the future. Encountering the pioneering *CyberPowWow* online exhibition space for Indigenous arts in 1997 inspired me to bring that same sense of future agency, as well as the capacity to build future technologies, into Indigenous contexts.

Though I did not have the conceptual language to understand fully what I was seeing, the first Indigenous future imaginary I experienced personally was in the spring of 2001: *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*, a web-based interactive work by the artist and my long-time collaborator Skawennati (Kanien'kehá:ka). This work consists of a 1,000-year timeline stretching from 1492, shortly before Columbus's floundering into North America, to the year 2490. The viewer engages with different points on the timeline via a paper doll representation of Katsitsahawi, a young Mohawk woman from our contemporary period. At ten different time slices, the viewer can try on clothes from that period as well as read Katsitsahawi's journal recording her thoughts about that moment. The viewer can visit Sacagawea, the Shoshone woman who kept the Lewis and Clark expedition from foundering in 1806; Raven, the Aluet from Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* cyberpunk set in 2121; or the 2488 Edmonton Olympics.

Later the same year I created my first Indigenous future imaginary: *Greetings to the Technological World*. This was another web-based interactive work, coauthored with Skawennati. This work, inspired by the Haudenosaunee Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen or "Thanksgiving Address", is composed of a three-channel video. On the left and the right are Skawenanti and myself, respectively, speaking directly into the camera in 20-second clips. In the middle is an overhead shot of a plate full of my family's American Thanksgiving meal—turkey, stuffing, potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce, and string beans—being methodically consumed. (All you see of us are our hands on opposite sides of the plate, wielding a fork and knife.) The lines Skawennati and I speak are imagined extensions to the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen, which offers gratitude for the elements of the natural world that support our existence such as the earth, the waters and the fish. Our extensions give thanks to those things that make our contemporary professional lives possible, such as the internet, desktop computers and digital media tools, e.g., "We are all thankful for the computer, the platform from which we can create and communicate … for this we send greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one".

Both of these works appeared in the wake of a continent-spanning conversation amongst Indigenous artists in the 1990s about how new digital tools and the internet could be integrated into Indigenous art practices. Lawrence Paul Yuxwelupton's (Coast Salish) *Inherent Rights Vision Rights*, the first VR environment created by an Indigenous person, appeared in 1992. Loretta Todd (Métis Cree)—reacting in part to *Inherent Rights Vision Rights*—wrote her seminal "Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace" essay in 1996 to articulate the challenges and opportunities these technologies presented to and for Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies. Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew (Cree Métis) explored the possibilities of Indigenous digital and network culture across a range of essays, websites, and performances ("Drumbeats to Drumbytes", "Storm Spirits", "Talk Indian to Me #4"). Skawennati curated four iterations of *CyberPowWow* from 1997 to 2004 to train Indigenous artists in digital techniques and exhibit the resulting artworks. One of those she invited along was Archer Pechawis (Cree), the first Indigenous artist to build and incorporate interactive instruments into his performances (*Binary* 1; *Memory* 2).

In retrospect it is clear that this effervescence of digital art-making, and thinking and writing about digital art-making, was in part about Indigenous people trying to understand their place in a future increasingly mediated by computational machines. Though the development of the term "future imaginary" came later (as detailed in the subsection "The Future Imaginary"), it is these turn-of-the-century explorations of the intersection between Indigenous creative practice and the digital that provided the first glimpses into how important it was and is to actively imagine ourselves as fully empowered agents of the future.

## Conceptual Foundation

The motivation to refine the future imaginary into a useful conceptual object came out of the activities of the Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) research network. Founded in 2005 by Skawennati and me, AbTeC brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, academics, activists, and technologists interested in the Indigenous/digital intersection. One of our main projects has been the Skins Workshops on Aboriginal Storytelling and Digital Media Design that integrate Indigenous community cultural knowledges with technical and creative instruction on producing digital media of various types. These workshops generated several conversations with Indigenous youth about the future: their future, the future of their communities, of humanity, of the planet (Lewis, *The Future Imaginary*). These in turn led to the Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF), founded by AbTeC in 2012. IIF's goal has been to think and create concretely around the idea of the future imaginary, drawing on Indigenous notions of the seventh generation to encourage exploring timescales that stretch into centuries. IIF built on the future imaginary work begun with *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century* and *Greetings to the Technological World*, utilizing creative practice and deep technological engagement to support Indigenous people and communities in developing future imaginaries ourselves (Lewis, *A Better Dance*).

The future imaginary is both a conceptual framework and a series of practices. Theoretically, it is founded in an intersection of sociologist Charles Taylor's notion of the "social imaginary" and literary scholar Grace Dillon's description of "Indigenous Futurism". While the former notion highlights the ways people imagine their social existence, the latter inscribes a means of establishing Indigenous presence in futures. This position takes further inspiration from the activist author Adrienne Maree Brown's understanding of speculative fiction as a way to "practice the future together".

## *Imaginaries*

Taylor describes the social imaginary as "the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings, not expressed in theoretical terms, but carried in images, stories, and legends" (106). He developed the concept to capture what I think of as the set of social "facts" that people take for granted as they operate in the mundane, everyday reality of their lives. It implies how we assume many things about the world without consciously aligning with a particular ideology or theory, but rather based on the stories we tell one another about how the world works.

I am interested in how we can create imaginaries of the future that establish fields of social facts that offer alternative configurations of how the world is ordered, for Indigenous people foremost but also for the wider human context in which we find ourselves. How do we get our people to assume life will be better for their seventh-generation descendants? To anticipate the revitalization and active everyday use of our languages? To point, with confidence, to futures marked by self-determination and agency? In other words, how can we change our expectations of how habitual, daily life can change? Once they are collectively articulated, future imaginaries can affect the current social imaginary to change how Indigenous people now think of themselves 100, 500, or a thousand years hence.

## *Futurisms*

Dillon, in her seminal Introduction to *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, writes about how Indigenous people have always been engaged in what is now commonly called science fiction (2). Yet we have been all but invisible in the science fictions that populate popular culture. By highlighting the Indigenous futures that have indeed been underneath our noses all along, Dillon reminds Indigenous people of how we have always imagined futures for our peoples. Simultaneously, she underscores the need to be even more active in envisioning our futures, echoing the sentiment expressed by the novelist N. Scott Momaday:

> We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who and what, and that we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined.

> *(167)*

Taken together, Dillon and Momaday express what I think of as the *imaginary imperative*: the necessary role that imagination plays in supporting Indigenous continuity by connecting the past and present to the future. Indigenous cultures are often written about and depicted as having been fractured or broken (Gruber), as a result of historical ignorance and attempts to delegitimize our existence as living cultures. Indigenous people also face pressures to conform to stereotypes of Indigenous ontology that withhold 'authenticity' from those actively engaged with many aspects of contemporary life (Crosby). Both kinds of settler strategies of elimination (Wolfe) interfere with the narratives we have within our communities about continuity between the past, the present, and the future. The imaginary imperative counters such strategies in its insistence on understanding Indigenous histories, current lives, and visions of the future as a persistent unfolding of an unbroken line of epistemological and cosmological frameworks that continuously evolve and adapt to support the lived experiences of Indigenous people.

Science fiction's roots in the imperial project are well-documented and require us to be wary of how naively engaging with its tropes invites the replication of colonial perspectives (Rieder). Yet it is also a powerful way to engender and celebrate the fantastical and the improbable.

We are fantastical, as seen from a settlers' perspective. Our circle of relations extends to the nonhuman, beings operating on geological time, connecting ourselves to our territories on timescales much longer than settlers' brief presence. Our continued existence itself is improbable, given the colonial forces arrayed against us and centuries of attempts to extinguish us. We survived apocalypse, proving our capabilities in surmounting challenges on an existential scale. Science fiction provides a palette expansive enough to accommodate imaginaries developed out of such complex histories.

### *Emergent Collaboration*

"Science fiction is simply a way to practice the future together", writes Adrienne Maree Brown (22). Her goal is to understand how to build systems of change, and, in that way, change systems. The approach she takes is to craft simple interactions through which the change one seeks can emerge, to avoid the trap of designing systems top-down and from whole cloth. Better to recognize that people live lives full of love and regret and chaos and resonance that is often nonlinear and difficult to predict; to recognize that social systems intertwine, interpenetrate, and interbreed in ways that always escape logical control.

Brown advocates a form of adaptive relationality: making connections with each other and other entities in our context that allow us to change and grow along with them. Such a path requires us to remain attentive to local entities (human, nonhuman, elemental) and conditions, flexible in the face of inevitable setbacks and capable of extending care where it is needed. Creating better futures must be a mindful, active practice. "What you pay attention to grows", she writes (46). The challenge is, "how we grow what we are all imagining and creating into something large enough and solid enough that it becomes a tipping point".

When considering the future imaginary, I prefer to think in terms of strategies rather than theories for the same reason I am interested in Taylor's recognition of the vernacular of embodied social behavior: most of us do not act day-to-day in response to ideologies and theories. We face challenges big and small every day, and we use the facts of our shared social imaginaries as the basis for developing strategies—again, big and small—to meet those challenges. Such strategies emerge constantly as we interact with each other, and evolve as the facts in those social imaginaries evolve.

### Precedents and Resonates

I first spoke publicly about the future imaginary in 2013, when I gave a TEDxMontreal talk previewing what we were planning with the Initiative for Indigenous Futures (Lewis, *The Future Imaginary*). Preparing for the talk, my research assistants and I conducted literature searches to see how the term might have been used elsewhere. We found only two precedents, both—interestingly—from 2009. One was an exhibition at the gallery of the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, which grew out of a multimedia project called *The Imaginary 20th Century* by Norman Klein and Margo Bistis. The heart of the project is a fictional travelogue of the turn of the twentieth century, which first took the form of an interactive and networked multimedia experience and, then, five years later, as a book-length comic novel (Klein and Bistis). However, neither the novel nor the exhibition engage the future imaginary as a conceptual object; they merely deploy the term in a few places as one of many types of imaginaries.

The second 2009 reference was a single mention in a scholarly manuscript on academic considerations of the body titled *The Future of Flesh: A Cultural Survey of the Body*. One sentence, "Undoubtedly, there is a strong link between the future imaginary and technoscience",

is much in the vein in which I had come to use the term: as a conceptual object for understanding the link between how we think of the future and the work we do in the present (Kitsi-Mitakou and Detsi-Diamanti 203). Unfortunately, as with the first reference, the authors do not expand on it further.

### The Future Imaginary

Those searches are what led us to the substantial literature related to social imaginaries as articulated in different flavors by Castoriadis, Taylor, and Anderson. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, I was particularly drawn to Taylor's definition of the social imaginary due to its emphasis on ordinary life. This emphasis helps ground future imaginaries in the challenges of lived experience while still allowing conceptual space for the fantastical visions inherited from science fiction.

The future imaginary is also conceptually recursive. As I developed it further in a series of essays from 2014 to 2020, I made a conscious decision to use "the future imaginary" rather than "the *Indigenous* future imaginary" in order to avoid the whiff of subordinance that terms such as "Indigenous literature", "Indigenous futures", "Indigenous arts", etc., carry with them. Such terms perform a vital function in making room within canonical discourses, but they also implicitly concede the center of "literature", "futures", "arts", etc., to the Western intellectual tradition. My interest is in placing Indigenous people's visions of the future in the center of humanity's future imaginary. As I have written previously, the goal is "to centre our practice in the cultural discourse and practices that frame it, and create a distinct future where we are not dependent on the gatekeepers to open the gates—not required, even, to storm those gates, or go around" (*Preparations* 1). In other words, if non-Indigenous thinkers begin employing the term, they will find Indigenous people already at the root of the concept and leading the conversation.

### Indigenous Futures

Grace Dillon's excavation of Indigenous Futurisms in *Walking the Clouds* generates an essential grammar for understanding different ways literary Indigenous future imaginaries have been formed. By identifying subgenres such as "Native slipstream", "Contact", "Indigenous Science and Sustainability", "Native Apocalypse", and "*Biskaabiiyang*, Returning to Ourselves", her work helps us better understand the complex historical, social, and cultural processes that shape and create relationships between the texts she anthologizes and connects them to similar themes found in Afrofuturism, mainstream science fiction, and Indigenous studies.

Dillon's work shares space with several other scholarly engagements with Indigenous futures that resonate with my definition of the future imaginary. In "Curriculum, Replacement, and Settler Futurity", Eve Tuck (Aleut) and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernandez speak in a context of curriculum studies to articulate Indigenous futurities that resist the replacement logic of settler futurities through mechanisms of refusal and rematriation. Karyn Recollet's (Cree) "Gesturing Indigenous Futurities Through the Remix" uses the term "future imaginary" to capture how dance, gesture, and movement practices embody new configurations of land, time, and space that better sustain Indigenous bodies. And Lou Cornum (Diné) discusses how "Indigenous Futurism is about honing our technologies to the most liberating ends", echoing the need to connect Indigenous futures with technological futures (*The Space NDN*).

**Strategies**

The future imaginary is a set of strategies as much as a conceptual framework. These strategies can be captured in five (somewhat unruly and promiscuous) dimensions:

- Ask our own questions
- Revise what we think possible
- Assert our presence in the future
- Romanticize our sovereignty
- Practice new futures together

Let us explore each in turn.

### *Ask Our Own Questions*

> That is not our question.
>
> —*Manulani Aluli Meyer (Ho'oulu 62)*

> Answer with your life the questions that give it meaning.
> —*Manulani Aluli Meyer (The Context Within 251)*

The pursuit of knowledge starts by asking our questions. The questions we ask shape the outline of the knowledges we inhabit, leading us down different paths of discovery. Kanaka Maoli scholar Meyers writes about her journey through education systems designed to privilege the questions important to Western colonial states while suppressing the questions of importance to colonized peoples, denying the latter the time and space to pursue their questions. Articulating Indigenous knowledge systems within such frameworks is a never-ending struggle to justify one's way of thinking from a perspective that, in the end, often does not accept such methods of learning and engaging with the world as capable of producing legitimate knowledge. The habitual questions of Western epistemologies work to establish settler prejudice as universal fact.
Consider:

Settler society asks: "How can we help you fix your community?" to establish as fact that our community is broken. Our response to such a question could be: "How do we enable our community's continued thriving?" in recognition of the facts of continuity and resilience.

Settler society asks: "How can we use this knowledge to control nature?" to naturalize the subjugation of the natural world to human needs. Our question is rather: "How does our knowledge of territory allow us to coexist with it and all of our relations on it in a mutually beneficial manner?" in recognition of the fact that relational concerns are the foundation of all knowledge.

Settler society asks: "How can our technology make your lives better?" to establish the fact that Western technology is the most desirable thing. Our question is: "Can we show you how to build technology such that it promotes human abundance?" to establish the fact that we know how to make tools that fit within an ecology of care rather than an environment of extraction.

Responding to the colonizer's questions also means conceding the epistemological center before the conversation has even begun. It places Indigenous thinkers in the role of supplicant, requesting that we be allowed into the "real" conversation to make our case for why our epistemologies matter. It is much more fruitful to our communities' thriving to spend that time rather than on asking the questions that—to paraphrase Meyers—give our lives meaning, draw upon our understandings of our histories, and respond to our desires for the future.

### Revise Our Sense of What Is Possible

The pursuit of sovereignty is to revise not our past, but our possibilities.

—*Scott Richard Lyons (449)*

One of the Skins Workshops is called 7th Generation Character Design. In these workshops we ask (usually Indigenous 18- to 25-year-old) participants to imagine a seventh-generation descendent of theirs. What is she wearing? What does her language sound like? What does her territory look like? With whom is she in relation, in her family, in her community, across her territory, and beyond it? We ask these questions while discussing the participants' present circumstances and the history of their community. We couch them in terms of the future, but the real goal is to help unlock participants' sense of what is possible now.

The political, legal, and social regimes of North American colonization were designed to facilitate assimilation and, eventually, extinguishment. One tool used to facilitate this process is through consistently constricting the range of Indigenous existence:

You can't be married to a non-Native and still be Native. You can't live outside your community and still be Native. You can't get a higher degree and still be Native. You can't be a professional and still be Native. You can't be a scientist and still be Native. Don't speak your language anymore? You can't be Native [etc.].

The pursuit of sovereignty is the pursuit of possibilities for being Indigenous. It is a refusal to limit ourselves to categories created by settler society, and in which boxes they wish to keep us. We not only reclaim the potentials lost to 500 years of constriction, but we also make room for new ways of being Indigenous. Recognizing such potential is a necessary step towards altering the trajectory established when the invaders first arrived on these shores so that its arc ends up in healthier futures for Indigenous people.

### Assert Our Claims on the Future

We live in the future. Come join us.

—*Bryan Kamoali Kuwada*

Come join us, indeed. Kuwada's quote (and the title of his essay)—responding to biased news reporting around protests against the installation of the Thirty Meter Telescope on Mauna Kea on Hawai'i Island—compresses history, critique, agency, presence, and invitation into just eight words. *History* as the foundation for how we formulate visions of the future, rather than regarding the future as a means to forget our pasts and escape the continuity in which we find ourselves; *critique* of the Settler culture's repeated attempts to fix us in the past; *agency* in

crafting the pathways of our choosing to get to the futures we want; *presence* in the stories we tell about the future rather than the absence of brown bodies one often finds in Settler future imaginaries; and an *invitation* to recognize our common humanity and join in a common project of creating the conditions under which we can all thrive, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.

Kuwada's statement inverts self-serving normative assumptions made by Settler culture about the "progress of civilization", where skin color proxies for stages of human advancement. Yet it expands even as it inverts, claiming the past, present, and future always and equally. "[T] he future is a realm we have inhabited for thousands of years", he writes elsewhere in the same essay. His is an argument for continuity rather than interruption, and for the past as a store-house of knowledge for building rich futures rather than a relic that notions of progress require us to discard. These two short sentences serve as an example of how crafting contexts that encourage such expansive claiming of time and space need not be complicated.

### Romanticize Our Sovereignty

My present is very much controlled by our history and in this future I can imagine … we can flip that control. I also am romanticizing my own sovereignty, but allowing myself to do that.
—*Hannah Donnelly*

Donnelly (Wiradjuri) uses the word "romanticizing" unapologetically *and* carefully. She is aware of how it might be dismissed as encouraging inconsequential fancy or selfish escapism. She is also aware of the power of both these modes of speculation to draw out the imagination, and, when contextualized through critical self-awareness, to encourage thinking "otherwise" per Crawley. To dream freely of agency is, by necessity, to romanticize it: no one of us is free of all constraints. We imagine doing only good, and forget the trickster's lesson that chaos will always sneak its way into order. We imagine the decisive act, and forget how many indecisive acts must accumulate to reach that tipping point. We imagine our children's children will see the world as we do, and forget that each generation sees anew the seams of the world.

But, as I have written elsewhere,

dream freely we must, if we are to imagine worlds that grow from radically different founding assumptions. In order to feel what it might mean to live self-determined lives, we must romanticize our sovereignty, imagining moments, lifetimes and generations living with the control 'flipped'.

(Lewis, Proto-typing 128)

Romantic gestures create excitement and energy, both of which are necessary to sustain the strategies we need to change our future facts.

### Practice New Futures Together

Per Adrienne Maree Brown, the future takes practice. Like an athlete teaching her body nerve-muscle memory so that more and more of a movement can be done without thinking about it, we need to talk future story with each other to accustom ourselves used to new ways of being. If we want to shape a future defined by Indigenous sovereignties, we have to explore different paths forward to disentangle us from colonization.

Walking those paths is possible only in relation with others, and so such exploration needs to be with one another. The new stories we tell are codeveloped, so that we can see together how well they fit us individually and collectively. By iterating on our visions together, we can craft futures that accommodate more of our kin, as we learn how our envisioned actions affect them and how their responses affect us.

### The Future Is Reaching for Us

In 2013, Skawennati, our young boys, and I participated in a life-changing event. The Peacemaker's Journey involved a group of two dozen mainly Iroquois citizens retracing the steps of The Great Peacemaker. We traveled around what is now Quebec, Ontario, and New York, visiting the different Haudenosaunee nations that he united into the Confederacy. At each stop we were hosted by the home nation, and their orators would tell the story of what The Peacemaker did with that community.

Skawennati and I had been in conversation about where, after eight years of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, we wanted to take our work together. The discussions about the future with Indigenous youth in our Skins Workshops had left a strong impression on us, and we were trying to figure out how to reframe our research-creation to focus on the future. I was writing both the TEDxMontreal talk and the first drafts of "A Better Dance and Better Prayers: Systems, Structures, and the Future Imaginary in Aboriginal New Media", the first time I would use "future imaginary" in print. I was anxious, though, as I had doubts about what it meant to direct our good minds away from the many challenges our communities face in the present. I had not yet read *Walking the Clouds* and was thus unfamiliar with how well Dillon had motivated the need for Indigenous Futurisms. Donnelly's call to romanticize sovereignty through Indigenous Futurism was … still in the future. I had not fully recognized the futurity inherent in the digital media work we did in AbTeC. Good minds are in short supply, I thought: should I turn them away from the present challenges?

At our stop in the Onondaga Nation, I found myself talking with an elder about AbTeC. I mentioned to her that we were thinking of spending the next decade or so with our heads in the future, and that I had concerns about how helpful it might be. She listened, nodding at first and then shaking her head as I expressed doubts. She pointed to our boys, who were playing with other children in the banquet hall, and said: "Look at them. If we aren't dreaming about better futures for them, what's the point? They need futures they can believe in, something better for our people. The next 500 years must be better than the last".

This was the imaginary imperative in a nutshell. "The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined", writes Momaday. Lyons asks us to revise our possibilities. Yet imagining our possibilities fully and freely can be difficult. Historical contingencies harden into what seem like facts that will never, ever change. The struggle to thrive in the present leaves little time for dreaming. People who pay scant attention to responsibilities to community and kin seem to have all the power, and do not seem likely to relinquish it. It is tiring having to constantly refuse the Settler's questions, and assert our presence in the future. It is labor to rewire our brains to revise what we think possible.

On the other hand, it is exhilarating to romanticize our sovereignty. It is fun to practice the future together. My own personal future imaginary is a lūʻau, where my great-great-grandchildren have finished the rebraiding of genealogies that I began, and sit once again amongst our kanaka ʻohana as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of an independent Hawaiian lahui. That is a future I feel reaching towards me. The future imaginary enables me to reach towards it.

## Notes

1  Translations: Kanien'kéha by Hilda Nichols; 'ōlelo Hawai'i by Nolani Arista; Cherokee by Joseph Erb; Annishinaabemowin by Pat Ningwence; and Lakȟótiyapi by Suzanne Kite.
2  These were the Institute for Research on Learning, Interval Research Corporation, and Arts Alliance Laboratories.

## Works Cited

*Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace*. Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, 2005, www.abtec.org. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 1983. Verso, 2006.

Brown, Adrienne Maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. AK Press, 2017. Epub.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, translated by Kathleen Blamey. The MIT Press, 1998.

Cornum, Lou. "The Space NDN's Star Map." *The New Inquiry*, 26 Jan. 2015, www.thenewinquiry.com/the-space-ndns-star-map. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

Crawley, Ashon. "Otherwise Movements." *The New Inquiry*, 19 Jan. 2015, www.thenewinquiry.com/essays/otherwise-movements. Accessed 24 June 2023.

Crosby, Marcia. "Construction of the Imaginary Indian." *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, edited by Stan Douglas. Talonbooks, 1991, pp. 267–291.

*CyberPowWow*. 1997–2004. curated by Skawennati Fragnito. www.cyberpowwow.net, Montreal, Quebec.

Detsi-Diamanti, Zoe, Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou, and Effie Yiannopoulou, editors. *The Future of Flesh: A Cultural Survey of the Body*. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2009.

Dillon, Grace. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. U of Arizona P, 2012.

Donnelly, Hannah, guest host. "Indigenous Speculative Futures with Hannah Donnelly." *Emerging Writers' Festival*, *Spotify* app, Sep. 2017.

Fragnito, Skawennati. *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*. 2001, www.skawennati.com/ImaginingIndians/index.htm, Montreal, Quebec. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

———. *TimeTraveller™*. 2008–2013, www.timetravellertm.com, Montreal, Quebec. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

Fragnito, Skawennati, and Jason Lewis. *Greetings to the Technical World*, 2001, www.obxlabs.net/shows/thanksgivingaddress, Montreal, Quebec. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

Gruber, Jacob W. "Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 72, no. 6, 1970, pp. 1289–1299.

"The Imaginary 20th Century." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 1 Feb. 2021, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Imaginary_20th_Century.

*The Initiative for Indigenous Futures*. The Initiative for Indigenous Futures, 2012, www.indigenousfutures.net. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

"Institute for Research on Learning." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 13 Dec. 2020, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institute_for_Research_on_Learning.

"Interval Research Corporation." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 1 Feb. 2021, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interval_Research_Corporation.

Klein, Norman, and Margo Bistis. *The Imaginary 20th Century*. ZKM, 2014.

Kuwada, Bryan. "We Live in the Future. Come Join Us." *Ke Kaupu Hehi Ale*, 3 Apr. 2015, www.hehiale.wordpress.com/2015/04/03/we-live-in-the-future-come-join-us. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

Lewis, Jason Edward. "22nd Century Proto:Typing." Afterward for *Àbadakone / Continuous Fire / Feu continuel* exhibition. National Gallery of Art, Ottawa ON: 2020. pp. 125–132.

———. "A Better Dance and Better Prayers: Systems, Structures, and the Future Imaginary in Aboriginal New Media." *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media Art*, edited by Steve Loft and Kerry Swanson. U of Alberta P, 2014, pp. 48–77.

———. "The Future Imaginary: Jason Lewis at TEDxMontreal." *YouTube*, uploaded by TEDx Talks, 30 Sep. 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwkyaUALKJc.

———. "Preparations for a Haunting: Notes Towards an Indigenous Future Imaginary." *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age*, edited by Darin Barney et al. U of Minnesota P, 2016, pp. 229–249.

Lyons, Scott Richard. "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2000, pp. 447–468.

Maskegon-Iskwew, Ahasiw. "Drumbeats to Drumbytes: Globalizing Networked Aboriginal Art." *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture*, edited by Dana Claxton, Stephen Loft, and Melanie Townsend. Walter Phillips Gallery Editions, 2006, pp. 188–219.

———. "Storm Spirits - Curatorial Statements." *Storm Spirits*, 2005, www.stormspirits.ca/English/curatorial.html. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

———. "Talk Indian To Me #4: Speaking Spider Languages." *grunt gallery*, 1996, www.ghostkeeper.gruntarchives.org/publication-mix-magazine-talk-indian-to-me-4.html. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

Meyer, Manulani Aluli. "The Context within: My Journey into Research." *Indigenous Pathways into Social Research*, edited by Donna M. Mertens et al. Left Coast Books, 2013, pp. 249–260.

———. *Ho'oulu: Our Time of Becoming—Collected Early Writings of Manulani Meyer*. Short Stack Native Books, 2003.

Momaday, N. Scott. "The Man Made of Words." *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, edited by Gary Hobson, U of New Mexico P, 1979, pp. 162–176.

*Ohén:Ton Karihwatéhkwen*. Kanien'kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitióhkwa Language and Cultural Center, www.korkahnawake.org/gift-shop-1/p/ohenton-karihwatehkwen-book. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

Pechawis, Archer. *Binary*. 1998a, Western Front, Vancouver, British Columbia, apxo.net/performance/memory.html. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

———. *Memory*. 1998b, Curating and Conserving New Media Symposium Banff Centre, apxo.net/performance/binary.html. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

Recollet, Karyn. "Gesturing Indigenous Futurities Through the Remix." *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2016, pp. 91–105, www.doi.org/10.1017/S0149767715000492.

Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan UP, 2008.

Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Duke UP, 2003.

Todd, Loretta. "Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace." *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, edited by M. A. Moser and D. MacLeod, MIT Press, 1996, pp. 179–194.

Tuck, Eve, and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández. "Curriculum, Replacement, and Settler Futurity." *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2013, pp. 72–89.

Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2006, pp. 387–409. www.doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240.

Yuxweluptun, Lawrence Paul. *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights*. 1992, Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta. www.lawrencepaulyuxweluptun.com/interdisciplinary.html. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021.

# 2

# "LANDS OF CHEMICAL DEATH"

## Toxic Survivance in Bunky Echo-Hawk's *Gas Masks as Medicine* and Misha's *Red Spider White Web*

*Stina Attebery*

The January 1970 issue of *Life* magazine accompanied a feature on the emerging American environmental movement with a grim photograph predicting an apocalyptic future. In the photo, a white woman pushes her daughter in a stroller through a deserted, snowy street; their faces are obscured by the gas masks both wear. A year later, in 1971, the Keep America Beautiful campaign introduced the American public to Iron-Eyes Cody, a white actor in redface staring tragically into the camera as he weeps a single tear for the transformation of a "pristine" pre-contact America into a nation filled with trash and pollutants. The Keep America Beautiful poster sums up this performance of Indigeneity with the slogan: "Pollution: It's a crying shame".[1] These images of the "Crying Indian" and the apocalyptic Madonna and child promise safety for the white heteronormative family while separating Indigeneity from environmental futurity. The Crying Indian is a ghostly or illusory figure, a metonym for colonized land, who cannot be protected by the gas mask without suggesting that he might survive into a polluted future.[2] These contrasting figures reveal the extent to which colonial governance structures American anti-pollution activism. When Indigenous artists imagine polluted futures, a technology of empire like the gas mask can take on new meanings, revealing our ongoing obligations to polluted land. Pollution is not "a crying shame", but the grounds upon which warped and toxic forms of Indigenous survivance can be imagined.

The health hazards of toxic waste can create transformative moments of intimacy, not only between a settler mother and child, but among the living and nonliving beings who share our toxic future. As Mel Chen argues in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, toxicity offers "the capacity to rewrite conditions of intimacy, engendering different communalisms and revising biopolitical spheres, or at least, how we might theorize them" (3). For Chen and others, there can be both trauma and posthuman pleasure in exposure to a contaminated world. I am interested in two Indigenous artists whose work exemplifies this attentiveness to toxicity: Bunky Echo-Hawk and Misha. *Gas Masks as Medicine* (2003–present) is a series of paintings by Yakama Nation pop artist Bunky Echo-Hawk depicting surreal human and animal figures with monstrous gas mask faces living in a toxic landscape. Métis writer Misha creates a similarly toxic future in her 1990 cyberpunk novel *Red Spider White Web*, in which a masked Native artist navigates a land of "chemical death" (107). Both texts draw attention to toxic matter as an ongoing form of colonial control over Indigenous lands and bodies. Echo-Hawk's

art and Misha's novel emphasize both the trauma and the posthuman pleasure of living in a contaminated world, showing how toxicity can reveal human obligations to land.

Pollutants are inextricable from the geopolitics of land sovereignty. As Max Liboiron (Métis) points out in their book *Pollution Is Colonialism*, "pollution is not a manifestation or side effect of colonialism but is rather an enactment of ongoing colonial relations to Land", and, as we see in the Keep America Beautiful campaign, "these colonial relations are reproduced through even well-intentioned environmental science and activism" (Liboiron 6). Pollution revises the biopolitical realm of personal and public health into what Elizabeth Povinelli calls "geontopower", where colonized bodies and lands are governed through the division between "Life" and "Nonlife". As Povinelli argues, the neoliberal settler state relies on maintaining clear distinctions between Life and Nonlife, while simultaneously prioritizing some forms of Nonlife over marginalized lives: within a neoliberal settler state, human lives have more value than rocks, but carbon economies have more value than human lives (4).

It is at this nexus of biopolitical and geontopolitical governmentality and Indigenous sovereignty that Indigenous Futurisms can reframe toxicity as a politically transformative space for survivance. For Povinelli,

> Indigenous sovereignty safely emerges in the corrupted and corroded areas of late liberal capital and governance—that sovereignty now thrives where Europeans have come, destroyed, and are fearful of returning, but to which [Indigenous peoples like the Karrabing] continue stubbornly to hold on.
>
> *(91)*

Chemical waste, radiation, and other toxic matter can serve as a politically transformative space for exploring human embodiment as part of a network of animals, environments, and objects.

The posthuman pleasures offered by Indigenous Futurisms stress the value of obligation as well as intimacy. For Liboiron, the ways pollutants like plastics

> pollute unevenly, do not follow threshold theories of harm, and act as both hosts for life and sources of harm have made plastics an ideal case to change dominant colonial concepts of pollution by teaching us about relations and obligations that tend to be obfuscated from view by environmental rhetoric and industrial infrastructures.
>
> *(5–6)*

Indigenous Futurisms build on these associations between contamination and connection, suggesting that new forms of posthuman kinship, obligation, and futurity emerge in polluted lands. For Echo-Hawk's masked warriors and Misha's cyborg artists, toxicity is intimately tied to colonial technologies like the gas mask which stress surveillance and the assessment of biomedical risk. However, their trickster characters salvage and repurpose these technologies. In doing so, Echo-Hawk and Misha explore the tensions between the desire to bear witness to damaged lands and peoples and the political need to decolonize and *unmap* these surveilled toxic landscapes.

### Witnessing in *Gas Masks as Medicine*

Bunky Echo-Hawk's visual art refigures the gas mask as a technology for bearing witness to environmental and political injustice. As he notes in his artist's bio, Echo-Hawk's "birthplace is 30 miles downwind from the Hanford Nuclear Site, the facility that created the bombs dropped

in Hiroshima and Nagasaki", resulting in a decade of unknowing exposure to low-level radiation for anyone living on this Yakama territory.[3] The invisible toxicity of the Hanford nuclear site reveals the ways land sovereignty and health are both impacted by the scientific imperialism of the Atomic Age, of which the gas mask is an ongoing symbol. This personal legacy features prominently in the bleak imagery of Echo-Hawk's art, particularly in his *Gas Masks as Medicine* paintings. These paintings transform the gas mask into an Indigenous technology, a posthuman prosthesis for assessing and surveilling risk visually incorporated into a Pawnee headdress as another piece of regalia.

Toxicity becomes the material condition for the creation of humor, survivance, and trickster aesthetics in these paintings. In her article "Laughing in the Dark: Weird Survivance in the Works of Bunky Echo-Hawk and Daniel McCoy Jr", Kristina Baudemann connects *Gas Masks as Medicine* to trickster aesthetics, arguing that because "survivance can involve dark humour and bleak imagery one might consider worthwhile the introduction of a new term that directs the scholarly gaze to the artistic handling of the grotesque and bizarre elements" (49). For Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe), survivance is a practice of "vital irony" ("Aesthetics" 1), and this irony can be bleak, a way of finding the humorous side of a dark situation. In conversation with Allan J. Ryan's definition of "toxic humour" in Indigenous trickster stories and art (168), Baudemann defines Echo-Hawk's mix of dark humor and bleakly surreal imagery as "weird survivance", a form of survivance which posits the futurity of landscapes and peoples even when they are poisoned.

"Weird survivance" is a good description of the unsettling trickster aesthetics of Echo-Hawk's paintings, which position masked figures against vibrant and unnatural green, orange, pink, yellow, and blue backgrounds. Part of this unnatural effect comes from using colors that do not match their apparent landscape. For example, in the painting *Chief Weapons Inspector Found Weapons of Mass Destruction*, a masked Pawnee figure in quarter profile faces away from the viewer toward a pig with glowing yellow eyes, presumably the Chief Weapons Inspector, who has a single feather from a war bonnet caught in its mouth. This startling and darkly humorous image appears against a landscape where the ground is light blue and the sky is dark orange. In the distant background, a dark-blue city is surrounded by a hazy yellow and green glow. These colors are not impossible to find in nature, but their placement in the painting renders visible the toxicity of this setting.

Echo-Hawk's use of color reflects the ways the shift into toxic forms of posthumanism can have a profound influence on perception and aesthetics. Writing about their experiences with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS), Mel Chen argues that sensitivity to toxins creates a "toxic sensorium", a changed relationship to sensation and affect which queers the human body by rendering it more open to assessing and perceiving nonhuman intimacies (196). These intimacies are characterized by a "poisoned affect", one which "incontrovertibly meddles with the relations of subject and object" (195). *Gas Masks as Medicine* foregrounds this toxic, poisoned sensorium as a method of bearing witness to the land. The invisible dangers of toxic chemicals are made visible through these brightly colored, poisonous landscapes—a kind of poisoned affective experience for the viewer. The viewer is therefore positioned as a witness to a toxic environment, who can perceive through Echo-Hawk's dramatic color choices toxic risks which might otherwise have been invisible.

These aesthetic choices also reveal another invisible form of toxic intimacy: intergenerational exposure. Two of Echo-Hawk's paintings—*Inheriting the Legacy* and *A Mother's Love*—combine toxicity with parental care and reproductive futurity. The gas masks of mother and child in *A Mother's Love* are connected by a tube resembling a technological umbilical cord, an image also suggested in the green tie visually connecting the two masks between a father and child in

*Inheriting the Legacy*. These images of intergenerational chemical exposure visualize how families pass along not only the latent chemical toxicity in their bodies but also the technological prosthesis to survive in these toxic environments. The children in these images are "inheriting" both the legacy of exposure and the technologies and techniques to make sense of the imperial scientific histories behind their contaminated bodies. I read these images through what Michelle Murphy (Métis) calls "alterlife" in her article "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations". Alterlife recognizes that in a toxic world, life is already altered and

> open to alteration. It indexes collectivities of life recomposed by the molecular productions of capitalism in our own pasts and the pasts of our ancestors, as well as into the future … Alterlife is a figuration of chemical exposures that attempts to be as much about figuring life and responsibilities beyond the individualized body as it is about acknowledging extensive chemical relations.
>
> *(497)*

Echo-Hawk's paintings capture this sense of community and connection from ancestors to decedents. Their contamination is no longer invisible, and by recognizing the toxicity of their land and bodies, these figures are able to seek out biomedical technologies to help them adapt. They are exposing each other to toxins and breathing together. Environmental toxicity both caused these parents and children to merge with their technology and their environment and provided them with the medicine necessary for their survivance.

These technologies of medical surveillance and knowledge production can also lead to more-than-human communities and obligations. For instance, Stacy Alaimo argues that toxicity makes bodies "trans-corporeal", where "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world … ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (*Bodily Natures* 2). Alaimo argues that trans-corporeality paves the way for new forms of environmental activism, which "[emerge] from exactly this sense of risk society, in which individuals require scientific knowledge not only to assess risks but to survey the landscape of the self" (19). However, these techniques also situate human individuals and populations within the biopolitical and gonto-political structures of settler colonialism and imperialism. After all, the white family in the 1970s *Life* magazine photograph is as much an example of trans-corporeal environmentalism as Echo-Hawk's portraits of shared exposure.

Surveilling or witnessing the landscape of the self can lead to resistant communities, but these techniques which surveil, breach, and police the borders of the toxic body are often deployed in service to the biopolitical management of empire. As Neel Ahuja argues in *Bioinsecurities: Disease Interventions, Empire, and the Government of Species*, there is a process he calls *dread life*, "by which bodily vulnerability is transmuted into political urgency" resulting in "techniques proliferate for managing the relations of populations and the living structures of species (human, animal, viral)" (Ahuja xi). Echo-Hawk's work picks up on this public management of bodily vulnerability. While, for Ahuja, dread life transforms bodily vulnerability into forms of political urgency that easily slide into fascism and white supremacy, in Echo-Hawk's Indigenous Futurism, these practices of risk assessment can be recuperated into a more resistant form of witnessing—drawing attention to the risks of exposure which disproportionately effect Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups by situating the "landscape of the self" within the politics of Indigenous land sovereignty.

By reworking risk assessment into bearing witness, Echo-Hawk references and repurposes environmental pop culture images of pollution like that of Iron-Eyes Cody into an image of posthuman futurity. Many of Echo-Hawk's masked figures are positioned similarly to the Crying

Indian—they gaze directly at the viewer in an extreme close-up—but the addition of a mask changes the ways these figures witness risk and empire. Many of the paintings in the series focus on observation. They have titles like *Outside Looks In*, *Witness*, *She Watches*, *Eyes on You*, *Always Watching*, and so on. These paintings are framed as portraits, with the subject facing the viewer, often in what feels like an accusatory stare despite or perhaps because of the lack of eyes visible through the gas mask. This accusatory stare reverses the biopolitical apparatuses of surveillance that Alaimo and Ahuja describe. Surveillance is transformed into witnessing, and the Indigenous posthuman figures in the paintings are the ones with the agency to witness instead of being surveilled by the settler state.

Echo-Hawk subverts the imagery of the gas mask as invoking safety, immunity, and national power by exposing the risks and vulnerabilities inherent in a biopolitical nation-state. Assessing the risks of exposure to pollution can create deviant scientific practices outside of the dread life of empire. Species, bodies, and toxic land bleed together, not merely through Alaimo's trans-corporeal activism or Ahuja's elision of species, disease, and national borders, but through Indigenous ontologies which prioritize land sovereignty and nonhuman kinship. This assessment of risk in a chemically toxic environment opens up possibilities for risk assessment alongside or outside of the control of empire. This toxic posthuman body can neither be transcended through technological apotheosis nor exist separately from its environment. Instead, the body's openness to forces and matter beyond the human instrumentalizes the human into a biotechnological being who exists to measure and assess risks.

Echo-Hawk reworks the posthuman technologies of risk assessment evoked through the imagery of the gas mask into a technology of witnessing these connections across bodies, species, and land. Many of Echo-Hawk's paintings refuse eye contact and lack faces. The eyes of the gas mask are typically empty, but in two of the paintings—*Witness* and *Camp Cryer*—the eye sockets seem to cast a reflection. In *Witness*, the eye sockets contain three bright-yellow splashes of color, which almost look like land masses and almost look like tears, especially in the figure's left eye, which contains a dripping yellow oval in exactly the place where a tear would form in the corner of an eye. *Camp Cryer*, as the punning title suggests, similarly features swirling yellow shapes in the figure's empty eye sockets, this time for a figure dressed and posed like a television interviewer, complete with a microphone. These figures refuse the performance of authenticity on which Cody's redface relies. They refuse to show their faces at all. In doing so they take on the role of observer situated *within* this toxic landscape, but not necessarily a witness *of* this toxic landscape. Even their tears are denaturalized, as it becomes unclear whether these are a kind of toxic "tear" caught in the prosthesis of the gas mask, or a reflection of the toxic land around them. In this way, surveying the self becomes a survey of land as well as individual medicalized body, and the land itself also bears witness to its own destruction.

This sense that the land itself enters spaces of legal governance in order to bear witness becomes most clear in the 2010 painting *In Pursuit of Justice*. The masked figure in this painting is dressed similarly to those in *National Resource Management*, wearing a suit and holding a gavel, but this figure is astride a horse. The horse initially appears to be also wearing a gas mask, but looking more closely, it becomes apparent that the horse's head *is* a gas mask—the animal has merged completely with the empty eye sockets and bulbous filtration canister of the mask. This is not the only time a masked animal has appeared in Echo-Hawk's paintings. *Tribal Law* also includes a horse in the background of the image, but in that painting the straps of the horse's gas mask are clearly visible. *In Pursuit of Justice*, on the other hand, suggests that the horse has merged completely with the technology of the mask, and that the same might be true of the rider. This complete merging with technology reinforces the posthumanism of these figures. The safety and distance from chemical toxins evoked by the gas mask is subverted as

these figures blend interior and exterior across individual bodies and species, embracing becoming a trans-corporeal scientific instrument. The trickster posthumanism, which earlier served as a lifeline between generations, now unites humans and animals in the service of justice. By seizing the posthuman medical interventions denied to them, this human/nonhuman pair expose the colonial state's complicity in the biomedicalization of Indigenous bodies and lands while suggesting that new forms of resistant community and obligation can form around these shared experiences of toxicity. These posthuman figures diagnose the colonial violence of pollution and imagine a future where these abuses can be witnessed and rectified.

As toxic posthumans, these masked warriors directly confront the structures of colonial power and empire responsible for their illness. The majority of these paintings feature Indigenous men in suits, gas masks, and Pawnee headdresses in positions of legal authority. In the painting *Prosecution Rests*, for instance, the masked figure carries a briefcase as he walks away from a courtroom. *State of the Union* and *Inauguration* show suited, masked figures standing in front of an American flag and the White House, respectively. *National Resource Management* has two figures in masks and judge's robes, one holding a briefcase and one holding a gavel affixed to the end of his breathing tube, as an oil derrick and the face of George W. Bush loom in the background. There are paintings called *Tribal Law*, *Tribal Council*, and *The Delegates*, which, although they lack the clearer markers of business attire or paraphernalia, suggest that these masked figures are bearing witness, in a legal sense, to the environmental devastation of their poisoned landscapes.

Echo-Hawk's work transforms the immunitary discourses evoked by the image of the gas mask—with its associations with borders, national identity, and empire—into a posthuman technology bearing witness to environmental racism without pathologizing these landscapes and bodies. His paintings show an intergenerational community formed around trickster subversions of the machismo of warrior iconography as human and nonhuman bodies work together to seek justice. The focus of these paintings is on the witness, not a damaged landscape, as they witness the oppressive systems of white settler power responsible for pollution. Witnessing, here, is not a passive act, but a step in a future-oriented process of decolonization and renewal. Witnessing also takes on an ironic, trickster aesthetic in these paintings, since bearing legal witness places these Indigenous men in a position of settler authority, as indicated by the White House, American flag, political press conference, and other icons of American statehood. In Echo-Hawk's works, these toxic colorful landscapes seep into the settler spaces where they had ostensibly been kept out. These places of legal witnessing bring the threat of toxic survivance into the heart of settler governmentality.

## Unmapping in *Red Spider White Web*

Where Echo-Hawk's toxic witnesses seek survivance by reversing the colonial gaze, Misha's Indigenous cyberpunks refuse to bear witness at all. Instead, *Red Spider White Web* leverages the refusal of legibility as a tactic for toxic survivance. The novel is a challenging and oppositional text even by the standards of cyberpunk, as Misha approaches technology and embodiment very differently from her cyberpunk contemporaries. As Sherryl Vint points out in "'The Mainstream Finds Its Own Uses for Things': Cyberpunk and Commodification", *Red Spider White Web* is distinguished from the more familiar hypermasculine version of cyberpunk in its focus on characters "materially and economically excluded from society … In contrast to [the console cowboy's] faux estrangement from power, Misha's characters live in an impoverished and bleak world, and more importantly a world in which previously uncommodified areas of experience are disappearing" (Vint 96). Significant to the bleakness of this world is the trash and radiation

which permeates the environment. The characters in this world are not just alienated by the commodification and dystopian capitalist domination of their world; they are also environmentally ill, disabled by pollutants and toxins.

The novel imagines a dystopian American city recently occupied by Japan, where society is divided between contained corporate dome cities run by the corporation Mickey-san, a clear analogue for Disney; the dismal Dogtown, where most of the population lives and works in factories; and Ded Tek, the polluted outskirts of the city inhabited by a bizarre collection of gangs, cannibals, cults, and artists. The artist community is the focus of the novel, as different characters incorporate trash and discarded technologies into their work and their lives in the polluted outskirts of the city. The narrative primarily follows Kumo, a Métis woman created through genetic experimentation on Indigenous reservations. Kumo has both human and wolverine DNA and describes herself as wolverine-like or feral on a number of occasions. As Corinna Lenhardt argues, "In Misha's dystopia, where all non-hybridized Native Americans are imprisoned in lab-like reservations and subjected to cruel medical experimentation, Kumo functions as a constant reminder of the precarious position of colonized peoples", linking to "the troubling history of medical and research abuses experienced by Indigenous peoples" (346). Kumo creates holographic art shows of extinct species, and her work leverages technological waste and salvage against what a fellow Métis cyborg, Tommy, calls the "effluent affluent" (110) of corporate consumer culture. Salvaging technological waste into outsider art becomes Kumo's strategy for playing with her toxic body and environment.

Misha grounds the trickster narrative in this toxic worldbuilding. *Red Spider White Web* is teeming with refuse. The novel begins with Tommy looking out over the city, by describing the city as a "world of living metal" overlooking "a river of chemicals, effluvium, and strange mailed fishes" (13) and buffeted by "sulfur wind and acid rain" (15). Misha uses poetic descriptions which create a viscerally unsettling environment. Everything is wet and fecal and toxic, a city of "splashy soshing smelt" (11). These disgusting descriptions link environmental refuse to biological matter. These are not descriptions of a distant slag heap observed from a position of safety; the waste in the novel permeates the bodies of the characters. As such, the novel shows how racialized peoples and lands become interchangeably pollutable, a process Traci Voyles calls "wastelanding". Writing about toxicity in Navajo country, Voyles argues that "wastelanding is a racial and a spatial signifier that renders an environment and the bodies that inhabit it pollutable" (9). Wastelanding grounds racial difference and racializes land by rendering both of them pollutable, sacrificial, and impure. If the biomedical apparatuses of empire like the gas mask treat the self as a landscape to observe, then this landscape is necessarily caught up in the histories of colonialism and scientific racism, which classify bodies and environments as expendable. Wastelanding suggests that this process of surveillance is always geontopolitical as well as biopolitical—it always entails the management of land as a form of Nonlife exploitable by the settler state.

Kumo's introduction is a good example of the novel's approach to wastelanding. She wakes in an abandoned boxcar she's been using as a shelter, and the novel spends several pages describing all of the secretions and vulnerabilities of her body underneath her protective mask: "goggled eyes crusted with sleep, her mouth and nose with mucous" (18). Kumo takes stock of her body's pains, surveilling and assessing her risks and wounds limb by limb until she is shivering and drenched in sweat. She continues to excrete parts of herself, spitting and pissing into a pail, laughing to herself as she warms her shivering body with the exertion of a "croupy cough" (20). The reader first learns about Kumo through her wounds—the ways her body excretes herself into the world around her—and through her practice of self-surveilling as a survival tactic in a dystopian world. However, unlike Echo-Hawk's masked figures, Kumo distinguishes between

the techniques for surveilling the landscape of herself and the strategies which allow her to thrive in Ded Tek. She *survives* by taking stock of her wounded body, but her mere survival is different from survivance—unlike in Echo-Hawk's paintings, *Red Spider White Web* doesn't associate these techniques of witnessing with community, sovereignty, or resistance. These techniques reveal the racial politics of wastelanding, but offer no solutions.

Instead of inverting the politics of bearing witness, as Echo-Hawk's figures do, Kumo unmaps the boundaries that biopolitical technologies try to assert over her body and her environment. She exemplifies the problems with simply celebrating the capacity for deviant agency to emerge from conditions of environmental precarity when many of the communities most affected by chemical waste already experience a heightened degree of surveillance. Michelle Murphy draws on Eve Tuck's (Unangax) foundational work on "Suspending Damage" to observe:

> Technoscientific research that seeks to contest the presence of synthetic chemicals in the world tends to proceed by detecting and measuring the damage chemicals do to bodies. … Focused on collecting the data of damage, much hegemonic North American environmental biomedical research surveils and pathologizes already dispossessed communities. It is hard to perceive the infrastructures of chemical violence in the world at the same time that research attends to molecular manifestations in bodies and communities already living in hostile conditions. Despite often antiracist intentions, this damage-based research has pernicious effects, placing the focus on chemical violence by virtue of rendering lives and landscapes as pathological. Such work tends to resuscitate racist, misogynist, and homophobic portraits of poor, Black, Indigenous, female, and queer lives and communities as damaged and doomed, as inhabiting irreparable states that are not just unwanted but less than fully human.
>
> *(496)*

While repurposing the technologies of risk assessment can lead to community-building and legal restitution, as it does in Echo-Hawk's art, there are limitations to simply reversing *who* gets to survey a damaged planet when the act of surveillance itself can so easily fall into a nostalgic pathologization of "lost" toxic lands.

Misha refuses a damage-based approach to toxicity, beginning with the ambiguous racialization of Kumo's toxic, posthuman body. Characters in the novel struggle to understand her race, because Kumo's human-animal body complicates national and ethnic markers of identity. When asked whether she is Japanese or white, Kumo laughs and identifies herself as "half breed", as "dirty white", and as a string of nonhuman Japanese trickster figures: "Speel-yi", "Kw-qua-hawk-as, Tanuki, Kitsune" (94). A fellow artist calls her "shadow-shit" and tells Kumo that her genetic illegibility means that she is "not one of them tribes", even though the novel makes it clear that she did come from a reservation research lab (33). Tommy also describes Kumo's race through negation. As he says, "You're not human. You're not a man. You're not even white" (78). These descriptions of Kumo as a shadow, as excreta, as a half-thing who is not-other things, emphasize the unknowability of her body. She doesn't just refuse to be surveilled—she is incapable of being surveilled because genetic racial markers cannot fully inscribe her contaminated, hybrid body.

Describing her race as a "dirty" version of whiteness is both a trickster joke and a reflection of the complicated status of Indigenous genetics, and particularly Métis genetics, within the settler state. As Kim Tallbear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate) observes in her book *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*, Indigenous DNA is a

material-semiotic substance within the settler state, alternately leveraged as a vanishing object of scientific study, a fetishized marker of "pure" racial identity reinforcing the multicultural nation-state, and a site where colonial science clashes with Indigenous governance (6). Native DNA, represented either through the scientific language of nucleotides and genetic markers, or through metaphors of Native blood, renders Indigenous peoples in posthuman terms, as a scientific hybrid merging biological material with data-mining technologies. Tallbear notes that this racial-ization of Indigeneity obscures the close relationship between Indigenous peoples and land, but Kumo's animal genetics and her association with dirt, shit, and the toxic matter of her world reinscribe her identity within the politics of land and Indigenous sovereignty. Kumo is trans-corporeal, physically part of a toxic landscape not only because she is environmentally ill but also because she is genetically "dirt". Her environmental illness disrupts the racialization of Indigeneity and reminds us that bodies are linked with land, not through a generalized environmentalism but through situated, relational histories of Indigenous sovereignty and displacement.

Kumo's illegible genetics and environmental illness refuse legibility within the colonial struc-tures of dread life and wastelanding. Audra Simpson (Mohawk) calls this tactic "ethnographic refusal", a methodology which rejects

> the requirement of having one's political sovereignty acknowledged and upheld, and raises question of legitimacy for those who are usually in the position of recognizing: What is their authority to do so? Where does it come from? Who are they to do so?
>
> *(11)*

While Simpson is writing about the politics of recognition and reconciliation under settler colonialism, her work also resonates with refuse as a term for detritus, junk, or trash. Murphy offers refusal as a way of suspending damage, noting

> This refusal [to become the subjects of scientific research and tragic narrative] … marks an invitation to find other ways of shining critical light on the infernal entanglements of settler-colonial capitalism as expressed through chemical relations, and at the same time a call to direct creative energy toward decolonial possibilities.
>
> *(496)*

Despite their different approaches to toxic survivance, I read both Echo-Hawk and Misha as practicing refusal as a tactic for resisting wastelanding. *Gas Masks as Medicine* refuses the terms of colonial anti-pollution environmentalism, turning the question of what counts as legitimate biomedical surveillance and data collection on its head by making settler politics answerable to the authority of Pawnee communities, nonhuman species, and the toxic land itself. *Red Spider White Web* rejects colonial science and white environmental politics altogether, exposing the inherent incoherence in a settler scientific schema that would create a wolverine-woman in a reservation lab and then deny the authenticity of her origins. Both cases showcase the creative energy and decolonial possibilities that Indigenous Futurisms bring to the question of what our relations and obligations to a pollution world will be, whether we seek recognition or invite incoherence.

The merging of body, technology, and environment in *Red Spider White Web* suggests there is a power in unmapping the landscape of the self. "Unmapping" is a concept Voyles offers as a counterpoint to wastelanding. If the immunitary biopolitical discourses of risk and dread life rely on the idea that the toxic body becomes a kind of scientific instrument, then, Voyles argues, we find

new ways of mapping the movement of toxins, as well as moves toward decolonizing cartographies of Native lands, suggest that territoriality, sovereignty, and ecology might work together to give us new maps of how to achieve environmental justice and decolonization in a toxic world.

*(Voyles 218)*

Kumo's assessment of her bodily vulnerabilities follows this logic of unmapping, expanding from the landscape of herself to the toxic world around her. She wakes into a "city shrouded in a brown smog … damp death moved among all of them with easy familiarity" (19). Kumo experiences this smoggy morning internally as well as externally, as "the river mist blanketed her and the lapping of the water licked the calcium straight from her bones" (19). Kumo's toxic environment is personified. The river blankets her and drinks from her bones, and the damp deathly fog is a familiar companion. Misha describes Kumo's illness as a relationship with the toxic beings populating Ded Tek, suggesting Kumo, the river, the polluted animals and plants, and even the smog itself exist in a web of obligations and relationships with each other. These relations are toxic, but they still create transformative possibilities for connection with a damaged landscape.

Kumo's genetic hybridity extends to other strange intimacies between her body and her environment. Even though she is physically vulnerable in her toxic world, she also protects herself with layers of masks and a suit made from "living shark clone skin, bristling with denticles, yet supple enough to stretch in" (19) and "patterned and molded to the shape of exposed muscle tissue" (41). Kumo has sewn poison into the inside of her sharkskin suit as a final defense against capture (104). This suit mixes up her performance of bodily interiority and exteriority—it is a trickster prosthesis which unmaps her body from a simple external assessment of her vulnerabilities and risks. Her suit both protects her from the toxic environment and invites exposure. Like Echo-Hawk's gas masks, this living technology designed to separate her body from the chemical refuse outside her also ties her to a network of obligations and nonhuman species relationships.

Kumo, like the other characters living on the periphery and like Echo-Hawk's exposed warriors, continually wears a mask, and her mask is part of her artistic practice. Kumo has built several layers into her masks, so that she can show different layers of artificial face. In her case, her mask is outwardly a wolverine, then a set of wolverine paws covering the face, then a distorted and frightening human face, functioning as an artistic reflection of her own genetically "dirty" body. Removing her mask feels to Kumo like "skinning a cat" (79), a form of vulnerability and exposure. The masks and skin suits in the novel play with the folding of sickness inside and outside the body. Kumo's salvaged posthuman medical devices protects her from some of the pollution in her environment, but these devices also expose macabre reflections of her body, in an endless series of masks or the shark suit's design of exposed muscles. As a living technology (sharkskin) or technologies that ape liveliness (animal masks), this reversal of inside and outside reveals the ways toxicity also invisibly crosses boundaries, turning toxicity into a performance of identity. Through her posthuman prosthetics, Kumo unmaps the boundaries of her own body, creating moments of intimacy and obligation with her toxic world.

Kumo embraces the strange transformations that come with living in a polluted world, rejecting mere survival and repeated victimhood. She uses refuse in her art and invites it into her hybrid body as a belligerently anti-capitalist form of toxic survivance. Unlike her counterpoint Tommy, who sees trash as his kingdom of salvage, Kumo taunts people until they throw something useful at her—she is a scavenger, but a scavenger who leverages disgust or anger to collect what she wants (44). She doesn't just repurpose refuse that has been abandoned, but

actively intervenes in the process of trash-making, goading people into gifting her trash instead of waiting for objects to become salvageable. Kumo eats "synthetic sushi" made of "glycerin and dacron" (27), and she breathes in the "radiant poison" of the toxic air and bathes in the "gluey water" of chemical tanks meant for growing clone materials (86). When she's attacked by a gang of "Pinkies", affluent city-dwellers whose name and adoption of a swastika into their clothing suggests cyberpunk white supremacists, Kumo weaponizes her own effluence, flinging her pail of shit and piss at the gang leader, biting off part of his tongue, and vomiting "some blood-flecked, foamy saliva in [the] nose and mouth" of another (21). Kumo is later raped by the Pinkies, who also forcibly tattoo her back with an image of a spider. Lenhardt connects Kumo to the disproportionately high instances of sexual violence against native women. In addition, I see these traumatic events as further connections between Kumo's bodily vulnerability and the vulnerability of her polluted world. The rape and animal tattoo repeat her earlier trauma as a research subject, but interestingly, the tattoo recodes Kumo's animality as "spider" instead of "wolverine"—she is yet again transformed by her toxic world into an illegible, posthuman trickster. She takes what's thrown at her (food, junk, radiation, chemicals) and transforms these materials; they become part of her simulacra art and her posthuman body. She deliberately incorporates refuse into her body and her environment in order not just to survive in this apocalyptic wasteland, but to render herself unmappable by the settler state.

## Conclusion

Misha's and Echo-Hawk's work imagine futures impacted but not destroyed by environmental pollution, exploring the consequences of human-created environments on human and nonhuman communities. Toxicity is a disturbing topic for any genre of futurism, but it is increasingly important to create ethical relations to an ecological future that is, at this point, unavoidably chemical, radioactive, and mutated. When toxic matter appears in Indigenous Futurisms, this matter can become a vehicle for critiquing and repurposing the apparatuses of settler governance. In these texts, the government of species, objects, and peoples becomes unmanageably complex, replaced by Indigenous cosmologies celebrating sovereignty and interconnection with even the most toxic lands. Indigenous Futurisms map and unmap toxicity as a space where biopolitics and geontopolitics come together, where the policing of making live and letting die reveals the structuring absence of Indigeneity in discussions of chemical risk and exposure.

## Notes

1   I am indebted to Finis Dunaway's reading of the ways gas mask iconography became tied up with American racial and gender politics in the 1970s in his book *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images.*

2   Michelle Raheja (Seneca) has an excellent reading of the Iron-Eyes Cody campaign in her book *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film.* As she points out, this redface performance of settler colonial tragedy is a famous example of the "vanishing Indian" trope, as he "can prompt environmental action on the part of the viewer through an appeal to guilt precisely because he is figured as ghostly (i.e., therefore not within the bounds of contemporary discourse on race in North America) and not a member of a vibrant, extant community" (107). Dressing Cody in a gas mask would undercut the campaign's message of white guilt because it would disrupt the power of this simulation—if Iron-Eyes Cody wore a mask, the white audience wouldn't be able to witness his stereotyped performance of redface or the single tear upon which the campaign focuses.

3   These events are, interestingly, also influential on Misha's work, especially in her often anthologized story "Chippoke na Gomi" (Tiny Dust). As she explains in an interview with Marc Laidlaw for *Weird Fiction Review*: "I had always and forever been upset about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even as a little girl.

I could never accept the reasons why the government felt it necessary to kill 74,000 people in one go, not to mention animals, plants, etc, in order to 'win.' … I was heartstruck by it, and always will be. It is a recurring theme in a lot of my writing. But then again, keep in mind, some of my heritage is Native American. A culture and race of people nearly genocided by others who wanted to win a war. A war on Indians. No. I said no and I will say it again: no!"

## Works Cited

Ahuja, Neel. *Bioinsecurities: Disease Interventions, Empire, and the Government of Species*. Duke UP, 2016.

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana UP, 2010.

———. *Exposed: Environmental Politics & Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. U Minnesota P, 2016.

Baudemann, Kristina. "Laughing in the Dark: Weird Survivance in the Works of Bunky Echo-Hawk and Daniel McCoy Jr." *Transmotion*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2019, pp. 45–62.

Chen, Mel Y. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Duke UP, 2012.

Dunaway, Finis. *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images*. U Chicago P, 2015.

Echo-Hawk, Bunky. www.bunkyechohawk.com. Accessed 5 Apr. 2019.

Laidlaw, Marc. "Interview: Misha Nogha and the Weird." *Weird Fiction Review*, 20 Nov. 2012, weirdfictionreview.com/2012/11/interview-misha-nogha-and-the-weird/. Accessed 15 Aug. 2022.

Lenhardt, Corinna. "Indigenous Futurisms." *The Routledge Handbook to Cyberpunk Culture*, edited by Anna McFarlane, Lars Schmeink, and Graham Murphy, Routledge, 2019, pp. 344–352.

Liboiron, Max. *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Duke UP, 2021.

Misha. *Red Spider White Web*. Wordcraft of Oregon, 1999.

Murphy, Michelle. "Afterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2017, pp. 494–503.

Povinelli, Elizabeth. *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Duke UP, 2016.

Raheja, Michelle. *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film*. U Nebraska P, 2010.

Simpson, Audra. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Duke UP, 2014.

Tallbear, Kim. *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*. U of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence*. U Nebraska P, 1998.

Voyles, Traci. *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country*. U Minnesota P, 2015.

# 3

# WATER, FIRE, EARTH
## Darcie Little Badger's "Ku Ko Né Ä" Series

*Kristina Andrea Baudemann*

Darcie Little Badger's science fiction (SF) short stories are among the prime examples of Indigenous Futurisms. The Lipan Apache author creates relatable characters who must find a way to define their Indigenous identities in an alternate or future universe shaken by catastrophe. Little Badger's female protagonists grapple with what is right: against powerful obstacles, they seek alternatives to the path of exploitation that has thrown their worlds into crisis. As Grace Dillon has pointed out, Indigenous Futurisms are not simply an SF genre authored by Indigenous people, but the term implies a specific ethical theme that could be summarized as striving for sustainability and solidarity in a ruined world:

> Indigenous Futurisms press further with the time-space of a common pot, shared at all levels by all peoples (animal, plant, minerals, spirits, humans and so on) and so could be said to extend far beyond the perimeters of known sf. … Indigenous Futurisms dives into a more genuine Harawayian sense of kinship of animal–human–machine.
>
> *("Indigenous" 6)*

In this chapter, I examine how Little Badger unfolds the "kinship" networks in her stories—in Lisa Brooks's sense of the metaphorical "common pot" (3), "that which feeds and nourishes" all past, present, and future generations and that must be protected, replenished, and carried into the future by the characters (3–4). I look at Little Badger's "Ku Ko Né Ä" series of stories that were published in John Joseph Adams, Hugh Howey, and Christie Yant's *Dystopia Triptych*, a three-volume collection of SF short stories that speak to our sense of acute emergency during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Subtitled "Before the Dystopia", "During the Dystopia", and "After the Dystopia", the three books suggest the climactic curve of entering into, living through, and surviving after catastrophe (Adams et al., *Dystopia Triptych* 1). Within the thematic frame of the *Dystopia Triptych*, Little Badger's stories offer an Indigenous spin on apocalypse, dystopia, and survival: the Indigenous characters have seen it all before, and they know that a change for the better must go deeper than what the mainstream society deems necessary.[1] Concordantly, with her three stories, Little Badger revises familiar SF themes, from the Orwellian surveillance state to a Conradian world in metaphorical moral darkness. Tracing the multifaceted web of relations Little Badger unfolds with her stories "The Orphan of Greenridge

(Water)", "How to Use Your Visor Evacuation Helper to Escape an Active Warzone (Fire)", and "Making Faces (Earth)", I investigate how the female protagonists strive to find a way of living a responsible life in societies that are deeply unethical.

## Darkness in Nevada: Weaponizing Resources in "The Orphan of Greenridge (Water)"

"The Orphan of Greenridge" ("Orphan") is part one of Little Badger's "Ku Ko Né Ä" series of short stories that are set in an alternate or future world where resources are scarce, disrupting humankind's relationship with the natural world. The power over resources presents itself as a major theme in "Orphan". Subtitled "Water", the story highlights how this essential resource has served as a tool of oppression of marginalized groups whose access to clean drinking water has been limited and controlled by the government. Little Badger's protagonist Nash is the titular orphan of Greenridge, one of the survivors of a fictional catastrophe—the "Greenridge tragedy"—where the inhabitants of a large apartment building were poisoned by drinking unclean tap water polluted by liver-damaging chemicals (238). All inhabitants of Greenridge were Indigenous people: during a fictional era of renewed Removal, "seven percent of all Natives in the US were forcibly evacuated from contaminated reservation land" and grouped together in huge apartment buildings like Greenridge (242). Years after the tragedy, Nash can access different qualities of water from her taps, "A-grade and B-grade water", which implies that the drinking water supply of Las Vegas is being ceaselessly monitored, so each drop would be checked for safety and labeled accordingly (238). However, Nash suspects that the allegedly uniformly clean water does still not measure up to the same safety standard everywhere, so Nash travels to different parts of the city and runs water tests using the public testing facilities. As the story progresses, the reader begins to understand that the Greenridge disaster might not be the only incident of its kind: Nash finds that one of her samples contains high amounts of lead.

The reader can surmise that in "Orphan", clean drinking water has not and is still not being distributed equally between the wealthy part of town and these ghetto-like places, new reservations within the city walls where the marginalized live. What Lisa Brooks calls an "ethic" of "sharing" with the community seems impossible: "Sharing space meant sharing resources, and Algonquian and Haudenosaunee communities relied on equal distribution to ensure social stability and physical health" (5). Although Brooks does not mention the Indigenous peoples of the American Southwest (like the Lipan Apache) in her example, the idea of sharing land and goods so that all may live may well be thought of as an essential human(e) ethic that would move a deeply moral character like Nash. Her sense of justice drives all of Nash's actions, which involve uncovering the truth about her grandparents' death in the Greenridge tragedy as well as, in a more abstract sense of the word *justice*, fighting for the ideal of a fair distribution of safe resources like clean water.

The dystopian theme of Little Badger's "Orphan" strikes readers as highly topical: the story hearkens back to such real-life catastrophes as the pollution of drinking water in Flint, Michigan, which, according to Little Badger, served as one of her inspirations (Howey/Little Badger).[2] However, the reader might be surprised to find that sustainability is one of the negative concepts on which the dystopia in "Orphan" is built: instead of making it the foundation for a positive future, Little Badger links the state-enforced economy of water and electricity with the theme of surveillance, to which book one of the *Dystopia Triptych* is dedicated. With their title *Ignorance Is Strength*, the editors of the collection warn their readers that the public discourse runs on Orwellian "Doublespeak":

> Government employees edited historical photographs to blur out criticism of The Great
> Leader. … And those who protest the right to get a haircut say it's wrong to protest sys-
> temic racism and police brutality. … Doublespeak that once seemed like nonsense in an
> author's imaginings now seems prophetic.
>
> *(Adams et al., Ignorance 5)*

As a consequence, it is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine a worst-case, or dystopian, scenario for American politics. Little Badger, however, excels at doing exactly that: her dysto-pian Las Vegas takes Orwellian surveillance a step further. More than the omnipresent cameras, it is the surveillance of resources through which the city exerts power over its citizens.[3] The doctrine of protecting natural resources justifies a constant close monitoring of people like Nash who have a legitimate reason to rebel against the status quo.

One might therefore claim that, in "Orphan", sustainability thinking is weaponized. After all, a renewed "Indian Removal" was justified, among other things, by the pollution of Indigenous lands and the necessary economy of resources. The city chooses to whom water and electricity are distributed, and how much: the amount of water Nash can get from her tap is restricted to daily "rations" and the "'derelicts under the city'"—people like Nash's mother Alexandra, whose activities are potentially terrorist to the system, do not even own A-water and B-water taps (239, 251). They must drink rainwater, which indicates that all the clean drinking water is controlled by one of the big companies that are the equivalent of George Orwell's totalitarian, all-seeing, and all-powerful government in *1984*. The omnipresent "[d]arkness" in "Orphan" is thus not only a literal darkness—the absence, at least mostly, of "frivolous electricity" (246). Similar to such works as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in Saint Louis* (1978), darkness as a theme also refers to the moral darkness of a world after colonialism, when human has cruelly turned on human in the interest of capitalist gain.

"Orphan" demonstrates that access to resources means power and Indigenous land owner-ship is especially unwelcome in this nightmarish version of a capitalist American society. With her story, Little Badger uses SF to teach readers a lesson in colonial history, and thereby diverges more and more from the Orwellian theme. After all, as many Indigenous scholars and writers have noted, the apocalypse is not a fiction for Indigenous people, but "has already taken place" (Dillon, "Imagining" 8; cf. Gross 437, Justice 8, Larson 18, Little Badger, "Decolonizing"). Little Badger, for instance, mentions the pollution of the Navajo Nation land through uranium mining as an inspiration for her story (Howey/Little Badger). Unlike Orwell's totalitarian regime in *1984*, Little Badger's dystopia *is* not simply a power imbalance between the wealthy and the poor. Disenfranchisement in "Orphan" clearly also relates to racism. John Rieder notes that "[t]he main line of division separating Afrofuturism and Indigenous futurism from the rest of SF is of course race" (*Science Fiction* 140–141). As the history of uranium mining in the Southwest shows, the infrastructure and resources of the places inhabited only by Indigenous people were treated as inferior, which turns their homelands from the colonial reservations to the fictional new reservations in "Orphan" into ghettos, where life is more difficult and less safe than everywhere else.

Not surprisingly, Little Badger's story references other Indigenous Futurist texts that paint a similar picture of an Indigenous dystopia, most notably Stephen Graham Jones's *The Fast Red Road: A Plainsong* (2000; *Red Road*) and *The Bird Is Gone: A Monograph Manifesto* (2003; *Bird*), where the protagonists, similar to Nash, investigate some sort of colonial conspiracy. This conspiracy involves non-Indigenous companies acquiring ownership over Indigenous lands: Nash's mother Alexandra is convinced that the Greenridge tragedy, which poisoned a huge apartment building inhabited exclusively by Indigenous people, was not an accident but part of

an obscure plan to get rid of Indigenous people once and for all. Such a plan also appears to be at the heart of Jones's works, where Indigenous people have been grouped together in a giant new reservation (*Bird*) and the reader picks up hints at a mysterious conspiracy that involves poisoning the drinking water supply (*Red Road*). While *Bird*'s LP Deal hides a mysterious manifesto in locker 32b of the Fool's Hip bowling alley, Nash, in a feminine spin on Jones's character, stashes her secret notes in "a tin of menstrual cups … the last place anyone would look for secret information" ("Orphan" 238). The characters in Jones's books scribble "coded messages about the end" (*Red Road* 171) onto bathroom stalls, whereas Nash encrypts her findings in a sort of algorithm on the walls of her grandparents' apartment in the abandoned Greenridge building, almost as if to write the truth into the walls of her old home. Finally, similar to Jones's works, "Orphan" relies on a new terminology for historical events, whether fictional or nonfictional, to write colonial history from an Indigenous perspective: in *Bird*, terms like "Skin Parade" (21) or "Red Tide" (21), for instance, refer to a fictional Removal era, whereas in Little Badger's story, the "Second Collapse" led to a renewed Removal, the "'[s]econd time our home was stolen'" (242). I interpret these similarities of Little Badger's story to Jones's older works as a proclamation of solidarity with other Indigenous Futurist writers. Instead of only relating her story to non-Indigenous SF, Little Badger earnestly dips into a sort of "common pot" of Indigenous SF, common themes that grow out of a common history of colonial disenfranchisement, as well as shared hopes and worries.

Solidarity is not just a strategy but also a theme in Little Badger's story, wherein "Orphan" climaxes on an unexpected moment of mutual understanding with "the enemy". A so-called "Sherlock", a bounty hunter hired by a big corporation, corners Nash in the Greenridge building and confronts her with all the information he has collected on her criminal activities (241). The Sherlock's body has been "enhanced by a cybernetic mycelium", which makes him appear all the more menacing as he is facing our protagonist (246). However, at this point in the story, the atmosphere suddenly changes: in their conversation, the Indigenous girl and the cyborg inadvertently exchange information, which leads to a moment of mutual understanding. When the Sherlock turns on his heels and rapidly walks out the door, he seems to have switched camps. Although unspoken, he seems to be on a different mission now, the one Nash has been working on, to uncover the truth and possibly avert future catastrophe: "Maybe they'd listen to him. Maybe it wasn't too late" (252). The reader can surmise that the Sherlock—despite his profession or his cyborg enhancement—seems to hold on to a certain ethos of protecting human life. On this dawn of the apocalypse, human and cyborg life forms acknowledge their common interest in the welfare of a shared world. Little Badger sends off the reader with a ray of hope that breaks through the sinister image of Nash in her dead grandparents' darkened apartment, a glimmer of light in a morally dark world.

### When the World Goes Dark: Survival of the Fittest in "How to Use Your Visor Evacuation Helper to Escape an Active Warzone (Fire)"

Little Badger continues the theme of forming a bond with others in a hostile environment in part two of the "Ku Ko Né Ä" series, "How to Use Your Visor Evacuation Helper to Escape an Active Warzone" ("How to Use"). "How to Use" seems to be set in the same fictional universe as "Orphan" but follows different characters. Subtitled "Fire", the story narrates the escape of mother and child during an invasion of an unknown terrorist force. A swift and terrifying read, a woman named Janelle, her baby son Key pressed to her chest, makes her way through the stampeding masses outside as bombs start falling and people drop dead left and right. For her story in the second volume of the *Dystopia Triptych*, *Burn the Ashes*, Little Badger has picked

the most frightening scenario imaginable, true to the collection's dictum that "[t]he deadliest apocalypse can be lived through" (Adams et al., Introduction, *Burn* 303): the reader is pulled close to the protagonist as she is desperately struggling to save the life of that which is dearer to her than her own. As recommended by the official protocol for a safe evacuation, Janelle puts on her "AR Visor", a fictional technology already mentioned in "Orphan", that indicates to her the different steps she must follow to survive ("How to Use" 544). Janelle finds herself in an environment that is not only hostile, but literally deadly. Just when she is starting to despair, a fellow human being breaks from the faceless masses of escapees and turns to her: they share a moment of empathy and camaraderie that ensures Janelle's survival.

Similar to "Orphan", "How to Use" climaxes in a moment of solidarity with another human. Rather than at the end, this moment is placed in the middle of the story and packaged brilliantly with a change in narrative perspective: the narrative moves so swiftly that the reader barely realizes that they have left Janelle in the middle of an explosion and, suddenly, begin following another woman named Alex. This narrative shift allows Little Badger to create, for a brief instance, a certain distance to the characters of the mother and child. As Alex follows a baby's screams, the reader approaches Janelle and little Key from the outside. The effect overwhelms in that the reader does not know whether Janelle has survived the blast, and if she has not, what will happen to her child. The fleeting encounter between Janelle and Alex becomes deeply significant. While others do not stop to help the desperate mother, Alex decides to place, for the moment, another's survival over her own, and she stops to free Janelle's leg. The most essential bond between a mother and child now extends outward in this bonding of the two women who are united in their wish to carry not only themselves but also those around them to safety.

The mutual empathy stands in stark contrast to the hostile environment, eerily enhanced by Janelle's AR Visor, high-tech glasses that superimpose an embellished alternate reality onto her surroundings. With the fictional technology, Little Badger renders a deep-seated problem of her fictional world in one concrete image: the AR Visor symbolizes humanity's detachment, not only from nature but also from each other, and their wish to live in an embellished version of reality that glosses over anything gory or horrifying. Alex, who is not wearing an AR Visor, thinks of the masses of Visor-wearing humans dashing to safety as "[d]ead things parading to the underworld" and "passing ghosts" (548, 551). Walking through the hyperreality created by their Visors, they appear unmoved by the real-world horrors around them. The idea of the glasses, apparently, is to shield its wearer from psychological shock, thereby improving the chances of survival and preventing trauma: corpses are blurred in AR mode, unsettling noises blocked out, and the path to safety is indicated with green arrows, as Janelle's Visor tells her to "'WALK'" or "'RUN'" (548). Instead of calming, however, the effect becomes unsettling: Janelle is not only alone in her struggle to survive the deadly attacks, but her Visor detaches her from her fellow humans—pixelating death itself, one of the most basic human experiences— and even from her own senses, as she is rendered partially blind and deaf through the Visor's trauma-prevention mode. This detachment from her surroundings culminates in Janelle's fear "to find a blur in the place of Key's round face" (547). Outside of this hyperreality, Alex and Janelle become human through their encounter: they acknowledge each other's existence ("'Can you see me?' 'I see you'"), exchange names, and hug (550). As their paths cross and separate again, the two women have bridged the divide between humans that has almost completely broken this fictional world apart.

With Alex and Janelle's moving encounter, Little Badger revises the familiar theme of a "survival of the fittest". As various scholars have pointed out, the evolutionary theory that only the most adaptable can, will, and must survive—picked up, among others, by Herbert Spencer

and Ernst Haeckel—has served to justify the oppression and murder of marginalized peoples. Isiah Lavender III, for instance, states:

> Indeed, the phenomenon of social Darwinism elevated race as an issue of science as scholars and scientists scrambled to justify the superiority of white culture … Darwinian principles could be used to support almost anything if the situation was sustained by the notion of the "survival of the fittest".
>
> *(44)*

Little Badger in her "Ku Ko Né Ä" series ostensibly develops this fictional technology based on this extreme belief in a survival of the fittest as a rationalization for human suffering. However, although Janelle's attempts to adapt—she literally dodges left and right to escape bombs and falling debris—ultimately fail, she nevertheless survives, indicating that human relationships are more complex than simply encounters of the fit and the expendable. Trapped underneath the rubble of a partially collapsed subway tunnel, Janelle depends upon another's help so she can carry her baby, the least fit of all in this situation, to safety.

Little Badger's Indigenous Futurist spin on colonial themes continues in this second installment of her short story series, when the darkness from "Orphan" is picked up again in "How to Use". This darkness refers not only to Janelle's lack of vision in her AR Visor's "tranquility mode" or the radio silence that befalls the characters as more and more places in the United States come under attack, but also to a literal darkness descending on the characters at the end of the story (546, 552). Toward the end, "the sky becomes overcast with clouds", "[s]oot" covers their surroundings, and "the city … smolders fitfully against the horizon" (553). The images of an almost-epic apocalypse linger in the reader's mind long after they put the story down. The darkness of Janelle's surroundings represents the end of the world: it stands for the polluted environment, the moral darkness of societies broken apart by war, and the grim chances of Janelle's survival. However, similar to "Orphan", hope exists, symbolized by the baby who continues to furnish his mother with a reason to go on. Janelle's baby son, tellingly nicknamed Key, "'[s]hort for Kaycee,'" indicates that his survival will unlock the future (550). "'[N]amed after a grandparent,'" Key simultaneously signifies Janelle's past and her future (550). Unsure of the whereabouts of her husband and of the general condition of the world around her, Janelle continues to carry her son "west"—literary code for walking into a better future (553). The final image of the survivors' feet connecting with the "green earth" and briefly leaving gentle imprints suggests that they are again daring to enter into contact with, and forming a delicate new bond with, a world that is slowly healing (553).

### After Dark: "Making Faces (Earth)"

In the final installment of her "Ku Ko Né Ä" series, "Making Faces", Little Badger fully develops the themes of solidarity and the search for an ethical way of life as aspects of an Indigenous future. More explicitly than the preceding stories, "Making Faces" discusses Indigenous sovereignty. The protagonist Breanne follows her family's call to return home, and the reader learns that not only do Indigenous rights have legal standing in Little Badger's fictional world, but reservations still exist. When Breanne mentions "the twenty-first century", the reader is assured that Little Badger's short story series is indeed set in a near-future (847). We also learn more details about the so-called "Second Collapse" and the politics of this future where land—as that which produces resources—is still the most valuable product (843). Subtitled "Earth", the story centers on the land of Breanne's family and her ancestors. Little Badger translates the theme of

the third volume of the *Dystopia Triptych*, "After the Dystopia" into her character's metaphorical journey back home, where Breanne must work to reconnect with an intricate network of relationships with the human and the nonhuman world (Adams et al., *Dystopia Triptych* 1).

Breanne's return mirrors the movement Little Badger describes with her three-part series. The fictional history of "Ku Ko Né Ä" comes full circle with Breanne's return to the land in "Making Faces". What Dillon has called "'Returning to Ourselves'" could be thought of as the overarching theme and narrative movement of Little Badger's series, with Breanne completing the work and fulfilling the hopes of the other protagonists ("Imagining" 10). Little Badger thus uses SF's theme of future history to evaluate, in hindsight, the reader's past and present and thereby show that the struggles of contemporary Indigenous activists and politicians—continued in Nash's clandestine work and Janelle's struggle to survive—was indeed worth it. Although still bleak, the future is tangible in "Making Faces". More and more people can return to the land and the era of land stewardship of wealthy white men is ending. As Breanne declares toward the end of the story, "'Times are changing. You can't get away with this kind of thing anymore'" (853). Fittingly, "Making Faces" ends on the word "future" (853). Little Badger replaces the images of lonesomeness and doom that wrapped up her two preceding stories with a feeling of openness and possibility at the end of "Making Faces".

Like Nash and Janelle, Breanne must figure out the right path in this broken world. As a hybrid life form, a cyborg like the Sherlock from "Orphan", Breanne torments herself because of the way she allowed her incredible powers to be abused in the fights for land and resources. Little Badger uses what Wendy Pearson, among other scholars, has referred to as "sf's ability to literalize metaphor" to illustrate Breanne's moral dilemma (158). Breanne may be thought of as an SF version of a diasporic Indigenous person who can claim both an Indigenous and a white Western heritage, which is translated into the fact that she literally has "two minds", one human and one machine ("Making Faces" 841). These conjoined minds, although apparently working well together, belong to two different worlds: her human brain can hesitate, remember, and repent, but Breanne uses "the cybernetic mycelium branching through her body" (838) as a sort of tool that she puts to the service of those who can pay her, which is mostly the wealthy corporations running the corrupt system. However, like Nash, Breanne can make a conscious decision to support or protest the system, regardless of her biology. "Making Faces" shows the moment of her awakening. Breanne uses her machine brain to investigate a powerful land steward and challenges his claims over Indigenous land. In a forest "at the crack of dawn"—the lingering darkness symbolic of, among other things, the morally questionable activities on the land steward's property—Breanne chooses to support the Indigenous cause completely, her two minds not only physically united but also finally operating under the same moral principle (850).

Little Badger further illustrates the major theme of choosing the right side of history through the specific abilities of the biologically enhanced character. Breanne can—with her mycelium—regenerate "possible faces" from DNA, a power she mostly uses to solve crimes (840). She literally appropriates faces and, at first, appears as an SF version of such anthropologists as Edward S. Curtis, who attempted, in his photography, to capture the facial features of allegedly extinct races. Her work that Breanne, in the beginning of the story, describes as merely "[providing] information" is not innocent, but it amounts to a kind of ownership of innumerable faces of the living and the dead of any age, gender, and culture, a dangerous archive that Breanne inadvertently used to identify and help incarcerate Indigenous activists (839). With her SF story, Little Badger demonstrates that in a colonial world, possessing and sharing information means to exert power over the colonized, and she lets her character Breanne choose the right side of history by having her purge her machine memory of "every face that was not hers to know", a refusal to be made complicit in the appropriation of Indigenous land and culture (852).

With her protagonist Breanne, Little Badger also literalizes the theme of a return to Indigenous land. Breanne's special abilities allow her to connect with the earth underneath her feet: when she comes across an ancient Indigenous burial ground, her machine mind creates the faces of her ancestors from the human DNA in a bone. As a cyborg, Breanne can reconnect with the land in a way other humans cannot. Acknowledging the resemblance between her own face and those of her ancestors helps her figure out her own place in relation to the land: "the forest merged with faces of the living and the dead. Shifting features. Unrealized possibilities. … The face of her ancestor was now within her. It had always been" (852). As Breanne's mycelium absorbs the strands of ancient Indigenous DNA, the story transforms into an intriguing parody of Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991). "Making Faces" could be interpreted as picking up Vizenor's tongue-in-cheek notion that Indigeneity might be synthesized, with the help of storytelling, from strands of Indigenous DNA. The words of Vizenor's character Pir Cantrip fit the dramatic scene of Breanne entering the multifaceted web of ancestral relations as "a stream of nucleotides, expanding and mutating and splitting, [whisper] secrets into her ear, at once seductive and terrible" ("Making Faces" 852). Vizenor writes:

> The genome narratives are stories in the blood, a metaphor for racial memories, or the idea that we inherit the structures of language and genetic memories; however, our computer memories and simulations are not yet powerful enough to support what shamans and hand talkers have inherited and understood for thousands of years.
>
> *(136)*

Through the SF technology, Breanne, like Vizenor's characters, can reconnect with her culture by literally accessing the DNA of her ancestors. However, rather than the futuristic mycelium, it is Breanne's creative imagination and her will to use it for her own culture that enable her to unfold, toward the end of the story, a vision of a better Indigenous future.

Similar to Vizenor's *Heirs*, "Making Faces" also functions as a story about storytelling. A metaphor for the Indigenous Futurist writer, Breanne can re-create innumerable possible worlds from strands of information provided to her by her ancestral homelands. Through Breanne's power to "make faces", Little Badger demonstrates that authors can use their art to create possible worlds from information gained from Indigenous cultures. However, like Breanne, authors must ultimately subscribe to a specific ethic and reject the appropriation and reckless use of cultural material not their own. A key scene of "Making Faces" expresses this message. Like the two preceding stories in Little Badger's series, "Making Faces" climaxes in a moment of solidarity with a fellow human being, this time the cyborg PA of the wealthy land steward Breanne is investigating. Like Nash and Janelle, she willingly takes another's hand to trade information. However, unlike the protagonists of the other stories, Breanne *is* betrayed. Although the cyborg PA shares with her the DNA of the Indigenous bone, she also attacks Breanne with a stun gun and almost destroys her mycelium. While Little Badger's other protagonists might learn to trust in moments of human solidarity, "Making Faces" takes the lesson on ethics a step further in that Breanne must choose her allies wisely. Although she shares the common history of biological enhancement with the land steward's cyborg PA, Breanne belongs with her Indigenous relations with whom she may "'share more than a nose,'" as a friend of her cousin Billy puts it (847). Rather than a message of Indigenous separatism, the encounter of the two cyborgs might simply be read as an encounter of two different kinds of SF, the new and the old—Indigenous Futurism meeting an outdated, racially insensitive form of SF—and the reader, like Breanne, must decide for themselves which version of the future they subscribe to. Indigenous sovereignty in "Making Faces" ultimately manifests, not only in the form of Indigenous land

ownership but also in more abstract terms, as creative practice, and the Indigenous future of Little Badger's "Ku Ko Né Ä" series relies on both.

## Conclusion: A 'Common Pot' of Hopeful Futures

During a roundtable discussion on "Decolonizing Science Fiction", Darcie Little Badger underlines the importance of storytelling to create versions of the future determined by Indigenous people. Little Badger states, "It's difficult to overstate the importance of art, particularly as a world-shaping force. Actions and human behavior are driven by our beliefs, fears, memories, and values, and art informs them all" ("Decolonizing"). Little Badger's "Ku Ko Né Ä" series of SF short stories may well be thought of as the programmatic piece that demonstrates how Indigenous fictional worlds can arise from an acknowledgement of a common colonial history, an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty, and a belief in the power of activism. I find Little Badger's female characters relatable because they might be each of us, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, figuring out their own path in this broken world. Contributing to a sort of "common pot" of hopeful futures, stories like "Orphan", "How to Use", and "Making Faces" collectively assert an Indigenous presence in SF and the power of Indigenous revisionism through storytelling. As Little Badger puts it, "Indigenous Futurisms speaks to our experiences, our souls. It is a celebration that we were, we are, and we will be" ("Decolonizing"). Embodying Indigenous survival and resistance, Nash's, Janelle's, and Breanne's quests for the truth, for a better and safer life, and for home and family, ask us readers how we will contribute to building a better tomorrow; their experiences in a fictional near-future teach us to attach significance to our encounters, no matter how fleeting, with our fellow beings, whether human, animal or machine; and, finally, their strength to resist corruption and rebel against the system implies that even the most persistent oppressive narratives can and must be revised.

## Notes

1  The Indigenous characters in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1978; 1990), Stephen Graham Jones's *Ledfeather* (2008), and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) have the ability to survive precisely because, to use Lawrence Gross's language, they "have seen the end of our world" in colonial catastrophe before (437).

2  For more information, see Elizabeth A. Wheeler's "Runoff: Afroaquanauts in Landscapes of Sacrifice" (2020).

3  Little Badger joins a series of young authors who productively combine the topics of surveillance and sustainability. Paolo Bacigalupi, for instance, centers his SF novel *The Water Knife* (2015) on the battle for, and manipulation of, clean water in future times of drought.

## Works Cited

Adams, John Joseph et al., editors. *The Dystopia Triptych: Digital Box Set*, 3 volumes, Kindle ed., Broad Reach Publishing + Adamant Press, 2020a.

———. "Introduction." *The Dystopia Triptych Vol. 1: Ignorance is Strength*, Kindle ed., Broad Reach Publishing + Adamant Press, 2020b, pp. 5–6.

———. "Introduction." *The Dystopia Triptych Vol. 2: Burn the Ashes*, Kindle ed., Broad Reach Publishing + Adamant Press, 2020c, p. 303.

Brooks, Lisa. *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast*. U of Minnesota P, 2008.

Dillon, Grace L. "'Imagining Indigenous Futurisms.' Introduction." *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, edited by Grace Dillon, U of Arizona P, 2012, pp. 1–12.

———. "Indigenous Futurisms as Stardust Imaginings: *Passweweg* [Echomakers] of Indigenous Futurisms." *Indigenous Futurism*, edited by Elizabeth LaPensée, special issue of *kimiwan*, no. 8, 2014, pp. 6–7.

Gross, Lawrence W. "The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion." *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2002, pp. 436–459.

Howey, Hugh, and Darcie Little Badger. "Dystopia Triptych Interview with Darcie Little Badger." *YouTube*, uploaded by Hugh Howey, 8 Jul. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DC0uJvqLYXA&ab_channel=HughHowey. Accessed 27 Oct. 2021.

Jones, Stephen Graham. *The Fast Red Road, a Plainsong*. Fiction Collective Two, 2000.

———. *The Bird Is Gone: A ~~Monograph~~ Manifesto*. Fiction Collective 2, 2003.

Justice, Daniel Heath. *Our Fire Survives the Storm: A Cherokee Literary History*. U of Minnesota P, 2006.

Larson, Sidner. *Captured in the Middle: Tradition and Experience in Contemporary Native American Writing*. U of Washington P, 2000.

Lavender, Isiah, III. *Race in American Science Fiction*. Indiana UP, 2011.

Little, Badger Darcie. "How to Use Your Visor Evacuation Helper to Escape an Active Warzone (Fire)." *The Dystopia Triptych Vol. 2: Burn the Ashes*, edited by John Joseph Adams et al., Kindle ed., Broad Reach Publishing + Adamant Press, 2020a, pp. 543–553.

———. "Making Faces (Earth)." *The Dystopia Triptych Vol. 3: Or Else the Light*, edited by Adams, et al., Kindle ed., Broad Reach Publishing + Adamant Press, 2020b, pp. 837–853.

———. "The Orphan of Greenridge (Water)." *The Dystopia Triptych Vol. 1: Ignorance is Strength*, edited by Adams, et al., Kindle ed., Broad Reach Publishing + Adamant Press, 2020c, pp. 237–252.

———. "Decolonizing Science Fiction and Imagining Futures: An Indigenous Futurisms Roundtable." *Strange Horizons*, 30 Jan. 2017, strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/articles/decolonizing-science-fiction-and-imagining-futures-an-indigenous-futurisms-roundtable. Accessed 27 Oct. 2021.

Pearson, Wendy. "Science Fiction and Queer Theory." *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 149–160.

Rieder, John. *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*. Wesleyan UP, 2017.

Wheeler, Elizabeth A. "Runoff: Afroaquanauts in Landscapes of Sacrifice." *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, Ohio State UP, 2020, pp. 128–148.

Vizenor, Gerald. *The Heirs of Columbus*. Wesleyan UP, 1991.

# 4

# CONTACT, RATIONALISM, AND INDIGENOUS QUEER NATURES IN ELLEN VAN NEERVEN'S "WATER"

*Arlie Alizzi*

Informed by Grace Dillon's understandings of survivance and contact as an Indigenous Futurist mode, along with Samuel Delaney's outline of the political potential of contact in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, this chapter looks at Yugambeh writer Ellen Van Neerven's 2014 short story "Water" as a queer contact narrative. "Water" presents a near-future commentary on reformist, progressive, and recolonizing left-wing systems of governance, reflected in the actions of its fictional Australian president, Tanya Sparkle. This chapter engages closely with the inter-species relationship between the story's protagonist Kaden and the "plantperson" Larapinta, which serves as both an incitement to political action and a generative restorying of queer, gendered, and human/nonhuman relations in Indigenous communities. The contact narrative in the story establishes queer Yugambeh survivance in a postcolonizing future, interrupting and complicating the colonizing actions of Tanya Sparkle's virtuous racial state.

One of the distinct practices of Indigenous Futurist works in so-called Australia is the imagining of an Indigenous politics in the future. Indigenous Futurist works imagine First Peoples involved in thoughtful and effective political collective organizing to resist colonizers and to practice their sovereignty and cultures. Another key concern in recent works is the self-representation of the stories of women, trans, and queer people in Indigenous Futures. Yugambeh Munanjali writer Ellen Van Neerven's short story "Water" is a dystopian Indigenous Futurist novella which sits between two short-story cycles in the collection *Heat and Light* (Van Neerven 2014). In this story, Van Neerven writes a relationship between a young queer Yugambeh "cultural liaison worker" named Kaden, and a Yugambeh ancestral being, Larapinta, who is part of a race of plant-like creatures called Jangigir. Their relationship takes place in Yugambeh country, on the islands of Moreton Bay, in the context of a new "progressive" regime of the fictional president Tanya Sparkle. President Sparkle is a white politician who is intent on solving the problem of Indigenous land rights by islandizing the waters of Moreton Bay to create "Australia2", a new country which dispossessed Aboriginal people can live on.

The critique of President Sparkle's progressive whiteness in Van Neerven's story exemplifies the way that First Nations Futurist work grapples with issues of legal recognition and the dangers of white left-wing politics. It represents an Australian republic in which native title, land rights, and cultural recognition have become hot topics, and Sparkle's determination to make her legacy through Aboriginal land rights and self-determination drives the creation of the destructive project of Australia2.

In this chapter, I want to zoom in on how "Water" engages with a critical Indigenous Futurist practice, which Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon refers to as "Contact", to write a queer Indigenous Futurist narrative that emphasizes Indigenous queer survivance. Survivance, to refer to Dillon's definition, is "more than survival, more than endurance or mere response … survivance is an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" (Vizenor, qtd. in Dillon 6). In articulating this definition, Dillon draws on Gerald Vizenor's well-established work on native survivance. Vizenor's theoretical framework of survivance describes a powerful aesthetic and storytelling mode, which is an expression of long-held and distinct First Nations modes of "diplomatic, strategic resistance" linked to "vision[s] of futurity" (*Native Liberty* 58). It is firmly grounded in the rejection of and resistance to "absence, literary tragedy, nihility, and victimry" (*Native Liberty* 1). As he puts it, "Native survivance is a continuance of stories", and "practices of survivance … are obvious and unmistakable in native stories" (*Native Liberty* 1). Further, survivance narrative is, for Vizenor, exemplified in modes of Indigenous story which are to be celebrated for their "innovative, emergent … and avant-garde narratives", diverse characters and experiences, and the ways in which they might "tease" and "bemuse" ideologies of colonial dominance and tragedy ("Introduction" 1–2). It is with this idea of survivance as both a practice and an aesthetic and literary strategy in mind that Van Neerven's work, and its complex engagement with the technique of contact, can be appreciated.

## Theorizing Contact

Contact, Dillon argues, is a mode of story which critically relates to stories of otherness represented in fantasy and science fiction genres, often through racialized tropes of aliens, invaders, discovery, and conquest. Historically, as both Dillon (2012) and Sierra Adare (2005) have noted, these 'contact' tropes in sci-fi have exploited images of the Native to construct often racialized narrative binaries in which white characters are empathetic saviors. They also often operate on the basis of a construction of *terra nullius* or "hollow earth" fantasies of exploration of unknown lands (Dillon 2012, 6). Encounters with otherness in the alien/other field generate terror, fear, and uncertainty and are sometimes also the occasion for the self (positioned as the human) to develop a degree of empathy for the racialized or subhuman "other" alien race. Dillon notes that in the hands of Indigenous writers, the contact narrative is repurposed with the intent of complicating self/other binaries and emphasizing Indigenous survivance. The alien/other contact trope in science fiction also functions as a narrative which critically interrogates the nature of humanism, providing space for ethical considerations for relating to the other-than-human. The alien/other idea is one of a few science fiction tropes that Van Neerven intentionally subverts from a Yugambeh perspective in "Water". At a critical turning point in the story, as Kaden is hearing from her uncle for the first time that the Jangigir (who have occupied a complex other-than-human status in her eyes), are her own ancestors, the film *Alien* plays on the television;

> I lift my eyes from the movie and look at him. … "I heard them speaking language." Uncle looks at me directly and speaks in the same language, and I feel goosebumps on my arm. … "They are our old people. Spirits."
>
> *(113)*

While conventional contact narratives frequently produce ambivalently anti-colonial sentiments, they do so while centralizing the empathetic perspective and transformation of the white

narrator. Contact with the alien race, within this narrative, produces an empathetic and politicizing response in the white protagonist through a public humiliation and social degradation by association of the human who has fraternized with the alien race in secret.

A more recent science fiction work, *District 9* (Blomkamp 2009), for example, draws on events that occurred in Cape Town's District Six during the apartheid era in South Africa to construct its alien contact story. Wikus van der Merwe is the human protagonist appointed to lead the liquidation and relocation of the District 9 alien settlement. Wikus's attitudes towards the aliens, which at first are casually violent and dehumanizing, change after he is exposed to a substance that transforms his DNA and initiates his mutation into a human/alien hybrid. He is detained for the purpose of medical experimentation and vivisection, and when he escapes, he is subjected to a smear campaign alleging he has had sex with the aliens. His employers, wife, and family abandon him, and he goes on the run. Van Neerven's story, as Vizenor puts it, *teases* this narrative trope by placing the Jangigir within the story as close relations and allies of the living Yugambeh community.

As Dillon notes, the Indigenous Futurist tactic of contact is in productive tension with the generic trope of the alien in sci-fi as much as it is with the colonial self/other binaries under interrogation. "Water" uses the familiar markers of the alien contact narrative of science fiction, which often appears as a racial metaphor. Instead of this contact producing a transformation of Kaden as the human subject through infection or contamination, Kaden's internal transformation is provoked by the understanding that the Jangigir are, and have always been, her ancestor spirits.

The story initially represents the Jangigir in othering and racializing terms. Kaden narrates encountering them using the stereotyped and sensationalized language of the media; initially noting, "I don't want to call them 'sandplants'—'sandpeople' or 'plantpeople' seems more sensitive, but I don't know which to use", and compares their situation to that of "asylum seekers in the naughties" (75). Despite these empathetic thought processes, upon first encounter she observes the Jangigir using the same language that she has signaled to the reader as racialized and insensitive:

> there are two sandplants standing outside the exam room. I walk past quickly. Seeing them for the first time, I am struck both by how startlingly human-like they are, and how alarmingly unhuman they are. Green, like something you would see in a comic strip, but they are real.
>
> *(78)*

The ambivalence, distancing, and fear evident in Kaden's language positions the Jangigir using both the normalized racial slurs of the universe of "Water" and the familiar disempowering and bureaucratic language of colonial governance which designates populations as obstructions to progress, or as *problems*. Kaden narrates:

> Basically, they present a problem for the Project at this stage, as all the southern Moreton Bay islands are being evacuated. This means everyone has to leave their homes and businesses for an indeterminate amount of time while the engineers work on the re-forming. These plantpeople, who divide their time between the water, Russell Island and the edges of some of the smaller unoccupied islands, must cooperate during the process, for the safety of all.
>
> *(76)*

Part of Kaden's role in the Project, as cultural liaison worker to the Jangigir, is to deliver buckets of toxic formula from the lab to the Jangigir and supervise to make sure they all take it. Like

Wikus in *District 9*, Kaden is co-opted to do the dirty work of displacement and, eventually, of killing on behalf of the government. She is invested in a colonial logic which determines the Jangigir as nomadic occupants with no connection to land, rights, or freedom of movement, but rather as a "problem" (76). A planned systemic killing is enabled in the story first through the dehumanization of the Jangigir, including reference to them as "a problem", and the application of scientific, institutional, and utilitarian language; multiple characters refer to them as specimens or plants. The bureaucratic language of safety and "public good", along with establishing the inhumanity of the population, generates a scenario where killing the Jangigir is necessitated by the islandizing Project.

Similar to the white male archetypes of alien/other narratives, Kaden lives in a social world where sexual desire for the "other" is forbidden, stigmatized, and ridiculed, but simultaneously, it is also expected. Her desire for the plantperson Larapinta, who she comes to spend time with, is mediated through and negated by her position as part of the Project. As liaison worker, negotiator, and handler of the Jangigir, she is in a position of power over them, and her knowledge about them has been carefully curated. Sexual desire for the Jangigir is then framed in hushed, euphemistic language. In this passage, before their first sexual encounter, Kaden speculates on the possibility for her to have a sexual relationship with Larapinta after episodes of persistent flirting between them:

> Kaden, it's come to my attention, through research, that as these sandplants can closely resemble us and mimic our behaviour—well, some people in close proximity can find themselves getting attached … Now, strictly off the record here, as a male I find, say, Larapinta, slightly of an attractive quality, it's natural, she's more human-like than the others in the way she looks. And females may feel the same way about Hinter. But it is unnatural if you take it that couple of steps further. … There was a fellow who, I won't go into details, he got himself engaged with one of them, and hurt himself quite badly. It was unnatural and not possible.
>
> *(97)*

Sex between the species is spoken of using discourses of danger, illegality, unsafety, and unspeakability, emphasizing both human superiority through comparisons of the Jangigir to a dog or a tree, and human vulnerability, risk, and innocence. Kaden's white supervisor Milligan's words also express the way that discourses of sexuality enforce a compulsory heterosexuality and position queer sexuality as "unnatural". This discourse of compulsory heterosexuality persists even in discourses of cross-species contact where the Jangigir are marked as plants whose genders are undetermined and socially adapted. While she initially complies with Milligan's instructions on how to approach the Jangigir as research subjects, Kaden gradually becomes more and more aware of the sinister nature of the feeding schedule during conversations with the scientists working on the Project. She discovers that the formula is changing in stages, firstly to make the Jangigir more and more docile, then to ultimately kill them. Upon questioning this process in conversation with another worker, Kaden comes up against the same dehumanizing rhetoric she had initially been reproducing:

> Are the plantpeople aware of this? This changed formula?" He shrugs and looks across as Milligan. "Not entirely. I don't think you should be discussing it with them." "I feel it's part of my job. It's ethical … This is sounding like social Darwinism, like the twisted justification of treating black people worse because of their skin colour." "He's looking

pained. I'd keep it quiet if I were you. Milligan's just over there" … He continues in a reasoned voice. "Look, obviously we're from different schools of thought. But as long as we do our individual jobs, we'll be fine.

*(94)*

Since coming into increasing contact with the Jangigir, especially working closely with Larapinta, Kaden has come to humanize the Jangigir. She begins to feel increasing alarm towards the same discourses she was using at first to describe her encounters with them, and her encounters with Larapinta have led her to doubt some of what Dillon calls the colonial psychological and emotional "baggage" (10) she had previously used to make sense of the situation. She begins to question her previously held assumptions about the ethics of the scientific work she is doing, comparing their treatment to the treatment of Aboriginal people, and relates her own role to the harms of scientific racism. Similar to the moment in *District 9* where the infected and hybridized Wikus is imprisoned in the lab about to be vivisected, and it dawns on him that he is no longer protected by virtue of his privileged humanness, Kaden comes to an understanding that *if they are willing to do it to the alien, they would probably do it to me, too.* Later, she observes that "the more switched-on I become, the more I am uncomfortable. I realise how naive I was before coming here" (103).

Unlike Wikus, emblematic as he is for the common science fiction trope of the white male who loses privilege through contact with the other, Kaden's empathetic response is not based on a threat to her status as human. Kaden has not been *infected* in the literal sense from contact with the Jangigir, nor has she been subjected to an invasive physical or chemical hybridization process, but instead holds the knowledge that violence stemming from scientific work has already eventuated and has impacted her community, generating a natural empathic response. She is consciously noting during the story how what is happening to the Jangigir has already taken place in relation to Aboriginal people and asylum seekers.

Scientific racism's impact on Indigenous communities is deeply felt. The University of Melbourne, for example, was considered to be the home of eugenicist science at the peak of the movement in the 1930s, the legacy of which is still felt today on campus through the naming of buildings. The building I work in, for example, is named after John Medley, a prominent member of the Eugenics Society of Victoria and a former Vice Chancellor. The work *Power and the Passion: Our Ancestors Return Home* (2010) by Shannon Faulkhead and Uncle Jim Berg details the struggle to repatriate a significant amount of stolen Aboriginal ancestral remains from the University of Melbourne. Notably, they acknowledge that the debates between collectors and Indigenous communities over the stolen ancestral remains which made up the materials of study for eugenicist science

are simplified and represented as a battle between Western-based research or science and the cultural beliefs of Indigenous peoples. … The main argument was that continued research will benefit society as a whole; that the research of Aboriginal skeletal remains would benefit humankind.

*(xxi)*

Similarly, Kaden's struggle here is positioned as a conflict between her ethics, her family, and her progress and productive output as a member of a scientific community with investments in territoriality and dispossession. If Kaden has been experiencing a type of dissonant "internal colonisation" (Dillon, 10) about working as an assistant to the science project, the passage where she is drawn into an argument about ethics with this scientist is one of a few key moments where her increasing dissent to that colonization is heightened.

*Arlie Alizzi*

**Contact and Queer Seduction in "Water"**

"Are you menstruating now?" Larapinta asks.
"I am due to."
"Does it affect your sexual activity?"
"No, not really." "Good", she says, and she *winks*.
She's letting me know she wants to try something out.

*(Van Neerven 2014, 99)*

"We'll get a bottle of nice wine."
"Are you talking about seduction?" A thought comes into my head. I'm being seduced by
    a plant.

*(Van Neerven 2014, 100)*

The idea of contact takes on other shapes of meaning in western queer writing, but remains focused on issues of taxonomy, definition, and the politics of difference within communities. Jewish American lesbian writer and activist Joan Nestle has noted that white LGBT cultures, at their worst, are deeply invested in forms of internal border policing and the creations of rigid taxonomical vocabularies in relation to the diversity of gendered and sexual identities, citing the ever-shifting uses of LGBT acronyms across political history. She voiced her concern that western white queer cultures are deeply invested in upholding border logics defining difference within the community, leading to heated contestations around queer belonging (pers. comm. 2017). An anonymous author from the queer culture magazine *Archer* in 2020 noted that LGBT communities are, however, at their healthiest when "deeply intermixed", and their sexual and gendered borders not clearly defined (Anonymous, n.p.).

Afrofuturist writer Samuel Delany noted in his two-part essay *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* that *contact* with people who are different from you is generative of a healthy sense of self, a healthy city, and, it is implied, a healthy gay community:

Life is at its most rewarding, productive, and pleasant when large numbers of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will … in the name of "safety", society dismantles the various institutions that promote interclass communication, attempts to critique the way such institutions functioned in the past to promote their happier sides are often seen as, at best, nostalgia for an outmoded past and, at worst, a pernicious glorification of everything dangerous: unsafe sex, neighborhoods filled with undesirables (read "unsafe characters"), promiscuity, an attack on the family and the stable social structure, and dangerous, noncommitted, "unsafe" relationships— that is, psychologically "dangerous" relations.

*(121–122)*

Anonymous sex in Delaney's understanding is a productive site of politicization and transformation—a generative site of "dangerous relations" (122). It is important for learning, knowledge production, and deconstruction for Delaney, because it is a site of "interclass" contact through which he is able to come into contact with "types" he would not otherwise (127). Delaney notes that the introduction of laws to limit public sex and promote public safety act to

push social and sexual life further inside the privacy of the home, further emphasizing the distinction between public and private. The distinction between public and private is tugged at by Kaden's internal narration as she and Larapinta begin to openly flirt and eventually have sex;

> Soon it is dark and she pulls on my arm and asks if she can follow me home. I ask for a reason and she answers: "I want to be with you so we can do what is private". Then she leans close to my ear and utters "*private*" again.
>
> *(102)*

> I tell her to turn around and look at the window as I take off my clothes. The blinds are open and there is only darkness outside.
>
> *(117)*

Delaney's vital contribution to the notion of contact is in how he values its sexual dimensions as politically important. It is the potential for queer sex to be transformative, confusing, and consciousness-raising that I am most interested in with relation to this text. "Water" is a contact story with multiple layers of self/other exploration, which playfully subverts the boundaries of public and private. Theorizations of contact by queer writers outside of sci-fi produce a notion of contact as a generative force for community politics, disruption of norms, activism, and healthy social life. As she attempts to navigate her desire for and curiosity towards Larapinta in an inherently dangerous and racially tense setting, under the watchful eyes of her supervisors in the science center, Kaden is uncomfortably aware of being watched.

"Water" presents a series of confused and dissonant moments that Kaden experiences in her position at the science center which are usually provoked by some type of contact, and her two sexual encounters with Larapinta are extremely tense in this respect. The two scenes of sex between them provoke intense episodes of questioning for Kaden, as she grapples with layers of political and personal meaning. The first time they have sex, Kaden's internal monologue narrates her struggle to make sense of Larapinta as other-than-human:

> What will this experiment hold for her? … What will I discover in this uncharted experience? How much of what it means to be human will sway deep in my mind like a ship. I see her eyes are open, those green unhuman eyes.
>
> *(102)*

The language of scientific *discovery*, experimentation, and uncharted knowledge clearly permeates Kaden's thinking. The more intimate they become, the more frequently Kaden reaches for humanistic language to rationalize their encounters, repeating to herself that Larapinta is not human, and that she is human herself. The language of humanness functions to distance her from Larapinta through reinforcing a human/nonhuman distinction between them, and Kaden fearfully maintains that she believes Larapinta cannot truly *see* or judge her because, as she almost compulsively repeats to herself, Larapinta is not human; "I'm glad she can't judge me. I'm afraid she can see into my soul" (100), again playing with the idea of the public-private distinction through Kaden's fear of being observed as she is. She repeats to herself that Larapinta has none of the sentience or moral judgments of a human, maintaining an ambivalent relationship with her intelligence. When Larapinta confesses she's been thinking of them together, Kaden snaps: "'You don't think … It's just processes'" (95). Despite the fact that Larapinta is clearly intelligent and observant about Kaden, Kaden's inner monologue repeats that Larapinta "can't judge me" because she's not human; "If she was human, she would tell me I'm an idiot

… but she's not human, so I feel better" (87). During sex, Kaden distances herself from the knowledge of who or what Larapinta is, noting that "In the dark of the room, her shadow enclosed into mine, she could be anything" (103).

Kaden's repetition that Larapinta is not human hopes to establish some certainty, disavowing Kaden's responsibility towards Larapinta as both a liaison worker and a human actor with power over her. By comparison, Larapinta, who is secretly knowledgeable about Kaden and their shared history, never embarrasses Kaden or exposes her for either her ignorance, her desires, or her sometimes rude behavior. Larapinta's initial interactions with Kaden involve her caring and providing for Kaden, as well as questioning and probing her in conversation to speak about her own position and identity. When they meet for the first time in the meeting room at the science center, the first thing Larapinta does is offer Kaden a drink of fresh water, extracted from her own body:

> "Water?"
> I realise I am still holding the styrofoam cup, which is empty.
> She tops up my cup with her hand. She holds three of her fingers together and a small flow
>     of clear water squeezes out and into the cup.
>
> *(78–79)*

This gesture is laden with both eroticism and care. Kaden's encounters with Larapinta frequently involve physical intimacy, the provision of care and nourishment, and episodes of gentle but direct questioning between them in which Kaden is asked to account for herself. When she first comes into conversation with Larapinta, Kaden is surprised when Larapinta asks her directly whether she's Aboriginal:

> "Yes."
> "Where is your ancestral home?"
> "The islands here, actually … Ki Island, I think. I've never been there. My father died, see."
> "I see." She says … "Doesn't this upset you?"
> "My dad? Of course …"
> "The mining. The islandising. Australia2." She's blunt.
> "Oh I don't know. Like I said, I've never been there. How can you have an attachment to
>     a place you've never been?"
>
> *(79)*

This questioning interrupts the flow of Kaden's thinking in relation to the Jangigir. In this exchange during their first meeting, Kaden reveals her understanding of herself as not responsible to her father's country, which is immediately placed in an uncomfortable position under direct questioning. Her perspective is disturbed by the conversation.

Her dissonance is again heightened when, following her first sexual encounter with Larapinta, she walks down George Street in Brisbane and encounters a protest against Australia2 with "lots of Murris around" (104). She looks around for her uncle, feeling foolish and uncomfortable. Kaden struggles to place herself, becoming confronted by the reality of the Project she is working for and suddenly desperate to connect to the people around her:

> It had come up so many times in the office, but I was used to hearing it from the other end,
> the guvvie buzzwords and contractions. What I was feeling from the crowd was so … *raw*
> … I wanted to go up to them, introduce myself, feel their feeling. Tell them I'm Murri too.
>
> *(104–105)*

This experience further highlights the problematics of being involved in the islandizing project for Kaden, and forces her into questioning her identity and position. On the occasion where she has her bluebottle injury healed by Larapinta, they have the following exchange:

> "Larapinta?"
> She looks up.
> I don't want to be rude but I say, "What would you say you are? And where do you come from?"
> She looks at me. "Can you answer that about yourself?"
> "I guess not."
> "For us it is the same."
> "Have you always been here?"
> "Yes."
>
> *(87–88)*

Coming into intimate contact with Larapinta, being both nourished and questioned by her, gradually shifts Kaden's understanding of her position in the world as an Indigenous person. Eventually, through a slow process of conversation and gentle questioning, it transforms her politics and drives her to join a collective community action to take the islands back. These episodes of questioning bring Kaden's identity, feelings, knowledge, and political positions to the surface and force her to carefully examine them, perhaps for the first time. By her second sexual encounter with Larapinta, a profound shift has occurred in Kaden's thinking. She is no longer invested in distance between them, or establishing a shield of deniability. She also looks differently at the country around her, commenting; "I know the ocean now. I know Ki … from the beginning I'd known there was something more, and now I know the truth" (115).

Kaden's seduction by Larapinta produces an incitement to join in a war of resistance by the Yugambeh and the Jangigir to unseat Tanya Sparkle's colonial authority in Moreton Bay. The reorientation of Kaden's politics in response to coming into contact with her nation, embodied in Larapinta, mirrors the trajectory of a host of other human characters in the science fiction canon who are dislodged from the privileged category of human through contact which transforms them into an alien or a hybrid, with a significant difference; Kaden is not only dislodged from the category of human, but she is reinstated into a position within her Aboriginal nation through an acceptance of her responsibility to country and her own human family. Through the progression of her sexual relationship with Larapinta, she begins to see herself as part of her nation's struggle for freedom and survival in threatened Moreton Bay, noting that "any loyalty I had to Milligan or the corporation has long ceased" (115). The story ends with Kaden infiltrating the science center, using her knowledge of the building to disarm the occupiers and enable the takeback; "I think our resistance has a chance … the water is rising around us and I can feel the force in the rising waves and what we're about to do" (120, 123).

The colonial powers of the corporation led by President Sparkle's government in "Water" depend upon the maintenance of a discontinuity and a distance between Indigenous peoples and their families and ancestral traditions. Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice points out that white possession is enabled by this discontinuity:

> The contemporary nation state depends upon people understanding themselves in this way to ensure they privilege their obligations to country and commerce above those to kin and relation to territory.
>
> *(58)*

Kaden's transition from a state of self-described naivety and loyalty towards her role in the science center's project, into a place of connectivity, relationality, and responsibility, is propelled by her seduction by Larapinta, which enjoins her back into a meaningful relationship with her own family, from whom she has been disconnected following her father's death. In this way, queer contact acts as the occasion for personal transformation and reconnection for the Yugambeh narrator in "Water".

## Works Cited

Anonymous. "Pronoun Trouble: Navigating Gendered Language." *Archer Magazine*, June 2020, https://archermagazine.com.au/2020/06/navigating-gendered-language/. Accessed 10 Aug. 2022.

Blomkamp, Neill, director. *District 9*. Tri-Star Pictures, 2009.

Delaney, Samuel. *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*. New York UP, 1999.

Dillon, Grace. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. U of Arizona P, 2012.

Faulkhead, Shannon, and Jim Berg. *Power and the Passion: Our Ancestors Return Home*. Koorie Heritage Trust Incorporated, 2010.

Justice, Daniel Heath. *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2018.

Van Neerven, Ellen. "Water." *Heat and Light* by Van Neervan, U of Queensland P, 2014, pp. 67–124.

Vizenor, Gerald. "Introduction." *Native Storiers: Five Selections*, edited by Vizenor. U of Nebraska P, 2009a, pp. 1–9.

———. *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*. U of Nebraska P, 2009b.

# 5

# WAYFINDING PASIFIKAFUTURISM

## An Indigenous Science Fiction Vision of the Ocean in Space

*Gina Cole*

### Introduction

Pasifikafuturism is a term that marks the meeting point and intersection of multiple diasporas of Indigenous Pacific peoples who envision, dream, imagine, create, or are receptive to ideas that play with, and liquify, the boundaries of technology and time and space. Pasifikafuturism locates Indigenous Pacific peoples' creative production within an environment where the Pacific Ocean is the central influence in science fiction. In this naming, "Pasifika" is a creolized replacement for the word "Pacific", the European designation for the region, which is not apt given the atrocities of settler colonialism and imperialism that hide behind that romanticized naming. Pasifikafuturism flows from Pacific Ocean Indigeneity and explores Indigenous Pasifika science fiction within a framework reflecting Pasifika culture, history, and values. It is situated in the afterlife of colonization and seeks to move beyond postcolonialism to create Pasifika conceptions of the future.

The Indigenous ancestral art of wayfinding across the Pacific Ocean provides a metaphorical model for Pasifikafuturist cultural production that focuses on Indigenous transformation resulting from our position in the Pacific Ocean. Waka builder and master navigator Hoturoa Barclay-Kerr defines wayfinding as "the ability to travel across thousands of miles of ocean safely and efficiently, using nothing but the ancestral knowledge of the past and the clues provided by nature to find land far below the distant horizon" (88). Wayfinding is a living practice of Indigenous science that continues in the present day. It is a practice that demonstrates that Pacific peoples and teachers have always been and continue to evolve as futurist thinkers. Our ancestors navigated across the vastness of the Pacific in deliberate voyages to their home islands. In wayfinding, the navigator always maintains an awareness of their site of departure and their future destination while calibrating their position against the totality of the environment and reading all the signs around them in the eternal present, including wind direction, swell patterns, currents, cloud lore, streaks of phosphorescence that indicate land mass, homing birds, and star paths. They make any necessary adjustments in course, drawing their destination to them until they make landfall. Similarly, Pasifikafuturist artists, such as Witi Ihimaera (Te Whānau a Kai, Te Aitanga a Mahaki, Rongowhakaata, Tuhoe, Whakatōhea, and Ngāti Porou), maintain an awareness of their Indigenous past while calibrating their cultural production in the present against the environment in which they exist. They make any required course corrections

DOI: 10.4324/9780429317828-7

in the present until their future destination comes to them. These destinations include the production and consumption of Pasifikafuturist stories written by, for, and about Indigenous Pacific peoples.

This chapter examines two science fiction novellas written by Indigenous authors. The first is a Pasifikafuturist story by Witi Ihimaera. His space novella *Dead of Night* is a story about six people traveling through space to the end of the universe, or Te Kore; the great nothingness, the void, the realm of potential being. By way of comparison, the second novella is a work of Africanfuturism by Nnedi Okorafor, who refers to herself as a "Naijamerican" (Nigerian American). In Okorafor's novella *Binti*, the titular protagonist, a young Indigenous woman from the Himba tribe in Namib, is the first person in her community to travel into space to attend an intergalactic university. These two Indigenous space stories find commonality in their use of oceanic metaphorical figures in space. They illustrate futures in which Indigenous people have survived via an Indigenous Oceanic conception of science fiction.

## Witi Ihimaera Steers the Doctrine of Discovery into the Māori Space-Time Continuum of Te Kore

### *A Postcolonial Navigation of Space*

Witi Ihimaera's 2007 novella *Dead of Night* is a Pasifikafuturist narrative that flips the doctrine of discovery and steers Captain James Cook's colonial voyages to the Pacific Ocean into the Māori space-time continuum of Te Kore. A central thread of the narrative structure of *Dead of Night* is a postcolonial navigation of space modeled on the voyages of Cook to the Pacific in 1769 to observe the transit of Venus in Tahiti. The story is set in 2169, 400 years after Cook's first voyage to the Pacific and his so-called "discovery" of Aotearoa, New Zealand, in 1769. The spaceship is named *Endeavour* after Cook's ship, and is run by an artificial intelligence named Hemi, an acronym for Hypertime Engineering Matrix Intelligence, and the Māori transliteration of the name "James". Cook's first trip to the Pacific, commissioned by the British Admiralty, was a combined Royal Navy and Royal Society expedition aboard the bark HMS *Endeavour*. The admiralty's orders to Cook were divided into two sections, both marked "Secret". The first order was to voyage to Tahiti to observe the 1769 transit of Venus across the sun. Second, once the transit was observed, Cook was directed to sail south to seek evidence of the southern continent.

Similarly, Captain Craig, who commands the spaceship *Endeavour*, is instructed by its owner and builder, scientist Peter Cortland, to voyage to the Hubble Deep Field, and to observe the transit of a black hole named Venus II across a galaxy named HUDF-JD2. Once the transit has been observed, Captain Craig opens a second set of secret instructions directing him to "Go forward to zero" as the universe is closed and will start contracting. Captain Craig is, therefore, humanity's only hope (200). Accompanying the second set of instructions is a codicil "which is not to be opened until zero is reached". The analogy with Cook's voyage to the Pacific is that while Cook returned home to Britain, the spaceship returns to the beginning of the voyage. This Indigenous representation of the circularity of time eschews the Western linear conception of time, and underscores the legitimacy of Indigenous values, celestial knowledge, and ways of knowing.

Only one of the six human characters onboard the spaceship is an Indigenous character, Captain Craig. Captain Craig is Māori and is an equal in all respects with the five other Pākehā (European) passengers, from engaging in socially appropriate conversations to having the required technological knowledge to fly the spaceship. The artificial intelligence (AI) characters in the story include the *Endeavour*'s avatar Hemi, who is in control of the spaceship and with whom Captain Craig communicates via an implant in his brain. Three robotic probes, named

the "Aunties" (Advanced Unified Navigational Tracking Intelligence), work with Hemi to shepherd the spaceship through space. The scientists who built the probes gave them "the personalities of three grumpy old ladies who are constantly scolding Hemi as if he were their nephew" (199). A robotic service crew assists Hemi and the Aunties. The AIs invoke whānau (family) of the mechanical type, standing in as disembodied technological Māori characters who have a relationship with Captain Craig—the only other Māori presence onboard the ship—but remain at a distance from the other passengers. The parallel is, therefore, that Māori are in control of the ship, navigating its course and protecting those who sail within. This idea of Māori being in control of the ship is a metaphorical turn towards an Indigenous view of who should be leading Aotearoa. The story, therefore, holds a glimmer of the idea of Māori governing New Zealand and gestures towards what that would mean in terms of an adherence to Māori values, such as Māori sovereignty or rangatiratanga, manaakitanga (caring for others), and kaitiakitanga (stewardship).

What is the purpose of modeling an Indigenous space story on the Crown-sponsored colonial voyage of Captain Cook who voyaged forth under the "doctrine of discovery", a doctrine which authorizes the dispossession and genocide of Indigenous peoples? In author's notes to the version of the story printed in *Are Angels OK?* edited by Callaghan and Manhire (2006), Ihimaera states that "as a New Zealand writer, I have always tried to put New Zealand at the centre of my work, even if, in this case, the narrative involves the universal world of science and mathematics" (310). Ihimaera goes on to say that

> like all my work, it is embedded with a Māori kaupapa and my constant environmental concerns. In my opinion it is not enough to just save the planet; we've got to give ourselves the chance to get off it so that future generations can fulfil their destiny and truly achieve the inheritance that belongs to them.
>
> *(300)*

Mapping the plot of *Dead of Night* onto the story of Cook's voyages, as well as providing a mirror narrative structure, also serves to challenge the colonial agenda implicit in Cook's journeys. Cook was searching for a land that Europeans thought of at the time as being at the end of the Earth.

Tina Ngata traces the justification for widespread colonization to a set of papal bulls from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The "doctrine of discovery" grew out of these decrees (45). The *Dum Diversas* empowered King Alfonso V of Portugal the "right" to conquer North Africa to "invade, search out, capture, and subjugate the Saracens [Muslims] and pagans [non-Christians]"—in other words, anyone who was not white and not Christian. This decree formed the basis of the Atlantic slave trade (46). Ngata points to later papal bulls such as *Romanus Pontifex* and *Inter Caetera*, which extended the rights previously granted into the New World. These decrees are still in force today. As Ngata states, "in justifying European imperialism, the papal bulls paved the way for Cortés, Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan, John Cabot and indeed James Cook" and provided "a convenient religious rationale for the … cruelties of colonisation" (46). The plot of *Dead of Night* challenges this colonial agenda by setting the story in space and offering an Indigenous conception of the journey to the end of the universe, in which such a journey is in effect a return to the self and not a precursor for imperial domination and colonialism.

Thus, the narrative, while being clothed in colonial trappings such as a faux Victorian dinner service and discussions centering around the European development of scientific theory in the Enlightenment tradition, is subverted by Māori kaupapa (themes) that continually disrupt the colonial journey. For example, Captain Craig, despite having Western technology literally

embedded in his head in the form of an interface with the ship, retains an Indigenous perspective. He challenges Western educational divisions between the humanities and science, arguing in favor of the holistic values of Indigenous peoples and posing the question, "How can the head function without the heart, the body without the spirit, the individual without understanding his role in the community?" (207). He observes Māori protocol and raises his voice in poroporoaki (farewell) when the ship reaches the end of the universe (240). However, he is a lone voice for the Indigenous perspective among a guest list representative of Pākehā scientific thinking, capitalism, religion, and cultural production. Captain Craig's minority position mirrors that of the minority position of Indigenous peoples in societies such as Aotearoa, where settler colonialism is the hegemonic framework. But while he is a lone voice, he is also the captain of the ship. He is therefore a metaphorical representation of the continued survival, leadership, and stewardship of Indigenous peoples despite their minority position.

### *Ihimaera's Didactic Game*

Another central narrative device used in the story is a didactic game played by the passengers during dinner. The game requires each guest to discuss what they think has been the most transforming event in the history of cosmological science. Ihimaera (2006) writes in the author's notes that

> for better or worse there's always been a strong didactic component to my work, and I had always wanted the story to begin a process of information transmission from the inventory of cosmological history, attaching it to the kinds of New Zealand, Pacific, Maori and indigenous histories that I write about.
>
> *(310–311)*

The text goes some way towards achieving Ihimaera's stated aim of attaching an account of Pākehā cosmological history to Indigenous histories. However, the didacticism of the game reflects a Western portrayal of scientific and cultural thinking and does not investigate Indigenous science or culture in any meaningful way. The attachment of Western philosophy to that of Indigenous peoples comes at the expense of the elucidation of Indigenous histories and reflects an obscuration of Indigeneity in the text.

Dr Foley, a historian, traces "the unfolding set of revelations of Earth's—and man's—position in the cosmos". He admits that he is only able to talk of "western man and western cosmology" and that "western cosmologists were blind to Muslim science and astronomy" (195). However, there is no acknowledgment of the existence of other Indigenous cosmologies or their legitimacy.

Professor Van Straaten, a scientist, continues the portrayal of European Enlightenment scientific discourse and offers a discussion on the way in which the telescope transformed the cosmological sciences. His discussion stretches across European science around the Big Bang theory, Einstein's theory of relativity and the cosmological constant, and quantum mechanics. During the Professor's discussion of European humanities and science, Captain Craig hesitantly points out that Indigenous people would not divide the sciences and the humanities into two separate disciplines and to do so was a grave mistake (207). The Professor does not take up the opportunity of engaging in a discussion about Indigenous science or giving any acknowledgement of the Indigenous viewpoint. Rather, his response is to denigrate Indigeneity by criticizing the Indigenous people of Te Rapanui for "cutting down all the trees on Easter Island" (207).

Monsignor Frère, a Catholic priest, engages in a debate with Professor Van Straaten about science versus God. The Monsignor's contribution to the discussion is that from the 1990s onward the most transforming event in the history of the cosmological sciences was the discovery of the unseen universe, that is "Dark Matter" or "exotic matter". This is a provocative plot device, given that the Monsignor's birthplace is a village in Nigeria, which places him as the only black character in the narrative. However, there is no discussion of his Indigenous roots, and his discussion focuses solely on his position as a Catholic priest. The Monsignor inevitably concludes that "the presence of the unseen affirms the continuing presence of God in the universe" (214). However, while talking of the discovery of the "unseen universe", the Monsignor's contribution to the game does not take up the opportunity afforded by the metaphorical implications of the phenomenon of "dark matter" as discussed by Afrofuturists, whereby dark matter stands in for Black people who are invisible in science fiction but whose gravitational force is unmistakable (Thomas).

Mrs. Cortland, the widow of the man who financed the spaceship, catalogs the unheralded contribution of women scientists, how their male employers underpaid them, how their achievements went unrecognized, and how they were passed over in favor of men for such awards as the Nobel Prize. She argues that "one would think, from looking at the history of the cosmological sciences, that it was a male history" (223). The men at the dinner are dismissive of Mrs. Cortland's topic. Professor Van Straaten "groans" at the mention of the subject and disparagingly refers to one group of women scientists as "Pickering's harem", thereby defining the women scientists in terms of their male boss and denigrating their contribution as against the contribution of male scientists. Mrs. Cortland thinks of the long dead and diseased Earth and wonders "how much better our future might have been if women had been allowed to take control of our destiny" (226). What is striking about this feminist musing is that it is an observation which is wholly directed at white women in the context of a discussion rooted in the European development of science in accordance with the Enlightenment tradition. There is no place in this discussion for the contribution of Indigenous women whose position in the community is yet again erased. The omission contrasts sharply with the placeholding that Ihimaera gives to Indigenous women in the form of the three robotic Aunties and their guiding auntie-nephew relationship with Hemi, the ship's controlling AI. Ironically, Ihimaera places Indigenous women, albeit in the form of robotic avatars, in control of the ship's destiny. But the subtext is that they are disembodied automatons with no real power.

The issue that Miss O'Hara, an actress in popular cinema, brings to the dinner debate is a discussion about the large number of films and television series in the science fiction genre that came out of Hollywood at the turn of the millennium. "In them we see our wonderment at the universe", she says (227). However, there is no discussion about the fact that science fiction film and television production is overwhelmingly peopled by white characters and that the figure of "the alien" always stands in for the "other" or Indigenous people. As the African American science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler pointed out, *Star Wars* featured "every kind of alien … but only one kind of human—white ones" (185).

Any analysis of the invisibility of Indigenous people and the whiteness of science fiction produced by the screen industry is lacking from Miss O'Hara's discussion. She considers the fact that

> for all our imaginary voyages through space we have not found any other life. There are no aliens out there, hostile, friendly, or otherwise. There's been nothing … The most transforming event in cosmological science? It is this: the discovery that man is truly alone. It has always only and ever been in this huge immensity just—us.

*(230)*

This comment speaks to a humanist understanding of the world that ignores the colonial representations of Indigenous peoples as the "alien other", and their omission from the science fiction genre. Accordingly, the omission of Indigeneity from the conversation highlights the devaluing of Indigenous science and bears witness to the dismissal and erasure of Indigenous ways of knowing.

### Oceanic Metaphor: Wayfinding in Space

The metaphoric device of a ship on a wayfinding voyage through a celestial sea is at the heart of the narrative in *Dead of Night*. The *Endeavour* is a spaceship built for an ongoing expedition over billions of light years from Earth to the end of the universe using black holes to slingshot itself across the space-time continuum (209). However, once the ship reaches the initial destination of HUDF-JD2, there is no further mapped area. The ship is sailing in uncharted waters, which must be navigated by robotic probes, the Aunties, much like Captain Cook in his first voyage to the Pacific who, eventually, with the help of his Tahitian navigator Tupaia, pivots around the islands of the Pacific until returning to the beginning in England. It is notable that Cook did not record anything about how Tupaia was able to retain his bearings and always knew where Tahiti was. Lewis notes that the fact that Tupaia could do so is in line with the home referencing systems of the Caroline Islands system of etak, of having the ability to point out the location of invisible islands while at sea (128). The subverted theme here points to historical blind spots where Indigenous knowledge was not considered worthy of note.

Similarly, the *Endeavour* spaceship relies on the Aunties to guide it on its voyage through the uncharted waters of the cosmos (217). Hemi and the Aunties, knowing that the humans on board crave "landmarks", must plot a course populous with galaxies and stars. Accordingly, black holes and galaxies provide turning points and landmarks or cosmic islands that plot the ship's journey in the "sea of stars", a cosmic environment that chimes with Hau'ofa's eloquent formulation of our Pasifika existence in "a sea of islands" rather than the colonial Eurocentric romanticism of far-flung "islands in the sea" (153). The Aunties must assess the environment in a wayfinding process. After negotiating the dangerous cosmic sea on its approach to zero, the spaceship anchors in the lee of a benign star system (220). The ship is described as a "valiant star waka" (221). When the ship nears Te Kore, the end of the universe, "the light-wings are reefed, minimising her profile so that the ship is not overturned by the cosmic winds buffeting from all around, and Hemi has dropped seven anchors to keep her from drifting" (233). While the ship rocks, "the three aunties are like lifeboats beside it" (239). Thus, Ihimaera's conception of space is not one of empty space but that of a place in dynamic movement that can be used to hold a ship in place, much like the ocean on Earth.

When Te Kore begins to collapse, and the countdown reaches zero, the ship is incinerated and likened to a "bloodied jawbone thrown through the air", recalling the legend of Maui who used his grandmother's jawbone to fish up the North Island of Aotearoa, New Zealand. Accordingly, at the end of the voyage, Indigenous ritual, myth, and practice are present. The subtext by analogy with Cook's voyage to the Pacific is that although Cook returned to Britain and settler colonialism followed in his wake, Indigenous Pacific peoples and cultures lived on, and we survive today. The narrative thus envisions an Indigenous counter history, reweaving the first contact colonial nightmare within a cosmic framework embedded in Oceanic wayfinding metaphors from the Pacific. This Indigenous oceanic conception of science fiction, and its portrayal of Indigenous survival using oceanic metaphorical figures in space, is a feature of both novellas.

**Envisioning the Dream of the Indigenous Woman in Oceanic Space in
Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti***

*An Indigenous Woman in Space*

In Nnedi Okorafor's 2015 novella *Binti*, the eponymous protagonist is a young woman from the Himba tribe in Namib who defies her parents and travels to a university planet, Oomza Uni, to study mathematics and currents. She is the first person from her tribe to attend university. When she makes the decision to travel to the university, she steps out of the Himba tradition of staying put and not leaving their land. The Himba people prefer to travel inwardly as opposed to outwardly. On the trip to Oomza Uni, Binti is an outsider, the only one of her people onboard a Khoush spaceship filled with Khoush people, who are the majority tribe on Earth and despise the Himba. As Crowley notes, "in contradistinction to the Himba, the uber-cosmopolitan Oomza Uni is replete with different peoples from all over the galaxy—a literal universe-ity" (249).

Binti grapples with opposing aspects of her nature, and this tension defines the arc of the story. On the one hand, her cultural traditions dictate an adherence to a type of stasis that rejects any threat to her people's way of life from outsiders. On the other hand, she wishes to pursue her desire to extend her love of "mathematics, experimenting, learning, reading, inventing, studying, obsessing, revealing" (9), and this desire obliges her to break with tradition and engage with other peoples and species. Accordingly, Binti's decision to go to Oomza Uni sits alongside her Himba Indigeneity, which Okorafor depicts as technologically advanced although contained within cultural rules.

Binti is a mathematical genius, a "master harmonizer" who builds "astrolabe" communication devices used universally by all peoples. Oomza Uni accepts her application based on her technologically advanced skills and knowledge. Thus, by investing an Indigenous woman with technological ability, Okorafor decenters the West's hold on access to technological advancement and provides her protagonist with the scientific agency that is usually absent for Indigenous characters in science fiction.

At the heart of the story is a theme of cultural appropriation, which is the main plank upon which Binti's role as protagonist rests. During Binti's interstellar trip to the university, a jellyfish-like species called the Meduse attack the spaceship and murder everyone on board except for Binti and the pilot. This extraordinary act of violence occurs in retaliation for human violence against the Meduse: in the past, humans removed the Meduse Chief's stinger, the source of Meduse power. To take the Meduse Chief's stinger was an act of war. Anthropologists from Oomza Uni have placed the Chief's stinger on display as an artifact in the weapons museum. After the massacre, the Meduse enlist and transform Binti to enable her to negotiate the return of the stinger from the university. When the Meduse Chief meets the professors at Oomza Uni, he tells them "if you do not give it to us willingly, we have the right to take back what was brutally stolen from us without provocation" (47). Binti helps to resolve the Meduse grievance over the unprovoked violence inflicted upon them, and the university agrees to return the stinger to the Meduse.

This strand of wrongful appropriation in the narrative is a powerfully evocative comment on the practice of European colonial invaders who took artifacts and body parts from Indigenous peoples, which are still housed in European museums today and which Indigenous people are seeking to have returned to them. James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson (Chickasaw Nation) notes that the unethical acquisition and cultural appropriation of Aboriginal human remains is harmful and does not benefit First Nations peoples or science. Such practices are acts of colonial privilege which academic researchers justify under the guise of good science. The resulting harm to First Nations people is "ignored, summarily dismissed, or scorned" (Henderson 57). Binti's

role in negotiating the return of the Meduse Chief's stinger is representative of some of the successful demands that Indigenous peoples have made to museums and educational institutions for the repatriation of human remains. She is a representation of successful Indigenous advocacy for justice in what Scarre refers to as "the collision between two fundamental values, knowledge and justice" (Scarre 81).

## *Oceanic Space*

Throughout the text of *Binti*, metaphoric and thematic lines draw linkages between space and the ocean through imagery and characterization. Oceanic and natural elements hold equal relationship with intelligent beings and are given their own agency as living entities. The spaceship on which Binti travels to Oomza Uni is a living technology, a sentient entity called "Third Fish … a Miri 12, a type of ship closely related to a shrimp. Miri 12s were stable calm creatures with natural exoskeletons that could withstand the harshness of space" (8). The spaceship is therefore a sentient, pelagic figure swimming through the sea of space in the same way that fish swim through the sea on Earth. Accordingly, Okorafor draws a direct parallel between the sea and space as essential sites of interconnection between lifeforms, such as the Miri spaceships and the lifeforms who travel within her, and metaphorically between Indigenous peoples and the sea. (This oceanic symbolism connecting sea and space is a foundational thematic device in both novellas).

The oceanic theme running through the text is most clearly drawn in the characterization of the jellyfish-like Meduse, who are blue and translucent and have "long tentacles spilling down to the floor like a series of gigantic ghostly noodles" (12). The Meduse also have, within their tentacles, a stinger that is "tinted pink like the waters of the salty lake" (15). In the formulation of the Meduse characters, Okorafor pays homage to Octavia Butler, a founding Afrofuturist author in the literary ancestry of Afrofuturism, and her creation of the "Oankali". The Meduse are reminiscent of the Oankali race in Butler's trilogy *Lilith's Brood*, who have writhing tentacles instead of hair, like "Medusa" (13). However, while the Oankali are humanoid, the Meduse are more like jellyfish in that their bodies are transparent blue domes.

The imagery of water contrasts with Binti's desert home throughout the text. For instance, the Meduse and the Khoush are old foes who once fought over water-soaked lands on Earth and have agreed by treaty not to attack each other's ships. Another metaphoric sea in the story is the current of numbers that runs through the "sea of mathematics". Binti observes a meditation-inducing state called "treeing" in which she can become lost in the "mathematical sea" (10). The "sea of mathematics" is a constant comfort to Binti and a place that she retreats to in times of fear and stress. For instance, when she is alone after the massacre, her "thirsty brain dropped into a mathematical trance like a stone dropped into deep water. And I felt the water envelop me as down down down I went" (21). Binti finds safety and protection in numbers and views them as deities invested with magical power. She invokes numbers as spiritual comfort, focusing on the number five when she witnesses the Meduse murdering the Khoush, and praying to the "Seven" when the Meduse imprison her on *Third Fish*. Although Binti is a desert dweller on Earth, her ability to access various numerical currents in the sea of mathematics serves as an oceanic metaphor in which she swims.

## *Privileging Indigenous Culture and Reenlisting the Science of Indigeneity*

Binti's Indigenous Himba culture is privileged throughout the story in several ways. For instance, over the course of the novella, Binti maintains a customary Himba practice of rubbing *otjize*, an ointment made of red clay and oil from her homeland, into her hair and skin. This

bodily link with the earth serves to always ground Binti so that she keeps a connection with her desert birthplace and her culture. The weight of otjize in her hair gives her cultural grounding and comfort when she first speaks with the Meduse after the massacre on board the Khoush spaceship, *Third Fish*. She observes that "the weight of my hair on my shoulders was assuring, my hair was heavy with *otjize*, and this was good luck and the strength of my people, even if my people were far far away" (23).

Binti's relationship with her hair and what it represents is one of the central threads weaving through the narrative. In the beginning, her hair is braided into a mathematical code, a history of her people, a pattern that speaks to her family's bloodline, culture, and history. She notes that "my father had designed the code and my mother and aunties had shown me how to braid it into my hair" (10). Binti's hair is, therefore, the embodiment of her culture in a sea of mathematics. Her cultural relationship with her hair and otjize and the Meduse's cultural relationship with the stinger merge when Binti befriends one of the Meduse named Okwu and heals his injured stinger with otjize.

At the end of the story, Binti is transformed into what may be described as an Indigenous posthuman state of survivance. Vizenor writes that "the character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry" (*Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* 1). Posthumanism is represented in Binti, who makes the decision to survive and avert a war by becoming a posthuman figure. When the Meduse Chief stings Binti, she becomes part-Meduse and her hair is replaced with ten Meduse tentacles called "okuoko",

> a soft transparent blue with darker blue dots at their tips. They grew out of my head as if they had been doing all my life … a little longer than my hair had been, hanging just past my backside, and they were thick as sizable snakes.
>
> *(54)*

As a result of her transformation, she is able to access the mathematical current all around her and is thereby able to communicate with the Meduse.

Although Binti's body changes into that of a hybrid Meduse–Himba person at a cellular level, she maintains her bodily connection to her Indigenous Himba culture by making new otjize from ingredients she finds on Planet Oomza and continuing to cover her okuoko tentacles: "I touched one of my tentacle-like locks … I plunged my two fingers into my concoction … I spread it on my flesh" (54). Accordingly, Binti's cultural practice of rubbing otjize on her skin, and on her transformed state in the form of Meduse okuoko, foreshadows a continuing connection with her culture and her Indigeneity, despite the changes to her physical body. Thus, Binti's ability to maintain a link with her Himba origins, despite her physical transformation, speaks to the ability of Indigeneity to survive and evolve in the face of forced change.

## Conclusion

Science fiction texts—particularly space stories—written by Indigenous authors often comment on the present social position of Indigenous peoples by recasting the colonial past into transformational futures of the imagination.

In the application of a wayfinding framework to the science fiction stories of Indigenous authors, the ocean figures as a metaphor for space and vice versa. These space stories, including novellas like *Dead of Night* and *Binti*, provide a lens through which to examine the corrosive effects of colonialism on Indigenous peoples, such as the harm caused by loss of lands, culture,

and language; cultural appropriation of artifacts and human remains; and continued subjugation under settler colonial and neocolonial rule.

Indigenous space stories such as *Dead of Night* and *Binti* also exemplify the envisioning of transformative futures in which Indigeneity is honored and recognized. They present an Indigenous Oceanic conception of the cosmic story. In this conception, Pasifikafuturist texts center Indigenous Pasifika peoples as the main characters. In these texts, an Indigenous imperative drives a narrative that foregrounds our culture and values, as opposed to the current mainstream presentation of science fiction story which favors a white, male, cisgendered, heteronormative, able-bodied, middle-class point of view.

Looking at Witi Ihimaera's novella *Dead of Night* through a Pasifikafuturist lens reveals a narrative that overturns the doctrine of discovery and directly examines Captain Cook's colonial voyages to the Pacific Ocean in contrast with a Māori conception of the space-time continuum. Ihimaera uses an examination of European scientific thought in the Enlightenment tradition as a backdrop against which to subvert the colonial gaze and place transhuman and robotic Māori characters in control of the voyage and as protectors of the human passengers on board the spaceship. The voyage in this sense stands in for the fate of humankind on the spaceship that is Earth. In this rendering, in the hands of Indigeneity, the fate of humankind as it faces annihilation is that of a closed, cyclical, or circular return to the beginning of time.

Okorafor's depiction of an Indigenous woman in space, in the novella *Binti*, privileges Indigenous culture and, in contrast to the usual white, Western, colonial norm of science fiction, displays a reenlistment of Indigenous science. Binti retains her connection with her home, family, and culture through an embodied relationship with clay and oil from Earth, even after she is physically transformed and separated from these elements. Okorafor places her protagonist's cultural origin from an Indigenous tribe in the Namib desert in dynamic contrast with an Oceanic view of the space journey. When Binti becomes part-Meduse, her identity is subsumed to an extent within a pelagic, posthuman physicality.

Oceanic metaphors positioning space as an ocean of cosmic islands, and the ocean as a galaxy, are common metaphorical figures in both Ihimaera's *Dead of Night* and Okorafor's *Binti*. Yet, these authors hail from vastly separate spaces—the Pacific Ocean continent and the African continent. I posit that their common use of oceanic imagery finds connection in the relationship between the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean as the liquid biotic mass that provided the highway for the worldwide invasion of white settler colonialism into Indigenous lives over the past 500 years. While the West views the high seas and space as *aqua nullius* and *spatio nullius* to be conquered, Ihimaera's and Okorafor's texts provide an Indigenous Oceanic view which figures these sites as places of deep connection where Indigenous science fiction can imagine transformed Indigenous futures.

## Works Cited

Barclay-Kerr, Hoturoa. "From Myth and Legend to Reality: Voyages of Rediscovery and Knowledge." *Global South Ethnographies*, edited by Elke Emerald et al., Sense, 2016, pp. 85–91.

Butler, Octavia E. "Black Scholar Interview with Octavia Butler: Black Women and the Science Fiction Genre." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1986, pp. 14–18.

———. *Lilith's Brood*. Hachette, 2000.

Callaghan, Paul, and Bill Manhire. *Are Angels Ok? The Parallel Universes of New Zealand Writers and Scientists*. Victoria UP, 2006.

Crowley, Dustin. "Binti's R/Evolutionary Cosmopolitan Ecologies." *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, pp. 237–256.

Hau'ofa, Epeli. "Our Sea of Islands." *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, edited by Eric Waddell et al., U of the South Pacific, 1993, pp. 2–16.

Henderson, James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood. "The Appropriation of Human Remains: A First Nations Legal and Ethical Perspective." *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, edited by James O. Young and Conrad G Brunk, Wiley & Sons, 2012, pp. 55–71.

Ihimaera, Witi. *Ask the Posts of the House*. Reed, 2007.

Lewis, David. *We, the Navigators: The Ancient Art of Landfinding in the Pacific*. U of Hawai'i P, 1994.

Ngata, Tina. "Toppling Cook." *Overland 236*, no. 236, 2019, pp. 44–48.

Okorafor, Nnedi. "Africanfuturism Defined." *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*. www.nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html. Accessed 22 Oct. 2019a.

———. *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*. DAW, 2019b.

Scarre, Geoffrey. "The Repatriation of Human Remains." *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, edited by James O. Young and Conrad G Brunk, Wiley & Sons, 2012, pp. 72–92.

Thomas, Sheree R. *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*. Warner Books, 2014.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. U of Nebraska P, 2008.

# CREATING COLLABORATIVE DIGITAL POETIC WORLDS IN THE VIDEO POETRY OF HEID ERDRICH AND KATHY JETÑIL-KIJINER

*Kasey Jones-Matrona*

Video poetry is unique because of the blending of orality, animation, photographs, videos, and music. The way authors and activists Heid Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Band Ojibwe) and Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner (Marshall Islander) share their video poetry through online platforms like YouTube and Vimeo, and on their own websites, allows for an audience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike to view, comment, and share these video poems that broach both historical and contemporary Indigenous issues. These video poems create new digital worlds by carving out spaces for Indigenous artists to share their work and generate conversations, and this builds new viewers and audiences who view, interact with, and participate in meaning-making. In these digital forums, futures are collaboratively created by many participants. Video poetry curated and circulated online is a novel format for Indigenous Futurisms for these reasons.

Erdrich collaborates with other Indigenous artists like Johnathan Thunder and Trevino Brings Plenty to animate and voice her various "poemeos" (as she calls them). Erdrich's multi-modal collection of poetry *Curator of Ephemera at the New Museum for Archaic Media* (2017) includes images of mix-tape lists, QR codes to her video poems, and ekphrastic poems for which the original art pieces exist only in her mind. Erdrich chose to guide readers to her online poemeos through this "archaic" media of the QR code. Erdrich's video poem "Pre-Occupied" addresses a multiplicity of audiences in order to examine forms of occupation and activism of both dominant culture and Indigenous cultures. Erdrich's video poem compositions recover Indigenous histories hidden by dominant culture's "occupation". "Pre-Occupied" serves as an act of resistance and recovery for Indigenous audiences while informing and educating other audiences about protest culture.

Similarly, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner produces her own performative and filmic video poems and posts them on her WordPress blog and website. Jetñil-Kijiner is well-known for performing "Dear Matafele Peinam" at the 2014 United Nations Summit, proving that poetry and activism are closely connected. She also collaborates with other Indigenous poets and filmmakers. Jetñil-Kijiner collaborated with the Greenlandic poet Aka Niviâna to film the video poem "Rise" for 350.org. They met and wrote the poem "Rise" the day before filming and recorded their

powerful poem on a melting glacier together in Greenland. Both Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna voice their concerns for and experiences with climate change to their native homelands.

These video poems exhibit expression of both digital activism and visual sovereignty which are important facets of Indigenous digital world-building in Indigenous Futurist works. I examine how these videos are composed and produced, what messages they send to Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, how they serve as and inspire activism, and how they are circulated and curated in the online environment in order to create collaborative Indigenous digital poetic worlds.

## Defining Collaborative Digital Poetic Worlds

In my own theorization, collaborative digital poetic worlds signify digital or online spaces where poetry and poetic works are featured and diverse audiences are drawn to create meaning. Collaboration is created and sustained on multiple levels. Multimedia techniques allow for a combination of multiple artistic genres. For video poetry, composers utilize written and spoken poetry, film, photography, music and sound, and animation to produce a text. Multiple professionals (poets, writers, producers, animators, musicians, editors) collaborate to create the video poem, and the audience's ability to share and comment on the video poem represents another layer of collaboration. In an Indigenous Futurist context specifically, collaborative digital poetic worlds signify an urgent critical representation and critique of contemporary issues in digital spaces ranging from climate change and environmental impacts on Indigenous lands to the plight of missing and murdered Indigenous women.

It is also important to define the term *digital* before discussing the video poems. Indigenous scholars like Angela Haas argue that this term dates back farther than the beginning of the World Wide Web. Haas writes, "'digital' refers to our fingers, our digits, one of the primary ways (along with our ears and eyes) through which we make sense of the world and with which we write into the world. All writing is digital" (84). According to Haas, the term *digital* is inextricably linked to embodied tasks. Reconceptualizing this term helps scholars and artists claim the internet as a space that belongs to and has always belonged to Indigenous peoples just like other technologies.

Before we can declare the digital world an empowering Indigenous space, though, it is crucial to acknowledge both the digital divide and the dangers that linger for Indigenous peoples online. Katharine Brodock notes "three manifestations of the digital divide", and those include "unequal access, unequal skills, and censorship" (71). Many rural Indigenous communities still struggle to gain internet access. *NPR* reports, according to data collected from the American Community Survey and the Census Bureau, that only 53 percent of Native Americans living on "American Indian reservations or tribal lands … have access to high-speed internet service" (Wang). Indigenous peoples also face widespread harassment online, and the internet can be used as a tool to organize sex trafficking, which affects Indigenous women in staggering numbers.

With all of the faults and inequalities associated with the digital world, many artists, activists, and scholars still argue that it is necessary for Indigenous peoples to claim this space. Natanya Ann Pulley recognizes the continual issues with interference and monitoring of Native activity on the web, but ultimately makes the argument that Native Americans should embrace the digital world and use it to politically mobilize. Pulley writes:

> Native people acquire a political pulse online that in the past was sequestered on the reservation—and beaten down there, as was the American Indian Movement at Pine Ridge. Though surveillance of politically engaged Native gatherings continues even online, varying

levels of involvement in Native American politics are at least guaranteed a voice through status updates, shared memes, and notices of events, petitions, and new movements.

*(100)*

Native communities can connect online, mobilize activist efforts, and share art. The digital world is also a space to represent oneself and one's community both individually and collectively. Bronwyn Lumby recognizes the impact and opportunity of digital activism as associated with social media specifically. She argues that

> Facebook is not a disembodied space or an imagined social sphere that has no real substance as a community. It is real in that it is composed of communities generated by real bodies that compose, interact, wrangle and communicate with one another.

*(Lumby 69)*

Lumby's argument connects to Haas's insight about the digital world serving first and foremost as an embodied experience.

Visual sovereignty is also a tenet of Indigenous world-building in online spaces. Joanna Hearne defines visual sovereignty as "an expansive framework that creates a critical space to privilege a range of Indigenous aesthetic strategies and access to traditionality in a political world" (15). Hearne also argues that

> thinking about the ways that Native films foreground imaginative visions of Indigenous futures—even as they look back at historical events and archival texts premised on Indian demise—facilitates an overt acknowledgement of the world-making qualities of visual media and articulates the political stakes of public culture images of Indians.

*(19)*

Hearne highlights the complex road to visual sovereignty that often involves either a correction and then representation, or simultaneous correction of popular cultural images and self or collective representation. Michelle Raheja's concept of the virtual reservation demonstrates how dominant culture and Indigenous narratives conflict in terms of visual representation. Raheja writes that "film and other forms of new media operate as a space of the virtual reservation, a space where Native American filmmakers put the long, vexed history of Indigenous representations into dialogue with epistemic Indigenous knowledges" (147). Raheja also reasons that while Native artists may work against dominant culture, they often must create and compose in dominant culture forums or through dominant methods or conventions (200).

The hybridity of video poetry, however, creates a new form of art and space to converse about Indigenous art and issues. Heid Erdrich and Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner utilize photography, animation, sound, music, and spoken word to share to curate video poems in online spaces. This novel genre creates a new digital Indigenous Futurist poetic world. Both Erdrich and Jetñil-Kijiner use what may be labeled as traditionally dominant culture methods like film, photography, and animation, but upon closer investigation, viewers can understand how these artists decolonize and reclaim these genres while also creating something entirely new.

### Heid Erdrich's "Pre-Occupied"

Heid Erdrich has published five collections of poetry along with writing and editing other texts such as cookbooks and anthologies of Native American women writers. Erdrich has

collaboratively composed video poems that layer images, video, and sound to share stories of Indigenous people that have long been misrepresented and misinterpreted from Western viewpoints. Erdrich's video poems prove that the internet can serve a productive space to share Indigenous narratives with the understanding that multiple audiences will view and interact with these innovatively structured stories. Erdrich's video poem "Pre-Occupied" from her poetry collection *Curator of Ephemera at the New Museum for Archaic Media* addresses a multiplicity of audiences in order to examine forms of occupation and activism of both dominant culture and Indigenous cultures. The uses of music, sound, video, and images, along with Erdrich's own reading of the poem, recover Indigenous histories hidden by dominant culture's "occupation". "Pre-Occupied" serves to inform and educate non-Native audiences about protest culture, while serving as an act of resistance and recovery for Native audiences. She addresses this multiplicity of audiences and simultaneously sends different messages.

Accessibility and visibility are the first hurdles for Indigenous artists and internet users to overcome. Erdrich publishes her video poems on her website and through YouTube and Vimeo, which are both free and open access, allowing anyone who has access to the internet to view and share. Erdrich published "Pre-Occupied" on YouTube on March 29, 2013. As of October 2021, the video poem had 8,104 views, 60 likes, and 4 dislikes. This viewing number is a bit under the average of YouTube views for a highly visible video, but Erdrich's work is a niche area on the internet. The views are most likely users who study and read Native American literature, are familiar with Erdrich's work, have seen Erdrich read and perform at an event, or even know Erdrich personally or professionally.

Digital storytelling projects are often collaborative in nature, as Erdrich's work demonstrates. Erdrich writes and directs her video poems, but enlists other Native artists and producers to add music, sound, and animation. On her website, Erdrich labels herself producer, co-director, and writer of her video poem "Pre-Occupied". She also notes that she receives artistic aid from two other Indigenous artists. R. Vincent Moniz Jr. is the co-director, and Jonathan Thunder is the art director and animator.

In the text above the embedded video poem "Pre-Occupied" on her website, Erdrich provides a brief synopsis of the video poem. She explains that the poem was originally written for the website *99 Poems for the 99%*. She includes a play on these percentages in the poem itself. The 99% is the dominant culture audience. Erdrich describes "Pre-Occupied" as a "collaborative collage" that produces "a visual landscape of associations and references that match the tremendous irony of how the word 'occupy' can be meant". The video poem was released in 2013, but both the written poem and a QR code leading the reader to the video poem appears as part of *Curator of Ephemera at the New Museum for Archaic Media*. Much of the content focuses on old and new media and technology, and the connection between technology and media to appropriation and misunderstanding of Indigenous culture by non-Native peoples.

The beginning of "Pre-Occupied" subverts typical popular culture expectations that are reproduced through mainstream media. The video poem begins with superhero theme music visually featuring a blue sky and stars dotting the background. The title "Pre-Occupied" and the banner "A film by Heid Erdrich" is inserted in place of the superhero figure that a viewer may be expecting next. The voice of Langston Hughes recites the first few lines of his poem "I've Known Rivers". Then, Erdrich's voice begins to read her poem, repeating "river" three times. The inclusion of Hughes's voice creates an intertextual connection of shared oppression between African Americans and Native Americans and the significance of the Mississippi River. Susan Bernardin argues that the image of the river

localizes this scene, whose identification as the Mississippi River is deferred in the poem, but also gestures toward the deep racial and national histories invoked by that river's name. These waterfalls on the upper Mississippi River, part of storied Dakota memory, were repurposed for hydroelectric power to fuel Twin Cities industrial development.

*(43)*

From the beginning of the video, Erdrich reworks cliché filmic focus on white male protagonist presence and inserts a famous African American voice followed by her own.

As the video poem continues, Erdrich states, "I never never never / etched your spiral icon in limestone / or for that matter pitched a tent on cement". Birch bark homes appear on a Riverwalk; then they become pitched tents as a newspaper headline about Occupy Wall Street appears and animated male figures fall from skyscrapers. Erdrich replaces birch bark homes with tents to simultaneously represent removal and Indigenous protest, then features a well-known protest: Occupy Wall Street. The text "Pitched a Tent on Cement" is inverted and appears upside down to display the transition. This scene demonstrates two forms of occupation: occupation of Native lands and occupation of Wall Street in a protest against income disparity. The slogan for Occupy Wall Street was "We are the 99", referring to disparity between the majority of Americans and the 1% of wealthy Americans. Erdrich reworks the notion of 99% to represent dominant culture. Native American cultures become threatened and overlapped with mainstream representation of culture and protests and issues of the dominant white culture. Erdrich also gestures toward Lenape removal from Manahata for Wall Street to be built. Mishuana Goeman writes that "the violent history of colonialism and Wall Street is forgotten, and in its place the state becomes naturalized as a center of wealth distribution" (203). However, Erdrich forces viewers to reconsider original land rights, while showing the Occupy protest as another complex layer of occupation. As Erdrich presents forms of dominant culture "occupation" later in the video poem, "pre-occupied" comes to also signify pre-contact (the time before Europeans invaded and occupied Indigenous lands in the Americas). There are various kinds of occupation, but when white bodies occupy, the media represents them as peaceful. and any violence they engage in becomes justified. Further, Erdrich also indicates that non-white occupation and the horrors of colonization have been erased from dominant culture history. Undoing Indigenous erasure in historical narratives is another tenet of Indigenous Futurisms. Futurist works not only posit Indigenous futures, but they correct and/or reimagine Indigenous pasts.

The way in which Erdrich and her collaborators utilize animation is novel. Joanna Hearne argues that animation films "redeploy both traditional Indigenous oral narratives and Western image-making technologies not as separate or oppositional binaries but rather as coterminous, mutually embedded, politicized modes of address" (90). An animated feature allows for storytelling on multiple levels, including visual and oral storytelling. Channette Romero studies Indigenous women's animation in order to gauge how Indigenous women artists use what might be considered the colonizer's tools. Romero argues that "One of the most striking characteristics of Indigenous women's animation is the prevalence of flat two-dimensional animation that is markedly at odds with settler animation's privileging of hyperrealist three-dimensional images that attempt to reflect 'reality'" (63). In Erdrich's video, Thunder utilizes some of this flat two-dimensional animation to create a unique visual that resists traditional animation.

Erdrich includes remixed images of herself in the video poem to represent herself as an Indigenous woman in place of stereotypes that circulate through mainstream media and to express her agency to represent herself on her own terms. Multiple images of blank screens pop up, acknowledging the digital space of the poem and the opportunity to publish whatever one creates on the web. Erdrich's image with a marionette-like mouth moving along with her voice

reading the poem appears alongside repurposed images of twentieth-century housewives making dinner and tending to children as she reads the lines "my screen is lit with invitations / bake a casserole—send pizza—make soup for the 99%". Erdrich then rejects these traditional roles of white women (the 99%) as aesthetically pleasing caregivers as she inserts her own image, a remixed photo of an Ojibwe woman defying the ability to be manipulated like a marionette. Erdrich states, "Sorry somehow I haven't time / Flow flow flow both ways in time / There's a river to consider after all". For Erdrich, there are more pressing concerns, like Indigenous land and water rights, than domestic duties that serve the patriarchy. These images also distinguish key differences between Indigenous women and white women. This is a key moment for audiences of the video poem to distinguish between the foregrounded history of white women in movements like women's suffrage and the histories of Indigenous women who were largely excluded.

Erdrich employs many modes of visuals in "Pre-Occupied", and most notably, images of herself. In their article "The Remediation of the Personal Photograph and the Politics of Self-Representation in Digital Storytelling", Sonja Vivienne and Jean Burgess discuss digital representations of the self to argue that the personal photograph allows users "agency and ownership over their online self-representations by selecting, curating, and deploying personal images" (284). There are five tropes of the personal photograph involved in digital storytelling including "family photographs, manipulated images, stock images, artistic abstractions, and re-enactments" (Vivienne and Burgess 284). Erdrich utilizes multiple forms of the personal photograph, mainly manipulated images, artistic abstractions, and re-enactments. These all work to subvert stereotypical images of Native women and reinstate self-representations.

One personal image of Erdrich appears in the video poem to challenge stereotypical images of Native American women as braided, buckskin-wearing sexual objects. Erdrich's sister, Angela Erdrich, painted this portrait of Heid sitting in a chair with bookshelves behind her wearing an animal skin outfit, with a headband and braids, holding cans of "maize". Heid Erdrich incorporates her sister's artwork, and, when the portrait appears, animated turkeys also pop up on both sides of Erdrich's body onscreen. Some scholars argue that this portrait references the Land O'Lakes butter girl who has a connection to Ojibwe history. Land O'Lakes is a Minneapolis–St. Paul company, and in the 1950s a Red Lake Ojibwe artist, Arthur Hanson, updated the butter maiden's image (Ganteaume). This image has long been debated as a stereotypical Plains Indian representation that the company tried to remedy by enlisting an Ojibwe artist to update. Susan Bernardin argues that Erdrich "redirects this enduring emblem of sexual, economic, and environmental commodification" by setting stacks of books in the background and utilizing a strong tone of refusal to "play" Indian (47).

As Erdrich remaps her own body, she also later remaps North America. Yellowed antique maps of the Americas overlap, then the outline of the United States with "100%" enclosed in it transfers into "1%" as pinpoints on the map show where Indigenous populations now live within those original borders. Erdrich states, "A bit pre-occupied, we original 100% who are also 1% more or less". The notes at the end of the poem also tell the reader that the 2010 census revealed that Indigenous peoples made up less than 1% of the population. Erdrich leaps from pre-contact lands and populations to current contemporary populations of Indigenous peoples as her voice echoes and resounds and the map images shift to an animated cityscape. Erdrich also describes the contributing factors to decreased Indigenous populations and the loss and exploitation of Indigenous lands. Erdrich reads, "Simply distracted by sulfide emissions tar sands pipelines foster / care polar bears hydro-fracking". Indigenous lands are targeted for their economic, even at the expense of the health, safety, and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. Natural contracts of reciprocity are also broken by extractive corporations. The notes at the end of the poem spell out these factors more directly for unaware audiences. Erdrich reads her

"notes" section at the end of the video poem, which would usually be left for the reader/viewer to browse through on their own, which gives specific examples of this kind of occupation along with Indigenous activist efforts:

> As the Occupy movement took hold, indigenous groups continued to struggle to protect our homelands from imminent threats such as the tar sands in Canada and its Keystone pipeline … This era of alternative energy has become the new land grab, the new water grab.

Erdrich continues to highlight contrasts between Indigenous protest culture and mainstream protest culture. Images of birch bark homes over city sidewalks appear in the video once again as Erdrich states, "Occupy Occupy Worked for the 99 / Occupy Re-occupy Alcatraz and Wounded Knee". Earlier, the Occupy Wall Street movement was compared to Indigenous protests through images of New York City and newspaper articles and the birch bark homes covering city streets. Now, Erdrich utilizes the birch bark homes as she discusses a "re-occupation" of Alcatraz and Wounded Knee. Photographs of both of these Native protests flash over the screen. Erdrich seems to question: if occupation protests work for "the 99%", why can't they be effective for "the 1%" without dominant culture inciting violence toward brown bodies? The occupation of Alcatraz ended because Native American protesters were forcibly removed by the U.S. government. These occupations attracted global media attention, enhancing visibility of Native American protest and issues, but this attention also sought to justify violence toward Native American people and represent them as dangerous or threatening.

Ultimately, "Pre-Occupied" traces instances of activism cross-culturally and serves as a powerful example of digital activism as a work of accessible art. This video poem occupies the internet and the viewer. It contests stereotypes of Indigenous peoples and honors activist efforts while creating its own unique form of activism in a digital world. Erdrich expresses agency over the space in which she shares her work but leaves room for others to make meaning and contribute to her work. This space for negotiation and collaboration between artist and audience creates a new range of possibilities for works of Indigenous Futurisms to remain dynamic, changing, and open for new conversation and critique.

## Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's "Rise: From One Island to Another"

According to her website, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner is a "Marshall Islander poet, performance artist, educator". She has published one collection of poetry, *Iep Jāltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter*, and many online video poems and performance poetry videos through her WordPress blog and now her own website. Jetñil-Kijiner's roles as poet and activist intertwine. One of her modes of activism is her poetry that is pointedly political by raising awareness about her homeland. Her website informs users that she is also the founder of a nonprofit "dedicated to empowering Marshallese youth to seek solutions to climate change and other environmental impacts threatening their home island". Jetñil-Kijiner states that her "poetry mainly focuses on raising awareness surrounding the issues and threats faced by [her] people. Nuclear testing conducted in our islands, militarism, the rising sea level as a result of climate change, forced migration, adaptation and racism in America".

In the Marshall Islands, nuclear testing and climate change are two major issues that are closely linked. Ahlgren et al. write that "in the post-WWII period, the US tested most of its high mega tonnage nuclear weapons in the Marshall Islands, resulting in population relocation and ensuing dependence on imported foods" (70). Nuclear testing produces environmental

devastation and widespread health issues. As Ahlgren et al. concur, relocation becomes unavoidable, and food sovereignty and security begin to decline. In 2012,

> the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration released Global Sea Level Rise Scenarios for the United States National Climate Assessment, which predicts with 90% confidence that the global mean sea level [for the Marshall Islands] will rise between 0.2 m (8 inches) and 2.0 m (6.6 feet) by 2100.4.
>
> *(70)*

The long-term impacts of colonization have direct links to climate change and the health of the Pacific Islands and its peoples.

Jetñil-Kijiner takes a unique approach to discussing the impacts of colonization and climate change on her homeland. Jetñil-Kijiner and her collaborators utilize visuals, photographic/filmic images, and written and spoken poetry to convey the devastating effects of climate change and environmental destruction on the Marshall Islands. I will now analyze how the video poem "Rise: From One Island to Another" represents the changing world for Marshall Islanders and natives of Greenland while also demonstrating that the circulation of this video takes place in and constitutes its own digital poetic world.

In the video poem "Rise: From One Island to Another" Jetñil-Kijiner and cowriter Aka Niviâna draw attention to the impact of climate change on two different Indigenous homelands across the globe. Described as a "poetic expedition" by 350.org, "Rise: From One Island to Another" is a visually stunning text that draws connections between "realities of melting glaciers and rising sea levels". Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna met, wrote, and edited the poem "Rise" the day before beginning filming and producing the video. Niviâna is from Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland). The rest of the production team as described on the 350.org website includes Dan Lin, Nick Stone, Rob Lau, and Oz Go. All those involved in this video poem collaborate to create a transnational dialogue about climate change. "Rise: From One Island to Another" was uploaded by Mainspring Media on Vimeo on September 12, 2018. Vimeo is designed differently from YouTube and does not have a "dislike" button. Currently in October 2021, the video has 54,100 views, 263 likes, and 21 comments. It has been published widely on other websites and on social media as well.

Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner explains how she usually grounds her poems in legends in the webpage section about the process and legend behind the poem. For "Rise", Jetñil-Kijiner researched "Ao Aorōk In Io̧kwe", which is a legend "from Ujae that was transcribed by Heynes Jeik. The legend features sisters from Ujae who loved and respected each other very much". She found this legend appropriate because the poem and performance is about a kind of sisterhood between Niviâna and herself and their shared plea for their homelands. Niviâna and Jetñil-Kijiner refer to each other as "sister of ice and snow" and "sister of ocean and sand" throughout the poem. All of the explanatory information about the making and meaning of the poem and video poem and the descriptions of the collaborative teamwork lend to an accessible work of art for viewers. Poetry has often historically been considered a more inaccessible form of literature, but this structure refuses an elitist or exclusive air. It is clear that this video poem is for anyone and everyone who will listen, with a special representation of Marshall Islanders and Greenlanders, as it urges viewers to join the fight against the contributing factors to climate change.

The film of the video poem transitions from the Marshall Islands to Greenland throughout the video, drawing connections between the two communities and the water that is shown. Both Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna narrate the poem, switching back and forth between and during stanzas, and sometimes speaking together. Both of their homelands are visually honored, and

they also give each other gifts; Jetñil-Kijiner presents shells, and Niviâna presents rocks. While both women exchange gifts, they also share stories and legends. Niviâna shares the story of a woman who is guardian of the sea. She states, "When we disrespect them / she gives us what we deserve, a lesson in respect. / Do we deserve the melting ice? / the hungry polar bears coming to our islands". Niviâna states that the guardian of the sea reacts when humans disrespect the sea, but questions if those who advocate for the water and if other innocents like animals deserve the ramifications. Niviâna and Jetñil-Kijiner implore the audience: "Let me show you / airports underwater / bulldozed reefs, blasted sands". Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues that Jetñil-Kijiner's poetry often "articulates the imperative to both witness and testify to a dynamic, changing Earth" (1). "Rise" expresses this imperative, as Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna implore viewers to acknowledge the devastating impacts of climate change.

The verbal and visual elements of "Rise" alongside the film of the changing lands and seas of the Marshall Islands and Greenland combine to create a multimodal literary text open for interpretation and collaboration with the audience for meaning-making. Hessa Alghadeer argues that "the remarkable aspect of collage poetry is its fusion of the verbal and visual and the abstract and concrete materiality of the text itself. In this sense, it juxtaposes a selection of words, phrases … and animations to evoke expressive meanings" (94). Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna standing side by side on a melting glacier and voicing the poem together is an empowering representation of the verbal and visual. Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna state, "may the same unshakable foundation / connect us, / make us stronger". Together, they state, "Let's watch as Miami, New York, / Shanghai, Amsterdam, London, / Rio de Janeiro, and Osaka / try to breathe underwater". They name these major cities to tell the audience that these beloved and highly populated cities will also be swallowed by the seas. Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna remind audiences that they cannot ignore climate change any longer as they read, "You think you have decades / before your homes fall beneath tides? / We have years. / We have months". As Indigenous women who have witnessed the devastation of climate change very intimately in their own homelands, Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna tell viewers who do not feel as directly impacted that time is running out, and that everyone needs to take responsibility.

As Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna are agents in this video poem, the glacier is also an agent, not just a setting. In her book *Do Glaciers Listen?* Julie Cruikshank describes glaciers as "both animate (endowed with life) and as animating (giving life to) landscapes they inhabit" (3). Glaciers "are shape-shifters of magnificent power" and "signify transitional spaces" (Cruikshank 69). The glacier serves as a meeting place between Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna in the video poem. The glacier itself is transforming, but in a negative manner as it melts, losing animation and agency. Elders have "ritualized respect relations with [glaciers] and go to great lengths not to disturb them" (Cruikshank 69). When these glaciers are disturbed, they cannot give life to their surrounding environment any longer. This loss is profound.

As sea levels rise and glaciers melt, Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna argue for people to rise, to take action and accountability. When the video poem ends, white text over a black background states, "It's time to rise". There is then a transition to text stating, "Join the movement for a fossil free world. gofossilfree.org". This text directly tells viewers one way to help: advocate for alternative energy and cut down on fossil fuel use individually. The website listed is another resource where viewers can go to learn more about and join the movement.

The comments section of this video poem is very active. The conversations in the comments section contribute to the meaning and urgency of the video poem because it reflects its reception and expresses what viewers felt and thought while watching and afterward. One comment suggests that the viewer has heard about climate change, but that actually seeing images of the negative impacts is more powerful. This viewer also relays their emotional response by sharing

that the video poem made them cry. The emotional appeal and urgent tone of the video poem seems to evoke a visceral response from viewers, as the commenter notes a "bitter-sweet beautiful" message where Jetñil-Kijiner and Niviâna share their powerful, urgent claim for others to also take responsibility to save their homelands. This comment, among many others, is interesting to study because it conveys that viewers experience a transformation or affirmation in their views and knowledge about climate change. The viewers demonstrate a willingness to listen, witness, and learn about rising seas, melting glaciers, and how these events deeply and complexly impact Indigenous communities on a global scale.

"Rise: From One Island to Another" is a collaborative video poem due to the writing, production, and online viewing and commenting. It allows us to see the power of video poems through users' comments and reactions, since it has achieved more views and responses due to its production funded by 350.org. Jetñil-Kijiner's video poetry, with a largely environmental focus, creates undeniable evidence about the power of multimodal poetry to engage and transform viewers. The same can be said about traditional print poetry, but readership and viewership only expands in the digital poetic world in which Jetñil-Kijiner collaboratively creates and participates.

## Conclusion

Heid Erdrich and Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, along with their many talented collaborators, are at the forefront of Indigenous Futurist digital poetics. We will continue to witness more hybrid and multimedia genres of Indigenous art and literature produced and posted in the digital world, and in the digital poetic world. These collaborative digital poetic worlds allow more Indigenous and non-Indigenous users and viewers to encounter different texts and engage in conversations online. Indigenous communities translate their sovereignty to digital spaces and manifest a future digital presence. Collaborative digital poetics are a form of activism and inspire activism. Most importantly, collaborative digital poetic worlds are embodied, empowering, and educational.

## Works Cited

org. "Rise: From One Island to Another." *350.org*, https://350.org/rise-from-one-island-to-another/. Accessed 5 Feb. 2020.

Ahlgren, Ingrid, Seiji Yamada, and Allen Wong. "Rising Oceans, Climate Change, Food Aid, and Human Rights in the Marshall Islands." *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2014, pp. 69–80.

Alghadeer, Hessa. "Digital Landscapes: Rethinking Poetry Interpretation in Multimodal Texts." *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2014, pp. 87–96.

Bernardin, Susan. "There's a River to Consider: Heid E. Erdrich's 'Pre-Occupied'." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2017, pp. 38–55.

Brodock, Katharine. "Economic and Social Factors: The Digital (Activism) Divide." *Digital Activism Decoded: The New Mechanics of Change*, edited by Mary Joyce, Idebate Press, 2010, pp. 71–84.

Cruikshank, Julie. *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination*. UBC P, 2005.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. Duke UP, 2019.

Erdrich, Heid. "Pre-Occupied." *Curator of Ephemera at the New Museum for Archaic Media*, Michigan State UP, 2017, pp. 22–24.

———. "Pre-Occupied." *Heiderdrich.com*, 2018, http://heiderdrich.com/video/pre-occupied/. Accessed 29 Oct. 2021.

Ganteaume, Cecile. "Americans: Major New Exhibition Asks, Why Do Images of American Indians Permeate American Life." *American Indian Magazine*, Fall 2017, https://www.americanindianmagazine.org/story/americans-major-new-exhibition-asks-why-do-images-american-indians-permeate-american-life. Accessed 6 Feb. 2020.

Goeman, Mishuana. *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*. U of Minnesota P, 2013.

Haas, Angela. "Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2007, pp. 77–100.

Hearne, Joanna. "Indigenous Animation: Educational Programming, Narrative Inventions, and Children's Cultures." *Global Indigenous Media: Cultures, Poetics, and Politics*, edited by Michelle Stewart and Pamela Wilson, Duke UP, 2008, pp. 89–108.

———. *Native Recognition: Indigenous Cinema and the Western*. SUNY P, 2012.

———. "Native to the Device: Thoughts on Digital Indigenous Studies." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2017, pp. 3–26.

Jetñil-Kijiner, Kathy. "About." *Kathyjetnilkijiner.com*, 2020, http://www.kathyjetnilkijiner.com/author-bio/. Accessed 5 Feb. 2020.

———. "Rise: From One Island to Another." Uploaded by Mainspring Media, 12 Sep. 2018, https://vimeo.com/289482525. Accessed 29 Oct. 2021.

Pulley, Natanya Ann. "Indigetechs: The Original Time-Space Traveling Native Americans and Our Modern World Hyper-Pow-Wow." *Western Humanities Review*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2014, pp. 95–101.

Raheja, Michelle. *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representation of Native Americans in Film*. U of Nebraska P, 2010.

Romero, Channette. "Toward an Indigenous Feminine Animation Aesthetic." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 29, no.1, 2017, pp. 56–87.

Vivienne, Sonja, and Jean Burgess. "The Remediation of the Personal Photograph and the Politics of Self-Representation in Digital Storytelling." *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2013, pp. 279–298.

Wang, Hansi Lo. "Native Americans on Tribal Lands are 'The Least Connected' to High-Speed Internet." *NPR*, npr.org, Dec. 6, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/12/06/673364305/native-americans-on-tribal-land-are-the-least-connected-to-high-speed-internet. Accessed 25 Apr. 2022.

# 7

# INDIGENOUS YOUNG ADULT DYSTOPIAS

*Graham J. Murphy\**

The global success of Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy, James Dashner's *Maze Runner* sequence, and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* novels, to name only a handful of series titles, is testament that Young Adult (YA) dystopias have proven to be immensely popular in these first decades of the twenty-first century. As Rebekah Sheldon writes, it has been a veritable "golden age for young adult literature [and] SF for young adults has proved especially fertile" (713). In her overview of Young Adult Science Fiction (YASF), Sheldon remarks that "[w]ith some exceptions, YASF takes only two forms: post-apocalypses and dystopias" (713), although distinguishing these categories often proves futile since one effortlessly bleeds into the other. "Post-apocalyptic" and "dystopia" may therefore be a distinction without a difference, particularly when YASF is commonly organized around the *Bildungsroman* format: the young protagonist(s) matures while simultaneously battling against an oppressive system in a nightmarish setting that is all-too-often recovering from a recent widespread calamity. In this vein, the Indigenous YA dystopias of Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki), Cherie Dimaline (Métis), and Ambelin Kwaymullina (Palyku) draw upon the marriage of "dystopia" and "post-apocalypticism" not only to tell engaging *Bildungsroman* stories but also to address Indigenous people's lived experiences explicitly in a genre that has too few Indigenous voices. Thus, Indigenous YA dystopias are "organic outgrowth[s] of the oral storytelling traditions in which the authors have been steeped" (James 156), and Bruchac, Dimaline, and Kwaymullina organically draw upon their diverse experiences as Indigenous peoples to frame their storytelling. In so doing, all three authors display a profound commitment to social critique, if not transformation, and focus upon Indigenous *survivance* as a path towards brighter futures.

## The Legacy of Stolen Generations

First, the "Indigenous YA dystopia" label is inherently problematic because it threatens to flatten Indigenous experiences into a falsely monocultural experience. As Dimaline explains, "[t]here are so many nations and languages and protocols and cultures within the Indigenous community; we're not one lumped group. And we need to respect each others' stories" (Henley). At the same time, these fictions are part of a larger science fiction (sf) mode, and Joy Sanchez-Taylor writes that the sf mode offers unique opportunities

> where authors can highlight the effects of [racist views] by creating dystopic or post-apocalyptic worlds where the effects of racism have become even more extreme. However, science fiction also offers a space for imagining the Fourth World, a world where all peoples would truly be equal, where no life is viewed as disposable, and where all peoples would enjoy the advantages of full citizenship.
>
> *(99)*

The toggling between post-apocalyptic dystopias and the hopeful promises of the Fourth World fuel Indigenous YA dystopias. For example, Joseph Bruchac's *Killer of Enemies* series—*Killer of Enemies* (2013a), *Trail of the Dead* (2015), *Arrow of Lightning* (2017), and the online prequel *Rose Eagle* (2014)—depicts an America that had once been ruled by cybernetically modified posthumans called Ones (or Primaries) until the arrival of a celestial Silver Cloud plunged the planet into a steampunk age of gears and clockwork technology. To worsen matters, two added threats stalk the survivors of this fractured land: first, "gemods" are the grotesque offspring of genetically modified predatory animals that were zoological curiosities designed for sport by the Ones; second, a viral mutation arising from gene-splicing experiments has created zombie-like revenants called the Bloodless. Within this setting, 17-year-old Lozen, Bruchac's Chiricahua-Diné/Pueblo protagonist, struggles to keep her family alive when they are incarcerated in Haven, a reconverted prison that evokes "the North American legacy of enforced relocation of southwestern tribes" (James 160). Four enigmatic and cruel Ones use unrestrained violence and the allegiance of drug-addled enforcers to rule the heavily fortified Haven. Forced into venturing outside Haven to exterminate any gemod threat lest any of the Ones execute her family, Lozen is valued for her ability to defend Haven, but the Ones know she is also extremely dangerous and calculating. Thus, Lozen must tread carefully, because the Ones are as likely to use her as a pawn in their plotting against one another over the control of Haven as send her out to protect Haven from deadly gemods or the Bloodless. And they are right to worry: amidst these internal and external dangers, Lozen carefully plans an escape from Haven, fueled by the desire to relocate her family and allies to a safer haven.[1] As the series progresses and Lozen and her family and allies escape, she turns her strength to building a new and thriving community while simultaneously defending her family and allies from Haven's constant threats, as well as the ongoing dangers of a ruthless bounty hunter stalking her and the ongoing threats of the gemods and Bloodless.

Lozen is loosely based on the first Lozen (circa 1840–1890), a "true warrior woman of the Chiricahuas [who] fought beside her brother Victorio during the long Apache resistance against Mexico and the United States" (Bruchac, "Author's Note", *Killer* 360). At the same time, she is "also a sort of reincarnation of another important being in Tinneh traditions [called Killer of Enemies], one whose mission in life—back in the beginning times—was to kill the monsters that threatened human life" (Bruchac, "Author's Note", *Killer* 360). Despite this honored genealogy, Lozen regrets that she is disconnected from her cultural lineage and knows only fragments of her

language: "Back in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that language was taken from most of us by schools my Navajo and Apache and Pueblo two-times great-great-grandparents were forced to attend" (Bruchac, *Killer* 87–88). These "schools" are the boarding schools that were a central component of the imperialist-colonialist enterprise allegedly designed to assimilate "wild" or "savage" Indigenous children into a more "civilized" western society; instead, they proved central to the colonial violence and legacy of cultural genocide and trauma that remains a reality for today's Indigenous communities and peoples, and while these boarding schools and their effects are subtly ever-present in Bruchac's series, the legacy of residential schools (as they are known in Canada) overtly fuels Cherie Dimaline's *Marrow Thieves* duology.

In Diamline's narrative arc, an ecological melt has effectively drowned many cities, while earthquakes have wracked (and wrecked) Turtle Island (North America). Following a plague, non-Indigenous peoples have lost the ability to dream, causing profound psychological imbalance, if not madness. Since Indigenous peoples' bone marrow offers a medicinal reprieve, they are hunted by Recruiters and Agents who harvest them for their genetic immunity: the former are government-sponsored bounty hunters, and the latter are Indigenous traitors who assist Recruiters. Collectively, they target anyone with Indigenous ancestry and shepherd their prisoners to institutions from which there is little hope of escape.

The first novel in the series, *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), follows Frenchie, who has been torn from his parents and brother and is presumably the only surviving member of his biological family. Frenchie joins Miigwans and a group of other similarly displaced survivors who now devote their time looking out for one another, avoiding Recruiters and Agents, and trekking north to presumed safety from the marrow extraction facilities clearly fashioned after Canada's residential schools. In a flashback, Frenchie remembers his father saying that the "Governors' Committee didn't set up the schools brand new; he says they were based on the old residential school system they used to try to break our people to begin with, way back" (Dimaline, *Marrow* 5). Later, Miigwans recounts this history for the younger ones in his found family by connecting the residential school system to Canada's imperialist-colonial legacy and focusing on the diseases, the lost languages, and the broken cultural ties that are common to those few escapees of the marrow extraction facilities, the remaining survivors who remain in hiding and on the run from Recruiters and Agents, and many of today's real-world survivors of residential schools who likely find Dimaline's future setting achingly familiar.

*Hunting by Stars* (2021) is arguably more frightening than *The Marrow Thieves*, particularly as the sequel gives readers an inside look at how thoroughly these new schools are brutalizing their prisoners, particularly when it comes to the guards (dubbed Watchmen) who take to the intimidation and violence of their roles with excessive relish. *Hunting by Stars* begins moments after *The Marrow Thieves* ends: Frenchie is captured by Recruiters and incarcerated in one of the schools. While he strategizes his escape, Frenchie discovers his brother Mitch, who valiantly saved him from capture at the start of *The Marrow Thieves*, is alive, except he has joined the Program and become an Agent. Frenchie keenly feels the depths of Mitch's betrayal while he pretends to join the Program, and learns from Mitch the planned evolution of these new institutions:

> If we change the institutes to focus on farming newborns, we can cut out all the messy in-between bits. And it means there will be a chance for more of us to integrate. To live like normal people … See, there will be the herd, and then there will be everyone else. Not divided by race, exactly. Just divided by purpose. And the purpose of Indigenous people will be to give birth to the answer. What more noble purpose could you ever ask for?
>
> *(Dimaline, Hunting 288)*

Mitch has no difficulties balancing the horrors of this equation: the forced impregnation of Indigenous women to produce (or "farm") newborns[2] for their marrow will replace the dwindling supply of those Indigenous "donors" whose marrow extraction means certain death; and this is apparently a *good thing* according to Mitch, because it will benefit the handful of Indigenous collaborators who are promised a better life as a reward. Mitch therefore has no qualms doubling down on his commitment to the Program and accompanying Frenchie on a planned infiltration of Miigwans's family, which eventually forces Frenchie to kill his brother to defend his loved ones.

Dimaline's depiction of the sheer brutality taking place both inside and outside these futuristic residential schools is comparable to Ambelin Kwaymullina's *Tribe* sequence: *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* (2012), *The Disappearance of Ember Crow* (2013), and *The Foretelling of Georgie Spider* (2015). Kwaymullina, an Aboriginal author, illustrator, lawyer, and professor hailing from the Palyku people of the Pilbara region in Western Australia, sets her series 300 years after a century-long ecological collapse and tectonic realignment called the Reckoning. Much like the ecological collapses that are foundational to both Bruchac's and Dimaline's respective dystopias, the *Tribe* sequence is in part "an index of the anxiety of the Anthropocene" (Sheldon 714) because the environmental Reckoning was a direct by-product of the exploitation and plundering of natural resources by the west's[3] commitment to neoliberal capitalism. This new social and political order that has emerged helps those in power justify for the "greater good" the brutal treatment of those marked as Other.

Kwaymullina's protagonist is Ashala Wolf, and she is the leader of the Tribe, a ragtag group of teens living in a forested region called the Firstwood. The Firstwood offers the Tribe protection from the series antagonists, Neville Rose and Terrence Talbot, as well as the enforcers who are tasked with rounding up and incarcerating the Illegals (a specific subset of teens; see the next section) in detention facilities. In the meantime, Ashala hails from "that ancient bloodline" of Australia's Indigenous peoples (Author Note #1, *Ember*), and while not every Illegal in the *Tribe* series is explicitly identified as a descendant of Australia's Indigenous peoples, Kwaymullina's depiction of children detained by government authorities and subjected to horrific mental and physical abuse is clearly drawing on Australia's Stolen Generations. "For nearly a century in Australia", Kwaymullina writes, "Indigenous children were forcibly taken from their families", and the "experiences of the Stolen Generations have parallels with the experiences of Indigenous children in Canada and the United States in Indian residential or boarding schools" (Author Note #2, *Ember*). Kwaymullina reveals that "[t]wo generations of my own family were taken, and much of the history of the stolen Generations has been woven into the Tribe series" (Author Note #2, *Ember*), and as we've also seen in both Bruchac's and Dimaline's series, this brutal depiction of stolen generations is a common thread in Indigenous YA dystopias. Profound familial and cultural separation are accentuated in Indigenous YA dystopias that repeatedly situate their narrative arcs in dialogue with a broader imperialist-colonial legacy of trying to reduce Indigenous human beings into nothing more than use value.

### *Survivance* and Indigenous YA Dystopias

Despite the ongoing trauma and legacy of boarding/residential schools and stolen generations, Indigenous YA dystopias are much more than their traumas. As Dimaline explains in writing *The Marrow Thieves*,

I wanted Indigenous youth to see themselves in the future, I wanted to put aside, even just for a moment, that sense of defensiveness or the tendency to shutdown that can come with talking about a difficult history. I wanted people to come away saying, "I would never let that happen", or more correctly, "I would never let that happen again".

*(Rogers)*

Therefore, one of the goals of the *Marrow Thieves* duology is not only to focus on the "potential of a repeated history: migrations without consideration of original lands and laws, loss of culture, commodification of spiritual practices and the fight to survive it all", but also for "Indigenous youth to see themselves in the future, and not just holding on by the skin of their teeth kind of surviving, but being heroes and leaders" (Diaz). These goals are not restricted to Dimaline's duology: "Nations have shown incredible resiliency throughout five centuries of cultural genocide and colonialism by majority cultures throughout the Americas", Bruchac explains in his Author's Note to *Killer of Enemies*, "[and] Indians will be a part of whatever future this continent holds" (Author's Note 359). Although neither Dimaline nor Bruchac uses the specific terminology, what they describe as the fuel driving their narratives is *survivance*.

In *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) defines Indigenous *survivance* as an "active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name [but a] renunciation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" (vii). In a video on Indigenous survivance, Vizenor draws on Luther Standing Bear's (Lakota) experiences with the Carlisle Indian Industrial School:

So much written about natives is like a declaration that represents the tragedy of our cultures, our horrible experiences with the federal government. I'll go to Carlisle like Luther Standing Bear. I'll go there for the adventure; I'll suffer through the denial of my language, the cutting of my hair, wearing a uniform because I know who I am. I'll do this and I'll even take interest in this name "Luther" that's on the chalkboard and I can barely pronounce it. And when I get back home, and he did, I shall teach. And he did. I shall write books. And he did. He is no victim of the Carlisle Indian School. Many children were; they died of diseases, died of loneliness, and I can't understate that. But that isn't our story. Our story is also the people who came out of that to create a new consciousness, to create a new sense of presence, because not to do that is to die in the graveyard at Carlisle.

*(Penn Museum)*

Therefore, Bruchac, Dimaline, and Kwaymullina use such topics as mass incarceration and cultural genocide to expose the brutalities enacted against their communities, but as tales of *survivance*, they individually showcase the collective will of "self-determination [that] compels Indigenous peoples to define their own identities and to regain lost sovereignties" (Dillon, "Global" 377). In so doing, they reject "the notion that Indigenous peoples ought to remain content that they survived colonization" (Dillon, "Global" 377) by demonstrating the power the protagonists (and others) possess in creating family, creating community, and creating a future.

In the *Killer of Enemies* sequence, Lozen's genealogical connections to both the first Lozen but also the Killer of Enemies in Tinneh traditions means she has what Oliva Kee Mathison (Diné/Navajo) calls "enhanced awareness abilities" (Facebook). Specifically, Lozen feels her hands vibrating and getting warmer the closer she gets to the gemods she is hunting (or hunting her). She also has intermittent telepathic abilities, and as the series continues, she discovers that other characters possess comparable telepathic skills, including (but not limited to) her mother,

her growing love interest Hussein, her younger siblings, and Hally, an ancient being who has its own, at times inexplicable, motivations for helping Lozen's extended family.[4] As Lozen's mother explains, these "enhanced awareness abilities" are part of an older tradition rooted in the ability to *listen* for the voices of the world. "[E]verything around us is listening", Lozen's mother reveals. "Sometimes those things find ways to speak to us. Rocks, plants, animals" (Bruchac, *Trail* 92). This "listening to the world" proves essential in providing the foundation for community as Lozen, her biological family, and her extended family start building Valley Where First Light Paints the Cliffs, a thriving and loving community based on a kinship that Lozen defends with every ounce of strength while drawing upon the support freely offered by those closest to her.

Lozen's character arc aligns with Ashala's arc in the *Tribe* sequence. Ashala and her fellow Tribe members also possess "enhanced awareness abilities": Firestarters control fire, Rumblers trigger earth tremors, Skychangers control the weather, Runners are speedsters, etc. As a result of these abilities, Ashala and her fellow Tribe members are denied citizenship according to the Citizenship Accords and, as noted earlier, these so-called Illegals are hunted by enforcers who incarcerate them. The Illegals cannot remain free to live their lives because their powers allegedly threaten the fragile ecological Balance and risk ushering forth another Reckoning-level environmental catastrophe, even though later developments in the series reveal this is a convenient fiction that services the needs of those in power. Ashala's ability, however, is both exceedingly rare and eminently powerful: she is a Sleepwalker, which means she can use her dreams to reshape reality. "When I Sleepwalked", Ashala explains, "I saw the world as a vivid dream that I could control, and whatever impossible thing I did in my dream happened in the world" (Kwaymullina, *Foretelling* 32). As part of her growth, Ashala must realize on her own what many around her already know, and it isn't until a conversation at the end of the second novel that Ashala has an epiphany. Ember tells Ashala that she has changed the world through her actions, and Ashala admits that she couldn't have done it alone. "And then I saw it … the many linkages I'd made on which events had turned. My jaw dropped. 'My power. It's … to connect. To—to love'" (Kwaymullina, *Ember* 412). Ashala realizes what Bruchac's Lozen and Dimaline's Frenchie also come to realize in their respective narrative arcs: *survivance* means nobody acts alone (even if they sometimes undertake solitary actions), but instead, they must form connections and build community together.

A common feature of this community building is the central role of language. For example, despite the best attempts by the boarding school system and her own feelings of inadequacy, Lozen's "family did keep enough of our languages to pass on to us certain songs and prayers. And certain words such as those I speak right now" (Bruchac, *Killer* 88). Similarly, the Elders Miigwans and Minerva in Dimaline's duology pass along language to Frenchie, Rose, and the other members of their found family, and for Frenchie, this is a sacred experience. When he learns the word *nishin*, he embraces its importance: "I turned the word over in my throat like a stone; a prayer I couldn't add breath to, a world I wasn't willing to release" (Dimaline, *Marrow* 39). Later, something as simple as finding an old hibachi in the forest is a revelatory moment: "Minerva was delighted by the contraption and even taught us a new word … I put my head down on my bent knees and repeated it over and over as softly as I could, hoarding something precious. 'Abwaad, cooking on a fire'" (Dimaline, *Marrow* 109). Language is tied to memory in these instances, and even when recovering language isn't the focus, the act of remembering is vital. For example, at the end of *Hunting by Stars*, Frenchie, Rose, Miigwans, and the others have turned away from the north and are now crossing the 49th parallel southward. When Nam, a transgender Native who has joined the family, despairs that they have been chased off their land by the Recruiters, Miigwans explains that

[t]he only thing we have to worry about is who the original people are so we can honor the lands we are on. And if we do that, remember to keep doing that, they don't win. They never win when we remember.

<div style="text-align: right">(*Dimaline, Hunting 378*)</div>

This creation of a "new consciousness" or a "new sense of presence" that is *survivance* is therefore in part grounded in the livingness of language and the ability to remember the past and draw on that past to fuel a drive towards a brighter future.

This "new consciousness" also involves creating community that crosses species boundaries, such as at the end of Bruchac's *Rose Eagle* when Rose forms a telepathic communion with equine gemods that are nothing like the monstrous creatures Lozen hunts in the longer novels: "*Our people will help each other*, the stallion thought to me. / *Yes*, I said in my mind as I put my arms around its neck … *We've missed you*". Similarly, in Kwaymullina's *Tribe* series, Ashala and the other Tribe members form an intimate connection with nonhuman animals and are adopted as kin: Ember bonds with crows that help her on her journey; Helper is a large arachnid who assists Georgie in making sense of her visions of alternate futures; and a nearby wolf pack thoroughly accepts Ashala and helps her work through her inner trauma, particularly in the beginning of *The Disappearance of Ember Crow*. As the series progresses, more and more Tribe members become animal-speakers, interpreters standing at the nexus of human and nonhuman animal worlds.

In the *Tribe* sequence, these new kinships are expressions of Country, which Kwaymullina explains is an

> ever moving, ever shifting, ever changing network of relationships; a pattern comprised of other patterns in which everything is interrelated and interdependent. Country is both alive and conscious and the source of all of consciousness. It is the web of relationships that is the world.

<div style="text-align: right">(*"Continuum" 154*)</div>

This is quite the opposite of a western view of the land (or country) because

> [u]nlike Indigenous people, who had lived in cooperation with country for so many, many years, the British would cause the rapid extinction of numerous plants and animal species. This devastation was itself a product of a worldview in which land was, and could only ever be, an inert possession.

<div style="text-align: right">(*"Land" 11*)</div>

Kwaymullina's depiction of the Firstwood is testament to Country because Ashala, Ember, and Georgie can achieve a balance with the land and its ancient spirits only when they are accepted. For example, Country is evident when Ashala communicates with the massive tuarts of the Firstwood and experiences firsthand its trauma: "Strange vehicles with metal jaws, weird saws with teeth that roared, and humans, always more humans, cutting and hacking and slashing and killing … the pictures kept on coming, filling my body with pain and my mind with the shocked confusion of dying forests" (Kwaymullina 178). Contrasted with the violence of large-scale clear-cutting is the true meaning of Balance and its rootedness in the land: "[T]here's the Balance, and it's in everything and it is everything. And the Balance shows itself in lots of ways, and some of those ways have names and personalities. They're ancient spirits" (Kwaymullina,

*Georgie* 325). This growing sense of community with one another, with nonhuman animals, and with the land defies what western science typically identifies as discrete taxonomies—human vs. animal vs. mineral; organic vs. inorganic; etc.—and in so doing, the *Tribe* series "is about reclaiming a living experience not defined by sorrow, pain, or trauma but rather organized entirely around complicated and interpenetrative kinships that are open to *everyone* who actively participates in new dialogues about possible futures" (Murphy 192). Thus, we can see that the central link between *survivance*, land sovereignty, and interpenetrative kinships is a throughline in Indigenous YA dystopias. In sum, Indigenous YA dystopias are not tales of survival; they are tales of *survivance*.

## A Returning to Ourselves

As tales of *survivance*, the *Killer of Enemies*, *Marrow Thieves*, and the *Tribe* sequences are infused with different degrees of hope and a faith in transformational change despite the darkness saturating the respective narratives. This hopeful outlook is perhaps not surprising: YASF may "unflinchingly engage with the problem of adolescents, [but] they are nonetheless tied to the broader tradition of children's literature, which stresses hope" (Basu, Broad, and Hintz 2). Therefore, a pattern in YA dystopias *en masse* is

> a state of temporary or prolonged suffering, maybe even chaos … And yet dystopia gives us hope. It gives us characters who reluctantly, or with clear focus and purpose, or more likely conflicted feelings, work to change the problematic circumstances of the present or the projected (dystopian) futures.
>
> *(Hentges 80)*

Critics such as Joseph W. Campbell may not agree on the primacy of hope—he writes that "hope versus lack of hope is not the defining characteristic … [instead] these texts have at their core explorations of subjectivity relating to the power of the child" (86)— but YASF generally avoids depicting its protagonists crushed under the bootheel of authoritarian oppression, preferring instead to have the protagonist(s) learn the transformative extent of their powers and abilities.

YA dystopias' indebtedness to hope, however, has also proven to some critics to be the genre's weakness. For example, despite Lyman Tower Sargent's endorsement of YA dystopias as "remarkably similar to those written for adults" (Afterword 233), some critics point to how often YA dystopias tend to miss the mark when it comes to the sociopolitical critique that fuels literary dystopias. "Most young adult dystopias from the period 2008 to 2015 tilt heavily toward escapism", writes Carter F. Hanson, "and engage only superficially in sociopolitical critique" (107). Similarly, Sheldon describes YASF "hold[ing] out the longing for the restoration of the present or the near past as their ethical and pedagogical spur to the reader" (724). While others can take up these comments in relation to the wider YA dystopia genre, claims of escapism or conservative longing for a near past simply don't apply to Indigenous YA dystopias. The *Killer of Enemies*, *Marrow Thieves*, and the *Tribe* novels are not "longing for the restoration of the present or near past", in part because the material conditions for many Indigenous peoples today are the fallout of both (near) past and present imperialist and colonial practices that are decidedly dystopian. In other words, the nightmarish futures depicted in Indigenous YA dystopias— mass incarcerations and the fracturing of the family, the poisoning or blocking of water sources, land theft and forced relocation, the fracture of family, "alien" invasions and cultural genocide, etc.—are the lived realities of today's Indigenous peoples the world over. For example, Amy

McQuire (South Sea/Darumbal) explains that twenty-first-century Australia is still governed by "the powers that continue to treat us as less worthy and disposable, that tear apart families—including mothers from their children—and keep us alienated from traditional lands and waterways". Meanwhile, water advisories in my home country of Canada continue to plague First Peoples' reserves, as access to fresh water remains an ongoing challenge. Dawn Martin-Hill (Mohawk) explains that "[s]ome advisories are so old you could have a 16-year-old girl growing up in northern Ontario who has never been able to drink or bathe in the water that they have access to" (Gerster and Hessey). Indigenous peoples continue to struggle against cultural stereotyping, educational policies that target (or ignore!) Indigenous culture on all fronts, and historical "whitewashing" or outright dismissal from the historical record. Meanwhile, relations with governments are best described as fragile or vulnerable when these centralized authorities routinely ignore the rights, needs, or concerns of Indigenous communities around such issues as systemic addictions, poverty, death by suicide, political sovereignty and representation, and pipeline construction and access. Thus, the destitute and/or oppressive conditions shown in Indigenous YA dystopias mirror too closely the quotidian realities of Indigenous peoples, and a "restoration" of the present or near past offers only a continuation of dystopian conditions. Cherie Dimaline puts it most succinctly: "[W]ho better to write a story about people surviving an apocalypse than a people who already had?" (Diaz). Therefore, as tales of *survivance*, Indigenous YA dystopias are a decidedly forward-looking genre that is in part designed to depict a hopeful future beyond the oppression conditions of today's lived dystopias.

In sum, Indigenous YA dystopias envision new social realities and more hopeful futures that are defined by Indigenous experiences that can shape and transform the world for all our benefit; or, as Kwaymullina remarks, "[w]hat marvels might we create if we could only be informed by other worldviews without subsuming them; if we could learn to relate to each other, and to other shapes of life, through interlocking circles?" ("Continuum"). Indigenous YA dystopias offer what in Anishinaabemowin is called *biskaabiiyang*, or a "returning to ourselves" (Kwaymullina, "Continuum"), and in so doing, these tales of *survivance* foreground Indigenous continuity from past through present and into future. As *survivance* tales, Indigenous YA dystopias are not only a masterful and powerful storytelling form that addresses contemporary issues facing Indigenous peoples globally; they envision the desire for social transformations by situating the centrality of Indigenous experiences as part of more complex, interconnected, and intersectional worldviews.

## Notes

1  In the e-novella prequel *Rose Eagle*, the titular protagonist is also seeking a haven for her community, many of whom are the survivors of the Deeps (a vast subterranean mining network) who are hiding out in a darkened shelter called Big Cave. Rose Eagle leads them into the light by following a vision to Mato Paha/Bear Butte.

2  Rose encounters a similar scenario when, searching for Frenchie, she is captured by Chief and his blood cult. Chief's motivations are unclear until Rose finally learns that he believes forced impregnation and sacrificing newborns to the "schools" is the path forward, although Rose escapes before she is a victim of Chief's plans.

3  A capital "W" to represent the West is certainly the norm. However, in an act of decolonization, I am not using the capital "W" for "west" so as to privilege Indigenous as the default lens.

4  In an online interview with Lee & Low Books, Bruchac explains that "Hally is based on the widespread traditional stories told by virtually every American Indian nation of large, hairy, man-like beings. They are known by various names, such as Sasquatch in the Pacific Northwest. They are beings who appear in many of our old stories, are much like giant humans, and are very reclusive—though at times helpful to humans".

## Works Cited

Basu, Balaka, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz. "Introduction." *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults*, edited by Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz, Routledge, 2013, pp. 1–15.

Bruchac, Joseph. Author's Note. *Killer of Enemies*. Tu Books, 2013a, pp. 359–361.

———. *Killer of Enemies*. Tu Books, 2013b.

———. *Rose Eagle*. Rakuten Kobo ed., Tu Books, 2014.

———. *Trail of the Dead*. Tu Books, 2015.

———. *Arrow of Lightning*. Tu Books, 2017.

Campbell, Joseph W. *The Order and the Other: Young Adult Dystopian Literature and Science Fiction*. UP of Mississippi, 2019.

Diaz, Shelley. "Cherie Dimaline on Erasure, the Power of Story, and *The Marrow Thieves*." *School Library Journal*, 2 Nov. 2017, https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=cherie-dimaline-erasure-power-story-marrow-thieves. Accessed 1 Mar. 2022.

Dillon, Grace. "Global Indigenous Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2012, pp. 377–378.

Dimaline, Cherie. *The Marrow Thieves*. Cormorant Books, 2017.

———. *Hunting by Stars*. Penguin, 2021.

Gerster, Jane, and Krista Hessey. "Why Some First Nations Still Don't Have Clean Drinking Water — Despite Trudeau's Promise." *Global News*, 28 Sep. 2019, https://globalnews.ca/news/5887716/first-nations-boil-water-advisories/. Accessed 1 Mar. 2022.

Hanson, Carter F. *Memory and Utopian Agency in Utopian/Dystopian Literature: Memory of the Future*. Routledge, 2020.

Henley, James. "The Message YA Novelist Cherie Dimaline Has for Young Indigenous Readers." *CBC.ca*, 7 July 2017, https://www.cbc.ca/books/the-message-ya-novelist-cherie-dimaline-has-for-young-indigenous-readers-1.4195036. Accessed 1 Mar. 2022.

Hentges, Sarah. *Girls on Fire: Transformative Heroines in Young Adult Dystopian Literature*. McFarland, 2018.

*Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. 2015. http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf.

James, Lynette. "Children of Change, Not Doom: Indigenous Futurist Heroines in YA." *Extrapolation*, vol. 57, nos. 1–2, 2016, pp. 151–176.

Kwaymullina, Ambelin. Author Note #1. *The Disappearance of Ember Crow*. Walker Books, 2013a. EPub$_2$ (Adobe DRM).

———. Author Note #2. *The Disappearance of Ember Crow*. Candlewick P, 2013b, n.p.

———. *The Disappearance of Ember Crow*. Candlewick P, 2013c.

———. Continuum Guest of Honour Speech. *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2015a, pp. 153–158.

———. *The Foretelling of Georgie Spider*. Walker Books, 2015b.

Lee & Low Books. Interview with Joseph Bruchac. *Leeandlow.com*, n.d. https://www.leeandlow.com/books/killer-of-enemies/interviews. Accessed 1 Mar. 2022.

Mathison, Olivia Kee. Origins of "Enhanced Awareness Abilities" Terminology. *Facebook* (*Imagining Indigenous Futurisms Group*), 30 Aug. 2020.

McQuire, Amy. "The Colonial Logic behind Australia Day Is a Worldwide Concern." *Medium*, 25 Jan. 2020. https://medium.com/@amymcquire/the-colonial-logic-behind-australia-day-is-a-worldwide-concern-6a851021cfc3. Accessed 1 Mar. 2022.

Murphy, Graham J. "For Love of Country: Apocalyptic Survivance in Ambelin Kwaymullina's Tribe Series." *Extrapolation*, vol. 57, nos. 1–2, 2016, pp. 177–196.

Penn Museum. "Postindian Warrior: Creating a New Consciousness in Native America." *YouTube*, 27 Jan. 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tx1uvgmXP48.

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

Sargent, Lyman Tower. Afterword. *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, edited by Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, Routledge, 2002, pp. 232–234.

Sheldon, Rebekah. "Dystopian Futures and Utopian Presents in Contemporary Young Adult Science Fiction." *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, edited by Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link, Cambridge UP, 2019, pp. 713–724.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*. U of Nebraska P, 1999.

# 8

# CENTERING TWO-SPIRIT AND INDIGIQUEER FUTURISMS

*Channette Romero*

Numerous reviews and articles about Métis writer Cherie Dimaline's award-winning novel *The Marrow Thieves* briefly mention the character Miigwans before quickly moving on to highlight other aspects of the post-apocalypse novel (see, for example, Mitchell; Ingwersen; Bryden). The marginalization of Miigwans is surprising since, for the vast majority of the novel, he is one of only two elders helping a ragtag band of youth survive. His queer masculinity is the only view of a non-predatory adult male that the youth see for many years. Further, his marriage is highlighted as the major love story in the novel; the reconciliation of Miigwans with his missing husband Isaac offers readers the novel's triumphant climax. Since Isaac is portrayed as the only living Indigenous character fluent in an older version of Cree capable of destroying settler colonialism's most violent weapon, their reconciliation is portrayed as finally offering Indigenous characters (and readers) the hopeful future they have so longed for. The novel's truest glimpse of an alternative future is available only with the help of a queer couple; this future was not possible when the main character, Frenchie, reunites with his biological father, an elder in a tribal council. The novel repeatedly asserts that the survival, and indeed, the future of Indigenous peoples depends not on heteronuclear families or tribal councils, but instead on building life-sustaining relationships under the direction of two-spirit (2S) and queer leaders.

This essay celebrates Indigenous studies' valuable efforts to draw wider attention to futurism by highlighting works like *The Marrow Thieves*; however, it warns that such work must not be made at the expense of downplaying 2S- and queer-centered narratives. The ongoing marginalization of Miigwans and other 2S/Indigiqueer leaders in Indigenous futurism reflects the ongoing apocalypse, a trauma that must be healed to avoid institutionalizing violence in any imagined Indigenous future. To truly imagine a decolonial future, we must avoid internalizing and replicating settler colonialism's gendered violence. What Indigenous futurist works repeatedly tell readers is that to survive settler colonialism, we must recognize and heal the wounds it causes, and that requires the wisdom of 2S/Indigiqueer healers. I contend that those individuals most targeted and wounded by settler heteropatriarchy provide the clearest view of its legacy and the most promising paths to navigating beyond it. Arguing that 2S/Indigiqueer persons have long been used to heal and reassert balance in tribal communities, this chapter places 2S/Indigiqueer narratives at the center, rather than the margins, of the burgeoning Indigenous futurism movement. Re-centering 2S/Indigiqueer narratives is essential to transforming the

questions we ask about futurism and to redefining the boundaries of the movement. Examining texts by Daniel Heath Justice, Darcie Little Badger, Billy-Ray Belcourt, and Joshua Whitehead, this essay highlights four common characteristics of 2S/Indigiqueer futurism. I contend these literary practices raise new questions about Indigenous futurism while reinvigorating our collective imaginings of potential Indigenous futures.

2S/Indigiqueer peoples are critically important to future Indigenous survival, and their stories must be viewed as central to futurism. Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon writes, "Native apocalyptic storytelling, then, shows the ruptures, the scars, and the trauma in its effort ultimately to provide healing and a return to bimaadiziwin", "the state of balance" (*Walking* 9). By marginalizing 2S/Indigiqueer narratives, Indigenous futurism has become unbalanced, failing to perceive all "the scars and the trauma" of settler colonialism and the creative approaches 2S/Indigiqueer peoples have long used to survive those traumas. The power of 2S/Indigiqueer futurist narratives comes from the relationships they remind us to create and sustain, relations that help rebalance the world. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg intellectual Leanne Betasamosake Simpson tells readers,

> The heteropatriarchy of settler colonialism has regulated the bodies of women and 2SQ people, and trans people particularly, to death. … It is a gendered regulation that controls women and 2SQ people and our spiritual power, and it prevents me from relating and attaching to the spiritual realm.
>
> *(141)*

The force with which settler colonialism works to control the bodies and spirits of women and 2S/Indigiqueer persons reveals the power they possess to disrupt the hierarchical system; there is no need to violently enforce that without influence or power. Simpson argues that by policing 2S/Indigiqueer peoples' bodies, settler colonialism works to disrupt the network of intimate and spiritual relationships that are central to peoplehood. Settler colonialism violently targets 2S/Indigiqueer peoples to disrupt Indigenous peoples' relationships with each other, their land, and the cosmos. The consequences of these centuries-long attacks, according to Simpson, are that now 2S/Indigiqueer peoples possess "a wealth of theory and critical analysis regarding settler colonialism that straight bodies cannot" (127). That 2S/Indigiqueer people have managed to survive such intense directed attacks reveals not only deep knowledge about settler colonialism and its workings, but also the most effective methods for surviving it. Imagining and creating life-sustaining Indigenous futures requires learning the important lessons that 2S/Indigiqueer texts have to teach us. Exploring characteristics common to 2S/Indigiqueer futurism, this chapter highlights some of the methods these texts propose for returning to bimaadiziwin, a state of balance based not on utopia, but on "a condition of resistance and survival" (Dillon, *Walking* 9).

First, a word about terminology. The important 2011 anthology *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature* uses the term "two-spirit/queer". Following in that tradition, I have updated the term to reflect its current use—two-spirit's popular acronym "2S" and the term "Indigiqueer", first coined by Joshua Whitehead but now widely used by writers, scholars, and activists in social media, magazines, podcasts, and university library guides. As with *Sovereign Erotics*, this essay's use of the slash between the terms seeks not to collapse important differences between Indigenous genders and sexuality, but instead to link the terms in a way that acknowledges potential overlaps and differences, while recognizing the important grassroots organizing conducted by individuals who identify with these terms. As the editors of *Sovereign Erotics* note,

> Not all queer Native people identify as two-spirit or see their sexualities and genders as connected to two-spirit histories in their communities, just as many who identify as two-spirit or with tribally specific terms do not identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer. … Regardless of the differences that individuals may have with the term "two-spirit", it is being widely used in grassroots movements throughout the United States and Canada. Thus, the term "two-spirit" can be an organizing tool and a particular political orientation that centralizes a decolonial agenda surrounding issues of gender and sexuality.
>
> *(Driskill,* Sovereign *5)*

Here, I adopt a modified version of the anthology's terminology of "two-spirit/queer", 2S/Indigiqueer, to refer to the political position taken by Indigenous futurist texts that make decolonizing gender and sexuality central to their narratives. This essay examines both the political orientations of the texts and the ways they position their readers—not as detached observers, but as peoples prompted to recognize their culpability in the violence of the current world and invited to help create more life-sustaining worlds like the ones the texts imagine. Tracing four features common to 2S/Indigiqueer literature, this essay shows how these works reveal a path for navigating settler colonialism's traumas, a route that promises metaphoric healing for all who have been wounded by it. I have selected generally well-known 2S/Indigiqueer texts to delineate each of the features. Rather than see these works as a representative sample of 2S/Indigiqueer literature, I imagine them as a point of departure for exploring a much more wide-ranging and diverse literary movement. This chapter's list of common features is proposed as a starting point for, rather than an exhaustive accounting of, conversations about the critical role of 2S/Indigiqueer narratives in Indigenous futurism.

## Genre Matters

The first major characteristic shared by many 2S/Indigiqueer futurist texts is a preference for short-form mediums. Grace Dillon urges us to "critiqu[e] the aesthetics of Native writing experiments in all forms" to avoid their "reduction to a simplistic political forum" ("Miindiwag" 233). Analyzing texts' formal components reveals not only their writers' artistry, but also the savvy ways they appropriate non-Indigenous genres for Indigenous ends. All of the texts I discuss here deploy short-form genres to decolonize gender and sexuality, rather than the more popular (within settler societies and academe) genre of the novel. Perhaps reviewers of *The Marrow Thieves* are not to be solely blamed for marginalizing its 2S/Indigiqueer narrative; its choice of the novel form might have worked against the story's efforts to disrupt heteropatriarchy. While some Indigenous writers have effectively used the novel form to highlight 2S/Indigiqueer stories—Cherokee author Daniel Heath Justice's trilogy *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* and Muskogee Creek-Cherokee writer Craig Womack's *Drowning in Fire* immediately come to mind—both of these works required extensive formal and temporal experimentation to resist the genre's historic intertwining with colonialism and heteropatriarchy. Scholars have long argued that the subjectivity interpolated in classical realist novels remains intertwined with patriarchal and colonialist suppression (see, for example, Michael McKeon's *Theory of the Novel* (2000), Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* (2002), and Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights Inc.* (2007), to name a few). Avoiding the labor required to free the novel from its colonialist origins allows 2S/Indigiqueer writers to more quickly focus on issues crucial to 2S/Indigiqueer survival. It is no surprise that examining widely read 2S/Indigiqueer texts reveals short anthologized prose, essays, poetry, comics, and web stories as the preferred mediums. Important

historic poetry and essay collections by Chrystos, Beth Brandt, Maurice Kenny, and many others have recently been joined by short-form pieces from a wide variety of 2S/Indigiqueer writers and two groundbreaking futurist anthologies, Hope Nicholson's edited *Love Beyond Body, Space, & Time* (2016) and Joshua Whitehead's anthology *Love After the End* (2020). Undoubtedly, it is easier for writers marginalized by their genders and sexualities to be published in short formats. However, I also believe these genres possess features that make them ideal for representing 2S/Indigiqueer narratives, most especially their brevity, which allows for wider distribution. Cree-Métis-Saulteaux scholar Lindsay Nixon claims "queer Indigenous youth" use short online formats "for the rapid-share of revolutionary ideas"; it "speaks to how younger generations are thinking about and enacting queer ethics in art outside of settler-colonial institutions like universities" (Belcourt and Nixon). Though Nixon focuses mostly on social media posts, their argument that shorter texts are more easily read and shared outside of settler-colonial institutions like universities is crucial. While 2S/Indigiqueer youth are not these texts' only audience, they are an important one, and these works' brevity and wider distribution networks are better suited for non-classroom reading practices in ways that longer novels are not. This is especially important since 2S/Indigiqueer youth are at greater risk of dropping out of school, and of homelessness. Further, these shorter, multimodal formats are less linear than novels; they possess a fluidity necessary for representing nonbinary genders and nonlinear temporalities. Their formal fluidity provides greater room for characters and readers to change, adapt, and heal, an essential component to imagining more expansive 2S/Indigiqueer futures. These short-form mediums better allow for the "rapid-share of revolutionary ideas" than the novels Indigenous studies scholars have long often preferred for their scholarship.

Daniel Heath Justice's "The Boys Who Became the Hummingbirds" offers a salient example of revolutionary ideas expressed in a deliberately short futurist format. Originally published as a short story in *Love Beyond Body, Space, & Time* (2016), it was reimagined as a comic in *Moonshot 2* (2020). Since Justice is capable of finding publishers for his many book-length projects, he has clearly chosen short formats for this particular story. In addition to existing as both written prose and comic simultaneously, "The Boys Who Became the Hummingbirds" deliberately draws upon Indigenous oral storytelling, borrowing from multiple genres to create a flexible, expansive tale. In its beginning and end, the story repeatedly asserts "This is a teaching, and a remembrance", revealing the text's orientation as a cyclical, nonlinear work, but also one readers are prompted by the words "teaching" and "remembrance" to see as an ethical moral lesson ("Boys" 54, 59). The lesson it imparts is that 2S/Indigiqueer peoples are essential for communities' survival in a post-apocalyptic world. The story's world is similar enough to our own that the text serves as a warning for readers' own possible future if their violent, exploitive behaviors continue: "Unhealthy waters flowed sluggishly. … Plants had long ago withered and blown away. … It was a place of daily cruelty … where to touch meant to hurt, where beauty went to die" ("Boys" 54). One boy, Strange Boy, is committed to returning beauty to the world, using dance, song, and visual art to inspire change in members of his community. Though his community violently brutalizes him in response, Strange Boy's art inspires "longing for gentle beauty" in his lover Shadow Boy (Justice, Boys 56). Once the two boys acknowledge their love for one another and their truest selves, they transform into iridescent hummingbirds; the beautiful dance they publicly create reveals hidden joy, beauty, and desire in the other townspeople. Using art to reveal "what could be", the Hummingbird Boys' "fierce, loving beauty … restored their world" (57, 59).

The brevity of this story is deliberate; it positions itself as kin to an oral story whose lessons require audience engagement and interpretation. The characters' abstract names (Strange Boy and Shadow Boy) reinforce the story's timeless quality. Situating itself generically close to an oral story, the text positions readers as more active, attentive participants than the passive role

of a reader of a novel. Leslie Marmon Silko describes the interaction between an oral storyteller and an audience thus: "a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener; the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listeners" (50). Recognizing the power of storyteller-audience dynamics, the story's reminder at its beginning and end that it is both "a teaching, and a remembrance" (Justice, "Boys" 54, 59) is audience-focused, prompting readers actively to interpret the story's lesson—to recognize that the most marginalized members of a community, those who see a community's worst and best, are the most knowledgeable about how to overcome its failings and restore balance.

The multiformat story also asserts the intergenerational power of 2S/Indigiqueer art to return the world to wholeness and, essential to maintaining that wholeness, its storytelling traditions. The story tells us, "The People found courage and guidance through returning to their stories. … They shared words of life and lineage, and committed themselves to caring for one another in better ways than they had" (Justice, "Boys" 57, 58). The recognition that earlier stories provide "life and lineage" to nonbiological descendants is essential to recognizing the powerful role that 2S/Indigiqueer individuals perform in tribal life; they can pass on a cultural lineage based on lessons of care rather than biological reproduction. The story metaphorically asserts this "lineage" and literally demonstrates it. By portraying the boys transforming into hummingbirds, the story alludes to Menominee poet Chrystos's powerfully erotic poem "Na' Natska", which describes sex between two women as follows: "Your fingers in me are ruby-throated / humming birds Your eyes iridescent wings" (Chrystos 60). Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen writer Deborah Miranda's insightful analysis of Chrystos's poem interprets the speaker as not only "see[ing] the wings of humming birds in the eyes of her lover", but as "becom[ing] the humming bird that laps the nectar of her lover" (Miranda 145). By returning to the powerful image of hummingbirds' erotic delight, Justice's story honors its nonbiological "lineage". Justice's and many 2S/Indigiqueer writers' use of intertextuality conveys what Grace Dillon has called the "pleasures of miindiwag—those curative stories told in an ironic giveaway" ("Miindiwag" 233). Dillon writes that the power of miindiwag is that they "taunt the audience by implicating their part in the lesson conveyed", "challeng[ing] readers to recognize their positions with regard to the diasporic condition of contemporary Native peoples" (*Walking* 6). Justice's multiformat story, like many 2S/Indigiqueer futurist texts, uses short-form storytelling to prompt audience engagement and self-awareness about their role in creating either a deadly or life-affirming world for 2S/Indigiqueer youth.

## Healing Through Expansive Sciences and Ceremonies

A second feature central to 2S/Indigiqueer futurism is the unquestioning assertion that 2S/Indigiqueer persons are crucial to healing the wounds of settler-colonial heteropatriarchy. In these works, healing is accomplished by returning to traditional Indigenous sciences and ceremonies, and by pairing that knowledge with Indigenous appropriations of settler STEM. Imagining Indigenous peoples healing themselves and their world with technology resists settler colonialist extractive technological-use and fantasies of Indigenous peoples as anachronistic relics of the past. Lipan Apache writer Darcie Little Badger's comics and web stories raise important questions about the role of STEM in Indigenous futures. Her 2S/Indigiqueer characters combine Indigenous science, ceremony, and technology to heal humans and lands damaged by settler colonialism. Examining her comic "Litmus Flowers" and web story "Black, Their Regalia", I demonstrate how Little Badger's futurist texts provide ways for contemporary readers not only to imagine more expansive futures, but to build and navigate paths towards their own healing.

Of utmost importance in Little Badger's and other 2S/Indigiqueer futurist texts is the belief that settler-colonial science and technology may successfully be appropriated, but it must be balanced by more important Indigenous science and ceremonies. For example, her comic "Litmus Flowers" directly juxtaposes Indigenous science with settler science to assert the superiority of tribal knowledge. The comic is set in the near future after Indigenous soil is bombed with "Famintoxin", a new poison, but as the name suggests, one based on an "old tactic that been around for centuries … you can destroy a people by eliminating their food source" (69). Fleeing the poison campaign, 12-year-old Fresia hides in an underground bunker with another Indigenous youth similarly gifted a name from nature, Coral. Rejecting settler colonialism that has long used famine as a tactic of genocide, Fresia grows up to become a scientist who breeds a litmus flower to help her tribe, who now all wear masks and live in domed shelters, to determine if their soil is safe to grow vegetables. (The flower is based on the settler-scientific litmus test—red flowers indicate the presence of poison/acid, blue flowers indicate safety/base). While out collecting samples one day in a remote area of the forest, Fresia sees that the poisonous red flowers are being replaced with blue flowers; she follows them to their source, an unmasked, nonbinary individual growing healthy vegetables on their own land. Readers discover that the gardener is Coral. They tell Fresia that "during my long walks, I'd find a clump of blue flowers in the middle of a million red flowers"; their next statement, "I always took a bit of the good soil and scattered it around my house", is accompanied by an image of them watering the replanted blue flowers (73–74). Coral is able to regenerate the land through direct observation, knowledge of planting, and careful nurturing—hallmarks of Indigenous science. While Coral's system worked with Fresia's modified settler-scientific test flower, it is shown to far exceed it since it succeeds in healing the land, not just indicating its acidity. Juxtaposing these two tribal people practicing differing sciences, the comic suggests that settler-colonial science may successfully be appropriated, but that its narrow vision must be balanced out by Indigenous science's more holistic practices.

Little Badger's web story "Black, Their Regalia" is also set in the near future and provides readers a path for navigating beyond internalized preferences they may have for settler science. It follows a 2S/Indigiqueer alt-metal band called the Apparently Siblings who receive a healing vision from a spirit-being named Plague Eater instructing them on how to defeat a deadly global virus; the Plague Eater appears to them because she is the band's "*biggest* fan" (Little Badger, "Black", emphasis in original). Before the band accepts the legitimacy of the vision, the trio has to overcome their own doubts about the vitality of tribal knowledge, especially when it is contradicted by settler-colonial science. For example, the band's singer, Moraine, immediately explains away the collective vision using settler science: "the virus causes hallucinations when it damages the temporal lobe" (Little Badger, "Black"). The drummer, Tulli, remains on "the fence straddling belief and denial" about the vision's legitimacy, until she uses settler science and technology to confirm the vision (Little Badger, "Black"). Once Tulli learns from Google that the turkey vultures in the vision appeared outside their natural habitat, she asserts, "those birds were scientific proof of the supernatural; they had to be sent by powers greater than nature: spirits, ghosts, gods. All of the above?" (Little Badger, "Black"). In Little Badger's stories, belief in settler science and technology does not preclude beliefs in tribal traditions. "Black, Their Regalia" contains a balance of ceremonial and scientific language, with references to "jingle dresses" and a "drum group", alongside terms like "space-time singularity" and "carbon nanotubes" (Little Badger, "Black"), understandable since Little Badger has a BS in geoscience and a PhD in oceanography. As with "Litmus Flower", though, the story implies that for true healing to occur, tribal knowledge must be privileged over settler science. When the band performs the healing ceremony gifted to them in their vision, they successfully defeat the deadly virus

simultaneously around the world, as later confirmed by the spirit being and also by medical tests and YouTube videos of their performance.

Refusing to relegate either Indigenous peoples or spirit beings to the historic past, Little Badger's stories provide healing ceremonies for the contemporary world. The spirit being in "Black, Their Regalia" appreciates heavy metal music, and the band's patchwork dance regalia are created out of donated clothing in natural fabrics like silk and cotton, but also synthetically created polyester, rayon, and faux leather. The story suggests that as long as one's intent towards healing is certain and you follow protocol as much as you are able, it is acceptable to update the ceremonies. Believing in and following tribal traditions (intent followed by action) leads to healing even if, on the surface, the method appears modified from past practices. Little Badger's stories gift readers with images (literally, in the comic) of powerful 2S/Indigiqueer individuals who use adaptations of traditional knowledge to heal their peoples. Her texts, like many 2S/Indigiqueer futurist works, draw upon tribal traditions, where 2S/queer persons fulfill healing roles. Simultaneously, they attempt to perform a metaphoric healing on her readers. Because of settler colonialism's targeted attack on 2S/Indigiqueer persons and sacred tribal knowledge, we have limited understanding of the tribal roles of 2S/Indigiqueer individuals. While the roles differ in various tribes, often 2S/Indigiqueer individuals function as healers and/or ceremonial leaders. Qwo-Li Driskill reminds us, "The stance that Two-Spirit people carry very *particular* medicine—which is not to be misunderstood as more (or less) important than men's or women's particular medicines—is one rooted within Native worldviews and land bases" ("Doubleweaving" 85, emphasis in original). The Mescalero Apaches, who are closely related to and frequently live alongside Lipan Apaches, recognize the power of their third and fourth gendered peoples. Claire Farrer contends, "Multigendered adult people at Mescalero are usually presumed to be people of power. … They are often called upon to be healers or mediators or interpreters of dreams" (Farrerr 248–249). Little Badger's works embody this tribal tradition. Though her characters and stories use unconventional mediums (like heavy metal bands and comics), her texts seek to bring about a larger healing for 2S/Indigiqueer people and all who have been affected by settler colonialism. Little Badger's futurist texts reveal the ways that settler colonialism's gendered hierarchies have unbalanced life, and they remind readers of the knowledge and power 2S/Indigiqueer people have long possessed to restore balance to the world. They prompt readers to exchange settler colonialism's toxic views with 2S/Indigiqueer leaders' more generous visions.

## The Erotic "And/As" Revolution

The third major characteristic of 2S/Indigiqueer futurism is its demonstration of the ways that erotic intimacies function as decolonizing acts. Unlike the other texts examined here, Driftpile Cree poet Billy-Ray Belcourt's *This Wound Is a World* is not set in the future or cyberspace; instead, after detailing our current world's horrific violence against Indigenous women and 2S/Indigiqueer persons, Belcourt builds his own worlds and urges readers to join him there. Belcourt writes, "to be queer and native and alive is to repeatedly bear witness to worlds being destroyed, over and over again"; despite this trauma, he asserts, "the world we want is waiting in the breakages between now and the next, what might get us there?" ("Can"). *This Wound Is a World* proposes non-heteronormative erotics as the means for accessing and creating alternative worlds that are more life-giving for 2S/Indigiqueer persons. Like many Indigenous futurist texts, Belcourt's book of poetry acknowledges that the Indigenous apocalypse has already occurred. The speaker of his poem "We Were Never Meant to Break Like This" asserts that Natives and their allies need to leave the current apocalypse of settler colonialism for a more

life-affirming world. The speaker says, "the future is already over, but that doesn't mean we don't have / anywhere else to go;" they urge readers to "follow me out of the backdoor of the world" (*Wound* 19). Belcourt's speakers repeatedly encourage readers to follow them (or their own body's pleasures) into an alternative cosmos where pleasure in its many forms sustains life. The speaker in "Notes in a Public Washroom" confidently asserts "I ran off the edge of the world/into another world / and there everyone / was at least a little gay" (*Wound* 12). "The Creator Is Trans" reveals that this alternative cosmos is sacred: "there is a heaven / and it is a place called gay. / gay as in let's hold up a world together" (*Wound* 24). While one might be tempted to reduce Belcourt's book of poetry to simply an extended metaphor about the support (or lack thereof) within the gay community, I assert that his world-building is futurist. In his 2016 essay "Can the Other of Native Studies Speak?", Belcourt suggests that the work of Indigenous "queer, trans, and two-spirit" writers might "recklessly generate radically new ways of being in the world" ("Can"). His publication of *This Wound Is a World* the following year attempts to do just that.

In 2S/Indigiqueer works, the body is not a metaphor. The body's materiality, its pleasure and pain, forms the basis for building ethical relations with all beings. *This Wound Is a World* repeatedly describes non-heteronormative acts of pleasure as ceremony, as sacred practices that radically return 2S/Indigiqueer peoples back to themselves and their networks of intimate and spiritual relationships, relations that are central to maintaining tribal personhood. The speaker in "Grief After Grief After Grief After Grief" says "his moaning is an honor song I want to world to" (Belcourt, *Wound* 23). "Time Contra Time" describes non-heteronormative sex as "an aesthetics of incarnation", an act that embodies the sacred (Belcourt, *Wound* 40). In "OKCupid" the speaker describes how

time stops
and is made anew
when two native boys
find each other's bodies
and write poems about it afterwards
because each kiss was an act of defiance
a kind of nation-building effort
our bodies were protesting
dancing in a circle
to the beat of
a different drum
that was also a world in and of itself.
*(Belcourt,* Wound *33)*

The erotic relations described in Belcourt's poetry are not powerful solely because of the sex acts. While pleasurable, it is not enough in this poem for "two native boys" to simply "find each other's bodies". Instead, they must "protest" the current world, intimately "nation-build", and "danc[e] in a circle" to create a new "world in and of itself". Their actions follow the drum's lead, suggesting they are ceremonial in addition to being celebratory. Importantly, given second billing after "find[ing] each other's bodies", they must "write poems about it afterwards". The ceremonial act of creating new worlds and relationships is complete only when they share their intimate world-building with others though art so that we, too, can help to imagine and build alternative futures. The text is miindiwag, a curative giveaway where readers are challenged with potential pleasure, no less, to do their part in building worlds more life-giving for

2S/Indigiqueer persons. The speaker in "Boyfriend Poems" directly addresses and taunts the reader, "sometimes our bodies obey in explaining our desires before we / do, are you listening?" (Belcourt, *Wound* 37). The text suggests that to build new worlds, we must honor our bodies, desires, the drum, and 2S/Indigiqueer poetry, all important relations for creating new futures. Describing 2S/Indigiqueer sex, Lindsay Nixon argues, "there's nothing revolutionary about the way we fuck and are intimate. It's the relationships, how we are in them with ethical actions (because fuck intention) that makes our relationships radical" (Benaway). The distinctions Nixon draws between action and intention, sex and ethical relations, are crucial to understanding how embodied erotic intimacies function as powerful acts of decolonization.

2S/Indigiqueer futurism has much to teach us about building ethical relationships; it prompts readers to recognize and return to our responsibilities to care for all. Dillon writes, "all forms of Indigenous futurisms are narratives of *biskaabiiyang* … the process of 'returning to ourselves'", which involves "discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from [colonialism's] impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world" (Dillon, *Walking* 10). The Cree possess six terms for genders beyond male and female: napêw iskwêwisêhot (a man who dresses as a woman), ayahkwêw (a man who dresses, lives, and is accepted as a woman), and iskwêhkân (one who acts and lives as a woman), along with iskwêw ka napêwayat (a woman who dresses as a man), înahpîkasoht (a woman who dresses, lives, and is accepted as a man), and napêhkân (one who acts and lives as a man) (see Vowel). While settler colonialism has affected knowledge about these genders and their accompanying roles, their large number and the careful distinctions between them suggest that the differences are important and perhaps, as with the case in other tribes, dictate the differing relationships tribal members have to them. Opaskwayak Cree Nation scholar Alex Wilson describes how in some contemporary Cree communities, 2S peoples are reclaiming their tribal roles. He asserts "two spirit" people do not "come out" in these communities; instead, they tell "stories of 'coming in' … an act of returning, fully present in ourselves, to resume our place as a valued part of our families, cultures, communities, and lands, in connection with all our relations" (3). Unfortunately, the current world described in *This Wound Is a World* and other 2S/ Indigiqueer futurist texts sometimes offers no safe place to return to. In the face of this absence, these texts urge readers to build new worlds and futures based not on settler colonial hierarchies, but on relationships of radical care. One wonders what will happen to settler colonialism's current world without the presence of 2S/Indigiqueer peoples to offer balance and prompt community members to attend to their relations? Daniel Heath Justice writes that in many, especially Southeastern, tribes, "the anomaly is constitutive of the norm, not outside or insignificant to it. By constituting the normative, anomaly is essential to its functioning and, indeed, its very existence" (Justice, Notes 221). Without the constitutive presence of 2S/Indigiqueer peoples to help construct and maintain intimate and spiritual relationships, the world built by settler colonialism is doomed to a pleasure-less end.

## Travelling Through 2S/Indigiqueer Temporalities

The fourth major characteristic of 2S/Indigiqueer futurism is the way it reveals literature's superpower—its ability fluidly to travel through different time periods, providing alternative ways to interact with the past and its legacy, especially the traumas of colonialism. Settler colonialism uses hegemonic linearity to symbolically relegate Indigenous peoples to a long dead past. Rejecting the deadliness of settler views of time, 2S/Indigiqueer futurism offers instead the possibility and pleasure of travelling through time, moving backwards, forwards, and sideways, a dance imagined and controlled by Indigenous creators. Grace Dillon argues that "Native

slipstream views time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream", allowing "authors to recover the Native space of the past, to bring it of the attention of contemporary readers, and to build better futures" (*Walking* 3, 4). Ojibwe-Cree writer Joshua Whitehead's *full-metal indigiqueer* (2017) embodies this time-traveling practice through its speaker-protagonist zoa, a 2S/Indigiqueer cyber trickster whose ability to deftly navigate through multiple temporalities disrupts settler colonialism and helps readers imagine more life-affirming ways to engage with the past. Whitehead asserts "I like poetry because it lets me build worlds from words in digital / cyber spaces: here I'm a time-traveler", "I say: sharpen the fang of a poem and let it wreck havoc on their hi / story, drain the life of canonicity—I found myself a jingle dress at the bottom of that well" (McLennon). Whitehead shares their jingle dress with readers in *full-metal indigiqueer*, dancing with us through a literary-spiritual healing. As with many ceremonies, the healing can be accomplished only by leaving behind settler views of time.

2S/Indigiqueer understandings of time offer a route out of settler colonialism's deadly time. Mark Rifkin argues that colonialism works by establishing chronogeopolitics, where settler states' destructive heteronormativity is imagined as the norm, "the self-evident basis for understanding the movement of time" (38). In this worlding,

> Queer theorizations of temporality then aid in understanding Native oppositions … resistance appears not as a refusal of the modern but as an expression of alternative experiences of time that persist alongside settler imperatives, and are affected by them, while not being reducible to them.
>
> *(38)*

In *full-metal indigiqueer*, zoa's ability to easily navigate settler and queer temporalities alike provides them strength that settlers, possessing only one-directional views of time, do not possess. zoa warns,

> i am the ghost of natives past;
> the ghost of colonialism present
> the ghost of settlers to come
> I live past|present|future
> the spirits of all three strive within me
> learn the lessons they have to teach
> & run afeared.
>
> *(Whitehead 48)*

Using lessons learned from the past and the future, which zoa as a cyber being has already experienced, they confidently assert the death of settler life, declaring it an always already-dead "ghost". zoa and other 2S/Indigiqueer beings' ability to navigate multiple temporalities assures their ongoing survival. The superpower shared by 2S/Indigiqueer temporalities and literature alike, to flexibly travel through time, allows for an expansive and enduring fluidity crucial to sustaining emotional life—if readers are brave enough to follow where they lead. zoa's miindiwag invites readers to let their worldview fully inhabit us: "I am the water / you are the vessel / when I pour myself into you" (Whitehead 21). zoa confidently asserts "ive outlived colonial virology / slayed zombie imperialism" (Whitehead 113), and they urge readers to follow their lead by doing the same.

Critical to 2S/Indigiqueer time travel is the idea that 2S/Indigiqueer persons and readers neither become stuck in the traumatic past, repeating a never-ending cycle of victimry, nor internalize settler views on history. *full-metal indigiqueer* asserts that the best way to navigate the past is by more fully seeing the way that it functions in the present. As a 2S/Indigiqueer being fully cognizant of settler colonialisms' inner workings, zoa is able quickly to expose the traps in their worldview: "they say, we need to work through / move beyond, undo, assimilate, associate, incriminate" (Whitehead 87). zoa's list quickly exposes the ways internalizing settler approaches to history renders Indigenous peoples guilty of existence. In its place, zoa proposes, "we need to work through you / move beyond; undo" (Whitehead 87). Rejecting the deadly one-directionality of settler linearity, *full-metal indigiqueer*'s rapid-fire time travel pulls readers through differing time periods and canonical and pop culture texts, providing readers with multidimensional routes they, too, may follow when navigating their own painful individual and collective pasts. Speaking about *full-metal indigiqueer*, Whitehead says,

> You're strapped onto the back of this viral trickster and you travel at near light speed across nations, countries, languages, genres, centuries. … [Philip] Sidney had one thing right, the point of poetry is to move—mine is just moving blockages out of the way and transporting a peoplehood into the future.
>
> *(McLennon)*

Rejecting the deadly blockages of settler colonial narratives that imagine Indigenous and 2S/Indigiqueer persons as shameful and criminal, zoa inspires readers to see the power and pleasure of actively choosing to navigate the past differently.

In the face of deadly settler narratives, *full-metal indigiqueer*, like many 2S/Indigiqueer works, describes the vital importance of narrating your own, more life-affirming story; as zoa says, "i am creator", "i am my own best thing" (Whitehead 22). The text imagines a new, more empowering world accessed through both the literary and the digital realms. zoa says, "i promise you: / these spaces can transform/an injun into a warrior / who can claw, scrape, fight / who can write on a piece of paper / sign a name instead of an 'X'" (Whitehead 103). In this life-affirming future, we are all valued. Through direct addresses, they invite readers to join them there: "this is the hive ive created / where were all plugged in / not competing or comparing / but saying I love you in decolonial tongues", "this is the hive … I am calling you" (Whitehead 109, 112). Accessing the decolonial future requires replacing competitive views of individualism with radical relationality. The payoff, zoa promises, is that

> indigeneity can encompass so much more
> complete, so much more
> if we interject, intersect, interlay, not compete or compare
> share, grow together, sideways
> woven together like kokums hair
> braided, queer & punk
> channeling our minds
> like a honeycomb
> to bind, break, reclaim
> reject the greedy fingers of settler colonialism.
>
> *(Whitehead 110)*

zoa's process of navigating a route beyond settler colonialism begins with the "bind", where readers move beyond "greedy" settler hierarchies that divide us and instead choose to "sideways" "grow together". Doing so requires "reclaim[ing]" what settler colonialism has long sought to suppress—the power of 2S/Indigiqueer persons to restore balance to the world. zoa proclaims "the premodern is the foundation for the postmodern" (Whitehead 112). 2S/Indigiqueer futurist texts like *full-metal indigiqueer* and many others remind readers of the power and strength to be found in returning to life-sustaining relationships with each other and the more-than-human world.

## Conclusion

2S/Indigiqueer futurist works provide paths for readers to follow out of our current deadly world and into more pleasurable, life-affirming futures. They tease and taunt readers, asking whether we are brave enough to leave behind our familiar, even if horrific, current world for an unknown future where we are held ethically accountable for building and sustaining a world for all living beings. They prompt us to question who we see as our leaders, and whether the directions they take us in are based on radical care. The implications these texts raise for Indigenous futurism as a movement are vast. Are we willing to realize the way our discipline inadvertently establishes a binary between the imagination and the body, privileging one over the other? Are we willing to create space for physical bodies—for discussions about how academic work relates (or not) to real-world bodies that cry out in pleasure and pain? Are we willing to change, to reassert balance by returning 2S/Indigiqueer persons and their stories to the center of discussions about Indigenous futures? Are we willing to do the hard work of attending to our relations with human and more-than-human others, our spirits, and our bodies?

## Works Cited

Belcourt, Billy-Ray. "Can the Other of Native Studies Speak?" *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, 1 Feb. 2016, https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2016/02/01/can-the-other-of-native-studies-speak/. Accessed 14 Dec. 2020.

———. *This Wound Is a World*. Frontenac House Ltd., 2017.

Belcourt, Billy-Ray, and Lindsay Nixon, "What Do We Mean by Queer Indigenous Ethics?" *Canadian Art Magazine*, 23 May 2018, https://canadianart.ca/features/what-do-we-mean-by-queerindigenousethics/. Accessed 14 Dec. 2020.

Benaway, Gwen. "Interview: Lindsay Nixon." *This Magazine*, 4 Sept. 2018, https://this.org/2018/09/04/interview-lindsay-nixon/. Accessed 29 Dec. 2020.

Bryden, Diana. "Risk, Mortality, and Memory: The Global Imaginaries of Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia*, and Andre Alexis's *Fifteen Dogs*." *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 78, Apr. 2019, pp. 97–112.

Chrystos. *In Her I Am*. Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1993.

Dillon, Grace L. "Miindiwag and Indigenous Diaspora." *Extrapolation*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2007, pp. 219–243.

———. "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms." *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, edited by Grace L. Dillon, U of Arizona P, 2012, pp. 1–12.

Driskill, Qwo-Li. "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques." *Sexuality, Nationality, Indigeneity*, special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1–2, 2010, pp. 69–92.

Driskill, Qwo-Li, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda, and Lisa Tatonetti, editors. *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*. U of Arizona P, 2011.

Farrer, Claire. "A 'Berdache' by Any Other Name … Is a Brother, Friend, Lover, Spouse: Reflections on a Mescalero Apache Singer of Ceremonies." *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, edited by Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, U of Illinois P, 1997, pp. 236–251.

Ingwersen, Moritz. "Reclaiming Fossil Ghosts: Indigenous Resistance to Resource Extraction in Works by Warren Cariou, Cherie Dimaline and Nathan Adler." *Canadian Literature*, vol. 240, 2020, pp. 59–76.

Justice, Daniel Heath. "Notes Toward a Theory of Anomaly." *Sexuality, Nationality, Indigeneity*, special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1–2, 2010, pp. 207–242.

———. "The Boys Who Became Hummingbirds." *Love Beyond Body, Space, & Time: An Indigenous LGBT Sci-Fi Anthology*, edited by Hope Nicholson, Bedside Press, 2016, pp. 54–59.

———. "The Boys Who Became Hummingbirds." *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection 2*, edited by Hope Nicholson, Inhabit Education Books, 2020, pp. 84–94.

Little, Badger Darcie. "Black, Their Regalia." *People of Colo(u)r Destroy Fantasy!*, a special issue of *Fantasy*, 60, 2016, pp. 5–15.

———. "Litmus Flowers." *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collective, Volume 3*, edited by Elizabeth LaPensée and Michael Sheyahsh, AH Comics, 2020, pp. 67–75.

McLennon, Rob. "An Interview with Joshua Whitehead." *Ploughshares*, 19 May 2018, https://blog.pshares.org/an-interview-with-joshua-whitehead/. Accessed 13 Dec. 2020.

Miranda, Deborah. "Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy: Searching for American Indian Women's Love Poetry and Erotics." *Frontiers*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2002, pp. 135–149.

Mitchell, Audra. "Worlding Beyond 'the' 'End' of 'the World': White Apocalyptic Visions and BIPOC Futurisms." *International Relations*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2020, pp. 309–332.

Rifkin, Mark. *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*. Duke UP, 2017.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. 1996. Simon and Schuster, 1997.

Simpson, Leanne *Betasamosake. As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. U of Minnesota P, 2017.

Vowel, Chelsea. "All My Queer Relations: Language, Culture, and Two-Spirit Identity." *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis & Inuit Issues in Canada*. Highwater Press, 2016.

Whitehead, Joshua. *Full-Metal Indigiqueer*. Talon Books, 2017.

Wilson, Alex. "Our Coming In Stories: Cree Identity, Body Sovereignty and Gender Self- Determination." *Journal of Global Indigeneity*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–5.

# 9

# BLACKFELLA FUTURISM

## Speculative Fiction Grounded in Grassroots Sovereignty Politics

*Mykaela Saunders*

The volume of speculative fiction (spec fic) texts that are set in the future and written by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in long- and short-form fiction and in other media, began small and slow but has grown exponentially over the last few decades. Between 1990 and 2020, ten novels, one novella and 14 short stories were published, and one television series was produced. Spanning 30 years of publication, there are now 26 works (and counting) written by Indigenous authors, which are all set in some version of the future. But can all these texts be considered Blackfella futurism? And of those that are, what do they say about who and how we may be in these futures?

### "Blackfella" as Political Terminology

But first, what is Blackfella futurism? In 2012's *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, Anishinaabe academic Grace L. Dillon coined the term Indigenous futurism to describe a subgenre of spec fic that grapples with issues that Indigenous peoples might face in the future (1–12). I would like to introduce Blackfella futurism as an antipodean offspring of Indigenous futurism and a sovereign-minded genre of spec fic. However, Blackfella futurism is not simply work that is authored by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and set in the future, although those two criteria are foundational. In line with its name, Blackfella futurism must connect to grassroots politics; this is what makes it a sovereign-minded futurism.

"Blackfella" is a grassroots terminology for a distinct cultural, social, and political identity. On the Australian continent, a Blackfella is considered to be a person of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent *and* who identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander *and* who belongs to an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community (Dodson 25–35). This is known as the threefold definition. To be legally considered Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, a person must address all three criteria simultaneously. So, it is not just *descending from* and *identifying as* a Blackfella that makes somebody one, but the *belonging to* a community who claims them too. (This latter point will be especially important for our discussion of which texts belong and do not belong in the Blackfella futurism canon.)

I've chosen Blackfella futurism as the most appropriate name to distinguish our work from other global indigenous or First Nations futurisms, such as Aotearoa futurism, which has emerged from Māori and other Pacific Islander storytellers, and to avoid the mouthful

"Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Futurism". As over 300 languages were spoken on our continent Before Colonization (BC), there was never one word that we all used to refer to ourselves. The closest such term would be Blackfella, alternatively spelt Blackfulla, Blakfella, or Blakfulla, which is a grassroots autonym originating in early colonial history, beginning from 1788. In first-contact histories, our people used the imposed British English language to distinguish themselves as "black fellows" from the colonizing "white fellows", which has become "blackfella" and "whitefella" over time, and part of the Aboriginal English vocabulary. From its earliest usage, Blackfella was widely used to denote difference in skin color, uniting some 300 of our nations under one umbrella term.

The cold, hard fact is that any term that unifies us will homogenize us too, but I have yet to find a more satisfying term than Blackfella that collects us together as "one mob" without using English words that perpetuate colonial relationships the way that "Indigenous" and "Aboriginal" do. Many people in our communities prefer "Blackfella" as shorthand for "Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander", as the latter has been externally imposed and has bureaucratic connotations. Similarly imposed is "Indigenous", which may have us subsumed within the group of global Indigenous peoples, just as "First Nations" may confuse us with our North American cousins. Blackfella seems to me to be the best way to distinguish ourselves without using colonial terms, without borrowing other peoples' terms, and without calling ourselves "Indigenous Australians" or "First Nations Australians", terms which are incorrect because we've belonged to our lands for far longer than "Australia" has existed.

Our use of the term "Black", and by extension "Blackfella", has sometimes been a point of conflict with Black settlers on our lands wanting to stake sole claim to this term and stop us from using it.[1] Some of these people have taken offence that fair-skinned Aboriginal people identify as "Black" or "Blackfellas", but this is the way our old people distinguished themselves from their colonizers, and our people have continued to identify in the same way as we claim our belonging to our old people while distinguishing ourselves from our colonizers too. As we are not yet postcolonial, both ourselves and our colonizers exist on the same continuum of time.

Due to histories of forced assimilation and other attempts at genocide, many Blackfellas have fair skin these days, myself included, so we are not necessarily identifying as Black as in skin color, but Black as in the First People who are of this earth, just like the top half of the Aboriginal flag. Black as in the shadow of history, too, as we have our own unique and horrific racialized histories out of which have emerged our own race logics and identifying terms, of which Blackfella is an important one. Blackfella politics, which includes how we identify, have firmed up in response to these specific histories. I hold the same views as Arrernte writer and unionist Celeste Liddle, who says:

> I tend to use the term "Black". Why? Because in this country the term "Black" carries a lot of political weight. It is a word that has power and a term that we've reclaimed. After years of removal policies and stolen generations based on the tone of one's skin and their alleged blood quanta, to state that you are "Black" regardless is defiant. It proclaims resilience in the face of harsh assimilation policies proudly. People sometimes fear that otherness, when what they should do is embrace it and recognise that it is important and something to celebrate.
>
> *("Why")*

"Blackfella" encompasses Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples under a common, colloquial, self-given umbrella term, which is fitting for Blackfella futurism as a self-referential grassroots iteration of a global indigenous literary coalition.

## "Blackfella" as Grassroots Sovereignty Politics

The foundation of Blackfella politics is Blackfella sovereignty. While there are many generalized and legal definitions of sovereignty, and many layers to these definitions, this chapter pulls focus to what sovereignty means to Blackfellas, which is the political, economic, legal, relational, and spiritual autonomy that derives from our cultural authority. This authority has an ancient history, going all the way back to when time began.

Aboriginal laws were created at the beginning of time in the creation period commonly translated into English as the Dreaming. These laws were created by the ancestor spirits, who taught them to Aboriginal people, who have passed these laws down through history, through education and ceremony, right up to the present day. Just as our people are well known for being attentive to our ancestral traditions, our people have also always been futurists too. Our ancestors were always forward-thinking in looking out for their descendants, especially by devising intelligent and sustainable ways of caring for country, community, and culture, and handing these ways down through the millennia.

There are three main spheres of Blackfella sovereignty, which are the basis of healthy life ways: *country*, which is land, waters, and sky, and all that enjoy it; *community*, concerning human relatedness and politics; and *culture*, which is all that emerges from the exchange between people and place over time. It can be difficult to pull Blackfella life apart into these three discrete spheres as they are often working in relation to each other, but let us try.

Regarding country, Dr Mary Graham (Komumberri) says that there are two basic precepts of the Aboriginal worldview; the first one is that "The Land is the Law" (Graham 105). Blackfellas believe that the lands, waters, and sky that make up country are alive with gifts from our ancestors. We feel deeply connected to everything within country, and these connections come with responsibilities as well as rights. Sovereignty is not just about the freedoms we want to exercise; it's also about how we protect the freedoms of all other life too. In this way our cultures are not merely sustainable, but they are actually regenerative; our cultures encode the continual proliferation of food, clean water, medicine, and other resources, which includes the management of risks to plants and animals.

Graham's second basic precept of the Aboriginal worldview is that "You are not alone in the world", maintaining that all life is related to other life and must therefore act in accordance with the same—that is, as part of a community (105). Blackfellas feel the same connectedness to our many living human kin, and to our ancestors, as we do to country.

Finally, culture is what arises from the long-term relationship between people and place. Of course, material and immaterial culture is embedded in, and embeds the ways of, caring for land and living in community. But other aspects of culture, such as language, necessitate that it has its own standalone sphere.

As Blackfella sovereignty has never been ceded or formally extinguished by the colonizer's law, it still exists today—though it has been mightily denigrated, subjugated, and abused. Still, our people have always exercised sovereignty, often against great adversity from governments, institutions, and corporations. While we acknowledge the importance of political and legal sovereignty, these are often theorized in a colonial framework, and we are also concerned with custodial, relational, communal, and spiritual sovereignty, in accordance with Blackfella lifeways.

One powerful assertion of Blackfella sovereignty is the popular land rights slogan "Always Was, Always Will Be Aboriginal Land", which originated in the 1980s through the grassroots Aboriginal land rights movement in far-western New South Wales. The phrase is attributed to Barkindji land rights activist William Bates's father, Uncle Jim Bates. Laura McBride writes:

On one of the many trips out on Country during this land rights campaign, Uncle William's father, Uncle Jim Bates, became excited and started telling stories of his Country and land. Uncle William said, "Dad, it's not your land anymore, whitefellas own it", and Uncle Jim replied, "No, they only borrowed it; it always was, and always will be Aboriginal land".

*(39)*

McBride says that the slogan

is an important statement within First Nations communities as it reasserts that the very first footprints on this continent were those belonging to First Nations peoples, and that their sovereignty of this Country has never been ceded. It is a clear declaration that First Nations people are still here and are never leaving. [It is] a statement of resilience, survival, deep connection and celebration.

*(39)*

I want to honor Uncle Jim Bates's futurist thinking by using his slogan as a guiding light for this chapter's theory of Blackfella futurism, which intends for Blackfella sovereignty to be active and alive in every possible version of the future. Anishinaabe critic and writer Gerald Vizenor calls this *native survivance*, which is "an active sense of presence over historical absence, deracination, and oblivion" (12). He says that

The nature of survivance is unmistakable in Native stories, natural reason, active traditions, customs, and narrative resistance and is clearly observable in personal attributes such as humor, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage in literature.

*(12)*

The survivance of our ways will endure only through the protection and reassertion of Blackfella sovereignty of country, community, and culture, so Blackfella futurism must be a sovereign-minded futurism that resists assimilation. As speculative genres offer humanity opportunities to imagine the seemingly impossible, Blackfella futurism opens up the possibilities for our people to explore worlds where our sovereignty is not a utopian ideal, but a reality.

## Criteria for the Blackfella Futurism Genre

From 1990 to 2020 there were 26 works written by Aboriginal authors and set in some version of the future.[2] But can they all be considered "Blackfella futurism"?

At this stage I want to delineate the parameters of Blackfella futurism: that to be part of the genre, in addition to being authored by a Blackfella and set in the future, stories must feature at least one identifiably Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander protagonist who is not the last of their race.

Why this criterion? As Blackfella grassroots sovereignty politics is focused on country, community, and culture, I argue that Blackfella futurism should also be concerned with the same, in the future.

Let's consider the characteristics of Blackfella futurism's roots and lineage. Afrofuturism ensures the survivance of Afrodiasporic ways into the future. Out of respect for Afrofuturism—as well as Aotearoa futurism, and Pasifika futurism, and all the other offspring of Indigenous Futurism—I believe that Blackfella futurism must represent our people and our ways too,

otherwise, how can we possibly try to understand *who* and *how* we may be in the future? To represent us and our ways at the most basic level, the story must be focused through a Blackfella consciousness at the very least. But to represent our people and our ways in the future *exceptionally* well, Blackfella futurism must be sovereign-minded, which means it must have a grass-roots politics, which is fundamentally a politics of relationship and relationality.

"Grace Dillon has described all Indigenous Futurisms as narratives of 'returning to ourselves', and I would add that in so doing, we also return ourselves to the world", says Palyku writer and scholar Ambelin Kwaymullina ("Reflecting on Indigenous Worlds"). I contend that returning to *ourselves* is a collective undertaking, and this undertaking must be pluralistic in the future too. Our identities as Blackfellas are social and relational because our cultures are collectivist and communal, and this must therefore endure in any sovereign-minded futurism.

These parameters speak to the threefold way we define ourselves, discussed earlier: that a Blackfella is somebody of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent *and* who identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander *and* who belongs to an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community. A Blackfella is somebody who ticks off all three points together, so it is not just *descending from* and *identifying as* a Blackfella that makes us one, but the *belonging to* a community who claims us too. The same must also be true of characters in stories for them to be considered Blackfellas. Without the presence of community in texts, it is impossible to study the opportunities and challenges that our communities might face in the future, and following on from that, our cultures too—as you cannot have much of a culture without belonging to its community of origin.

## Non-Blackfella Futurism Texts

Let's first examine which of the 26 texts, according to these parameters, are *not* part of the Blackfella futurism canon.

The stories which have no identifiably Aboriginal characters include Kalkadoon writer Tristan Michael Savage's 2014 YA novel *Rift Breaker* and three stories by Claire G. Coleman (Noongar)—"Noplace" (2018), and "Ostraka" and "Wish You Were" (both 2020)—so we'll outright exclude these.

In the following texts, there are no main Aboriginal characters, and only one or two minor Aboriginal characters, which means these texts are not really about us. Eric Willmot's *Below the Line* (1991) features one main Aboriginal character, Mick, who is subsumed into the military, and later we meet a "traditional" black family north of the line. However, this family really functions only as a plot device, as does Paddy, the sole Aboriginal character of *Terra Nullius* (2017), who is a hinge that Coleman's plot twist swings from. These two novels can then be excluded, as can *The Disappearance of Ember Crow* (2013) and *The Foretelling of Georgie Spider* (2015), the second and third books from Ambelin Kwaymullina's YA *Tribe* series, as they also do not have any main Aboriginal characters.

Three futuristic worlds that complicate things are: Kwaymullina's *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* (2012), her first book in the aforementioned *Tribe* series; Wiradjuri writer Hannah Donnelly's microfiction "After the End of Their World" (2019); and Karen Wyld's (Martu) multitemporal story "We Live On, in Story" (2020). *Ashala Wolf* does have a main Aboriginal character, the lone titular protagonist narrator. Her name is fitting; her family is all dead, and the only other "Blackfella" consciousness she relates to is Grandfather Serpent, who is an ancestral spirit and not a human character. There is no Aboriginal community in the entire *Tribe* series; the group of teen Illegals lives "tribally" but without Elders, so in this sense they are playing native (similar to how Aboriginal life ways are adopted by white survivors in *Terra*

*Nullius*). The characters in "After the End of Their World" are posthuman beings: "The disappearing humans built Yandamula and her sisters to stop big wildfires from destroying country. They were too late to save themselves" (Donnelly "After the End of Their World"). In this world, humans, including Blackfellas, no longer exist, though our cultural ways endure. Finally, while there are some main Aboriginal characters in "We Live On, in Story", they live only in the narrative past and present; the Aboriginal family's culture becomes diluted and lost through the generations, and is no longer part of the main character Leroy's identity in the narrative future (Wyld 22–26).

Nevertheless, while the former two texts problematize my criteria in interesting ways that ask whether we should characterize pre- and posthuman beings as Blackfellas, we still come up hard against the fact that in each story, there is either only one human Blackfella left, or none at all. To me, this does not speak very confidently to our survivance. Here, we butt up against the core problem that "last of their race" or "lone wolf" characters throw up for Aboriginal stories (and for real-life people too): it is difficult to have a culture without either a country or a community, but without both it is impossible.

## Country, Community, and Culture in the Blackfella Futurism Canon, 1990–2020

The remaining 15 texts are what I will refer to from hereon in as "the Blackfella futurism canon": those that are authored by our writers, that are set in the future, that feature at least one main character or consciousness who is identifiably a Blackfella, and who exists in relationship with at least one other living Blackfella.

Now that we've established the parameters of the Blackfella futurism canon, what does it say about who and how we may be in these futures? Let's now discuss how the writers have envisioned the future of country, community, and culture in their texts. By looking at the way these spheres are written in Blackfella futurism texts, we can later identify some patterns in our collective imaginary from which we can extrapolate the genre trends, themes, and tropes of the Blackfella futurism canon.

The first texts from the canon are two novels by Aboriginal men, both published in the 1990s. In 1990, Birri Gubba and Munanjali author and activist Sam Watson wrote *The Kadaitcha Sung*, the first Blackfella spec fic work. *The Kadaitcha Sung* is partly set in a futuristic, dystopian Meanjin/Brisbane, a relatively untouched Booningbah/Fingal Head, and a timeless Uluru; ancient and ancestral entities come forth from the spirit realm of country and step through into mundane reality to influence events. Young lawman Tommy Gubba is the titular kadaitcha who is chosen to save his people and acts as a middle ground between the magical and material worlds. *The Kadaitcha Sung* centers and celebrates Aboriginal community through a massive cast of characters, and they work together to fight mythic and mundane enemies. *The Kadaitcha Sung* shows infinite variations of Blackfella love, sex, and affection, including gay and bisexual masculinity—as well as homophobia that rejects and shames queer sexuality, and masquerades as "proper culture" to bully queer Blackfellas. Play and pleasure is important cultural business in *The Kadaitcha Sung*. Tommy Gubba and his friends like to drink, dance, fight, and make out with each other. The community settles grievances by ritual fighting, the way our people did traditionally. Other aspects of both traditional and more urbanized contemporary cultures are explored, particularly through the characterization of Gubba, who is a Magical Murri, a localized version of the Magical Negro stock character. He simultaneously represents every good and bad, serious and frivolous, and do-gooder and no-hoper trope for Aboriginal people, through the coding of urbanization as inauthentic and tradition as authentic.

Nyungar writer Archie Weller's 1998 *Land of the Golden Clouds* closes out the canon in the 1990s. The novel could be placed in the "dying earth" genre; in it, the sun's radiation has been made so harsh through runaway global warming effected by an historic nuclear war that changed the landscape and ecosystem irrevocably (56). The scorching sun is personified as the goddess Melanoma, whose kiss can be fatal for fair-skinned people (20). All peoples live in distinct tribes, and some of these disparate, culturally distinct tribes come together to fight their common enemy, the Night Stalkers. The Keepers of the Trees are coded as a traditional Aboriginal community. They speak some Aboriginal language; Weller used "Nyoongah words from the southwest of Western Australia and also Koori words from New South Wales" (viii). The fair-skinned Ilkari are partly descended from the Keepers, and they are Blackfella-like in some ways. Each tribe has its own lore, origin stories, and ways of understanding the world, with attendant custodial responsibilities that cross over into spiritual ceremonies. The book shows the special ceremonies of the Keepers of the Trees and the Ilkari. All of the Keeper of the Trees tribes attend a huge corroboree or festival together. The law business includes dancing and storytelling, which are ceremonial but also social. Some of the Keepers of the Trees begin romantic and sexual relationships at this corroboree, just before the attack of the Night Stalkers (89–91).

There is a 15-year gap before the next set of texts in the canon, when women and nonbinary writers begin writing our people into the future. In 2013, Alexis Wright (Waanyi) published her surrealist cli-fi novel *The Swan Book*. In this story, climate change has been so severe as to create a lush green swamp in the middle of the Australian continent (17–18). A powerful eucalyptus tree cocoons the protagonist Oblivia after her sexual assault, and her totemic swans are central to her character development, and to her journey away and back home again (7–8; 13–16). Oblivia's community is interred together at the swamp, in poverty, under the control of the army; they are contrasted with Warren Finch's people, who were historically able to claim native title and get ahead by saying yes to government initiatives (93–109). *The Swan Book* exposes the problems of the "promise marriages" between the resistant Oblivia and the duty-bound Warren Finch. The story's narrator frequently punctuates the story with untranslated Waanyi interjections.

Ellen van Neerven's (Munanjali) sci-fi fantasy novella "Water" was published in their 2014 collection *Heat and Light*. "Water" opens with the Quandamooka islands about to be terraformed into a new "Australia2" for Aboriginal people to self-segregate onto, under the orders of white left-wing president Tanya Sparkle (70–74). The liberties taken to satirize this non-Indigenous politician are witty and refreshing.[3] The environmental catastrophe orchestrated by Sparkle is resolved only through Aboriginal community cohesion, as well as ancestral collusion. Country is characterized through the plantpeople, ancestral entities who express distress at ecocide and care deeply about the queer First Nations protagonist Kaden, the first of her kind (78–80). The story explores an interspecies romantic and sexual relationship between Kaden and Larapinta, a plantperson. Kaden is appointed to a cultural conservation role within which she's expected to sell out; she eventually rejects this, choosing community over capital (119–123). She finds her purpose and belonging through activism within her community's fight for their ancestral homeland. Law and justice are expressed by people asserting sovereignty against the ecocidal act of destroying existing islands to create a new one.

The television series *Cleverman* ran for two seasons in 2016–2017, and was written by Aboriginal creator Ryan Griffin and directed by Wayne Blair (Butchulla) and Leah Purcell (Wakka Wakka). In *Cleverman*, two brothers battle it out over who gets to inhabit the titular, mythic role. The story is set in Redfern in Gadigal/Sydney, which is a real-world historical site of Aboriginal self-determination in health, housing, law, and culture, which has recently experienced a neocolonial incursion through development and gentrification, affecting the community's relationships to country.[4] The dystopian world of *Cleverman* explores these impacts

through forced segregation; however, the community division is mostly split along the faultline of human and nonhuman "hairypeople" or "hairies". The Aboriginal community unites against oppressive government forces and reforges kinship with their nonhuman hairy relatives. The Gumbaynggirr language is spoken by the hairies and the brothers, and seems to have replaced the local Dharug language.[5] Fitness, health, and well-being are important in *Cleverman*, as the community keeps fit through training and settles grievances by fighting.

Hannah Donnelly's (Wiradjuri) short story "Before the End of Their World" (2018) takes place in a near-future Naarm/Melbourne, where Aboriginal people have been relocated into work camps to rehabilitate country; protagonist Tully rebels against this program by sneaking out of the compound with her friend. Together, they smoke yarndi/marijuana and make out with each other. The story ends with a stoned Tully sneaking into a field of murnong/yam daisies and digging them up.

Alison Whittaker's (Gomeroi) "The Centre", from her 2018 collection *Blakwork*, is made up of four microfiction pieces which explore the relationship between incarceration and escapism. Like *Cleverman*, "The Centre" is also set in Redfern, in "a continent besieged by fire, starvation and water" with mention of "rivers and beaches variously flooded and depleted" (136), although the titular "Centre" also hosts The Cloud, a nowhere-but-everywhere country, a virtual and augmented reality ("virtualisation", Whittaker 136–139). The Cloud begins as a virtual reality internment technology, and incarcerated Blackfellas are able to serve their sentences there, but many mobs end up preferring to be there than in the real world. Access to The Cloud is gatekept by AI Black Captcha, who tests people for "how Aboriginal" they are using common identity stereotypes such as making tea ("blak captcha", Whittaker 134–135). The story ends on a promising note, with the rebel community inside The Cloud planning on shutting their pretty prison down ("the last project", Whittaker 140–141).

Claire G. Coleman's second novel *The Old Lie* (2019) is a space opera mostly set in warring outer space. In the opening pages, Naarm is "sweltering under a damp, oppressive forty-six degrees centigrade" (1). Later in the novel, the government tests weapons on Uluru, echoing the real-world nuclear testing at Emu Fields and Maralinga (which the story also references). The story follows mostly solitary, atomized Aboriginal characters throughout the war, some of whom come together in the latter part of the story when their intertwined relationships are made clear. One of the main characters is the queer Aboriginal fighter pilot Romany Zetz, whose hypersexuality gets her into trouble over and over again.

The next two short stories appeared in the local YA anthology *Kindred* in 2019. Coleman's "Sweet" is set in a fascist nonbinary Naarm, where binary gender has been outlawed and characters experience shame when they come out as identifying with a binary gender (127). The Aboriginal teenagers in "Sweet" are a group of young misfits who coalesce around their love of music and are a refuge to each other. In this story, the only self-determining Aboriginal people live out in the desert, feeding into stereotypes by coding remote communities as authentic and urban communities as not (127–128).

Van Neerven's "Each City" from the same anthology follows hip-hop artist Talvan's escape from fascist Meanjin and their exile to another country (216–223). Talvan's strength and joy are their familial and romantic relationships, and their grief is the forced separation between them and their queer lover. Talvan finds strength in the hip-hop scene in their new country.

Published in *Overland Literary Journal* in 2019, Woromi artist Krystal Hurst's genre-bending cli-fi story "Lake Mindi" takes place after the apocalyptic Big Fire. The group of three climate refugees help each other to go on after so much has been lost. Storytelling helps the small family bond and gives them hope as they search for the fabled Lake Mindi, encountering spirits and ghosts on the journey.

My own short story "Buried Time" was published in another issue of *Overland* in 2019. Taking a long view of history and projecting into the future, the collective first-person narrator unifies the Tweed Goori experience across the community and throughout time. In this story, the narrators gather all the clocks in the land and feed them to the earth, signifying the end of colonial time and capital.[6]

The anthology *After Australia* featured Ambelin Kwaymullina's "Message from the Ngurra Palya", a narrative poem told by a first-person narrator who speaks for their community, which is orbiting earth in their spaceship. The ship's crew is "mainly Indigenous" and they are "led not by a captain / but by an Elder / an Aunty" (239, 240). The narrator recounts the backstory of how they came to be on the spaceship; the message is one of hope and peace, and grounded in Aboriginal ways of relating, yarning, and thinking, which is rooted in Aboriginal law.

Another of my stories, "Fire Bug", was published in 2020. Also set in the Tweed, in a world of global warming and increased bushfires, Aboriginal cultural burning is central to the story, placing this in Dillon's "Indigenous science and sustainability" category. The Goori rangers in "Fire Bug" take students on a camp on their country and teach them cultural burning. The story centers on one of the students, Tyson, a troubled teen who is obsessed with fire. Tyson's conflict in this story takes place in a community context, as does the resolution of his problems. He and the nonbinary Betty have a crush on each other.

Finally, my story "Terranora" was published in *Collisions: Fictions of the Future, a Liminal Anthology*. This story is also set in the Tweed, in the Terranora estuaries—though in a different version of the future, where the Goori community have learnt to live with the dizzying weather that cycles rapidly through their country. "Terranora" investigates the dynamics between traditional owner Valmae and Skinny Kel, the stranger who arrives. In this story, characters fish and mend nets together. Conflict resolution is also a whole-community affair.

## Genre Trends for Country, Community and Culture in Blackfella Futurism

I will conclude with a summary of themes in the Blackfella futurism canon and then a final word on some problems and opportunities for the genre. The main themes of Blackfella futurism can be essentialized as the following: country's consciousness and ecocide; community cohesion and conflict; and cultural lore, spirituality, and pleasure.

Country is a consciousness for our people, and our writers in the canon imagine this in different ways. Climate change is integral to the storylines in many Blackfella futurist works. Another running theme is ecocide, and the destruction of country is often correlated with colonial governance. Country's response to its own killing is performed in each world in various ways. Country often has agency through climate and weather events, through the actions of animal and plant emissaries, and through ancestral spirits and other creatures. Land-based lifestyles feature in many texts, though country isn't just the remote or regional places, as urban centers such as Redfern and Naarm are well represented. Fascist versions of the future tend to feature urban settings; one interpretation of this theme could be that urbanization equals dystopia for all.

Many examples of community cohesion can be found in Blackfella futurism, particularly where community members hunt, fish, and gather together. Belonging takes other forms too, through work life and the esteem that comes with community-minded vocations. Conflict, which is the other side of the coin of community life, is also present, as are inter- and intra-community factional splits. Familial, romantic, and sexual relationships are centered. Diverse genders and sexualities are well-represented in the canon, though in earlier texts there is an absence of queer characters and their relationships, and in later texts, there are few examples of gentle black masculinities. In the canon there's a dearth of perspectives from older people,

especially Elders. This results in a glaring lack of different kinds of relationships between mature people, both straight and queer, and cross-cultural. Still, there is much to admire in the way these writers have explored complex and vibrant community dynamics in their stories.

Spiritual knowledge, and the attendant rites and ceremonial practices, are the main signifiers of culture in the canon. Sometimes this theme can become a fetishized trope or be leaned into so hard that it becomes satirical, either by the author's intention or simply by effect. Aboriginal law and lore are central to many Blackfella futurism storylines. Pleasure isn't incidental to sovereignty—it's central. Dance, play, drama, laughter, love—all the good things we value in life are foundational to these sovereign-minded stories too.

In summary, the field of work that represents *who* we might be and *how* we might be in the future is still small but growing exponentially, and as a sovereign-minded genre, Blackfella futurism is in need of constructive criticism. Many of the Blackfella futurism texts are essentially dystopian, exaggerated renderings of our lived realities today. In these stories, we are often dispossessed, oppressed, or otherwise struggling for sovereignty. Many of these stories replicate social structures that are similar to our present world, and some of the writers are as complicit in perpetuating colonial oppression as non-Indigenous authors have been.

Interestingly, the precipitating events in many of the postapocalypse stories are catastrophic—and so this could be read as an equalizing genre, where colonizing cultures may soon share an experience of world-shattering with us (rather than them inflicting it on us). The postapocalyptic genre is often laden with dystopian connotations. But as history has shown, one group's apocalypse is another group's golden age. This presents opportunities for peoples who welcome a collapse of the dominant oppressive stranglehold on their affairs. A postapocalyptic Australia could simply mean that the colonial state of Australia is no more, and that the power differentials resulting from issues of dispossession and political violence are being resolved.

Still, for such a new genre, and one that tends toward the dystopian, there are many exciting examples of sovereignty in the Blackfella futurism canon. One unifying aspect of Blackfella futurism is that traditional countries are also future countries, reflecting that it always was and always will be Aboriginal land. Many of the canon's stories feature complex First Nations characters who are neither wholly good or bad, and by writing communities of such characters, the authors refuse the "assimilated Aborigine", "lone wolf", and "last of their race" tropes. There are some truly fresh and nuanced representations of sovereign cultures in the future, which gives me hope that there might be some things worth looking forward to.

### Notes

1 For an account of a representative chapter of this conflict, see Larrakia and Tiwi writer Eugenia Flynn's blog post.

2 I acknowledge that questions have been raised about the identities of Coleman, Weller, and Willmott, though I won't replicate those discussions here or comment on them because it's not my business as somebody who belongs to a different community from that of these writers. This chapter treats all three writers as they identify—as Aboriginal people.

3 In *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction*, Iva Polak reads Sparkle as "an Aboriginal woman running an Australia that is now a republic" (122); however, van Neerven definitely writes her as white. For example, Sparkle says to the Aboriginal artist Hugh Ngo (emphasis mine): "'I am an optimist. I believe one day Aboriginal people will get back what *they* lost and more'. … Hugh raised an eyebrow. 'What?' he said. 'Are *you mob* gonna give us two countries?'" ("Water", van Neerven 72).

4 For a history of Aboriginal Redfern, see the website redfernoralhistory.org

5 Gumbaynggirr country is on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, some 500 kilometers north of Redfern, where Dharug was traditionally spoken.

6 I am hesitant to discuss my stories as part of the canon, as it's difficult to discuss my work as equal to the great works that inspired them. However, they *do* fit the criteria.

## Works Cited

Coleman, Claire G. *The Old Lie*. Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2019a. Print.

———. "Sweet." *Kindred: 12 #Loveozya Stories*, edited by Michael Earp, Walker Books Australia, 2019b, pp. 151–180.

Dillon, Grace L. editor. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. U Arizona P, 2012.

Dodson, Mick. "The End in the Beginning: Re(De)Finding Aboriginality." *Blacklines*, edited by Michelle Grossman, Melbourne UP, 2003, pp. 25–42.

Donnelly, Hannah. "After the End of Their World." *Cordite Poetry Review*, 1 Feb. 2019, cordite.org.au/poetry/domestic/after-the-end-of-their-world/. Accessed 27 Nov. 2022.

———. "Before the End of Their World." *The Indigenous Story Project*, 2018.

Flynn, Eugenia. "Solidarity—You Are Doing It Wrong." *Black Thoughts Live Here: A Blog by Eugenia Flynn*, 14 Apr. 2014, https://eugeniaflynn.wordpress.com/2014/04/14/solidarity-you-are-doing-it-wrong/. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Graham, Mary. "Some Thoughts About the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews." *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1999, pp. 105–118.

Griffen, Ryan, creator. *Cleverman*. Australian Broadcasting Company and Red Arrow Studios International, 2016–2017.

Hurst, Krystal. "Lake Mindi." *Overland Literary Journal*, issue 237, Summer 2019, https://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-237/lake-mindi/. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Kwaymullina, Ambelin. *The Disappearance of Ember Crow*. Candlewick Press, 2013.

———. *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf*. Walker Books Australia, 2012.

———. "Message from the Ngurra Palya." *After Australia*, edited by Michael Mohammed Ahmad, Affirm Press, 2020, pp. 199–207.

———. "Reflecting on Indigenous Worlds, Indigenous Futurisms and Artificial Intelligence." *Mother of Invention*, edited by Tansy Rayner Roberts and Rivqa Rafael, Twelfth Planet Press, 2018, pp. 177–186.

Liddle, Celeste. "Why I Prefer the Term 'Black'." *Daily Life*, 28 Feb. 2014, www.dailylife.com.au/life-and-love/real-life/why-i-prefer-the-term-black-20140224-33cte.html. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

McBride, Laura. "Always Was, Always Will Be, Aboriginal Land." *Explore: Australian Museum Magazine*, 7 Nov. 2021, https://australian.museum/learn/first-nations/always-will-be-aboriginal-land/. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Polak, Iva. *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction*. Peter Lang, 2017.

"Redfern Oral History." redfernoralhistory.org. Accessed 9 Sept. 2022.

Saunders, Mykaela. "Buried Time." *Overland Literary Journal*, issue 234, Autumn 2019, pp. 42–46.

———. "Fire Bug." *National Indigenous Story Awards*. Indigenous Story 2020a. Web.

———. "Terranora." *Collisions: Fictions of the Future, a Liminal Anthology*, edited by Leah Jing McIntosh, et al., Pantera Press, 2020b.

Savage, Tristan. *Rift Breaker*. Magabala Books, 2014.

Van Neerven, Ellen. "Each City." *Kindred: 12 #Loveozya Stories*, edited by Michael Earp, Walker Books Australia, 2019, pp. 288–312.

———. "Water." *Heat and Light*, U of Queensland P, 2014, pp. 67–124.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. U of Nebraska P, 2008.

Watson, Sam. *The Kadaitcha Sung*. Penguin, 1990.

Weller, Archie. *Land of the Golden Clouds*. Allen and Unwin, 1998.

Whittaker, Alison. "The Centre." *Blakwork*. Magabala Books, 2018.

Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. Giramondo Publishing, 2013.

Wyld, Karen. "We Live on, in Story." *After Australia*, edited by Michael Mohammed Ahmad, Affirm Press, 2020, pp. 6–21.

# 10
# ANTHOLOGIZING THE INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINARY

## *Moonshot* Volume 3 and Ecocritical Futurisms

### *Conrad Scott*

Contemporary Indigenous sf writing highlights how modern engagements with landscapes, waters, and ecologies are problematized by socioenvironmental issues as current social processes increasingly accelerate troubling future changes to places recognizable in the present day. In the resulting narratives, which might otherwise be referred to as some permutation of dystopian fiction, a focus on geographical traces relatable to the real world empowers Indigenous writers imagining the future in connecting their texts urgently and tangibly to issues relevant today. Social dynamics drive and are driven by the alterations to environments and geographies within such Indigenous sf works. In its speculative presentation of environmental, geographical, cultural, and other shifts from the time of modern society, this body of fiction also considers futures that resonate with Grace Dillon's critical framing of more hopeful futures and even a renewal of sovereign, sociocultural engagements with the land and waters. Dillon (Anishinaabe), the scholar of Indigenous speculative and science fictions who coined the term "Indigenous futurisms",[1] argues that "[i]t might go without saying that all forms of Indigenous futurisms are narratives of *biskaabiiyang*, an Anishinaabemowin word connoting the process of 'returning to ourselves'" (Introduction, *Walking* 10). Often, in Indigenous sf, the home place is part of what is altered by larger environmental shifts that include considerations of the local, regional, and global. Some examples include the following novels: Harold Johnson's *Corvus* (2015), Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), and Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017). However, while several Indigenous sf novels and short stories feature real-world places with changes imagined from the present day into the future of the narrative, many also formulate the crises of their given story not through direct place-based markers but through environmental shifts that instead permeate cultural storyworlds as a narrative focus.

A landmark recent example can be seen with some of the content in *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection*, Volume 3 (2020), edited by Elizabeth LaPensée (Anishinaabe, Métis, and Irish) and Michael Sheyahshe (Caddo Nation of Oklahoma). Key offerings include Jennifer Storm's "Future World", LaPensée's "They Come for Water", Gerard and Peta-Gay Roberts's "H2O", and Darcie Little Badger's "Litmus Flowers". For such narratives, I propose the alternative terminology of "Indigenous ecocritical futurisms", which partly resonates with—but, notably, departs from—my terminology of the "ecocritical dystopia" that I have previously presented in the context of the climate crisis in fiction[2] and Indigenous sf writing.[3] The

ecocritical dystopia imagines futures in which environmental alterations shift our sense of place and therefore societal dynamics. While ecocritical dystopianism also offers the potential for utopian emergences, Indigenous ecocritical futurism need not be centered on environmental changes to a specific place. These stories are, in a sense, not about *topos* (Ancient Greek for place), but about *ethos* (character/custom) and *kairos* (right or opportune moment). Rather, the role of this subgenre of Indigenous futurisms is to highlight the environmental problems of today in a critical way, while folding in Indigenous solutions to crisis and promoting ways of living that are deeply rooted in culture but also treat adaptation as advantageous.

The importance in distinguishing between specifically place-based narratives about the future and those ecocritical futurisms that are culturally focused is partly in the fact that some traditional lands no longer exist, or even that a given people may have been displaced from them for a significant period of time. While these traditional places are highly connected to Indigenous cultures, and writers of Indigenous ecocritical dystopias obviously imagine future alterations to places, environments, and society, many Indigenous sf writers instead present non-geographically articulated changes imposed upon Indigenous cultures in the long process of alterations since Contact: such dramatic shifts that occurred are still ongoing, which also means that such processes will continue to affect cultural and ecological factors into the future. This is illustrated by the fact that existing constructs like suburbia and the concrete jungle are rather new to this landscape. For instance, as Alan Weisman recalls for us, even Manhattan, a quintessential bastion of skyscrapers and capital, had "more than 40 brooks and streams that traversed what was once a hilly, rocky island" that "the Lenni Lenape" called "*Mannahatta*" (23). Here the Lenni Lenape "cultivated corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers" amidst a backdrop that was otherwise "green and dense" (33), but that reality is no more.[4] With this example and others, a sense of environment has often long changed from what traditional knowledge was once rooted in, yet such traditional knowledge still resonates even when a sense of place has been completely altered. While tracking changes to specific local and regional landscapes and waters is highly important, exploring the resilience and adaptability of culture *despite* what has often been a loss of or forced departure from traditional lands is also paramount—especially in a world where rampant environmental degradation is not only ongoing, but increasing in the form of climate change and other interrelated processes.[5]

### *Moonshot* and the Indigenous Environmental Imaginary

The form of the short story or graphic anthology narrative offers an opportunity for creators to do something different from what might be needed in the longer narrative of the novel, or even other setting-related choices in some short stories. Storm's "Future World", LaPensée's "They Come for Water", Gerard and Peta-Gay Roberts's "H2O", and Little Badger's "Litmus Flowers", alongside other contributions from Indigenous sf anthologies besides *Moonshot* Volume 3, navigate future cultural and environmental concerns without a need to specifically root their stories in place—though they could have easily chosen to do so more prominently. Admittedly, certain locales and regions may be hinted at in the splash of a story from *Moonshot*, or in the imagery of the midground or background, with the former perhaps containing recognizable landforms and the latter providing additional, subtextual setting information for the reader. For instance, panels on the third page of "Future World"[6] present a coniferous forest, and a panel on the fifth page adds deciduous growth, while panels on page 8 contain what might be the rocky outcrops of the Precambrian geological formation now called the Canadian Shield, which is apt since "Future World" conjures the "Sky Woman" story of Anishinaabeg and, as Dillon hints at in her foreword to *Moonshot* (5), a panel on the second page of "Future World" features the Pleiades. The region here could easily be somewhere near the Great Lakes of Turtle Island, or in the

north of what is now colonially called Ontario. But place takes a background role in this narrative, and the cultural passing down of stories and tradition is given prominence, as the environmental destruction wrought by the year 2171—animals are scarce, trees are synthetic, "the waters of earth are polluted and dried", and "the air is unbreathable" (Storm 11)—is brought to the attention of pre-Contact elders in a slipstream moment that is more about the larger-scale concerns of the people and nonhuman peoples moving forward into the crisis of the current day.

The movement away from a focus on place seen in a *Moonshot* Volume 3 story like Storm's "Future World" differs from something like the near-future narrative that Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas (Haida) displays through his longer "haida manga" graphic novel form in *Carpe Fin* (2019), where he "[e]xplor[es] themes of identity, environmentalism and the human condition" by using "art and speaking opportunities to communicate a world view that while particular to Haida Gwaii—his ancestral North Pacific archipelago—is also relevant to a contemporary and internationally-engaged audience" ("Biography"). Yahgulanaas's visual and textual narrative involves a speculative consideration about the future through an environmental disaster focused on the specific place and cultural dynamics of his ancestral lands and waters, and the book involves both Indigenous futurism and ecocritical dystopianism. Through these means, the environmental and social crises of the local and global, and of the past, present, and future, are successfully navigated and conflated. But the ecocritical futurism narratives in anthologies like *Moonshot* contribute to important dialogues about environmental issues and cultural responses by approaching these elements beyond a focus on place, and thus feature a form of Vizenorian survivance that involves an adaptation without adherence to setting, which is sometimes necessary to the many past, current, and future situations of a given People.

A deliberate departure from the specificity of place is seen in the concluding text of "H2O", by Gerard (Karina) and Peta-Gay Roberts (Tairo/Arawak). The final paragraph starts with the phrase, "We have been here from the beginning of time" (57), where the *here* plays the dual role of indicating cultural longevity and of referring to the traditional lands and waters of the Haudenosaunee people. This specific cultural knowledge base provides succor during environmental crisis as water itself is threatened: for instance, Roberts and Roberts provide a reminder about "the knowledge of the plants and the medicines" (57). But, even with this focus on culture and the passing down of ecological knowledge sacred to the Haudenosaunee, the penultimate words of "H2O" argue the following: "We can survive in the far North and South, in the jungles and the deserts" (57). This pivotal textual moment is one suggesting adaptation and cultural resilience, *not* fixed on remaining in place. In an interesting move, Roberts and Roberts suggest that to be and to remain surviving as Haudenosaunee even during catastrophic environmental crisis does not mean being tied to the lands their People have known in perpetuity before Contact. Notably, this survival is of a different kind from that of the "euroamericans" (56), whose "society … acts as if [water] is a renewable resource" (57). This is a society where "man will try to leave this earth we call our mother in their sky horses to seek new lands and clean water as they destroy this one" (57). But despite Roberts and Roberts's suggestion of adaptability and the role of cultural resilience even through territorial movement, the lessons of "H2O" reject a planetary exodus and process of resource extraction and abandonment in favour of one that fosters the earth, whom they call "our mother who provides and nourishes for all beings that live here" (57).

## Indigenous Ecocritical Futurisms and the Crisis of Extractivism

Despite a long presence of First Peoples in North America who have mostly lived in concert with the land, the force of colonial settler-invader processes and related ways of living are deeply interconnected with a consumption of goods and resources that damages local and regional

environments through the extractive culture involved. This is the heart of the crisis within many Indigenous sf narratives. Narratives critiquing resource extraction are seen alongside Indigenous peoples' work towards survivance through culturally sustaining means that do not completely adhere to specific geography in both LaPensée's "They Come for Water" and Simon Ortiz's "Men on the Moon" (1999). The latter, which appears in Dillon's *Walking the Clouds* antholo-gization of Indigenous sf, certainly echoes real-world environmental issues that connect with place: as Dillon explains, Ortiz's story is prescient in connection with "the Ambrosia Lake mine in New Mexico on Acoma Pueblo land" (86). According to Dillon, "Men on the Moon" "anticipates … Ambrosia's subsequent dubious status as one of the largest uranium tailings in the Western world" (86).[7] However, "Men on the Moon" also connects with a larger, non-place-based conversation about the environmental destruction wrought by so-called advances in technology brought on by processes such as the space race. In a dream that the character Faustin has, a "Skquuyuh mahkina" wreaks havoc through the natural landscape in its extractive search for resources:

> It walked over and through everything. It splashed through a stream of clear water. The water boiled and streaks of oil flowed downstream. It split a juniper tree in half with a terrible crash. It crushed a boulder into dust with a sound of heavy metal. Nothing stopped the Skquuyuh mahkina.
>
> *(91)*

In this dreamscape, especially, geography is not the focus. Instead, cultural references are made, and this is how "Flintwing Boy" and his "people must talk among themselves and learn what this is about, and decide what they will do" (91) in the face of rampant resource extraction processes.

In an examination of extractive resource industries (fossil fuels, minerals, water) and Indigenous efforts toward ecologically sound, sustainable futures, William Huggins writes that "[t]he vital spirit of water links human cultures, stories, and families to our nonhuman animal relations" (54). This, he says, affects even the stories we tell, and thus how we imagine and enact those better futures, for "respect moves from literature to life" (58). Respect for the vital role of water and other elements of our environment not only is essential now, but will always be a backbone to healthy, sustainable communities. Water and community are the focus of, and solution to, techno-industrial catastrophe—in Thomas King's novel *The Back of the Turtle* (2014), for instance—and it is notable that, in this narrative, King creates a fictional geographi-cal locale to stand in as a sense of place echoing that of Indigenous communities alongside settler-colonial ones on the west coast of what is currently called British Columbia. But, in *The Back of the Turtle*, as in many other near-future narratives about Indigenous communities facing environmental (and therefore social) crises, the geographical—whether fictionalized, as with the Smoke River reserve, or of the real world, as with Lethbridge, Alberta—is an active element. However, a narrative like LaPensée's "They Come for Water" also deals with the extraction of water in a way that echoes a larger scope of concerns than those in one place.

Again, though LaPensée, like Storm, engages with Anishinaabe culture, "They Come for Water" is not place-specific: only one potential reference is made when, in three panels, the phrase "MINO BIMAADIZIWIN HEALTH CENTER" is presented as part of the illustration (49, 51, 53). But this phrase is not directly related to a locale or even region; it is simply a term that "means to 'live the good life'" (Fiddler), and is therefore applicable for a larger context that could encompass Turtle Island, the planet, and even off-Earth places like Mars, which features as a dubious water-extraction source in the story. As Dillon explains in her foreword to *Moonshot*

Volume 3, "[i]n 'They Come for Water', dystopic imagery hits one as no new technology in this future has innovatively provided for the challenge of healing our waters globally" (7). The basic human rights of all people are caught up in the future availability of resources, but this needs to include the impacts to those living in resource-rich areas. Gillian Steward argues that

> [t]he most direct and long-term effects of carving up the land, withdrawing immense amounts of water from rivers, discharging air- and water-borne waste, and the influx of thousands of construction workers—all part of the furious pace of oilsands development—have fallen on aboriginal people and the once-remote places that have been their homes for generations.

We have seen disturbing social responses to changes in climate with the creation of social disparity, civil disputes, and mass dispersal of populations from affected areas; the summers of 2017, 2018, and 2019, for instance, saw emergency evacuation orders from wildfires in British Columbia, Alberta, and down into the United States, as well as for hurricane-impacted and flooding areas such as Texas. Candis Callison intervenes here with an apt reading of the real-world situation for Indigenous peoples:

> Indigenous experiences with climate change have become increasingly visible in media, climate research, activism, and policy negotiations. Many Indigenous people live outside major urban centers and are deeply and disproportionately impacted by a broad range of climate-related changes, from shifting conditions for marine and land-based subsistence food gathering to sea level rise and coastal erosion. Global and national English-speaking media have paid limited bursts of attention to indigenous experiences at particular junctures when novelty or conflict narratives are deemed timely. Examples include the potential of climate refugees due to sea level rise in the South Pacific or catastrophic damage to Arctic villages due to climate disruption.
>
> *(2)*

Questions about human rights and diverse cultural concerns are troubled in all future scenarios, as growing populations require food, energy, and water resources.

LaPensée's story is, in many ways, an imagined future outcome to the failure of modern human society and its continued resource extractive nature in listening to Indigenous-led activists such as the Water Protectors and their allies. In her foreword to *Moonshot*, Dillon comments that "[a]s the imagery of the process of extraction becomes clearer, this sequence also reminds us of the Tar Sands, Standing Rock and so many other moments of destroying aki and bodies of water" (7).[8] Though "They Come for Water" is about the extraction of water, and not that of fossil fuels, the larger conversation about water as a vital resource that should neither be wasted nor polluted is encapsulated in the immediate results of the Presidential Executive Order that opened the Dakota Access pipeline, where it then "leaked at least five times in 2017" (Brown). The lessons of Standing Rock are stark, and poignant: the colonial, settler-invader nation-state and its multitudinous, bureaucratic branchings of governance provide the possibility for violence against Indigenous peoples in the name of expediting current systems of energy resources.

One potential outcome for these failures is vividly captured in "They Come for Water", where for those whose greed is for resource consumption, such greed becomes their downfall. While "reservations [are] banned from access" (49) to water extracted from Mars, those elsewhere, "already consumed by insatiable greed" (50)—and especially those representative of

hyper-capitalistic drives (50)—have their tendencies exacerbated by "those who eat the eating ones" (48), which are "the spirits from the red planet" (49). Contrasting this essential vampirization of both corporate and individualistic, insatiable hunger for consuming all for personal pleasure and gain, in discussing the #NODAPL protests and other activism, Shelley Streeby argues that the message offered through every act of Indigenous resistance works to incorporate a more integrated relationship between society and environment—a message also offered in "They Come for Water", with how the actions of the "water walkers" (52) result in a "thriving" community inhabiting a post-consumption society by the very last panel of the story (54). In the real world, the very near-future permutations of current real-world issues emerge, and water shapes the cultural and survival landscapes of local and regional communities. This galvanizing issue showcases both the cultural impacts upon and the absences of the Indigenous peoples at many vital discussions in the modern day[9]—peoples for whom the trauma of experiences post-Contact has been continual, multigenerational, and quite often about lived environments. An ecocritical futurism story like "They Come for Water" suggests that the solution is culture and community, no matter the landscape, setting, or environmental disruptions perpetuated by an increasingly insatiable modern world.

## Ecocritical Futurisms and Science in the Indigenous SF Anthology

In fiction both in and beyond sf, as well as in the real world, Indigenous cultural relationships with the landscape present numerous examples where the practice of living in harmony with the environment has been passed down between generations as communal knowledge for as long as a given people can remember. Creative representations of this process are notable throughout short story anthologizations of speculative narratives about the future. For instance, Dogrib (Tłı̨chǫ) writer Richard Van Camp's expanding "Wheetago War" narrative offers an ecological Indigenous horror scenario where environmental mutations erupt with the awakening of ancient powers that skew a sense of place, home, flora, and fauna and extend from abnormal emergences in the present day into a full-blown dystopian future. The "Wheetago War" texts at the very least include "Mermaids" from *Angel Wing Splash Pattern* (2002); "On the Wings of This Prayer" and "The Fleshing" from *Godless but Loyal to Heaven* (2013); "Wheetago War", "I Double Dogrib Dare You", and "Crow" from *Night Moves* (2015); "Lying in Bed Together" from *Cli-Fi: Canadian Tales of Climate Change* (2017); and the "Wheetago War" stories from *Moccasin Square Gardens* (2019). Clearly, Van Camp's main mode of delivery for this ongoing narrative has been the short story anthology, which is highly relevant in the case of something like "Wings" and "Fleshing", connected stories that appear in *Godless* and present back-to-back textual considerations of how the particular regional place of the traditional Dogrib lands and the landscape of the North in what we now call Canada have been altered both environmentally and socially, with the former set in the far future and the latter in the relative present.[10]

But anthologizations of Indigenous sf short narratives present a growing recent body of work and thus an increasing variety of approaches to how stories about the future are handled. While *Moonshot* Volume 3 is one of the latest anthologies focused on Indigenous futurisms, Dillon's *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012) is the first fully Indigenous sf anthology, though editors Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan's *So Long, Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2004) anthology is a strong earlier example that includes some Indigenous authors, as is Dillon's *Hive of Dreams: Contemporary Science Fiction from the Pacific Northwest* (2003). In 2016, two other Indigenous sf anthologies were also published: editor Neal McLeod's *mitêwâcimowina: Indigenous Science Fiction and Speculative Storytelling*, and editor Hope Nicholson's *Love Beyond Body, Space, and Time: An*

*Indigenous LGBT Sci-Fi Anthology.* Nicholson also edited the *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection*, Volumes 1 (2015) and 2 (2020), which were followed by Volume 3. More recently, in 2020, editor Joshua Whitehead (Oji-Cree/Peguis) issued *Love after the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction.*

In many ways, the ecocritical futurism narratives in these anthologies are still about community and its role in overcoming dire environmental circumstances; these narratives underscore the idea that community is, again, not subject to reliance upon living in a specific place or engaging with a specific landscape. A prime example is the *Moonshot* story "Litmus Flowers", by Darcie Little Badger (Lipan Apache), where no locale or region might directly be traced—even through the forest trees (which are both deciduous and coniferous), a rolling hillscape, a stream, or a clearing. The one potentially place-specific marker is a set of bluffs, but this also appears in a scene that is imagined and fantastical: the scene is complete with a unicorn and triceratops who shoot defensive rainbows out of their foreheads as the childhood characters Fresia and Coral play in a bunker (71), and is therefore not proof of a tangible landscape that could still, really, be anywhere on Turtle Island with treed hills and the geological processes that produce bluffs. Rather, the focus of this story is the creation of the titular "litmus flowers" that a grown-up Fresia develops, and the practical fieldwork observations that Coral (also grown up) makes. This is an Indigenous ecocritical futurisms story where applications of traditional knowledge and "science" come into play, as highlighted by the epigraph from Rebecca Roanhorse: "Indigenous Futurisms includes an awareness and embrace of Indigenous science, which is only radical because Western colonial culture discounts our cultures as primitive" (67).

The specter of Euro-Western science is already a common trope in Indigenous literature—and especially Indigenous sf, with examples like King's *The Back of the Turtle*—but recent ecocritical futurisms like those in *Moonshot* Volume 3 approach the discussion through a mode that, again, highlights adaptation. In fact, the impact of modernity as seen through science is one of the aspects driving ecological disruptions in anthologized works like those from *Moonshot*. But, when they are read through the lens of Indigenous ecocritical futurisms, it can be seen that characters like Fresia and Coral often adapt so-called modern technologies to their own aims—even while employing technologies that defy what Euro-Western science understands, like in Roy Bonnie Jr.'s "Xenesi: The Traveler". While I use "Euro-Western science" here instead, the term "Western science" is already widely in use by prominent thinkers, including Grace Dillon (*Walking* 7), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Harris, "Indigenous"), Kyle Powys Whyte (Hatfield et al. 1), George Nicholas, and others (Goodall; Pynn; Gies), who argue that traditional knowledge is scientific in a way not historically understood by colonial or outside observers, and that "western science" is still "catching up" (Nicholas). Gregory A. Cajete's discussion of "high-context" and "low-context" is also invaluable to comparing both systems of knowledge, since "the knowledge that comprises Indigenous science is derived using the same methods as modern Western science" but "perceives and reasons from a" different "relational worldview" (137). In Little Badger's "Litmus Flowers", we see such a convergence highlighted—and not only for the sake of the Indigenous community, but for the overall human one, since "it's a human right to know when you're standing on sick land" (68).

The *Moonshot* stories like "Future World", "H2O", "They Come for Water", and "Litmus Flowers" suggest that the Indigenous ecocritical futurism development in genre is arguably even more applicable to Indigenous perspectives in both a real and a speculative, future-forward sense, since the modern world has, without question, already altered relevant cultural places and spaces from their previous iterations. A Euro-Western prioritization of its own systems and knowledge bases over others in Turtle Island society has also, in many cases, resulted in further ecological problems. This is evident in the hierarchization of non-Indigenous technoscientific

understandings over what Dillon calls "Indigenous scientific literacies", which "represent practices used by Indigenous peoples over thousands of years to reenergize that natural environment while improving the interconnected relationships among all persons (animal, human, spirit, and even machine)" (Introduction, *Walking* 7). Such a hierarchy, which is often employed to enable further resource extraction and enable modes of modern convenience, contrasts how Cajete argues that "the low-context approach of Western science has given rise to a mindset that acts blind to our interrelatedness"—by which Cajete means a "Western" science co-opted by technocapitalism that produces "[p]olicies and patterns of actions … that threaten virtually all species and the biosphere" (138). Cajete also contributes useful definitions of "Indigenous science", including "A body of traditional knowledge unique to a group of people that has served to sustain that People through generations of living within a distinct bioregion" (136). But the lessons in an anthology like *Moonshot* Volume 3 move beyond an adherence to "a distinct bioregion". That is, Indigenous ecocritical futurism challenges the presumption that Euro-Western science performed merely for monetary advancement is the preferable answer to the crises of the time, and reminds us that the Indigenous futurism narratives of "'returning'" to communities resonant with cultural lessons must become prominent if ecological systems are to be renewed.

Looking forward in the real world, future adopted strategies can definitely play an important role not only in the face of things like resource-extractive tendencies and energy futures, but also in mitigating the potential and very real, globally relevant, environmentally apocalyptic set of interconnected issues that are often highlighted for environmental disruptions like climate change and its interconnected co-conspirators, not to mention the continued loss of biosphere integrity[11] that relates to the ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction. Indigenous ecocritical futurisms underline the fact that, really, we must all start to adopt modes of caring for those persons, flora, fauna, and even insects in our shared environment—no matter where we live, specifically, on Turtle Island or more globally. That is, modern society must move toward a re-conception of its relationship with the natural world. We might even learn from the thinking behind Aotearoa New Zealand giving both the Whanganui River (Roy, "River"; Tanasescu) and Mount Taranaki (Roy, "Mount") the same legal rights as human beings. The Indigenous ecocritical futurism narratives in *Moonshot* Volume 3 and elsewhere suggest that we must all be a community, as we are all involved together. Of course, this is one of the major lessons of *Moonshot* and implies a range from close local community, to the larger, continental community, to the planet. We must all become one to survive—and the time is now, not a hundred years in the otherwise dystopian future.

## Notes

1  Dillon coined the Indigenous Futurisms terminology "back in 2003 after Alondra Nelson's wonderful intro and editing of the special edition on Afrofuturism", which she later credits in *Walking the Clouds* (Message).

2  See my article "'Everything Change': Ecocritical Dystopianism and Climate Fiction", which was published as part of Paradoxa's 2019–2020 special issue on *Climate Fictions*, edited by Alison Sperling.

3  See my article "'Changing Landscapes': Ecocritical Dystopianism in Contemporary Indigenous SF Literature", which was published in *Transmotion*'s special issue on Indigeneity and the Anthropocene (II), edited by Martín Premoli and David Carlson.

4  See also Brent Bellamy and Imre Szeman's critique of Weisman's "thought experiment" (193), since the "only reason to think of a world without us is to use the knowledge generated through such a narrative experiment to reimagine a world *with* us" (194).

5  See, for instance, the Stockholm Resilience Centre's "The Nine Planetary Boundaries".

6  Jennifer Storm is from the Couchiching First Nation (Ojibway).

7  Dillon also reminds us about Elizabeth Ammons's work on Ortiz's collection of the same name and environmental justice.

8  Dillon defines "aki" as "the earth" ("Foreword" 7; "aki").

9  For instance, Kimberly R. Marion Suiseeya and Laura Zanotti argue that Indigenous peoples have been occluded from "contributions to global environmental governance" and climate discussions globally.

10 I discuss these changes in my article about Eden Robinson's and Van Camp's dystopias (Scott, "(Indigenous)").

11 "Loss of biosphere integrity" is the new term for "biodiversity loss and extinctions" explained by the Stockholm Resilience Centre while discussing "planetary boundaries" (Steffen et al., "Planetary"; "Nine").

## Works Cited

"aki." *The Ojibwe People's Dictionary*, 2021, https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/aki-ni. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Ammons, Elizabeth. "*Men on the Moon* and the Fight for Environmental Justice." *Simon J. Ortiz: A Poetic Legacy of Indigenous Continuance*, edited by Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez and Evelina Zuni Lucero. U of New Mexico P, 2009, pp. 287–313.

Bellamy, Brent, and Imre Szeman. "Life After People: Science Faction and Ecological Futures." *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, edited by Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson, Wesleyan UP, 2014, pp. 192–205.

"Biography." *Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas*, Yahgulanaas Creative Group, 2019, https://mny.ca/en/biography. Accessed 8 Jun. 2023.

Bonnie, Roy, Jr. "Xenesi: The Traveler." LaPensée and Sheyahshe, *Moonshot*, pp. 98–108.

Brown, Alleen. "Five Spills, Six Months in Operation: Dakota Access Track Record Highlights Unavoidable Reality—Pipelines Leak." *The Intercept*, 9 Jan. 2018, https://theintercept.com/2018/01/09/dakota-access-pipeline-leak-energy-transfer-partners/. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Cajete, Gregory A. *Indigenous Community: Rekindling the Teachings of the Seventh Fire*. Living Justice P, 2015.

Callison, Candis. "Climate Change Communication and Indigenous Publics." *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Climate Science*, Sept. 2017, climatescience.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228620-e-411. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Dillon, Grace L, editor. *Hive of Dreams: Contemporary Science Fiction from the Pacific Northwest*. Oregon State UP, 2003.

———. "Introduction." Simon Ortiz, "Men on the Moon." Dillon, *Walking the Clouds*, U of Arizona P 2012a, pp. 85–87.

———, editor. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2012b.

———. "Indigenous Futurisms, Bimaashi Biidaas Mose, Flying and Walking towards You." *Extrapolation*, vol. 57, no. 1–2, 2016, pp. 1–6.

———. Message to Conrad Scott. *Facebook Messenger*, 3 Oct. 2017, 10:22 a.m., www.facebook.com/messages/t/1993304647362755.

———. "Foreword." LaPensée and Sheyahshe, *Moonshot*, Alternative History Comics, 2019, pp. 4–7.

Dimaline, Cherie. *The Marrow Thieves*. Cormorant, 2017.

Erdrich, Louise. *Future Home of the Living God*. HarperCollins, 2017.

Fiddler, Willow. "First Nation Students in Thunder Bay Learn Meaning of 'mino bimaadiziwin.'" *ATPN National News*, 23 Aug. 2016, https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/first-nation-students-in-thunder-bay-learn-meaning-of-mino-bimaadiziwin/. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Gies, Erica. "Tribes Use Western and Indigenous Science to Prepare for Climate Change." *Hakai Magazine*, 21 Feb. 2019, www.hakaimagazine.com/news/tribes-use-western-and-indigenous-science-to-prepare-for-climate-change. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Goodall, Laura. "Climate Change Scientists Look to Māori and Other Indigenous People for Answers." *Stuff*, 23 Feb. 2019, www.stuff.co.nz/environment/climate-news/110587713/climate-change-scientists-look-to-maori-and-other-indigenous-people-for-answers. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Harris, Malcom. "Indigenous Knowledge Has Been Warning Us About Climate Change for Centuries." *Pacific Standard*, 4 Mar. 2019, psmag.com/ideas/indigenous-knowledge-has-been-warning-us-about-climate-change-for-centuries. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Hatfield, Samantha Chisholm, Elizabeth Marino, Kyle Powys Whyte, Kathie D. Dello, and Philip W. Mote. "Indian Time: Time, Seasonality, and Culture in Traditional Ecological Knowledge of Climate Change." *Ecological Processes*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1–11. Springer, https://doi.org/10.1186/s13717-018-0136-6.

Hopkinson, Nalo, and Uppinder Mehan, editors. *So Long, Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Arsenal Pulp, 2004.

Huggins, William. "Pipelines, Mines, and Dams: Indigenous Literary Water Ecologies and the Fight for a Sustainable Future." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2017, pp. 54–67. https://doi.org/10.1353/crc.2017.0003.

Johnson, Harold. *Corvus*. Thistledown, 2015.

King, Thomas. *The Back of the Turtle*. HarperCollins, 2014.

LaPensée, Elizabeth. "They Come for Water." LaPensée and Sheyahshe, *Moonshot*, Alternative History Comics, 2019, pp. 46–54.

LaPensée, Elizabeth, and Michael Sheyahshe, editors. *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection*. Volume 3, Alternate History Comics, 2019.

Little, Badger Darcie. "Litmus Flowers." LaPensée and Sheyahshe, *Moonshot*, Alternative History Comics, 2019, pp. 67–75.

McLeod, Neal, ed. *mitêwâcimowina: Indigenous Science Fiction and Speculative Storytelling*. Theytus, 2016.

Nicholas, George. "It's Taken Thousands of Years, but Western Science Is Finally Catching Up to Traditional Knowledge." *The Conversation*, 14 Feb. 2018, theconversation.com/its-taken-thousands-of-years-but-western-science-is-finally-catching-up-to-traditional-knowledge-90291. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Nicholson, Hope. *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection*. Volume 1, Alternate History Comics, 2015.

———, editor. *Love Beyond Body, Space, and Time: An Indigenous LGBT Sci-Fi Anthology*. Bedside, 2016.

———. *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection*. Volume 2, Inhabit Education Books, 2020.

Ortiz, Simon J. "Men on the Moon." Dillon, *Walking the Clouds*, U Arizona P 2012, pp. 87–95.

Pynn, Larry. "Clam Digging through 3,500 Years of Indigenous History." *Hakai Magazine*, 27 Feb. 2019, www.hakaimagazine.com/news/clam-digging-through-3500-years-of-indigenous-history/. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Roberts, Gerard and Peta-Gay Roberts. "H2O." LaPensée and Sheyahshe, *Moonshot*, Alternative History Comics, 2019, pp. 55–57.

Roy, Elanor Ainge. "New Zealand Gives Mount Taranaki Same Legal Rights as a Person." *The Guardian*, 22 Dec. 2017a, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/22/new-zealand-gives-mount-taranaki-same-legal-rights-as-a-person. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

———. "New Zealand River Granted Same Legal Rights as Human Being." *The Guardian*, 16 Mar. 2017b, www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/16/new-zealand-river-granted-same-legal-rights-as-human-being. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Scott, Conrad. "(Indigenous) Place and Time as Formal Strategy: Healing Immanent Crisis in the Dystopias of Eden Robinson and Richard Van Camp." *Extrapolation*, vol. 57, no. 1–2, 2016, pp. 73–93.

———. "'Everything Change': Ecocritical Dystopianism and Climate Fiction." *Climate Fictions*, special issue of *Paradoxa*, no. 31, 2019–2020, pp. 403–424.

———. "'Changing Landscapes': Ecocritical Dystopianism in Contemporary Indigenous SF Literature." *Indigeneity and the Anthropocene (II)*, special issue of *Transmotion*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2022, pp. 10–38, https://doi.org/10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.979.

Steffen, Will, et al. "Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet." *Science*, vol. 347, no. 6223, 2015, p. 736.

Steward, Gillian. "First Nations Bear the Risks of Oilsands Development." *The Star*, 2015 Atkinson Series, 28 Aug. 2015, www.thestar.com/news/atkinsonseries/2015/08/28/first-nations-bear-the-risks-of-oilsands-development.html. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Storm, Jennifer. "Future World." LaPensée and Sheyahshe, *Moonshot*, Alternative History Comics, 2019, pp. 10–18.

Streeby, Shelley. *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making Through Science Fiction and Activism*. U of California P, 2018.

Suiseeya, Kimberly, R. Marion, and Laura Zanotti. "Making Influence Visible: Innovating Ethnography at the Paris Climate Summit." *Global Environmental Politics*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2019, pp. 38–60, https://doi.org/10.1162/glep_a_00507.

Tanasescu, Mihnea. "When a River is a Person: From Ecuador to New Zealand, Nature Gets its Day in Court." *The Conversation*, 19 June 2017, theconversation.com/when-a-river-is-a-person-from-ecuador-to-new-zealand-nature-gets-its-day-in-court-79278. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

"The Nine Planetary Boundaries." *Stockholm Resilience Centre*, 2015, www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/planetary-boundaries/about-the-research/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Van Camp, Richard. *Angel Wing Splash Pattern*. 2nd ed., Kegedonce, 2004a.

———. "Mermaids." Van Camp, *Angel Wing*, 2004b, pp. 1–14.

———. *Godless but Loyal to Heaven*. Enfield and Wizenty, 2013.

———. "The Fleshing." Van Camp, *Godless*, 2013c, pp. 18–42.

———. *Night Moves*. Enfield and Wizenty, 2015.

———. "Crow." Van Camp, *Night Moves*, 2015a, pp. 152–153.

———. "I Double Dogrib Dare You." Van Camp, *Night Moves*, 2015b, pp. 44–64.

———. "Lying in Bed Together." *Cli-Fi: Canadian Tales of Climate Change*, edited by Bruce Meyer, Exile, 2017, pp. 231–242.

———. *Moccasin Square Gardens*. Douglas and McIntyre, 2019a.

———. "Wheetago War I: Lying in Bed Together." Van Camp, *Moccasin Square Gardens*, 2019b, pp. 41–53.

———. "Wheetago War II: The Summoners." Van Camp, *Moccasin Square Gardens*, pp. 55–67.

———. "On the Wings of this Prayer." Van Camp, *Godless*, n.d.-a, pp. 9–17.

———. "Wheetago War." Van Camp, *Night Moves*, n.d.-b, pp. 186–193.

Vizenor, Gerald. "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice." *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, edited by Vizenor, U of Nebraska P, 2008, pp. 1–25.

Weisman, Alan. *The World Without Us*. HarperCollins, 2007.

Whitehead, Joshua, editor. *Love after the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*. Arsenal Pulp, 2020.

Yahgulanaas, Michael Nicoll. *Carpe Fin: A Haida Manga*. Douglas and McIntyre, 2019.

# 11

# SPECULATIVE LANDSCAPES OF CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN INDIGENOUS FICTION

*Julia Siepak*

This chapter addresses the representations of apocalyptic and postapocalyptic landscapes in three recent Canadian and American Indigenous novels written in English: Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), and Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018). While the selected narratives propose different visions of the future and are situated within different geographical and cultural contexts, all of them depict the decline of settler colonial states and various aspects of Indigenous collective mobilization in the face of a crisis. In these novels, altering ecologies and geographies induced by anthropogenic climate change function as challenges to the survival of the represented Indigenous communities, while at the same time offering a decolonial potential.

The three writers, who have diverse experience with speculative writing, frame their novels within the confines of speculative fiction to address the entanglements of an Indigenous past, present, and future under settler colonial domination. The acclaimed and prolific American writer of Anishinaabe descent, Louise Erdrich, for the first time confronts the category of speculative fiction in her *Future Home of the Living God*, which undeniably stands out from the rest of her literary output. Cherie Dimaline, a Canadian writer from the Georgian Bay Métis community, works predominantly within the categories of science and speculative fiction. Her novel *The Marrow Thieves*, young-adult speculative fiction, achieved great success in Canada. Waubgeshig Rice, in turn, is a First Nations writer and journalist from the Wasauksing First Nation. As in the case of Erdrich, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* is his first speculative novel.

I propose the term "speculative landscapes" to describe the spatial poetics of Indigenous futurism. This poetics transforms North American geographies and contests colonial normative mappings. Writers imagine alternative spaces that are open for speculation and based on reciprocity between the human and the nonhuman. Such representations challenge the colonial idea of land as stable and inactive, as well as depart from the dominant understanding of space as based on the categories of ownership and resource extraction. At the same time, I approach speculative landscapes as not solely contesting settler mappings, but also remapping geographies of Indigenous bodies that, like land, have been sites of colonial commodification and conquest. Speculative landscapes allow for a reimagining of the future, projecting the potentialities of Indigenous peoples and ecosystems to flourish despite their settler colonial past and the lurking calamities of the Anthropocene.

The rising popularity of speculative fiction coincides with the Anthropocene and emerges as an important trend in contemporary North American Indigenous literature. However, scholars such as Rosalyn Weaver, Grace Dillon, and Danika Medak-Saltzman point out that speculative fictions share an attachment to the historical preeminence of whiteness and to troublesome representations of people of color. Weaver argues that "[s]peculative texts not only regularly focus on a white future, but also often privilege that scenario over a non-white or multicultural past, in a practice that echoes colonial processes" (100). Hence, the genre, rather than subverting the settler colonial order, typically mimics racialized hierarchies.

Indigenous authors transform speculative fictions, inscribing future potentialities of Indigenous peoples into literary landscapes that used to deny their presence. Dillon coins the term *Indigenous futurisms* to describe the wave of Native writing that reimagines these literary categories (3). She recognizes Indigenous attraction to the apocalypse, referring to their experience of colonization that proved to be "the Native Apocalypse" (8) and evoking the notion of postapocalyptic stress syndrome to emphasize the traumatic character of the colonial apocalypse: "Native apocalyptic storytelling, then, shows the ruptures, the scars, and the trauma in its effort ultimately to provide healing and the return to bimaadiziwin [the state of balance]. This is a path to a sovereignty embedded in self-determination" (9). Thus, Indigenous apocalyptic narratives, rather than stressing the dystopian end, provide space for decolonial projections. On the same note, Medac-Saltzman observes that even though Indigenous futurisms engage in dystopian considerations, so eminent in recent mainstream speculative fiction, they also commit to:

> imagining, creating, and manifesting a variety of possibilities that better represent [their] understandings of, [their] place in, and [their] responsibilities to this world and to those yet to come. This is to say that Indigenous futurist works do not simply "include" Native people as part of the narrative; rather, they are generated by and inspirational *for* Native peoples.
>
> *(143, emphasis in original)*

Therefore, in their representations of apocalyptic futures, Indigenous writers engage in the mediation of ethics for better Native futures.

The experience of colonialism shapes Indigenous responses to the future marked by anthropogenic climate change. Reiterating Dillon's assertion of colonialism as the Native apocalypse, a Potawatomi scholar, Kyle P. Whyte, observes that contemporary Indigenous people live in "today's dystopia of [their] ancestors" ("Our Ancestors" 207). Under settler colonialism, the forced removals of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories and the damage wrought upon its ecosystems alienated Native peoples in North America from their traditional lifestyles. However, this dystopian estrangement provokes a different response to the Anthropocene than the dominant settler vision of the apocalypse. Whyte explains that Indigenous people "do not always approach the climate crisis as an impending future to be dreaded" ("Indigenous Science" 227). The process of adaptation to the altered realities that follow the colonial apocalypse teaches Indigenous peoples how to respond to an ongoing crisis: "if there is something different in the Anthropocene for [I]ndigenous peoples, it would be just that we are focusing our energies *also* on adapting to another kind of anthropogenic environmental change: climate destabilization" (Whyte, "Our Ancestors" 208, emphasis in original). This way of tackling the Anthropocene stresses the reciprocity existing between people and the land, as well as the indispensability of learning from it. Land is understood as more than territory—a web of complex interrelations that ensure survival. Whyte's theory, therefore, illustrates the entanglement of ecologies and geographies in Indigenous responses to the Anthropocene.

## Ecological Grief and the Spatial Poetics of Hope in *Future Home of the Living God*

Erdrich's speculative novel depicts a world dominated by an extremist religious order that oppresses women, stripping them of dignity and exploiting them for the purposes of reproduction. In her politically charged dystopian vision of the future, Erdrich represents anthropogenic climate change as the driving force for social unrest. The unpredictable changes traceable in both the surrounding environment and human genetics generate a strong sense of tension in relation to the survival of humanity in the face of the climate crisis. The ever-changing situation prompts widespread uncertainty and speculation that fuel social anxieties. Erdrich gives voice to Cedar Hawk Songmaker, a pregnant woman of Indigenous descent, who narrates the crisis in a journal dedicated to her yet-unborn child.

The social and environmental transformation leads to the demise of the United States as a federal state, allowing religious fanatics to fulfill their fantasies of the apocalypse. The Church of the New Constitution establishes the new order by changing street names to biblical verses, a procedure paralleling the processes of colonization in North America. Through new cartographic impositions, the new order frames its projected ownership over the territory with the intent to legitimize their control over it. As the sacred eclipses the secular, the boundary between the public and the private is also transgressed. Citizens live under the constant surveillance of state agencies that utilize the technology present in peoples' houses to spy on them. Hence, the home loses its status of a private and safe space, becoming as scrutinized and precarious as the outside. The religious state invades domestic spaces both remotely and physically, strengthening the sense of fear and precarity, especially in the population's women of color, who are the regime's principal target. The new spatial politics, therefore, alienates people from familiar topographies. Cedar observes the uncanny metamorphosis of space when looking at "the muted perfection of a 'before' disaster photograph" (63). Her hometown of Minneapolis becomes an estranged space for Cedar. Erdrich thus constructs a truly dystopian vision of the cityscape that is alienating for its residents.

Erdrich reinforces this unsettling transformation of the familiar urban space by imagining a growing network of "gravid female detention" institutions (74). The state authorities go as far as to empty the prisons to convert them into detention institutions for pregnant women: "[a]ll of the prisoners in the country have disappeared. Most people say they have been euthanized. Or freed … The prisons are for women" (85). The gravid detention institutions become sites of physical and psychological torture, filled with the suffering of forcibly impregnated women. Stripped of their identities, women are merely objects for the system that imprisons them and treats them as incubators in the name of human survival—their bodies appropriated, lives insignificant, and deaths ungrievable. Subsequently, women's bodies become sites of oppression and exploitation, territories colonized by a new religious imperialism. Again, Erdrich's dystopian vision parallels colonial exploitation in its commodification of Indigenous women's bodies and their virtual erasure from the social landscape. As Mishuana Goeman stresses, this colonial desire "is not just about conquering Native lands through mapping new ownerships, but it is also about the conquest of bodies, particularly women's bodies through sexual violence, and about recreating gendered relationships" (33). By escalating the precarious condition of Indigenous women in North America marked by ubiquitous violence, the novel comments on the commensurability of heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism. In the world conceived by Erdrich, gendered violence against Indigenous women is amplified and mapped out as a strategy of dispossession.

The future in the novel emerges as distant, intangible, and uncertain; paradoxically, it provokes a sense of nostalgia in Cedar. She expresses this shift in the object of collective nostalgia:

"I feel that, instead of the past, it is the future that haunts us now" (63). Erdrich delineates a longing for the irrecoverable past resulting from both social and environmental changes. In this respect, the novel addresses the overwhelming feeling of loss in the age of the Anthropocene linked to the altering social and environmental landscapes. The loss of winter, "a ghost season" (110), being one of the consequences of progressing global warming, functions as a prelude to the long chain of loss that is yet to come. Cedar recounts a moving memory of the last snowy winter in Minneapolis, remembering how she "was there the last time it snowed in heaven" (266–267). The winter imagery of snow seasonally blanketing all the surrounding land and cityscape is saturated with positive emotions. An overwhelming sense of grief emerges when Cedar mourns the Earth that will never again be her "cold heaven" (266). Erdrich engages in what Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis conceptualize as *ecological grief*, namely, "the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change" (275). Silvia Martínez-Falquina, in turn, addresses the future-oriented character of this kind of grief, describing the novel as "a literary ritual of proleptic mourning" (165), which stresses the anticipatory way of experiencing the world undergoing climate change. Even though the ecological grief permeating the novel intensifies its dystopian character, it might also be approached as a call to action, "aimed at making us react before ecological disaster becomes inevitable" (Martínez-Falquina 165). Imagining the world from a broader perspective of what is yet unknown, the novel intervenes in the reader's imagination to encourage reflection on their own position in the broader scheme of environmental future.

Despite the profoundly dystopian character of the world depicted by Erdrich, a sense of hope humbly sneaks into the novel. As the urban space becomes more and more defamiliarized because of the regime's intervention in the landscape, species of fauna and flora begin to over-run the cityscape:

> I see the birds that come to feed on the purple fruit of two large mulberry trees. … Maybe next year, if there is one, I can dry the berries out. Maybe I can gather them at night. I see squirrels flow up and down the oak tree that might provide … an emergency source of food in the fall if I can figure out what to do with the acorns. … Occasionally, a deer wanders in. I see rabbits, chipmunks, several varieties of woodpecker, neighborhood cats, finches, robins, nuthatches, sparrow, ravens, crows, and my favorite bird, the chickadee. … I've seen a fox, rats, ducks, and a wild turkey. I suppose that I see more animals than my neighbors.
>
> *(Erdrich 91)*

Nature flourishes in spite of the Anthropocene, repopulating the deserted concrete city. The image of nature taking over human-made spaces and infrastructure suggests that the environment, however changed, will continue to exist on Earth. This thriving puts into perspective the human position on the planet, suggesting we are equally as vulnerable to the consequences of anthropogenic climate change as other species on the planet, if not more so.

Interestingly, in the passage quoted earlier, Cedar considers the need to adjust her lifestyle to a hunter-gatherer model to survive. The climate catastrophe makes capitalism an obsolete and unsustainable system. The reference to gathering berries and acorns as well as to hunting squirrels symbolically evokes the precolonial Indigenous ways of living on the land. As recognized by Eddy, Cedar's Indigenous stepfather, Native people in North America, taught by the experience of colonization, will easily adapt to the new environment: "Indians have been adapting since before 1492 so I guess we'll keep adapting" (Erdrich 28). This assumption resonates

with Whyte's theoretical stance that stresses Indigenous peoples' adaptation to new ecosystems. Moreover, social unrest in the dystopian settler America depicted by Erdrich provides an opportunity in the novel for Indigenous people to mobilize in order to regain their ancestral territories. They organize a militia, "a pack of elite soldiers" (227), that openly fights for decolonization by reclaiming ancestral territories: "we seized the National Guard arsenal up at Camp Ripley, which is on our original treaty grounds. Ours" (Erdrich 227). Even though the novel refrains from arriving at a definite conclusion as to the result of this struggle, Erdrich creates the potentiality for such an event to happen, promoting futurity and restoration. The birth of Cedar's son on Christmas Day further strengthens this sense of hope because it symbolically connects him to the figure of Jesus. This irreverent appropriation of the fundamentalists' religion appears an important tactic that challenges the dystopian status quo and Christianity as a tool of colonization. Fittingly, the boy emerges as the eponymous *Living God*, his *Future Home* being the postapocalyptic world that is yet to come (Siepak 68), ascertaining the futurity of both life on Earth and Indigenous survival.

## Sites of Extraction in *The Marrow Thieves*

Dimaline, in *The Marrow Thieves*, also projects a vision of the future shaped by the effects of climate change. While Earth undergoes a climate apocalypse, settler Canada is troubled by the epidemic of dreamlessness. As the epidemic spreads, First Nations communities become the physical target of mainstream society, since the Indigenous retain their ability to dream. This peculiar capacity of Indigenous people, as opposed to the rest of settler Canada, provides a direct critique of settler reliance on capitalistic extraction and consumption that become unsustainable at the time of crisis. At the same time, First Nations' traditional ways and stories grant them immunity to the epidemic of dreamlessness, elevating Indigenous ethics to the remedy that permits survival. The novel concerns the northward journey of a Métis boy named Frenchie and his "adopted" Indigenous patchwork family, who search for survival in the boreal forests of Ontario. Both climate change and the oppressive system necessitate the journey.

As an Elder and a storyteller figure in the family, Miig narrates *Story*—virtually a history of the Anishinaabe people and their land from time immemorial (precolonial), through the horrors of colonization and the present-day process of reconciliation, to the environmental apocalypse and its aftermath. Miig recounts the water crisis, manifesting itself in the pollution of the Great Lakes and oceans, the flooding of California, and the melting glaciers in the Arctic, which leads to armed conflict. Extreme weather conditions devastate the planet, permanently intervening in its cartography. Unmistakably, *The Marrow Thieves* generates a dystopian vision of the future, where "the past" for Miig's world is an extrapolation of already-existing climate threats related to water today (pollution, melting, and flooding). These events seem entirely plausible when thinking about the contemporary condition of the environment and advancing climate change. Moreover, in portraying climate refugees, Dimaline speculates on a future reality that is already in the process of being enacted. Employing the poetics of Indigenous oral storytelling that has the ability to interweave diverse timescapes, the novel sketches the mechanisms of a slow "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). By including the oral story of the environmental catastrophe, Dimaline succeeds in depicting the slow violence of the Anthropocene and colonial complicity in it.

Miig approaches the dystopian weather events as the Earth's rebellion against the violent extractivism characteristic of colonialism and capitalism. He declares: "The Earth was broken. Too much taking for too damn long, so she finally broke … So much laid to waste from the

miscalculation of infallibility in the face of a planet's revolt" (Dimaline 87). As a result, Earth and nature are personified and given agency. The nonhuman rebellion against the human domination of the planet counters the essential premise of the Anthropocene, namely that humanity becomes the force for environmental and geological change, while the nonhuman remains inanimate and inactive. Nature emerges as an active, transformative force, loaded with affect. This representation radically destabilizes the divide between the human and the nonhuman and emphasizes the entanglements between them. Such an understanding of environmental agency resonates with Indigenous perspectives that stress the ethics of responsibility and reciprocity of humans and nature that are kin.

Dimaline furthers her critique of extractivism through the settlers' desire to extract dreams from the bone marrow of Indigenous bodies. This deadly theft also enhances her colonial critique because white people implant this stolen marrow into their own bodies to cure the epidemic of dreamlessness. An Indigenous body becomes a site of appropriation and extraction for the purposes of the settler colonial future: "people being served up like a club sandwich to the dreamless" (145). Consequently, personal geographies parallel the territorial cartographies of extraction. Settler Canada desires to control dreams as any other available resource, "looking for ways they could take what we [Indigenous people] had and administer it themselves" (88). In this light, Indigenous people become an element of the environment meant to be "harvested" (143). Dimaline parallels settler exploitation of Indigenous bodies and the environment to demonstrate that settler colonial nation-states invariably depend on the mechanisms of extraction that convert certain bodies and entities into disposable resources to be sacrificed for the sake of settlers' futurity.

For the purposes of extraction, the Government of Canada's Department of Oneirology reproduces the mechanisms of colonization, introducing a network of institutions named satellite schools that mimic the former residential schools (Dimaline 4). The settler colonial system once again threatens the spirituality that Indigenous ancestors preserved in spite of the residential school experience and the policies of assimilation. In these institutions, Indigenous people function as commodities. After the torturous marrow extraction procedure, the liquid substance gets bottled in glass tubes labeled with identification numbers, age and sex of the donor, and their origin, for example, "67541B, 23-year-old male, Odawa-Miqmaq" (144). Indigenous people are thus stripped of their identities and dignity, reduced to mere numbers. Dimaline points to a new genocidal topography by calling the institutions "death camps" (81). The parallels to other holocausts feel overwhelming at this moment because of the conceivability.

The glass tubes containing extracted marrow, kept in highly technologized spaces, clearly represent confinement, estrangement, and extermination. With this thought in mind, Miig decides to free the marrow he repossesses through ambush into one of the few lakes that remain unpolluted: "I drove to the lake, one of the last ones I knew still held fish. … I sang each of them home when I poured them out. It rained, a real good one, too. So I knew they made it back" (145). This process of returning human particles to the environment serves as a gesture of protest that re-humanizes the biological material which constitutes the only remains of the Indigenous persons exploited and deprived of existence in the satellite schools. Miig conducts a funerary ceremony, singing and pouring the marrow into the lake. The waterscape that becomes the home for Indigenous marrow and dreams materializes as a site of resistance to the settler institutional spaces. Water and all the nonhuman creatures that inhabit it intermingle with the human matter, transgressing the boundaries between human and nonhuman, once again stressing the reciprocity connecting all beings. Such a union of particles of Indigenous bodies with the nonhuman fuses them in their precarity and creates a geography of resistance and potentiality to mediate resurgence.

Moreover, the traditions, stories, and languages preserved across generations, despite forced assimilation in residential schools, become crucial in the struggle for decolonization. The songs of Minerva, the eldest member of Frenchie's new family, shatter the machinery at the satellite school and thereby prevent extraction. The elder's traditional knowledge and ability to speak, sing, and dream in Anishinaabemowin, perceived by the school officials as a sign of mental illness, manifest as a power that disrupts the oppressive system of settler extraction. The dreams and stories symbolically fossilized in her Indigenous bones bear a potential for resurgence. In "Reclaiming Fossil Ghosts", Moritz Ingwersen observes that "Dimaline ambivalently invokes fossils as a metonymy of both Indigenous erasure and resurgence. … Indigenous bones are envisioned as reservoirs of a material-semiotic life-force or energy that, if properly channelled, can also be wielded as a decolonial weapon" (7). Minerva's act of resistance reshapes the landscape:

> The school had been imposing: a fallacy of glass and steel against the dusty expanse of the north shore clearing, like a middle finger thrown into the sky, built in record time. Now it was nothing more than one storey, maybe two, of jagged edges, melted poles, and broken cement. A spew of office chairs, smashed computer parts, and chewed-up bricks lay on the ground around it.
>
> *(173)*

This emblematic transformation of a site of systemic oppression into a ruin opposes settler spatial domination, symbolically liberating the Indigenous land. The resistance of an individual imperils the whole system, which kindles hope that the topography of dystopia might be transformed into a site of Indigenous futurity.

The cave in *The Marrow Thieves*, transformed by the council into an Indigenous refuge, most clearly counters the dystopian message of Dimaline's novel. In this quasi-utopian space, children participate in Indigenous language classes led by the few remaining Elders and the community cultivates medicinal plants. They build a sweat lodge to serve as the community's ceremonial center, wherein they also engage in traditional song and dance. These accomplishments fuel the aspirations of the patchwork community, creating the desire to return to their homelands, regain stewardship over them, and sustainably manage them. They identify healing of ancestral land with bringing reconciliation to the people. Thus, Dimaline represents an ecology connecting the well-being of the environment with that of the community. The novel proposes an ethical approach to place that respects the nuanced entanglements between the human and the nonhuman. Indigenous aspirations to steward ancestral lands contest the apocalyptic landscapes of the Anthropocene. The projected reciprocal care for the environment results in a resurgence of ecosystems, which transgresses settler conceptualizations of land as a mere resource, putting forward a vision of decolonial futurity.

## The Energy Industry, Infrastructure, and Apocalypse in *Moon of the Crusted Snow*

Rice locates his dystopian plot on a small Anishinaabe reserve in northern Ontario, where despite the slowly advancing infrastructure, the community still retains the cyclical way of living on the land. A long and harsh winter constitutes the central element both in the novel's structure and in the characters' lifestyles since their activities throughout other seasons of the year serve as a preparation to survive through the wintertime. Therefore, the novel's title emphasizes the importance of the land in the lives of the characters, thinking back to the Anishinaabeg term

"Onaabenii Giizis", which translates into English as "the moon of the crusted snow", defining "the peak of winter when weather was so cold the snow simply froze over" (Rice 152). This extremely harsh winter environment necessitates effective planning in terms of energy and food supplies, as well as collective collaboration to secure the community's survival. In the novel, the onset of winter coincides with the apocalyptic energy crisis that destabilizes the Canadian infrastructure, leading to riots. While the cities cannot control the situation, the far North Anishinaabe community becomes a potential place of refuge for settlers escaping the South. The novel recounts the Indigenous protagonist Evan Whitesky's struggle for the survival of his family and community in the face of the crisis.

Evan, despite his relatively young age, aspires to live according to traditional Anishinaabe ways, which emphasize community values and reciprocity with the environment. However, he does not despise the infrastructure of roads, hockey rinks, and the Internet, thinking that they can provide better futures for the children on the reserve. Electricity and modern technologies prove to be relatively new infrastructure brought to the community by the energy industry that built a hydro dam near their home. The infrastructure left behind not only transforms the space but also fundamentally impacts the lifestyle on the reserve. The temporary camps built for the hydro workers turn into a permanent settlement for poor Indigenous community members who waste nothing. As Rice states, "It was temporary housing for southerners but, like so much on the rez, it stayed up and got used" (33). This impromptu conversion of the temporary into the permanent fits with Billy-Ray Belcourt's description of the reserve as a geography of misery, which speaks to "the cramped conditions under which life is haphazardly improvised" (2). From this perspective, the energy industry's spatial intervention on the reserve brings a deceptive impression of introducing modernity and progress but, in the long run, does not cause any real change in the living conditions of the First Nations community.

Evan's hope in the infrastructure's potential to improve the living conditions on the reserve reflects the dominant approach towards the energy industry as promoting progress. In his analysis of the novel, Reuben Martens argues that for the disadvantaged colonized subjects "the promise of infrastructure can be *aspirational* and has often less to do with the promise of (clean) energy than with the social change that the introduction of infrastructure can facilitate" (195, emphasis in original). Therefore, the energy industry and the infrastructure it grants surface as facilities that offer opportunities to transgress the geography of misery on the reserve, leading to a more promising future. Even though the community approaches new infrastructure with a dose of skepticism, the failure of all the settler technology on the reserve provokes a feeling of unease. Martens further argues that "[i]n the absence of energy supplies, the youngest generations struggle to survive while suffering from petromelancholia" (197). Namely, the feeling of loss and grief generated by the diminishing fossil fuel resources undermines the idea of the abundance of resources as well as energy security. Notwithstanding the limited dependence of the community on new technologies, the sudden shortage of power leads to anxiety. Evan calls into doubt the community's reliance on the power grid by stating: "I guess we're getting too used to hydro" (31). This statement contradicts the belief in the correlation between Western infrastructure and the well-being of the community.

Rice depicts the tensions caused by petromelancholia in his characters' dreams. Since dream visions are legitimate ways of knowing in Indigenous worldviews, their incorporation into the novel signals that the events that unfold on the reserve are of critical importance for the further livelihood of the community. Evan's father, Dan, recounts the dream vision he experiences, which worries the protagonist, as his father is not a good storyteller and hardly ever shares his dreams with others (25). Dan's dream conjures up a vision of a cold spring and the landscape brimming with fire (26). The fire permeating the imagery of Dan's dream expresses the

desperation of the community experiencing extreme hunger because of the prolonged winter. People set fires to drive moose out of their shelters so as to obtain food, representing a breach of traditional Indigenous ethics, which forbids hunting animals out of season, when they are weak and struggling for survival. This hunting scene early in the novel, where the members of the community violate Anishinaabe rules out of desperation, foreshadows the challenge that the crisis poses to the traditional Indigenous concept of a good life.

Rice resurrects in the novel the wiindigo figure characteristic of traditional Indigenous storytelling to reflect on ethical choices in the time of the apocalypse. When more and more people fall victim to the harsh weather, the Council decides to transform a shed into a temporary mortuary—an "industrial tomb" (194). The wave of loss as well as the increasing food insecurity cause some of the community members to follow a white man, Scott, who promises access to an alternative source of sustenance. The settler newcomer that attracts followers engages in cannibalism of the bodies temporally placed in the morgue. In Native stories, the figure of a wiindigo/wittigo represents a human transformation into a cannibalistic monster resulting from an act of violating community values. Methot argues that:

> the wittigo represented the balance between the individual and the collective and illustrated the dangers of selfishness and over-consumption. … As a symbol, the wittigo represents core ideas within Indigenous belief systems, illustrating what happens when individuals turn away from the values of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relationships that are central to Indigenous cultures.
>
> *(272)*

Scott and his followers transform into wiindigo figures, for their selfish actions transgress community values and introduce imbalance. Importantly, the wiindigo "has also been widely used as a metaphor for the violence of imperialism and the sickness at the heart of the modern capitalist world" (Sugars 79). Rice reiterates this strategy as cannibalism is initiated on the reserve by a white settler; his Indigenous followers experience the wiindigo psychosis as they reject traditional ethics. The novel warns against the temptation of settler individualism and locates surviving the apocalypse in collectivism.

Despite the dystopian vision of the future, Rice's novel offers a glimmer of hope linked to the prospective survival of the community. Aileen, Evan's go-to Elder, explains that the word apocalypse does not function in their original language:

> apocalypse! What a silly word. I can tell you there's no word like that in Ojibwe. Well, I never heard a word like that from my elders anyway. … Our world isn't ending. It already ended.
>
> *(149)*

Aileen celebrates the adaptability of Indigenous people and its roots in traditional environmental knowledge. The experience of colonization influences her interpretation of the events. As Whyte writes, "Indigenous persons see [their] current situation as already having been through a crisis that is ongoing" ("Indigenous Science" 227). Aileen does not approach the crisis as a final apocalypse but as another obstacle that her people will survive. Indeed, Evan and his family are forced to migrate again in search of survival "to begin this new life nestled deep in the heart of Anishinaabe territory" (Rice 213), which suggests a positive ending. Settling on Anishinaabe territory provides a sense of homecoming, a reclamation of the land that restores First Nations' people to their ancestral territories.

## Speculative Landscapes and Indigenous Futurities

In constructing Indigenous futurisms, the three novels under consideration reconceptualize speculative fiction in the time of the Anthropocene. Erdrich, in *Future Home of the Living God*, envisions a truly dystopian landscape that interweaves estranged urban topography, policies of conquest and commodification of women's bodies, and a sense of grief towards the future loss. Yet, she chooses to project Indigenous resurgence at the center of her novel by sketching a speculative landscape that contests colonial impositions, both conceptual and physical. In *The Marrow Thieves*, Dimaline critiques settler colonial extractivism, highlighting parallels between the land and Indigenous bodies as sites of extraction. Reviving the institutional framework similar to that of residential schools and its subsequent disruption through Indigenous language and tradition, the novel transforms the cartographies of dystopia into spaces of revitalization and resurgence. *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, in turn, applies the wiindigo figure to address Indigenous ethics in the times of the Anthropocene. Challenging settler colonial discourse of progress connected to the energy industry, Rice imagines Indigenous survival as depending on Native reclamation of land. While the writers adopt certain well-established strategies, they also undermine speculative conventions, intricately weaving into their narratives Indigenous stories, worldviews, knowledges, and decolonial aspirations. Exploring important contemporary social issues, the selected fiction provides a powerful critique of settler colonialism, demonstrating that the commodification and exploitation of Indigenous bodies proves to be the essential element of the colonial enterprise.

Erdrich, Dimaline, and Rice address the limits of dystopian future, offering an ethical response to both the social crises and the environmental catastrophe built on the premises of community and reciprocity. In so doing, the speculative landscapes of contemporary North American Indigenous fiction present a web of relationships that, if upheld, projects a postapocalyptic Indigenous future. Just as land bears the potential for regeneration, Indigenous bodies display a capacity for renewal. This conviction regarding the desire to accommodate future realities for the survival of Indigenous communities and the environment, as well as their potential to thrive, connects the three novels as they inscribe Indigenous futures and dismantle settler colonialism. Enacting speculative landscapes that revise settler spatial impositions, Indigenous futurisms create space to mediate decolonial poetics and to better Native futures.

## Acknowledgment

## Works Cited

Belcourt, Billy-Ray. "Meditations on Reserve Life, Biosociality, and the Taste of Non-Sovereignty." *Settler Colonial Studies* vol. 8, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–15.

Cunsolo, Ashlee, and Neville R. Ellis. "Ecological Grief as a Mental Health Response to Climate Change-Related Loss." *Nature Climate Change*, vol. 8, 2018, pp. 275–281.

Dillon, Grace L., editor. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. U of Arizona P, 2012.

Dimaline, Cherie. *The Marrow Thieves*. Cormorant Books, 2017.

Erdrich, Louise. *Future Home of the Living God*. HarperCollins, 2017.

Goeman, Mishuana. *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*. U of Minnesota P, 2013.

Ingwersen, Moritz. "Reclaiming Fossil Ghosts: Indigenous Resistance to Fossil Extraction in Works by Warren Cariou, Cherie Dimaline, and Nathan Adler." *Canadian Literature*, no. 240, 2020, pp. 59–76, 177.

Martens, Reuben. "Petromelancholia and the Energopolitical Violence of Settler Colonialism in Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow*." *Ecological Grief*, special issue of *American Imago*, vol. 77, no. 1, 2020, pp. 193–211.

Martínez-Falquina, Silvia. "Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*: Uncertainty, Proleptic Mourning and Relationality in Native Dystopia." *ATLANTIS: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2019, pp. 161–178.

Medak-Saltzman, Danika. "Coming to You from the Indigenous Future: Native Women, Speculative Film Shorts, and the Art of the Possible." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2017, pp. 139–171.

Methot, Suzanne. *Legacy: Trauma, Story, and Indigenous Healing*. ECW Press, 2019.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.

Rice, Waubgeshig. *Moon of the Crusted Snow*. ECW Press, 2018.

Siepak, Julia. "Dimensions of Decolonial Future in Contemporary Indigenous Speculative Fiction: Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Rebecca Roanhorse's *Trail of Lightning*." *Anglica. An International Journal of English Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2020, pp. 57–74.

Sugars, Cynthia. "Strategic Abjection: Windigo Psychosis and the 'Postindian' Subject in Eden Robinson's 'Dogs in Winter'." *Canadian Literature*, vol. 181, 2004, pp. 78–91.

Weaver, Rosalyn. "*Smudged, Distorted and Hidden*: Apocalypse as Protest in Indigenous Speculative Fiction." *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World: Essays on Postcolonial Literature and Film*, edited by Ericka Hoagland and Reema Sarwal, McFarland, 2010, pp. 99–114.

Whyte, Kyle P. "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene." *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, edited by Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann, Routledge, 2017, pp. 206–215.

———. "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of the Climate Change Crises." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 1, no. 1–2, 2018, pp. 224–242.

# 12

# RUSSELL BATES (KIOWA)

## Eco-SF and Indigenous Futurisms

*Patrick B. Sharp*

Decades before the term Indigenous futurism was coined, author and screenwriter Russell Bates (Kiowa) was making significant contributions to mainstream SF. Bates was a missile technician in the U.S. Air Force (Bates, "Modest" 214) and began writing SF as a part of his lengthy recovery from an injury he sustained in an explosion at Tyndall Air Force base on 29 April 1966. During his recovery, Bates became a fan of the original *Star Trek*, and as he lay in the hospital he began working on crafting a script for his new favorite show ("Russell Bates"). Bates gained the support of *Star Trek* writer D.C. (Dorothy) Fontana, and after his discharge from the Air Force he moved to Los Angeles, where he attended the Writers Guild of America Open Door classes for minority writers. Fontana introduced Bates to Harlan Ellison, who helped convince him to attend the 1970 Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Workshop (Bates, "Patient" 56). At Clarion, Bates befriended his fellow workshop participant Octavia E. Butler, with whom he corresponded and met up with at conferences for the next several years. Butler's correspondence indicates that Bates spurred her thinking about Indigenous peoples and environmental issues (Streeby 75–77), and his scripts and short stories displayed many of the same characteristics that became associated with Indigenous futurism in the twenty-first century. Bates's first few stories were consistent with the dark, skeptical worlds of New Wave science fiction, which challenged the old SF assumptions that progress was inherently good and that the conquest of outer space was desirable (Latham 205–207). Like Harlan Ellison and other New Wave writers, Bates focused on the inner space of human consciousness and life on planet Earth. In his later work, Bates placed Indigenous characters at the center of his stories, publishing in venues such as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and writing an Emmy-winning episode of *Star Trek: The Animated Series* that asserted the importance of Indigenous knowledge for the survival of humanity. Bates utilized the possibilities built into the genre of SF to critique colonial approaches to nature, countering the "othering" and fetishizing of Indigenous peoples that was endemic to SF of the day.

### Eco-SF and Settler Fantasies of the "Indian"

In the early Nuclear Age, the dominant representation of Native Americans in SF was still shaped by nineteenth-century accounts of "savages" who are incompatible with—and disappear in the face of—Euro-American "civilization." Scientific accounts of human origins continued to cling to the Darwinian formulation of technology as the driving force of human evolution, with

"advanced" civilizations seen as the most evolved and "savage races" relegated to the role of living relics whose importance lay in what their cultures might reveal about Euro-American culture before it progressed (Sharp 2007, 44–47). However, stories such as Stuart Cloete's "The Blast" (1947) began to embrace a romanticized vision of "Indians" as "noble savages" whose "primitive" life provided a superior model for how to live in the aftermath of nuclear war (Sharp 2007, 176–179). This fetishization of stereotyped "Indian" culture became increasingly common with the rise of ecological science fiction (eco-SF) in the 1960s. Spurred by Rachel Carson's landmark critique of artificial toxins in *Silent Spring* (1962), eco-SF attempted to use the genre's power of estrangement to show the dystopian nightmares that awaited us if we did not change our relationship to nature (Otto 8–11). As Eric Otto observes, extrapolation "is one of environmentalism's favored critical strategies," and eco-SF evoked the specter of growing "food scarcity," clean water shortages, and toxic landscapes in an attempt to spur readers into changing the course of our societies before it is too late (11). Anti-nuclear SF slowly transformed with this growing volume of eco-SF, with nuclear technologies serving as touchstones for the dangers of the wrong kinds of progress and the toxicity of colonial approaches to nature. Unfortunately, when eco-SF turned to utopia instead of dystopia, it still displayed the settler colonial assumptions that Indigenous peoples were scientifically unsophisticated and incompatible with modernity. Novels such as Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975) and *Ecotopia Emerging* (1981) epitomized the fetishization of "Indian" culture in eco-SF, reducing "Indian" cultures to persistent anthropological stereotypes and assuming that Native Americans had either vanished or were on their way to extinction.

Callenbach's novels imagined a utopian culture arising in northern California, Oregon, and Washington that uses stolen nuclear weapons as a threat to break away from the United States to form a new country named Ecotopia. The novels serve as a case study in the logic of cultural appropriation that led many people of the counterculture movements of the late 1960s and 1970s to "play Indian" as a way to ward off or survive the threat of nuclear and ecological catastrophe (Katerberg 121–122). For many Euro-Americans, "Indians represented instinct and freedom" from the normal rules of society, and in the 1960s, "countercultural rebels became Indian to move their ideas away from Americanness" in "what seemed like a clear-eyed political critique" (Deloria 3, 161). In the many communes that sprang up—especially in the Pacific Northwest—Euro-Americans "toyed with symbolic Indianness" but "were in reality largely disconnected from Indian people" (159). These bizarre appropriations *are* perhaps clearest in the ways they adopted "Indian" symbols that owed more to Hollywood films than to any understandings of actual Native American cultures, such as living in "Plains tipis" instead of traditional "Northwest coast log homes" and wearing "headbands, fringed leather jackets, and moccasins" instead of the culturally specific and climate-appropriate clothing of local Indigenous peoples (Deloria 154–155). These counterculture attempts to appropriate Indigenous cultures were merely a new kind of colonization, with the irony being that they were appropriating cultural stereotypes produced by whites instead of actual Indigenous knowledge and culture.

Callenbach's *Ecotopia* makes clear the author's investment in this kind of faux appropriation through incessant references to "Indians" and "Indian culture." For example, Ecotopian social structure is based largely on "communal living groups" that try to model their lives in part on their understanding of "Indians" (24). The skeptical narrator William Weston, who is visiting Ecotopia and becoming converted to its ideas, observes in his journal that,

> Ecotopians … pay more attention to things like sunrise and sunset or the tides than to actual hour time. … "You'd never catch an Indian wearing a watch." Many Ecotopians sentimental about Indians, and there's some sense in which they envy the Indians their

lost natural place in the American wilderness. Indeed this probably a major Ecotopian myth; keep hearing references to what Indians would or wouldn't do in a given situation. Some Ecotopian articles—clothing and baskets and personal ornamentation—perhaps directly Indian in inspiration. But what matters most is the aspiration to live in balance with nature, "walk lightly on the land," treat the earth as a mother.[1]

*(29)*

This passage makes explicit that Ecotopians are not "Indians," and that the new country does not include any actual surviving members of the many Indigenous groups who lived in Washington, Oregon, and northern California during the 1970s. Though filtered through the somewhat unreliable narrator, the attribution of these cultural elements to "Indians" and not any specific people signals the evocation of Eurocentric anthropology and the assumption that "Indians" are simple hunter-gatherers who have vanished instead of cultures that persist and carry scientific knowledge of the lands now occupied by Ecotopians.

Botanist M. Kat Anderson has shown that the natural landscape of California was not "a wild Eden providing plentiful nourishment to its native inhabitants without sweat or toil," but instead "the outcome of sophisticated and complex harvesting and management practices" (1). The hunter-gatherer model embraced by Callenbach implies a relatively passive relationship with nature where "Indians" do little to shape the land. In anthropology's progress-oriented Darwinian narrative of cultural development, this is seen as a stage before the active control of nature that comes with agriculture and more "advanced" technologies. Anderson demonstrates how the Ohlone, Coast Miwok, and Coastal Pomo groups in the San Francisco Bay Area— where most of Callenbach's novels take place—engaged in seasonal burning and planting that transformed the landscape and maximized the growth of desired plants and animals (166–168). These Indigenous Californian peoples engaged in practices that had been developed over millennia that we now understand as examples of Native science. As Gregory Cajete (Tewa) explains, Native science is based in part on "careful observations" of "the structures of natural entities" and "traditionally applied practical experimentation at all times to find efficient ways to live" (67). The Ohlone, Coast Miwok, and Coastal Pomo are sophisticated practitioners of Native science, not the technologically backward primitives Callenbach assumed they were when he erased them from his Bay Area of the future.

Instead of drawing from such Native science, Callenbach goes out of his way to reinforce the nineteenth-century hierarchy of cultures that accepts the claim that Indigenous scientific practices were nothing more than primitive wisdom. This becomes obvious when Weston notes,

> [The Ecotopians] evidently feel a little like the Indians must have felt: that the horse and the teepee and the bow and arrow all sprang, like the human being, from the womb of nature, organically. Of course the Ecotopians work on natural materials far more extensively and complexly than the Indians worked stone into arrowpoint, or hide into teepee.

*(47)*

Once again, Callenbach underscores here how Ecotopia does not include Indigenous peoples, but rather that Ecotopians fetishize "Indians" and try to model their inventions after some nebulous "Indian" sense of connection to nature. The claim that "of course" Ecotopian work with nature is more complex shows Callenbach's Eurocentric ignorance of Native science and technology among the Indigenous groups of California, and simply repeats broad anthropological assumptions about "primitive" hunter-gatherers. The reference to

"tipis"—structures that were not used by the Ohlone, Coast Miwok, or Coastal Pomo—again reveals Callenbach's ignorance of local Indigenous cultures and further erases their names, knowledge, and histories. Constructing narratives of the future where Indigenous peoples are replaced by whites epitomizes a racist form of storytelling known as "settler futurity," where whites are seen as the inheritors of "contested land" in a future where Indigenous claims to the land are dismissed or made invisible (Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández 80). Callenbach's erasure of Indigenous Californians places his work in direct opposition to "Indigenous futurity, which does not foreclose the inhabitation of Indigenous land by non-Indigenous peoples, but does foreclose settler colonialism and settler epistemologies" (Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández 80). Callenbach's fetishization and erasure of "Indians" exemplified the racist cultural tide against which Russell Bates was swimming when he was writing his science fiction.

## Russell Bates and Eco-SF

Bates published his first story in the 1971 anthology *Infinity Two*, which also included new stories by SF luminaries Poul Anderson, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert Silverberg. In the introduction, editor Robert Hoskins notes that "Man is a waster. … This year, ecology is the catch phrase—ecology, and pollution. This, in a society that has been taught to believe that man's greatest advances came only with the constant development of technology" (7). Within this eco-SF framework, the long-standing assumptions of colonial scientific masculinity are challenged as the wrong kind of progress. In his story "Legion," Bates picks up on this theme through an updated *Frankenstein*-style tale told from the perspective of the Creature. The story begins with a man named Troy Britton napping in a car on autopilot who then awakens to experience his own death in a crash. This introduction foregrounds the danger of putting your life in the hands of modern science and advanced technology. For the next few pages, Britton awakens repeatedly in a vat where scientists are conducting painful experiments on him and manipulating his body with invasive tools as they bring him back to life. His memory slowly begins to return, focusing on his memory of his own death. However, Britton then starts having vivid, first-person memories of other deaths as well. Dr. Fowler, who is running the experiment, informs Britton that,

> You were brought here barely alive; almost nothing was salvageable. Your brain and a few important nerve groups were still intact, though. … Transplants were out of the question. We were forced to move along a higher plane. … We went ahead of anything else we've done here so far, Mr. Britton. We made you an entirely new body out of parts.
>
> *(145)*

Bates associates Dr. Fowler's work with the Frankenstein-like faith that scientific progress is always moving to a "higher plane" regardless of the consequences. However, when Britton sees himself in a mirror, he sees that his racial identity has been changed: "Where he remembered red hair, black curls abounded. His eyes were brown rather than hazel. … His skin was a swarthy olive, not freckled and fair-skinned" (145). By changing these phenotypic traits, Bates signals that the once-privileged Britton has now become a colonial subject, his body (and those of the others whose parts were harvested) now just experimental fodder in Dr. Fowler's attempts to conquer nature. By doing so, Bates engages in a common ecological critique of science while also connecting it to the histories and enduring practices of scientific racism ignored by eco-SF authors such as Callenbach.

Technologized death thematically dominates the many different narrative fragments laced through Bates's story. As Britton continues to be sedated by doctors, he continues to have horrible dreams: a famous actress dies in an airplane crash; a child accidentally drinks poison in a cabinet; a fireman is crushed in a collapsed building; and a rich man is gunned down in his pool. When Britton wakes up, though, the memories continue. Dr. Collins, an assistant of Fowler, makes the connection to a scientific theory: "That paper a year ago! You read it Fowler—the Jennings Syndrome—" (148). As Britton begins to lose control of his mind and become overwhelmed by the memories, the voices of the scientists begin to blur together into a diagnostic conversation:

> "Are you ready to admit failure now?"
> "I'm afraid so. Jennings was right, damn his soul."
> "What happened? We were sure it would work."
> "Jennings postulated that memory and intelligence are involved with the whole body. A hand would remember, or a heart, or anything alive. …"
> "It wouldn't be so bad, but the memories he's retrieving are all trauma-oriented, probably all of death. And they all died violently."
> "Is there no hope?"
> "None at all."
>
> *(149–150)*

The story ends with the doctors leaving Britton in misery, alone in the dark, abandoned by his creators like the Creature had been abandoned by Frankenstein. As a colonial subject pieced together by heartless colonizers, Britton has no hope for healing or a return to balance, something that later became a characteristic of some Indigenous futurist stories (Dillon 9). In this sense, Bates's ending echoes the bleakness of much New Wave SF and the sensibilities of authors such as Harlan Ellison: science has led to misery, and the conquest of nature has led to not just one death, but a subjectivity that embodies the collective deaths of many who perished due to modern technologies. Like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Bates shows the horror that is created by the European scientific tradition that is driven by the masculine conquest of nature (Sharp 2018, 31–33). In this case, the trauma of that conquest becomes concentrated in a non-white body, providing a critique that was lacking in some eco-SF.

Bates's next publications were in a similar vein. "Get with the Program" was written during the 1970 Clarion workshop and published in the March 1972 issue of *Amazing Stories*. A very short story, "Get with the Program" intercuts vignettes of people dying in technological catastrophes with a scientist walking reporters through the new artificial intelligence his company has created. It becomes clear by the end of the story that the artificial intelligence has thrown off the control of its creators and is using communications systems to take over the minds of people who then cause airplane and train crashes. "A Modest Proposal" appeared in the *Clarion II* anthology edited by Robin Scott Wilson, and was placed right before Joanna Russ's classic essay "The He-Man Ethos in Science Fiction." A cutting tale about the environmental problem of overpopulation, "A Modest Proposal" follows a man named Kermit who has discovered that a global pandemic—which manifests itself through major neurological problems in newborns—is caused by a shortage of souls. Kermit proposes mass killings to ensure the survival of the human race. As law enforcement officers close in on him in Denver, Kermit detonates a bomb that kills over a hundred people. The story ends with a report that a hospital in Denver saw a jump in healthy births, proving the validity of Kermit's hypothesis. In these stories Bates extends his critique of science as an unsustainable endeavor, and in his hands, settler futurity is a dead end that creates illness, suffering, and death instead of prosperity for all.

## "Rite of Encounter": Native Apocalypse and Survivance

Bates's most well-known literary work was published in the May 1973 issue of the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. The story, "Rite of Encounter," marked Bates's turn from criticizing the colonial agendas of science toward championing Indigenous knowledge as a path to health and survivance. "Rite of Encounter" was translated into Italian in 1974 under the title "Visione Indiana" for the magazine *Urania*, and at the end of the twentieth century, it became anthologized in collections such as *Native American Literature* by Lawana Trout. As the title implies, "Rite of Encounter" is a contact narrative of a kind that challenges the traditional SF formula of white male protagonists "discovering" Indigenous/alien locals during their exploration of the wilderness. In this story, it is a young Kiowa named Singing-owl who discovers invading white men while on a vision quest. Singing-owl is fasting and waiting for his vision, and has just taken a drink of water when he sees the camp of the invaders:

> One white man lay beside a long-dead fire. Another sat against a tree, his arms limp, his head fallen forward to his chest. A third lay sprawled on the riverbank, his head and one arm in the water.... He looked closer. The hand that lay out of the water was almost raw; crusted yellow ooze edged what little skin that remained on its back. He looked at the face. The sores there had ragged white strings that waved in the flowing water.
>
> *(122–123)*

What was often represented in SF as heroic conquest is instead shown here by Bates to be another dead end. The story doesn't even include a living white character. Instead, whites are simply seen as necrotic bringers of disease. The disease functions as the real antagonist of the story, just another perversion of nature that came from Europe. Bates also shows in this passage the beginning of a Native apocalypse. Where most SF saw apocalypse as something that was one possibility of the future, a common feature of Indigenous futurism is that it draws attention to the fact that the apocalypse "has already taken place" for Indigenous peoples (Dillon 8). In this sense, stories like Bates's "Rite of Encounter" show how the still-avoidable future apocalypses of nuclear frontier and eco-SF come from a Euro-American position of privilege. Instead of struggling against some fantastic manifestation of "savagery," Singing-owl signifies a heroic figure who is fighting against the historical incursions of Euro-American colonization. His heroism blunts the impact of this historical apocalypse and enables the survivance of his people through his use of traditional knowledge and Kiowa culture.

In the original introduction "Rite of Encounter," Bates said that,

> There is a world of experience and culture that is exclusively Amerindian that has never been told. That I have set out to try to relate what I can of this world is audacious, perhaps. But there was simply no way I could have done otherwise, even if I had consciously tried.
>
> *(120)*

Bates uses his contemporary reader's knowledge of smallpox to highlight how Singing-owl uses Kiowa "experience and culture"—and what is now known as Native science—to discover the nature of his new invasive antagonist. In Bates's story, the first thing Singing-owl does when he realizes the white men are dead is to drop the things he has picked up and move away from their bodies. What anthropologists might dismiss as a "taboo" is presented by Bates as a wise move by someone whose culture has taught him how to avoid disease. Unfortunately, by drinking the water downstream before he sees the white men, Singing-owl becomes infected. Having fasted

for weeks and placed himself in a state to receive and understand visions, however, Singing-owl is able to see his alien antagonist for what it is. When the vision comes, it is a grotesque figure that calls itself "Black Smallpox": "It was a mass of raw flesh. With a body, and arms and legs, and a head. No skin or hair; just endless running sores" (124). At first Singing-owl thinks that the "thing" is "surely … not the vision" he has been waiting for (124). However, he quickly realizes, "it perhaps [was] the vision after all, somehow spoiled by white man's evil? Yes, the white men. Their sores. Death" (125). With his ability to recognize his real antagonist, Singing-owl then proceeds through a series of experiments, trying to outrun and outwit Black Smallpox in a number of ways. Singing-owl comes to understand that he is a carrier of the disease—but will not die from it—and that if he returns home, he will kill his own people. In this way, Bates shows how a traditional vision quest leads to a useful scientific understanding of disease. Armed with the experience and culture of the Kiowa, Bates creates a new kind of SF character in Singing-owl: the heroic Indigenous scientist whose culture provides all the knowledge he needs to defeat his science-fictional adversary.

"Rite of Encounter" can also be understood as a story of survivance. In Gerald Vizenor's articulation of the concept, "survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry," and includes "the continuance of stories" that are also "renunciations of dominance, deracination, and oblivion" (1). Grace Dillon argues that survivance is a key element of Indigenous futurism, where Indigenous peoples do not just survive, but actually thrive in the face of apocalyptic colonial incursions (Dillon 5–6). Singing-owl sees such an apocalyptic future for his people through a second vision: "Singing-owl heard wailing and moaning, but very faint. Then he saw people reflected in the pool. They were Kiowas; ragged, wet sores covered their arms and faces. The wailing reflections reached for him, crying louder" (125). After this vision, Singing-owl begins testing Black Smallpox by running away through the landscape, and eventually comes to understand that the only way to avoid this future is to allow himself to starve to death. As he sits and waits for death, Singing-owl takes solace in the silencing of Black Smallpox and has a final vision:

> He prayed, asking the mercy of the spirits. Small things came back to him: a boy's game with a willow hoop; his mother and stories and songs and gentle scoldings, the self-tortures that had declared him a man, the smiling, teasing daughter of Gray Bear; how fat quail sizzled when roasted.
>
> *(127)*

Through these memories of the good life, Bates ends his story by showing what Singing-owl's sacrifice has preserved for the future. Bates's future *is* a utopia built not on the conquest of nature, but on the preservation and adaptation of Indigenous traditions to a new postapocalyptic world. Singing-owl's death is not nihilistic, and he is not a victim: he is a hero who has ensured that his people will survive and thrive in the future. Indeed, the story itself embodies a testament to survivance, with Kiowa traditions and knowledge forming a foundation for a story in a SF magazine.

### Russell Bates Reimagines the Final Frontier

With support from D.C. Fontana, Bates had written a screenplay for *Star Trek* that was meant to be used for the show's third season. Unfortunately, a change in showrunners led his script to be thrown out. He eventually published it (in screenplay format) as "The Patient Parasites" in the 1978 anthology *Star Trek: The New Voyages 2.* Luckily, his 1974 contribution to the *Star*

*Trek* universe made it to the screen and won both critical praise and legions of fans: Bates cowrote the *Star Trek: The Animated Series* episode entitled "How Sharper Than a Serpent's Tooth" with David Wise, and it went on to win the Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Children's Series. In a 2015 interview, Bates said one thing that appealed to him about *Star Trek* was its rejection of the Nuclear Age's apocalyptic cynicism:

> We arise from a generation where we thought nuclear war would end the human race. [Gene] Roddenberry's program *Star Trek* said, "Man will continue. Man has a future. Man may even have a promising future. He … will learn from his own past experiences, and that's how he will survive. … He will encounter other races, and what he has learned from his own experiences will determine how he responds to those meetings". It was hope that there is a future, there is a time when humans, learning their lessons, will not destroy everyone that they meet. Instead, [humans will] try to treat with them, live with them, understand them.

> *("Russell Bates")*

Bates weaved this vision of survivance for the whole human race into the storyline for "How Sharper Than a Serpent's Tooth", and anchored it in the experiences of Indigenous peoples through a new character: the episode introduced Walking Bear (voiced by James Doohan) to the bridge crew of the *Enterprise*. Bates designed Walking Bear—including his face and name—after two of his uncles ("Russell Bates"), and made him a Comanche who is an expert in "the histories of many ancient Earth peoples," including the Comanche (Bates and Woods 9). As the episode unfolds, it is this expertise that allows the *Enterprise* crew to identify and outwit their antagonist, teaching it (and the children watching at home) some important lessons along the way.

Bates establishes the importance of Indigenous knowledge early in the episode, when the *Enterprise* is pursuing a vessel using superior technology that turns and attacks them. Walking Bear recognizes the ship as being "Kukulkan," a feathered serpent god from Mayan and Aztec cultures that also went by the name of Quetzalcoatl. Kukulkan spares the *Enterprise* because of the fact that Walking Bear recognizes it, and then transports some of the crew (including Walking Bear and Captain Kirk) to its ship. The screenplay by Bates and Woods foregrounds the value of learning from past civilizations: with Walking Bear translating evidence from many ancient Earth cultures, the crew solves a riddle set by Kukulkan and precipitates a final showdown. Kukulkan explains that it was attempting to curb hate and the self-destructive violent tendencies of "children" by guiding and controlling their civilizations. Working together, the *Enterprise* crew frees members of species Kukulkan keeps in cages and shows Kukulkan that its use of advanced technology to enslave or interfere with other cultures is wrong. They show Kukulkan that humans have used their intellects to work together in peace and advanced to a point where its guidance is no longer needed. Bates and Woods link this rejection of a violent colonial mentality to the embrace of knowledge from all cultures, including the Comanche, Mayan, and Aztec civilizations. This knowledge highlighted what Bates understood as central to the *Star Trek* universe: the hope for a future where humans learn from their mistakes, value all cultures, and overcome the bigotries that are warping its progress.

In 1975 Bates cowrote "The Lights of Mystery Mountain," the pilot episode of the Saturday morning children's show *The Secrets of Isis*. Like Bates's Emmy-winning *Star Trek* script, the pilot for *Isis* focused on the importance of melding science in the European tradition with non-European scientific knowledge to solve crimes and thwart disasters. Though it would be a stretch historically to refer to Bates's work as Indigenous futurism, his writing clearly anticipated many of the concerns that became associated with Indigenous futurisms in the twenty-first

century. The body of his work provided a consistent critique of colonialism and the blind celebration of Euro-American scientific progress. His early stories contributed to eco-SF and the New Wave writing of the 1970s, drawing attention to the scientific racism and colonial oppression that were often masked or ignored by other authors of the period. His later writing, including his screenplays, showed the emergence of an important Indigenous perspective in the genre, with his stories celebrating Indigenous cultures and what they have to contribute to a vision of progress that is not driven by colonial greed and the conquest of nature. He rebutted the "savage" stereotypes of colonial SF and provided culturally specific responses to the fetishized "Indian" fantasies put forward by eco-SF authors such as Callenbach. SF provided Bates with a path to his own healing after grievous injury, and he in turn helped create a vision for others in the genre to follow: a vision of survivance that highlighted the problems of settler futurity and the promise of Indigenous futurity, with all peoples learning to work with nature and each other to build a future that avoided further apocalypse.

## Note

1   In the sections that are from Weston's journal, Callenbach tries to reproduce the language and feeling of fieldnotes from a journalist or anthropologist by dropping verbs, pronouns, and other formal syntax patterns.

## Works Cited

Anderson, M. Kat. *Tending The Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources*. U of California P, 2005.

Bates, Russell. "Legion." *Infinity Two*, edited by Robert Hoskins, Lancer Books, 1971, pp. 133–152.

———. "A Modest Proposal." *Clarion II*, edited by Robin Scott Wilson, Signet, 1972, pp. 214–225.

———. "Get with the Program." *Amazing Stories*, vol. 45, no. 6, March 1972, pp. 97–101, 124.

———. "The Patient Parasites." *Star Trek: The New Voyages 2*, edited by Sondra Marshak and Myrna Culbreath, Bantam, 1978, pp. 56–95.

———. "Russell Bates, the Complete Interview." Oct. 2015. *Trekspertise*, YouTube, https://youtu.be/d-SyXWy6Uq4. Accessed 10 Sept. 2021.

———. "Rite of Encounter." *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, vol. 44, no. 5, pp. 120–127.

Bates, Russell, and David Wise. Screenplay of "How Sharper Than a Serpent's Tooth". 2nd Draft. *Star Trek: The Animated Series*, Norway Productions, 15 July 1974.

Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Clear Light Books, 2000.

Deloria, Philip J. *Playing Indian*. Yale UP, 1998.

Dillon, Grace L., editor. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. U of Arizona P, 2012.

Hoskins, Robert. "Introduction." *Infinity Two*, edited by Robert Hoskins, Lancer Books, 1971, pp. 7–9.

"How Sharper Than a Serpent's Tooth." *Star Trek: The Animated Series*, written by Russell Bates and David Wise, performed by William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, and James Doohan, CBS, 5 Oct. 1974.

Katerberg, William H. *Future West: Utopia and Apocalypse in Frontier Science Fiction*. UP of Kansas, 2008.

Latham, Rob. "The New Wave." *A Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by David Seed, Blackwell, 2005, pp. 201–216.

Otto, Eric. *Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism*. Ohio State UP, 2012.

Sharp, Patrick B. *Savage Perils: Racial Frontiers and Nuclear Apocalypse in American Culture*. U of Oklahoma P, 2007.

———. *Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction: Angels, Amazons and Women*. U of Wales P, 2018.

Streeby, Shelley. *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*. UC Press, 2018.

Tuck, Eve, and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández. "Curriculum, Replacement, and Settler Futurity." *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2013, pp. 72–89.

Vizenor, Gerald. "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice." *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, edited by Vizenor, U of Nebraska P, 2008, pp. 1–23.

# 13

# WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF TOMORROW!

## Building the Decolonial Apocalypse in Indigenous Futurist Writing

*Anne Stewart*

At the Unist'ot'en camp on Wet'suwet'en land in northern British Columbia, Canada, land defenders have been building strategically located infrastructure since 2010 as acts of cultural healing and land protection. This infrastructure has been erected directly in the path of a cluster of pipeline projects cutting through unceded ancestral Wet'suwet'en territory. Before violent checkpoint clashes with local and federal law enforcement began in 2019, the Wet'suwet'en fought to assert land title by building and occupying camps along the GPS-demarcated routes of proposed Chevron, TransCanada, and Enbridge pipelines. "The pipelines are trying to go right through where the salmon spawn, and that's where we decided to put the action camp in last year", explains Unist'ot'en land defender and Indigenous Futurist Freda Huson, "we put a cabin right smack in the way of the pipeline so that they would not go through" ("How To"). When the action camp blocks a route, the pipeline developers shift coordinates, and the Unist'ot'en build again, constructing, over the last decade, cabins, a pit house, and a still-growing healing center. I group the land defenders among Indigenous Futurists because these structures are the manifestation of an Indigenous Futurity in which pipeline development appears as politically retrograde, a throwback effort to shore up the contours of a dying world-system. Conversely, the log cabin, the pit house, and the healing center direct us to the conditions of possibility for other, decolonial worlds of tomorrow.

Infrastructural development that ties the past and the future of Indigenous nations to ancestral territories serves as an effective, albeit qualified technology of colonial resistance. These structures assert presence in what Mishuana R. Goeman calls "a settler-colonial grammar of place" (236). From *terra nullius* to *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, the colonial-capitalist state's reliance on property relations as *the* metric of economic and juridical order make infrastructural development a spatial grammar of occupation.[1] As resistance technology, then, barricade-like infrastructures assert the relationship between place and Indigenous nationhood. Conversely, they can work to extend the colonial relationship between sovereign Indigenous nations and settler state power, fixing Indigenous groups in what Glen Sean Coulthard calls the "*field of power through which colonial relations are produced and maintained*" (20, emphasis in original). When Indigenous land defenders build blockades against state-sanctioned development, the land remains caught in a relationship of dependence and reconciliation futurity in which the settler state maintains its role as final arbiter in a dispute over property rights.

The Indigenous Futurist is thus confronted by the need to both disrupt and build alternatives to settler spatial grammar. Perhaps for this reason, Unist'ot'en land defenders deny the use of barricade tactics, which imply that there is a reconciliatory relationship to the settler state that still requires negotiation. "The Unist'ot'en Camp is not a blockade, a protest, or a demonstration", the action camp's website reads, "it is a permanent, non-violent occupation of Unist'ot'en territory, established to protect our homelands from illegal industrial encroachments and to preserve a space for our community to heal from the violence of colonization" ("6th Annual"). Rather than positioning itself as the site of a potentially resolvable standoff between the people and the state, the action camp emphasizes the futurity of the relationship between the people and the land ("permanent", "to protect", "to preserve"). In their creation of a decolonized spatial grammar, the Unist'ot'en reimagine barricade infrastructure to express a relationship to land that values kinship over a special relationship to the settler state; the sovereignty of the earth over the sovereignty of colonial-capitalist power relations; and the modeling, as such, of a different set of spatial relations designed with the future of Turtle Island in mind. This radically decolonial vision bypasses negotiating better terms of representation and inclusion with the settler state; instead prioritizing the human relationship to land—its reoccupation by Indigenous intelligence—as the pathway to Indigenous Futurity.

The work of these land defenders physically expresses an Indigenous Futurist praxis that is also at the core of contemporary Indigenous Futurist writing and its speculative work. This praxis centers on forms of development that are drawn from knowledge given *by* the land and that propose a decolonial relationship *to* land, focused on healing after violence. As a Métis elder puts it in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), "When we heal our land, we are healed also" (197). Indeed, the Unist'ot'en camp is not properly a blockade so much as a futuristic redesign of what it means to engage in land-based direct action. Rather than working with piles of rubble to build barricades, the anti-pipeline post-barricade models possible futures after coloniality, in which people and land cocreate spaces of cultural healing and decolonial spatial grammars. This activity resonates with Lou Cornum's description of the work of Indigenous Futurist writing:

> One of the most powerful narratives offered by Indigenous Futurism is that we Indigenous peoples are carriers of advanced technical knowledge that can be applied in ways much more profound and generative than the extractive, destructive, life-denying processes of capitalism and Western progress.
>
> *("Creation Story")*

As a form of advanced technical knowledge, post-barricade structures interfere with extractive colonial-capitalist state expansion and thus with the projection into the future of the unbroken ascendance of "settler colonial formations", as Coulthard puts it, that promise to be "territorially acquisitive in perpetuity" (125). Acknowledging that colonial-capitalist relations of production are unsustainable and exhausted, Indigenous Futurists posit indigeneity as permanent, stable, and sovereign. Coloniality emerges through this spatial grammar as contingent, fragile, and potentially reversible.

Like the post-barricade, recent works of Indigenous Futurist fiction operating in the subgenre of the decolonial apocalypse also reimagine infrastructure in ways that upset colonial grammars of place. Examples of this intense focus on infrastructure stretch from the northeast Métis and Anishinaabe terrains of Dimaline's novel and Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2019), to the southwest Diné territories of Rebecca Roanhorse's *Sixth World* series, which includes the novels *Trail of Lightning* (2018) and *Storm of Locusts* (2019). Grace Dillon

defines the decolonial apocalypse as "posit[ing] the possibility of an optimistic future by imagining a reversal of circumstances, where Natives win or at least are centered in the narrative" (9). In the foundational 2012 collection, *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, Dillon maps the contours of an Indigenous literary futurism that has gathered together, over the last decade, a broad spectrum of literature, arts, and digital media engaged in imagining, theorizing, and *building* decolonial spaces and temporalities. Jason Edward Lewis, in his work on the analysis and development of Indigenous digital technologies, identifies one of its WEmandates as "claiming territory" (37). For Lewis, the territory claimed by these practices is that of digital media and culture, "engaging with the infrastructure of the present", as he writes, "to bend it in a direction more conducive to Indigenous ontologies" (44). This chapter migrates Lewis's call to engage with infrastructure from digital to land-based territories. In these terms, a decolonial apocalypse, understood as Dillon's "reversal of circumstances", entails centering indigeneity through building over and against colonial-capitalist social-spatial orders in "a direction more conducive to Indigenous ontologies" (Lewis 44).

Like anti-pipeline action camps, these narratives call into being Indigenous ontological orders, eschewing reconciliation futurity and classic sci-fi tropes of conquest and domination. In the decolonial apocalypse, the end of the world is a generative event, signaling the end of colonial-capitalist order and the viability of its infrastructures and extractive practices. Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1990) offers a spatial metaphor for such a generative event when Proude Cedarfair "turned the past under" by walking away from defending his people's sovereign land as coloniality comes to an end on Turtle Island (33). In the decolonial apocalypse, the earth "turn[s] … under" the settler state, burying one world and unearthing long-buried orders of being. In so doing, the earth also reaffirms its own sovereignty, understood in the sense of the term forwarded by Taiaiake Alfred's call to "create a meaning for 'sovereignty' that respects the understanding of power in indigenous cultures" (54), in which "power flows from respect for nature and the natural order" (60). As we move from state to terrestrial sovereignty, the decolonial apocalypse imagines what infrastructures might emerge after the end of extractive and settler colonial grammars of place. Although this process does bring human and nonhuman life into violent conflict, the works of Indigenous Futurists that I discuss here propose that the decolonial apocalypse creates space for reimagining relationships to earth and to material life that connect pre-settler-occupation orders of being to the future of human-land relationality. Apocalypse, in this context, wrests the question of what it means to be human away from Eurowestern epistemic traditions and reignites its potential in the imagination and construction of other worlds.

## Decolonial Infrastructures

In accounts of established settler state power, infrastructure often becomes the front upon which colonial force is exercised most abstractly and at times most ruthlessly. Pipeline developers planning routes through Indigenous land using GPS mapping technologies represent the most recent manifestation of colonial population controls. Anthropologist Nélia Dias writes that

> the construction of infrastructure, or what used to be known as public works, including railroads, roads and telegraphs, has been one of the main material instruments of colonization … a constituent part of a vast political project aiming to impose discipline at a distance.
>
> *(171)*

In *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, Rice imagines an Anishinaabe community in northern Ontario experiencing a decolonial apocalypse wherein much of the settler state's "discipline at a distance" collapses. Rice locates his unnamed reserve 300 kilometers north of the nearest large town. The climate is so difficult that some believe the Anishnaabe were relocated there to die. As one character observes, "the white people who forced them here had never intended for them to survive" (212). The reserve gets its first hint that something is wrong when cell phones and power lines stop working early in the winter. At first, no one thinks much of the interruptions, and the disconnection is an opportunity to joke about the unpredictability of the power infrastructures to which the community is connected. "'We've dealt with this before'", a community elder reminds concerned constituents, "'These things go out all the time'" (38). As we learn, it has only been a few years since the town has been fully, reliably "connected to the grid" (55). Infrastructure improvements recently brought in regular cell and internet service, "hydro lines from the massive dam to the east", and a permanent service road originally built to serve the development of the billion-dollar hydroelectric project (29). Though the community has temporarily lost service before, this time power and communication never return, leaving them to rely on diesel generators, emergency food stores, and meat from hunting and trapping. The community is proud of the survival strategies that they have developed and adapted "through the decades of imposed adversity" (48) to defy the settler government's genocidal mandate and reverse the course of residential school assimilationist tactics. Some members of the younger generations are consciously engaged with resurgence education, "trying to live in harmony with the traditional ways" (6). But when a few stragglers arrive by snowmobile from other remote communities, the reserve's worst fears are confirmed: power and communications are out everywhere, social order is breaking down, and no help or additional supplies are coming.

Rice's apocalyptic setup draws our attention again and again to the problem of infrastructure because some of the sharpest ironies and impasses of coloniality play out at the level of these material conditions. Rice's is a modern community: they want Wi-Fi and satellite TV; they want access to the hydroelectricity produced by the settler state's expropriation and hyper-development of ancestral Anishinaabe territory in the Canadian northeast. But the tenuousness with which these services are extended to reserves, which are themselves deliberately located in what was once considered resource-poor and undesirable land, also punctuates the strategic marginalization of these communities. On Canadian reserves and American reservations, critical infrastructures are key points at which the state administers pressure on the negotiation between citizenship and sovereignty. In the United States, one aspect of mid-twentieth-century Indian termination policies entailed the state's withdrawal of its commitment to the provision of federal supports like "BIA health, education, and utility services" (Tigerman 36). Conversely, Rice's Canadian context tracks a history in which northern reserves often see only the benefits of improved and intensified infrastructure like roads and power lines when the state invests in hydroelectric dam development and other extractive industries that feed the growth of settler wealth through the destruction of Indigenous ancestral land. As protagonist Evan Whitesky thinks, it was

> only a few years before, when the community was finally connected to the wider hydro grid. Even then it only happened because the construction contractors from the South wanted a good signal while they built the massive new hydro dam farther north on the bay.
>
> *(14)*

Whether emblematic of the state's neglect, unwanted attention, or as a byproduct of extractive colonialism, infrastructures linking remote reserve land to the grid have historically represented a

relationship of "discipline at a distance". The framework of this spatial grammar addresses demands for self-determination made by the affected communities at the convenience of settler state power.

However, in the decolonial apocalypse, it is the very tenuousness of the grid that is exposed when the planet moves to assert its climatic and terrestrial authority. A quality of the spatial grammar of Indigenous Futurism is the expression of the land's ontologically sovereign status: the planet's irreducible capacity to assert its own laws, limits, and right to self-determine. As an elder puts it when telling the story of the end of the world in Dimaline's novel,

> The earth was broken. Too much taking for too damn long, so she finally broke. But she went out like a wild horse, bucking off as much as she could before lying down. A melting North meant the water levels rose and the weather changed. It changed to violence in some cases, building tsunamis, spinning tornadoes, crumbling earthquakes, and the shapes of countries were changed forever, whole coasts breaking off like crust.
>
> *(87)*

This account does not shrink from the violence of the planet as it destroys settler world order, but what is ruin for coloniality in this future is the reassertion of the land's Indigenous relations of production. In terms of these relations, the twenty-first-century paradigm of a fully networked planet is recast as a fragile fantasy of global order. As Evan thinks, with the new service road, they "now had the freedom to drive out on their own, theoretically. The weather and lack of maintenance often played havoc with that fine thought, though" (17). While this observation is a folksy truism, it also expresses how infrastructure like roads and power lines can symbolize a subdued nonhuman world, data in the atmosphere, and concrete covering the terrestrial surface. A decolonial apocalypse unveils that constant development and constant capital growth are required to maintain this settler-colonial infrastructure. It is only the uninterrupted flow of productive forces, which reserves experience as a stuttering trickle, that makes it appear as if the planet is not itself constantly at work attempting to regain and reclaim ground. For Rice's Anishinaabe, winter always waits to turn under the "fine thought" of usable roads and predictable power; and as soon as a global apocalyptic event strikes, the earth reabsorbs these infrastructures.

At the same moment that old colonial infrastructures become useless, resurgent modes of existence take on material force. Landed property values in the north of Turtle Island shift: the hydro lines that the province spent a hundred million dollars building become worthless, as do the phones and TVs that connect reserve residents to the grid. Newer housing that lack in generators or wood-burning stoves become irrelevant, and when the diesel reservoirs run dry, the heavy-duty trucks once coveted on the reserve go silent. As the second winter of the decolonial apocalypse comes to an end, Rice's community makes the decision to return south and rebuild "deep in the heart of Anishinaabe territory" (213). As Evan's family prepares to leave, his wife Nicole assesses the empty shell of their family home with a critical eye: "The structures they were leaving behind would likely stand for a few more generations … And all the infrastructure was most likely still functional. But there was no use for any of it" (211). While the rest of the world has gone silent, the survivors on Rice's reserve have been planning a future that moves away from settler infrastructures.

Movement into the future involves crumbling their old homes into fuel for fires, building knowledge, and spinning new skills. Evan learns to build tipi shelters:

> They weren't characteristic of the Anishinaabeg. But he learned how to build one from a how-to guide in a hunting magazine of all places … Right now, it was the easiest, most reliable thing he could build in the middle of the winter in a power crisis.
>
> *(186)*

This adoption of a nontraditional technology suggests that Rice's community, entering into a new phase of living and working together, refuses to idealize a return to old lifeways. As the novel points out, the apocalypse that was settler coloniality on Turtle Island already forced the Anishinaabe to push beyond those lifeways and to create new knowledge and practices. The decolonial apocalypse has the potential to do the same. The migration south reverses the trajectory of colonial exile and returns the people to the land of their ancestors, but they are not going back in time. At the end of the novel, an opportunity exists to begin again outside of the constraints of landed property relations, grid systems of control, and models of "artificial, state-created identities (such as 'ethnic group') that are imposed on original peoples" (Alfred & Corntassel 598). The band's adoption of tipi technology points to pre-occupation tribal relations in which communities were less rigidly constrained by what Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel call the state's "definitional authority" (600). As technologically futuristic thinkers, Rice's Anishinaabe, traveling south, work to reconcile their way of life with the sovereign earth, rather than any sovereign state.

## The Sovereign Earth

Indigenous Futurist writing, like post-barricade infrastructure, frequently frames the destruction of settler-colonial society as the furious planet's reaction to climate change. In this context, the planet functions as the agent of decolonization, and individuals who want to survive the transition must bring themselves into right relation with the earth's agenda. Its "bucking", "building", "spinning", "crumbling" motion demonstrates the limits of settler-colonial epistemic and ontological orders that privilege human agency, instrumental reason, and the logic of unfettered resource exploitation (Dimaline 87). Although the actor is the planet in this scenario, rather than a revolutionary human force, its movement nonetheless decolonizes in the sense proposed by Frantz Fanon when he describes decolonization as an activity that "focuses on and fundamentally alters being" (2). Fanon's sense of decolonization as an alteration in being *in* and *with* the world is also what Freda Huson asserts in a confrontation with Enbridge pipeline spokespeople when she says, "Look at the state of our whole planet, what it's in, and all our waters are being destroyed, the air is destroyed, the trees are being destroyed. You can't continue to bulldoze over my people" ("How To"). Huson does not frame her statement as a plea or an inquiry. In saying that pipeline developers *cannot continue*, she makes an assertion from within the Indigenous ontological order that describes the impossibility of proceeding into the future within the colonial order of being. In the decolonial apocalypse, the sovereign earth effects the end of this colonial ontological order.

While *Moon of the Crusted Snow* contemplates a slowly violent apocalypse-at-a-distance, Roanhorse's *Sixth World* books follow Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* in having the earth tectonically churn settler-colonial society into the abyssal plains of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Roanhorse's series begins by introducing monster-hunter Maggie Hoskie as she defends Dinétah, the ancestral land of the Diné people, from human and nonhuman monsters that stalk the land in a mid-apocalyptic future. In Roanhorse's novels, the end of the world arrives in the form of what people call the Big Water. A confluence of climatic and terrestrial disasters, reminiscent of Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart* and Octavia Butler's *Parable* series, push the west coast into the ocean, "caught by a massive earthquake that sheared most of the Pacific Northwest straight off the continental shelf" (*Storm* 209). Simultaneously, hurricanes batter the eastern seaboard so that the new eastern coastline "stretches from San Antonio to Sioux Falls" (*Trail* 22). As the edges of Turtle Island fall away, Dinétah rises as an economic and territorial powerhouse that defends its borders against the masses of climate refugees looking for places to resettle on the continent, and auctions off its oil reserves to desperate feudal states like New Denver and the Exalted Mormon Kingdom.

As in *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, the planet's assertion of sovereignty in Roanhorse's novels fundamentally reconfigures landed property relations, particularly the colonial emphasis on the value of oceanfront development. The history of colonial empire, Amitav Ghosh points out, is one in which "People began to move closer and closer to the water" (55). Settler populations, more interested in transportation logistics than in bioregional histories, built massive port cities based on fantasies of unlimited human agency, and a "collective setting aside of the knowledge that accrues over generations through dwelling in the landscape" (Ghosh 55). By the same logic, on Turtle Island, middle America or flyover states like Navaholand came to be positioned, particularly in bourgeois imaginaries, as cultural and economic deserts. In Roanhorse's novels, as climate change increasingly identifies coastal territory and property as sites of risk and disaster, this dynamic again undergoes one of those reversals of colonial trajectory that Dillon delineates: Dinétah, a geographical interior framed as marginal within the logic of the colonial property value form, becomes a new geographic as well as economic and political center. And in Roanhorse's decolonial apocalypse, the planet itself forces this shift in property relations. As Maggie puts it, "Earth herself stepped in and drowned them all regardless of personal politics" (*Trail* 54). Importantly, the novels do not describe the Big Water as the product of anthropogenic climate change. Rather, by framing the apocalypse as a moment when "Earth herself step[s] in", Roanhorse maps a terrain of relationality defined by unruly terrestrial motion, demanding that humans recognize the land as an entity ontologically distinct from colonial property relations and resource extraction agendas.

The Navajo Nation's infrastructural agendas reflect these new modes of relationality, which center in Roanhorse's novels around the development of a massive wall that the tribal council builds to defend Dinétah during what history now calls the Energy Wars. While it is difficult to tell a story about a border wall that does not reek of a creeping fascism, Roanhorse confronts this impasse by taking up Lewis's challenge to bend infrastructure "in a direction more conducive to Indigenous ontologies" (44). The Wall's foundations, constructed from materials drawn from the four sacred mountains, mark the corners of Navaho ancestral territory. As the first bricks are laid with respect and prayer, sung over by medicine men,

> the Wall took on a life of its own. When the workmen came back the next morning, it was already fifty feet high. In the east it grew as white shell. In the south, turquoise. The west, pearlescent curves of abalone, and the north, the blackest jet. It was beautiful.
>
> *(*Trail *23)*

As a material infrastructure, the Wall repels the concrete and barbed wire aesthetics of fascist settler development; it grows, organic, warmly curved, and cradling its inhabitants, as it is composed of rock and aggregate material sacred within Diné ontological order. The Wall physically manifests the relations encompassed by the four mountains, not by demarcations of nation-state borders or bulldozed ecosystems. Further, the wall's aesthetic beauty connects it to a broader tradition of radical anti-racist and decolonial struggle on Turtle Island, in which there is "an unbreakable link between artistic production and revolutionary politics" (hooks 67). Aesthetics, as bell hooks argues, represent "a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming" (65). The Wall in this sense calls Diné ontological orders into being. The earth extends its sovereignty to the Diné in a way that acknowledges and reaffirms the relation between land and people at the core of many Indigenous ontologies and philosophies of resurgence.

## Becoming Human

In the Eurowestern intellectual tradition that shores up settler-colonial modernity, the category of the human represents a failed project; an old white male myth used to justify exploitative property relations. But for many decolonial thinkers, becoming human is an aspirational practice; a futurist's activity. In the book *Why Indigenous Literature Matters*, Daniel Heath Justice describes "how we become human" as a struggle; not a state but a process, and a daily practice "we *enact*" (70, emphasis in original). As the Wall around Dinétah offers its aesthetic force to an emergent decolonial spatial grammar, preoccupation ways of becoming human begin to emerge through reconfigured relationships to earth, to material life, and to economic order. After the Big Water, gods and sacred beings that belong to the land take on material force. Their physical presence shifts material conditions in Roanhorse's novels through their economy of barter and trade. Both in and beyond Dinétah, labor and exchange value moves to barter systems in which value is determined by, to borrow a phrase from Coulthard's definition of "Indigenous anti-capitalism", "what the land *as system of reciprocal relations and obligations* can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms" (13, emphasis in original). In the *Sixth World* books, barter depends on kinship ties, which are, for the Diné, intimately tied to land. *Trail of Lightning* opens with Maggie trading her monster-hunting services with the small community of Lukachukai for silver, turquoise, and weaving. When Maggie bargains with a representative from Lukachukai for her fee, she refuses to "give my names and clans so he and the others can place me in their little world, decide our relations and what k'é they might owe me. And what k'é I owe them" (3). Her refusal to identify herself results in "a pretty stingy deal" (5), and it is only after she shares her clan names that they agree to pay more. In many ways, this familiar scene of post-capitalist exchange maps onto economic orders in settler apocalyptic fiction, a trope acknowledging that a true end of the world would require the fall of global capitalism. However, what Roanhorse's new economic order adds to this familiar formula is a stress on kinship as key to determining the terms of barter. Although the negotiation is not friendly, the evocation of kinship asserts terms of mutual obligation as having priority over contract capitalism.

The humans and nonhumans of the Sixth World also barter *for* relationships and obligations. In *Storm of Locusts*, Maggie trades for information with Mósí the Cat, one of the Bik'e'áyéeii, who desires entrance into Maggie's community, a rag-tag band on a rescue mission to the Malpais, the wastelands beyond the walls of Dinétah. "'Very well,'" Mósí agrees, "'I will give you this map, my aid, and any knowledge I may have of the Malpais in exchange for your protection on the Mother Road to a destination of my choosing'" (98). Mósí is able to strike this deal for protection and companionship after she reminds a reluctant Maggie of an incident from *Trail* in which Maggie was indirectly involved in Coyote burning down Mósí's lair, an intricate structure of responsibility that eventually presses Maggie's hand. The bargain is one that determines the parameters of relationship, rather than being derived from predetermined kinship ties. But here, as at Lukachukai, the terms of exchange prioritize obligation along the precise lines of responsibility and reciprocity that are valueless in capitalist relations of production. Capitalist transactions are designed specifically to protect the autonomy of the liberal humanist subject. In the decolonial barter economy schematized by Roanhorse, kinship relations, based on ancestral connections to land, determine the terms of barter, replacing the individual as the privileged actor in economic transactions. The earth's sovereignty produces the re-existence of modes of production and therefore of social consciousness that are made marginal and invisible by settler colonialism's dehumanizing market logic.

But just as these new relations of production are not necessarily friendly, the new modes of being human that respond to the demands of the sovereign planet are not, by default, gentle. In Roanhorse's novels, the rise of the sixth world intensifies the human capacity to physically express "clan powers" associated with *k'é* and *k'éí*, "ancestral relations that make [one] Diné and decide our kinship obligations" (*Trail* 3). Roanhorse has garnered criticism for her depictions of *k'é*, which bring together Diné spiritual doctrine's focus on "values that include respect, kindness, cooperation, friendliness, reciprocal relations and love" (Austin 84) with stereotypical sci-fi glorifications of violent power. Maggie, as a monsterslayer, uses her clan powers to shed blood and struggles with the fear that she will become one of the monsters that she hunts. "Roanhorse mixes Diné beliefs of the sacred with the evil of which we would never speak", writes Jennifer Rose Denetdale, "for as one Diné writer said of Roanhorse's depiction of Diné sensibilities on evil and witchery, 'It is a calling into being'" ("Guest"). One of Roanhorse's provocations in these novels, which the decolonial apocalypse genre makes possible, is that an end to deeply embedded settler structures of being human would not, when taken to its fullest expression, be a purely healing transformation. Archer Pechawis writes that "clearly, if we are to survive as a species, there must be a paradigmatic shift in our approach to life itself, one that encompasses Indigenous modes of thought and experiential reality", but, he continues, "perhaps the near or total destruction of the human-habitable ecosphere is a necessary step in our development" (44). Pechawis, like Roanhorse, proposes that decolonization on the planet's terms points to the inevitability of transition, but not of utopia.

To accept the facticity of violence within the speculative gambit of writing the decolonial apocalypse may indeed challenge the very traditions and processes of healing that Indigenous Futurity commits to reclaiming, but it also insists on the component of struggle in learning to be human. As a serious thought experiment, the decolonial apocalypse acknowledges the real material stakes of decolonization, and refuses to romanticize Indigenous resurgence politics as a benevolent cure-all for the history of settler colonialism. The Wall cradles Dinétah, but it does not protect the people from that "atmospheric violence" that comes with the collapse of an entire world system (Fanon 31). In *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, too, survivors look hopefully to the future even as they acknowledge that "the collapse of the white man's modern systems further withered the Anishinaabeg here" (212). The price of reclaiming and developing knowledge that allows the people to live in right relation with the land has been deprivation, subsistence living, and massive loss.

Stories of decolonial apocalypse call into being an understanding of the stakes inherent in relearning how to be human after the violent death of the liberal humanist subject so long naturalized by colonial epistemic tradition and ontological order. If this relearning entails accepting an operative logic in which "power flows from respect for nature and the natural order" (Alfred 60), the lesson may also require accepting the planet's own violence. What Indigenous Futurism adds is the need to match this violent power with the imperative to heal. "The future I see is more and more of our people living in cabins all over this territory", Huson asserts, even as pipelines break ground in Wet'suwet'en territory,

> more of our people getting thoroughly immersed in their culture, becoming independent and harvesting their own food, their own medicine so they can take care of themselves and their families…The future I see is there will be no pipelines through here.
>
> *("Invasion")*

Huson speaks in the voice and spatial grammar of Indigenous Futurism, which asks us, as does Fanon, to admit to the violence of decolonialization. But Indigenous Futurism builds from this

historically grounded premise to just as firmly insist that decolonization, like post-barricade infrastructure, is also a structure of healing. The Indigenous Futurist holds these opposing tensions up toward the approaching bulldozers and helicopters, and makes the revolutionary proposition that the future remains to be built. The world of tomorrow will not emerge through clinging to the maintenance of a colonial past; its crumbling infrastructure does not require an apocalypse to expose it as a world already in ruins.

## Note

1  Huson refers to the relationship between building cabins and blocking pipelines, which is based on the Canadian settler state's legal understanding of Indigenous land title, established by the landmark 1997 *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* Supreme Court ruling. This ruling asserts that in order to prove and defend title to unceded land, Indigenous groups must satisfy the following criteria: (i) the land must have been occupied prior to sovereignty, (ii) if present occupation is relied on as proof of occupation pre-sovereignty, there must be a continuity between present and pre-sovereignty occupation, and (iii) at sovereignty, that occupation must have been exclusive. (para. 143).

## Works Cited

"6th Annual Spring Unistoten Construction Camp." *Unist'ot'en*, https://unistoten.camp/2019spring/.

Alfred, Taiaiake. *Peace Power Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*. Oxford UP, 1999.

Alfred, Taiaiake, and Jeff Corntassel. "Being Indigenous: Resurgences Against Contemporary Colonialism." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2014, pp. 597–614.

Austin, Raymond D. *Navajo Courts and Navajo Common Law: A Tradition of Tribal Self-Governance*. U of Minnesota P, 2009.

Cornum, Lou. "The Creation Story is a Spaceship." *Voz-à-Voz*, http://www.vozavoz.ca/feature/lindsay-catherine-cornum. Accessed 7 Apr. 2022.

Coulthard, Glen Sean. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. U of Minnesota P, 2014.

Delgamuukw v. British Columbia, 3 S.C.R. 1010, 1997.

Denetdale, Jennifer Rose. "Guest Column: New Novel Twists Diné Teachings, Spirituality." *The Navajo Times*, Navajo Times Publishing Co., 21 Nov. 2018, https://navajotimes.com/opinion/essay/guest-column-new-novel-twists-dine-teachings-spirituality/. Accessed 7 Apr. 2022.

Dias, Nélia. "Exploring the Senses and Exploiting the Land: Railroads, Bodies and Measurement in Nineteenth-Century French Colonies" *Material Powers*, edited by Tony Bennett & Patrick Joyce. Routledge, 2010, pp. 171–189.

Dillon, Grace L. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. U of Arizona Press, 2012.

Dimaline, Cherie. *The Marrow Thieves*. Dancing Cat, 2017.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. 1963, translated by Richard Philcox, Grove, 2004.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement*. U of Chicago P, 2016.

Goeman, Mishuana R. "Disrupting a Settler-Colonial Grammar of Place: The Visual Memoir of Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie." *Theorizing Native Studies*, edited by Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith, Duke UP, 2014, pp. 235–265.

hooks, bell. "An Aesthetic of Blackness—Strange and Oppositional." *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry*, vol. 1, 1995, pp. 65–72.

"How to Stop an Oil and Gas Pipeline: The Unist'ot'en Camp Resistance." *YouTube*, uploaded by AJ+ (*Al Jazeera*), 5 Nov. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiVxyLb1hJA.

"Invasion." *YouTube*, uploaded by UnistotenCamp, 1 Nov. 2019, youtube.com/watch?v=D3R5 Uy5O_Ds.

Justice, Daniel Heath. *Why Indigenous Literature Matters*. Wilfred Laurier UP, 2018.

Lewis, Jason E. "A Brief (Media) History of the Indigenous Future." *Public*, vol. 27, no. 54, 2016, pp. 36–50.

Pechawis, Archer. "Indigenism: Aboriginal World View as Global Protocol." *Coded Territories: Tracing Indigenous Pathways in New Media Art*, edited by Steve Loft et al. U of Calgary Press, 2013, pp. 31–48.

Rice, Waubgeshig. *Moon of the Crusted Snow*. ECW Press, 2018.
Roanhorse, Rebecca. *Trail of Lightning*. Saga Press, 2018.
———. *Storm of Locusts*. Saga Press, 2019.
Tigerman, Kathleen. *Wisconsin Indian Literature: Anthology of Native Voices*. U of Wisconsin P, 2006.
Vizenor, Gerald. *Bearheart: Their Heirship Chronicles*. 1978. U Minnesota P, 1990.

# 14

# CODING POTAWATOMI COSMOLOGIES

## Elements of Bodwéwadmi Futurisms

*Blaire Morseau*

### Coding

Bodwéwadmimwen is the language spoken by Potawatomi peoples whose diaspora originated in the Great Lakes region and is grouped into the larger Algonquian language family which extends throughout much of what is now called Canada and the East Coast of the United States. More than this, Bodwéwadmimwen is a tool for future work or "futuring"—carving space to manifest Indigenous desires centered on heathy kin relations. Described as a "dialect of dreams", the many languages of Anishinaabemowin, of which Bodwéwadmimwen is a part, help us imagine an otherwise to settler colonial violence and Indigenous erasure (Noodin). Bodwéwadmimwen contains ancestral codes that can be deployed to program an infinite number of Indigenous futures centered on healthy relations between humans, other Earth beings, spirit beings, and even machines.

"Coding" as a verb is more important for the purposes of this essay than the noun "code". In its most basic sense, coding in sociolinguistic terms means "identifying analytic categories that reflect on the experiences of participants and henceforth, highlighting the significance of cultural events happening in the research setting" (Wan 1). However, there is coding that is done not just by researchers to understand large amounts of linguistic data. Coding is also done by Indigenous peoples in everyday processes of living, speaking, dreaming, and especially in "storywork" or telling stories for a specific political purpose. For example, the word for coffee in Bodwéwadmimwen is *gapi*. Because Anishinaabemowin in general is a very descriptive language, there are many ways to name things based off their appearances and behaviors. Another word for coffee is *mêkadémshëkéwabo*. Most words that end in "wabo" or "abo" are liquids— drinks, soups, etc. To the front of the word is *mêkadé*, meaning "black". And finally, in the middle of this word is *mshëké*, or "medicine". Coffee in Bodwéwadmimwen is no longer a disassociated noun as it is in English. Promoted from some dark bitter substance adults begrudgingly consume to wake up to their lives, coffee in Bodwéwadmimwen is our "black medicine drink". It therefore takes its place in the realm of other medicines used to heal mind, body, and spirit, whether those are tea, sage, or even aspirin. Thus, the descriptive nature of sentence structure and word formation in Bodwéwadmimwen is also a creative enterprise. To create and to name quite literally makes new meanings for Potawatomi speakers, and, as I argue, the capacity to imagine alternative futures.

The gist of coding in this chapter is borrowed from the computer sciences and related disciplines and is used to describe a process of creating instructions to program a language. Codes are the smallest bits of information that, when read and interpreted by a computer, allow apps, games, and websites to function properly. Like computer languages, the use of Bodwéwadmimwen allows the Potawatomi community to function properly and healthily. Ancestral, linguistic, and cultural coding are terms used interchangeably here. Put simply, Indigenous languages were developed, co-constructed, and evolved as a direct product of our ancestors' use of it (or lack thereof, when considering the cultural genocide of settler colonial states). Anishinaabemowin has been used in relation to speakers' own communities (or peoples speaking what they understood as their own language) as well as in relation to other communities speaking what they considered different languages. As linguists who study the Algonquian language family, of which Potawatomi is a part, have previously noted, Bodwéwadmimwen is highly influenced by Sauk-Fox and Kickapoo as well as Ojibwe and Miami through linguistic borrowing (Costa 195). Additionally, language and culture—while useful as separate concepts in specific discussions— are mutually influential and overlapping ideas that inform human identity and the larger organization of human societies. It is possible to refine the definitions and examples of each of these terms, teasing out the differences between ancestral, linguistic, and cultural codes, but doing so would inflate the theoretical discussion and depart from the larger argument I make about Indigenous futurisms. Lastly, the specific term "ancestral code" has gained traction in linguistic anthropology in the last decade or so and can problematically be used to associate one form of a language or dialect as more "authentic" or closer to what was used by a community's ancestors. Reaching for authenticity is dubious for many reasons, one being that cultural and linguistic authenticity, defined as recreating the conditions of an imagined past, is impossible, and ideas about what authenticity means are constantly renegotiated and changed over time. Social science and humanities scholarship also use the term coding or code, but in different ways. Linguistic anthropologists use the term "coding" or "code" to describe sociolinguistic phenomena. One example, "code-switching", refers to the alternation between two or more different languages in an utterance. With this sociolinguistic definition of code, the language itself is the smallest bit of information considered. While the understanding of codes in linguistic anthropology is useful, it limits the development of a more nuanced understanding of Indigenous coding, and by extension, how these codes are (or can be) deployed into Indigenous futurisms. Instead, ancestral codes or atomized bits of traditional knowledge and Native science are being used to deploy Bodwéwadmi futurisms. This coding carves out much-needed Indigenous space in the future to imagine an otherwise to settler colonial futures imposed on Native peoples.

## Bodwéwadmi Futurisms

Each community's ideas of the future, collectively understood as a multiplicity of potential futures, are conceptual rejections of what has been previously understood by anthropologists and other social theorists as "revitalization". Revitalization, whether it is cultural, linguistic, or ecological, is problematic because it describes a process of cultural necromancy, or reanimating something that has died or been brought close to death. Of course, Neshnabé peoples, like many Indigenous communities around the world, have been subjected to settler colonial policies that did in fact aim to disappear Native languages. As a result, there is so much work to be done to recover language and traditional knowledge understood not to be lost or dead, but "sleeping".

But where did this term revitalization come from, and why is it deficient? Cultural anthropologists have always thought about Indigenous peoples in temporalizing ways. Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1985) posited three stages of cultural evolution, from Savagery, to

Barbarism, to Civilization. Placing human societies on a linear scale, Native peoples in North America were seen as relics of the past or contemporary groups of peoples living as one might expect Western peoples to have lived centuries earlier. Of course, this was an inaccurate and racist hierarchy of categorizing and organizing humanity that anthropology has long since rejected. Despite this more recent rejection, as the field of cultural anthropology developed in the United States, salvage ethnographic projects grew. These scholarly and political projects aimed to collect and preserve linguistic and material culture from Indigenous communities with the pervasive assumption that Native Americans would not exist in the future.

Despite decades of rigorous scholarship and an institutional rebuff of understanding human diversity in terms of biological evolutionary principles, Indigenous peoples are still negatively affected by these racist temporalizing theories because they have programmed the ways in which non-Native peoples see us and represent us in policy, scholarship, film, and other media. As a result of these scholarly and colonial projects, insolent ideas of "primitive" versus "modern" cultures permeated peoples' understanding of non-White communities for decades, denying Native peoples a place in modernity or the future. These dubious understandings of cultural difference legitimized policies aimed at "civilizing" Native American peoples. The calamitous effects of policies of cultural genocide, such as Native American boarding schools, and land theft, by means of policies like the Dawes Act of 1887, on Native Americans cannot be overstated. Because much has been published on this topic, the purpose of this chapter is not to add to this important discussion. Rather, the point is that the concept of Indigenous futurisms is a refusal of cultural revitalization, as the latter framing is bound up with traditions of salvage anthropology. It is no surprise from this brief return to history that even today, Indigenous peoples are seen and represented by non-Native agents as so backwards, primitive, and antithetical to modernity that we cannot exist in "the" singular future (as if there were only one way to imagine it).[1]

Adversative to revitalization, Indigenous futurisms are a conceptual rejection of theoretical, institutional, and political projects that placed Native peoples and cultures in the past and denied them a place in the future. Since scientific or scholarly research incarcerated Indigenous peoples in an imagined past or framed Indigenous peoples as trying to rectify their place in the modern present through the rhetoric of revitalization, the concept of Indigenous futurisms is centered on Indigenous traditional knowledge systems instead of just Western science. It is used to reclaim Indigenous space while levering Indigenous stories and traditional languages used to tell those stories.

Instead of language and story work being described as revitalizing aspects of some idealized past, when seen as Indigenous futurisms, these same language and story work projects actively create spaces for Indigenous peoples in the future. Imaginations and speculations about the future help guide the momentum and efficacy of Indigenous futurism work. Because all speculative fiction already imagines potential futures most commonly through literary and visual works, forms of Indigenous futurisms have also been understood through the multiple lenses of Indigenous visual art,[2] dance,[3] filmmaking,[4] storytelling,[5] and activism.[6] Indigenous futurisms have been defined by others as the creative works and intellectual theorizations produced by Native peoples which imagine a multiplicity of potential futures through wedding the latest scientific understandings with Indigenous traditional knowledge.[7] This definition is not meant to reinforce the dubious binary between Western science or empirical inquiry and those of traditional knowledge. Rather, because these two knowledge systems are differentially deployed along lines of unequal relationships of power and representation, Indigenous futurisms must still address these politicized differences in the respective intellectual traditions. Baudemann defines Indigenous futurisms as "Indigenous storytelling about the future" (117). So, what stories are Neshnabé peoples telling, and why?

## Story Work

By surveying old stories transcribed hundreds of years ago as well as reviewing recently produced Indigenous science fiction and fantasy, we can see these forms of story work in terms of their smaller parts or language codes with specific attention to Potawatomi cosmological narratives. Story work is telling stories that catalyze social change. Deploying narratives centered on lived experience and curated by community peer review are the most effective way Indigenous peoples have to leverage their knowledge systems in diverse settings—often settings not of their own choosing, with oppressive power structures that operate to erase them. Stories have the capacity to inform, entertain, inspire, and influence behavior in small instances and large contexts.

The capacity to dream, imagine, and aspire to alternative (read: better) futures is no small matter. Indeed, in *The Marrow Thieves*, an award-winning novel by Métis Canadian writer Cherie Dimaline, the apocalypse is brought on by a sudden and complete inability to dream by non-Indigenous peoples. The desperation this incites for non-Native peoples leads them to renewed organized violence against Indigenous peoples—the only humans who can still dream. Living as refugees hiding in the woods and constantly on the move, Indigenous peoples are hunted for their bone marrow. It is painfully syphoned off from their bodies for its enigmatic dream-inducing matter, distilled into a serum, and injected into non-Natives. This corporeal solution is leached from the marrow of Native peoples so that non-dreamers can experience temporary moments of reprieve. The stealing from and killing of Natives in *The Marrow Thieves* mirrors the lived experiences of First Nations in Canada as well as other settler colonial states around the world. It is clear that the ability to dream, to imagine, and to aspire is a vital element of survival.

Anishinaabemowin also plays an important role for the Indigenous peoples in *The Marrow Thieves*, as it is not just biology or genetics that make them who they are. Described as a candy that melts in and coats the mouths of speakers, the children hold tightly to the few welcomed instances in which elders share their knowledge, savoring the sweet experiences of uttering their Native language well beyond the moments in which the auditory waves of spoken Anishinaabemowin settle in the air. For the main character, Frenchie, this plays out in his first description of Rose, his love interest: "having been raised by old people, she spoke like them. It made us feel surrounded on both ends—like we had a future and a past all bundled up in her round dark cheeks and loose curls". She speaks like them, those old ones, not just in her peculiar mannerisms, but in her knowledge of Anishinaabemowin. It is no coincidence that this description of Rose lends to the actual word in Anishinaabemowin for old folks, *ankobthegen*. Ancestor or *ankobthegen* also means "grandchild" in Anishinaabemowin, so context is important for comprehension. More specifically, *ankobthegen* translates to "tied to through the generations" in English—a description of the webs of kinship Indigenous peoples recognize and value. "It made us feel surrounded on both ends". The kinship envisioned and lived by Neshnabék extends through time in both directions. Bodwéwadmi futurisms can be actualized only by honoring the gifts of our ancestors and using them appropriately into speculative and cocreated futures.

Neshnabék see their relations and responsibilities not only to humans who have existed in the past, who are alive in the present, and who may exist in the future, but to all animate or sentient beings. Much has been published on the animals, or more appropriately, "other-than-human beings" that Indigenous peoples relate to and honor, but also machines[8] and, as I argue, spirit beings. Phenomenology informs Neshnabé ecological relationships to the (super)natural world specifically through stories. Fantasy and speculative fiction are not the only sites of Indigenous futurism work. There are multiple ways to theorize Neshnabé stories. Jill Doerfler

et al. identify two main typologies of Neshnabé storytelling. First, *Aadizookaang* are sacred texts, and are facilitated by mnedowêk, or spirit beings who have never lived as humans (Doerfler et al. xvii). Stories identified as Aadizookaang instruct Neshnabék in the ways of living a good life and are linguistically classified in Bodwéwadmimwen as animate beings. The second form of Neshnabé storytelling is *Dibaajimowinan* and is understood to mean history or news (Doerfler et al. xviii).

Dibaajimowinan is linguistically classified as inanimate and often includes family histories, stories from long ago, and stories from just yesterday. Interestingly, Neshnabé prophesies often blur the lines between both categories. It is not necessarily the case that Aadizookaang are untrue or are "myths" while Dibaajimowinan are accurate accounts. Instead, Neshnabé stories often oscillate between both categories. As Doerfler et al. eloquently explain, "These live, change, and grow through continuous retellings, constituting a dynamic narrative practice and process by a people" (xviii).

To this point, in the winter of 2019, I had the opportunity to hear Jim Thunder, a first-language Potawatomi speaker from Forest County Band in Wisconsin, orate several stories in a community event marketed as "traditional storytelling". Two of the most notable stories/histories he told were about how a group of Potawatomis escaped Indian agents during the removal era (early to mid-1800s). These stories are also published in a book, *Wete Yathmownen: Real Stories: Potawatomi Oral History* (2018), by Jim Thunder Sr. and Mary Jane Thunder. The first is a shorter narrative describing how Neshnabék prayed on the forces of fog and mist to mask their escape. The direction in which they fled and the route of their tracks were inundated by wafting particles of moisture overwhelming the air, blinding the pursuing Indian agents. Not only did the Potawatomis survive, but they ultimately established a community on the U.S.-Mexico border of Mexico near the state of Texas (currently the Mexican Kickapoo [Tribu Kikapú]):

> Wabansi wgi yonawa gode neshnabek egi webiwewat ezhi Mexico.
> I ga zhe widmagoyan ge ni nmeshomes, nneneyem wdedeymen.
> Egi webiwewat wi ye i ga yowat egi ndedmewat I wabansi, ebwa wabmegwat node wa ndo nsegwathen she zhna yedek.
> Gode keweziyek wgi *mnedokazwek* se zhna wi ye i ga yowat ode wensi.
> Wi ye i ga yowat na ewebiwewat ge winwa.
>
> The Neshnabe people used fog when they were on the run to Mexico.
> That's what my grandfather told me, my mother's father.
> When they were on the run, that's what they used, they asked for fog, so that they wouldn't be seen by those who were trying to kill them.
> Those old men did *ceremonies*, that's how they used the fog.
> That's what they used when they escaped.
> They were far away when whoever it was that wanted to catch them woke up.
> And so when those ones woke up, the other ones weren't there; they were far away.
> When those ones got up hoping to catch those Potawatomi.

In this story, Potawatomis escape capture by calling on mnedowêk. The root word for "ceremonies" or mnedokazwek is *mnedo*, referring to ceremonies as a space where spirit beings are called to conduct a specific purpose. The word mnedo has also been translated as "those who go about causing change". In this case, mnedo could change the environment through conjuring fog. This story also demonstrates the use of both Aadizookaang, or stories about mnedowêk

and drawing upon traditional teachings and ceremony to live a good life, and Dibaajimowinan, or historical accounts, in Neshnabé storytelling to share the circumstances of an event that occurred 200 years ago when Neshnabék were being forced west of their traditional homelands or being hunted and killed.

Neshnabé stories have been recorded by anthropologists, folklorists, and hobbyists for centuries, but researchers have mostly failed to theorize how these stories evolve to articulate contemporary experiences, let alone imagine the future. As an alternative ethic and methodology of research, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997), James Clifford extends this discussion of Bodwéwadmi futurisms to other Indigenous communities in North America. He reflects on his consultation experience in the Portland Art Museum in Oregon, which, at the time, was planning to reinstall an exhibit of Indigenous Northwest Coast artifacts. A group of Tlingit elders was invited to participate in the planning. Despite the Museum's expectations of learning the purpose and origins of the objects, the Tlingit elders used these items as catalysts for memoir, politics, and moral discussions. Initiating songs and stories from a deeply felt appreciation for the works of their relatives and ancestors, these items were entangled in an Indigenous matrix of history, law, and "myths". What became clear, Clifford writes, is that "from the elders' viewpoint, the collected objects were not primarily 'art', (but) 'records', 'history' and 'law', inseparable from myths and stories expressing ongoing moral lessons with current political force" (190). This exchange Clifford calls a "contact zone", whereby items in a collection were used as texts to read and understand contemporary and perhaps future political relationships between museums, Indigenous communities, and beyond (8).

Other-than-human beings played a central role in one of the stories shared by elders in the basement of the Portland Art Museum. In one instance, a headdress with representations of an octopus was brought out. The story that was shared by one of the Tlingit elders as a result recounts how a huge octopus with its appendages blocked the bay, keeping all the fish from reaching the shores. A Tlingit hero had to kill the octopus so that his community didn't starve to death and the salmon could reach their spawning grounds. "And by the end of the story the octopus has metamorphosed into state and federal agencies currently restricting the rights of Tlingits to take salmon according to tradition" (Clifford 190). The evidence for Indigenous storytelling, as seen in Clifford's accounts, are not new or rare. Indeed, they have been recorded in many works, but they have been theorized in terms of traditional accounts "surviving" to the contemporary moment or Indigenous attempts to "revitalize" the stories of their ancestors. But rarely have these stories been viewed in light of their application to present-day issues, as Clifford's example exemplifies. More rarely still have these traditional stories been theorized to understand Indigenous conceptions of the future. Before embarking on a discussion of how these stories about other-than-human relatives and "mythical" beings imagine Neshnabé futures, I first situate scholarly theorizations of humanity's entanglements with other-than-human relatives.

## Neshnabé Ecology

Indigenous ecology is best understood through the lens of kinship and relationality. In the summer of 2018, I helped conduct interviews with my tribe, the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi. Assisting the Pokagon Department of Natural Resources (DNR), I interviewed tribal members about their experiences of climate change through a grant-funded project called the Forestry Understory Project. Tribal members were interviewed in the communities represented in the Intertribal Council of Michigan that includes all 12 federally recognized tribes in the state.[9]

Most participants from the Pokagon Band whom I interviewed along with two nontribal employees from the Pokagon Band DNR included those identified as "possessing traditional ecological knowledge". I was not a part of the grant proposal process. My internship with DNR that summer was simply a serendipitous opportunity for the DNR project, as I was the only tribal member employed in the department at that time. So, at the request of the DNR director, I helped with community outreach to encourage community members to participate. In the interviews, most interviewees explained how their foraging practices have changed in the past decade or so as harvesting times for various natural resources significantly changed or decreased. Many of their observations paralleled those made by climate change scientists and ecology experts. For example, Potawatomi citizens included in the interviews noted that harvesting times for various plants and medicines seemed to be occurring later in the year and had a significantly shorter duration. It seemed as though these interviews were simply a qualitative buttress to what scientists already knew to be true about understories in the Great Lakes region.

However, one interview foregrounded Neshnabé ecological interpretations which included a space to talk about nonhuman relatives or spirit beings. The interviews were not designed to identify or examine participants' cosmological interpretations about climate change, per se. One participant, Jefferson Ballew Jr., nonetheless offered some of his interpretations.

*Jefferson:* We have guardians out there. It's why you put tobacco out there. Because then *pa'isêk* will get you. The Little People will get you. They're—they're put out there because if we're going out there to be naughty, they're going to deter you. They're going to move the trees so you get lost. They're gonna move the trail. They can do that you know … That's what their magic is all about.

Jefferson is explaining here about pa'isêk, or Little People. A shared belief of many tribes throughout the United States and Canada, Little People may be considered harmless or malevolent, but at the very least, they are tricksters. They're sometimes known to steal things from humans. So, when you can't find your car keys or seem to have misplaced something, it's typical in any Neshnabé household to offer something to the Little People, such as candy or something shiny. However, they're sometimes known to steal children as well. As a result, some tribal members are really scared of them. Another Pokagon citizen, Kyle Malotts, has also explained to me that Little People were once human children, but they crept off in the woods and never came back. Neshnabé relationships with Little People are therefore also biological.

Jefferson continues his description of Little People in our interview. He's explaining pa'isêk to me, but also to the two other interviewers who are non-Native. Instead of understanding changes in the availability of some natural resources as simply the result of anthropogenic climate change, Jefferson makes a connection between our lack of respect and beliefs in these other-than-human relatives to global changes in ecology:

*Jefferson:* The people don't believe in that anymore. Why doesn't England have flowers and trees anymore? Why aren't their vines growing like they used to?
*Ian:* Because it's been industrialized for so long and that's just essentially all—
*Jefferson:* —Oh sure. That's the White way of saying it, right? The Indigenous people will tell you, they stopped believing in their fairies. They stopped believing in their wood elves. They stopped believing in their leprechauns. Those are the individuals that take care of that out there. If you don't believe in them, they're not going to be there. Why is America still so lush? Because we still believe. Because we still believe that our wood elves are out there that those spirits, that those fairies—we still know. So, because we believe in it, it's still here.

According to Jefferson, negative environmental conditions are caused by some humans forgetting about their kinship responsibility to spirit beings. Neshnabé ecology situates agency differently from Western science in ways that explain climate change as not just the result of poor ecological management strategies, but of larger issues of ontology or connectedness with nonhuman animate beings.

## Conclusion

Deploying narratives centered on lived experience and curated by community peer review are the most effective way Indigenous peoples have to leverage their knowledge systems in diverse settings—often settings not of their own choosing, with oppressive power structures that operate to erase them. Stories have the capacity to inform, entertain, inspire, and influence behavior in small instances and large contexts. By surveying old stories transcribed hundreds of years ago as well as reviewing recently produced Indigenous science fiction and fantasy with specific attention to Potawatomi cosmological narratives, these forms of story work become visible. More than mere tapestries of the past, the Potawatomi language was coded over time by generations of speakers that are now being used to program a set of Bodwéwadmi futurisms. Coding is also done by Indigenous peoples in everyday processes of living, speaking, dreaming, and especially in "story work" or telling stories for a specific political purpose. This coding carves out much needed Indigenous space in the future to imagine an otherwise to settler colonial futures imposed on Native peoples. Adversary to revitalization, Indigenous futurisms are a conceptual rejection of theoretical, institutional, and political projects that placed Native peoples and cultures in the past and denied them a place in the future. These language codes, pixels, spirit beings, and more are elements of what I call Bodwéwadmi futurisms, or atomized bits of traditional knowledge and Native science. Rejecting problematic ideas of "revitalization" centered on pastness, these codes are deployed to program an infinite number of Indigenous futures centered on healthy relations between humans, other Earth beings, spirit beings, and even machines.

## Notes

1 For more on this topic, see Isiah Lavender III's *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011), Lavender's collection *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction* (2014), and John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008).

2 See Kristina Baudemann's *Extrapolation* essay "Indigenous Futurisms in North American Indigenous Art: The Transforming Visions of Ryan Singer, Daniel McCoy, Topaz Jones, Marla Allison, and Debra Yepa-Pappan" (2016).

3 See Karyn Recollet's *Dance Research Journal* article "Gesturing Indigenous Futurities Through the Remix" (2016).

4 See William Lempert's *Visual Anthropology Review* essay, "Decolonizing Encounters of the Third Kind: Alternative Futuring in Native Science Fiction Film: Decolonizing Encounters of the Third Kind" (2014).

5 See David M. Higgins's *Extrapolation* article "Survivance in Indigenous Science Fictions: Vizenor, Silko, Glancy, and the Rejection of Imperial Victimry" (2016).

6 See Shelley Streeby's book chapter "NoDAPL Native American and Indigenous Science, Fiction, and Futurisms", in *Stories through Theories/Theories through Stories: North American Indian Writing* (2009).

7 See Grace L. Dillon's collection *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012).

8 See Jason Edward Lewis et al.'s *Journal of Design and Science* article, "Making Kin with the Machines" (2018).

9  Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, Bay Mills Indian Community, Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, Hannahville Potawatomi Indian Community, Keweenaw Bay Indian Community, Lac Vieux Desert Band of Chippewa Indian Community, Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians, Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians, Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians, Saginaw-Chippewa Indian Tribe, and Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians.

# Works Cited

Baudemann, Kristina. "Indigenous Futurisms in North American Indigenous Art: The Transforming Visions of Ryan Singer, Daniel McCoy, Topaz Jones, Marla Allison, and Debra Yepa-Pappan." *Extrapolation*, vol. 57, no. 1–2, 2016, pp. 117–150.

Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Harvard UP, 1997.

Costa, David J. "Borrowing in Southern Great Lakes Algonquian and the History of Potawatomi." *Anthropological Linguistics*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2013, pp. 195–233, https://doi.org/10.1353/anl.2013.0013.

Dillon, Grace L. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. U of Arizona Press, 2012.

Doerfler, Jill, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, editors. *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*. Michigan State UP, 2013.

Higgins, David M. "Survivance in Indigenous Science Fictions: Vizenor, Silko, Glancy, and the Rejection of Imperial Victimry." *Extrapolation*, vol. 57, no. 1–2, 2016, pp. 51–72.

Lavender, Isiah III. *Race in American Science Fiction*. Indiana UP, 2011.

———, editor. *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction*. UP of Mississippi, 2014.

Lempert, William. "Decolonizing Encounters of the Third Kind: Alternative Futuring in Native Science Fiction Film: Decolonizing Encounters of the Third Kind." *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2014, pp. 164–176, https://doi.org/10.1111/var.12046.

Lewis, Jason Edward, et al. "Making Kin with the Machines." *Journal of Design and Science*, 16 July 2018, pp. 1–18, https://doi.org/10.21428/bfafd97b.

Morgan, Lewis Henry. *Ancient Society*. U of Arizona P, 1985.

Noodin, Margaret. *Bawaajimo: A Dialect of Dreams in Anishinaabe Language and Literature*. Michigan State UP, 2014.

Recollet, Karyn. "Gesturing indigenous Futurities Through the Remix." *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2016, pp. 91–105, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767715000492.

Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan UP, 2008.

Streeby, Shelley, "NoDAPL Native American and Indigenous Science, Fiction, and Futurisms." *Stories through Theories/Theories through Stories: North American Indian Writing*, edited by Gordon Henry, Nieves Pascual Soler, and Silvia Martínez-Falquina, Michigan State UP, 2009, pp. 34–68.

Thunder, Jim Sr., and Mary Jane Thunder. *Wete Yathmownen, Real Stories: Potawatomi Oral History*, 2018. https://shop.fcpotawatomi.com/products/wete-yathmownen-real-stories-potawatomi-oral-history/.

Wan, Rosalind. "Data Coding for Indigenous Language Research: Attaching Local Meanings in Generating Categories and Themes." *SHS Web of Conferences*, vol. 53, no. 01002, 2018, pp.1–7, https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20185301002.

# 15

# (RE)WRITING AND (RE)BEADING

## Understanding Indigenous Women's Roles in the Creation of Indigenous Futurisms

*Emily C. Van Alst*

### Introduction

The project described in this chapter exists at the intersection of Indigenous art, Indigenous futurisms, and Indigenous feminism. Here I present a brief survey of the evolution of beadwork in Native North America (which will include the United States and Canada), while intertwining examples of Native[1] women artists from historical and contemporary case studies. I use examples of beadwork and quillwork found on Instagram and Facebook because social media is an important venue to share Indigenous art in the present day (Thompson 19), and because these examples are what I deem representative of Indigenous futurisms. As a Lakota/Anishinaabe woman, the people whom I follow on social media are from these tribal communities, and therefore designs and techniques are from those groups. This online space from which I draw examples, in particular, acts a space for "Indigenous artists, especially those which are female and femme-identifying, which are gaining opportunities to move beyond the factory-line production of 'souvenir goods'" (Thompson 12). Though the focus is on beadwork and quillwork, that is not to say that there are no other Indigenous women creating other types of art that replicate the themes we will see in this chapter. I also focus on Indigenous women, but Indigenous men and Two-spirit relatives are also creating art that is reflective of Indigenous futurisms.

I utilize the concept of Indigenous futurisms, a term coined by Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon, as the framework for this project. Indigenous futurisms (re)imagine the past, present, and future for Indigenous people, by Indigenous people. Though the concept comes out of Indigenous literature and media studies, I argue that this concept can be applied to art and specifically, beadwork (Dillon; Lempert). I use "re" in parentheses here as utilized by Risling Baldy (Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk), who argues that the revitalization of traditional practices allows for communities to practice (re)claiming, (re)writing, (re)righting, and (re)riteing. Risling Baldy takes her use of "re" from Mishuana Goeman's work on (re)mapping settler colonial geopolitical spaces. She argues that Indigenous women and Indigenous feminism can (re)map and (re)understand their own place in settler colonial spaces (Goeman 29). I will also be examining Gerald Vizenor's (Anishinaabe) concept of survivance, which can be traced within the concept of Indigenous futurisms. Overall, this chapter argues that Indigenous women and the beadwork they create can and does (re)imagine and (re)bead our communities' past, present, and futures.

## Quillwork

One of the most important traditional forms of artwork in our communities is quillwork. It is created by using porcupine quills that are often dyed and then flattened and wrapped into or onto a rawhide that has been cut out in a particular shape, or quills that are sewn onto or into either fabric or leather. The quills must be cleaned, sized, and sorted by similar size, and dyed with natural dyes before they can be used to adorn clothing, jewelry, or other objects. According to a museum exhibit entitled *Sacred Beauty: Quillwork of Plains Women*, "Before commercial dyes various natural dyes were utilized including berries, flowers, plant toots, and nuts were steeped in water and then transferred to quills" (Halvorson 3). In regard to designs, Eastern Sioux or Dakota women used floral motifs and western Sioux women (Lakota) used abstract geometric patterns to decorate items with quills, beads, and paint. One scholar recalls in a conversation with a Dakota elder that quillwork is profoundly difficult, and women who mastered the art were seen as important and sacred. The elder explained,

> Beading could be done by anyone at any time, but not quillwork. Quillwork and other "fancy work" partook of all these attributes of *wakan*: it was an ancient knowledge handed down from one generation of women to another; the talent to do this work came from a mysterious being who appeared in a dream, and it possessed power to make beautiful tools and equipment of everyday life.
>
> *(Hyman 35)*

Because of the skill and beauty it would take to create quillwork, women would publicly display their work to their communities. They would actively be a part of quillwork societies that were dedicated to women and their craft. During the fur trade period, quillwork became an important part of this economy, and many women created quilled work specially to sell and bargain with fur traders and other settlers (Phillips and Berlo 126). But after being confined to reservations, that particular economy (along with most others) ended, and the need to create elaborate and ornate pieces to be traded faded out of style. But the introduction of European beads would be vital to maintain traditional artistic expression.

## Beadwork

Glass beads were first introduced by Euro-Americans during the early period of contact between Native Americans and settlers (early 1700s–late 1800s in the western plains region). This was even earlier in the northeastern part of the United States and Canada. Beading and beadwork replaced more traditional practices such as shell work, quillwork, and stone beads. But traditional techniques and traditional designs were still utilized during this transition. In contemporary Native North American art, beading is one of the most recognizable forms of Native American art.

Ruth Phillips and Janet Berlo argue in their book *Native North American Art* that

> Native women quickly recognized the bead's artistic potential in terms of individual design units. Often beads were used alongside quillwork for extra richness and or ornamentation. But soon, quillwork would fade out of style and by the 1840's beads had almost completely replaced quillwork.
>
> *(Phillips and Berlo 125)*

Glass beads, in their various shapes, sizes, and colors, were popular trade items that fur traders brought to what would be called the United States. Between 1840 and 1850 the seed bead (the style of bead we see in contemporary art) was introduced in the Plains region by settlers and through Indigenous trade networks from the East Coast. The want and desire for beads may have come from the fact that "beads offered the embroiderer a more flexible medium to work with as well as a decorative material that required no preliminary preparations. Great quantities of beads were readily available to Indian bead workers" (Phillips and Berlo 127). With the introduction of the reservation policy, which confined Native people, scholars have claimed that Native women had more time to work on beadwork, which they could then sell to non-Native people. Art historians have argued that "in many regions, beadwork designs became more complex. Items of clothing were lavishly covered with beads. Lakota artists were specifically known for beading historical battles, names, dates, and American flag iconography" (Phillips and Berlo 127). During the reservation period "women's arts came to symbolize the ethnicity for the tribe, for the people themselves and for outsiders, and they became, even more than before, a way of affirming the traditions of the group" (Phillips and Berlo 126). These types of objects were sold in order to feed children and keep families alive during this period of containment and isolation. It was during this time too, Collete Hyman argues, that "women's creative work played a multifaceted role in survival" (Hyman 14). Not only did these traditions (beadwork) survive, but motifs and designs from quillwork carried on through beadwork. Though the materials were Euro-American, the creator and the creativity was Indigenous, keeping those traditions and motifs alive today. Part of this survivance is Native women's ability to adapt their social setting of creating art from traditional ways to the churches' imposed social settings of small quilting societies. These societies reflect the quillwork societies of the past.

## Theoretical Background

This chapter is driven, theoretically, by Indigenous scholars from literature, history, Indigenous and Native American studies, and Indigenous feminist backgrounds. During the 2010s and early 2020s, Indigenous scholars became increasingly interested in how Native American and Indigenous people are reclaiming academic disciplines and other settler colonial spaces from which Native communities have been historically excluded. Indigenous feminism has also become an important concept and area of praxis for many Indigenous communities and Indigenous scholars. One of the first scholars interested in answering these questions is Mishuana Goeman (Seneca). Her book *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* sets out to "interrogate the use of historical and culturally situated spatial epistemologies, geographic metaphors, and the reality they produce" (Goeman 2). She argues as well that by "locating a Native feminisms spatial dialogue that conceives of space as not bounded by geo-politics, but stories, are necessary" (Goeman 184). Though she uses Indigenous literature to conceive of Native women (re)mapping their experiences and communities, her work is applicable here. Native women are using the space where beads can be laid down to conceive of a different world. Native women artists and the practice of (re)beading creates Indigenous space within the art world.

Building on Goeman's work, Cutcha Risling Baldy (Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk) wrote *We Are Dancing for You: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women's Coming-of-Age* (2018), in which she explores how Indigenous women in her community are working towards (re)claiming, (re)writing, (re)righting, and (re)riteing. Though her work is focused on how Indigenous women are reclaiming Indigenous womanhood, female spaces, and coming-of-age ceremonies, her work is also applicable in this instance. The practice of reclaiming

traditional practices and revitalization traditions is a key concept when looking at how Indigenous women are also doing this in the art world. Just as Risling Baldy argues that rewriting is a form of (re)claiming traditional coming-of-age ceremonies, I argue that by using social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, Indigenous women are (re) beading, which is a form of (re)claiming our traditional artistic practices despite ongoing threats of violence and erasure.

Maintaining these traditions is a form of *survivance*, a concept coined by Anishannabe scholar and activist Gerald Vizenor. He has stated that Indigenous people are not victims of colonization but have had the ability to adapt and change our traditional culture. He argues "Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence … survivance is the continuance of stories not a mere reaction, however pertinent" (Vizenor 1). We can see how expressive art as a tradition among Indigenous women has survived despite colonial threats to the continuation of modes of art. Indigenous women are maintaining traditional artistic practice by adapting their practices using Euro-American technology, which has allowed traditional designs and motifs in art to survive. Survivance becomes an important term and paradigm for Indigenous scholars to utilize in the investigations of Indigenous futures, where the presence of indigeneity extends from the physical self to the physical representations of the materiality of culture, such as art and literature.

Part of survivance is the term Indigenous futurisms, coined by Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon. In her important anthology *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science*, she argues that science fiction within literature acts as a space that Indigenous people can utilize in order to rewrite and experiment with pushing the boundaries of Western ideas of science fiction. Indigenous writers and artists are not just recreating the same Western science fiction tropes but making them their own and indigenizing different themes. Some of these themes within Western science fiction include Indigenous science, contact between the Indigenous (as alien) and the foreign, Native slipstream, and post-apocalyptic. Post-colonized people are then dealing with and trying to create an optimistic space to (re)write an Indigenous future (Dillon 8). This idea comes from conversations about Afrofuturism in which the African diaspora is explored with technology at the intersection of art and philosophy. Dillon argues that for many Native American and Indigenous communities, a post-apocalyptic world is actively being experienced. What is the major takeaway from Indigenous futurisms? Representation is key for Native people to rewrite and see themselves represented in a contemporary present and in possible and alternative futures. Visual representation is then representative of Indigenous people, our history, and culture that is resilient, contemporary, and traditional.

Scholar Kristina Baudemann, in her article *Indigenous Futurisms in North American Indigenous Art*, builds on Dillon's literary anthology with an exploration of five contemporary Indigenous visual artists where she argues that Indigenous futurism's art is at

> the intersection of North American Indigenous realities with pop art and popular culture, and of the memory of historical trauma with Western ideologies of progress, Indigenous artists create a visual code to map out new worlds and project Indigenous sovereignties into parallel dimensions and fantastic futures.
>
> *(Baudemann 117)*

Again, visual representations and understandings of past, present, and future can be seen in contemporary Indigenous art. Throughout this chapter, we will see how art, Indigenous futures, and pop culture collide to create a beaded Indigenous future.

## Contemporary Beadwork

Today beadwork and quillwork are seen mostly in the digital media realm and in Western museums. Beadwork of the past and beadwork of the present are seen as Western "art", where we see contemporary and historical Indigenous women's work in museums. Beadwork is created by artists drawing their ideas on some sort of paper and then beading onto a sturdy type of felt or fabric. Each Native community has its own traditional practice of how to tack down beads—lazy stitch and other stitches are utilized. Types of glass beads range from Japanese Delica to Czech Luster. Each artist has their own type of beads they prefer to use, but in general, the more sparkly, the better. There are also a variety of different sizes. If an artist can use and successfully manipulate size 13–15, they can sell their art for a higher price. Most women I know use 11 or 12—small enough to look nice and neat, but big enough to be actually able to manipulate in the way one would want. Powwows have allowed beadwork and quillwork to develop as one of the most recognizable forms of powwow regalia, and Native women's ideas about design has changed, especially with earrings, and we see "fancier" designs. The traditional motifs are there, but we see more "sparkly" beads and neon colors across Native North America. However, I have noticed in my own observations of Lakota/Dakota women that they use more traditional designs, patterns, and motifs in comparison to other Indigenous women.

These designs gained popularity especially on social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Lakota and Dakota women are using social media platforms to show off, so to speak, their work to the public, just like they would have done historically. They are also using these platforms to sell their beadwork and quillwork. As Cherokee scholar Phyllis Thompson argues, Indigenous peoples in the twenty-first century have been

> allowed opportunities to exert agency not only over their presentation of self, but their empowerment in an economy in which many remain systemically dispossessed. Processes of decolonization are no longer confined to colonialist and capitalist physical subjectivities—these desires for expanded autonomy can be pursued at the push of a button and the stringing of a bead.
>
> *(Thompson 45)*

Use of social media and engagement with the online economy of Native art selling is just another act of Indigenous women actively adapting their practices in order to maintain traditional expressive art. The following artists are all excellent examples of how Indigenous women have adapted their practices and embraced the online social media platforms. Indigenous women are creating "wearable" art via their earrings, pins, and medallions. Each set of earrings or medallions (larger beaded pieces worn around the neck) is unique to the artist who created them. The examples in the next section are pieces that I believe represent Indigenous futurisms and indigenizing pop culture. There is a mix of contemporary artists whose work is shown in museums and Indigenous women who sell their wearable art.

## Indigenous Women Artists

Sometimes artists are known merely by their Instagram handles (names searchable on the social media application). Northern Cheyenne and Lakota artist @tiyospaye_Beadwork displays and sells her work on that platform. In these photos (Figures 15.1 and 15.2), we see a mix of two different traditional Lakota artistic media: beadwork and parfleche.[2] She paints a traditional bear motif with heart lines on a contemporary set of earrings and cuffs. She also

*Figure 15.1* @tiyospaye_beadwork. Pictures screenshotted from artist's Instagram page. 2019. Photos seen here with permission of artist.



*Figure 15.2* @tiyospaye_beadwork. Pictures screenshotted from artist's Instagram page. 2019. Photos seen here with permission of artist.

adds pompoms of what I assume is rabbit fur. She includes traditional Lakota/Dakota floral motifs on both the earring cuff set and the earring and purse set. In 2019 @tiyospaye_Beadwork began showing her work, and she quickly gained popularity on Instagram. Her work commands premium prices, and she has sets like the ones pictured in Figures 15.1 and 15.2, as well as other earrings, purses, earmuffs, and medallions. By doing so she represents a facet of the beadwork community that brings together traditional patterns and materials with sparkly, neon, and glittery aesthetics that many Indigenous women seek out in their earrings, purses, and other adornments.

Charlene Holy Bear (Lakota, @c.holybear) is well known for her work regarding beading Vans shoes (Figure 15.3). Her work has been featured in major fashion magazines such as *Vogue* as well as other media and social media platforms. Vans are popular among the younger generations, and with more affordable options, they have become popular among Native American youth. The checkered designs on Vans act as a perfect geometric base for Holy Bear to bead. Each of the different squares that creates the checkered design acts as a different beading possibility. Here, we see Holy Bear create an intricate overall design by paying attention to each individual checkered square. She indigenizes an important commercial product; her work is less commercial (not selling on social media), but it is seen as contemporary art and is shown in museums across the country.

Jamie Okuma (Shoshone Bannock, @J. Okuma) is a high-fashion Indigenous artist. She creates wearable clothing, including jackets, scarves, purses, and beadwork like earrings. For this chapter, I chose her most iconic beadwork seen in high-fashion magazines such as *Vogue*—the Elk Boots. The boots are high fashion, high heeled, and fully beaded with some of the smallest beads in the world (size 15). We see traditional motifs on the bottom, which then move into a long-legged elk. The elk is of a traditional pattern, but the long legs give it a futuristic appearance. She not only beads fashion and accessories with pop culture like Pennywise the Dancing Clown from Stephen King's *It* but maintains traditional Shoshone Bannock floral motifs. Her work is displayed on runways and in magazines. She represents an Indigenous future that makes high fashion possible for Native people.

Margaret Nazon (Gwich'in), from the Northwest Territories of Canada, is a traditional bead worker who is inspired by the galaxy. On her website, in her "about" section, she notes that the



*Figure 15.3* Charlene Holy Bear. https://www.charleneholybear.com/#/new-gallery/. Pictures screenshotted from artist's Instagram page. 2019. Photos seen here with permission of artist.

Northern Landscapes were a great inspiration for me until 2008, my subject matter changed to cosmic images. I used glass beads of various sizes and designs to capture the shimmering beauty of the Aurora Borealis and the images inspired by the Hubble Space Telescope. Beads are stitched to black velvet or canvas.

In her piece "Saturn", we see the planet Saturn represented. She utilizes varying beading techniques and different types of beads with different sizes to create particles and other material from the universe. Though this is not pop culture, it does represent Native people and Margaret's perspective in the realm of science fiction and that of the larger universe.

Jana Schmieding (Lakota, @janaunplgd), a comedian located in Los Angeles (and a writer and actress with the TV series *Rutherford Falls*), is a relatively new artist who was on Twitter but recently moved over to Instagram to show off her work. Jana's work is fascinating in that she beads mostly fruit—either slices or whole pieces of fruit. Here we see avocados and grapefruit slices (Figures 15.4 and 15.5). Jana's and other artists' work on beading fruit is fascinating because it plays into the "super foods" phenomenon. Given current movements to reclaiming traditional food practices and food sovereignty, Jana's fruit beadwork pushes an Indigenous visual representation of this movement. There is also a cultural aesthetic of fruit motifs on clothing and other wearable and usable pieces. By indigenizing fruit, it allows Native people to enter and participate in another aspect of pop culture.

Mariah Quincy (Anishanaabe, @iah.q) is a new creative beadwork artist who recently gained popularity on Instagram. Her work is mostly wearable art, but her themes are the most align with my argument here. In Figure 15.6, she beads a dead Christopher Columbus. The hot-pink background highlights the purple, cream, and orange matte beads she utilizes. Overall, her work uses themes of traditional floral work and fruits, common among Anishinaabe artists. Her



*Figure 15.4* Jana Schmieding. Picture screenshotted from artist's Instagram page. 2019. Photo seen here with permission of artist.
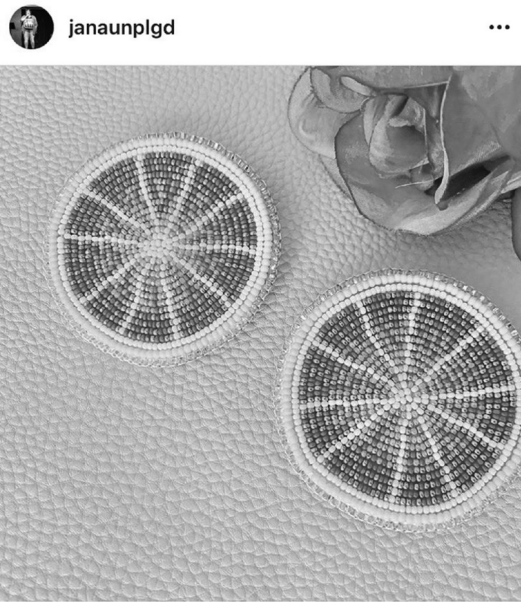
*Figure 15.5* Jana Schmieding. Picture screenshotted from artist's Instagram page. 2019. Photo seen here with permission of artist.



*Figure 15.6* Mariah Quincy. Picture screenshotted from artist's Instagram page. 2019. Photo seen here with permission of artist.

Instagram page also features aliens, cowboy hats, small Indigenous women, and most recently Louise from the popular television show *Bob's Burgers*. She is greatly influenced by current pop culture, memes, and science fiction and dreamlike color palates. She imagines how Indigenous folks are part of these pop culture phenomena. Her work offers Indigenous people a space to imagine themselves in pop culture but in alternative futures and spaces. She highlights her work by utilizing these bright-colored backgrounds to compliment her beadwork. Her use of digital backgrounds instead of those in reality speak to her work at indigenizing a digital and futuristic space.

Lastly, Heather Stewart (Cree, @sweetgrass_beads) runs an Instagram and an Etsy account where she creates beadwork that focuses mainly on indigenizing pop culture with a particular focus on horror (Figures 15.7 and 15.8). She creates images from *Beetlejuice*, *The Shining*, *Jaws*, *The Simpsons*, and more. Most of her work is traditional powwow earrings, longer dangly earrings, and the patches that depict iconic science fiction and horror characters. This example features Frankenstein's monster and his Bride from *The Bride of Frankenstein*. She uses mostly matte beads but has an intricate design to create the two recognizable characters. She places the two wearable patches on a backdrop of exotic feathers to highlight the matte colors of the characters. The second photo is a beaded Baby Yoda (Figure 15.8). The character Baby Yoda has become a fundamental pop culture character for Indigenous communities.

After the release of the *Star Wars* series *The Mandalorian*, Grogu, or Baby Yoda as many fans called him, became a breakout character. In an *Indian Country Today* article, Aliyah Chavez notes about how Native communities online claimed Baby Yoda as Native and that many communities argued about his tribal affiliation, but Chavez writes too that many Indigenous artists began to draw, paint, bead, and quill Baby Yoda. Many Indigenous artists like Heather Stewart beaded Baby Yoda sipping soup, a common food used by Indigenous communities in ceremonial contexts. Baby Yoda is a great example of how Indigenous artists can use a character to imbue their own cultural contexts into this pop culture icon, and by doing so indigenize the



*Figure 15.7* Heather Stewart. Pictures screenshotted from artist's Instagram page. 2019. Photos seen here with permission of artist.

*Figure 15.8* Heather Stewart. Pictures screenshotted from artist's Instagram page. 2019. Photos seen here with permission of artist.

character. By beading horror and other iconic pop culture characters, Stewart is a perfect example of creating a form of Indigenous futurisms that indigenizes Western pop culture and ultimately allows Native people to envision a future of Indigenous pop culture.

## Discussion

In Lakota, we do not have a word for art, but we do have the concept of "bringing out the beauty". By using our traditional practices, which have survived for hundreds of years, Indigenous women are (re)beading and (re)claiming our practices, and bringing out the beauty in contemporary material culture and art. By building upon the work Indigenous scholars who advocate for Indigenous women and their unique role in maintaining traditional artists' practices, we can investigate what Indigenous futurisms look like from a visual representation standpoint. Thompson argues in her thesis that beadwork has the ability to heal and make amends with the past:

> intangible concepts like stereotypes have direct physical, psychological, and sociological effects for Native communities, especially Native youth. There is much new research on this correlation in the fields of psychology and sociology, though still not enough. Contemporary Indigenous artists are picking up needles and threads and turning them into weapons for survival and visibility.
>
> *(Thompson 37)*

Representation, again, is key in how beadwork can be utilized by Native communities. One scholar has argued that by "drawing on popular culture, North American Indigenous artists assert their presence in global media consumers' world—drinking Coke, watching *Star Wars*, taking selfies—and re-appropriating the right to tell their own stories about past, present, and future" (Baudemaan 123). With beadwork, Native women are uniquely positioned to (re)bead

our past and create an Indigenous present and future that optimistically represents Indigenous people and our culture. The artists highlighted in the previous section all share themes of survivance, alternative futures, and a reimagining of Indigenous people and art forms in contemporary and future spaces.

The first three artists (tiyospaye_beadwork, Charlene Holy Bear, Jamie Okuma) utilize traditional art forms to create contemporary art that can be worn. Tiyospaye_Beadwork combines three different traditional forms of art (beadwork, quillwork, and parfleche) to modernize traditional adornments such as earrings and cuffs. Her mix of traditional, contemporary, and powwow shows how innovative her work can be. She sees Native people as being able to wear her art with her traditional motifs on displayed but modernized to show a new aesthetic that Indigenous women can wear. Holy Bear's beaded Vans are similar to tiyospaye_beadwork's art. Vans are a shoe worn by many, but, in Indigenous communities, are worn by Indigenous youth. By adding beadwork designs to them, Holy Bear imagines an everyday fashion item as an Indigenous object, to be worn by Native youth as an expression of their identity. It carves out a space for Indigenous people to see themselves as part of contemporary culture. Okuma's work represents Indigenous people in the fashion world. By creating beaded high-fashion adornments with traditional motifs and patterns like high heels and purses, Okuma pictures Native people in places that have historically stolen and appropriated from Native people. Her iconic beaded shoes and her own line of Indigenous fashion not only represents people in the fashion world but allows communities to wear her art and represent traditional designs. All three women have utilized traditional artforms and brought them into the contemporary world, which represents the idea of survivance, keeping these traditional artforms alive with contemporary twists, much like Indigenous women artists during the reservation period.

Continuing the pop culture represented in adornments, Schmieding and Mariah Quincy bead mostly earrings and medallions that use brightly colored beads and utilize contemporary themes like fruit, animals, pop culture icons, and more while still maintaining traditional art forms through their beadwork. Their earrings and medallions convey subcultures and pop culture themes that become wearable art. Indigenous people who then wear these items are able to imagine pop culture futures where Indigenous peoples' knowledges and stories are shown. Jana's beaded fruit provides an important world where popular fruit motifs are Indigenous, and carves out a place for Indigenous women to take part in a fashion trend. Meanwhile, Quincy's dead Christopher Columbus is a perfect example of a beaded alternative future, where Columbus being dead may provide a different world for Indigenous communities.

Beadwork that features science fiction, like *Star Wars* characters such as Baby Yoda, allows Indigenous communities to picture themselves within an alternative future or places. The *Star Wars* universe, a science fiction series, imagines a different and speculative space; this place becomes open for Indigenous communities to imagine how they might fit into this alternative future. Beadwork, much like science fiction, becomes part of "linkages being made in Indigenous speculative fiction between traditional stories or Indigenous knowledge systems with futurity or alternative realities. These creative undertakings make compelling gestures toward ideas of futurity and constitutive creative approaches to representation and, by extension, sovereignty" (Topash-Caldwell 52). Similarly, Nazon's work imagines the literal stars and space, and through her beadwork science fiction that imagines life outside of our planet is experienced by an Indigenous person. By utilizing beads to recreate her perspective of the universe that exists beyond this world, Nazon's work rewrites the galaxy through each individual bead she tacks down and by doing so indigenizes the world beyond this one.

Baby Yoda instantly became an iconic character especially for Native children—my niece affectionally calls him Baby Uncle, which is the perfect encapsulation of what Baby Yoda represents to Indigenous communities. He is simultaneously a sacred child and an important elder, both significant roles in Indigenous communities. Baby Yoda is not the first *Star Wars* character or show that Indigenous communities have been interested in. Native communities have always imagined and indigenized *Star Wars* imagery, and Stewart Baby Yoda is just one example of the many Indigenous artists who have re-imagined an Indigenous Baby Yoda. One scholar explains that Native artists can

> subvert iconic images of Star Wars as a means to address dominant American culture's understanding of Indigenous identities and histories, thus engaging in contemporary art and political conversations. Their works re-imagine what it means to be Indigenous in the 21st century and create affirmative visuals for Indigenous peoples.
>
> *(McLaughlin 31)*

By doing this, Native people are able to create imagery that becomes inherently Indigenous and therefore controlling how Indigenous people are represented an aspect of visual sovereignty. Additionally, Native scholar Darren Lone Fight argues that by

> revising Star Wars iconography and imbricating or adorning the textual field with unexpected Indigeneity, it forces the viewer to also consider the conflict between the historical narrative of erasure and Indigenous presence in futurist contexts, and, through the force of the creation of the art-object itself, the clear-but-unexpected presence of Native voices in the pop-cultural present.
>
> *(Lone Fight 133)*

We can see that Baby Yoda is representative of how Indigenous artists can indigenize pop culture characters and disrupt hegemonic pop culture narratives that have historically excluded Native people. These creative endeavors then work to represent Indigenous people and allow Indigenous people to imagine an alternative and better future through traditional art forms and traditional materials.

## Conclusion

Beadwork is an artform that in particular creates a space—a space to indigenize art and pop culture. Beadwork's flexibility and openness constructs and allows for creative possibilities, and, by extension, freedom and choices for Indigenous women, which is not always possible in other realms in a settler-colonial world because Indigenous people are seen as relics from the past. Indigenous futures can be utilized for Indigenous people to bead, draw, and visualize themselves in a future instead of in the past. Survivance and alternative futures are prominent themes in contemporary beadwork through pop culture references, which can actively show Indigenous communities, especially youth, a world where their stories, voices, and knowledge matter. By Indigenous bead workers tapping into pop culture and subcultures, (re)imagining places and spaces can resettle Indigenous people at the center of visual representation. Indigenous women have always used traditional art to express identity and culture. Indigenous women make us all hopeful as they (re)write, (re)right and (re)bead our futures.

## Notes

1 Throughout this chapter, I use the terms Native and Indigenous interchangeably, but Native is used in contemporary Native American communities to denote Indigeneity by dropping the American part from the term Native American. Indigenous is used here to situate Native people of the United States and Canada in a globalized world and to elicit solidarity with Indigenous people elsewhere.

2 Parfleche is a traditional art which includes painting geometric, abstract, or traditional designs on rawhide (either elk, deer, or buffalo).

## Works Cited

Baudemann, Kristina "Indigenous Futurisms in North American Indigenous Art: The Transforming Visions of Ryan Singer, Daniel McCoy, Topaz Jones, Marla Allison, and Debra Yepa-Pappan." *Extrapolation* vol. 57, no. 1, 2016, pp. 117–150.

Berlo, Janet Catherine, and Ruth B. Phillips. *Native North American Art*. Oxford UP, 1998.

Baldy, Cutcha Risling. *We Are Dancing for You: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women's Coming of Age Ceremonies*. U of Washington P, 2018.

Chavez, Aliyah. *Baby Yoda Is One of Us Now*. Indian Country Today. 2019. Web. https://indiancountrytoday.com/news/baby-yoda-is-now-one-of-us. Accessed 10 June 2023.

Dillon, Grace L. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. U of Arizona P, 2012.

Goeman, Mishuana. *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*. U of Minnesota P, 2013.

Halvorson, Mark J. *Sacred Beauty: Quillwork of Plains Women: A Museum Exhibit*. North Dakota Heritage Center, 1997.

Hyman, Collete. *Dakota's Women's Work*. Minnesota Historical Society, 2012.

Lempert, William. "Indigenous Media Futures: An Introduction." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2019. pp. 173–179.

Lone Fight, Darren. *Indigenous Impositions in Contemporary Culture: Knotting Ontologies, Beading Aesthetics, and Braiding Temporalities*. 2021. U of Massachusetts Amherst. Doctoral Dissertation.

McLaughlin, Olena. "Native Pop: Bunky Echo-Hawk and Steven Paul Judd Subvert *Star Wars*." *Transmotion*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2017, pp. 30–52.

Nazon, Margret. "Margaret Nazon Artist Statement." *Nomad Designs*, 2016. http://nomaddesigns.yolasite.com/about-the-artist.php. Accessed 10 June 2023.

Thompson, Phyllis K. *Every Bead is Medicine: North American Indigenous Beadwork Agency and Entrepreneurship in the Digital Age*. 2018. Yale U Senior Thesis.

Topash-Caldwell, Blaire. "Sovereign Futures in Neshnabé Speculative Fiction." *Borderlands*, vol 19, no. 2, 2020, 29–62.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Survivance Narrative of Native Presence*. U of Nebraska P, 2009.

# 16

# "OKINAWA Q" (AN UCHINANCHŪ FUTURISM)

## Okinawans Rectify the Japanese Unbalanced View of Nature Through *Tokusatsu* Television and Film

*Kenrick H. Kamiya-Yoshida**

Okinawa (Ryūkyū) was an independent island kingdom approximately 400 miles south of Kyūshū until it was invaded by the Japanese settler-colonial state in 1609 (Sakihara 10). From that point on, people of the diverse island chain were forced to assimilate into the Japanese system of values and eventually, after Okinawa's official annexation in 1879, which made it into a Japanese prefecture, integrated into that foreign political body and civil society. This assimilation process reflected Japan's imperial policy called *doka seisaku*, which means when "a nation endeavors to make the life-styles and ideologies of the people in its colonies the same as its own" (Rabson 133), enforced in many countries Japan had occupied within the Pacific and Asia from the late nineteenth century through its surrender of those overseas colonies after World War II. Treated as second-class citizens, Indigenous Okinawans had to hide their background to pass as Japanese or face discrimination in mainland Japan. From the post–World War II era onward, though, such hidden Uchinanchū (Native Okinawan) creative artists made their way into the Japanese media business, feeling obliged to share their own Okinawan worldviews, which they wove into their cinematic and televisual storytelling work. Thus, some Japanese audiovisual speculative works, like the multiple "classic" Ultra TV series and the contemporary Ryūjin Mabuyer television shows/film/OVA, quintessentially have elements of Okinawan culture, history, and ethics.

My earliest childhood memory of Japanese media culture is of Gojira (Godzilla) ripping apart the power lines of a barrier of electrical towers. The electricity crackled and exploded around the giant beast, the light flashing across the night sky, as he stomped around the city. Though this film was viewed on a neighbor's small black-and-white television, it scarred my five-year-old imagination, leaving an indelible mark on my Okinawan/Japanese American mind about the destructive makeup of the natural world. I was afraid that Gojira could show up in my neighborhood, Homerule Street in lower Kalihi near Honolulu Harbor. The neighborhood was a collection of old above-ground wood homes, built during the 1950s, and two-story cinder-block apartments from the 1960s. Encroaching on this community were small factories and warehouses of Oʻahu's light industrial sector. The houses and most of the apartments are gone now, razed to make room for business-office structures, but the memories of the strange giant movie creatures still lurk in the back of my mind.

---

*  With thanks to Ida M. Yoshinaga.

*Tokusatsu eiga* is used by Japanese to describe films or television series that rely heavily on special effects. Typically utilizing scale models, miniature sets, full-body costumes, and forced perspective, these techniques were innovated by postwar corporate-media artists in Tōkyō. One of the masters of this technique was Tsuburaya Eiji,[1] a former special-effects technician who had worked on pro-war films for the Japanese military before the United States entered World War II (Ragone 28). He later became an important producer of tokusatsu film and TV. Tsuburaya's special effects were so sophisticated in those propaganda films that the movie *The War at Sea from Hawaii to Malaya*—which re-enacted the bombing of Pearl Harbor in such detail that it was thought to be actual footage of the attack (Tsutsui 22)—was confiscated by the U.S. government after the war. This example shows how Japanese studios were convinced that tokusatsu was an effective way to convey stories with fantastical elements in SF stories in a realistic way.

The tokusatsu genre varies, but here I will focus on Japanese science fiction's *kaijū* ("strange beast"; usually monstrously giant creatures) and live-action superhero subgenres. The most famous film exemplifying these subgenres is *Gojira* (1954), directed by Honda Ishirō with effects by Tsuburaya. The plot concerns an ancient creature, Gojira, awakened by an atomic-bomb explosion in the South Pacific. The Southern Islanders in the movie are Pacificized in stereotypical ways that make these Indigenous characters seem primitive.

The portrayal of peoples from the euphemistically named "Southern" tropical islands—called Nantō, which in Japan's racial ideology obliquely references Okinawa as well as diverse Pacific Island nations and regions—as simple or subhuman, is a trope used by the Gojira series of films. There is literally an Infant Island in these movies, where the "natives" who worship moth kaijū Mothra are Japanese-speaking, dark-skinned, half-naked primitives from Polynesia that do not threaten the Japanese sense of pre-war colonial nostalgia (Igarashi 85).

In *Gojira*, the Southern Islanders (perhaps coded as Okinawans?) perform a "native" ritual in hopes of appeasing the beast. Though marked as primitive in a "Nantō" way, their ritual also evokes Shintō rituals originating in Japan's premodern era. A ritual is performed with priests in masks and thatched costumes, dancing to the simple music of flute and drums.

The Gojira film series shows many scenes of the kaijū, gigantic monsters worshipped as gods by actors in brown-face, body paint, and thatched skirts. The kaijū, however, are portrayed as just giant creatures and not magical beings in these secular tokusatsu story worlds. The film, *Gojira*, shows that the ritual does not work when Gojira destroys the village. Thus, religion in these tokusatsu is presented mostly as a kind of ineffective, nonsensical, nonspiritual practice.

Japanese actually see the Shintō religion as more of a seasonal cultural practice than an expression of institutionalized spirituality. As the original religion of Japan proper (excluding Okinawa and also Hokkaidō/northern Honshū/the Sakhalins and Kurils, the ancestral lands of various groups of Native Ainu), it features an animistic spirituality that imbues specialness in certain elements of nature, whether a rock, a tree, a waterfall, a plant, or a mountain.

Modern Shintō, after syncretizing with Zen Buddhism in the twelfth century, was held up as quintessentially Japanese by the fascist Nipponese state in the early to mid-twentieth century. However, especially from the postwar era it has been secularized, regionally practiced, and often transactional. Practitioners believe that they can ask for, or bargain with, these natural spirits and gods to benefit daily human life (Reader and Tanabe 18). Zen Buddhism, or Zenna, arrived in Japan via Buddhist monks from China. This meditation practice emphasizes that "dualistic distinctions like I/you, subject/object, and true/false are eliminated" (Fischer-Schreiber 261). In combination with the Zen philosophy advocating for an emotionally detached state of mind, and aesthetic traditions that advance formal beauty and protocols over interpersonal ethics, Japanese religious culture becomes one of dispassionate cruelty to nature.

Although both Shintō and Zen proclaim a reverence for nature, modern Shintō allows for ritualistic harm to animals such as Ageuma, which forces horses to run up and down tall, stone walls that sometime cause crippling injuries to the animals (Animal Cruelty). "Zen"-related art can be a form of torture in Japan, forcing scrupulously ordered aesthetics upon living plants and earth, as in the practices of *bonsai* (the violent shaping of small trees in shallow trays through cultivation technologies) and *karesansui* (so-called Zen rock gardens). Such cruelty is even extended to food in the action of eating live animals in the culinary technique of *ikizukuri* (preparing raw fish or *sashimi* from sea creatures while they are still moving and conscious). Therefore, Japanese have used nature to feel at peace through powerfully inscribing upon it aesthetic forms, as they seek haven from their violent, unjust, or overcompetitive society.

This kind of cultural sadism performed upon nature can be seen in tokusatsu like the 1972 children's program *Jinzō Ningen Kikaider* (Android Kikaider or Kikaider, Android of Justice). As a cult hit, *Kikaider* continues to enjoy a following in the Hawaiian islands to this day. The main character Kikaider (in Hawai'i, often translated as Kikaida), a "good" but imperfect android created by Dr. Kōmyōji and his daughter, undermines the workings of the terrorist organization called Dark. Dark attempts world domination by the selling of arms, theft, extortion, assassination, and general mayhem. Japan's energy infrastructure, which fuels Nippon's reborn postwar industry by extracting resources from the natural world—dams, power plants, even alternative-energy sources—represents Dark's main targets. Dark uses super robots in the shape of animals to enact its plans; the show's villains are automatons in the form of creatures from the natural world, for example: Bull Kong or Green Mantis. *Jinzō Ningen Kikaider*'s animal robots symbolically put nature in opposition to late-twentieth-century Japanese society and its neocolonial economic progress. By the end of each show, the creature of the week—portrayed as a shrill, malicious, unapologetically destructive "other"—gets thrown off a cliff by Kikaider, blown to bits in a violent explosion of fire, before its mechanical entrails scatter to the ground below. This pattern is repeated in the 43 episodes of its only season (1972–1973) without fail. The repetition feels almost mind-numbing to a child, such that a five-year-old can predict (as I had) the sequence of events that would lead to the monster's demise.

Returning for a moment to *Gojira*, the film also makes clear that the giant creature is a threat to not only to Japan's citizenry, but also the infrastructure of Tōkyō, which is what the characters in the film really value. They do not revere nature, but fear that nature is uncontrollable; it cannot be bound with wire and pruned like bonsai trees, and may strike back at the heart of industry. Where the Shintō-resembling ritual of the village fails to stop Gojira at the beginning of the film, the military-industrial complex succeeds in destroying the monster with an oxygen destroyer bomb. The bomb kills all life forms within its explosion radius, but leaves buildings, vehicles, the oil refinery, electrical power plants, shipping lanes, and the harbor system (the political-economic machineries of a reemerging Japanese empire) intact. One of the overriding themes is that even if humans are to blame for damaging nature, scientific violence offers the only solution to preserve such things of value.

Little empathy exists in Japanese tokusatsu for these animal villains. Rare exceptions stand out: for example, the Kikaider episode "Black Spiny Anteater Destructoid and Child". Monsters of the week, Black Spiny Anteater and his daughter, Tiny Spiny, must retrieve a microfilm from a human widow, whose husband was murdered by Dark. Unusually, these robots show love for each other: when Black Spiny Anteater is damaged, Tiny repairs her father and gives him emotional support to continue to fight, and he does the same for Tiny Spiny by telling her she will grow up to be a fearsome destructoid. Later, Tiny Spiny is sent to spy on the widow's daughter; however, things are turned upside down when Tiny befriends the girl. Dark considers the

friendship a betrayal and orders Tiny Spiny's destruction. Black Spiny Anteater pleads with Dark to spare his daughter if he can kill Kikaider. Kikaider learns about this bargain and feels ethically torn, but in the end, he destroys both monsters even if Tiny Spiny is innocent of violence. Their potential for hampering Japanese progress makes them a danger; Kikaider, though slightly upset, acts righteously in his decision to kill both creatures.

This kind of tokusatsu aesthetics and ethics affected me as a child. I remember catching butterflies with neighborhood kids. Once a small bottle containing a butterfly was given to me as a gift to take home. I wondered at its orange wings, at its thin, black, chitinous body, which was speckled with white spots. I recall being terrified suddenly by its uncoiled proboscis. The butterfly became an object of hatred and fear. I threw the bottle to the ground and ran home, leaving the insect crushed in shattered glass. This gut terror existed because of the training I had received from these shows. Even when the monster does not mean any harm, destruction is assured for the poor creatures. During my later childhood, I reenacted these violent actions on real live insects with a match or magnifying glass, or squashed them with my foot. I can't count how many creatures died in my need to recreate the violence of these television shows and films.

After consuming half a lifetime of tokusatsu films and television, I came to accept the thesis of nature as something that must be dominated and controlled as the only way to tell stories. I believed that Okinawan stories were not important or possible, even though my mother was an Uchinanchū from Gushikawa (today Uruma-shi), Okinawa. There were, of course, tokusatsu that took place in Okinawa. An example is *Gojira versus Mechagojira* (1974): an Okinawan priestess has a dark vision that her island will be destroyed by Gojira, with the solution resting in an ancient prophecy about an Okinawan artifact, which eventually awakens Kingu Shisa, a kaijū. Kingu Shisa joins forces with Gojira against the real enemy—Mechagojira (Mecha-Godzilla), sent by the ape people of the Third Planet of the Black Hole to destroy Earth. Okinawa provides the backdrop in this movie without the context of its culture or 365-year history of Japanese colonialism. The "ancient artifact" that the film's characters themselves cannot even identify is just a ceramic shisa, a mythical lion dog that Okinawans have used to decorate every building since the earliest time in their history. The film never mentions the genocidal Battle of Okinawa, less than 30 years after it killed a third of the Indigenous Uchinanchū population, caught between Japanese Imperial forces and a carpet-bombing U.S. military near the end of World War II. Neither is the invasion of the Okinawan islands by the Japanese in the early seventeenth century mentioned. The main story is an alien ape conspiracy threatening to destroy Japan's oil refineries and shipping lanes.

Okinawa was raided by southern Japan's Satsuma *han* (clan) on behalf of the newly established Tokugawa shogunate government in 1609 (Turnbull 4). This invasion took away the independence of the Ryūkyū (Okinawan) Kingdom and de-throned the rightful King Shō Nei, who was forced to become a vassal of the Satsuma *daimyō* (feudal lord). Eventually, the isolationist Japanese formed a puppet government in Okinawa in order to let live (secretly) the latter's outside economic relations with China and the rest of Asia (Ethnic 10) at a time when Japan was officially closed to the world. This relation continued until 1879, when the former kingdom was formally annexed by Japan (Rabson 137), starting a period of horrific poverty in Okinawa during which its people were disproportionately taxed without political representation (or even elections until 1920). This exploitative treatment by the Japanese state inspired Uchinanchū peasants to rise up to protest the need for land reform throughout the late 1800s (Sakihara 14). The poverty of Okinawans forced them to sell their titles to ancestral land when the Japanese government privatized it in 1903, effectively incorporating the Uchinanchū natural world into Japan's capitalist real-estate market (Sakihara 14).

During World War II, Okinawa was seen as the last line of defense against the United States and its allies. The islands were the site of the bloodiest battle in the war's Pacific theater; by most accounts, over 150,000 of the Indigenous population was killed (Ota 22). However, the history of this battle is hidden from Japanese popular culture, wherein Okinawans are just seen as belonging to a poor prefecture of Japan with residents that speak a strange dialect and that have different rituals. Learning about this history made me reevaluate my worldview. However, there was one more piece to my development.

My perception about Japanese SF storytelling dramatically changed when I was introduced to a film adaptation of an Okinawan tokusatsu television series. The film was *Ryūjin Mabuyer: Nanatsu no Mabui*. It was screened at the 2012 Hawaii International Film Festival, to a small Hawai'i audience. The film was about a young man who is a "local" superhero (*rōkaru hirō*, a Japanese TV subgenre of the live-action superhero tradition that specifically presents regional heroes)—Ryūjin Mabuyer. *Ryūjin Mabuyer* the television series premiered in 2008, becoming an unusually decolonial show broadcast in Japan. The series showed a modern Okinawa where Japanese settlers, Japan's government, and its colonial policies are absent. The show focused instead on Okinawan cultural values and Indigenous history. These values, embodied in nine stones which are scattered throughout the Okinawan islands to protect Uchinanchū from evildoers, must be protected by the series' superheroes from the villains:

> These stones are Uchina-guchi (Okinawan language); Ishiganto (keeps evil away); Te-ge (clear and independent thinking); Eisa (Okinawan dance and love); Chaganjuu (long life); Ichariba cho-de (brotherly love); Totome (respect of ancestors); Nuchi do takara (positive thinking); and Kachashi (the ability to play the sanshin and dance).
>
> *(Ryūjin)*

The story world reflects Okinawan spirituality, an animistic worldview where spirits and gods reside everywhere and even exist inside every inanimate object (Ehman 1). In its larger arc, *Ryūjin Mabuyer* features two male superheroes, humans whose bodies are inhabited by gods (and sometimes a villainous spirit), and who are guided by a female superhero, a human psychic that is thus more spiritually potent than her human male compatriots. This last character reflects how Uchinanchū religion follows a female leader, a noro (official priestess), who advises a village. Sometimes the women of the village take turns holding this office (Allen 121). Community decisions are made in Okinawa both by men (who rule the political sphere) and women (who oversee this spiritual aspect of society). Even the show's villains display a balance of male and female characters, with the latter mocking the authority of the former and even holding power over them.

Kanai, the Uchinanchū protagonist, must learn about his cultural heritage while protecting the stones from theft by man-sized animals, the Majimun in the *Ryūjin Mabuyer* TV series (which had its 2008 premiere on Okinawan prefectural television). Most Majimun represent culturally and geographically specific creatures: Habu-Devil (*habu*, a snake native to Okinawa) is the Majimun leader, followed by Onihito-Devil (*onihito*, a crown-of-thorns sea-star, a starfish common in Okinawan waters), and the rebelliously *femme* Mangoochu ("Ms. Mongoose", a female mongoose whose name ends in "chū"—an informal, endearing suffix meaning "person" in Okinawan). In addition, the hero Kanai and his brother Nirai (who initially becomes Onihito Devil, only to be saved by his brother) are named after Nirai Kanai, the Okinawan land of the gods, and the setting of the main island of Okinawa is inhabited by gods who turn their human bodies (and that of female psychic Nami) into superheroic forms.

The series was the first Okinawan tokusatsu television show with a nationwide airing throughout Japan. What writer Yamada Yuki presented initially resembled any other tokusatsu superhero show from Japan—a virtuous human hero battles against the animal-like (or alien nonhuman) villains. However, by the end of the first series, the hero and antagonists come to a truce, though they might grapple again in the future. None of the Majimun are destroyed—this set an unusual precedent in tokusatsu TV. In fact, the 2012 film makes clear the true motivation of the Majimun through dialog by the main antagonist, Habu-Devil: humans, he says, have been the caretakers of Earth's environment for thousands of years, and they have wrecked it. So now the animals have to rise up to take down humans from the current upper rung they presently occupy to restore balance. Hearing that, Ryūjin Mabuyer experiences uncertainty about his mission. In the end, the hero negotiates with the Majimun: humans must learn from the Majimun to take better care of Okinawa's environment. This message *is* very different from the ones presented in mainstream Japanese tokusatsu. In the tokusatsu genre, mankind is the rightful ruler of the planet, as superheroes safeguard this rule by saving humans from either mutated animal or alien creatures dedicated to the destruction of Japanese industrial civilization. But in *Ryūjin Mabuyer*, by contrast, human problems must be confronted and dealt with in an ongoing process of negotiations with natural forces. So, instead of a black and white outlook, the Okinawan series presents a nuanced worldview.

While *Ryūjin Mabuyer* is a positive show about Uchinanchū values, it presents an onscreen world in ways that do not depict the direct consequences of Okinawa's actual colonial history: the past invasions of the islands by Japan and then the United States. Also, it does not acknowledge how Okinawa's centuries-long occupation by Japan in its civilian areas and over three-quarter-century occupation by the United States in its militarized areas have created violence against, and friction amongst, Okinawans. These anti-colonial concerns were presented earlier in the 1960s–1970s television efforts of Uchinanchū producer, showrunner, and screenwriter Kinjō Tetsuo in the immensely popular Japanese SF television series *Ultra Q, Ultraman*, and *Ultraseven.*

*Ultra Q* (airing in 1966) was a television program produced by Tsuburaya Productions, which created the world-famous special effects in the Gojira films; Tsuburaya Eiji wanted to bring film-level tokusatsu to a television audience. He approached the young Uchinanchū writer Kinjō Tetsuo to develop a show that could highlight these special effects. Kinjō was born in Naha, Okinawa, and had survived the destruction of Okinawa during World War II as a child (Ragone 84). He also experienced discrimination by Japanese while going to school in Tōkyō. Kinjō thus combined his concerns of the U.S. occupation of Okinawa, Japanese discrimination, and the horrors of war into developing a new Japanese SF series. The result was a show that combined *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*, called *Unbalance* (Ragone 84). Eventually, the show's title was changed to *Ultra Q*, with Ultra referencing the catchword "urutora" (ultra) popular in Japan at that time because of gold medalist Endo Yukiko being known as "Ultra-C" during the 1964 Tōkyō Summer Olympics, and with "Q" standing for question or quest (Ragone 89). *Ultra Q* is unique among tokusatsu narratives of the time, in that Kinjō's overarching message of the series was that human actions on Earth have caused an imbalance in the environment. Though paralleling the themes explored in *Ryūjin Mabuyer*, at this earlier time, Kinjō thought the problems that humans create have no easy solutions.

In his *Ultra Q* teleplays, Kinjō showed that humans have a deep disregard for nature. For example, in the episode "Goro and Goro", scientists create a hormone called the Aoba Potion. This potion causes gigantism in any life form that is exposed to it, including a spider monkey that is mutated accidentally to gigantic proportions. In the episode "Terror of the Sweet Honey", another group of scientists create genetically engineered giant mutated honey bees to

create super honey which in turn accidently transforms a mole into enormous size. These experiments cannot be contained responsibly and expose the life forms in the surrounding areas to their effects. While the plot's solution to both problems is a military one, following the Gojira formula, Kinjō ultimately questions this military action. His story poses that there is no actual resolution, for the wider effects of these human actions remain unknown. In other "Ultra" series, Kinjō explores this "mad scientist" trope again, including the *Ultraman* episode "The Mysterious Dinosaur Base". In this episode Professor Nikaida re-creates dinosaurs for his own edification. His masterpiece is Jirahs, a gigantic reptile, who terrorizes the mountain around Lake Kitayama. While the story could be about the wrongdoing of an individual (Nikaida), in the episode, Kinjō also shows fishermen using poison in order to catch a large amount of fish. Here Kinjō portrays that it is human disregard for nature that unbalances the environment.

Kinjō Tetsuo also infused several TV episodes with the iconography of his childhood experiences with the Battle of Okinawa and warfare. In the *Ultra Q* episode "Fury of the South Seas", the Japanese defense force bombs a South Pacific island in order to destroy a giant octopus. In a *Return of Ultraman* (the fourth *Ultra* series) episode, "A Poison Gas Monster Appears", the monstrous Mognezun rises and brings with it a horror from the past, "Yellow Gas", developed by the Japanese empire's chemical-warfare program; here Kinjō bases his story on an actual wartime Japanese military department (Tanaka 241). While the solution to stopping the monster is simply for Ultraman to destroy the creature, Kinjō's narrative poses questions for the young Japanese audience: Which people was the gas used on? Why did Japan use chemical weapons? Why was there a war? In the SF story's subtext, the young audience faces the real history of Japan and the Japanese during World War II. The Japanese education system in the mid-to-late twentieth century was notorious for not including its nation's modern colonial history in classroom history books, especially Japan's brutalities wreaked upon its imperial (colonized) Asian and Pacific Islander subjects overseas before and during World War II. It would seem that Kinjō's writings were indirectly meant as a critique of these curricula, reflecting his feelings that the Okinawan experience should not be ignored.

"A Poison Gas Monster Appears" was the last *Ultraman* script written by Kinjō in 1971. Okinawa's rule had just reverted from the United States back to Japan, but parts of the main island were still occupied by the U.S. military. A deal was struck between the Japanese and U.S. governments without the approval of the Uchinanchū people: Japan regained political authority over Okinawa in exchange for an overage of U.S. military bases there. This back-door bargain must have created an unease in Kinjō, as the crime rates in the islands perpetrated by U.S. servicemen rose (Keyso xiii); and the inferior treatment of Uchinanchū by the Japanese people continued (Ethnic 128), while Okinawa remained the poorest of Japan's prefectures (Ota 89). In 1976, Kinjō Testuo would die in a household accident (Yamada 11), leaving his fans to wonder what other issues he would have brought to the Ultra story universe.

Perhaps the richest part of his legacy, impacting later Okinawan televisual (and film) works such as those of the Ryūjin Mabuyer story world, was Kinjō's importing into Japanese TV elements of Okinawan spirituality to emphasize connections between the human world and the natural world of gods and spirits. Several of his scripted episodes of *Ultraman*, for example, feature ghosts performing the function of justice. In "Terror on Route 87", a child, killed by a drunk driver, becomes a ghost and awakens a monster called Hydra that hunts reckless drivers. Another connection to Okinawan religion is that Ultraman and his Ultra-kin come from Nebula M78, the Land of Light. This name suggests where the spirits and gods dwell in the Okinawan religion, the land of the gods or Nirai Kanai, also known as the Land of Light ("Niraikanai").

Though Nirai Kanai Shinkō, the animistic religion of Okinawa, seems similar to Shintō on the surface, it is Indigenous to the Okinawan islands (Reader and Tanabe 281). Native

Uchinanchū spirituality treasures the life essence connecting living and deceased humans and supernatural beings, as expressed in our optimistic aphorism, "nuchi du takara" ("life is precious"). This essence means that humans are connected with nature and with Nirai Kanai. Okinawan American scholar Wesley Ueunten explains Okinawan consciousness as one that takes note of these larger spiritual links, of developing a sense of "one's feelings stemming from the heart and soul — paying attention to the emotions being passed down" (Yoshinaga).

Historically Okinawans have always believed in the spiritual world and honor spirits or "gods" that exist in nature as well as inside and around the home. The "god of the hearth" and "god of the well or spring" are examples of gods that are worshiped regularly. The key belief is that the relationship with the spiritual realm belongs to women (Ehman 1). This can be seen in both "Terror on Route 87" and another Kinjō-authored episode, "Ambassador to the Nonmalt", whereby the female main character is the first to make contact with a ghost.

This belief system contrasts with Shintōism, which values energetic purity versus *kegare* (spiritual pollution). The Shintōist notion of the polluting character of death, including supposedly unclean dead bodies and their parts, has influenced core Japanese social values, including sexism against women, whose menstruation is believed to threaten spiritual contamination via its "dead" blood (Namihira S67), and classism against the Burakumin, Japan's untouchable caste perceived as kegare from performing jobs where they handle dead things such as meat, leather, or hair (Namihira S71). Kegare, and its result of *tsumi* (violation of spiritual protocols, similar to sin), serve as a barrier separating ideal (read: male, pure-raced, non-*Burakumin*-descended) humans from things—and people—associated with death. Purification rituals are core to Shintōist practice.

Rather than focus on spiritual cleanliness, Okinawan religion emphasizes ethical harmony between humans and each other as well as with the natural and spiritual worlds. "Ambassador to the Nonmalt" in the *Ultraseven* series (which aired from 1967) shows Kinjō combining his concerns about the environment, gendered spirituality, and colonial warfare. A strange boy warns Ultra Guard officer Ann Yuri that a human undersea development called Seahorse will be destroyed by the rightful rulers of the sea—the Nonmalt. Later, Ann and fellow Ultra Guard member Dan Moroboshi (secretly the superhero Ultraseven) witness the sudden explosion of the Seahorse base. An atomic submarine rises from the ocean and attacks a nearby seaside town. But Dan remembers that his people from Nebula M78, the Land of Light, had once called Earth residents "Nonmalt". Before Dan can sort through his doubts about the Nonmalt being alien invaders, the Ultra Guard, a human scientific-military organization that Dan and Ann serve, mobilize to fight the atomic sub. The Ultra Guard forces follow the atomic submarine to its undersea base, which is actually a Nonmalt city. Ultraseven arrives too late to stop the destruction of the sub and the undersea city. While the Ultra Guard celebrates its victory, Dan mourns the extinction of the Nonmalt, revealed to be the original denizens of Earth. Ann discovers that the human boy, Shinichi, had drowned in the sea the year before—he is now a ghost trying to defend the rightful rulers of the ocean. Both Ann and Dan realize that they are on the wrong side of this battle for the planet.

The Nonmalt attack on the town brings to mind the Battle of Okinawa during World War II—Okinawans call the event the Typhoon of Steel. This was the bloodiest battle in the Pacific War, with both U.S. and Japanese forces losing massive numbers of soldiers and even more Okinawan civilians killed (Yahara 156). Kinjō was concerned with the idea of an invading people occupying the land (or waters) of Indigenous population, as his land, Okinawa, was invaded and occupied first in 1609 by the Japanese, then in 1945 by the U.S. military. This is just like the Seahorse base impinging on the Indigenous territory of the Nonmalt city. Shinichi's appearance as a prophetic spirit warning the main characters of their misguided alliance reflects the spirituality of Okinawa, where ghosts are believed to be everywhere.

There were other Okinawan writers for the Ultraman series, including a man with one of the longest tokusatsu careers on record, Uehara Shōzō. Uehara was brought in by Kinjō to write on *Ultra Q*, and his stories focused on discrimination and isolation. His most notable episode must be "The Monster Tamer and the Boy" from the *Return of Ultraman* series. Townspeople persecute an orphaned boy, Ryo, because they believe that he is an alien with supernatural powers. While not an alien, Ryo is a friend of an alien environmental investigator that is later killed by villagers. This theme of discrimination is also explored in Kinjō's "Phantom of the Snow Mountain". In this episode of *Ultraman*, an orphaned girl named Yuki is persecuted by mountain villagers because she communicates with the snow giant Woo. Both episodes end tragically, with the boy Ryo left alone to continue his hopeless quest to go to his alien friend's home planet Meits. Yuki is killed by the villagers, and her spirit becomes a white rabbit. The idea that discrimination is not easily resolved persists across these Uchinanchū writers' teleplays.

The Okinawan influence on these popular "Ultra" series of Japanese speculative-fiction shows added an Uchinanchū spirituality, politics, and compassion to them. Writers like Kinjō and Uehara brought with them an historical subtext and a life perspective that would not ordinarily have been added to the "Ultra" franchise and tokusatsu genre. Their work demonstrates that it is possible for Okinawans to input their ideals and creativity into a colonial science-fiction media genre. Their courage in that postwar era later allowed for a millennial show like *Ryūjin Mabuyer* to exist with its decolonial emphasis on Okinawan culture and ethics. Thus, their efforts to use SF to bring Okinawan issues and values into the Japanese mainstream can be seen as an act of *chimu*, or the heart. Ueunten emphasizes "how it (chimu) ties us to other people, not just Okinawans. Other people, other beings like animals, other sentient beings" (Yoshinaga).

Okinawans have for centuries held on to their culture, politics, spirituality, and values, despite the continued colonization by Japan and the United States. As the Uchinanchū writers and episodes in this chapter demonstrate, Okinawans have also shared their culture through conversations with other ethnic groups via literature, scholarship, and media. In honor of Kinjō, we might call this kind of Uchinanchū cultural production "Okinawa Q"—Indigenous Futurist stories by Okinawans that not only question the colonial status quo and confront its obstacles, but also share the history, spirituality, and community of Okinawans and thereby connect all of us together in past, present, and future.

## Notes

1  This chapter follows the Japanese and Okinawan naming conventions of family name followed by personal name.

## Works Cited

Allen, Mathew. *Identity and Resistance in Okinawa*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

"Ambassador of the Nonmalt." *Ultraseven: Complete Series 03*, written by Testuo Kinjo, directed by Misuta Kazuho. Tsuburaya Productions, 1967.

"Animal Cruelty (Ageuma)." *Green Shinto*, 29 Jul. 2015. www.greenshinto.com/wp/2015/07/29/animal-cruelty-ageuma-2/. Accessed 29 Jan. 2021.

"Black Spiny Anteater Destructoid With Child." *Jinzō Ningen Kikaida: Volume 7*, written by Ishinomori Shōtarō. JN Productions Inc., 2001.

Ehman, Kenneth. *The Okinawa Explorer: A Complete Guide Book to Okinawa*. Kenneth Ehman, 2010.

Ethnic Studies Oral History Project and United Okinawan Association of Hawaii. *Uchinanchu: A History of Okinawans in Hawaii*, University of Hawaii Ethnic Studies Program, 1981.

Fischer-Schreiber, Ingrid, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, and Michael S. Diener. *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*. Shambhala, 1991.

*Gojira*. Directed by Honda Ishirō. Toho Studios, 1954.

"Goro and Goro." *Ultra Q: Complete Series 01*, written by Kinjō Testuo, directed by Tsuburaya Hajime, Mill Creek Entertainment, 2019.

Igarashi, Yoshikuni. "Mothra's Gigantic Egg: Consuming the South Pacific in 1960s Japan." *Godzilla's Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage*, edited by William Tsutsui and Michiko Ito, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Keyso, Ruth Ann. *Women of Okinawa: Nine Voices from a Garrison Island*. Cornell UP, 2000.

"The Monster Tamer and the Boy." *Return of Ultraman*: Complete Series 04, written by Uehara Shōzō, directed by Tōjō Shōhei, Mill Creek Entertainment, 2020.

Namihira, Emiko. "Pollution in the Folk Belief System." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1987, pp. S65–S74.

"Niraikanai, Where God Lives, Also a Land of the Dead." *Okinawa Film Office*. 2020. https://filmoffice.ocvb.or.jp/en/en/about-okinawa/lomgevity_001/. Accessed 30 Jan. 2021.

Ota, Masahide, *Essays on Okinawa Problems*, Yui Shuppan Co., 2000.

"Phantom of the Snow Mountain." *Ultraman: Complete Series 02*, written by Kinjō Tetsuo, directed by Higuchi Yugo, Mill Creek Entertainment, 2019.

Rabson, Steve, and Chalmers Johnson, editors. "Assimilation Policy in Okinawa: Promotion, Resistance, and 'Reconstruction'." *Okinawa: Cold War Island*, Japan Policy Research Institute, 1999.

Ragone, August. *Eiji Tsuburaya: Master of Monsters: Defending the Earth with Ultraman, Godzilla, and Friends in the Golden Age of the Japanese Science Fiction Film*, Chronicle Books, 2007.

Reader, Ian, and George J. Tanabe Jr. *Practically Religious*, U of Hawai'i P, 1998.

Ryūjin Mabuyer, Season 1. Yuichi Koyano, producer. Tokyo, MX, 2008

———, Season 2. Yuichi Koyano, producer. Tokyo, MX, 2010.

Ryūjin Mabuyer the Movie: Nanatsu no Mabui. Tomiki Sano, Dir. 2012.

*Ryūjin Mabuyer*. www.mabuyer.com/english/. Accessed 30 Jan. 2021.

Sakihara, Mitsugu. "History of Okinawa." *Uchinanchu: A History of Okinawans in Hawaii*. Ethnic Studies Program, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 1984.

Tanaka, Yuki, *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II*, Westview Press, 1996.

"Terror of the Sweet Honey," *Ultra Q: Complete Series 01*, written by Kinjō Tetsuo, directed by Kijita Kōji, Mill Creek Entertainment, 2019.

"Terror on Route 87." *Ultraman: The Complete Series 02*, written by Kinjō Testuo, directed by Higuchi Yuzo, Mill Creek Entertainment, 2019.

Tsutsui, William. *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Turnbull, Stephen. *The Samurai Capture of a King: Okinawa 1609* (Raid Book 6), Osprey Publishing, 2009.

Uehara, Shōzō, and Hashimoto Yōji, developers. *The Return of Ultraman: The Complete Series 04*. Tsuburaya Productions. Mill Creek Entertainment, 2020.

Yahara, Colonel Hiromichi. *The Battle For Okinawa*, Wiley, 2002.

Yamada, Teruko. *The Man Who Gave Birth to Ultraman: The Life of Tetsuo Kinjo*. Asahi Shimbun Company, 1992. [Unofficial English translation by Jiawen Ge, 2020.]

Yoshinaga, Ida. "We Are All Connected Under the Same Moon': Sansei Scholar Wesley Ueunten on What It Means to be Okinawan." *The Hawai'i Herald: Hawai'i's Japanese American Journal*. 2021. https://www.thehawaiiherald.com/2021/08/20/cultural-identity-we-are-all-connected-under-the-same-moon/. Accessed 9 Apr. 2022.

# PART II

# Latinx Futurisms

# 17

# THE ECONOMIC MIGRANT AND THE SPECTER OF PERMANENCE IN *WHY CYBRACEROS?*, *THE RAG DOLL PLAGUES*, AND *WALK ON WATER*

*Catherine S. Ramírez*

The coronavirus pandemic exposed the outsize roles migrant workers play in the United States. It has also laid bare many of the dangerous contradictions and inequities with which many migrant workers are forced to live. For example, on 19 March 2020, eight days after the World Health Organization announced the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the agency charged with hunting down, rounding up, incarcerating, and deporting migrants, classified farmworkers as "Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers" (U.S. Department of Homeland Security). That many, if not most, farmworkers are undocumented in the United States is an open secret (Jordan).

Confronting this paradox and the hypocrisy accompanying it, some migrant advocates have praised undocumented essential workers as "American heroes" and have pushed to regularize them via the Farm Workforce Modernization Act (Ruiz-Grossman). First introduced in 2019, this legislation would allow undocumented farmworkers to earn legal permanent residency. As its title signals, the bill implies that the current farm workforce is out of step with modern needs and ways, and requires updating. Where opponents have warned that regularizing undocumented farmworkers would be tantamount to repeating "the mistakes of the past"—among them, the bracero program (1942–1964)—supporters have insisted that these very workers are "vital to our nation's economic future" (C-SPAN).

Undocumented farmworkers' contradictory position as both essential and excluded points to a larger, originary paradox:

> the desire for economic and territorial growth requires an increase in the nation's population and diversity, but white Americans fear that new groups will curtail their cultural, political and economic dominance, and so work to reduce the political voice and citizenship rights of people of color.
>
> *(Castañeda)*

Put another way, Americans depend on land and migration and desire their rewards, but they reject Indigenous peoples and migrants—in particular, economic (namely, poor) migrants, especially if they intend to become permanent members of society and U.S. citizens themselves.

Focusing on the economic migrant, a label I unpack in the next section, this chapter looks to three Latinxfuturist works for visions of migrant labor: Alex Rivera's short 1997 film *Why Cybraceros?*, Alejandro Morales's 1991 novel *The Rag Doll Plagues*, and Guadalupe Maravilla's 2019 performance *Walk on Water*. Latinxfuturism uses the tropes of speculative fiction to excavate and to retell histories of contact, colonialism, displacement, labor, migration, resistance, and social and cultural transformation in the Americas. In addition, Latinxfuturism offers visions of a future with and shaped by Latinxs (Goodwin 5).[1]

*Why Cybraceros?* distorts the history of the bracero program, *The Rag Doll Plagues* expands on Greater Mexico's legacy of mestizaje, and *Walk on Water* confronts the traumas of unauthorized migration and xenophobia to highlight the essential roles migrants play in society. Notwithstanding the importance of calls to include historically marginalized people in visions of the future—for instance, Alicia B. Wormsley's powerful multimedia series *There Are Black People in the Future* (2012–2020)—Rivera's film and Morales's novel warn against differential inclusion, against including Mexican migrants in a future of exploitation and extraction (Wormsley). Sociologist Yen Le Espiritu defines differential inclusion as "the process whereby a group of people is deemed integral to the nation's economy, culture, identity, and power—but integral only or precisely because of their designated subordinate standing" (Espiritu 47). The differentially included are incorporated, but only as outsiders on the inside—as internal aliens, in other words. Appropriating the figure of the alien, *Walk on Water* honors migrant workers and offers healing from the violence and trauma inflicted by xenophobic immigration policies and attitudes. Whereas *Why Cybraceros?* and *The Rag Doll Plagues* present a dystopia of differential inclusion, Maravilla's performance empowers the migrant worker and enacts futurity, "a refunctioned notion of utopia in the service of subaltern politics" (Muñoz 49) and "an open-ended desire for a world beyond the present" (Marez 9).

## The Economic Migrant

Training their sights on the world beyond the present, on replenishing the United States' shrinking rural population and agricultural workforce, supporters of the Farm Workforce Modernization Act argue that undocumented migrants are willing to work jobs "local people" refuse (C-SPAN). In the language of migration studies, the bill targets economic migrants. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, economic migrants move "purely for economic reasons not in any way related to the refugee definition, or in order to seek material improvements in their livelihood". Where the refugee is imagined as a victim, as "a person who is forced to flee their country because of violence or persecution". the economic migrant tends to be regarded as an interloper, an opportunist, and a competitor for natives' jobs (UNHCR).

Despite efforts to distinguish refugees from economic migrants, the two are often one and the same. Moreover, stories about the achievement of the American dream usually gloss over the fact that the United States is and always has been a nation of *economic* migrants, a capitalist society in need of labor. Yet even though the scrappy immigrant who moves to this country for economic opportunity is the hero of many tales about immigration, Americans usually do not celebrate economic migrants *as* economic migrants, especially if they are not related to them and they are not in the remote past. Instead, economic migrants are viewed with suspicion and fear. Not only do they threaten to take Americans' jobs; they also threaten to stay in the United States, thereby transforming this nation. *Why Cybraceros?* confronts the threat of permanence underlying American xenophobia by reimagining the bracero, the ostensibly temporary *non*immigrant. It is to this figure that we now turn.

## The Bracero

The discrepancy between *immigrant* as American hero and *economic migrant* as undesirable threat is evident in the figure of the bracero. In Spanish, *un bracero* is a male, unskilled, temporary laborer or a male, economic migrant—an "emigrant laborer" (Wordreference.com).[2] In the Northern Hemisphere, a bracero was a Mexican national who participated in the bracero program. The largest guest worker program in U.S. history, the bracero program was a series of bilateral agreements and laws that brought over four million Mexican men to the United States from 1942 until 1964 (Weiss and Rass 1). The primary reason for the program was the labor shortage in agriculture in the United States during the Second World War. However, the bracero program was established at a time when the influx of new workers to this country had come to a virtual standstill, a consequence of the restrictive immigration laws enacted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In exchange for employment that was supposed to be temporary, braceros were promised food, lodging, basic health care, and a minimum wage. Growers, meanwhile, secured access to a massive, proximate, and flexible source of labor. The growers imported the braceros when they needed them, then sent them away when they did not need them anymore. If the United States is a nation of immigrants—of people who come to this country and stay and, in the process of staying, become Americans—then braceros were not immigrants or prospective Americans, at least not from the state's point of view. Indeed, in the twenty-first century, the U.S. Department of State classifies the bracero's successor, the H-2A (or temporary agricultural) worker, as a *non*immigrant (U.S. Department of State).

Nearly 20 years after the end of the Second World War, the bracero program was terminated due to the mechanization of harvesting, concerns about the mistreatment of braceros, and pressure from labor unions, including the United Farm Workers (Bardacke 162). Yet despite its putative temporariness, the program has had an enduring impact on U.S. agribusiness and Mexican migration to the United States. American growers "adjusted to the availability of Braceros and planted more crops that relied on low-cost hand labor", while "Mexican workers became accustomed to higher-wage US jobs". In short, the labor pool and migration networks that the bracero program established over two decades helped "fuel more migration", authorized and unauthorized alike. In fact, at least 100,000 braceros "became legal immigrants when their employers sponsored them for immigrant vias in the late 1960s" (Martin). As the debate over the Farm Workforce Modernization Act signals, some Americans do not welcome undocumented workers' regularization. To the xenophobe, the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, not unlike the bracero program before it, is more than a mere labor stopgap; it is a Trojan horse of immigration and demographic and cultural change.

### *Why Braceros?*

The bracero's presumptive status as temporary is apparent in *Why Braceros?*, the 1959, 19-minute, black-and-white documentary by the Council of California Growers that helped inspire *Why Cybraceros?* In addition to introducing the bracero program to the American public, *Why Braceros?* seeks to allay Americans' concerns about the use of a foreign workforce on U.S. soil and to justify the bracero program. To do so, the male narrator stresses that braceros are necessary and temporary. He assures us viewers that American growers will hire them only until they—the Mexican workers—can be replaced by machines.

Machines play a starring role in *Why Braceros?* In the opening scene, the camera pans over a tractor harvesting a crop and pulling other large pieces of farm equipment across a field. From

above, we viewers watch the machines grind the crop into a fine powder. All the while, the narrator praises farming, "America's biggest industry", for its "great advances in productivity" and "intense mechanization" (Council of California Growers).

In the next scene, the machines are replaced by two men making their way down a row in a field. The men's bodies are cut off by the camera's frame, so we never see their faces. However, we glimpse their hats, long-sleeve shirts, and gloves. Working in unison, each man walks a few steps, bends down, inserts a weeder into the dirt, and removes a stake. They do this repeatedly and quickly. As they approach the camera, the narrator explains,

> [S]ome crops must still be harvested by hand where such things as inspection, selection, cutting, or gentle handling are basic to quality. Yet even now, practically every hand-picked crop is under intensive study and the constant flow of new and remarkable experimental equipment is on trial, all designed to relieve man's age-old burden of manual labor. But until each piece of equipment can be shown to eliminate hand labor and reduce costs with no sacrifice in quality, until then, much of the work must still be manual.
>
> *(Council of California Growers)*

From the film's opening until its closing credits, we see braceros perform manual labor: they harvest crops in fields and pick fruit in orchards. The images of their stooped bodies and simple tools, like weeders, ladders, and machetes, stand in stark contrast to those of tractors, balers, conveyor belts, trucks, trains, and cranes.

These massive and powerful machines are the harbingers of what is known in the twenty-first century as agtech, short for agricultural technology (Manhas). They represent progress in *Why Braceros?* None are operated or used by braceros. As literary critic Curtis Marez has noted, Mexico and Mexicans have long been cast "as backward and technologically inferior" vis-à-vis the United States and Americans, particularly white Americans (6). Agtech has been likened to "something out of science fiction" (Marez 3). According to the Council of California Growers, the farmworkers, the people who simultaneously constitute and provide the raw material that makes the use of that technology possible, are a necessary, albeit temporary, regression in the inexorable march toward a technologically enhanced future.[3]

To emphasize society's dependence on braceros, *Why Braceros?* features testimonies from a spectrum of people, among them labor brokers, the Mexican Counsel, and "a local merchant" from whom the braceros buy "clothing … transistor radios, luggage, [and] home furnishings". Without braceros, the narrator warns, not only farmers, but "the thousands of people who work in or invest in … allied industries" would lose jobs, money, or both. *Why Braceros?* concludes with the reminder that, until "machines to eliminate stoop labor … are ready, los braceros are a necessary supplement to our domestic crews. In Spanish, *braceros* means a man who works with arms and hands. But in American lingo, they are called lifesavers" (Council of California Growers).

In fact, braceros are peripheral in *Why Braceros?* Unlike the labor brokers, the Mexican Counsel, and the local merchant, none speak to the camera. Many, like the two men pulling stakes from the earth, remain faceless. The braceros seem to blend into the background, whether they are toiling among crops in a field or alongside machines. Working in unison and performing the same mechanical movements over and over, the braceros resemble the machines and even appear to be an extension of them. Rather than being a necessary supplement to "our domestic crews", whom we never see in *Why Braceros?*, the braceros are a supplement to agtech. Their dehumanization is evident in the very name *bracero*, "a man who works with arms and

hands". Faceless, voiceless, and reduced to mere body parts, the bracero's subjectivity is curtailed. He is not an immigrant or a future American, but a worker exclusively, and an "unskilled" and temporary one at that.

## Why Cybraceros?

*Why Cybraceros?* imagines a world in which economic migrants no longer threaten to become Americans, especially unruly Americans who demand fair wages, decent working conditions, and the right to organize as workers. A combination of parody and science fiction, Alex Rivera's five-minute mockumentary mines music, footage, and language from *Why Braceros?* as it distorts our world and transforms it "into that which it is not or not yet" (Dick 99).

In *Why Cybraceros?* Mexicans work on farms in the United States but never set foot on U.S. soil. Instead of using weeders, ladders, and machetes, they use the tools of the internet age to control robots that harvest crops and pick fruit north of the international divide. At the same time, U.S. growers use these same tools to extract labor from workers south of the border. In short, Americans continue to rely on Mexican labor, but they do so without importing Mexican workers. And those workers no longer need to be temporary when they can be remote. *Why Cybraceros?* ends with an echo from *Why Braceros?*, with the female narrator declaring triumphantly, "In Spanish, *cybracero* means a worker who operates a computer with his arms and hands, but in American lingo, *cybracero* means a worker who poses no threat of becoming a citizen" (Rivera).

In 1959, *Why Braceros?* maintained that machines would replace braceros in the future. Like the best science fiction, *Why Cybraceros?* constructs that future as it presents "a society that does not in fact exist, but is predicated on our known society—that is, our known society acts as a jumping-off point for it" (Dick 99). In the society of *Why Cybraceros?* the cybracero is not only the "worker who operates a computer with his arms and hands", but a "robotic farm worker" as well (Rivera). No longer a mere appendage of the machine, the cybracero *is* the machine, not a prospective new American or a rights-bearing human.

Like the bracero in *Why Braceros?*, Rivera's cybracero is faceless and voiceless. Where the bracero is reduced to arms and hands, only the cybracero's dark eyes and hands are seen in *Why Cybraceros?* In addition, the cybracero is depicted as an avatar, "a graphical illustration that represents a computer user, or a character or alter ego that represents that user" (Technopedia). As a man with brown skin, dark eyes, and dark, graying eyebrows operates a desktop computer, his avatar, a spherical robot wearing an orange sombrero, hovers among the treetops in an orchard. Using green and purple appendages that resemble arms and hands, the avatar plucks what appear to be oranges from the trees' branches. A basket hangs from the avatar's round, black "torso", across which *CYBRACERO* is emblazoned.

In another scene that deploys the imagery of a late-twentieth-century video game, the cybracero's predecessor, the bracero, is also depicted as an avatar. The bracero avatar wears a poncho or serape with green and red stripes, brown huaraches, and a yellow sombrero with *BRACERO* written across it. Like the original Donkey Kong, the bracero avatar bounces into and around the frame, which has been divided into two halves, labeled *MEXICO* and *USA*. A black squiggle in the middle of the frame represents the international border fence. As the narrator introduces the cybracero program, the bracero avatar jumps over the fence and stops in midair. A large, red general prohibition sign appears over the bracero avatar. The bracero avatar's arms then separate from its body and float into the United States as the rest of the bracero avatar's body returns to Mexico. The narrator explains,

> Under the cybracero program, American farm labor will be accomplished on American soil, but no Mexican workers will need to leave Mexico. Only *the labor* of Mexicans will cross the border. Mexican workers will no longer have to. … To the American farmer, it's all the labor without the worker.
>
> *(Rivera)*

Depending on the point of view, "all the labor without the worker" is a fantasy or a nightmare. American capitalists no longer need to move production offshore when labor can be extracted from foreign workers. Rivera further develops the fantasy/nightmare of disembodied labor at cybraceros.com, his website for Cybracero Systems, a fake cybracero employment agency, and in *Sleep Dealer*, his brilliant 2008 feature film. Rather than discuss these works, the latter of which has received considerable attention from scholars and other cultural critics, I turn to another dystopian vision of migrant labor and extractivism: Alejandro Morales's *The Rag Doll Plagues*.

### The Rag Doll Plagues

*The Rag Doll Plagues* is a novel about disease, blood, and survival—in particular, mestizx survival and supremacy. It consists of three books, each of which is named for its setting. Book 1 takes place in Mexico City in the late eighteenth century. Book 2 is set in 1979 in and around Delhi, a working-class, Mexican American neighborhood in Santa Ana, California; and Book 3, *LAMEX*, takes place primarily in twenty-first-century Southern California. However, by 2079, the year in which that book opens, nations no longer exist. Canada, the United States, and Mexico have been dissolved into the Triple Alliance, and the region extending from Los Angeles to Mexico City is known as LAMEX. While the nation-state is a thing of the past, class endures. Three classes occupy LAMEX: Higher Life Existence, Middle Life Existence, and Lower Life Existence.

Written in the first person, *The Rag Doll Plagues* has three narrators. Each is a physician confronting a mysterious and deadly epidemic. Book 1's narrator, Gregorio, is a Spaniard whom the Spanish king has sent from Madrid to Mexico City in 1788 because a disease, *La Mona*, is ravaging the population of New Spain. Gregorio is the progenitor of the other books' narrators. Book 2's, Gregory, is a Chicano doctor in Orange County whose lover is an early victim of HIV/AIDS. Book 3's narrator, also named Gregory, is the medical director of the LAMEX Health Corridor, a region in the grip of the Blue Buster, an epidemic caused by an environmental catastrophe. The product of generations of human waste and reminiscent of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, an enormous, toxic mass that had been floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean has collided with the Southern California coast and is emitting "putrid gases" that are deadly to most humans (Morales 154).

A pair of ghosts, Papá Damián and Gregorio, appear in all three books to the narrators exclusively. Papá Damián and Gregorio are eighteenth-century Gregorio's descendants and twentieth-century Gregory and twenty-first-century Gregory's ancestors. The ghosts' identities are never clearly delineated. In fact, it is difficult to distinguish them from their carnal kin or the three narrators from one another. For example, when eighteenth-century Gregorio first encounters the ghosts in a dream, he recounts,

> I was not afraid. It was as if I knew these men. The young [one, ghost Gregorio,] reached out to shake my hand. "Gregorio", my own name was repeated countless times. … With [Papá Damián] leading, we traveled together. Gregorio and I moved as one in the same person.
>
> *(23)*

Blood unites the narrators and the ghosts. In contrast, it oozes or bursts from other people's—mostly women's—bodies. Along with its problematic celebration of mestizaje, *The Rag Doll Plagues*' misogyny warrants scrutiny. Each book's narrator has a female lover, the main character's "female counterpart" (Garay 142). The female counterpart is of a different race from that of the narrator. If blood is the manifestation of race, as biological racism maintains, then the three female counterparts represent difference vis-à-vis the protagonists' uniformity and wholeness. To bring that uniformity and wholeness into relief, each female counterpart falls apart: one must have her legs amputated, another bleeds profusely, and the third has had her arm cut off and replaced by a robotic appendage. Ultimately, each devolves into a "diseased and dead female body" (Garay 142).

In Book 1, Marisela, Gregorio's Indigenous lover and the mother of their daughter, is afflicted with *La Mona*. The disease starts off as a pox, then it eats away at its victims' flesh. If the victim's bloated limbs do not fall off on their own, they are amputated so as to slow the disease's relentless progression. To save their unborn daughter, Gregorio amputates Marisela's legs, then removes the infant from her womb via caesarean. Marisela, the Indian mother, dies, while her mestiza daughter, Mónica Marisela, the embodiment of modern Mexico, of "liberation" in "a new century in [a] new country", lives (Morales 66).

In Book 2, Sandra Spears, twentieth-century Gregory's Jewish lover, suffers from severe hemophilia. She "open[s] up all over" as she bleeds internally and coughs up blood (Morales 98). Her surname underscores her painful and sullied self-fragmentation; "little knives carve their way through her body" (94). After she contracts HIV from a blood transfusion, she becomes "a human scourge", "a job risk", and "a human disease puzzle to be solved" (112). Desperate, she and Gregory travel to Mexico so she can learn from Indigenous "*curanderas* … about herbs and plants to ease her pain" (122).

Sandra's association with Mexicans is echoed in her affiliation with Delhi's working-class Chicanxs, among them Doña Rosina. Doña Rosina, one of Gregory's elderly patients, has diabetes. Her legs are swollen and she has an infected, ingrown toenail, but she refuses treatment because she wants "to die whole". Ultimately, Sandra dies in Doña Rosina's humble, yet colorful home, not in her blond parents' elegant, posh house. Just as Marisela is survived by her mestiza daughter, Sandra is survived by Delhi's mestizx residents, the people Doña Rosina describes as "the color of tomorrow" (88). Differences notwithstanding, neither Marisela, a dismembered, dark-skinned, Indian woman, nor Sandra, a pale, bleeding white woman, are fit for a whole and polychromatic mestizx future.

That future is the setting of Book 3. Not unlike Sandra, victims of the Blue Buster drown in their own blood. "[T]he blood vessels in the lungs become engorged, expanding the chest and back, eventually bursting" (185). Alongside these rupturing bodies, we readers encounter Gabriela "Gabi" Chung, twenty-first-century Gregory's Asian lover and research partner. One of only a hundred elite participants in a pilot medical robotics program, she has had her right arm from the elbow to the hand replaced with a robotic appendage. In addition to functioning as a sort of high-tech Swiss army knife, the robotic arm allows her to plug into an information system that resembles the internet.

Moreover, the robotic arm is a requirement for promotion by the Directorate, a mysterious and powerful branch of the Triple Alliance. Gregory must also have one of his arms replaced with a robotic arm if he expects to be promoted. However, not unlike Doña Rosina, he resolves not "to be carved up and shaped into what the Directorate considered a model optimum efficient doctor" (143). He becomes even more determined to keep his body intact as Gabi's begins to reject the prosthesis. The smell of singed flesh accompanies her, a sign that she needs to recharge the arm and that she is bound to be terminated from her job (135–136). Devastated,

she kills herself by inserting the robotic arm into a powerful conductor in the lab where she and Gregory work. The "voltage is so great", he recounts, "her arms and legs popped open like spring rose buds, slowly exposing the inner color of their flower" (197). Brains and guts notwithstanding, Gabi, it appears, is reduced to a mass of flesh that resembles a vagina.

With her robotic arm, Gabi reifies *bracero*, a "model optimum" worker. She embodies the promises of science and technology that frame *Why Braceros?* and that animate *Why Cybraceros?* Yet rather than enhance her physical form, the machine corrupts "her human flesh and bone" (196). Ultimately, the machine is all that is left of her. After she blows her body to pieces, "the mechanical appendage" remains "connected to the generator" (197).

Gabi is a victim of failed technology, the Directorate's demands, and her own ambition. In contrast, the heroes of Book 3 are the humble Lower Life Existence people of Mexico City, also known as MCMs (short for Mexico City Mexicans). Gregory reports that Mexico City is the "Golgotha of pollution", a city of toxic air, sprawling shanty towns, and towering mountains of trash. Anyone with the means abandoned it generations ago. Yet, the people who were unable to flee—namely, the poor—have "adapted to their environment" (181). As Gregory discovers, they have developed an immunity to the Blue Buster. Where Gabi's ambition and hybridity lead to her downfall, the MCMs' lowliness and impurity enable not only their survival, but their existential advantage over all other humans.

In an inversion of eugenics and an affirmation of mestizaje, MCM blood becomes a prized commodity at the end of *The Rag Doll Plagues*. Reminiscent of medical research that has exploited socially marginalized people, pharmaceutical companies open blood farms where they extract blood from MCMs and establish breeding programs for MCMs. As producers and vessels of MCM blood, MCMs themselves become valuable objects to possess, and an economy of blood enslavement emerges. "People took their Mexicans everywhere, fearing that friends or relatives would steal them", Gregory observes. "Millions of MCMs signed contracts of blood enslavement. Here again, the Mexican population became the backbone of the LAMEX corridor" (195). Just as *Why Braceros?* ends by declaring braceros lifesavers, in *The Rag Doll Plagues*, their late-twenty-first-century corollaries, MCMs, are upheld as essential to LAMEX. Indeed, MCMs are the most essential workers in Morales's dystopia and their blood, the most precious of extracted commodities.

## Walk on Water

Unlike *The Rag Doll Plagues*, *Walk on Water* emphasizes healing. Many of Maravilla's elaborate, mixed-media sculptures, immersive installations, and collaborative, ritualistic performances grapple with his "traumatic experiences" as a former unaccompanied child and undocumented migrant, a refugee, and a cancer survivor. In addition to being part of his personal self-healing process, his Salvifuturist works are his offerings "for self-healing to the immigrant community and beyond" (Antoni).

Formerly known as Irvin Morazán, Maravilla was born in 1976 in San Salvador. In 1984, at the age of eight, he fled the civil war in El Salvador and migrated to the United States as part of "the first wave" of unaccompanied children to travel from Central America to the U.S.-Mexico border (Knockdown Center). With the assistance of a coyote, he hid beneath a dog in a truck, crossed the border, and made his way to New York City, where he grew up undocumented. At 26, he naturalized as a U.S. citizen.

Ten years later, Maravilla was diagnosed with advanced, stage-three colon cancer. He sought remedies from western medicine, "shamans, Brujox, [and] curanderos". He was drawn to sound therapy in particular. "[O]ur bodies our over 60% water", he explained in a 2021 interview:

> And in the water, we carry anxieties … stress … trauma. In some cases, we carry … illnesses. Or sometimes, these untreated traumas can manifest in an illness. … The sound vibration shakes up the water in your body and releases the toxins. It's … cleansing and washing away these toxins with vibration.
>
> *(Donoghue)*

After overcoming cancer in 2013, Maravilla reclaimed his original first name and adopted his father's "fake last name". Because Maravilla was born on 12 December, the feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, his parents gave him the name Guadalupe. However, they changed it to Irvin because they were concerned that "Guadalupe was too feminine". Maravilla is the surname his father took on after he migrated to the United States without papers. In solidarity with his undocumented father, the artist jettisoned Morazán, which he described as "a conquistador's name", and changed his surname to his father's alias (Antoni).

Along with the theme of rebirth, water plays a prominent role in many of Maravilla's works. For example, in his 2011 site-specific performance, *Illegal Alien Crossing*, he returned to the U.S.-Mexico border. Yet rather than hiding beneath a dog in a truck, he donned a large, silver, metallic headdress with solar panels, submerged himself in the Rio Grande, and walked across it. The headdress's "hyper-visibility", art historian Kency Cornejo has observed, contrasted sharply with the secrecy and invisibility to which so many undocumented migrants are subject as they make their way to and in the United States. "By exalting his presence", she notes, Maravilla transformed the "trauma of negation into a healing ritual of light and preservation". As he emerged from the river, he was reborn not as an "illegal alien", but as a luminous, "hybrid half-man, half-machine extraterrestrial creature"—"a futuristic border crosser", in Cornejo's words. In this act of self-baptism, he transformed not only the undocumented migrant, but the Rio Grande from a site of violence and death into one of "healing powers and the sacredness of water" (Cornejo 26).

Akin to the healing powers and sacredness of water, Maravilla's sound baths are performances/rituals with gongs that seek to restore participants' well-being. From 15 May until 4 September 2021, he performed sound baths for undocumented migrants, people affected by cancer, and the general public at *Planeta Abuelx*. Spanning 60 feet in Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, this exhibition consisted of two towering, cast aluminum and steel sculptures; two massive gongs; a ring of medicinal plants indigenous to the Americas, including corn, squash, and beans; a ground drawing made of water-based paint; an aluminum fire pit; and a *retablo* (devotional painting) the size of a billboard ("Planeta Abuelx"). Images of his sound baths show participants relaxing on yoga mats, beach towels, and picnic blankets.[4] These images stand in stark contrast to those of migrant children wrapped in mylar blankets in *hieleras*.

Maravilla's sound baths stem from his autobiographical trilogy, a combination of musical performance, dance, and sculptures. Using science fiction tropes and Indigenous Mesoamerican imagery, and reenacting moments from his own life, the trilogy invents what he calls "[n]ew mythologies" and "a new visual language for border crossing stories".[5] The first installment, *The OG of Undocumented Children*, performed at the Whitney Museum in 2018, recounted the story of his journey to and arrival in the United States as an unaccompanied and undocumented child migrant.[6] The second installment, *Walk on Water*, which I will discuss in further detail, took place on 21 July 2019 at the Queens Museum as part of the exhibition, *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas*. Fantastic, mixed-media, gong-bearing sculptures comprise the third installment, *Disease Thrower* (Remick and Wu). These totemic sculptures, two of which were part of *Planeta Abuelx*, link the trauma of his border crossing to his cancer and highlight "the ways he overcame the disease" (Knockdown Center).

*Walk on Water* was set in the *Panorama of the City of New York*, a 9,335-square-foot archi-tectural model of New York City that was created for the 1964 World's Fair. Accompanied by the "songstress" La Momia (Sam Xu), a "team of [gong-playing] healers", and two "futuristic border crossing coyotes" with exposed torso organs (Nima Jeizan and Maxwell Runko), Maravilla invoked his own traversing of the border at age eight as he trod across the *Panorama*'s waterways.[7] The green, inflatable suit he wore transformed him into the Alien Abductor, an enormous, otherworldly creature, and, at the same time, the Alien Abductor's abductee. In the Alien Abductor's arms, Maravilla's own arms were extended outward.[8] In addition to appearing small, vulnerable, and childlike, he resembled Christ on the cross.

Like many of his other works, *Walk on Water* had a strong spiritual and therapeutic compo-nent. Its title alone evokes the story of Jesus' miracle and the gongs' swirling, overlapping sounds were "intended to cleanse political phobias and blockages of New Yorkers" during the third year of the Trump administration.[9] Connecting illness and illegality, "illEGAL" was writ-ten across the Alien Abductor's back.[10]

What is more, *Walk on Water* was an homage to migrant labor. With their handheld vacuum cleaners and fluorescent mop slippers, the coyotes performed a *limpia* (energy cleansing) as they literally cleaned the space of the *Panorama*. All the while, the gongs emitted vibrations that extended to the listeners and the water filling their bodies. While the coyotes' exposed intestines evoked Maravilla's colon cancer and the migrant's (and everyone else's) corporality and vulnerabil-ity, *Walk on Water* likened the unaccompanied and undocumented child migrant to a miracle worker and transformed the migrant housecleaner and domestic worker into a powerful shaman.

More than a smuggler of people, the coyote, in both North American and Mesoamerican cosmologies, is often a "sacred trickster" (Fragoza). In the Aztec pantheon, the coyote, Huehuecóyotl, is the god of music and dance (De Durand-Forest and Graulich 134). In colo-nial Mexico, *coyote* also came to signify *mestizaje*. According to anthropologist Gabriella Sanchez, the term was "a quasi-pejorative designation that conveyed mixed ancestry. … In this context, and by virtue of their marginal and ambiguous condition, coyotes emerge as those who … navigate the boundaries between the admissible and the unacceptable" (518). By including coyotes with exposed organs in *Walk on Water*, Maravilla not only invoked his own crossing from Mexico to the United States and his own history of cancer; he also conjured a conver-gence of the physical and spiritual worlds. His performance transformed the coyote from an "inherently predatory", "violent", and "greed-driven" criminal into a powerful intermediary leading us to a healthier and less toxic future (Sanchez 517).

## Conclusion: Essential and Still Excluded

*Why Cybraceros?*, *The Rag Doll Plagues*, and *Walk on Water* present overlapping, but ultimately diverging views of Latinx migrant workers. In Rivera's and Morales's dystopian works, differen-tial inclusion persists: disembodied Mexican workers are integral to the U.S. labor market as cybraceros, while MCMs provide blood to a vampiric society. In contrast, in Maravilla's perfor-mance, the migrant worker is a powerful shaman who bridges the corporal and spiritual, washes away fear, and heals undocumented workers and the society that simultaneously disavows and depends on them.

## Notes

1 *Latinxfuturism* stems from *Latinofuturism*. See Merla-Watson.
2 Also see Real Academia Española.

3 The Council of California Growers' dream of replacing human workers with machines appears closer to being realized. See, for example, "Automated Robots Are Now Being Used in California's Strawberry Fields".
4 See, for example, "Guadalupe Maravilla" and Guadalupe Maravilla's Summer Solstice Healing Sound Bath.
5 https://www.guadalupemaravilla.com/og. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
6 https://www.guadalupemaravilla.com/og. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
7 https://www.guadalupemaravilla.com/irvin-morazan. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
8 To see Maravilla dressed as the Alien Abductor and the Alien Abductor's abductee, see @guadalupe_maravilla, https://www.instagram.com/p/Bz_F1SelLxr/ (posted 16 July 2019 and accessed 3 Oct. 2021).
9 https://www.guadalupemaravilla.com/irvin-morazan. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
10 @guadalupe_maravilla, https://www.instagram.com/p/Bz_F1SelLxr/ (posted 16 July 2019 and accessed 3 Oct. 2021).

## Works Cited

Antoni, Janine. "Guadalupe Maravilla." *BOMB*, 5 Jan. 2021, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/guadalupe-maravilla/. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
"Automated Robots Are Now Being Used in California's Strawberry Fields." *Los Angeles Times*, 26 July 2022, https://www.latimes.com/business/00000182-3cae-dd3c-ade7-7dfec77e0000-123. Accessed 10 Aug. 2022.
Bardacke, Frank. "The UFW and the Undocumented." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 83, 2013, pp. 162–169.
Castañeda, Ernesto. "The Contradiction at the Heart of Immigration Restriction." *Washington Post*, 10 June 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/10/contradiction-heart-immigration-restriction/. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
Cornejo, Kency. "Decolonial Futurisms: Ancestral Border Crossers, Time Machines, and Space Travel in Salvadoran Art." *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas*, edited by Robb Hernández, Tyler Stallings, and Joanna Szupinska-Myers. UCR ARTSblock, University of California, Riverside, 2017, pp. 20–31.
Council of California Growers. *Why Braceros?* Wilding Inc, 1959, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTgL9clv0t8. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
C-SPAN. *Senate Judiciary Hearing on Immigrant Farmworkers*, 21 July 2021, https://www.c-span.org/video/?513557-1/senate-judiciary-hearing-immigrant-farmworkers. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
De Durand-Forest, J. and Michel Graulich. "On Paradise Lost in Central Mexico." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1984, pp. 134–135.
Dick, Philip K. "My Definition of Science Fiction." *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick: Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings*, edited by Lawrence Sutin, Pantheon Books, 1995, pp. 99–100.
Donoghue, Katy. "Guadalupe Maravilla Is Healing Generational Trauma through Sound Art." *Whitewall*, 19 Mar. 2021, https://whitewall.art/art/guadalupe-maravilla-is-healing-generational-trauma-through-art-and-sound. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
Fragoza, Carribean. "Guadalupe Maravilla: The Coyote." *Aperture*, Fall 2020, https://issues.aperture.org/article/2020/3/3/guadalupe-maravilla. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
Garay, R. Joyce Z. L. "Reading Alejandro Morales' 'The Rag Doll Plagues' through Its Women: Gender, Sexuality, and Nationalistic Complexity." *Bilingual Review / La Revista Bilingüe*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2012, pp. 141–165.
Goodwin, Matthew D. *The Latinx Files: Race, Migration, and Space Aliens*. Rutgers UP, 2021.
"Guadalupe Maravilla." https://artatatimelikethis.com/the-life-instinct/guadalupe-maravilla. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
*Guadalupe Maravilla's Summer Solstice Healing Sound Bath*, 12 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIwb3MIYG8o&t=20s. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
Jordan, Miriam. "Farmworkers, Mostly Undocumented, Become 'Essential' During Pandemic." *New York Times*, 2 Apr. 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/coronavirus-undocumented-immigrant-farmworkers-agriculture.html. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.
Knockdown Center. "Guadalupe Maravilla: Disease Thrower." 14 Mar 2020, https://knockdown.center/event/guadalupe-maravilla-disease-thrower/. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

Espiritu, Yen Le. *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives Across Cultures, Communities, and Countries.* U of California P, 2003.

Manhas, Karn. "Why the Agtech Boom Isn't Your Typical Tech Disruption." *World Economic Forum*, 25 Feb. 2019, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/02/why-the-agtech-boom-isn-t-your-typical-tech-disruption/. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

Marez, Curtis. *Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance.* U of Minnesota P, 2016.

Martin, Philip. "Mexican Braceros and US Farm Workers." *Wilson Center*, 10 July 2020. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/mexican-braceros-and-us-farm-workers. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

Merla-Watson, Cathryn. "Latinofuturism." *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, 2019. https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-648. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021

Morales, Alejandro. *The Rag Doll Plagues.* Arte Público Press, 1991.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th Anniversary Edition. NYU Press, 2019.

"Planeta Abuelx." https://socratessculpturepark.org/exhibition/planeta-abuelx/. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

Real Academia Española. "Bracero." https://dle.rae.es/bracero. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

Remick, Rachel, and Simon Wu. "Forms of Care: Guadalupe Maravilla's *Disease Thrower* #5 and *Circle Serpent.*" https://post.moma.org/forms-of-care-guadalupe-maravilla-s-disease-thrower-5-and-circle-serpent/. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

Rivera, Alex, director. *Why Cybraceros?*, 1997, https://vimeo.com/46513267. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

Ruiz-Grossman, Sarah. "Democrats Call for Fast-Tracking Citizenship for Undocumented Essential Workers." *Huffpost*, 15 Jan. 2021, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/democrats-undocumented-essential-workers-citizenship_n_6002173fc5b6ffcab964638e. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

Sanchez, Gabriella. "Smuggling as Spectacle: Irregular Migration and Coyotes in Contemporary U.S. Latino Popular Culture." *The Routledge Companion to Latina/o Popular Culture*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama, Routledge, 2016, pp. 515–528.

Technopedia. "Avatar." https://www.techopedia.com/definition/4624/avatar. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

UNHCR. "What Is a Refugee?" https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Migrants (Economic)." *UNHCR Master Glossary of Terms*, June 2006. https://www.refworld.org/docid/42ce7d444.html. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security. "Memorandum on Identification of Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers During COVID-19 Response." 19 Mar. 2020. https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/CISA-Guidance-on-Essential-Critical-Infrastructure-Workers-1-20-508c.pdf. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Directory of Visa Categories." https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/all-visa-categories.html. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

Weiss, Julie, and Christoph Rass. "Migrating Concepts: The Transatlantic Origins of the Bracero Program, 1919–42." Unpublished paper, n.d., pp. 1–26.

WordReference.com. "Bracero." https://www.wordreference.com/es/en/translation.asp?spen=Bracero. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

Wormsley, Alisha B. "There Are Black People in the Future: Text That Became a Movement." *Monument Lab*, 1 Oct. 2020, https://monumentlab.com/bulletin/there-are-black-people-in-the-future-text-that-became-a-movement. Accessed 3 Oct. 2021.

# 18

# THE CREATIVE TECHNOLOGISTS OF ADÁL'S *OUT OF FOCUS NUYORICANS* AND RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

*Matthew David Goodwin*

*This chapter is dedicated in friendship to ADÁL who passed into the Spirit realm in 2020.*

The framework of Afrofuturism and its various formulations and descendants often express a particular concern with technology, not only because of the history of technological violence against communities of color, but also because of the unique ability of technology to draw out creativity from its users. Mark Sinker writes about Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet*:

> HipHop is in the grand syncretic tradition of bebop, not ashamed to acknowledge that technological means and initial building material are always simply what falls to hand: but that meaning is nonetheless a matter of energetic and visionary redeployment, not who first owned or made this or that fragment.
>
> *("Loving the Alien")*

An "energetic and visionary redeployment" is the calling card of the cultural figure discussed in this chapter, the creative technologist. Creative technologists invent, adapt, transform, misuse, and appropriate technology, opening up the future to new possibilities. They have a very different relationship to the future from other forms of futurism that imagine, depict, or predict it. The futurism of the creative technologist is an act of placing a finger into the water, sending ripples into the future, envisioning what technology can become, and making it happen. In the context of racism, sexism, and colonialism, the ripples formed by creative technologists have a chance of becoming an empowering wave, as Tiffany Barber writes: "Afrofuturism is a revisionist discourse in which racialized, gendered bodies use technology to reparative ends" (137). This essay places two works in conversation: ADÁL's photo series *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* (1995–1996) and Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952).[1] These two works center creative technologists who deploy their optical metaphors in order to form a powerful reparation for their communities.

What is initially striking about this conversation between *Invisible Man* and *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* is their overlapping history. In 1995, while taking photos of his fellow Nuyoricans, ADÁL was also reading Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which then became a key influence on the series (Jackson). During the period that Ellison was writing *Invisible Man*, as Sara Blair points out in her essay "Ellison, Photography, and the Origins of Invisibility", he was also working as a freelance photographer (56). Ellison was inspired by the experimental street photography of artists such as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Lisette Model (Blair 72–77), photographers who also inspired ADÁL (*Jíbaro* 26), with Model being the one who baptized Adál Maldonado as ADÁL (Catlin). Photography inspiring literature, and literature inspiring photography, back and forth. These interwoven threads come to the surface with their use of the optical concepts of the invisible and the out of focus and the unique political perspective with which these artists imbue them. ADÁL and Ellison, pointing to the ancient metaphor that connects seeing with knowing, use invisibility and the out of focus to signify an unknowing, a lack of recognition, and prejudice. By exploring *Invisible Man* and *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* in conversation, however, it becomes clear that ADÁL and Ellison expand on their central metaphors in order to express a unique form of creative empowerment.

Invisibility and the out of focus, on one level, express a lack, and through that lack the prejudices of whites and mainstream society. These two works, however, also position invisibility and the out of focus on a different level, through a political aesthetics that layers meanings. In an often-quoted statement, Toni Morrison offers a critique of Ellison's use of the concept of invisibility, as she says in interview: "'The title of Ralph Ellison's book was 'Invisible Man,' … 'And the question for me was "Invisible to whom?" Not to me.'" (Morrison). The critique is that the title of the novel intimates that the invisible man is primarily invisible to whites, not to blacks. Ellison therefore places the white gaze at the head of the novel. The critique is warranted and may very well have affected its enormous reception. However, it is at the same time important to directly address the question that Morrison poses in light of the novel itself, and not just the title. In that case it becomes clear that the "Invisible to whom?" is multiple, and that invisibility in the novel is not only a metaphor for the psychosocial discrimination of black communities. Racism is certainly a major cause of his invisibility, however, as Ellison says in an interview: "The hero's invisibility is not a matter of being seen, but a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity, which involves guilt" ("Ralph Ellison, The Art of Fiction"). *Invisible Man* is after all a *bildungsroman*, a story of maturation and growing awareness, and in a sense the narrator begins to take a risk of his humanity only at the end of the novel, as he plans to leave his basement. In fact, throughout the novel, Ellison layers invisibility upon invisibility. The narrator's invisibility is a defining factor for him because no one sees who he really is, his authentic self. This is signaled in the novel by the expansion of imagery related to invisibility and the continual use of images that prevent clear sight, such as blinding light, darkness, fog, haze, frosted or darkened windows, veils, and so on. There are practically always optical barriers between him and other people. He is actually unseen in this larger sense by just about everyone—by teachers, doctors, religious leaders, politicians who purport to support the black community, the black community in Harlem, and even by himself at the beginning of his journey. His invisibility is so complete that he is existentially alone, appropriately depicted as being in a basement, hidden from society, the underground man.

*Out of Focus Nuyoricans* is guided by a similar technique of layering, in the first instance, the photographic with the non-photographic. The series is comprised of 20 out of focus, black-and-white portraits of Nuyorican artists, activists, and community members and is part of a larger artwork which includes installations and performances and a variety of narratives that tell the story of the out of focus Nuyoricans.[2] The context is the conceptual nation of El Spirit Republic

de Puerto Rico, an imaginal nation, a state of mind, a cultural movement, and the out of focus Nuyoricans are its citizens. ADÁL specifically developed *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* along with his passport project, *El Passport*, a Puerto Rican passport that rearranges the U.S. passport by inserting images associated with Puerto Rico. The full dimensionality of *El Passport* was articulated through the performance of the production of the passport for live performances, with ADÁL personalizing them as any bureaucracy would. The images from *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* are layered into the passports as well as being exhibited separately.

The fact that the *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* series is part of *El Passport* points to the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. Nuyoricans (and any Puerto Rican who comes to the United States) may not have the obstacle of immigration status; however, the U.S. passport is at the same time a symbol of colonization, as it is for many Indigenous groups. Referencing the 1898 takeover of Puerto Rico by the United States, Pedro Pietri's opening line of his essay-poem "Nuyoricans Out of Focus" that accompanies the series declares: "Congratulations! You've been out of focus for one hundred years!" At the same time, the individuals depicted in the photos are not a group just of Puerto Ricans, but of Nuyoricans, those migrants and children of migrants who are in a particularly ambivalent situation because the colonial legacy of Puerto Rico is compounded by the challenges of being a migrant marked by race and language. Furthermore, their migrant status also separates Nuyoricans from the island, creating a sometimes tense relationship. ADÁL describes Nuyoricans as "treated as outcasts by the dominant Puerto Rican culture and too ethnically and linguistically challenged by the United States" (*Jíbaro* 26). Finally, though most of the portraits depict artists unrecognized by the mainstream media, there are a few who are well-known, such as Marc Anthony. In this case, however, what is out of focus is Anthony's connection to the other individuals in the series, the collective, the Nuyorican Art Movement. The upshot is that the out of focus Nuyoricans are out of focus from a number of different perspectives. Just as invisibility, this is not just a black-and-white matter.

As a corollary to these multiple and layered meanings, these works assert that, rather than clear sight, it is the invisible and the out of focus that are correlated with the truth. As such, these works express the idea that becoming aware of one's invisibility or out of focus state is significant in itself. This is, of course, easier said than done. The structures of racism, xenophobia, and other forms of prejudice are particularly adept at covering over our ability to see one another as we are—they are in fact deeply obscuring. Near the end of his time working with the Brotherhood, the narrator of *Invisible Man* expresses his awareness: "I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same—except I now recognized my invisibility" (Ellison 508). Ellison explains in an interview: "In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment, invisibility to visibility" ("Ralph Ellison, The Art of Fiction"). As the narrator expresses it: "I've illuminated the blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa" (Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 13). Pedro Pietri in "Nuyoricans Out of Focus" suggests a similar point for *Out of Focus Nuyoricans*, perhaps a bit stronger: "you can go to hell if can't see [*sic*] that ADÁL's camera is telling you the truth about who you are and what you are seeing is what you are not seeing". The irony of Pietri's declaration is that it is the out of focus that demonstrates the truth. In the common thinking about photography, it is the "focused" that is correlated with truth, representing the way things are in the world. The auto-focus function of a camera, in addition to the social convention of photography as a documentary device, means that cameras almost always function to create images that are in focus, with the out of focus providing background. To turn against this technical and cultural convention by presenting out of focus portraits is to bring the out of focus to the foreground.

Even in this emphasis on the truth of invisibility and the out of focus, these two optical states still connote an absence of visibility or focus, a lack, and a devaluing. Considering them in and of themselves, however, they gain a new set of meanings that value invisibility and the out of focus. Being invisible or out of focus contains an additive richness in terms of how they relate to the history and genres of their media. *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* and *Invisible Man* are realist works in a number of ways. They are documenting communities in New York, and they are focused through individual portraits, as it were, while demonstrating collectivities. However, both of these works can be seen as working in opposition to what Susan Sontag calls "colonization through photography" (64) and some of the realist and exploitative works exemplified by the Farm Security Administration photography program. In the fiction realm, Ellison probably had Richard Wright's more realist novel *Native Son* in mind as a counterpoint. As Sara Blair observes, photography can be a "source for devastating misrepresentation of black Americans and a resource for combating it" (65). *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* and *Invisible Man* combat the potential of realism to be exploitative by adding elements which filter and affect the status of these works as realist.

*Invisible Man* is a pretty straightforward tale of a young man's journey from the South to the North and his interactions with various institutions. Ellison, however, says in his National Book Award acceptance speech that his technique is to augment a realist literary style that tells the "truth about the human condition" with the "brightness of a fairy tale" ("Brave Words" 153). The brightness of a fairy tale can be understood in a number of ways, but I take it to mean that the story has an unreal, abstract, allegorical quality. This effect is primarily created by the layering of the sustained metaphor of light and visibility which calls the reader to read the novel allegorically (even the term itself, "brightness", has that quality). The names of the characters are also clearly significant: Tod Clifton dies in the story (*tod* is German for death), Rinehart is a master of disguise (Rine is the outside, hart is the inside), and so on. These elements give the novel the sense of a morality tale, a certain abstractness which tends towards the philosophical, in that it refers to something beyond the narrative itself, similar to the way that science fiction and fantasy often call on readers to interpret them allegorically. It is this layering of realism and the brightness of a fairy tale that accounts for the novel's resistance to being captured by a genre determination.

The aesthetics of layering in the novel is mirrored by a particular vision of the narrator. In the "Prologue", the narrator imagines a new form of listening to music:

> Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue"—all at the same time.
>
> *(8)*

There is certainly an expression of loneliness in the invention; the narrator is, after all, alone in his basement apartment. The invention also tells us that he is a creative technologist, or as he calls himself, a "thinker-tinker" (7). Let us imagine the layered musical event invented by the narrator. Even if he devised a way to start them all at once, with five connected tone arms, they would still not start precisely at the same time, and fuzziness and distortion would result. Along with the adding of record players, there is an fuzzy remainder, often the hallmark of creative technologists. The strange misalignments would intertwine with the lyrics and create new meanings, as with the distortion of the line in the song "I'm white—inside—but that don't help my case", that would deepen the ambiguity already in the lyrics, as it oscillates between an ironic

joke and a disturbing statement of white normativity. The aesthetics of layering and the resulting distortion, as is often the case in the novel, destabilizes binary positions and creates a multiplicity of meanings.

The out of focus also has its own unique aesthetic property; in particular, an out of focus image is a visible image, as opposed to something that is invisible. An out of focus image is one that appears blurred or mixed, not absent. This, then, can express the richness of Nuyorican culture that is formed from the combination of multiple cultures (Puerto Rican, African American, Anglo, Spanish, Indigenous, and so on). Out of focus is a way to describe not only something that is not clear, but also something that is rich and complex. A can of paint that contains a mixture of various paints is not a lesser form of those individual paints, but the creation of a new color. In *Out of Focus Nuyoricans*, then, in addition to depicting various forms of social exclusion, the out of focus is able to positively affirm the state of being culturally mixed.

ADÁL's experimental photography plays with the "program" of the technology, as Vilém Flusser writes, experimental photographers create works that "win out against the camera's program in the sense of their human intentions, i.e. they subordinate the camera to human intention" (47). This playing with the program, shifting to the positive aesthetic quality of rich blurriness, points to the large palette of the out of focus, as compared to the relatively single point of the in-focus. On the one hand, the out of focus aspect of ADÁL's portraits is not slight enough so that the photos could be confused with an error or sloppy photography. On the other hand, they are not out of focus to the extent that the individual cannot be recognized at all; that is, it is important that these individuals can be recognized. ADÁL's winning out against the program of the camera is to win out against the program of colonization.

Even as ADÁL was immersed in the artistry of the camera, it is important to note that he never actually owned a camera, and always used cameras borrowed from friends. He never wanted to fetishize the technology, as the Italian Futurists; rather, he wanted to work against our habitual ways of relating to technology in order to see Nuyoricans anew. The images he produced were not meant to be pure mirrors of Puerto Rico, but rather layered and provocative images. In this case, *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* was formed not only through the camera, but also through an early version of Photoshop and its layering tools. Some of the images that he uses were taken out of focus, while others were taken in focus and then modified to appear blurry. In fact, all of the images in this series were digitally modified in some way, either making the images blurry or pixelating certain parts of the image, deepening the layers of blurriness.

Beyond their particular aesthetics, the invisible and the out of focus are given substantial meaning by their engagement with the speculative arts. As Lisa Yaszek demonstrates, *Invisible Man* can be understood as a work of "proto-Afrofuturism" (299); after all, creative technologists are ever-present in Afrofuturism. The novel is also an example of proto-Afrofuturism because of its use of the language of speculative fiction throughout the novel; for example, robots (570), zombies (94), and the utopia future of the Brotherhood (385). It is the title, however, that permanently marks the book with speculative fiction. Invisibility, since it does not refer to actual optical invisibility, functions primarily as an intertextual literary reference, a playful nod to H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*. This playfulness is apparent in the narrator's clarifying statement: "I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms" (3). Like the "brightness of a fairy tale", the language of speculative fiction gives the narrative an abstract and unrealistic tone that calls to be read allegorically, and as a result, opens the novel to the multiple interpretations that allegorical readings can produce.

*Out of Focus Nuyoricans* is more clearly a work of speculative art in itself. El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico is not just a metaphor; it is a speculative and a fantasy world in which the people are actually out of focus. The images are portraits of people, and there are enough details, such as the shape of the head or hair, that clearly mark them as individuals. The blurriness, however, adds an actual brightness to the portraits, giving an abstractness to the images, and at times a ghostly quality. Like invisibility, this abstractness invites the viewer to interpret the out of focus element allegorically, but it does something else as well. The visibility of the out of focus Nuyoricans ironically gives the images a substantiality, an actuality, that signifies that these people are actually out of focus, that it is something that they are, rather than just a metaphor. This is expressed as well by the narratives surrounding the photo series, which show that the world of El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico is in fact an out of focus world.

Ellison's referencing of speculative fiction and ADÁL's speculative art are exemplified by how they evoke the mad scientist, the antagonist to the creative technologist. While being mis-recognized may not be an ideal condition, *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* and *Invisible Man* embrace their visual conditions as accurate and aesthetically rich representations. As a foil to this perspective, these two works depict the figure of the mad scientist who attempts to tech-nologically fix and resolve the state of being invisible or out of focus. They are professionals who use their technology to destroy. They are seemingly sane, but in fact, their methods are quite mad. The image of the mad scientist, formed by works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*, is that of an "overreacher", someone who goes beyond current science practices and envisions new ways of using technology (Haynes 67). In this way, they share a common approach with the creative technologist; however, they differ in that the ethical implications of their work are highly questionable, sacrificing others for the sake of science, and ultimately turning to violence and domination. Ellison and ADÁL have repur-posed the mad scientist so that they are not a romantic or evil outsider overreaching the bounds of science, but a respected member of society who uses accepted science to put a community in danger. This is certainly a more accurate portrayal for many black and Puerto Rican communities.

After traveling from the South to New York, Ellison's narrator begins working at Liberty Paints, where he is wounded during a pipe explosion. He is sent to the factory hospital, where he has a particularly dangerous confrontation with some mad scientists. These mad scientists are health professionals, doctors, nurses, administrators who express their intention of helping him but seem to be more interested in experimenting on him. Their intention is to make him more visible to them, to "keep him under observation" (231). They examine him with "pierc-ing eyes", a "calm, scientific gaze", and a "steady scientific gaze" (239, 245, 248). They have technological devices to assist them in their attempt to make him visible to them, even though they are not truly able to do so. All of the mad scientists' attempts at objective knowledge are something of a front. The scenario involving the X-ray is a revealing example, since as soon as they are done with the X-ray session, they switch to giving him electric shock therapy. As a political statement, the narrator correlates these mad scientists with the leaders of the Brotherhood who also aspire to objectivity, as in one discussion with Brother Hambro. Hambro says: "'We judge through cultivating scientific objectivity', he said with a voice that had a smile in it, and suddenly I saw the hospital machine, felt as though locked in again" (505). Both are, in the mind of the narrator, attempting to resolve human complexity.

*Out of Focus Nuyoricans* likewise evokes the figure of a destructive mad scientist who is pur-ported to be a trusted figure. Along with the portraits in *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* is included the image of a pair of metal-framed eyeglasses, an artifact from El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico. The caption under the image of the glasses in the companion booklet reads: "Ultimate

weapon created by Doctor Ocula to topple the Out of Focus State of *El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico*". Doctor Ocula is described this way:

> Following the creation of the out of focus state of El Spirit Republic—situated at 10 degrees latitude just west of a place called Eden—Doctor Ocula an eccentric optometrist who during his student days had been a member of Los Bodega Bombers a para-military dissident group that set off explosive cans of Bustelo Coffee to protest against anything the out of focus state stood for began a series of experiments to see what laid beyond the field of restricted sight in this out of focus world and developed an optic apparatus he called eye glasses. This new development allowed the wearer to bring blurred objects into focus.
>
> <div align="right">(<em>ADÁL,</em> Coconauts in Space<em>)</em></div>

In the world of El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico, the Bodega Bombers are a fictional pro-statehood terrorist group that supports making Puerto Rico the 51st state. That Ocula was a part of this group indicates that he supports the assimilation of Puerto Rico into the United States. Opposed to embracing the out of focus, therefore, the doctor has the goal of resolving this visual condition. Being able to see in focus, in an out of focus world, corresponds to promoting the assimilation of Puerto Ricans into mainstream U.S. society, thereby violently resolving the political and existential dilemmas that Nuyoricans experience, and extinguishing its political potential. In addition, ADÁL here reverses the U.S. perspective, which associates Puerto Rican independence movements with terrorism, and instead correlates terrorism with the cultural and economic violence of assimilation.

Nevertheless, ADÁL is clear that including Ocula in the collection is significant (just as the inclusion of the Brotherhood is a key aspect of Ellison's *Invisible Man*). El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico is "situated at 10 degrees latitude just west of Eden", meaning that the nation is somewhat near Eden as an invented fantasy world, and yet clearly separate. ADÁL says in an interview:

> I don't feel that these worlds that I create are Utopias—even though I feel comfortable in them—they're not intended to be Utopias. I don't consider them to be my attempt to go back to the Garden of Eden. … I feel that whenever more than two people are in an environment that there's going to be differences of ideas, and differences of ideas is going to bring some kind of conflict, you know? So I think that differences of opinions and tolerating difference of opinion is what this journey should be about, and learning from that shared experience, and not to try to be like anyone else. Tu sabes … So that's why I introduced the Bodega Bombers into my imaginary world.
>
> <div align="right">(<em>Valentín</em> 224)</div>

Ultimately, this is the political aesthetics of *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* at play, adding and layering political views rather than developing a pure politics, embracing multiplicity rather than the singular vision of one political group.

While *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* and *Invisible Man* are critical of the mad scientists who attempt to clarify the visual states of the invisible man and the out of focus Nuyoricans, they do not reject science and technology. Opposed to the destructive mad scientist figures, ADÁL and Ellison provide depictions of creative technologists who use technology to express their political views. They do not want to cure or resolve the visual condition of their communities; instead, they want to give their communities an opportunity for artistic expression and for

potential political action. In *Invisible Man*, a number of characters are creative technologists, but the most significant is a Zoot Suiter named Rinehart, described as a "spiritual technologist" (495) and who wears green-tinted glasses. The idea is that he uses technology to creatively change his perception of the world; that is, he does not use clear glass to see but a layering glass. He is aware of his invisibility but does not remain resigned to that state, and so he creates his own way of seeing. He becomes a powerful inspiration for the narrator who sees in Rinehart's aesthetic approach to life the possibility of a new politics in Harlem, as he states: "I felt that somewhere between Rinehart and invisibility there were great potentialities" (511). It is not clear where these potentialities will lead the narrator, but it can be argued that ultimately it is the complex novel itself, running the risk of his humanity through art.

Some of the characters in El Spirit Republic that appear in the surrounding narratives are also creative technologists. The leaders of El Spirit Republic do not impose technological clarity as does Doctor Ocula, but are formed as creative technologists. Creative technologists often engage other non-technological fields that affect their use of technology; for example, Doctor Shevek in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), who, in Roslynn Haynes's terms, is a "reha-bilitated" scientist who is able to combine mystical and rational thinking (295). In this case, the particular training that the out of focus Nuyoricans receive is not just traditional science, but includes the Indigenous metaphysics of "assemblage points", as described by Carlos Castañeda in his book *The Teachings of Don Juan*, and which was also an influence on *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* (Catlin). In addition, they developed the Coconaut Space Program to preserve and expand the out of focus state. The Comandante of the program explains it: "Information regarding these concealed experiments [of Doctor Ocula] reached the ears of the Grand Spirit Council and our physicists and scientists realized that an optic experiment like this could bring down El Spirit Republic before its time" (ADÁL *Coconauts in Space*). The purpose, then, of the Coconaut Space Program is to "explore the cosmos for alternative out of focus life supporting territories in other solar systems" (ADÁL *Coconauts in Space*). The out of focus Nuyoricans are a band of creative technologists who are making a cosmic effort to assure the future flourishing of Nuyorican communities.

The extent of the aesthetic expansion of the invisible and the out of focus in *Invisible Man* and *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* are fully expressed in their potential to create solidarity. Shelly Eversley argues that one of the major plot developments of *Invisible Man* is that the narrator, in part because of his own growing awareness of his invisibility, learns to see that the women he encounters are invisible as well. The metaphor is broad and abstract, and so the metaphor has a unique capability of being extended to groups other than the narrator's own community. An expansion of who is invisible to humanity in general is signaled by the final lines of the novel as the narrator speaks of his invisibility: "And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (581). ADÁL also expresses a sense of solidarity in his work as he often quips at shows: "Why should I be concerned with being global when I can find the whole universe in a mango". To form solidarity is not to reject the value of one's own community, but rather to find its deepest structures. The shared aesthetics of Ellison and ADÁL find their expression in the lower frequencies and the pits of mangos, as multiple viewpoints and perspectives are added, opening a field for the development of an empowering solidarity.

Ellison and ADÁL center the optical concepts of invisibility and the out of focus in their works. They layer their metaphors with multiple meanings and complexities that point to the dynamic nature of their communities. However, they also employed the related concept of fluidity to develop their aesthetics, something more substantial than optical states, yet more watery and plastic. The narrator of *Invisible Man* says of Rinehart:

His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home.

*(498)*

This fluidity was matched by the aesthetic of Rinehart's green glasses that the narrator describes as presenting the street "swarmed in a green vagueness" (483). What is so powerful about this idea is that it is a concept that involves motion; that is, it includes the passage of time, evolution, and transformation, in a way that invisibility does not. Ellison connected this "magical fluidity and freedom" with the diversity of the United States, a uniquely democratic political aesthetics that is forever in transition ("Brave Words" 153).

ADÁL moved in a similar direction. In the 1990s, ADÁL not only developed his out of focus images, but he began work on images of people underwater. In 2015, he picked this idea up again with his series *Puerto Ricans Underwater/Los Ahogados*, which depicts Puerto Ricans underwater in ADÁL's bathtub.[3] There is here a layering technique as in *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* that results in a degree of blurriness; however, the layering also depicts morphing waves and rising bubbles. ADÁL initially correlated the drowning with the debt of Puerto Rico, but when Hurricane Maria landed, it took on even greater significance for an island under water. The activity and the movement of the people under water demonstrate their agency in the storm, that the future of Puerto Rico is not lost at sea. One thing is clear: the people in these photos, with their unique props and poses, may be drowning, but they are very much alive.

### Notes

1   To access the full photo series, see *Out of Focus Nuyoricans* published by the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies. For images online, see the Facebook page dedicated to the project: https://www.facebook.com/Out-of-Focus-Nuyoricans-333065547492132/.

2   In 1976 Eduardo Figueroa, conceptual artist and play director, founded the New Rican Village down the block from the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City's Lower East Side. While the Nuyorican Poets Café primarily was a site for the performance of poetry, the New Rican Village was particularly well-known as a site for innovative music, salsa, and Afro-Latin jazz. Figueroa dubbed this cultural center an "embassy", a concept that functioned to create an experimental venue for the performance of plays and poetry readings. After Figueroa's death, ADÁL approached the poet Pedro Pietri about taking Figueroa's concept of the embassy to its natural conclusion as the emissary of a nation, El Spirit Republic de Puerto Rico. Together they established *El Puerto Rican Embassy* in 1994 as an "official space of cultural and political resistance where one is empowered through one's own creative intentions" (Goodwin 153).

3   Some images from *Puerto Ricans Under Water / Los Ahogados* can be found in Jhoni Jackson's essay "Powerful Photo Series 'Puerto Ricans Underwater' is a Biting Metaphor for an Island Drowning in Debt".

### Works Cited

ADÁL (Adál Alberto Maldonado). *Coconauts in Space: Pre-NASA Luna Histories*. Taller Puertorriqueño, Inc., 2004a.

———. "El Puerto Rican Embassy." https://elpuertoricanembassy.msa-x.org/index.html. Accessed 30 Nov. 2020.

———. *Jíbaro; Blueprints for a nation: Installations*. Lehigh University Art Galleries, 2002.

———. *Out of Focus Nuyoricans*. David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2004b.

———. *Out of Focus Nuyoricans*. Facebook Page. https://www.facebook.com/Out-of-Focus-Nuyoricans-333065547492132/. Accessed 30 Nov. 2020.

Armstrong, Louis. "Black and Blue." *The Essential Louis Armstrong*. Sony Legacy, 2004. Apple Music, https://music.apple.com/us/album/193896088?i=193898655&ign-mpt=uo%3D4.

Barber, Tiffany. "25 Years of Black Speculative Thought." *Topia*, vol. 39, 2018, pp. 136–144.

Blair, Sara. "Ellison, Photography, and the Origins of Invisibility." *The Cambridge Companion To Ralph Ellison*, edited by Ross Posnock, Cambridge UP, 2005, pp. 56–81.

Catlin, Roger. "Behind the Devastating, Prize-Winning Image 'Muerto Rico'." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2020, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/behind-devastating-prize-winning-image-ADÁLs-muerto-rico-180975010/. Accessed 30 Nov. 2020.

Ellison, Ralph. "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion." *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. Modern Library, 2003, pp. 151–154.

———. Interview by Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard. "Ralph Ellison, The Art of Fiction." *The Paris Review*, Issue 8, Spring, 1955. https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5053/the-art-of-fiction-no-8-ralph-ellison. Accessed 30 Nov. 2020.

———. *Invisible Man*. 1952. Vintage, 1995.

Eversley, Shelly. "Female Iconography in *Invisible Man*." *The Cambridge Companion To Ralph Ellison*, edited by Ross Posnock, Cambridge UP, 2005, pp. 172–187.

Flusser, Vilém. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. Reaktion Books, 2000.

Goodwin, Matthew. "ADÁL's *Out of Focus Nuyoricans*." *Visual Culture and Race*, a special issue of *MELUS*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2014, pp. 153–156.

Haynes, Roslynn D. *From Faust to Strangelove: Representations of the Scientist in Western Literature*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1994.

Jackson, Jhoni. "Powerful Photo Series 'Puerto Ricans Underwater' is a Biting Metaphor For an Island Drowning in Debt." *Remezcla*, 2016, https://remezcla.com/features/culture/puerto-ricans-underwater-photos-adal-maldonado/. Accessed 30 Nov. 2020.

Morrison, Toni. Interview by Hilton Als. "Ghosts in the House: How Toni Morrison Fostered a Generation of Black Writers." *The New Yorker*, 20 Oct. 2003, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/10/27/ghosts-in-the-house. Accessed 30 Nov. 2020.

Pietri, Pedro. "Nuyoricans Out of Focus." *Out of Focus Nuyoricans*. David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2004.

Sinker, Mark. "Loving the Alien." *The Wire*, 96, 1992. http://web.archive.org/web/20060209100352/http://www.thewire.co.uk/archive/essays/black_science_fiction.html. Accessed 21 June 2021.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. 1977. Anchor Books, 1990.

Yaszek, Lisa. "An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man." *Rethinking History*, vol. 9, no. 2/3, 2005, pp. 297–313.

# 19

# INDIGENOUS AND WESTERN SCIENCES IN CARLOS HERNANDEZ'S *THE ASSIMILATED CUBAN'S GUIDE TO QUANTUM SANTERIA*

*Joy Sanchez-Taylor*

In 2018, *Smithsonian Magazine* ran an article titled "When Scientists 'Discover' What Indigenous Peoples Have Known for Centuries". This article, written by George Nicholas, uses the example of researchers "discovering" intentional fire-setting by kites and falcons in Australia to demonstrate how Indigenous knowledge is frequently overlooked by Eurowestern scientists. Nicholas notes that the fire-setting behavior of these birds has been observed by the Indigenous peoples of northern Australia for so long that the knowledge is ingrained in their "ceremonial practices, beliefs, and creation accounts". The main point that Nicholas draws from this example is that Eurowestern science is quick to value Indigenous knowledge when this knowledge supports its claims; however, when Indigenous knowledge goes against established Eurowestern scientific views, it is often dismissed as "primitive" belief not worthy of "rational" scientific study. Gloria Emeagwali and Edward Shizhaote further explain Eurowestern cultural bias against African sciences in their introduction to *African Indigenous Knowledge and the Sciences* (2016):

> Discounting and underrating scientific epistemologies and ontologies that are associated with Indigenous societies has been a major tendency by Eurocentric observers. Building technologies, physics and mathematical principles used in constructing the Indigenous structures such as Great Zimbabwe are dismissed as non-scientific. In addition, ethno-medicinal treatment of illness and diseases as well as the application of spiritual healing from holistic geoscience and human interactions are viewed with suspicion.
>
> *(x)*

These examples demonstrate how Eurowestern cultures could benefit greatly from a decolonized view of Indigenous science and a willingness to learn from cultures defined by centuries of shared knowledge. While some Eurowestern scientists are beginning to acknowledge Indigenous expertise in the areas of botany, ecology, and sustainability practices,[1] there is still a large portion of Indigenous scientific knowledge that has been ignored or undervalued because of cultural bias. Eurowestern scientific bias leads scientists to believe that the scientific method,

DOI: 10.4324/9780429317828-22

which privileges objectivity, analysis, and experimentation, is the only rational method for acquiring knowledge. This bias leads Eurowestern scientists to label Indigenous science as religious belief instead of what it actually is: an alternate scientific worldview that refuses to uphold the Eurowestern divide between science and spirituality. As Gregory Cajete notes in *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (2000), Eurowestern views of Indigenous science are distorted by "the lens of Western thought, language, and perception" (4).

Science fiction authors of alternative futurisms often draw on Indigenous knowledge in their works to destabilize the perception that Eurowestern culture is more modern and rational than Indigenous culture. Carlos Hernandez's *The Assimilated Cuban's Guide to Quantum Santeria* combines references to the Indigenous practice of Santería with references to quantum physics to demonstrate parallels between Indigenous knowledge and Eurowestern theories of quantum physics. Hernandez's work also demonstrates the limits of Eurowestern science, which cannot fully explain the fantastic events that occur in the narrative. The act of a Latinx son and his father, both scholars of Eurowestern science, reclaiming the Yoruba Cuban practice of Santería demonstrates how science fiction authors like Hernandez are calling for decolonization practices within Latinx and Eurowestern communities. I argue that references in *Quantum Santeria* to ideas of spiritual healing and nonlinear time demonstrate how science fiction authors like Hernandez are ultimately working to restore *Biskaabiiyang*, or a return to self,[2] within science fiction narratives by writing narratives that decolonize views of Indigenous teachings.

In *Quantum Santeria*, Sal's parents act as a metaphor for the effects of colonization on Latinx cultures. After Sal's mother dies, he consoles himself by learning to perform magic tricks. One day he brings a taxidermied black cat to school to perform a trick for the class. When he arrives home, he discovers that his mother has come back from death to express her outrage at his decision to perform "black magic". Sal's mother's outrage comes from her Catholicism, a religion brought to Cuba by European colonizers. The name "Santería" means "worship of the Saints" and is a Yoruba-based religion; however, the name also references the African slaves brought to Cuba who were forced to convert to Catholicism. These slaves continued to practice their African religions in secret by finding parallels between Catholic saints and African orishas, or gods (Barton). One main reason that European colonizers forced slaves to convert was because they didn't want slaves meeting in large groups; this overall bias against African cultural practices combined with colonizers' fears of slave rebellion[3] led to a labeling of non-Eurowestern religions like Santería as "black magic". Nathaniel Samuel Murrell explains in *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions* (2010) that the death of a white girl in 1919 Cuba led to a mass lynching of Black santeros "fueled by outrageous rumors of santeros kidnaping white children and using their blood and entrails in satanic rituals" (105). At the beginning of *Quantum Santeria*, an older Sal states that his research specialty is "unspeakable information", a phrase that Hernandez employs as a metaphor for the ways that Indigenous knowledge has been suppressed by European colonizers and the idea of Indigenous cultures possessing knowledge that is only now becoming clear to Eurowestern cultures (213). Sal's mother and her strict Catholic beliefs represent the internalized colonization inherent in many Latinx cultures.

Hernandez also employs the seemingly fantastic, impossible occurrence of Sal's mother's return to demonstrate the limits of Eurowestern science. Sal's father is a science teacher. The unexplained appearance of his wife challenges his belief in scientific rationality. He becomes depressed, so Sal reads a psychology book written for the parents of grieving children to try to understand how to help his father. This book gives a rational, Eurowestern explanation for why children have a hard time accepting the permanence of death:

adults think of time as linear, a one-way street with a consistent speed-limit. But not children. They think time can go forward, backwards, sideways, and loop like a Hot Wheels racecar track. You need to understand how children see time to help them understand that the dead stay dead forever.

Unless the dead show up one day to tell you to get rid of your stuffed black cat.

*(232)*

Hernandez uses this quote to challenge Eurowestern belief in linear time and scientific rationality. Sal's lived experience makes the Eurowestern views about the permanence of death in the guidebook comical rather than authoritative. Grace L. Dillon explains in her introduction to *Walking the Clouds* (2012) that Indigenous science fiction authors often utilize Native slipstream thinking in their writing, a concept that "views time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream" ("Imagining" 3). Dillon also notes that Indigenous slipstream predates Eurowestern theories of physics:

Native slipstream thinking, which has been around for millennia, anticipated recent cutting-edge physics, ironically suggesting that Natives have had things right all along. The closest approximation in quantum mechanics is the concept of the "multiverse", which posits that reality consists of a number of simultaneously existing alternate worlds and/or parallel worlds.

*("Imagining" 4)*

The fact that Sal's love ebo, or spell, learned through his reading about Santería practices, allows his mother to appear again in a corporeal form later in the narrative seems to reinforce the idea of either a shift in time or the existence of other or parallel universes. Hernandez links the practice of Santería to Eurowestern science by having Sal embrace both of his cultural inheritances: he becomes a well-known physicist specializing in multiverse theory as well as a practitioner of Santería.

Hernandez uses Sal's father's attempts to relearn his practice of Santería and Sal's research on Santería to demonstrate the ways that Latinx cultures are often unable to fully recover lost Indigenous cultural information or to reintegrate this information into the "rational" Eurowestern mindset forced onto colonized Latinx peoples. Sal's father explains to him that in Cuba he was a practitioner of Santería, specifically a cabeza of Elegua, the pathfinder god who helps travelers find their way (229). Nathaniel Samuel Murrell further explains that Elegua (or Eleggua) is a powerful orisha who holds the ability to divine the future (110). Sal's father utilizes his faith and his knowledge of science to make sense of the reappearance of his wife:

When your mámi died, I thought God was dead, too. But then your mámi came back … And that ruined everything. Because it's impossible. Your mámi is dead … It's like there's a parallel universe out there where she and you and I are still a family … And only God brings people back from the dead. Only God can do magic.

*(230)*

Sal's father returns to his faith to try to reconcile the reappearance of his wife; he prays to Elegua in an attempt to spiritually connect with her. Yet he also explains his wife's return using the Eurowestern scientific language of parallel universes. This language is consistent with Santería's teachings about the connection between spirit and science. A defining feature of many Indigenous cultures is that they do not feel the need to separate what Eurowestern scientists

would deem religious belief from their scientific teachings.[4] Murrell notes that practitioners of Santería see spirit and science as interconnected:

> Practitioners believe that magical-working properties are produced in the interactive chemistry between plants, animals, other natural substances, and the spirit world; when ritually prepared, they are infused with supernatural ashe [cosmic energy] and spiritual "science", the result of which is sacred medicines of many descriptions.
>
> *(132)*

Santería, like many Indigenous teachings, leaves room for the unknown and spiritual realms in its scientific teachings. The art of healing for a santero/a becomes as much about healing the spirit through connection with the orisha and ashe as it does the preparation of medicinal plants. Hernandez uses Sal's father's struggle to reconcile his Indigenous and Eurowestern knowledge systems to demonstrate how Eurowestern scientists incorrectly label Indigenous practice as faith or magic because these cultures leave room for the "visible and invisible world" in their teachings (Murrell 108). If Sal's father did not have the influence of Eurowestern colonization causing him to question his beliefs, he would better understand that the reappearance of his wife is part of a larger web of interconnections between humans, plants, animals, inanimate objects, space, and the spirit world.

Sal and his father both struggle to learn and relearn the practice of Santería because of their distance from their Cuban culture. Sal's father explains that "Connecticut isn't exactly a Santeria Mecca, you know. Where the hell do you get aguardiente in Handcock?" (230). When Sal fails to find a book on Santería in his school library, his vice-principal, Ms. Anbow, gives him a master's thesis titled *The Ebos of Santeria* written by a graduate student named Ines Guanagao (232). The author of this text received her degree from the University of Connecticut, a Eurowestern institution, yet her name indicates that she may be Latinx, which could indicate a cultural knowledge of Santería. Hernandez does not make it clear whether the author of the thesis had previous knowledge of Santería before starting her research and does not reveal anything about her research process, so the audience is left to wonder about the accuracy of the information Sal is reading. Like many contemporary Indigenous peoples, Sal is reading a second-hand account of Indigenous cultural practice written by a Eurowestern university student who, like Sal and his father, may be trying to recover lost cultural knowledge.

Although Sal has incomplete and potentially inaccurate information about the practice of Santería, he brings his mother back to his timeline again by performing a love ebo adapted from his readings. Sal is confident in his ability to perform the spell, despite not following any of the directions in total, because his father has explained to him that Santería embraces the idea of adaptation: "But Santeria was born of adaptation. I will do the best I can with the materials at hand. If Elegua wants to hear me, he will hear me" (230–231). Many Indigenous cultures have adapted cultural practices due to colonization or forced relocation. Nisi Shawl explains in "Ifa: Reverence, Science, and Social Technology" that in contrast to Eurowestern scientific practice, Indigenous practice makes use of all available resources:

> The idea that science may reject spirituality in general, and African religious traditions in particular … has very little impact on its complementary acceptance by Ifa practitioners. We're used to belittlement of that sort. Christianity rejects and has always rejected African-born philosophies such as Vodun, Lucumi, and Santeria, yet these and related religions equate Christian saints with members of our pantheons. Some rituals require the use of holy water, or the recitation of Bible verses. The Afrodiasporic religious outlook is deeply

pragmatic; it makes use of what is useful. A scientific approach to the world is useful. Scientific knowledge is useful—also, at times, awe-inspiring and breathtakingly beautiful. What's not to like? We ain't mad at you, pretty science; don't be mad at we.

*(224)*

Shawl's statement demonstrates the adaptability of Indigenous teaching, which tends to be more open to integration of "useful" knowledge and practice. Sometimes the usefulness is born of the need to hide Indigenous cultural practice from colonizers to preserve it; sometimes it is an integration of religious artifacts that are more readily available. Shawl's final line, playfully written in dialect, is a testament to how Eurowestern cultural bias causes many scientists to be dismissive of "primitive" Indigenous cultural practices, which are labeled "religion" or "magic" rather than science.

Hernandez does not reveal why Sal's ebo is successful, but the answer may come from the teachings of Santería that stress the power of a willingness to sacrifice. Sal states:

There wasn't a single love ebo in the thesis I could—or would—follow all the way through. But there were ingredients of different love ebos I didn't mind, like cinnamon sticks and wine and hard candies and incense and Borax. So why couldn't I combine those to make my own ebo? Papí said that Santeria was born of adaptation; if the orishas wanted to help me, they would. I just had to prove I was serious. Willing to sacrifice for the sake of my desire.

*(235)*

Murrell notes that sacrifice plays a large role in the practices of Santería:

An ebo is a tribute offered to the spirit in the form of sacrifices, offerings, and purificatory oblations. It requires participants to part with something of great value, often a victim, in order to release ashe from its spiritual source into the community. Ashe is the all-pervasive cosmic divine energy with which the gods endow and empower humans. With it, the world was created and sustained; through it, everything is empowered; and with it, all things are made possible.

*(114)*

Sal takes the life of a pigeon in his ebo while thanking the bird for its sacrifice. His willingness to sacrifice and the empathy he demonstrates for the life he is taking contrasts with his father's attempts to contact Elegua. When Sal's father prays to Elegua in front of his hastily constructed altar, he offers some traditional gifts, such as candy, fruit, and rum, but he drinks the rum and does not sacrifice or offer anything of great value. This lack of sacrifice combined with the fact that Elegua is known to be fond of children may be the reason that Sal's ebo is successful while his father's prayers are not.[5] Sal uses the materials he has at hand to practice a Santería ritual and demonstrates an intuitive understanding of the underlying principles of connection through ashe practiced in Santería. His ability to adapt his practice of Santería to a Eurowestern environment gives him the ashe he needs to fulfill his true desire to lessen his family's grief by connecting to his mother.

Sal's description of his mother's second return reinforces the idea that Hernandez is blending elements of Santería and quantum physics to explain how Sal's mother is able to reappear. After the pigeon ebo experiment, Sal explains his mother's appearance and disappearance as "slipp[ing] off the tightrope of my timeline and tumbl[ing] into another" (246). This statement is not only consistent with descriptions of the Native Slipstream and other Indigenous views of time and

space, but it also reflects Eurowestern scientific theories of quantum mechanics, quantum entanglement, and the multiverse. Quantum theory is built on a foundation of nondeterministic, nonlinear results stemming from examination of "the way the microscopic world impinges on the macroscopic one" (Ismael). Quantum entanglement has also proven that correlations are possible between quantum systems over large distances which can be utilized as "a quantum information channel" (Bub). In quantum theory, microscopic particles often act in unpredictable ways and can affect other particles even if separated.[6] The practice of Santería also includes ideas of connection and influence; the initiation ritual of *asiento* creates a channel of communication between a santero/a and the spiritual realm of the orishas, deities who can be drawn into another plane of existence through a temporary possession of their accepted santero/a (Murrell 116, 127). The *asiento* demonstrates that practitioners of Santería view the physical and spiritual realms as interconnected and able to influence one another.

Sal's decision to thank the pigeon he is sacrificing aligns with the idea in Santería that all beings have ashe, a spiritual energy or lifeforce. Although practitioners of Santería may not consider plants and animals to be equal to human beings, all life is considered to have ashe that can be transferred from one being to another through ritual. Leroy Little Bear explains how the principle of all beings having spirit connects to ideas of interrelation and influence found in many Indigenous cultures:

> The Native American paradigm is comprised of and includes ideas of constant motion and flux, existence consisting of energy waves, interrelationships, all things being animate, space/place, renewal, and all things being imbued with spirit … The constant flux notion results in a "spider web" network of relationships. In other words, everything is interrelated.
>
> *(x)*

The constant flux that Little Bear describes is the basis for Native Slipstream literature, which often employs the idea of time as nonlinear to challenge Eurowestern ideas of history as the recording of an accurate, linear progression of time. Dillon notes that the use of Native Slipstream "allows authors to recover the Native space of the past, to bring it to the attention of contemporary readers, and to build better futures. It captures moments of divergence and the consequences of that divergence" ("Imagining" 4). While Indigenous authors like Gerald Vizenor and Sherman Alexie utilize Native Slipstream to bring the historical past into the present in their writings, Hernandez combines the notion of intersecting timelines with Santería's practice of connection to the spirit to create a quantum channel that allows Sal to connect with his mother and call her back into his timeline. This reintroduction of his mother into the family unit also serves as a metaphor for the reintegration of Indigenous knowledge into Latinx cultures.

Hernandez's story also draws parallels between quantum ideas of microscopic life and Indigenous teachings about spirits. David F. Peat notes that the interrelatedness Little Bear describes as a tenant of Indigenous knowledge extends to the "unseen" world of the spirit:

> The Blackfoot know of no such fragmentation [between matter and spirit]. Not only do they speak with rocks and trees, they are also able to converse with that which remains invisible to us, a world of what could be variously called spirits, or powers, or simply energies. However, these forces are not the occupants of a mystical or abstract domain, they remain an essential aspect of the natural, material world. It is not so much that the Blackfoot live in an extended reality but that our own Western vision had become excessively myopic.
>
> *(567)*

Indigenous teaching about spirits treat these beings not as "ghosts", but as another class of being residing in an unseen or alternate plane of existence who interact with the physical world. Not all humans can see or connect with spirits, but this fact does not negate their presence. Santería includes similar teachings; ashe connects all beings, seen and unseen, in ritual practice that allow Santero/as to connect to their Orishas and effect change in the world. Orishas and ashe are not described as symbolic or spiritual; these beings and the energy that connects them to humankind are viewed as active forces (Murrell 108). Unlike Eurowestern science, Indigenous cultures that teach ideas of connectivity understand that the practice of science cannot be solely defined by "objective" experimentation because of the interconnectivity that exists between all beings.

Hernandez's choice to make Sal and his father scientists also allows him to challenge the Eurowestern scientific belief that objectivity and rationality are superior to lived experience. Peat notes that one element that distinguishes quantum physics from classical views of physics is its acknowledgement that the observer plays a role in the results of their observations:

> According to classical physics, nature consists of objects in interaction with one another. Observation is an objective business that reveals the world for what it is. Quantum theory, by contrast, stresses that observation is participation and within any act of observation the observer and observed are united in a holistic and unanalyzable way. Observation is a process within which it is no longer possible to speak of the independent existence, or properties of, the observer and observed.
>
> *(569)*

In most Eurowestern scientific teachings, objectivity is cited as "an ideal for scientific inquiry, as a good reason for valuing scientific knowledge, and as the basis of the authority of science in society" (Reiss). One reason that alternate views of science, such as Indigenous knowledge, are often dismissed by Eurowestern sciences is because of Eurowestern culture's decision to privilege an often-unobtainable requirement of scientific objectivity above other forms of observation.[7] However, some Eurowestern scientists are now recognizing the value of Indigenous scientific practices, in particular those applying to environmental sustainability. Fulvio Mazzocchi notes in "Western Science and Traditional Knowledge: Despite Their Variations, Different Forms of Knowledge Can Learn from Each Other" (2006) that traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) pertaining to the environment "might provide humanity as a whole with new biological and ecological insights; it has potential value for the management of natural resources, and might be useful in conservation education as well as in development planning and environmental assessment" (463–464). Eurowestern scientists are beginning to see the value in Indigenous knowledge, especially as it pertains to saving humanity from the environmental impacts of Eurowestern objectivity; however, it remains to be seen if these scientists will be receptive to Indigenous scientific teachings that do not reinforce established Eurowestern scientific beliefs.

As a Latinx person living in a Eurowestern culture, Sal participates in Eurowestern science by becoming a physicist. He writes a book titled *The Grid of Time*, which posits that time could contain multiple dimensions. Hernandez uses Sal's description of his research as a humorous nod to the fact that Sal cannot tell the scientific community what he has learned through his lived experience and study of Santería. Sal describes his book as "the kind of speculative, sweeping thought-experiment that all the cool physicists are writing these days" and acknowledges the amount of error that exists in Eurowestern scientific theory: "I am probably wrong about almost everything. But I hope I'm wrong in the ways that will someday lead us to science" (213). Sal's inability to inform the Eurowestern scientific community about his experiences with his mother

and alternate timelines means that instead of being celebrated for his discovery—knowledge gained through lived experience and Indigenous teachings—he is forced to write his experiences in the Eurowestern culturally acceptable form of scientific theory. Again, Hernandez demonstrates the limitations of Eurowestern culture and science, which would refuse to accept Sal's findings unless other scientists could re-create Sal's achievement in a controlled environment. Considering the fact that the teachings of Santería often center on an individual's connection to ashe and Orisha as well as their intentions, it does not seem likely that another Eurowestern scientist could re-create Sal's experience. *Quantum Santeria* is Hernandez's way of critiquing Eurowestern science's insistence that it is the only rational way to perceive the universe.

While Sal enjoys a measure of popular interest in his research (he references an NPR interview at the beginning and end of the story), Hernandez does not make it clear whether the Eurowestern scientific community approves of his research. Eurowestern scientists have a long history of rejecting scientific findings that do not align with the established scientific community and its beliefs. A good example of this trend in the field of quantum physics is Hugh Everett III, a young graduate student whose ideas about parallel universes were rejected in 1956 because they dared to critique the writings of Niels Bohr, one of the foundational scientists of quantum theory. Everett was forced to modify his graduate thesis to avoid critique of established quantum theories, and his published ideas were ignored for the next ten years (Greene 245–246). Hernandez uses Sal's comments about his book being a "thought-experiment" and his description of his field of research as "unspeakable" to critique the Eurowestern scientific community, which is often far from the objective field it claims to be. Sal cannot publish his actual experiences because he would be shunned by Eurowestern scientists, so he theorizes and waits for the day that Eurowestern science catches up to Indigenous knowledge.

While *Quantum Santeria* challenges ideas of Eurowestern scientific superiority, it also leaves room for both Indigenous and Eurowestern scientific knowledge. At the end of the novel, Sal tells his father, "nobody knows the first thing about quantum physics. Except maybe Elegua" (247–248). Directly after this statement, Sal's stepmother, Mrs. Anbow, suggests that Sal's mother should be part of the celebration of Sal's successful book interview. After she leaves the house, Sal's father states, "Now all we need is a pigeon" (248). Hernandez playfully hints that these two men, both trained in Eurowestern sciences, are going to once again perform the Santería ritual that calls Sal's mother into their timeline. This choice to blend Indigenous and Eurowestern scientific knowledge is the literary embodiment of current movements to decolonize scientific practices in Eurowestern countries. One good example of this movement is the work of botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, a Distinguished Teaching Professor at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry and the founding director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. This center was founded to foster cooperation between Indigenous and Eurowestern scientists and to educate scientists and the general public about traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) practices. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (2015), Kimmerer argues that scientists should make room for both Indigenous scientific literacies and Eurowestern science through ethical, decolonizing practices of study and research. She uses the metaphor of the relationship between the "Three Sisters" (corn, beans, and squash), three plants which share a reciprocal relationship, to explain her vision for the future of scientific cooperation:

> The Three Sisters offer us a new metaphor for an emerging relationship between Indigenous knowledge and Western science, both of which are rooted in the earth. I think of the corn as traditional ecological knowledge, the physical and spiritual framework that can guide the curious bean of science, which twines like a double helix. The squash

creates an ethical habitat for coexistence and mutual flourishing. I envision a time when the intellectual monoculture of science will be replaced with a polyculture of complementary knowledges. And so all may be fed.

*(139)*

Kimmerer uses the Three Sisters metaphor to envision a scientific community that values all cultures, particularly those of Indigenous peoples, and that is open to integrating multiple scientific practices rather than relying on one culture's knowledge set. Her statement that both sciences are "rooted in the earth" highlights the need for Eurowestern sciences to acknowledge the symbiotic, interconnected relationship between humanity and their surrounding environments.

Similarly, "Quantum Santeria" is Hernandez's vision of a world where Latinx communities can embrace their Indigenous heritages and integrate this knowledge to combat internalized colonial views. This effort aligns with current Latinx Indigenous scholarship. In "Indigenous Latino Heritage: Destruction, Invisibility, Appropriation, Revival, Survivance" (2020), Paul Edward Montgomery Ramírez explains that contemporary Latinx cultures contain the possibility for a revitalization of Indigenous culture that rejects the narrative of the *mestizo* as a substitute for Indigenous culture:

> Through remembering and using the past, while adapting to the present, Indigenous peoples have survived genocides—and will continue to do so. Many of the people who identify as *mestizo* do so to avoid anti-Indigenous abuse and to ensure their family's survival. There are those who are yet asleep, dreaming of the Indigenous, unaware that *mestizaje* is something that can be rejected. As images of "los indios" are navigated and used to raise Indigenous voices and combat social stigmas, some of those "mestizos" may awaken. The power of *mestizaje* is one that can be grappled with, taking back intangible heritage from state power and becoming an instrument for Indigenous survival.

*(167)*

As Latinx cultures grapple to acknowledge their distinct Indigenous heritages, which include African cultures, Latinx science fiction creators are combining their visions of more inclusive Latinx cultures with references to Indigenous and Eurowestern sciences to combat the stereotype of both Latinx and Indigenous peoples as premodern, a topic discussed at length by Catherine Ramírez in her writings on Chicanafuturism.[8] Alternative futurisms offer a unique space where authors and artists can look backwards and forward simultaneously. In *Quantum Santeria*, Hernandez adapts his own interests in Santería and quantum physics to demonstrate the parallels between Indigenous knowledge and current Eurowestern scientific theories. This story makes a strong argument that both knowledge sets are necessary for the decolonization of Latinx cultures.

While the bringing together of Indigenous and Eurowestern scientific knowledge is a necessary move to ensure the survival of humanity, an idea shared by scientists and science fiction creators alike, it is also crucial to acknowledge the need for Indigenous autonomy. In a talk titled "Listening to Indigenous Knowledge as Colleges and Universities: Building a Foundation", Kimmerer expands on her metaphor of the Three Sisters to explain that while Indigenous and Eurowestern sciences need to build a mutual relationship, Indigenous science must be the foundation of this shared understanding. Indigenous science is the corn, the elder knowledge system which must guide the curious younger Eurowestern scientific bean to a more ethical employment of scientific knowledge, one that is founded in "the knowledge of mutualism" ("Listening"). As an example of a relationship founded on the ideals of mutualism, Kimmerer references the Two Row Wampum treaty between the Haudenosaunee and Dutch, a 1613

treaty represented by the Haudenosaunee people as two parallel lines of purple beads with rows of white beads between them ("Two"). This visual representation of the treaty documents the idea of each culture allowing the other autonomy and also marks a promise of noninterference. Kimmerer uses this example to explain the need for Indigenous science not to be treated as subservient to Eurowestern science. Although the two sciences should work together, she notes that Indigenous science cannot become so influenced by Eurowestern scientific practices that it loses its ability to challenge the ethics of Eurowestern scientific practices.

I argue that the same can be said of science fiction's treatment of Indigenous science. While authors and scholars of alternative futurisms must be engaged in the work of recognizing Indigenous sciences in their writings, these references cannot be surface acknowledgments. Science fiction has an acknowledged history of privileging Eurowestern cultural beliefs; this viewpoint includes the ideal of scientific rationality as the only acceptable form of scientific inquiry.[9] A true and accurate acknowledgement of the contributions of Indigenous science demands a shift towards decolonizing Eurowestern scientific views within and outside of science fiction writing. Like *Quantum Santeria*, science fiction depictions of Indigenous cultures must be rooted in a deep knowledge and respect for both Indigenous and Eurowestern science, a perspective that understands both viewpoints and works to represent them on equal footing.

## Notes

1   See Amy S. Groesbeck et al., "Ancient Clam Gardens Increased Shellfish Production: Adaptive Strategies from the Past Can Inform Food Security Today" (2014) and Cheikhyoussef et al., "Ethnobotanical Study of Indigenous Knowledge on Medicinal Plant Use by Traditional Healers in Oshikoto Region, Namibia" (2011). See also Uprety et al. (2012) and Amuri et al. (2018).
2   For more information on the concept of *Biskaabiiyang* in Indigenous culture, see the introduction to Grace L. Dillon's *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012).
3   A common example is the labeling of African religious practice in the Caribbean as "Obeah", a creolized African-Caribbean term that came to refer to rituals viewed by Eurowestern colonizers as black magic. The practice of Obeah was outlawed throughout the Caribbean because of its ability to create communities among African slaves, and thus to incite rebellion. Herbal knowledge of poisonous plants, in particular, was a great fear for Eurowestern slave owners (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 132).
4   For examples, see David F. Peat's "Blackfoot Physics and European Minds" (1997) and Grace L. Dillon's "Haint Stories Rooted in Conjure Science: Indigenous Scientific Literacies in Andrea Hairston's *Redwood and Wildfire*" (2014).
5   See Murrell (110).
6   For an example of quantum entanglement over time, see Adrian Cho's article in *Science* magazine, "Quantum Internet Closer as Physicists Stretch Spooky Link between Atoms" (2020).
7   Julian Reiss and Jan Sprenger explain in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on scientific objectivity that "The ideal of objectivity has been criticized repeatedly in philosophy of science, questioning both its desirability and its attainability".
8   See "Deus ex Machina: Tradition, Technology, and the Chicanafuturist Art of Marion C. Martinez" (2004) and "Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism: Fictive Kin" (2008).
9   For a thorough explanation of the history of colonial thinking and science fiction, see John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008).

## Works Cited

Amuri, Bakari, Mwamba Maseho, Lumbu Simbi, et al. "Hypoglycemic and Antihyperglycemic Activities of Nine Medicinal Herbs Used as Antidiabetic in the Region of Lubumbashi (DR Congo)." *Phytotherapy Research*, vol. 31, no. 1029–1033, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1002/ptr.5814.

Barton, Erin. "Demystifying Santería, One of Cuba's Liveliest Religions." *Panoramas: Scholarly Platform*. The Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, 26 Jan. 2017, https://www.panoramas.pitt.edu/art-and-culture/demystifying-santer%C3%ADa-one-cuba%E2%80%99s-liveliest-religions.

Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Clear Light Books, 2000.

Cheikhyoussef, Ahmad, Martin Shapi, Kenneth Matengu and Hina Mu Ashekele. "Ethnobotanical Study of Indigenous Knowledge on Medicinal Plant Use by Traditional Healers in Oshikoto Region, Namibia." *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, vol. 7, no. 10, 2011, https://doi.org/10.1186/1746-4269-7-10.

Cho, Adrian. "Quantum Internet Closer as Physicists Stretch Spooky Link between Atoms." *Science*, 13 Feb. 2020.

Dillon, Grace L. "Haint Stories Rooted in Conjure Science: Indigenous Scientific Literacies in Andrea Hairston's Redwood and Wildfire." *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction*, edited by Isiah Lavender, UP of Mississippi, 2014.

———. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. U of Arizona P, 2012.

Emeagwali, Gloria, and Edward Shizhaote. "Introduction." *African Indigenous Knowledge and the Sciences: Journeys into the Past and Present*, edited by Gloria Emeagwali and Edward Shizhaote, Sense Publishers, 2016, pp. ix–xii.

Fernández Olmos, Margarite Fernández, and Lizbeth Paravisini-Gebert. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*. NYU Press, 2003.

Greene, Brian. *The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.

Groesbeck, Amy S., Kirsten Rowell, Dana Lepofsky, and Anne K. Salomon. "Ancient Clam Gardens Increased Shellfish Production: Adaptive Strategies from the Past Can Inform Food Security Today." *PLoS One*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2014, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0091235.

Hernandez, Carlos. *The Assimilated Cuban's Guide to Quantum Santeria*. Rosarium Publishing, 2016.

Ismael, Jenann. "Quantum Mechanics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/qm/. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2015.

———. "Listening to Indigenous Knowledge as Colleges and Universities: Building a Foundation." Michigan State University, 16 Oct. 2020, https://events.anr.msu.edu/event.cfm?eventID=4CBDB61A885644D28242BF18C73243CAE07462A474B4FC24B91E8B37F529187C. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Little Bear, Leroy. "Foreword." *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Clear Light Books, 2000.

Mazzocchi, Fulvio. "Western Science and Traditional Knowledge: Despite Their Variations, Different Forms of Knowledge Can Learn from Each Other." *EMBO Reports*, vol. 7, no. 5, May 2006, pp. 463–466, https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.embor.7400693.

Murrell, Nathaniel Samuel. *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions*. Temple UP, 2010.

Nicholas, George. "When Scientists 'Discover' What Indigenous People Have Known For Centuries." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 21 Feb. 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/why-science-takes-so-long-catch-up-traditional-knowledge-180968216/. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Peat, F. David. "Blackfoot Physics and European Minds." *Futures: The Journal of Policy, Planning and Futures Studies*, vol. 29, no. 6, 1997, pp. 563–573, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287(97)00028-1.

Ramírez, Catherine. "Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism: Fictive Kin." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2008, pp. 185–194.

———. "Deus ex Machina: Tradition, Technology, and the Chicanafuturist Art of Marion C. Martinez." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2004, pp. 55–92.

Ramírez, Paul Edward Montgomery. "Indigenous Latino Heritage: Destruction, Invisibility, Appropriation, Revival, Survivance." *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage: Construction, Transformation, and Destruction*, edited by Veysel Apaydin, UCL Press, 2020, pp. 155–168, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv13xpsfp.

Reiss, Julian, and Jan Sprenger. "Scientific Objectivity." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/scientific-objectivity/. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, Wesleyan UP, 2008.

"Two Row Wampum—Gaswéñdah." *Onondaga Nation: People of the Hills*, Onondaga Nation, 2020, https://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/two-row-wampum-belt-guswenta/. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Uprety, Yadav, Hugo Asselin, Emmanuel K. Boon, et al. "Indigenous Use and Bio-efficacy of Medicinal Plants in the Rasuwa District, Central Nepal." *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2010, https://doi.org/10.1186/1746-4269-6-3.

# 20

# CONJURANDO PODERES DE EXISTENCIA

## Depictions of Sabidurías in the Latin American Speculative Fiction Series *Siempre Bruja*

*Vanessa J. Aguilar*

### Introduction

The interest in Western futurisms in popular culture has long been associated with Eurocentric ideologies of technological advancement. Themes such as artificial intelligence, cyborgs, interstellar war, and cloning have dominated the genre of speculative fiction. The editors in this anthology state that the cultural production of CoFuturisms

> can be thought of as one's response to the self-conscious, perplexed state of mind that confronts many discussions of race, gender, nations, and social justice today, especially those that grow from traditional "first contact" scenarios between Indigenous peoples and invading Empires
>
> *(Dillon et al.)*

Yet, the long history of Latin American descent spiritual practitioners conjuring fantastical and supernatural elements has been overlooked. In particular, the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Press's anthology of *Altermundos: Latin@ Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture* (Merla-Watson and Olguín) excludes essays about spiritual practitioners like brujas (witches) and Curanderas (folk healers).[1] Meanwhile, the surge in literature and media like the series *Siempre Bruja* (Parra) highlights the interest in Latin American descent spiritual practitioners as dominant narratives in speculative fiction, especially those borrowing from Afro-diasporic religious practices.

Conjurando poderes de existencia (conjuring powers of existence) is a conscious initiative where authoritative power is redistributed discursively for the purposes of creating alternative histories and futures. The supernatural element of creating alternative histories and coexisting futures has been a long-standing traditional practice to reallocate power stripped from peoples of Indigenous and African descent.[2] Supernatural elements like prayers are philosophical interventions used to create alternative futures.[3] Most importantly, the supernatural goes beyond the physical world and "scientific understanding or the laws of nature" ("supernatural, adj. and n."). Spiritual practitioners can wield supernatural powers through the use of magic, divination, herbalism, incantation, rituals, ceremonies, and conjuring.[4] Supernatural powers are metaphysical technologies that disrupt the fundamental nature of reality. Metaphysical technologies as philosophical practices are used by spiritual practitioners rooted in supernatural sabidurías that

construct alternative realities. Sabidurías are what I call gifted ancestral wisdom because sabidurías occupy Indigenous and Afro-diasporic traditional knowledge systems.[5] An important feature of sabidurías is the use of magic. Magic is a foundational concept composed of supernatural powers that are built on ancestral sabidurías, which become vehicles for interpretation, construction, and navigation in the physical and metaphysical world(s). Sabidurías are made popular by spiritual practitioners because their philosophies are put into praxis to subvert colonial oppression. More specifically, spiritual practitioners' metaphysical technologies subvert colonial frameworks of social hierarchy, gender, and time. Thus, sabidurías go beyond the depths of the physical world. Sabidurías encompasses epistemologies and ontologies that house metaphysical philosophies and cultural production to reproduce ideas of existence.

Historically, these ancestral sabidurías have been marginalized as brujería (witchcraft) in attempts to expunge and invalidate spiritual practitioners. Replacing the term brujería with sabiduría becomes an alternative for the colonial narrative, as sabidurías reject the imperial gaze and restore it with narratives of spiritual practitioners possessing authoritative power in the genre of speculative fiction. Spiritual practitioners' contributions to alternative and coexisting futurisms have been manipulated, undervalued, and discarded in popular culture because they defy the macro-Eurocentric narrative. In addition, marginalized communities have countered the hegemonic narratives that erase their histories. In Latin American and U.S. Latinx literature,[6] the rise in rewriting history has been influenced by the genre of Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism is a foundation for Latinx and Latin American futurisms; Latinx and Latin American futurisms situate Afro-diasporic cultural practices throughout las Américas. I discuss common themes of sabidurías across Latin American and the U.S. Latinx context because U.S. Latinx are products of Latin American and Caribbean colonial dispersal. The transformed futures imagined by Afro-diasporic and Indigenous peoples are philosophical interventions that pose threats to the "legitimacy" of colonialism and its institutions. Afro-Latina spiritual practitioners challenge power systems through Afro-diasporic spiritual practices like Santería, Vodou, Palo, and Curanderismo, for which they are stigmatized as brujas. Thus, brujería is a European construction made to condemn unorthodox spiritual practices that posit challenges toward Western domination and knowledge. Rather than seeing these practices as brujería, I position them as sabidurías. Offering an epistemic intervention, I shift the language of the term bruja interchangeably with spiritual practitioners to reclaim the term bruja from its negative connotation. Using terms such as bruja and "spiritual practitioner" interchangeably disrupts macro-conceptual frameworks in Eurocentric discourses of knowing and being.

The historical figure of African descent Paula de Eguiluz influences the backdrop and ancestry for the character Carmen Eguiluz in the Latin American speculative fiction series *Siempre Bruja*. Carmen is an Afro-Latina in Cartagena, Colombia, who displays supernatural metaphysical technologies rooted in Afro-diasporic cultural production like time-traveling/flying, fugitivity, shapeshifting, and zombification. Acknowledging the historical representation of Afro-Latina spiritual practitioners, audiences can understand how the historical colonial narratives attempt to persecute spiritual practitioners and inform the creative production of *Siempre Bruja*. Furthermore, centering their ancestral sabidurías at the forefront of alternative futurisms in speculative fiction as metaphysical technologies position spiritual practitioners as philosophical theorists.

## Speculative Hechizos/Spells

In the literary genre of speculative fiction, there has been a rise of female spiritual practitioners at the forefront of alternative futures movements that expose past and present colonial domination. Latin American interest in alternative futurisms is not a new phenomenon, as rituals of

futurity are linked to Indigenous folk and Afro-diasporic religions long before the conquest. Together, these ideas are portrayed in Western society as primitive and superstitious, altogether discredited by the rise of Eurocentric scientific advancement. As a whole, Latinx and Latin American alternative futurisms borrow from Afrofuturism as they, too, question colonial domination, humanism, technology, and existence. Mark Dery first coined the term Afrofuturism in 1993 to address how enslaved peoples were the first to experience dystopian events as a product of colonialism (Dery 736). The alien invasion of Europeans, forceful kidnapping, and enslavement of Afro-diasporic peoples to las Américas have been co-opted into popular themes of speculative fiction. On the other hand, speculative fiction themes are taboo if not relevant to the dominant cultural society, a characteristic of the genre.

Similar to the African diaspora, the conquest of Indigenous peoples in the Caribbean and las Américas encountered plagues, sorcery, apocalypse, and other disastrous events like those portrayed in contemporary speculative fiction. Chicana scholar Catherine Ramirez explains, "And like Afrofuturism, which reflects diasporic experience, Chicanafuturism articulates colonial and postcolonial histories of *indigenismo, mestizaje*, hegemony, and survival" (Ramirez 187). While Chicanismo and the *mestizaje* project offer points of kinship, it, too, is guilty of a colonial gaze that is rooted in anti-Blackness and Indigenous dispossession. I challenge Latin American descent scholars, reminding us that las Américas and the Caribbean are home to Black and Indigenous bodies who are radical theorists, thinkers, and knowledge bearers. Together their ancestors have shared experiences of apocalyptic worlds and are represented in Latin American, Latinx, and Afrofuturism. Their contributions to sabiduría invoke epistemological, ontological, and heuristic abilities that are critical to the portrayal of spiritual practitioners' engagement in alternative futures. These sabidurías are not restricted to speculative texts or films but are embodied in lived experiences across the Caribbean and las Américas.

Spiritual practitioners offer an assemblage of sabidurías as Sami Schalk points out in *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Schalk suggests that

> contemporary black women's speculative fiction changes the rules of reality to create worlds with new or different genders, races, disabilities, and other forms of life, and in doing so these texts also require a change in how we read and interpret these categories.
>
> *(Schalk 3)*

Building on this premise, Afrofuturism, Latinx, and Latin American Futurisms subvert historical and ongoing colonialism, promoting excavation of histories that contribute to invalidating, persecuting, romanticizing, and ignoring spiritual practitioners altogether as alternative futurity theorists.

Contemporary work by U.S. Latinx and Latin American authors repositions these various practices to obstruct the imperial gaze at the same time as it highlights ancestral sabidurías of survival. *Siempre Bruja* provides examples of metaphysical technology (Parra). The Spanish Columbian series produced by Caracól Productions centers on an Afro-Colombian protagonist, Carmen de Eguiluz, as a time-traveling woman from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries. The premise of the show displays how Carmen invokes ancestral sabidurías like the supernatural metaphysical technologies of magic, shapeshifting, and flying to combat a brujo, Aldemar. In the process, Carmen attempts to save her slave-owner boyfriend, Cristóbal, while escaping enslavement. To do this, Carmen becomes recognized as a "blood bruja" (bruja de sangre), unveiling supernatural powers that were passed down from her mother, Paula de Eguiluz.[7] *Siempre Bruja*'s plot derives from an infamous inquisition case in which Paula was on

trial three times in 1624, 1636, and 1638 for accusations of brujería (McKnight 154).[8] Denouncing women was not an uncommon event, but the racialization of Black women as "brujas" and their perceived threat of alternative conceptual frameworks were the driving forces for denouncing them to the inquisition across Latin American and the Caribbean. The historical witch-hunt craze in literature does not end with the inquisition; rather, the interest has entered contemporary literature, with women of Indigenous and African descent at the locus of possessing supernatural powers.

Particularly in speculative fiction, the surge in spiritual practitioners as protagonists does not stop with *Siempre Bruja*. In Chicanx literature, Rodolfo Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima* (1972) depicts a Curandera, named Ultima, as a protectress and shapeshifter who helps the protagonist, Antonio, combat machista-murderer Tenorio. Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Hummingbird's Daughter* (2006) recounts the historical life of Teresa Urrea, known as "la santa de cabora", as a folk healer and saint across borders from Sonora, Mexico, to Texas in the midst of the Mexican government's reign of Indigenous territories. In Latino author Daniel J. Older's novel *Shadowshaper* (2015), the protagonist Sierra Santiago, an Afro-Boricua, learns how to use her magical abilities to open portals in Brooklyn while combating gentrification. Ecuadorian novelist Zoraida Córdova's trilogy series *Brooklyn Brujas* (2017) emphasizes the cognitive use of supernatural powers while following three sisters, Alex, Lula, and Rosa, on magical quests traveling throughout various realms. Costa Rican author Isidora Chacón's *Yo, Bruja* (2015) centers conjure work as Amanda Fuentes goes on a life journey across Costa Rica and Paraguay. Mexican author Carlos Fuentes's *Aura* (1962) leaves to the imagination how a widow named Consuelo uses Eurocentric conceptions of brujería in rituals of animal scarification and spells for containing youth. Yet, contemporary scholars overlook contributions from spiritual practitioners of Latin American descent that offer new realities that are unconventional in a colonial context. Furthermore, the marginalization of Afro-Latinas, their representations, and their contribution to sabidurías that promote alternative futures are also overlooked.

## Cognitive Dissonance

Historically, women of African descent have been plagued with accusations of practicing unorthodox "black magic", deemed as so-called "primitive" and "superstitious" practices (Chireau; Fett). I encourage further discussions of Black and Afro-Latinx women as spiritual practitioners, calling for more elaborative discourse on the racialization and representations of spiritual practitioners in film, TV, and literature. Contemporary television shows have shifted focus onto Afro-Latina protagonists. The revamped version of *Charmed* (2018) and *Siempre Bruja* demonstrate various forms of magic that promote witchcraft. The 2018 *Charmed* series portrays three Puerto Rican sisters living in Michigan as witches, who fight together while learning about their family, but centers on Eurocentric themes of witchcraft. Many themes in *Charmed* include fighting monstrous demons, seances, and pagan Wiccan rituals.[9] *Siempre Bruja* attempts to focus on the colonial Latin American narrative of brujería that again reinscribes negative connotations. The series walks a fine line of displaying European ideologies of brujería aligning Afro-diasporic practices with "black magic".

Similarly, the accusatory European perception of Afro-diasporic practices as "black magic" in television bridge historical xenophobia across the Caribbean and las Américas. As a result, plots continue to reinscribe violence by centering the persecutions of African and Afro-Latina women as "brujas". Women of African descent, like the character Carmen Eguiluz in *Siempre Bruja*, have been wrongfully aligned with practicing "black magic". Black magic was manufactured by Eurocentric ideologies used to persecute Black, Indigenous, and Mestiza women in the

so-called "New World" from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries under the Holy Inquisition. I re-present the portrayal of Carmen's "black magic" as sabiduría because the show fails to re-envision a world where Black women can possess authoritative power and not align Black women with black magic.[10] Carmen's sabiduría provides authoritative power—a discursive production of power outside the domain of Christianity. As a young Black woman, Carmen cannot easily escape the alignment with "black magic". Carmen's sabiduría is viewed as "black magic" because her power subverts patriarchal structures foregrounded on the ideology that white cis men attain predominant access to authoritative power. Therefore, the European gaze attempts to invalidate ancestral sabidurías as power, thus calling it "black magic". The trope of black magic, then, spills into the representation of spiritual practitioners found across Latinx and Latin American literature and film. For instance, *Siempre Bruja* connotes ideologies that Black women who are unorthodox spiritual practitioners will always (siempre) be aligned with black magic (brujería). Thus, Carmen is portrayed as a witch (bruja), hence the name of the series, *Siempre Bruja*. The name of the series becomes a re-inscription of Eurocentric practices that are deeply embedded across las Américas and other colonized locations.

Nonetheless, Carmen's alternative twenty-first century breaks the stigma embedded within the title. Carmen's configured alternative site of existence re-presents her practices as sabiduría by disrupting colonial vestiges, meanwhile simultaneously revealing the perils of colonial ideologies. The twenty-first century serves as a conjured sacred space to escape historical enslavement and gender binaries. Carmen's use of metaphysical technologies like time-traveling and shapeshifting allows Carmen to envision new realities, a reality that is not speculative but possible with the use of magic. Russell Gill reminds readers that speculative fiction entails a systematic difference, it "envisions a more radical vision of alternative conditions [and] fulfillment of impossible wishes and fears come within its scope" (Gill 73). In the same sense, spiritual practitioners posit their own realities, which are incomprehensible to our ordinary reality. In Indigenous and Afro-diasporic religions, women use unorthodox sabidurías to access the divine, spirits, and/or magic outside of the patriarchal structure. Women's mystic, psychic, and conjuring practices in Vodou and Santería demonstrate how spiritual practitioners navigated around these restrictive structures.

Furthermore, Carmen's Afro-diasporic sabidurías are not speculative; rather, these ancestral-sabidurías guide her as she forms her own identity and traverses colonial patriarchal structures of oppression. In Santería, access to the divine is a blessing across the pantheon of Orishas. If we interpret Carmen's sabidurías as accessing the spirit of ashé,[11] she then invokes ashé on her own when needed. Ashé is passed by Olodumaré, the supreme deity. Ashé is "a spiritual-mystical energy or power found in varying degrees and in many forms throughout the universe" (Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 30). Carmen embodies ashé when her supernatural powers are triggered. Ashé provides navigational forces for ancestral-sabiduría guidance. Furthermore, ashé helps Carmen conjure the Orisha, Oyá. Carmen arrives on the scene at the festival de la Virgen de la Candelaria in search of herself. Flashing back and forth from her first introduction of la Virgen de la Candelaria in 1646, Carmen recognizes la virgen in the twenty-first century. La Virgen de la Candelaria represents Oyá. She is "a female warrior deity who often fights at the side of Changó, mistress of lightning, the wind, and gatekeeper of the cemetery" (46). Oyá serves as an alternative space that blends death with life. Reading Oyá's symbolic appearance in *Siempre Bruja* means Oyá represents the allowance for Carmen to discard her former identity as an enslaved woman and raise her oppressive political-social-economic state to an authorial one. Carmen negotiates what supernatural powers she will enact and which ones benefit her in the long term. This helps Carmen navigate around orthodox patriarchal structures that are meant to suppress and dehumanize her as an enslaved woman.

The colonial ideology of dehumanization was created to represent Afro-diasporic people as nonhuman. Black women were not recognized as human beings or "mankind", excluding them from the taxonomic classification of human beings. Therefore, Black women were interpreted as physical and sexual commodities, thus the colonial project devalued them as intellectual, moral, and spiritual beings. On the other hand, the slippage of the classification of nonhuman allows for new possibilities, those that create new identities, belief systems, and realms. Imani Perry examines that

> The perceived threat of witches was at once the literal product of a belief in the supernatural but it was also a symbolic threat, driven by a fear of what witches knew about different possibilities of social ordering, specifically those in which the feminine would not necessarily be subject to patriarchal authority.
>
> *(Perry 29)*

The "belief in the supernatural" was a "symbolic threat" because it meant that orthodox religious practices could be called into question and calls for investigation of the relationship with the physical and metaphysical world(s). In Christianity, supernatural miracles are produced by God and/or the Holy Trinity. Supernatural abilities used by women challenge social constructions of patriarchy and religion. Imani Perry's analysis of envisioning a different social order means that spiritual practitioners like Carmen do not fit within colonialism's hierarchical structures. If spiritual practitioners have supernatural powers, then they are nonhuman. As a member of the African diaspora, Carmen is already dehumanized, and with her supernatural powers, she can philosophically challenge the Eurocentric "natural order of the world". This allows Carmen to form her own identity independently from the social order within her alternative seventeenth- and twenty-first-century future.

If we consider characters like Carmen Eguiluz in *Siempre Bruja* as nonhuman, she then becomes a supreme entity or shapeshiftress. Creating her own identity and social order outside of the patriarchal structure provides her access to authoritative roles and breaks the construction of gender binaries. Xhercis Méndez references how

> [Santería] rituals [have] also been the space where "those who are not fully yet subjects, but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject," can and do activate another reality and possibility, a reality not fully captured or subsumed by a colonial logic or imagination.
>
> *(Méndez 104)*

In the series, Carmen's ancestral sabidurías activate another reality. She bends time and is no longer confined to enslavement. Enslavement positions her body as an object for capitalistic gain and a subject under patriarchal domination. Ontologically as nonhuman, Carmen isn't just one substance, she embodies multiple things. She lives in the exterior of the colonial domain and becomes a phenomenon of her own imagination, independent of colonial constraints.

Constituting outside of the domain means that the construction of gender binaries is loosely applied to spiritual practitioners. Carmen has been identified three times as nonhuman. First, for being of African descent. Second, because she was enslaved. And third, for possessing supernatural shapeshifting abilities as a spiritual practitioner. Carmen is not confined to the Eurocentric gender binary. Roberto Strongman's *Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporality in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou* takes it a step further in the application of Afro-diasporic religions. Strongman analyzes how Afro-religious rituals like Santería display ruptures of

ontological concepts of gender formation. For example, Orishas that are viewed as male or female can mount any living body. Strongman's analysis aligns with Xhercis Méndez's article that the possibilities of queering gender in spiritual possession allow for gender fluidity or shapeshifting. The binary standard is eradicated: spiritual practitioners are genderless shape-shifters, a concept beyond the scope of colonial Latin American imagination. If power and sabiduría are passed down from Olodumaré (see Schmidt), originally a deity who was gender-less, to ashé, then ashé passes gender fluidity to Carmen. Therefore, spiritual practitioners pose realities that are not comprehensible to those who subscribe to hegemonic colonial "norms" and ideologies. Adaptations of rituals and magic as metaphysical technology provide subversion of colonial-heuristic paradigms, especially those that hold control within power structures still present today.

## Conjuring Existence: Fugitivity and Travel

The opening scene of *Siempre Bruja* begins with a grotesque inquisitor who identifies the parameters of the sentencing, explaining that women like Carmen tempt, seduce, think, and don't obey. Carmen stands in the background tied to a pole, where she is sentenced to burning at the stake in efforts to extinguish her from the world. Later in the first episode, we find out that Carmen made a pact with a powerful brujo named Aldemar "el Inmortal", who grants her time-traveling, in exchange for a favor in return. Escaping persecution, Carmen chants "mitutu onatutu laroyrile", manifesting transcendence to 2019.[12] Spiritual practitioners' conceptions of time and transportation do not fall linearly—time is contested under sabidurías. In other fictive narratives, time-traveling is often used with a machine. Machines are often seen as products of scientific advancement and modernity. The construction of time under colonialism depends upon labor production rooted in capitalist ideologies. Similarly, spiritual practitioners counter Western construction of time. Its contestation is highlighted in the development of time-traveling under supernatural powers of magic. By distorting time, what Carmen achieves with magic is a way to metaphysically transport herself between centuries to exist in a world where she can be free from enslavement.

*Siempre Bruja* is set in the Southern Hemisphere, a principal slave port for the Spanish empire in Cartagena de Indias (McKnight 157). *Siempre Bruja* becomes a neo-Latin American slave narrative that retells themes of colonial domination. Rather than escaping to a palenque, maroon societies where enslaved peoples fled from enslavement, Carmen creates a palenque of her own in modern-day Cartagena, Colombia. Carmen enacts fugitivity when traveling to the twenty-first century. Madhu Dubey's "Speculative Fiction of Slavery" favors that neo-slave narratives demonstrate common themes of fugitivity. Carmen's magic produces a utopian world as she transcends epochs. Fugitivity does not indicate an end, but rather the beginning of a new world. Fleeing enacts resistance, a strategic escape with hopes of survival. The manifestation of an alternative future thus becomes Carmen's utopia, a reworking of an envisioned twenty-first century, where her former subaltern state is elevated to an authorial one. Using ancestral sabidurías of traveling, Carmen's autonomous power strengthens her sociopolitical status. Even though Carmen time-travels to escape enslavement, she is still enslaved to institutional violence hammered by the colonial iron fist.[13]

Beyond ideas of fugitivity, pre-conquest notions of time-traveling can be found in various Afro-diasporic cultural practices, religions, and even in Indigenous folk beliefs. In the Akan of Ghana and other West African peoples, the symbol of sankofa represents a bird "with its head turned so that its beak touches its back" (Grayson 26). The image of sankofa means "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you have forgotten or lost" (Temple 127). If we consider

*Siempre Bruja* as a form of sankofa, then it becomes an attempt of retrieval of "Afro-diasporic wisdom [that] offers a solution to reconstituting the fragmented cultural past" (Temple 128). The symbolism of sankofa as a bird can be read as a form of transformation, time-traveling, and shapeshifting, a form of looking back at the ancestors as spiritual guides. Carmen's character in *Siempre Bruja* serves as a symbolism of sankofa. The powers were gifted by her mother Paula and Aldemar, who provide an infinite connection to the past, present, and future. Carmen uses these abilities to travel into the twenty-first century and invoke the retrieval of ancestral wisdom or sabiduría. In later episodes, Carmen discovers a way to travel back in time to help her friends escape from enslavement. In a similar fashion, Latinx and Latin American futurisms reflect back, look toward the future, and conjure ancestral practices that have been pushed into the periphery. Latinx and Latin American futurisms in speculative fiction teach ways of interpreting the world externally, within, and against colonialism.

In contrast, flying and time-traveling are often thought of as being used with scientific inventions like time machines and spaceships. Latinx science fiction scholar Fabio Chee explains that "the technologies employed by the subaltern in the age of progress and machine are psychic and physical relations that provide a type of semiotic challenge to the production of meaning, and thus, to power itself" (Chee 112). Marginalized narratives center "psychic and physical relations", or what I call metaphysical technologies as methods to produce meaning in supernatural elements that obtain sabidurías. Under the imperial gaze, sabidurías challenge our general understanding of hegemony because they redistribute power. Aurora Levins Morales references that brujas, or what I consider spiritual practitioners, use the concept of "nightflying" as a form of travel. Nightflying becomes a

> common accusation against witches: the ability to change shape or endow a household object, a pot or broom, with magical powers and soar above the landscape of daily life, with eyes that can penetrate the darkness and see what we are not supposed to see
>
> *(Levins Morales 49)*

These flying figures were thought to have metamorphic abilities causing terror in the community. The threat of nightflying without the use of machines means that practitioners are not dependent on Western concepts of modernity. Nightflying does not just mean the act of flying, but it encompasses other elements like epistemic transformation, ontological shifting, and resistance to oppression.

Folktales across the African diaspora hinted at the notion of flying peoples as a symbolic representation of freedom. In Esteban Montejo's narrative in *Biography of a Runaway Slave* (1966), he explains that enslaved peoples in Cuba had flying abilities. In short, he gives details about how "they tied a doodad they called a prenda around their waist" (Barnet 43). Montejo's narrative displays how Regla de Palo, an Afro-diasporic religion, used prendas, or charms, in the belief that they could fly. Carmen also has a prenda of sorts in the form of markings of stars on her arm that are activated when they light up.[14] Carmen's prenda activates the ability to levitate even unconsciously in her sleep. Levitation provides her space where she can tap into her psychic abilities and speak to her ancestors. Flying and time-traveling are not exclusive to an elite society or those excluded from imagined worlds like those in *Star Wars* (Lucas) or *Harry Potter* (Rowling). Spiritual practitioners, too, have access to the power of nightflying.

Practitioners do not need elaborate machines to produce metaphysical manifestations, unlike colonialism, which is rooted in modernity. The commercialization of sabidurías, spell bags, and medicinal herbal remedies entered the realm of capitalism without spiritual practitioners' consent. In episode four, season two, Carmen develops a potion that will allow her friend Léon to

work productively, as he was on the verge of falling behind on his studies at the university. He then appropriates the potion for his own economic gain. Historically, hechizos (spells) have been appropriated, providing evidence of how spiritual practitioners' remedies are hijacked and then sold for capital profit, just as midwifery expertise has shifted from rootworkers to certified doctors. Sharla Fett's book *Working Cures: Healing Health and Power on Southern Plantation* analyzes "the idea of superstition thus operated as a racial currency that inflated the value of certain knowledge holders while devaluing others" (Fett 45). Practitioners' ideas and sacred hechizos were condemned as either "superstitious" or altogether stolen for capital gain. Not only were land, bodies, natural resources, and holistic healing stolen from African and Indigenous descent peoples, but so were their contributions to alternative futures in popular culture.

In addition, spiritual practitioners of Vodou offer various sabidurías that have been, again, mistaken for "black magic". In Vodou, the zombi, or zombie, has been mystified as a flesh-eating, corpse-like figure. In the genre, zombification is feared because the macro-narrative suggests that one is no longer human. In Vodou, zombification is a coma-induced state, not a product of black magic (Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 123). Rather, it is used by the Bazingo people in Haiti, a secret Vodou society, to "maintaining order and control local communities" (Davis 3). Zombification is a temporary state that allows authoritative power to protect communities from external threats. Similarly, I consider Carmen's alternative future as a comatic state induced for purposes of healing from the trauma of enslavement. On the contrary, zombification has been adopted into popular culture as a frightening effect where dead-like bodies gain control of the world as we know it. Haitian novelist René Depestre states that "the history of colonization is the process of man's general zombification" (20). Depestre connects zombification with Eurocentric narratives of conscious ignorance of colonial domination. If we flip the gaze of zombification onto colonization, then the colonized have been induced to a state where we have been blinded way beyond the scope of its spell. The zombification of colonialism continues to co-opt the marginalized ideas of alternative futurism. Rather than being ignorant to these macro narratives, marginalized speculative fiction writers use themes of zombification, like in *Siempre Bruja*, to write alternative histories of oppression.

## Conclusion

As taboo as these concepts of zombification, flying, and shapeshifting might seem, they have been adopted as dystopian themes in popular culture. As we have seen through the analysis of *Siempre Bruja* and the representations of Afro-diasporic religious practices, popular culture has appropriated various sabidurías that provide spaces for intellectual discourses on writing alternative histories. These subversive texts provide cognitive estrangements while writing ourselves into existence. I extended our veiled conceptual understanding of spiritual practitioners as contributors to alternative and coexisting futurisms. The compelling representation of young adult Latina spiritual practitioners in literature and film demonstrates how their narratives destabilize tropes and move from dominated objects to authorial subjects. Characters like Carmen in *Siempre Bruja* demonstrate how colonial stigmas are disrupted by positioning spiritual practitioners' metaphysical technologies as sabidurías rather than brujería. Engaging with their philosophies calls for interrogation and rectification of colonialism and its institutions. I have barely scratched the surface on the topic of spiritual practitioners' contributions to counter-hegemonic narratives of flying, technologies, and shapeshifting. I realize that I can neither do enough justice nor speak for all ancestral sabidurías, but their theories, concepts, and supernatural abilities are found in *Siempre Bruja*. One thing is for certain: sabidurías are regalos (gifts). They are regalos beautifully packaged and preserved with love ready to become weapons against colonial combat.

## Notes

1 Spanish terms such as Bruja/o, Curandera, sabiduría, ashé, and so forth will not be italicized throughout this chapter as a method of subversion against hegemonic norms that marginalize languages other than English.

2 For the purposes of consistency of this chapter, I have chosen to focus on peoples of Indigenous and African descent. In addition, I expand upon the use of conjuring powers of existence as a method used by all non-Western European folx to create alternative futures and histories.

3 Throughout this chapter, I will be using alternative futures interchangeably with CoFuturisms as a stylistic choice. Other times, I will use coexisting futurisms. I use alternative futurisms when specifically speaking about how spiritual practitioners contribute to the creation of existence while at the same time paving the way for a possibility of CoFuturisms.

4 In my research, the term spiritual practitioner was not compiled into a comprehensive list. Therefore, I consolidated my own definition to include an array of practices across the Afro-diaspora and Indigenous cultural practices.

5 Sabidurías derive from Indigenous sciences and traditional practices that introduce a plethora of ways to combat colonial narratives and destruction. Traditional practices have been co-opted into Western narratives, turned into fiction, and have been invalidated under the Western gaze. For more on Indigenous sciences and white savior complex, see Kyle P. Whyte's "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises" (2018).

6 Latinx are descendants of Latin Americans and Caribbeans, but the term "Latinx" focuses on discourses surrounding the U.S. context. The "X" in Latinx means nongender binary. During the evolution of this chapter, there were some debates on the term Latinx and whether it is inclusive or not. Currently, there are other terms used, such as Latine, which has also made a recent impact on discourse on the Spanish language, Latinidad, Anti-Latinidad, Anti-Blackness, and identity.

7 Paula de Eguiluz's inquisition trial is held in the Archivo Histórico Nacional de España. For further readings, see Guengerich.

8 Paula de Eguiluz was not raised as a Christian. She was born in Africa, then enslaved in Santo Domingo in Hispaniola, from where she was later transported to Cuba. In 1624 she moved from Cuba to Cartagena on charges of brujería, where she served "a two-year sentence in the Hospital of San Sebastian" (McKnight 154). In "Performing double-edged stories: the three trials of Paula de Equiluz", Kathryn McKnight reports that Paula was granted freedom around the year 1630 (McKnight 154).

9 The general trend of witches in mainstream media represents white women and the relationship to white privilege. For instance, the production of *Bewitched* (1964), the CW's 1990s version of *Charmed* (1998), *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996), and *Good Witch* (2015) connote a positive portrayal of European-descent women as witches who use their power as "good" Samaritans, a narrative that haunts our realm today. Whites far remove themselves from any connections of "black" magic and position their so-called scientific advancements, religious beliefs, and violent scientific experiments and deemed as "purge-cleansing". The truth holds value in the way that white witches operate in speculative fiction novels and film.

10 In this sentence, I am only discussing the negative connotations of the term bruja under Western ideologies, not the reclamation of the term used by spiritual practitioners.

11 Ashé means "power, grace, growth, blood" (Murphy 175).

12 For purposes of length, I shortened the chant. See episode 1 of *Siempre Bruja* for the complete chant.

13 The "colonial iron fist" alludes to the 1400s German text *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *Hammer of Witches*. In short, the *Malleus* outlines the ways that peasant women were speculated as heretics and witches. The text's authors were inquisitors who believed that the devil tempted women with sex and those specific women possessed powers over men (Mackey 69). Furthermore, the debate on witchcraft began with women having metaphysical proximity to the divine. This idea baffled the clergy, sending them into an uproar, challenging patriarchal domination in Christianity.

14 Regla de Palo is a male society, but I am associating the use of charms or prendas, which is not exclusive to a particular gender.

## Works Cited

Anaya, Rudolfo. *Bless Me, Ultima*. Grand Central Publishing, 2012.

Barnet, Miguel. *Biography of a Runaway Slave*. Northwestern UP, 2016.

Chacón, Isidora. *Yo, Bruja*. Alianza Editorial; edición, 2015.

Chee, Fabio. "Science Fiction and Latino Studies Today … and in the Future." *The Routledge Companion to Latina/o Popular Culture*, edited by Frederick Louis Aldama, Routledge, 2016, pp. 126–135.

Chireau, Yvonne P. *Black Magic: Religion and the African American*. U of California P, 2003.

Córdova, Zoraida. *Labyrinth Lost*. Brooklyn Brujas series. Sourcebooks Fire, 2017.

Davis, Wade. *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*. U of North Carolina P, 2000.

Depestre, René. *Change*. Violence II, No. 9, Paris: Seuil, 1971.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery, Duke UP, 1994, pp. 179–222.

Dillon, Grace, Isiah Lavender III, Taryne Jade Taylor and Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay. "CFP: The Routledge Handbook to Alternative Futurisms." *Call for Papers*. University of Pennsylvania, Department of English.https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2020/01/06/the-routledge-handbook-to-alternative-futurisms#:~:text=Alternative%20Futurisms%20can%20be%20thought. Accessed 26 Aug. 2020.

Dubey, Madhu. "Speculative Fictions of Slavery." *American Literature*, vol. 82, no. 4, 2010, pp. 779–805.

Fernández Olmos, Margarite, and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*. NYU Press, 2011.

Fett, Sharla M. *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations*. U of North Carolina P, 2002.

Fuentes, Carlos. *Aura Bilingual Pa*. Macmillan, 1975.

Gill, Russell B. "The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2013, pp. 71–85.

Grayson, Sandra M. *Symbolizing the Past: Reading Sankofa, Daughters of the Dust, & Eve's Bayou as Histories*. UP of America, 2000.

Guengerich, Sara V. "The Witchcraft Trials of Paula de Eguiluz, a Black Woman, in Cartagena de Indias, 1620–1636." *Afro-Latino Voices, Shorter Edition: Translations of Early Modern Ibero-Atlantic Narratives*, edited by Kathryn Joy McKnight and Leo J. Garofalo. Hackett, 2015, pp. 116–125.

Levins Morales, Aurora. *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals*. Duke UP, 2019.

Lucas, George, director. *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*. Twentieth Century Fox, 1977.

McKnight, Kathryn J. "Performing Double-Edged Stories: the Three Trials of Paula de Eguiluz." *Colonial Latin American Review*, vol. 25 no. 2, 2016, pp. 154–174.

Méndez, Xhercis. "Transcending Dimorphism: Afro-Cuban Ritual Praxis and the Rematerialization of the Body." *Power*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 101–121.

Merla-Watson, Cathryn J., and B. V. Olguín. *Altermundos: Latin@ Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017.

Murphy, Joseph M. *Santeria: African Sprits in America*. Beacon, 1993.

Older, Daniel José. *Shadowshaper*. Scholastic, 2015.

Parra, Ana Maria, creator. *Siempre Bruja*. Netflix and Caracól TV Productions, 2019.

Perry, Imani. *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation*. Duke UP, 2018.

*Proceso de fe de Paula de Eguiluz*, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Inquisición, 1620, exp. 10. http://pares.mcu.es/ParesBusquedas20/catalogo/show/1312143. Accessed 8 Aug. 2020.

Ramirez, Catherine S. "Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism: Fictive Kin." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2008, pp. 185–194.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Scholastic, 1997.

Schalk, Sami D. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Duke UP, 2018.

Schmidt, Bettina E. "Possessed Women in the African Diaspora: Gender Difference in Spirit Possession Rituals." *Spirit Possession and Trance: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Bettina E. Schmidt and Lucy Huskinson. Bloomsbury, 2010.

Strongman, Roberto. *Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou*. Duke UP, 2019.

"supernatural, adj. and n." *OED Online*, Sept. 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/194422. Accessed 7 Sept. 2020.

Temple, Christel N. "The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States: A Modern History." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2010, pp. 127–150.

Urrea, Luis Alberto. *The Hummingbird's Daughter: A Novel*. Little, Brown, 2006.

Whyte, Kyle P. "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 1, no. 1–2, 2018, pp. 224–242, doi:10.1177/2514848618777621.

# 21

# UTOPIC RAGE

## Transforming the Future Through Narratives of Black Feminine Monstrosity and Rage

*Cassandra Scherr*

Through her use of speculative fiction, Nalo Hopkinson takes an unflinching look at the realities of race, class, ethnicity, and power, allowing her to explore the "real world's" uncomfortable truths. She does this by answering a deceptively simple question: "Who does the work?" The answers to this question are, in part, a code for the politics of visibility and monstrosity that is applied to the social other and, in turn, that other's response to this application. When specifically applied to concepts of the monstrous, the monstrous becomes "pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read" (Cohen 4). For those who have been labeled monstrous, "being read" is a type of work the monstrous does to maintain the social borders between normal and abnormal. Hopkinson contests these boundaries by creating works that empower othered narratives that challenge "imperialist conceptions of modernity and primitivism, technology and folklore, science and magic, the sacred and sexual, and masculine and feminine"; through this she embraces Afrofuturistic and Africanfuturist understandings of the world (Faucheux 563).

Like many, I describe Hopkinson's work as Afrofuturistic, a term that Mark Dery first defined as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). To this I add that Hopkinson's work also embraces Africanfuturism, a term coined by author Nnedi Okorafor, which describes texts "specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora". However, in Hopkinson's case, it may be more accurate to call her work Caribbean Futurism, as she often draws on her experiences as a Jamaican woman and embraces a Futurism that

> can be seen as less a marker of black authenticity and more a cultural force, and episteme that betokens a shift in our largely unthought assumptions about what histories matter and how they may serve as a precondition for any future we may imagine.
>
> *(Kilgore 8)*

By this I mean that Hopkinson centers Caribbean narratives that both privilege Black experiences and point towards a future that centers the African diaspora. These dynamics are present in most of Hopkinson's fiction; however, this discussion focuses on her novel *Sister Mine*.

*Sister Mine* tells a complex story of Black women's work, rage, and the relationship between the two. This chapter discusses how these themes can be used to decenter western assumptions of the future through an in-depth exploration of the main character Makeda and the depictions of her mojo's monstrous physical manifestations. Hopkinson uses these elements to craft a narrative that moves beyond the question "of should Black women's rage exist"; instead, Hopkinson embraces the exploration of the work that rage does. By forcing readers not only to see rage but embrace its potential, *Sister Mine* moves readers beyond the continuous reinscription of Black pain to arrive at a place that creates a possible future of Black pleasure. Ultimately, Makeda's story embraces the potentiality of monstrosity, but in doing so, it also means embracing her rage. We come to see that by both facing and welcoming her rage, Makeda builds a space where she can generate some much-needed social change both by demanding that her labor is finally acknowledged and through the pleasure of expressing her rage in ways that force her family to start to see and fully acknowledge her. In short, Makeda's rage is a potential path to a new utopic future, one centered in Hopkinson's embracement of a Caribbean Futurism.

## Visible Rage, Politicized Rage

The question of the place of rage has long been a part of activism, and particularly Black activism. For example, Shermaine Jones explains how the nonviolent civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s call "for suppressing any feeling of rage and instead taking on the cloak of humility" (181). These groups claim that to create progress, Black people need to remain calm and collected when faced with adversity. On the other hand, one can look to groups such as the Black Power movement, which "sought to marshal that same rage and, in fact, to stoke it toward nationalist and revolutionary ends" (Jones 181). In doing so, these groups created a moment when rage becomes a "required black effect, a marker of black authenticity and a badge of commitment to the movement. Rage becomes a kind of cultural capital. It is manufactured, commoditized, and performed by those committed to Black Power" (Jones 181). In part, these two strategies are navigating the politics of visibility when working for social change and a new Black inclusive vision for the future. Rage is forced visibility, abrupt and impolite, but powerful because it forces the viewers to look at and deal with the enraged person.

Another example that speaks to Hopkinson's centering of African cultures and traditions is in precolonial Igbo traditions, when women would exercise their political power against men who committed a social taboo by "sitting on them" or "making war on them". As is described by historian Judith Van Allen,

> to "sit on" or "make war on" a man involved gathering at his compound, sometimes late at night, dancing, singing scurrilous songs which detailed the women's grievances against him and often called his manhood into question, banging on his hut with pestles women used for pounding yams, and perhaps demolishing his hut or plastering it with mud and roughing him up a bit.
>
> *(70)*

Essentially, Black women would take on aggressive, and some would say monstrous, behaviors to put a socially powerful man in his place. Thus, their performance of rage was a type of communal labor performed to punish and discourage problematic behaviors. This performance of rage was a service these women did to better their society. But there is a social stigma towards

this kind of visibility in many societies, particularly when Black women perform it. On the one hand, it can be said to clearly state that one will no longer be ignored, that one will not be pushed aside or be redirected. On the other hand, rageful action is seen as a distraction or even a call for violence. As one experience by Audre Lorde frames it, "a white academic welcomes the appearance of a collection by non-Black women of color. 'It allows me to deal with racism without dealing with the harshness of Black women', She says to me" (126). Here we see visible rage being used as an excuse to bar Black women from a conversation. Lorde's experience shows us that the social systems work to ensure, for better or worse, that disrupting actions remain either invisible or are politely visible. In the case of rage, the rage of a group either remains behind closed doors or is expressed in a controlled and sparing manner (which doesn't really make it rage any more) through the systems in place. One common rhetoric of "anti-rage" proponents is that there is not only a correct way to protest, but also a "time and place" for dissent. Often these people encourage groups to focus on the courts and policy changes. A strategy that undeniably has helped foster positive changes in the world, but that is also a strategy that keeps disgruntled groups polite, controlled, semi-invisible, and often beholden to the very power structures they are attempting to dismantle. Those who refuse to politely debate for their rights, insisting on the validity of their rage, are often labeled aggressive, uncontrollable, ungrateful, and even terroristic. In short, they are aligned with or directly labeled monstrous.

Looking at past movements when attempting to apply these lessons today, we tend to think of these two strategies in an either-or manner. But as Hopkinson shows us, the reality is more a navigation and balance between the two. In this sense, Hopkinson's work is an embodiment of Britney Cooper's "elegant rage", which is rage, explicitly focused, as a tool for social change. Often the process of Hopkinson's character's exploration of their rage is "messy as hell", something Cooper tells us is true for many Black feminists. However, in time that rage becomes "focused with precision", or, to quote Lorde, "every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional which brought that anger into being. When focused with precision, it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (127). Thus, the question for Hopkinson's work isn't if rage should exist—it should and does—but instead, how does one navigate this rage once it's created, and what work does this rage do?

Hopkinson's intricate understanding of rage may in part be connected to her experiences being a Black Caribbean woman living in the west and working in spaces often dominated by western, white, straight, and masculine voices. She addresses these experiences in her essay *Report from Planet Midnight*, where she discusses some of the ways science fiction has become limiting to people of color and the understandable rage people like her may feel because of this. Part of what makes this rage understandable is the fact that science fiction is by nature a space where anything can happen, and therefore many creators use this freedom to depict their visions for the future. Yet many of these works ether actively ignore the Black diaspora or use Blackness as a shorthand for monstrosity (or vice versa), giving the impression that Blackness doesn't belong in our future, or worse, that Blackness is a potential threat to the future. This dynamic makes *Sister Mine*, published after *Report from Planet Midnight*, particularly interesting because in the novel we quickly learn that there are imbalances between the characters that need correcting, and in doing so, Hopkinson unapologetically engages her characters' rage. But this engagement is complicated, causing the reader to question the place of visible rage and its potential as a tool to shape one's future.

## Trapped by Love and Rage: Using Monstrosity to Render
## Rage's Work Invisible

Boiled down to its basic elements, *Sister Mine* is a story about a family in a moment of crisis, attempting to deal with their patriarch's failing health and the inevitable changes in their lives. With that in mind, this discussion will concentrate on the labor and monstrous rage of both Makeda and her mojo/haint. Through Makeda's journey, we see the potentiality of a progressive narrative of Black women's rage. Ultimately, it is by embracing her haint—the rageful physical manifestation of both Makeda's mojo and her family's refusal to understand or acknowledge her labor—that Makeda potentially manifests a future where she can finally access the pleasure of using her mojo and, by extension, becoming truly visible (aka acknowledged) by the other characters. Thus, for Makeda, only through the embracement and pleasure of expressing one's rage can she build a future that not only addresses Black pain but also unlocks the potentiality of pleasure.

At the start of the novel, Makeda is on the cusp of establishing her independence from her celestial family (who and what Makeda and Abby's family are, is hinted at but not explicitly said, though they appear to be Loa or possibly Orisha) and, most importantly, her once-conjoined twin sister Abby. Makeda needs her independence for many reasons, but the most obvious and painful for her is that everyone in her immortal family, including Abby, inherently has access to mojo (magic), usually specializing in something specific that makes them unique. That is, everyone but Makeda, who was born physically "perfect" but without mojo. This lack is appalling to her family, causing her to be shunned by everyone but her father, uncle, and sister. Though Makeda's immediate family loves her, they can't help but frame all of their interactions with her in terms of protection due to her lack. They are frequently both subconsciously and consciously reminding her of her lack of mojo, a lack she is deeply ashamed of and desperate to correct, causing Makeda to frequently search for some hint of her mojo. Yet her family responds to Makeda with disbelief and censure anytime she claims to have done or seen something mojo-related. This response causes Makeda to feel rage, but she also directs that rage inwardly as shame, creating a cycle of desire and self-hate that Makeda spends much of the novel trying to navigate. We see an example of this cycle in the following:

> "I think a tree talked to me today", I told Abby, hating myself for doing this again, for coveting mojo so badly that I kept trying to talk myself into believing I had it.
>
> *(Hopkinson,* Sister Mine *3)*


> "Makeda, I don't care whether it's desperate wishful thinking or a stupid little trick you play to impress, but it's really cruel of you to play it with Dad lying helpless in palliative care." Oh, gods, why couldn't I ever stop doing this? Abby was right. I was only shaming myself.
>
> *(Hopkinson,* Sister Mine *4)*

Makeda's family is one that controls others through the enforcement of hierarchies and their need to uphold the family ideal. Makeda is unable to be that ideal, and thus she is framed as someone to be loved, but also someone who is a burden. Thus, her family must manage her at all times. This includes pressuring her to always live with her sister and finding ways for her to be "useful", which means providing the majority of care to her ailing father and demanding her presence for emotional support.

Makeda's family utilizes her as a kind of sad bogeyman. She is not overtly scary, but she is viewed as a social horror. She and Abby were born when her celestial father married and impregnated her mother, one of his human servants. Her lack of mojo is said to be a result of this "unnatural" union. Thus, like all cultural monsters, Makeda is othered and pushed to her society's metaphorical borders. Her life and body serve as a border between that which her family deems correct and that which is aberrant to them. Makeda has grown tired of this and, at the start of the novel, is attempting to leave. For Makeda, this means finding her place in the human world, but her family and the novel's events are actively hindering that process. They, particularly Abby, don't want Makeda to force the issue of her separation, and they are not ready to question why this bothers them. They know the world is "not safe" for Makeda, but they do not think beyond their general fear and discomfort. Instead, they would be far more comfortable if Makeda just accepted the status quo and remain helpful but invisible, quietly supporting everyone around her and serving her purpose. This system of othering, hierarchy, and shame renders much of the work Makeda does hidden and keeps her rage inwardly focused and unable to achieve its full potential for change.

As a result, Makeda is a character who is equal parts full of love, rage, doubt, and shame. She loves her family; they are everything to her. She is particularly dependent on her relationship with Abby, who not only financially supports her but is someone Makeda views emotionally (and at one point physically) as her other half. But this relationship has grown unhealthy, and Makeda is saddened and enraged by the way her family, particularly Abby, treats her. This rage only escalates as the novel progresses. Makeda learns that her family, without her consent, made and continued to make choices that drastically affected her life. This included removing her mojo at birth, mojo which they, through misunderstanding, arrogance, and an unwillingness to adjust their understanding of mojo and by extension labor, deemed useless. When they did this, they mortally wounded her. To save Makeda's life, they made Makeda the new home for her father's mojo, something that both made her ill (like a body trying to reject another's organ) and made it impossible for her mojo to rejoin with her. In this way, Makeda is constantly losing pieces of herself due to her family's interference. Yet, like so many people who have been burdened with monstrosity, she is made to bear the burden of their assumptions and actions. Makeda's most significant pain is that she doesn't have mojo. This does not only make her feel useless, as she is unable to do the kind of work her family values. But this lack has forced her to endure the ridicule, rejection, and potential violence of her extended family. However, this social monstrosity is not due to her actions; instead, her family gave it to her, and it is something they depend on to maintain their social hierarchy.

Her family also gave her the burden of housing her father's mojo, which is taxing on her body and limits her potential. This is one way that Makeda's family used a false narrative of monstrosity to shape the story of her work and control her rage. This narrative renders the very intensive labor she does invisible and denies the work she would find most fulfilling. The fact that she is a vessel for someone else's mojo means she is literally carrying the burden of their actions and beliefs within her body. Furthermore, she spends the majority of the novel unable to directly work with her mojo, magic that, among other things, has the power to amplify the abilities of those around her. These are significant acts that deserve substantial rewards. This labor is hidden, especially from Makeda, and anytime she dares to question, she is mocked. At the same time, this narrative renders politely visible Makeda's aspects that her family can use as a part of a system to control and punish her. They point out that she can't use mojo (she can't access her father's even though she houses it), making her think that she should be thankful to do whatever jobs make her useful to make up for her lack. Thus, Makeda can be convinced to gratefully labor at those jobs her family finds most burdensome, freeing others to live more

desirable lives. Furthermore, Abby found out the truth about Makeda when they were both children but continued the fiction that their father and uncle created.

> When they told me, what I understood was that if you died, you would go away, so then Dad could have his mojo back, and then he would go all godlike on me, and I figured he would probably go away, too. It made me frantic. Since then, I've been trying to make sure that nothing ever happened to you.
>
> *(Hopkinson,* Sister Mine *130)*

Abby knew the truth but instead left Makeda with a story that made Abby more comfortable and Makeda more controllable.

To put it mildly, there is an imbalance in Makeda's life, and to correct that imbalance means facing some hard conversations with people she loves. It is this "facing" that Hopkinson calls for when addressing social imbalances in fiction and life. As she puts it,

> if you really want to correct the imbalance, you have to be willing to hear pent-up rage and not retaliate. You have to be willing to acknowledge your actions that make you complicit. You have to be willing to apologize and then take visible, effective steps towards righting the imbalance.
>
> *(Hopkinson,* Report from Planet Midnight *31)*

In part, Hopkinson is telling us here, both as part of her narrative and as a Black woman existing in the world, that creating a future that allows Black women (or any othered group) to flourish is going to be built in part on and by rage. Futurists like Hopkinson are not asking for change, and she is not simply hoping for a future that creates space for Caribbean Futurism. Rather, she is demanding these things as her rightful due. Thus, in *Sister Mine*, Hopkinson creates a story where part of what drives Makeda's choices and the events of the novel is that her family is not taking these steps to right this imbalance, just as many societies aren't taking the steps to right social inequalities. Whenever Makeda attempts to call attention to the problem, whether by actions or by rage, her family is forcing this dialog into a more "polite and correct" space. Early in the novel, this happens when Makeda tries to justify moving into her own place. Abby reframes Makeda's need for space and visibility as selfishness. Equating Makeda's need for free- dom to the abandonment of their father in his time of need: "'Where the hell were you?' hissed Abby. 'You told me you were going to stay with him last night'" (Hopkinson, *Sister Mine* 70). This reframing redirects Makeda's rage into shame for her very reasonable desires, forcing her and her work back into the narrative of constant and invisible support—and carefully ignoring the facts that Makeda had been providing all of the care for their father up until this point and the fact that their father, for all practical purposes, is a god. The care Makeda provides is largely performative, since their father can't die but rather would move on to a new shell. Thus, the work Makeda is made to do is both a trap and completely without acknowledgment.

When reframing Makeda's protests doesn't work, Makeda's family attempts to defuse the situation to render the unfairness of Makeda's monstrous otherness invisible again. Think of Abby's response to why she didn't tell Makeda the truth about her mojo. Abby focused on the idea that she has been doing everything she could to ensure Makeda's safety, but she doesn't acknowledge that this "everything" has been extremely controlling or that part of the reason why Abby does this is for *Abby* to avoid being alone. Makeda's family frames her identity as monstrous because they see Makeda's need for visibility and validation as unhelpful, distracting,

and even destructive to their way of life. But this really means that her visibility wouldn't help them remain complicit in their actions and destroys the comforting but false narratives they have created. To fully face the reasons that Makeda's work has been rendered mostly invisible is to admit that they actively caused her harm.

Furthermore, Makeda's family actively benefits from that harm; they are privileged in part because Makeda is othered. That dynamic is the actual work of a cultural monster. Those labeled monstrous forcibly take on extra burdens so that those labeled normal can flourish. Abby maintains that she took the actions she did to protect Makeda, which is a noble narrative and is true. But what is also true is that Abby's music-related mojo works better when Makeda is actively around. It is implied that this benefit to Abby's (and others') mojo has something to do with Makeda's mojo. But it is only stated that Makeda's mojo is a service she gives for others.

> *So I guess my mojo is to be some kind of amplifier?* To whom was I speaking? Where was I?
> "Not really, but it was clever of you to work it that way."
> *Well if not that, what is it then? What's my gift?*
> "You still think it's something you get, don't you? Something you own?"
> *Isn't it?*
> "Honey bun, no. It's a service you give to others, not the other way around."[1]
>
> *(Hopkinson,* Sister Mine *301)*

To face Makeda's status as a monstrous other and take the appropriate steps to fix the imbalance of how she and her work are viewed, Abby would have to admit to herself that she has been undercutting the acknowledgment of Makeda's work to benefit her own work and, by extension, status. To put it bluntly, Abby has emotionally abused Makeda. Yes, she is driven by love, but she still has caused harm and would need to change her reality in uncomfortable ways to fix this harm. In this dynamic, Hopkinson shows us the complicated nature of a question like "Who does the work?" The story forces characters and, by extension, readers to see their actions from various lenses, but rarely do we find easy answers. Often, we need to be forced to acknowledge these problems and to make tangible changes. That need to force change is what makes rage so important when envisioning a future that embraces the Black diaspora. The problematic social hierarchies that work against Caribbean Futurism (or most nonwestern futurisms) are not going to politely dismantle themselves because they serve an ingrained social purpose. Furthermore, many will fight to keep these problematic social hierarchies; thus, Black women who want to create a future that positively engages the Black diaspora are going to need to demand the space to do so.

## Monstrous Rage: Transforming the Future Through Black Rage

Makeda's labor is only invisible and devalued by her family, the most powerful and privileged group in this story, but to those outside of Makeda's family, Makeda's direct access to higher powers give her a lot of privilege. Those with the least privilege in this novel are characters like Makeda's mojo/haint. Over time, that underdeveloped bit of mojo that Makeda's family took from her as a child grew and eventually became its own entity. Many characters encounter this entity in several forms. But it is most visible when it appears as a haint, which takes a different monstrous and rageful shape in each appearance: "today my haint was wearing the form of a child just old enough to walk on its chubby legs. Its hair framed its anger-contorted cherub's

face" (Hopkinson, *Sister Mine* 58). In this form, this entity is nothing but action and rage because it knows it belongs to Makeda, and it knows that not being with Makeda is wrong. To do its work, it *needs* Makeda, and for her to acknowledge it as more than a monster. Thus, it spends much of its time hunting Makeda down and violently working to rejoin with her. The issue is that Makeda, for most of her life, doesn't know that this thing is her mojo. She sees it as a monster that is always trying to harm her. To Makeda, her haint's work is, at best, confusing and at worst destructive.

> "We think your haint is your mojo. Somehow it developed. But it's unattached. It's desperate to be part of you again."
> I boggled at them. "That thing can't be my mojo! It's been trying to kill me for years!"
> Wonderingly, Abby said, "It's trying to get inside you where it belongs. All this time, that's what it wanted."
> "By climbing in my *mouth*?!"
> Beji shrugged. "It doesn't understand why that makes no sense. It's your mojo, not your brain."
>
> *(Hopkinson,* Sister Mine *253)*

Even when Makeda does learn that her haint is her mojo, she is frightened of it, and she has good reason: her mojo/haint's actions are rage's work in its most visible, aggressive, and impolite form. In many ways, it is the work of social justice and the demand for a more inclusive future. This haint/mojo actively gets in people's faces and forces visibility by making everyone look, acknowledge, and deal with it. When the haint does the work, it demands appropriate compensation, and when it no longer wants to work for someone, it lets them know violently. Makeda's haint/mojo does work in a matter that forces everyone, including Makeda, to learn something is not right with their situation, and, unlike Makeda, it can't be shamed into being "reasonable". Thus, through the haint, Hopkinson shows us the real power of rage, a rage that burns like a forest fire ready to destroy to birth a new and better future. The work this rage does is what many fear whenever a marginalized voice, and especially a Black woman's voice, starts to get upset. This rage is what made the Igbo practices of "sitting on a man" so compelling. These women were willing to demand change and wouldn't be silenced until they got it because they understood that they needed to use their voices to ensure a future that was safe, comfortable, and maintain spaces for their (and by extension the entire communities) success. When applied with purpose and for a good cause, rage informs society that a reckoning has finally arrived and that something may need to be burnt in the name of social change. This rage is justified, but it is also terrifying.

However, Makeda's haint/mojo is also a temporary stand-in. For most of the novel, it is treated like its own entity, which makes it and its visible rage seem separate from Makeda. But ultimately, her monstrous haint is *her* mojo. It is part of her. Thus, its rage is part of her. When Makeda and her mojo are finally rejoined, we are only left with Makeda, but we know that that rage still exists. Furthermore, we know Makeda is now fully aware of her society's problems and knows she can create tangible changes. Eventually, the characters and, by extension, the readers must face the real and uncomfortable conversations that need to happen. For Makeda and her family to move forward and create a future that protects those like her, something they all claim they want, everyone must take a hard look at the systems that harmed Makeda in the first place. Perhaps she has been bolstered by joining with her mojo or, more likely, all the knowledge that those events brought. Yet, Makeda is still left with the same social system that has always limited

her. Now that she has mojo, there are more factors to consider. By the end of the novel, Makeda is unsure how her mojo works, but she knows it is "a service". Thus, to use the very thing she always wanted, to do her work, she must remain an active and supportive part of her community and family.

That said, we know that whatever Makeda's mojo is, it challenges how these other characters have understood themselves and the world. As Makeda was told, mojo and the work that mojo does is "a service you give to others, not the other way around" (Hopkinson, *Sister Mine* 301). This means that Makeda's labor through her mojo/rage is a literal mechanism for shaping the future. In other words, when Makeda chooses, because now she has the choice, to work *with* (not for) those around her, she, and all those like her, serve the community around them and, by extension, can shape that community's future. Makeda and her family's work literally manifests the future they want to live, and as entities that are based in Caribbean and African culture and history, that future may physically take place in the west (*Sister Mine* being set in Toronto, Ontario) but is centered in Caribbean and Africanfuturisms. But for that to happen, Makeda needs to make some demands, because it is still not clear that her family is ready or even capable of "taking visible, effective steps towards righting the imbalance", particularly if the right thing would mean that they were servants and not masters. Thus, by the end of the novel, Makeda is more visible, but her family will most likely try to fold her back into the existing social system. But will that calm last? This re-establishment of the tentative truce exposes the potentiality of monstrous rage. On the one hand, Makeda got what she wanted, her mojo; but not having mojo was just a symptom of a larger problem. However, Makeda now understands that problem and knows she has the power to create a more inclusive future using both her mojo and her eloquent rage.

## Conclusion: The Utopic Potential of Rage

*Sister Mine* ends at a crossroads. Makeda's transformation may end with her getting her mojo and moving on; we don't know what choices she will make. However, Makeda learned things that she can't now unlearn. She learned the true and often cruel shape of her world. She also learned that these things could change if one pushes hard enough in the right spots. She watched for years as her mojo raged and fought to rejoin with her, and ultimately it won. She started to visibly express her rage and see results from those actions. When Abby tried to justify their father and uncle's misuse of Makeda's mojo and body, Makeda started to push back, saying, "Right now, I don't care. They fucked with me. I don't so much mind that, because it helped Dad out. But they've been lying to me about it all my life, and that bites" (Hopkinson, *Sister Mine* 130). This statement is what forced Abby to explain her actions where before she would have silenced Makeda. These pushbacks are not the aggressive rage of her haint, but that is because Makeda is capable of more nuanced and eloquent actions. Makeda, on some level, always understood the complicated nature of the world around her. However, now she also is starting to understand her potential to change that world for the better, creating a more comfortable space not only for herself, but for other invisible or monsterized characters such as her haint/mojo. If her family is unwilling to listen to her, she now knows the power of her rage. Furthermore, she better understands how to navigate their social systems; thus, she can potentially engage in her equivalent of "sitting on a man". She could start to use her newfound knowledge and the power of her rage to push back against her family's more problematic notions, potentially bettering her life and empowering others to do the same. That in itself isn't a utopia, but it's a start.

## Note

1   It is never stated who Makeda is talking to at this moment, but one can assume that she is speaking to the Supreme Creator that her family serves.

## Works Cited

Allen, Judith Van. "'Sitting on a Man': Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women." *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1972, pp. 165–181, https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.1972.10803664.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture.* U of Minnesota P, 1997.

Cooper, Brittney C. *Eloquent Rage: a Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower.* Picador, 2019.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery, Duke UP, 1994, pp. 179–222.

Faucheux, Amandine H. "Race and Sexuality in Nalo Hopkinson's Oeuvre; or, Queer Afrofuturism." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2017, pp. 563–580.

Jones, Shermaine. "Presenting Our Bodies, Laying Our Case: The Political Efficacy of Grief and Rage during the Civil Rights Movement in Alice Walker's Meridian." *Southern Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2014, pp. 179–195.

Kilgore, De Witt Douglas. "Afrofuturism." *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, edited by Rob Latham, 2014, pp. 561–572.

Hopkinson, Nalo. *Report from Planet Midnight.* PM Press, 2012.

———. *Sister Mine.* Grand Central Publishing, 2013.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider Essays and Speeches.* 1984. Crossing Press, 2007.

Okorafor, Nnedi. "Africanfuturism Defined." *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog The Adventures of Writer Nnedi Okorafor and Her Daughter Anyaugo Okorafor*, 19 Oct. 2019, nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Rutledge, Gregory E. "Speaking in Tongues: An Interview with Science Fiction Writer Nalo Hopkinson." *African American Review*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1999, pp. 589–601.

# 22

# GROUNDING THE FUTURE

## Locating Senior's "Grung" Poetics in Tobias Buckell's Speculative Fiction

*Jacinth Howard*

The dearth of criticism on Caribbean speculative fiction is gradually reducing as a result of increasing scholarly interest, innovative perspectives and emerging writers committed to developing the genre. Jamaicans Nalo Hopkinson, Curdella Forbes, and Stephanie Saulter, as well as Grenadian Tobias Buckell and Barbadian Karen Lord, have become the distinguishable names associated with the niche. More recently, writers such as Brandon O'Brien, Maurice Broaddus, and Kevin Hosein have made significant interventions within the field in terms of novels and short stories. While works by these authors represent a significant wave of modernity for both West Indian fiction broadly and its speculative subdivision, I deduce as an especially necessary premise that the concept of speculative fiction is not new to the region, or to its writers. Speculative fiction was formulated by the earliest of West Indian novelists, such as Edgar Mittelholzer and later Wilson Harris. Mittelholzer's phenotypic horror *My Bones and My Flute* and Harris's Quantum Physics wonder *The Palace of the Peacock* exhibit explicit, generic signs which may be compared to more modern Caribbean sf novels. More subtly, the fantastic nature of the speculative is innate to the West Indian identity, such that works which are generally read as realism naturally demonstrate principles and features typically linked to the sf genre.

Olive Senior, born in Jamaica, is the consummate example of such a writer. Easily amongst the most prolific of West Indian writers, as well as a cognoscente of both poetry and prose, Senior's oeuvre extends over almost 40 years of literature. Her focus generally pivots on the "human condition" across varying strata of Jamaican society (Pollard 540). The selected settings are aptly nationalistic, ranging from rural landscape to inherited plantation houses to tenement yards. So broad is her span that Jamaican poet Velma Pollard determines that any initial critical approach to Senior's work must display cognizance that "the attempt to slot her writing into a particular genre immediately gives one an uncomfortable feeling" (540). This blurring of genre boundaries and eluding of boxes is a customary trait shared with the region's literary corpus. It typifies what theorist Jean Bernabe calls creolite or Creoleness, "a transactional aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asian and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history" (Bernabe 81). This diversified unicity is perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Caribbeaness itself.

The same trait, therefore, informs the work of identifiably Caribbean sf writers such as Nalo Hopkinson. In addition to blurring boundaries of culture, writing style, realities, and demographic subdivisions, Hopkinson applies the principle to genre boundaries, determining that because the

Caribbean is a place of fusion, it is natural to forget to tell the difference between distinctions like fantasy and sci-fi (Nelson 97). Unsurprisingly, the reverse is true, and the breadth of Senior's work too encompasses elements of the fantastic and, by extension, speculative fiction. She cites renowned magic realism writer Gabriel García Márquez as a distinct influence, and she stated in an interview with *Callaloo* editor Charles Rowell that she believes in "transactions in the world beyond the natural" (qtd. in Bucknor 86). Her proclivity for the fantastic will constitute the first half of the discussion in tandem with her theoretical approach, "grounding" in an attempt to begin articulating a native poetics for Caribbean sf uninfluenced by exterior standards. Buckell's established mainstream sf will then be read by this grassroots means to highlight the Caribbean subtexts and equivalents to universal perceptions of sf, which operate alongside indigenous notions and knowledge that exist holistically outside of Eurocentric and capitalist constructions of speculative fiction.

The current idea of Caribbean futurisms already focuses on that sense of distinction. It mainly revolves around the idea of guaranteeing a significantly West Indian existence in what is to come. As Tobias Buckell points out, "I believe that if we don't imagine our futures, other people will for us" (Hernandez et al.). As a result, authors from the Anglophone Caribbean tend to root this type of writing in the tradition of Afro-Jamaican cosmology, or, as Marie Sairsingh calls it, "cosmogony".[1] This is comprised of defying dominant "Westernist theoretical models" (32). Grounding, like this cosmogony, foregrounds Caribbean folklore and often an Afro-Caribbean past; this chapter aims to demonstrate that it is applicable to the future. It is a cosmogeny that allows transcendence between realms: past identities and future possibilities.

To understand the inevitability of sf in Senior's work, one must grasp that Caribbean sf is a complex iteration of the genre which draws heavily on the history and culture of the region. In the foreword of the short story anthology *New Worlds, Old Ways*, Karen Lord evokes that speculative fiction from the Caribbean is more than "Tolkien pastiches and pulpy space opera" (7). While it functions like mainstream sf in that it focuses on scientific method, ideas beyond realism, and the generic labels of horror, science fiction, and fantasy, regional sf is inevitably "Caribbeanized" in culture, history, execution, and terminology. In fact, instead of merely copying popular sf, the work of analyzing West Indian speculative fiction is just as rooted in thoroughly excavating and revising the past as it is in constructing the future. As a result, this investigation will focus on the essential deconstruction at work in Senior's *Gardening in the Tropics* along with Buckell's *Xenowealth* series, using "grung" poetics as a theoretical framework in order to demonstrate and illustrate decoloniality in the past, present and futures articulated through Caribbean sf.

## Olive Senior and Grung Poetics–Infused SF

Before discussing how Buckell and Senior use grounding through the speculative to perform decoloniality, I would like to operationalize the expression of the terms. I will first explain the problem to coloniality, then express the function of "grounding" in relation to it. According to theorist Nelson Maldonado-Torres, coloniality "refers to the long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism but that define culture, labor, relations, and knowledge production" (240). As he puts it, coloniality outlives colonialism, and as a result its impact is evident in our everyday living and operation. Speculative fiction as a relatively new categorization in fiction, with vision towards and about the future, is an ideal critical lens to unpack and critique the effects and currency of coloniality, which not only dominates the procedure of economic affairs but also the cultural. Thus, while grounding involves revisioning the past to interrogate the colonial space and its dispossessing experience, Senior's foci on the current realities of the marginalized lends relevance to grounding in terms of rationalizing and explicating the present and future away from an imperial center.

In order to sufficiently nullify coloniality's patterns of power and reach a stage of decolonization and decoloniality, the authority of Eurocentrism must be dismantled such that the discourse between the Global North and South reflects what critic Ramon Grosfoguel terms "horizontal dialogue" (28). In other words, instead of classifying the experiences and knowledges of the marginalized as "alternative", they must be elevated to a place of equivalence in power. This would successfully be effected by transforming thinking of the self and others as equals instead of in terms of hierarchy, followed by the actions that support such egalitarianism on the parts of both the colonizer and colonized. The task ahead, then, according to cultural theorist Walter Mignolo, is "to decolonize knowledge" (492), especially since coloniality of power is inextricably connected to coloniality of knowledge and being. Grounding, which emphasizes a return to the roots and an evocation of authenticity, demands a focus on an interior and reflexive understanding of self and community to salve superficiality of a strictly colonized identity and reclaim knowledge and being. When the voices of the subaltern are positioned in locales of power and then married with this reclamation of knowledge and being, the summit of decoloniality will be realized.

The process of decoloniality must oppose a system which operates from the "top down", from the age of the transatlantic slave trade and plantocracy to current corporations and by extension states and governments (Mignolo 492). It must then do the reverse and take a "bottom up" approach, which involves:

> the practice of liberation and de-colonization is initiated with the recognition, in the first place, that the colonialization of knowledge and being consisted of using imperial knowledge to repress colonized subjectivities and the process moves from there to build structures of knowledge that emerge from the experience of humiliation and marginalization that have been and continue to be enacted by the implementation of the colonial matrix of power.
>
> *(Mignolo 492)*

This procedure epitomizes the essence of "grounding", as Senior determines that unlike colonized knowledge, which is scribal truth, which is handed down, ground truth is truth which begins from the ground up and is au/o/ral in nature, necessitating a redefinition of truth and central knowledge (Senior 15:30). Grounding, according to Bucknor, involves a "departure from strict European scribal orthodoxies by incorporating and privileging nature practices, rituals, beliefs, alternative cosmologies and orality", thus validating alternative knowledges by repudiating the authority of imperial power and knowledge, thereby providing a solution to the persistent problem of coloniality (85).

Importantly, as expressed earlier, coloniality is largely about imperial thew via knowledge production. Thus, the effectiveness of decoloniality pivots on who has the ability to inform and perform it. As Grosfoguel puts it, the process demands a production of knowledge that surpasses the dichotomy of third-world versus Eurocentric constructs. Particularly, these perspectives, as articulated by critics who do not comprise the disenfranchised groups in question, decoloniality and decolonization, demand that it does. Grosfoguel outlines his outrage when confronted with the reality that much of the discourse is comprised of "studies about the subaltern", but not enough "from a subaltern perspective" (2). In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Collins proffers the idea that while it is useful to present subordinate groups with "new knowledge concerning ways of accessing the truth", it is even more essential for these groups to discover authentic and familiar ways of establishing their own realities and defining them on their own terms (221).

The oppressive dichotomies represented by Grosfoguel and Collins similarly remain operative in the region, as in most of the postcolonial world, as a result of historical imposition. Still, within a Caribbean space, the workings of identity and therefore the ability to generate knowledge is nuanced. With a numerical majority of African descendants, Afrocentric ideas prevail in a way that they do not in an American space, for example; however, the idea of blackness in relation to the Caribbean is less monolithic and more complex, as it "moves in and among so many other cultures and is so dependent on context" (Edmondson 112). Therefore, it lends itself to ambiguity which escapes the limiting polarity of the racial/ethnic structure of the United States. As Bernabe suggests, it is neither entirely Europeanness nor entirely Africanness, which are both "forms of exteriority", but Creoleness. Likewise, the ability to establish epistemological autonomy is empowered within the region, though it may be marginalized on a global scale (80). This access to distinct narratives aside from Eurocentrism allows a unique opportunity. Much like border thinking, concepts like "grounding" illustrate long-standing courses of action in decolonizing and decentering the dominant Eurocentric perspective in the Caribbean, without ignoring its influence. Through the lens of speculative fiction, many parallels are foregrounded to demonstrate ancient strategies which have always been natural to West Indian form and writing. These strategies are, then, essential for effective decolonization. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert observes that the "West looks to the Caribbean to understand hybridity"; likewise, the West can look to the Caribbean for modes of decolonization (167).

"Grounding" is, therefore, fundamentally an epistemological means for examining Caribbean reality through its own grassroots conduits. As the name implies, Senior intends that the model moves discourse about Caribbean literature towards "forming new canon by grounding ourselves in our own soil" on several levels (Bucknor 85). Considering the colonial polarity between margin and center, "grounding" is inevitably utilized within the margin, not only because of the lower class and silenced people groups it represents, but as a result of its foundational, rootsy, and often unseen subterranean location within the natural sphere. Caribbean feminist Sylvia Wynter classifies Caliban's and Miranda's race- and gender-based ostracism as a type of grounding, which is further vilified as "demonic ground" (356). Demonic grounding provides permission to remove will and autonomy from its victims because they are deemed unfit to curb harmful desires (Caliban) or protect and look after herself (Miranda) by the more powerful Prospero. Most relevant to this discussion is what I believe is the traditionally unobserved "grounding" that Ariel experiences where Prospero controls his flight and inhibits his magic to reduce the likelihood of him becoming a threat. Even a winged, angelic creature like Ariel is reduced to a slave, and while both characters exemplify supernatural creatures through celestial and demonic descriptors, Prospero's dominance within the contextual colonial matrix of power deems his own practice of magic the only acceptable default.

This control over the dissemination of knowledge canonizes Prospero's Eurocentric perspective, which celebrates the genial restoration of Ariel's freedom by Prospero and negates the abuse of the two native figures. The involuntary silencing of Ariel and Caliban remain an apt metaphor for the colonial experience in the Caribbean. As Fanon puts it, true liberation and decolonization is a "double operation" requiring participation from both the colonizer and the colonized, where instead of waiting "for the generous gifts of the colonizer 'given them freedom'", the process is conducted "from the perspective and interests of the damned" (qtd. in Mignolo 458). Consequently, I see in "grounding" as expressed by Senior the opportunity not only to revise and reverse the tale to the autonomous perspectives of Ariels and Calibans, as Cesaire and others have done, but to do so with the impetus of their grounded gifts. The speculative sensibility of Senior exemplifies Ariel's flight in the imagination, Caliban's subversion of language in what I call "magic words". The shared revision of history, like sci-fi's alternate

history subgenre in the form of "counter memory", alongside the scientific, medicinal propensity of the literal ground, comprise important subversive methods employed by Senior towards undermining colonial legacy.

The first decolonial strategy Senior enacts in her work is the use of counter-memory, which resembles the science fiction tradition of alternate history. Alternate history is generally at the crux of time-travel stories and is used to revise actual historic events through fiction. Senior performs a type of time travel where her poem "Meditation on Yellow" returns to the Aboriginal past of the West Indies to tell the story from the perspective of the Arawaks (Taino or Lokono) and Kalinago instead of the genocidal colonizers. In this world, the truth of shapeshifting men in "Amazon Women" becomes more than a sensational tale, especially when held up to the mirror of the fabulous tales which maintain the dominant narrative. Senior interrogates the fabulous nature of expecting to find an empire made of gold in the poem to equally nullify its believability if Toezya's exploits are deemed imaginary. Likewise, counter memory seeks to equally validate the narratives of the silenced by providing "collective representations of the past which are omitted from official reports of history" (Whitlinger 648). The personas in both poems provide extended accounts with historical data which are generally excluded from recorded accounts, and perform a type of time-jump similar to what theorist Anjali Prabhu calls a "disjunctive experience" (88). Disjunctive experience entails interrupting what is "known and knowable in a linear modality" (88). Prabhu means this in relation to hybridity; however, the Taino and Kalinago personas execute a similar process by voicing their unspoken tales, experiences, and knowledge within a timeframe truncated to exclude them, demanding that the authoritative notions of time and truth purported by Eurocentric narratives should be dissolved or at least disempowered.

Senior continues these practices of decolonial strategies through her articulation of the medicinal and food science in her work. Her methods are identical to what Grace L. Dillon describes as "Indigenous literacies" in her examination of Hopkinson's science fiction novels. These testable, reliable, aboriginal methods are "those practices used by indigenous native peoples to manipulate the natural environment in order to improve existence in areas including medicine, agriculture, and sustainability" (470). These approaches are distinguished from scientific method in terms of execution, but more importantly in terms of origin. Indigenous literacies absolves native knowledge of imperial control. Likewise, Senior identifies herself as an ethnographer schooled in these uninfluenced techniques. She learned about bush medicine, yam planting, and yucca and cassava processing through ground truth passed on orally as opposed to exclusively obtaining imported knowledge from books. So rich is her understanding that it is reflected in both her fiction and nonfiction publications.

The alternate history approach in "Meditation on Yellow" is also a significant decolonial tactic because it centers the Taino persona as an expert in horticulture, specifically in botany and herbal science. This alternative intelligence is generally thought to have been lost, as Senior notes that finding out about the region's Taino and Kalinago presences are among the most recent historical revelations. Senior determines that "grounding" is necessary for digging up secrets and treasure (15.30), and the hidden herbal knowledge is one of the most important discoveries. As Dillon pinpoints, Hopkinson's construction of Tan Tan's ability to distinguish "between look-alike edible and poisonous plants" such as "water vine and the more dangerous jumbie dumb cane" (477) in *Midnight Robber*, Makandal's wisdom with herbs in *Salt Roads*, and Ti-Jeanne's herbal expertise bequeathed to her by her grandmother, Senior similarly divulges the secret, magic, medicinal properties of bush. It is necessary to observe that Tan Tan, Ti-Jeanne, and Makandal all use their knowledge to navigate dystopian, oppressive, historical, or foreign contexts where they inevitably occupy the margin. On the other hand, Senior's shift

in perspective via counter-memory permits the Taino speaker to hold the dominant narrative and therefore act as a decolonizing shift.

The authority given to the Taino presence in Senior's "Meditation on Yellow" is especially evident in how she expresses their array of skills. They are schooled in how to heal, feed, and medicate—traits that often earn them labels such as "child-like", "peaceful", naïve, and lesser in intelligence (line 9). Scientific racism reinforced these patronizing perceptions within the coloniality of power matrix where "the lighter one's skin is, the closer to full humanity one is" (Maldonaldo Torres 241). Considering that Senior describes them as Red Indians who were "not golden" and "a shade too brown", they were among the least human and therefore regarded as barbaric and ignorant (lines 85–86). Still, the volition prioritized in Senior's poem presents the Taino in a less subordinate light by highlighting their proactive potential. The persona claims that if he/she had known that the colonizers arrived with the intention of slaughtering to obtain gold, he/she "would have brewed you up some yellow fever grass and arsenic" (line 7). This line once more exposes the shrewdness and diverse knowledge of the indigenous, which is hardly underscored, but also their propensity for protest and retaliation because they understand their humanity. Since a Eurocentric worldview would have negated that capacity, the knowledge about the Taino and Kalinago becomes inevitably compromised and, through narrative voice, Senior attempts to reverse that.

Along with scientific proclivity, the skills shown by descendants of the marginalized can be read in terms of speculative fiction tradition as Senior determines that their ability to manipulate the land is a miraculous one. While here she is alluding to scientific proficiency in yields, she also specifically refers to the people's ability to provide and produce with so few resources. Within the capitalist matrix of coloniality, the rural residents of Jamaica rely on the land out of financial necessity, but also because of heritage and tradition. Grounding quite literally means using the ground of "economic plots" and front yards to grow starchy ground provision for food and sale. The magic happens in the manufacturing possibilities of these simple crops, in "Hurricane Story, 1903", "cassava bammies and chaklata balls with a nutmeg and cinnamon leaf" are all yields from canella, cocoa, cassava, and nutmeg plants (lines 14–17). Along with corn, the raw materials contribute to limitless mealtime possibilities that provide food, health, and financial security, which "give us courage" according to the persona, i.e., grounding and reassurance (line 21). The special skills passed down for generations by empirical observation and oral communication are evident in grandfather's understanding of the Earth's seasons in rotation and his ability to drain his fields, ensuring that he "shored up their lives against improvidence" (line 4), therefore guaranteeing their future (line 4). He would plant during the dry season, "when the earth baked hard again", and during the hurricane season would preserve "afu yam and sweet potato ripened (safe from breeze-blow) underground" (lines 5, 8–9). This demonstration of "Indigenous scientific literacy" is paramount for the survival of West Indians both for the near future and for the distant future (as seen in Buckell's work).

Learning to survive hurricanes is a particularly Caribbean experience. Kamau Brathwaite determines that the languages of the region are distinguished from the British standard in that, like the hurricanes, they do not roar in pentameters. Likewise, Senior portrays the onset of the storm as a supernatural intervention of biblical significance within the region. The old people learned to read its characteristics. Hurricanes were characterized by "a special peach glow" in the sky and the directional change in trajectory in the birds flying west (line 30). All these are part of what Senior dubs "the ways of orchestrating disaster", a science her grandfather had inherited "from his father and his father before him" (lines 40, 28–29). The knowledge has not been lost; rather, it has been documented by the mind and the mouth instead of by the politics of writing.

Instead of reading pages, the family learns to read nature unfolding before them like a magical text. The changing weather is likened to Noah's global disaster, and Senior infuses a sense of preternatural mystery by the end of the poem, where she elaborates on her grandmother's missing sensay fowl and leghorn rooster, which passed the event within a cotton tree. On one level, they wait for chicks to come forth, symbolized as a "strange bird to be born" out of the storm; on another, the chickens' dwelling is of folkloric importance (line 61). The cotton tree is known within Jamaican custom to house duppies and is revered in ancestral Africa. The bird to be born signifies more fortunate, though bizarre, future occurrences which would be accepted as a procession of norms, as is tradition in magical realism. Further, it represents the phoenix spirit of the Jamaican people which would be reborn from the ashes and destruction of the hurricane due to their strong survival skills and determination. These purposeful acts of preservation, involving subterranean history and tradition, help to ground a Caribbean delinked from colonialism in the future.

## Grung Poetics in Tobias Buckell's Speculative Fiction

Tobias Buckell's *Xenowealth* series situates the Caribbean identity in the context of the future, suggesting that these small islands should still be viewed as a model for the eventual ousting of colonial thought and influence. He reiterates the messages and poetics of Senior's untethered, West Indian critical thought in *Crystal Rain*, *Ragamuffin* and *Sly Mongoose*. Buckell's works represent the futurity of the Caribbean and its contribution to the longevity of human existence. Grounding acts as a connecting mechanism between the contexts of the two writers, where double consciousness as defined by Jessica Langer is exhibited: the past and the potentiality of the future are heavily linked (Langer, qtd. in DeGraw 42). The application of grung poetics to Senior's work results in insightful conclusions on how coloniality could be mitigated in future contexts and how Caribbean people enable the dominance of their presence long term.

In the *Xenowealth* novels, Buckell enacts a similar tactic to counter-memory through his revision of the "first contact" trope. The outsider protagonist entering a new world is a common plotline in science fiction stories, particularly utopian and dystopian configurations or planetary explorations, where man leaves Earth in search of new knowledge. This certainly privileges the perspective of the discoverer in a way parallel to the conquest of Western civilization. In his novels, Buckell inverts this approach and uncovers the reality that the notion of "discovery", alleged by ancient discoverers such as Columbus, is a falsity when groups of people existed in the Americas long before their arrival. In other words, history did not begin with the colonizers. The dominant narratives in Buckell's stories, like Senior's, belong to the marginalized peoples such as the African, Arawakan, and Kalinago descendants. This repositioned angle paints the alien figure not as naïve, barbaric, uncivilized nomads but as powerful, extraterrestial creatures called the Satrapy and "teotl",[2] who announce themselves as gods. These colonizers, worshipped by some and demonized by others, represent the potential perpetuity of coloniality.

Civilizations will perpetually fight for economic power and political dominance, but while Europe was able to historically tout its perceived benevolence because it controlled the narrative, the Satrapy struggles to promote the propaganda. The several retaliating factions, including the Ragamuffins, as well as the heroic old fathers and the reinforced legends about them, become oral records of history that dominate the knowledge of the Nanagadans enabling their decolonization process. This evolution is reminiscent of the anticolonial spirit which dominated

philosophical thought in the Caribbean during the 1930s, opening the possibilities of localized, decolonial schools of thought.

Buckell's *Crystal Rain* bears the same subversive subtext as Senior's "Meditation on Yellow". Michael Bucknor highlights and explains this sense of insurrectionism in "Sounding Off" through the use of the "cuss poem". This is a "dramatic monologue" to "throw wud" in response to a deleted, official history; a necessary subversive component of "Afro-Caribbean rituals of revolt" including "witty, crafty anancy-esque" oration with the purpose of rebelling "against hegemonic discourse" (Bucknor 55, 68). Bucknor notes that this strategy is necessary for the survival of Caribbean descendants, as it enables them to preserve traditions to counter the damaging effects of colonialism. Although *Crystal Rain*'s deuteragonist Pepper, a black, Rasta man from the Caribbean, and a secondary character, Oaxyctl, who is an Azteca native from the other side of the planet, believe that they are in enmity with each other, they exemplify the same griot function of telling the stories which are most important to Caribbean communities. Like Senior's ancestral wisdom, where she puts her ear to the ground to tell her wud, Pepper leans on his memory retention to speak the truth and Oaxyctl on the internal compass he develops. The variety in methods to discover the truth exhibit Mignolo's "pluriversalism" or Bernabe's "mosaic" approaches to Caribbean epistemology, instead of the egocentric or universalist approaches that dominate Westernization and keep the colonized stifled within the coloniality of power matrix.

Both characters are necessarily from the margins and occupy a foreign planetary environment but use what I call "magic words" to "cuss out" the colonizer, a right their peoples were deprived of in the past. Ironically, the monarchic figures in the novel are the "loa" derived from the Haitian religious pantheon and the "teotl". Historically, these figures are relegated, marginalized spaces in terms of epistemology. Buckell situates them in positions of influence to demonstrate the pernicious effects of colonial mechanism, regardless of who is in charge. As a result, Pepper responds to their usurpation in several ways. First, in *Sly Mongoose*, he challenges the prevailing narrative of reverence for masquerading teotl by asking the natives to think through their loyalty to their beliefs. He deems them "annoyingly superstitious" (127) and admonishes them to realize that what they believe they see does not necessarily make it real (128), effectively undermining the religious chokehold used by the Satrapy. Additionally, he remembers a past of lost narratives in a way similar to Senior's persona in "Meditation on Yellow". Paralleling the trauma of the transatlantic slave trade, Pepper and his friend John, who liberated the Nanagadans from Earth on a Garveyan-themed spaceship, experience PTSD:

> They had also expected it would be a decades-long journey back from the destroyed wormholes in tiny, barely functioning vehicles that they'd hardened to survive the pulse. But things went wrong, and instead of decades, they saw centuries. They both had the modifications, and the pods the recycling equipment, needed to hunker down for that kind of time, though. It had almost driven Pepper mad. Apparently, John suffered as well.
>
> *(Crystal Rain 227)*

John's experience was so crippling that he erases his memory. Pepper, on the other hand, bears the weight of "a far more ancient load" (307). Still, his recollection of the painful past is necessary to help John rediscover himself so that they can escape Nanagada on the advanced technological vessel called the *Ma Wi Jung*. Just as Pepper's memory provided escape to the future, the West Indian African descendants must look to ancestral wisdom and understand the alternative knowledges passed down over generations in order to understand themselves, navigate the future, and dismantle coloniality. On the other hand, Oaxyctl's journey leads him down an

existential path where he questions what he believes to the extent that he comes face to face with his "god" and boldly begins lopping it to pieces to reconcile his own epistemological outlook and as an act of protest against his abuser. Likewise, the Global South must deconstruct and examine taught perceptions about themselves and their beliefs (book truth) and discover innate ontological means to effectively decolonize society (ground truth).

Grounding is evident in Buckell's allusion to the resilience and survival instinct of West Indians. On Chilo, a planet made of volcanic rock, the descendants of the American Indians build their own civilization among "hurricane like winds" and "hundreds of years of sulphuric rain" (*Sly Mongoose* 11). The symbol of the hurricane transmits to a futuristic context to evoke the tenacity of the peoples to withstand natural disaster and to use it to their advantage. On this planet, Timas and other boys from his Central American-inspired city of Yatapek must sustain their livelihoods by mining valuable rock on the dangerous surface of the planet. Like the Caribbean, the atmosphere was tremendously hot with heat that could kill, at 800 degrees such that "the horizon constantly rippled" (12). The Arawakan and African ancestors were forced by plantation slavery to work the land and survive the sun; the skills they obtained were passed on to the ethnographers of the rural Caribbean. Buckell suggests that these skills are further transferrable to the distant future, where descendants of the Caribbean can manipulate the land for survival under inconvenient conditions.

Buckell's decision to construct a steampunk Caribbean reality carries significance on numerous levels. The retrograde technology which characterizes the subgenre necessitates a return to the land. There is a reflective, local dependency on connection with and utility of the land and environment. The Wicked Highs, a mountain range introduced at the beginning of the novel, is the perfect terrain for the Mongoose men and Aztecas to do guerrilla warfare and marronage, two significant resistant tactics frequently employed by the region's Indigenous peoples to survive European invasions. These skills and Indigenous knowledges are also manifested in the knowledge of the seasons, which determine the immediate backdrop of the novel from the beginning. So connected are the locals to the land that as they await the predicted rainy season, it "tugged their joints. It made them feel older, creakier, and yet thankful life was about to return" (1). Life from the water cycle to Earth yielded the crops that made the "plain porridge" and "rice-n-pea" that the Brungstunners in Nanagada depend on for survival (9, 13). Importantly, though, John has lost his memory and knowledge of who he is; his instinct guides him back to the land and the sea. He settles in the northern village as a fisherman and though he hopes that his son will be a banker he recognizes the value in teaching Jerome how to manage the Lucita on the ocean as part of a livelihood (16).

Just as grounding connects Jerome and John in the tradition of navigating the water, it connects the West Indian battalion of Ragamuffins in the skies. The preservation of Jamaican creolized code in names like "Magadog" for spaceships and "Don" as an honorable title for a captain is among the keenest strategies for decoloniality in a Caribbean context. The Ragamuffins, who resemble Rastafarians, equally advocate an antiestablishment position in the war against the Satrapy, and their shared language sustains their connection via lamina. Like their Rastafarian models, the Ragamuffins hold groundations, which they dub in creole a "grounation", which is derived from the term grounding. As Senior points out, Rastafarians hold these meetings for days and nights as reasonings (15.30). In order to win the war, the Ragamuffins see the need to ground themselves in their philosophies and their communal outlook on the world. Similarly, the fundamental method to undermining coloniality in a Caribbean context is to engage in introspection and collective affirmation to establish truth.

According to Kamau Brathwaite, the anti-colonial period of the 1900s preceded an era of authentic Caribbean art where "natively conscious poets and singers" were self-taught (371).

This reflexiveness appears in every facet of Caribbean knowledge, intelligence, and imagination. Like Prime Minister Dihana in *Crystal Rain*, descendants must continue to "scour the city and the lands for insight into their past and the past's technologies", digging up masterful tools and handbooks, treasures, and secrets, as Olive Senior defines it (34). A commitment to grounding will surely yield results, whether it be in retelling the past or concretizing the future.

## Notes

1 Sairsingh describes the work of Jamaican proto-speculative fiction writer Erna Brodber as "representations of African belief systems that inhabit Afro-Caribbean philosophical inheritance, evince the spiritual world as the most important realm of existence" and "infuses the physical, material, social and individual worlds" (32).
2 The term *teotl* is a Nahuatl (Aztecan) word that translates to mean god in English.

## Works Cited

Bernabé, Jean, et al. *In Praise of Creoleness*. Gallimard, 1997.

Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. "The Love Axe (I): Developing a Caribbean Aesthetic 1962–1974." *Caribbean Cultural Thought: From Plantation to Diaspora*, edited by Yanique Hume and Aaron Kamugisha, Ian Randle Publishers, 2013, pp. 354–376.

Buckell, Tobias. *Crystal Rain*. Kindle, Tor, 2006.

———. *Ragamuffin*. Kindle, Tor, 2007.

———. *Sly Mongoose*. Kindle, Tor, 2008.

Bucknor, Michael. "Sounding Off: Performing Ritual Revolt in Olive Senior's 'Meditation on Yellow.'" *Mosaic:An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2009, pp. 55–71.

———. "Olive Senior: 'Grung'/ground(ed) Poetics: 'The Voice from the Bottom of the Well." *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, edited by Michael Bucknor and Alison Donnell, Routledge, 2011, pp. 85–92.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought*. Routledge, 2015.

DeGraw, Sharon. "Tobias Buckell's Galactic Caribbean Future." *Extrapolation*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2015, pp. 41–61.

Dillon, Grace. "Indigenous Scientific Literacies in Nalo Hopkinson's Ceremonial Worlds." *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, edited by Rob Latham, Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 470–487.

Edmondson, Belinda. "Race, Tradition, and the Construction of the Caribbean Aesthetic." *New Literary History*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1994, pp. 109–120.

Grosfoguel, Ramon. "Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality." *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso Hispanic World*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–38.

Hernandez, Ari, et al. "Implications for Our Future: An Interview with Tobias Buckell." *Moko: Caribbean Arts and Letters*, WordPress, Nov. 2018, mokomagazine.org/wordpress/implications-for-our-future-an-interview-with-tobias-buckell. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.

Hopkinson, Nalo, and Alondra Nelson. "Making the Impossible Possible: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson." *Social Text*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2002, pp. 97–113.

Lord, Karen. *New Worlds, Old Ways*. Peepal Tree Press, 2016.

Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2007, pp. 240–270. Taylor & Francis Online, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548.

Mignolo, Walter D. "DELINKING: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2-3, 2007, pp. 449–514. Canadian Research Knowledge Network. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647. Accessed 18 Aug. 2020.

Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth. "Women Against the Grain: The Pitfalls of Theorising Caribbean Women's Writing." *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of the Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars*, edited by Adele S. Newson and Linda Strong-Leek, Peter Lang, 1998, pp. 161–168.

Pollard, Velma. "An Introduction to the Poetry and Fiction of Olive Senior." *Callaloo*, vol. 1, no. 36, 1988, pp. 540–545.

Prabhu, Anjali. "Interrogating Hybridity: Subaltern Agency and Totality in Postcolonial Theory." *Diacritics*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2005, pp. 76–92.

Sairsingh, Marie. "Erna Brodber's Myal Principle in Afro-Caribbean Literary/PhilosophicalDiscourse." *CLA Journal*, vol. 61, no. 1–2, 2017, pp. 31–44.

Senior, Olive. *Gardening in the Tropics.* Insomniac Press, 2005.

Whitlinger, Claire. "From Countermemory to Collective Memory: Acknowledging the 'Mississippi Burning' Murders." *Sociological Forum*, vol. 30, no. S1, 2015, pp. 648–670.

Writers Trust of Canada. "2019 Margaret Laurence Lecture with Olive Senior." *YouTube*, lectures from Canadian writers by Writers Trust of Canada, 21 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsAcNy2H88A&ab_channel=WritersTrustofCanada. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Afterword: 'Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the "Demonic Ground" of Caliban's Woman'." *Out of the Kumbla Caribbean and Literature*, edited by Carol Boyce-Davies and Elain Savory-Fido, African World Press, 1990, pp. 355–370.

# 23

# RECURSIVE ORIGINS AND DISTRIBUTED COGNITIVE ASSEMBLAGES IN ANTHONY JOSEPH'S *THE AFRICAN ORIGINS OF UFOS*

## Liam Wilby

In a personal exploration of origins and identity, poet Dionne Brand describes an imaginary "Door of No Return", a threshold through which Caribbean people's ancestors were forcibly transported by way of the Middle Passages:

> Having no name to call on was having no past; having no past pointed to the fissure between the past and the present. That fissure represented the Door of No Return: that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old World for the New.
>
> *(5)*

Passing through the Door of No Return denies Caribbean people a site of origin—what Martinican poet and critic Édouard Glissant terms a "cultural hinterland" (103). Writing that "too much has been made of origins", Brand produces a cartography of her identity by tracing its movement through her experiences, encounters, imaginings, and writings (69). In this process, Brand locates origins in the absence of origins: "The journey," she writes, "is the destination" (203).

For Glissant, one primary task of the Caribbean artist is to creatively explore and produce what counts as history for communities that came together following the fissure between past and present described by Brand. Colonial discourses posited the concept of a "single History," an empirical and linear line of development from an originary moment of genesis to the present (Glissant 66). Caribbean people, however, "came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces", a phenomenon which denies them even the pretense of a historical "continuum" (Glissant 62). The passage through the Door of No Return denies Caribbean people a history, producing an "eras[ure] of the collective memory" that Glissant describes as the experience of "nonhistory" (62). In this context, Caribbean writers may produce a "*prophetic vision of the past*" (Glissant 64, emphasis in original), a creative reconstruction of history.

Anthony Joseph's science fiction novel *The African Origins of UFOs* (2008) is just such a reconstruction of origins and history. Joseph was inspired to write *African Origins* by the story of Daaga, an African slave conscripted into the British West Indian Army stationed in Trinidad,

who in 1837 set fire to his barracks and "set off to walk back to Africa" (Ramey xvi). Imagining that Daaga and his people fled Trinidad in a spaceship, Joseph describes "their journey as a metaphor for black people trying to find their roots" (Joseph, qtd. in Ramey xvi). This search is not a backwards journey towards a point of singular origin. Rather, the novel depicts the experiences of a Trinidadian community across various generations in the past, present, and future; these are histories which function as the processes behind the emergence of what Glissant terms a "collective consciousness" (Glissant 62–63). *African Origins* opens in the year 3054 on a distant planet named Kunu Supia, to which a largely Trinidadian community has fled following the flooding of its island home. The novel takes place in this future, as well as in present-day Trinidad and in a mythological past Ïerè—the Meso-Indian name for Trinidad. The novel's structure is recursive. Beginning in the future, the novel moves through a section set in the present to one set in the past. Joseph then iterates this process eight times to produce a novel of 24 sections, made up of eight sets of three distinct chapters, each set in one of the three space-time locations. The recursive structure of the text precludes the possibility that Daaga's search for roots will be a return to the site of an originary beginning. As with Brand's *Door of No Return*, Joseph locates the origins of this Black community within nonlinear processes. The novel's narrative frame determines its recursive structure. In the opening section set on Kunu Supia, an unnamed narrator takes the contraband drug "Ceboletta X", which is "known to cause genetic flashbacks" (8). *African Origins* is subsequently "spun from fragments of genetic memory" (34); it is constituted by a web of Caribbean cultural practices occurring in the future, present, and past—all of which are memories that Joseph imagines are embedded within the narrator's body.[1] Significantly, the imagination of futures, as well as representations of the present and the past, is employed to liberate a Black Caribbean community from its experience of nonhistory.

Through its projection of a Black Caribbean community into the future, *African Origins* is in many ways an Afrofuturist text, imagining—but also importantly making possible—alternative Black futures. I am invoking Afrofuturism here as described by Ingrid LaFleur as "a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens" (cited in Womack 9). Afrofuturist works are not solely forward-looking, but rather also aim to disrupt the coloniality of the present and past through the projection of Black cultures into the future, producing what Kodwo Eshun has termed a "counterfuture" which "returns to preprogramme the present" (290). In other words, Afrofuturists understand that the past and present are not fixed but are instead open to transformation, in part through their feedback loop relationship with the future. The recursive chronology of *African Origins* explicitly reveals this relationship, as lived histories in the past, present, and future interact to mutually transform each other. Through this process, Joseph contributes to the construction of alternative futures. The "single History" of human development that is posited within colonial discourses, as outlined by Glissant, constricts possibilities for the future by rendering blackness as the antithesis of futurity, which is coded as a domain for white Western cultures and people alone. Joseph's representation of the transgenerational memories of a Caribbean community, however, depicts the emergence of a *decolonized* collective consciousness that opens the future to further possibility. Such a consciousness, constructed through Black cultural practices in the past, present, and future, is thus the lens through which alternative futures can be manifested. In his depiction of nonlinear origins and the emergence of a collective consciousness, Joseph draws not only on the insights of Caribbean artists, but also on contemporary cognitive science, in particular the experience of consciousness as an emergent phenomenon that arises through cognitive processes.[2] Joseph's text reflects on cognition both through its recursive structure and its content, particularly its representation of the narrator's ancestors' embodied and embedded lived histories. I shall expand on these two points in turn.

The recursivity of *African Origins*—the eight iterations of movement from future to present to mythological past—is analogous to the cognitive model first outlined by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (1980). Autopoiesis—self (auto) and creation (poiesis)—describes the self-referential organization of the mind constituted by a network of feedback loops. The mind has a multi-scalar structure; it is a system consisting of subsystems. Cognition is constituted by the networked interaction, described as the "global coherence", of these locally acting autopoietic systems (Varela et al. 88). As Thompson indicates, this is a relational model of cognition: "part and whole are completely interdependent: an emergent whole is produced by a continuous interaction of its parts, but these parts cannot be characterized independently from the whole" (391). I regard the recursive structure of *African Origins* as a literary representation of autopoiesis as the recursive, feedback-loop structure of the mind. Indeed, in her introduction to the novel, Lauri Ramey describes the text's organization as "systems within systems", a "network of parts rather than a vertical progression of events and actions" (xv, xiv). The flashbacks to the narrator's ancestral memories produce a network of fragments, which, like the subsystems of the autopoietic mind, "global[ly] cohere". Analogous to the mind, the novel is a larger system constituted by subsystems. As I will show, however, Joseph is interested not in a single mind, but in a cognitive system that is distributed throughout a transgenerational community.

Within the individual memories that constitute the components of *African Origins*'s networked structure, the novel enters into dialogue with theses of the embodied mind and, in particular, N. Katherine Hayles's concept of cognitive assemblages which function as distributed systems (*Unthought* 1–5). Hayles argues that "higher consciousness"[3] is not the totality of cognition, as it has assumed to be within the Western humanist tradition, but rather cognition is "enhanc[ed] and support[ed]" by "the ways in which the embodied subject is embedded and immersed in environments that function as distributed cognitive systems" (*Unthought* 2). Consciousness is thus an emergent phenomenon; a process that is conditional on the embodied subject's entanglement with its environment. I argue that the memories which constitute the components of the novel's wider cognitive structure depict histories of embodied and embedded being for an ancestral community: they are memories of distributed cognitive assemblages. These memories from the past, present, and future agglutinate within the novel's multi-scalar structure to represent the processual origins for the transgenerational community's emergent collective consciousness.

This chapter outlines Joseph's engagement with both cognitive science and a multitude of Caribbean—as well as wider Black diasporic—practices and knowledges in order to depict the emergence of a decolonized collective consciousness. Emerging through the networked interaction of cultural practices of a community across multiple space-time locations, this transgenerational consciousness is not essentialized but rather perpetually open to transformation. The novel challenges the colonial implementation of linear histories, subsequently opening pathways to multiple alternative futures.

## Performance as Distributed Cognitive Assemblages

Throughout *African Origins*, Joseph represents various performances: ecstatic scenes of dance and music on Kunu Supia; a Trinidadian Carnival, or mas festival; and scenes of ritual possession in Ïerè. These performances are quintessential examples of the representation of cultural practices as distributed cognitive assemblages, events from the past, present, and future that interact

within the novel's recursive chronology to function as the nonlinear processes behind the emergence of a decolonized collective consciousness. The novel's section depicting a mas festival exemplifies Joseph's idiosyncratic poetic prose:

> we comin' down! blowin' conch shell an' singing, anointing our bodies with liquid light like blue we blue, we red, we black, magenta, silver striped, satyr tailed—scars of white paint. powder smoke billow from sailor mas, calabash green, wild island gold. but some colours cannot be deciphered by the bare hearing eye. and the sound: brass wrestles wounds through asphalt, steelband jammin' like they bound to make a body make a body leap arcs of abandon, take days to come down. drums like cathedrals tumbling. hi-hats reeling sparks like cutlass lashing de road – hot so hot even thumb tacks moan. … we as dense as wet gravel down henry, george and charlotte street, all the way down to the jetty in a cast surging kaleidoscope of blazing fire mas.
>
> *(46–47)*

In Joseph's fragmented prose, the "we" described here is open and fluid, as boundaries blur in the chaotic presentation of movement, music, and color. As the performance unfolds, the text depicts the fluctuating entanglements of mas performance, presenting the dynamism of the scene in terms reminiscent of the formation of an assemblage: "configurations" that "are always in transition, constantly adding and dropping components and rearranging connections" (Hayles, *Unthought* 2). This assemblage is not only a configuration of humans, but also includes the "conch shell", the "brass", the nebulous "liquid light", the "steelband drums", and the "hi-hats". The drums in particular inform the ecstatic movement of "abandon" and in turn become agents in the formation of an embodied assemblage, captured in the repetition of "make a body make a body", suggesting the configuration of a body of people and things. In *The Embodied Mind*, Varela and his cowriters Thompson and Eleanor Rosch write that cognition is "embodied action and so inextricably tied to histories that are lived" (213). Embodied actions are the lived histories through which cognitive structures emerge, structures that are not isolated to the singular subject but are instead distributed throughout emergent and embodied cognitive assemblages. In "Extending", Joseph depicts the embodied actions of the Carnival performers as a distributed assemblage in which various elements of the environment become prosthetic to the body. This assemblage is referred to in the image of the Carnival performance as "a vast and surging kaleidoscope of blazing fire mas". Akin both to a cognitive system and the novel as a whole, a kaleidoscope has a fractal structure, a multi-scalar network of colours within colours.

By presenting Trinidadian mas functioning as a cognitive system, Joseph highlights the decolonial potential of such cultural performance. The legacy of colonial rule in Trinidad is evident during the mas, which travels down "henry, george, and charlotte street", spaces bearing colonial names. This official cartography imposes symbolic routes as the names of British royalty indicate identities to be aspired to. The performance, however, is an expression of alternative routes: "the drummer knock claves and the horns leggo bop and the whole band ketch a vaps and start churn a revel rhythm/congas run amok like footsteps of runaway slaves" (Joseph 49). Through the sound of the drums and horns that lead to movement likened to that of escaped slaves, Joseph invokes the legacy of the Maroons in the Caribbean. Maroon communities consisted of escaped slaves and were locales for the survival of culture through a process that Sylvia Wynter describes as the "*indigenization*" of West African cultures into the new island landscape:

There they [Maroon communities] retained African traditions, customs, folklore; later their settlement served as a place of escape for slaves from the plantations. Linking them together, across time and distance, was the Drum from Africa, and the Abeng or Horn, both of which were means of communication.

*(36; emphasis in original)*

The mas performance in *African Origins* adopts the language of the drums and horns, which produce a "revel rhythm", a description which highlights these instruments as means of communicating across both time and space, connecting the Carnival participants to their ancestors in the past, present, and future. As Wynter notes, "rhythm" is itself an expression of a univocal force present from the onset of creation and which is called upon and inhabited during performance:

RHYTHM is the universal life force. On donning the mask the dancer enters into this force, the god possesses him, and in a modern Jamaican cult term informed with the same meaning, the dancer "*delivers*" himself by patterning the steps of the god, or ancestral spirit.

*(38, emphases in original)*

The mas in *African Origins* recalls the spiritual history of these performances: "while our gods sleep we steal their masks and exhale completely … pump biscuit tins slack with rhythm … blowin' conch shell an' singing" (Joseph 46).[4] Masquerade during the Carnival assists participants' attempts to inhabit this force of rhythm, connecting them to ancestral spirits and to the deities, who are also called upon by the blowing of the conch shell (see Harvey). The simile of "drums like cathedral tumbling" gestures to the decolonial potency of such performance, rendered as a challenge to the imposition of the European colonizer's Christian religion. Through the drums and horns as a means of communication across time and also between the human and spirit realms, the ancestors and deities become components of the assemblage. In the context of the imposition of colonial religion and culture, this assemblage facilitates the emergence of an alternative transgenerational collective consciousness which configures within the immanent force of rhythm.

This emergent collective consciousness, constructed through Carnival performance, is depicted as forging a pathway to alternative futures. Scenes of performance in present-day Trinidad occur synchronously with those in the future, with the effect that the imagination of futures also becomes integral to the novel's construction of the community's history:

That naked island funk was steady lickin' hips with polyrhythmic thunderclaps! Does the Berta butt boogie? Do bump hips? Flip'n spin'n bop'n finger pop'n/subaquantum bass lines pumping pure people-riddim funk like snake rubber twisting in aluminium bucket, reverberating 'round the frolic house with a heavy heartbeat, causing black to buck and shiver—
   wooeee! wooeee!—
   The very groove caused coons to stumble loose and slide on Saturnalian pomade until their conks collapsed. The sound possessed more swing than bachelor galvanised in hurricane, more sting than jab-jab whip, more bone than gravedigger boots and more soul than African trumpet bone. It was pure emotive speed that once improvised harmolodic funk to Buddy Bolden's punk jazz on the banks of Lake Pontchartrain, double bass still reverberating through space-time like long lost Afronauts on orbiting saxophones. And the solid sound did shook Spiritual Baptist shacks with rhythm, till the Sankey hymns they sung became cryptic mantras that slide like secrets through water.

*(Joseph 4)*

Joseph presents music and dance as a connective force running throughout the African diaspora. The "pure emotive speed" and "punk jazz" of Kunu Supia reverberates "through space-time like long lost Afronauts on orbiting saxophones", from Buddy Bolden and the origins of jazz to the intergalactic diaspora on Kunu Supia. The description of bodies moving to "poly-rhythmic thunderclaps!" indicates the performers' engagement with the life force of rhythm, which connects this community to their ancestors and to the deities. As with the mas performance, decolonial resistance is embedded in this performance. The description of the scene's rhythm as "thunderclaps" suggests that the performance calls upon Shango, the god of thunder in the Orisha religion. In his cosmology, Shango was once a human who in death was raised to the pantheon of deities to become one who "challenged the omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence of the gods", subsequently becoming an emblem for the challenge of authority (Tidjani-Serpos 8). With Shango called upon in the jazz bar on Kunu Supia, the deity himself becomes a constituent of the scene's assemblage and ultimately empowers the dancers to challenge colonial legacies: "the solid sound did shook Spiritual Baptist shacks with rhythm, till the Sankey hymns they sung became cryptic mantras that slide like secrets through water" (4). The rhythm of the performance recalls the "drums like cathedral tumbling" (47) of mas through its shaking of "Spiritual Baptist shacks" (4). Rhythm as a universal force of life, a concept descended from West African religions, shakes the foundations of Spiritual Baptism. Subsequently, "Sankey hymns"—Christian revivalist songs from the nineteenth century—are transformed through transgressive mimicry into "cryptic mantras that slide like secrets through water". Clinton Hutton explains that, through mimicry, slaves "perform[ed] the ontological transcript designed and written for Blackness by Whiteness as a cover or mask for … its own sovereign script, its own freedom-making enterprise" (129). Such a "philosophy of praxis" (Hutton 130) enables the defiant survival of African cultures which "slide like secrets through water" to be present in the Caribbean following the Middle Passage. As this praxis of mimicry is enacted in *African Origins*, however, Joseph also reverses the journey so that the secrets travel backwards from a future on Kunu Supia. As such, the decolonial power of the performance, that which is provided by Shango, travels multi-directionally through time to empower the community in the past, present and future. It represents a counterfuture, akin to Eshun's terms described earlier, which returns to decolonize the present and the past.

The decolonial power of performance in *African Origins* is particularly invoked through the act of drumming. Drumming was banned in the Caribbean for its role in producing slave solidarity. As Wynter notes, the "proscription of the drum came about when it was realized that the drum rhythms were part of unifying force of revolts" (36). The drumming of Maroon communities represents one form of resistance to such prohibition. A further transgression is depicted in one of the novel's sections set in the past, in which Joseph describes a possession ceremony. Entitled "The 'doption," the section refers to a practice whereby the voice is used to replace the rhythm of the drum.[5] Joseph describes a performance during which a practitioner named Sister Verso is possessed by one of the deities: "And with a voice that whistled like slivers of dried flesh on a branch she began to relay multiple pages of transcendent jazz—the metaphysics of another world" (120). Through the use of doption, the ceremony communicates with the spirit world as Sister Verso becomes possessed. She inhabits rhythm, becoming able to speak "the metaphysics of another world". This metaphysics of "transcendent jazz" forms a connective line running from this ceremonial possession to an imagined future and the jazz performance on Kunu Supia.

The language of "another world" spoken by Sister Verso is an alternative metaphysics to that posited within the hegemonic colonial culture imposed within the Caribbean—a framework through which decolonized Black futures can be manifested. Jamaican poet Kei Miller refers to

the prohibition on drumming as a "banning of blackness". People were forced to abandon the "language of the drums" for "the civilised language of English, or French, or Spanish, or the language of violins and pianos" (Miller). Such an education reifies tenets of white Western culture, resulting in a colonisation of the mind: "[o]n some deep level across the Caribbean, we still believe that African religions are backward. We still believe that even though we're not white—not all of us—we can at least act white" (Miller). In this context, the language of the drums that enables communication across the African diaspora is a powerful imprecation against the imposition of whiteness. The drums facilitate the emergence of a Black identity, forging a connective history that exists despite the violent rupture of the journey through the Door of No Return and making possible alternative futures constructed through Black, rather than solely white cultures. In one Kunu Supia section, Joseph describes a group named the "post-earth negroes" who reject the term Black, claiming that "**black** as a concept of being was only ever relevant on Earth and even then it was suspected as the mindset of a con that pat afros down and kept negroes terra bound to suffer" (Joseph 37–38; bold in original). Yet, these post-Earthers disconnect themselves not from an imposed identity but from their ancestors: "Their ears would ring with trans-genetic texts and they wouldn't understand it. Drums would tumble with insecret textures and they wouldn't understand it" (Joseph 38). The "post-earth" group loses its ability to understand the language of the drums, becoming illiterate to the transgenerational communication within *African Origins*. Such communication, facilitated by the novel's multiple "trans-genetic texts", informs an emergent Black consciousness that develops within the novel's recursive chronology.

## Becoming with the Landscape

As well as the ecstatic scenes of performance in *African Origins*, more quotidian moments from the narrator's ancestral memories also constitute processes behind the emergence of a collective consciousness, through which possible alternative futures can be manifested.

> arrive in the early evening. Red dusk shimmers in the /trees/light sparks mosaics of diamond. Climb down dirt into the village and the dogs begin to bark tantie selma at her kitchen window. when she sees me sends her laughter travelling first. then she comes, wiping her hands in her dress/brisk, her slipper slapping. *embrace her/her full body.*
> *(Joseph 9, emphasis in original)*

A brief moment depicting a person arriving in a village is presented through fragments of perceptions: the shimmer of "Red dusk" in the tree; the laughter of tantie (aunt) selma; her embrace; the way she wipes her hands on her dress; the slap of her slipper; and the bark of the dogs. All of which cohere like the present "light" as a shining mosaic of sense perception. Joseph foregrounds sense perception to register an intersubjective embodiment that arises through affective connection. The extension of the body through affect forms what Lisa Blackman terms "immaterial bodies" that do not end at the skin:

> Haptic, or affective, communication draws attention to what passes between bodies, which can be felt but perhaps not easily articulated. The more non-visual, haptic dimensions of the lived body distribute the idea of the lived body beyond the singular psychological subject to a more intersubjective and intercorporeal sense of embodiment.
> *(12)*

Embodiment is both distributed and processual, informed by affective communication. The narrator's memories in *African Origins* tell of sensuous moments in which bodies are entangled in webs of affective communication. Joseph imagines the narrator's body containing the ancestral genetic memory of these assemblages; they are the "roots" of the transgenerational community, found not within a singular location but within non-conscious, embodied processes which emerge through situated and ongoing lived histories of trans-corporeal embodiment.

Through imagining the Black Caribbean community on Kunu Supia, Joseph uses memory recollection as a means of tracking the histories through which alternative futures become manifest. Significantly, the act of recollection is presented as not isolated within the mind but is itself tied to sense perception. A descendent of tantie selma returns on Kunu Supia when Miss Selma's "black cake", a rum-infused cake common in Trinidad, is described as being able to "make people ketch genetic backslap" (Joseph 57). Eating the cake generates ancestral memory, which is a phenomenon that extends beyond the individual mind and which emerges through sensuous engagements with an external world, in this case the culturally significant black cake. Here, Joseph's depiction of memory resonates with that of Glissant, as explained by Michael Dash: "Glissant … observes that it is not the rational mind that restores the past, but that the past resides in material objects that only release their hidden meanings when encountered imaginatively or sensuously" (xix–xlv). In *African Origins*, the cognitive process of memory is generated through eating the culturally specific food—black cake—an act of revealing the past through "backslap".

*African Origins* also depicts intimate co-becomings between members of the ancestral community and the landscape of Trinidad. The colonial notion of a singular history is disrupted, for the becoming of the novel's ancestral community is contingent on immanent entanglements and, as such, cannot be scripted in advance. The novel's "Caura" section, named after the Caura River in Trinidad, provides potent examples of the entanglement of body and land: "a swami seems to meditate in the splash of the surg. he lies supplicated on the wet sand and wrings his beard—undulating wave of white muslin—lets his body roll with the late morning tide" (Joseph 76). There is a spiraling interaction between the landscape and the swami, whose beard is an undulating "wave" and whose body moves "with the late morning tide". In their theory of the embodied mind, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch produce the concept of "enaction", which describes how cognition emerges through the interplay between a living system's perceptual capacities and its neurological organization as its body moves through an environment with which it is intimately coproduced. Neither mind nor the external world can be said to preexist a mutually constitutive lived history of "structural coupling":

> We propose the name enactive to emphasize the growing conviction that cognition is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs.
>
> *(Varela et al. 10)*

Both the mind and the world are considered "groundless" in the sense that they do not preexist their entanglement, but are instead coproduced by a history of structural coupling (Varela et al. 130). Joseph ties memory to such entanglements with the landscape. Just as the swami's embodied actions merge with the sea, throughout the novel, water is imbued with knowledge and memory: "And when the river speaks I listen. Deep runs the history of this river through

this floating island. Space exists where we thought mattered. The earth is indeed hollow, not solid as we thought" (Joseph 20). The river remembers a lived history of structural coupling, a history not solely present within a human mind but that emerges through relations with the landscape itself.

The river is not just a mnemonic device that a human subject uses to recall its personal history. In a neo-materialist vein, the river itself is imbued with agency. It speaks its history to which the authorial voice is present—it listens—but the human does not dominate the interaction. The river remembers a history of its mutual enfolding with the novel's ancestral community, out of which various materialities unfold. Neither human nor environment preexists a history of structural couplings. Referring to the world as "hollow, not solid as we thought", Joseph articulates the concept of enaction, which defines the world as groundless. There is no primordial ground on which to stake the origins of a world or a mind. Both are mutually enacted and therefore "hollow". It is the interacting space between landscape and subject which in fact comes to matter: "space exists where we thought mattered". What constitutes history for the community represented in *African Origins* is precisely the embodied entanglement with the Caribbean landscape, which is an integral element of the emerging collective consciousness.

The final passage of "Caura" captures a constellation of memory, landscape, and creative expression, through which Joseph self-referentially indicates the importance of art to the construction of a shared history in the Caribbean, as well as the possibility of constructing alternative futures:

> the coast may break for rocks and reeds but the bay flows from horizon to horizon. the sea pulls the sand open and then shut, reveals the stems of seagulls polished to pearl by atlantic dust. blue water. coconut husks and seashells, drift dried crisp in salt, brittle skulls of molluscs that crush powder underfoot, luminescent jellyfish veils. seablast shivers the trees—a gust in the ear—and the sun … the bay is as wide as memory.
>
> *(Joseph 81)*

The vitality of the landscape, the sea's waxing and waning as it "pulls the sand open and then shut", provokes an image of the island's breathing, its lungs pulled open and then closed by the sea. The "seablast" that "shivers the trees" becomes like a breath which blows over the land. In this image of the breath of landscape, Joseph self-reflexively refers to the role of the Caribbean artist in the emergence of a collective consciousness. Within the novel, the narrator's genetic memories are described as being housed within a "secret under*lung*" (Joseph 37; emphasis added). This reference to memories housed within a lung suggests that each lived history remembered in the novel is like a sustaining breath for the community. Creative memory sustains life for the Caribbean, but it is a creativity which, through the image of the island's breathing, is entangled with the landscape and is possible only through the "creative energy of a dialectic reestablished between nature and culture in the Caribbean" (Glissant 64–65). In the metaphor of the bay as memory, opened and closed by the wash of the sea, Joseph highlights how Caribbean history is embedded in the landscape, a history which can be accessed through creative expressions: life-sustaining breaths from an underlung of collective memory.

## Conclusion: Memories as Panspermic Dust

*African Origins*'s final section depicts the events which inspired the novel—Daaga's liberation from slavery by escaping the Caribbean in a spaceship:

Long time people used to call dem flying sauces. UFO an' space ship. Dey didn't know then 'bout panspermic dust. Dey never get genetic flashback. Or spend nine night on de mourning ground. But now we know different, how plenty time them object appear in de sky, was just Daaga and those he led, lost in space, drifting from place to place, still trying to find where they come from.

*(Joseph 137)*

Joseph refers to the theory of the origin of life on Earth known as Panspermia, which centers on the idea "that interstellar dust is rife with prokaryotic spores that could have seeded an early earth" (McNichol 259). That is, life on earth was generated from dust that came from space. In *African Origins*, it is Daaga, who, traveling through space, disperses panspermic dust. In Joseph's rendering of panspermia, these particles are the memories of embodied and embedded histories, distributed cognitive assemblages which are remembered in the novel as "genetic flashbacks" of the past, present, and future. Daaga's once-captor fears the man's escape for "anywhere he plant that melocyte seed blacknuss sure to spread" (Joseph 136). The image of Daaga sowing the seed of "blacknuss" on a journey described as a search for his roots is an apt ending to a novel that refuses the possibility of singular origins. The ancestral memories within *African Origins* are the seeds of an emerging Black consciousness, a consciousness that liberates the community from an imposed nonhistory and makes possible alternative Black futures that are not prescribed in advance, but rather emerge through ongoing histories from the past, present, and future.

## Notes

1 The conceit of genetic memory enables Joseph's imagination of the narrator's body as a storehouse for ancestral memories. Despite memories being described as "genetic", these ancestors are not restricted to biological family.

2 N. Katherine Hayles describes emergence as "the idea that the system will beget something that has not been previously planned" (*How We Became Posthuman* 11). Consciousness is therefore not the totality of cognition, but rather one emergent product of the processes within a cognitive system.

3 Higher consciousness "refers to thoughts and capabilities … such as rationality, the ability to formulate and manipulate abstract concepts, linguistic competencies, and so on" (Hayles, *Unthought* 2).

4 For the spiritual origins of mas, see Francis.

5 Frances Henry explains doption:

> Worshippers make a special kind of sound called "doption", from the English "adopt". Instead of using the drum, which was prohibited, the Baptists developed a special sound, sometimes likened to a grunt, made with the tongue in the back of the throat. These drum sounds create several different rhythms. "Doption" can be used to accompany someone speaking or sermonizing, or it is interspersed in a person's own speech when praying out loud or testifying.
>
> *(38–39)*

## Works Cited

Blackman, Lisa. *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation*. SAGE, 2012.

Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Vintage Canada, 2001.

Dash, J. Michael. "Introduction." *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, translated by J. Michael Dash, U of Virginia P, 1996, pp. xi–xlv.

Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 287–302.

Francis, Kela Nnarka. "The Spirituality of Carnival: Using Yoruba Cosmology to Read the Dragon Can't Dance." *International Journal of Art and Art History*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2015, pp. 63–82.

Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, translated by J. Michael Dash, U of P Virginia, 1996.

Harvey, Marcus L. "From the Sacred Sound of the Conch Shell to the Cemetery Dance: Reimagining an Africana Festival Created in a Southern Appalachian City." *Religions*, vol. 8, 2017, pp. 1–30.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. U of Chicago P, 1999.

———. *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Unconscious*. U of Chicago P, 2017.

Henry, Frances. *Reclaiming African Religions in Trinidad: The Socio-Political Legitimation of the Orisha and Spiritual Baptist Faiths*. U of West India P, 2003.

Hutton, Clinton. "The Creative Ethos of the African Diaspora: Performance Aesthetics and the Fight for Freedom and Identity." *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 1/2, 2007, pp. 127–149.

Joseph, Anthony. *The African Origins of UFOs*. Salt Publishing, 2006.

McNichol, Jesse. "Primordial Soup, Fool's Gold, and Spontaneous Generation: A Brief Introduction to the Theory, History, and Philosophy of the Search for the Origin of Life." *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2008, pp. 255–361.

Miller, Kei. *The Banning of the Drums; or "How to Be a Good Nigger in Jamaica" | Under the Saltire Flag*. 13 July 2013, https://underthesaltireflag.com/2014/07/13/the-banning-of-the-drums-or-how-to-be-a-good-nigger-in-jamaica/. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.

Ramey, Lauri. "Introduction." *The African Origins of UFOs*, Salt Publishing, 2006, pp. xi–xx.

Thompson, Evan. "Life and Mind: From Autopoiesis to Neurophenomenology. A Tribute to Francisco Varela." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 3, 2004, pp. 381–398.

Tidjani-Serpos, Noureini. "The Postcolonial Condition: The Archeology of African Knowledge: From the Feat of Ogun and Sango to the Postcolonial Creativity of Obatala." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1996, pp. 3–18.

Varela, Francisco J., Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. MIT Press, 1991.

Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2013.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards an Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process." *Jamaica Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1970, pp. 34–48.

# 24

# ALEJANDRO MORALES'S *THE RAG DOLL PLAGUES*

## Chican@/Latinx Futurism—Between Intra-History and Utopia

### *Daniel Schreiner*

Being outside the Chicano mainstream, the Californian writer and scholar Alejandro Morales (b. 1944) addresses a variety of themes and eras in his prose. He implements techniques of intra-history and biographical metafiction in his engaged storytelling, throwing light on the untold lives of the Mexican American workers and their impact on the origin and evolution of wealth in the United States. Going beyond the narration of literary social research, Morales also recurrently maps the landscapes of dystopian and utopian futurisms in his novels. His highly educated interest in the fine arts and the history of medicine has a deep influence on the literary figuration of his prose. In this regard, Morales is especially interested in the horrible influences of diseases and viral outbreaks on societies. Considering the high death rates of Latinos and Black Americans during the recent coronavirus crisis, Morales's complete work has an uncanny foresight. This chapter focuses on his novel *The Rag Doll Plague* from 1992. Standing in the tradition of Voltaire's *Candide ou l'Optimisme* (1759) and Albert Camus's *La Peste* (1947), Morales creates a harrowing panorama of once and future outbreaks of deadly plagues which are reshaping borders and cultures into a "Hetero-Utopia".

Next to *The Captain of All These Men of Death* from 2008, *The Rag Doll Plague* is Morales's most significant prosaic engagement with the social impact that pandemics are having on minorities and people living in precarious conditions within a society. *The Captain of All These Men of Death* is a work of fiction inspired by the author's family history following the life of Morales's late uncle Roberto Contreras in the mists of World War II. While Contreras undergoes medical examination for enlisting to fight, he learns about his tuberculosis infections. Instead of being send to the Pacific Theater or Europe like his four older brothers, the young man finds himself locked up in a depressing and eerie sanatorium, Olive View. Within the walls of that uncanny place, Roberto gets involved with the local patient's newspaper, *The Point*, which is part of occupational therapy for long-term convalescents. The paper also functions on a second narrative level, which Morales uses to recapture major turning points in the medical history of epidemic control. But Olive View is much more than a sanatorium: it also serves as an unofficial prison for politically undesirable persons like the union worker Sandro Díez. After fellow patients start disappearing, Roberto starts an investigation of even more unsolved mysteries lingering in the hospital. A former colleague of the Nazi doctor Josef Mengele, the French Dr. Demore, is undertaking confidential experiments and surgeries on animals and Black Americans in a remote tract of the compound. Although it becomes clear that the medical

system is taking advantage of underprivileged groups to come up with a safe therapy for white people, Roberto agrees to undergo Dr. Demore's treatment and recovers from his tuberculosis. Although the novel is set in the 1940s, it also can be read within Catherine S. Ramírez's framework of Latin@futurism:

> Like African Americans, Chicanos have been barred from Western definitions of the human and denigrated as, to use Paul Gilroy's term, "infrahuman" (Gilroy). They, too, have been excluded from and objectified by discourses of science. And they are also generally associated more with a primitive and racialized past than with the technologically enhanced future. Yet, new technologies have transformed Chicanos just as much as they have transformed African Americans, and they have enabled us to articulate (to enunciate and link) past, present, and future identities.
>
> *("Deus" 157)*

Morales's *The Captain of All These Men of Death* is a prosaic phenomenon I want to call "Past Chican@futurism". His intra-historic and futuristic writing speculates about the continued exploitation of Mexican American people by a dominant group over the centuries. Being an inmate of Olive View, Roberto Contreras and other Mexican American "patients" have to defend their identity and freedom against the white reproduction of the colonial regime and suppression within the settings of the supposedly technologically advanced therapeutic system. Hence, I want to read *The Captain of All These Men of Death* as the futuristic sequel to *The Rag Doll Plagues*. In both novels either the Spanish or the Anglo-American formations of dominance react to the outbreak of infectious diseases based on their racist presumptions about the suppressed marginalized group, which itself is fighting not only for survival but also for its right of cultural and political self-determination.[1]

While *The Captain of All These Men of Death* is a typical example of Alejandro Morales's approach to narrating the intra-history of ordinary people, *The Rag Doll Plagues* can be read as the author's most experimental novel in form and content. Morales presents the idea of a heterotopic California and multicultural society beyond the dominant WASP culture of the twentieth century. The term heterotopia, a composition from the Greek word hetero/different and the Latin word topos/place, refers in the tradition of Michel Foucault's discourse analysis to places and concepts far from the "normal" dominant expectation (Foucault). In his essay "Dynamic Identities in Heterotopia", Morales points out his understanding of Foucault's approach:

> Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia explains the border culture experienced daily in the urban zone between Santa Barbara, California, and Tijuana, Mexico. We live in a time and space in which borders, both literal and figurative, exist everywhere. Borders made of concrete, asphalt, aluminum, barbwire, and water, which mark the dividing line of one community in relation to another and mark the demographic, racial, ethnic, economic, and political separation of people, are the physical borders of heterotopia. Metaphorical borders are symbolized by the divisions and limits of culture, language, food, traditions, influence, and power. Psychological borders are manifested in metaphors of fear, desire, love and hatred.
>
> *(23)*

The novel consists of three separate books which are thematically interwoven with each other, since the protagonists of later storylines are studying the memoirs of their relatives, having been the center of the earlier narrative settings. In addition to this, the main protagonists are also

literary imaginations of the writer's ancestors and descendants within his playful concept of metafiction (see Frank). With regards to the works of Linda Hutcheon, *The Rag Doll Plagues* can be understood as a narcissistic narrative which hides the introspection of the text within the unconscious (see Hutcheon). This covert form of metafiction informs the reader about its fictional origin, without declaring it openly: In *The Rag Doll Plagues*, the recurring versions of the chronicler Gregory Revueltas deconstruct the illusion of narrated reality.

While working on *The Brick People*, Morales attended a lecture by the medical historian John J. Tepaske at the University of California in Irvine. Morales, intrigued by illness since his youth, was fascinated by Tepaske's nightmarish portrayal of pandemic outbreaks in colonial Mexico (see Lanning). In my interview, the author explained that his main protagonist in *The Brick People*, the factory worker Octavio Revueltas, kept dragging him into Mexico's past, so that he had to interrupt the process of writing and focus on the new project.[2] Hence, Sonja Georgi points out that *The Rag Doll Plagues* is a dystopian development of the realistically styled social criticism presented in *The Brick People*. Georgi furthermore argues that both novels question mainstream narrations of globalization and ethnicity:

> While in *The Brick People* Morales traces the historical causality between slavery-like working conditions of workers on Mexican haciendas in the nineteenth century and the social and economic exclusion of Mexican laborers in the United States in the early twentieth century, in a postmodern manner *The Rag Doll Plagues* juxtaposes not only two historical periods but extends the narrative to the future, thus establishing causality between the living circumstances of Mexican, Mexican Americans, and white Americans in the past, the present, and the future. … While *The Brick People* already establishes a causality between colonialism and capitalism in America, book three of *The Rag Doll Plagues* continues the logic of globalization to arrive at a hyper-capitalist and hyper-technological NAFTA-like confederation comprising Canada, the United States, and Mexico, and in which Mexicans from Mexico City are, as they were in *The Brick People*, commodified and viewed as resource by mainstream society. Further, *The Rag Doll Plagues* extends the concept of heterotopia as it combines narratives set in the past and in the future, thus creating further causality between colonialism, globalization, and information technology.
>
> *(225)*

The main protagonist and authorial narrator of the first book of the *Rag Doll Plagues* is the Spanish physician Gregorio Revueltas, who is sent in 1788 to the royal palace of the Viceroy Juan Vicente des Guemes Pacheco de Padilla (1740–1799) in Mexico City. Revueltas relates the impressions of his journey, of his inner struggles and his professional consideration of the ongoing plague, *La Mona*, which has befallen the colony. On his way from Veracruz to Mexico City he perceives the natives as soulless savages and impersonates colonial superiority. Nonetheless, Revueltas is impressed by the natives' ability to survive in the jungle. As the director of the royal Protomedicato, Revueltas is supposed to get *La Mona* under control, since the pandemic is also causing political unrest threatening the order of the empire. In Mexico City, the disfigured priest Father Jude becomes Revueltas's aide, a specialist in the native's traditions of healing. The city is in a catastrophic state: feces, garbage, and corpses are tossed onto the streets and the waters. Revueltas hence arranges strict hygiene regulations (see Vasquez-Gómez). As soon as possible he also starts to experiment with amputations to save the lives of people. In this regard it can be said that Morales's horrendous and explicit descriptions bring back the morbid lucidness of Gottfried Benn's poetry (see Benn) and anticipate the dreadful realism of Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (see Bolaño). The improvements of living conditions and the cooperation with the native

population is a turning point in the fight against the flesh-eating *La Mona* and marks the symbolic merging of the good doctor with Mexico. Due to Revueltas's engagement with the natives, the population is becoming interested in the prospects of the country. The outlook of survival creates possible futures and lays the foundation for the longing of independency. Three years after his arrival, Revueltas breaks off his engagement with his fiancée in Spain and decides to stay in Mexico. The doctor's decision is exemplary for the permanent transition of the country and its inhabitants: The *mestizaje* people rise out of the ashes of the colonial empire.

The narrator of the second book, *Delhi*—the name refers to a barrio in Santa Ana, California—is the medic Gregory Revueltas, which is also the name of the last-born son of Octavio Revueltas, the main protagonist in the novel *The Brick People*. The plot of *Delhi* is set in the 1970s and takes place in Orange County. Gregory is a successful doctor and is married to the Jewish actress Sandra Spears. Alongside his career, Gregory is working on a kind of family memoir which also includes historic events like the death of General Franco and the evacuation of Saigon. His great-grandson will study this recollection in the third book of *The Rag Doll Plagues* in order to find inspiration for his quest to find a cure for the pandemic of his time. In the first 11 uneventful chapters of *Delhi*, Gregory accounts for the daily life of his family. Then suddenly, his wife falls ill with the bleeding disorder hemophilia. During an emergency blood transfusion, Sandra is also infected with HIV, which weakens her immune system. In the following chapters, Sandra is exposed to stigmatization by her colleagues who are afraid of this new disease. Since no doctor in Orange County can help, Sandra and Gregory follow the advice of age-old Doña Rosina, a *curandera* in the Mexican barrio of Santa Ana. She sends the couple to Mexico to find a cure. In a hidden library in Mexico City, Gregory finally comes across the memoirs of Gregorio Revueltas and learns about his insights of shamanic healing traditions as a therapy against *La Mona*. In order to help his wife, Gregory takes her to the historic area Tepoztecatl, the ancient Aztec Mexico City, to get the assistance of local *curanderas*. Although the *curanderas* are unable to cure Sandra, they at least can stabilize her condition and conduct a mystical ceremony by summoning the healing power of *Coatlicue*. Sandra's course of disease and her way of coping with fear with the help of the spiritual care of the Mexican (American) community can be best comprehended with Gloria Anzaldúa's approach of *Coatlicue* and *conocimiento*. As described in her shamanic manifesto "*let us shift*", these concepts go beyond being an alternative mystical way to acquire knowledge. The state of deconstruction (*Coatlicue*) and transformation (*conocimiento*) are furthermore the core of Anzaldúa's understanding of a futuristic indigenous way of holistic soul healing:

> You can't change the reality, but you can change your attitude towards it, your interpretation of it. If you can't get rid of your disease, you must learn to live with it. As your perception shifts, your emotions shift—you gain a new understanding of your negative feelings. By seeing your symptoms not as signs of sickness and disintegration but as signals of growth, you're able to rise from depression's slow suicide. By using these feelings as tools or grist for the mill, you move through fear, anxiety, anger, and blast into another reality. But transforming habitual feelings is the hardest thing you've ever attempted.
>
> *(552)*

The ceremony of *Coatlicue* eases Sandra's pain and lets her make peace with her destiny, and she can overcome her "Shadow Beast", to quote again a term of the late Gloria Anzaldúa. Back in the United States, Sandra spends her final weeks in the care of the local barrio population who, unlike her Anglo-American colleagues, don't stigmatize her for being sick with AIDS.

The plot of the last book, *LAMEX*, is set in the year 2030. Although the borders between the United States, Canada, and Mexico have disappeared and the superstate "Triple Alliance"[3] has been founded, society is still hieratically divided by race and income. Twelve years before Catherine S. Ramírez was pinning down her concept of Chicanafuturism for the first time, the *Rag Doll Plagues* is one of the earliest speculative Mexican American novels discussing colonial aspects in a science fiction setting.

In *The Rag Doll Plagues*, the greater areas of Los Angeles and Tijuana have grown together and become the gigantic conglomerate LAMEX. While the Mexican (American) population lives in the poor areas called Lower Life Existence, the rich white citizens settle in luxurious complexes in Baja California. Most Lower Life Existence settlements, including former cities like Chula Vista, have been built around old prison facilities and provide homes to the systemically criminalized outcast of society. The dystopian world is also riddled by natural and climate catastrophes and pandemics. After decades of pollution of the Pacific Ocean floor/seabed, a toxic garbage lifeform has evolved and finds its way to the mainland, where it causes a deadly plague within the population. The toxic sea garbage is not the only entity coming to new life; Morales also imagines the possibility of AI developing out of saved human data. The auctorial narrator of *LAMEX* is again a medic by the name Gregory Revueltas, who is the grandson of the earlier Gregory in the book *Delhi*. Since the memory of his grandfather was digitalized, Gregory is even capable of communicating with the essence/computer ghost of his ancestor, who discusses medical considerations with him. Morales points out his fantasy in our interview:

> Computers are memory banks that will accumulate information on individuals. Computers will have millions and millions and millions of details of who you are, what you are, what your body is, what your DNA is, data on your health, how you think, everything! Eventually, computers will not be able to store and securely handle big data clusters that will eventually energize, mutate, break free in search of larger, more powerful computer systems. In *The Rag Doll Plagues* these computer ghosts—a new form of being—are able to travel through time and space and have an impact on the lives of human beings.
>
> *(Schreiner 182)*

It can be stated that Morales claims his own form of spirituality, which is stimulated by Mexican folklore, and a playful approach towards the further evolution of technology. In this regard, Morales also understands the appearing ghost of Toypurina Rio in his novel in *River of Angels* as an energy lifeform from the far future. Morales explains that his ideas are inspired by the theories of Jean Gebser:

> The story is based on a theory by a man named Jean Gebser. He wrote this book *The Ever-Present Origin*. … He says that mankind has gone through the evolution of human consciousness; it has gone through particular different structures. The first structure is the archaic, the second structure is the magical, the third the mystical and the mental is sort of the rational. And we are right now at the verge of the integral. The integrated consciousness. … So much for Gebser's theory. So what I wrote about it, is that the brain has all its different structures and memories which are housed somewhere in the brain. And when they are active, different things can occur at the surface and become more active. People have images coming from different parts of the structure. Talking about the archaic structure, this was the first structure ever developed back then when mankind walked for the first time on earth. … All of these images are possibly housed in your brain

depending on your DNA history. If your ancestors have been from Africa, you might have memory from an archaic person from there who has passed on his memory up to you.[4]

Gregory Revueltas is the director of the Lamex Health Corridor and hence responsible for the containment of new outbreaks. He is supported by the medic Gabi Chung, who is voluntarily participating in a cyborg program, which modifies and enhances her body into some kind of lab-robot. Gregory also finds inspiration in the Revueltas family library, which includes the research on HIV that his grandfather had conducted decades earlier. The LAMEX region is frequently exposed to deadly scourges, but Revueltas is lucky and finds a cure. Since he is a geneticist, he learns that the DNA of Mexicans has been enhanced over the last few decades due to the harsh and unbearable environment of the superslum, Mexico City. The local conditions for living and surviving had caused a higher evolutionary pressure than in the former U.S. American areas inhabited by people of Anglo-European heritage. Revueltas starts experimenting with a serum and develops a therapy: Mexicans are asked and paid for moving into the white areas and get hired as professional blood donors. It is a special turn in Morales's utopia that Mexican migrants, who had been disdained and exploited by Anglo-American society for over a century, suddenly become respected saviors (who nevertheless are now utilized for their appreciated blood). Marc Priewe understands the blood narrative as follows: "in *The Rag Doll Plagues* the conflation of biopolitics and the power/knowledge grid is represented as a discursive and material practice for the constitution of post/national bodies in the past, present and future" (124). We can find a similar but much darker and dystopian version of this plot in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*. This novel is set in a postapocalyptic Canada where so-called Recruiters hunt down Native Canadians to ingest their ability to dream. That being said, we witness a more positive outcome in *The Rag Doll Plagues*. Gregory Revueltas cognizes the Mexicans' godsend to the world in a larger historic context:

> I was alone, more than ever before. I had discovered a biological change that occurs once in a millennium. This knowledge threw me into an abyss of loneliness, emptiness. The renegade blood of Mexicans who for almost two and a half centuries lived under the surmising eye of the United States, had now given the world an unbelievable gift. … For thousands of years, on authorities' terms, whether by a high Aztec priest or a United States or Mexican president, Mexicans have offered their blood to the world and to the sun only to be exploited and manipulated. Mexican blood paid the price: human sacrifice, physical or psychological. The Mexicans suffered the abuse, but because of their extreme spiritual strength, they have survived like the delicate butterfly or hummingbird or like the repugnant insects of the earth.
>
> *(Morales, Rag 181)*

*The Rag Doll Plagues* exposes the prominent theme in Morales's work in a very distinct way: The author ties technology with spirituality and creates his own *mestizaje of motifs*,[5] which recalls the omnifariousness of the Mexican American heritage. Without mentioning the term explicitly, Morales recreates the narration of the *raza cosmica*[6] who, like Christ, saves the world through its suffering. In this doctrine of salvation, Revueltas is an important link.

As a Chicano whose family had settled in the United States long before his birth, he is connecting the spiritual-mystical world of his ancestors with the fully technological—but "blood-less"—Anglo-American society. In Morales's book, the melting of cultures and the rise of a heterotopian community become the solution for a planet in essential crisis. By doing so, Morales challenges the usual white mainstream presentation of Black and Native people and

Chican@s as being unconnected with "science, technology, signifiers of civilization, rationality, and progress" (Ramírez, "Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism" 188). Bound, however, to a realist perspective on society and history, Morales also presents the ongoing negative side effects of the cultural melting process: The embracing/welcoming of the Mexican (American) people follows a capitalistic logic and happens due to the market's demand for life-saving blood. In spite of all future upvaluation, the Mexican (wo)(men) hence still continue to be the objects of Anglo-American demand.

## Online Interview with Alejandro Morales (10 December 2020)

*Daniel*
*Schreiner*
*(DS):*     Five years ago, when we met for the first time to discuss your books, you already had forecasted the outbreaks of new plagues in the future. Now we are in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. What did you think was the true magnitude of the outbreak? Did you imagine it would be like this?

*Alejandro*
*Morales*
*(AM):*     No, but I have read and written about tuberculosis in The Captain of All These Men of Death and a horrific unknown pathogen in The Rag Doll Plagues that spread quickly in 18th-century Mexico City. And, of course, I researched the "Spanish flu" worldwide pandemic of 1918. In addition, I lived during the time of several epidemics such as tuberculosis, polio, HIV/AIDS, the threat of Ebola, and experiencing flu season yearly. I wrote about plagues based on what I read of ancient civilizations practically annihilated by diseases brought by the great migrations of Europeans to the New World during the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries. I certainly was aware of the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 that killed approximately 50 million; some estimates go as high as 100 million worldwide. I wrote about this pandemic in my current project A Rainbow of Color, a biographical novel based on the lives of my in-laws Stewart and Helen Teaze, who worked as expats in Japan for about 25 years. Helen's brothers participated in World War I and returned from Europe in ships with soldiers sick with the Spanish flu. In my novel The Captain of All These Men of Death I wrote about how tuberculosis impacted the Chicano/Latino community in Los Angeles during the 1940s and 1950s. The book is based on the life of my uncle Roberto Contreras, who suffered from TB and spent from 1944 to 1949 as a patient at Olive View tuberculosis sanatorium in Sylmar, California. Moreover, along with Roberto's struggle to survive TB are interwoven major episodes of the history of tuberculosis.

*DS:*     Did you foresee also that large numbers of citizens would doubt science and the official warnings about COVID? How do you explain people's opposition to wearing masks or following rules which would help to stop the spread of the virus?

*AM:*     When I first heard of COVID-19, it was still in China. At that time, I didn't think it would be as deadly and widespread as it became. I started to pay attention when Trump began to avoid the science and announce his misguided responses to the virus. From the first signs that COVID-19 was present in the United States, the president should have declared a national mandate to practice six-feet distancing, wear a mask,

wash your hands to slow the virus from spreading. Instead he took a cavalier attitude, telling his steadfast followers that the virus would go away in a few months and mocked those who wore masks. As the virus took its course, infecting and killing exponentially more people, Trump's statements became increasingly erratic and unsubstantiated. Eventually he swept the science away.

At large political rallies, shoulder to shoulder, unmasked Trumpers waited for hours to hear Trump state emphatically "It's a hoax!" "It will miraculously disappear, soon it will be down to zero". "We have tested the most of any country". The strategy to zealously reiterate outrageous falsehoods created false truths in the minds of Trump devotees. Mesmerized, his faithful believers easily began to doubt and defy the science, ignore official warnings and rules, and live a life in skeptical and scornful bliss. As the infections mounted and Trump's diatribes multiplied and grew louder, his devotees became more resistant to the scientists' warnings and suggestions to wear masks, distance six feet, wash hands, avoid crowds, etc.

*DS:*    In the DST, the Disrupted States of Trumperica, we can witness that story and certain narratives create new realities. Facts and science seem to become relative. Due to the immense influence of social media it is more important than ever what people believe are the actual facts. What are your thoughts as an author on that twisted relationship between fiction and reality?

*AM:*    As you know, one of my writing mottos is "If you read my books like works of history you are reading fiction; if you read my books like works of fiction, you are reading history". Social media strategy allows a space for radical, hateful statements to attack and demean science and make Trump's false rhetoric believable. Trump applied the same method to attack and debase Mexicans, Central Americans, African Americans, and Muslims to stop or deport or make them socially unacceptable in Trump's America. This practice is known as eliminationist ideology.

*DS:*    Are you aware of the situation in Mexico? What would your characters Don Juan Vicente de Guemes or Dr. Gregory witness there today? What is the main difference between the Mexicans and the Americans in their reaction towards the pandemic?

*AM:*    Mexico mirrors the COVID-19 response in the north. Their medical system has been overwhelmed. In the cities there's not enough supplies for doctors and nurses. Hospitals don't have needed beds to treat the critically ill. There is not enough testing. Not enough medicine to treat the critically ill. The Mexican population is split; some don't trust what President Lopez Obrador says, others support him.

*DS:*    Statistics show that Mexican Americans and the black community are suffering the most during the pandemic. It seems that COVID reveals each and every country's injustices and structural weakness. How are these matters discussed within the communities?

*AM:*    I believe that most constituents of the Latino community throughout the U.S. are responsible. They practice the Fauci COVID-19 protocols. They are concerned about their families; they have to be super-cautious because they find themselves and members of their family in working-class jobs that expose them daily; they suffer from preexisting health conditions; experience crowded living conditions of two or more families living in two-bedroom, one-bath apartments, yet other Latinos live as if they have never heard of COVID-19—this kind of behavior has produced lethal results. It's not until a family member or neighbor or friend dies that they start facing

their precarious health circumstances. As Gustavo Arellano wrote in the *L.A. Times*, Latinos in general are aware of the pandemic, but still many practice *pandejo* behavior, a combination of pandemic and *pendejo*, the Mexican Spanish word for blockhead. In the barrios where Mexican, Central American recent immigrants and generations of Latino families live, there is an exchange of personal and community news that travels from grandparents to children. In this way families are informed who is sick, needs with the kids, needs food, a ride to the doctor, who needs a curandera, who needs prayer, etc. In Latino working-class neighborhoods there is a lot of support for one another.

**DS:**    When we met the last time, Donald Trump hadn't been elected president yet. Now after the 2020 elections, we can look back on four years of disruption, lies, and xenophobia. Although Trump was not able to build his wall physically, he erected walls of the mind. In *The Rag Doll Plagues* we can read about your vision about the LAMEX corridor and the browning of America. Is that still going to happen, even since Trumperica won't cease to exist with the start of the Biden presidency? Since you have proven yourself not only to be able to preserve intra-history as an archeologist of the letter, but you also have shown your ability to look into future with your prose: What is the heritage of Trumperica, and what is the future going to look like? Tell us about your outlook on the alternative futurisms lying ahead of us?

**AM:**    Your reference to the browning of America, this will happen, but it will be a much broader natural melding of races and ethnicities that will not depend on who is the president of the United States. Nor will this process of blending and bonding of America be halted by extremism. Many factors such as education, economics, religion, race, and ethnicity, arts, NGOs, social movements, and more will create a space for sincerely caring for your brothers, sisters, in general for one another, will thrive.

Now let me mention other futurisms that will occur. Many are developing now. Geographies, geopolitics that will greatly impact the relationships between Canada, United States, and Mexico; for example, there will be radical changes in the borderlands between these countries. Populations will boom in border cities and in the cities in northern Mexico. Internal migration in Mexico will stimulate the economies in these cities and stimulate internal migration to go to the border cities in the United States–Mexico border. Mexico will become one of the largest economies in the world, attracting international immigration and investment from Asia and the Middle East. Americans will also live in northern Mexico cities. Mexico will allow large self-sustaining colonies that will contribute to the growth of the Mexican economy and will export product to the United States, Canada, and internationally.

Allow me to list a few technologies that will influence the future in these three countries: desalination, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, 3D printing, computer software. Computers will be exponentially better at understanding the world and eventually human beings. Autonomous cars, trucks, trains—the above entities will radically change work, travel, and cities—the construction of new communities, transportation, travel corridors. New technologies will also impact education as we know it today. Medicine and law will change as well. Knowledge will be contained in small computer pods for specialists. Estimations indicate that 50–70 % of current jobs will disappear. Transhumanism, cloning, organ harvesting will be medical procedures that will extend human longevity. The capitalist economy will be greatly challenged by the extremes in wealth and poverty.

*DS:*    Thank you for the interview!

*AM:*    Thank you!

## Notes

1   If we take look beyond the American perspective of Alternative Futurisms, it is interesting to note that we can hardly observe a similar approach within the corpus of Turkish German literature, although the Turkish German community faces comparable structural disadvantages and racism within Germany as, for example, Mexican Americans do in the United States.

2   This sequence was part of my interview with the author (Schreiner), but it was not published in the edited version of *Symbolism*.

3   The Triple Alliance is a reference to the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, which was implemented by the Bush administration in 2005.

4   This sequence was part of my interview with the author (Schreiner), but it was not published in the edited version of *Symbolism* (for further information, see also Gebser).

5   Stefanie Wickstrom and Philip D. Young summarize the current range of the term *Mestizaje* as the following:

> The word does not easily translate to English. A language dictionary will define it as "miscegenation", a term associated with illegitimacy and taboo. Miscegenation refers to race. Mestizaje can be biological or cultural. It can be considered an ideology or a movement, and it has been influential in drawing attention to identity and power in evolving intercultural relations in Latin America. Norms and ideas about racial and cultural mixing throughout the Americas have been constructed and imposed by any different kinds of social, political, legal, religious and economic institutions, among others.
>
> *(6)*

6   The term *La raza cósmica* refers to the race concept of the Mexican writer and intellectual thinker of the Mexican revolution José Vasconcelos (1882–1952), who drew an alternative draft in opposition to the biological and cultural ideology of purity of other racial theorists in the early twentieth century (see Stavan).

## Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria E. "Now Let Us Shift … The Path of Conocimiento … Inner Work, Public Arts." *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, edited by Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, Routledge, 2002, pp. 540–578.

Benn, Gottfried. *Sämtliche Gedichte*. Klett-Cotta, 2019.

Bolaño, Roberto. *2666*. Editorial Anagrama, 2004.

Camus, Albert. *La Peste*. Librairie Éditions Gallimard, 1947.

Dimaline, Cherie. *The Marrow Thieves*. Cormorant Books. 2017.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Vintage, 1971.

Frank, Dirk. *Narrative Gedankenspiele. Der metafiktionale Roman zwischen Modernismus und Postmodernismus*. Deutscher Universitätsverlag, 2001.

Gebser, Jean. *Ursprung und Gegenwart. Die Fundamente der aperspektivistischen Welt*. Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1949.

Georgi, Sonja. *Bodies and/as Technology*. Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011.

Gilroy, Paul. Against Race Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line. Belknap/Harvard UP, 2000.

Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metaficitonal Paradox*. Wilfried Laurier UP, 1980.

Lanning, John Tate. *The Royal Protomedicato—The Regulation of the Medical Professions in the Spanish Empire*, edited by John J. Tepaske, Duke UP, 1985.

Morales, Alejandro. *The Brick People*. Arte Público Press, 1988.

———. *The Captain of All These Men of Death*. Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 2008.

———. "Dynamic Identities in Heterotopia." *Alejandro Morales: Fiction Past, Present, Future Perfect*, edited by Jose Antonio Gurpegui Palacios, Bilingual Review Press, 1996, pp. 14–28.

———. *The Rag Doll Plagues*. Arte Público Press, 1992.

———. *River of Angels*. Arte Público Press, 2012.

Priewe, Marc. *Writing Transit: Refiguring National Imaginaries in Chicana/o Narratives*. Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007.

Ramírez, Catherine S. "Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism: Fictive Kin." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2008, pp. 185–194.

———. "Deus ex Machina: Tradition, Technology, and the Chicanafuturist Art of Marion C. Martinez." *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Jennifer A. González et al., Duke UP, 2019, pp. 146–164.

Schreiner, Daniel. "The Once and Future Chicano—World Literatures between Intra-History and Utopian Vision." *Symbolism: An International Annual of Critical Aesthetics*, vol. 17, 2017, pp. 171–184.

Stavan, Ilan. *José Vasconcelos: The Prophet of Race*. Rutgers UP, 2011.

Vasquez-Gómez, Juana. *Dictionary of Mexican Rulers, 1325–1997*. Greenwood, 1997.

Voltaire. *Candide ou l'Optimisme*. Reclams Universal-Bibliothek, 1986.

Wickstrom, Stefanie and Philip D. Young. "Introduction." *Mestizaje and Globalization: Transformations of Identity and* Power, edited by Stefanie Wickstrom and Philip D. Young, U of Arizona P, 2014, pp. 3–19.

# 25

# PROSTHETIC VISIONS, BODILY HORRORS, AND DECOLONIAL OPTIONS IN *MADRE*

*Márton Árva*

Imagining alternative futurities entails a twofold process of delinking from the timeline of Eurocentric, bourgeois-capitalist, heteropatriarchal modernity, and, in turn, engaging with the complex narratives of human societies and the nonhuman lifeworld "that hegemonic discourses about the real had previously deemed inexistent" (Escobar 4). In political praxis and social organizing, such resurgences and reconceptualizations from the perspective of Western modernity's "others", or, as Catherine Walsh has put it, the struggle "*against* the colonial matrix of power in all of its dimensions, and *for* the possibilities of an otherwise" (17, emphasis in original), have been ongoing for more than 500 years. Gaining a renewed worldwide impetus in the last couple of decades, these emergent social movements counter what Walter D. Mignolo calls the modern imperialist project's "global linear thinking", and (re)claim violently discarded local historical trajectories, venturing to (re)build pluriversal worlds which are not forced into one single, "universal" teleology (*The Darker Side*).

However, when it comes to cinematic expressions of futurity, the powerful imaginary of modern timelines still seems overwhelming. Frederic Jameson famously pointed to science fiction's ultimate inability to dream up radically different futures due to the "systemic, cultural, and ideological closure" (153) resulting from its adherence to the idea of a technology-fueled "progress", and hence to more or less foreseeable changes *within* the capitalist chronology. This seems especially characteristic of mainstream cinematic futurities, which are often "structured by the dominant needs of the interests that create and market them" (Lothian 179). Orienting perceptions toward spectacular visions marked by technological innovation, these moving images tend to emphasize the inevitable control and commodification of lineal time. On the other hand, counterhegemonic impulses within the speculative arts often bring to the fore that the potentiality to disorient unique timelines are already present in the most common lived experiences of the subaltern. Christopher González argues that typical narrative elements of sci-fi, such as being considered "alien" or being treated as a robot-like disposable working body, are "overwhelmingly complementary" (216) with everyday issues of *Latinidad*. Karina A. Vado notes that racialized people are themselves "the embodiment of the forward-looking spirit of speculative fiction" (165), since the multiple histories they carry in the face of systematic oppression attest to an anticipation of different worlds. Moreover, Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B.V. Olguín recall that Latin American and Latinx perspectives are prone to be associated with "a particular cyborgian and oppositional consciousness" that resists normative constraints and

is located in-between cultures ("Introduction" 136). As Taryne Jade Taylor concludes, such "impossibly diverse yet also unified" viewpoints not only allow for a critique of the dominant timeline, but also to "call an alternative future into being" (46).

In this light, I propose to frame the horrific as a mode of cinematic expression that might begin to articulate what Walsh referred to as the "*against*" and the "*for*" of alternative world-making. Resisting the shiny technological futures and disastrous prognoses extrapolated from the capitalist timeline's harsh past and present, horror appears as a tool "to re-represent the seemingly mundane" in a way that highlights the violence of modern epistemologies and state apparatuses that "make carceral, militarist, and exploitative realities seem 'normal'" (Merla-Watson and Olguín, "From the Horrific" 145). More than that, as Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez points out, a subaltern perspective on horror recovers and redefines the monstrous otherness assigned by colonizers since the very first instances of the modern/colonial project, marking those who didn't conform to European standards not only as lacking history, but consequently, also as futureless. As such, it may be mobilized as a means "to reread and rewrite a colonial past and to formulate a hybrid future" (Eljaiek-Rodríguez 8). This way, the horrific may not only disrupt a universalizing understanding of chronology, but can also revalue modes of feeling, knowing, and being that emerge from interactions and interconnections negated by coloniality. In sum, it can express an affinity with Arturo Escobar's recognition that "another possible is possible" (1–12).

This chapter nuances the aforementioned claims through the case study of *Madre* (2016), an independent horror film produced in Chile and directed by Aaron Burns, a child of Venezuelan and Afro-American parents. *Madre* narrates the vicissitudes of a white-criolla pregnant woman who finds herself simultaneously imperiled by the patriarchal norms of neoliberal Chile and the revolt of an alliance of its subjugated "others", Filipino household workers and a child with autism spectrum disorder. The film directly engages with questions of futurity through an explicit concern with epistemic, ideological, and bodily reproduction. It traces the establishment of a "conflictive coexistence" (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* xxvii) between the chronology of hegemonic life narratives and alternative temporal threads rising from the underside of the "colonial divide". Although the film follows an attempt to bring this fundamental antagonism or ambivalence to terms through "cyborgian" collaborations with intelligent machines, this fails painfully. Hence, the film's subversive speculative potential lies in its insistence on a horrific "plurality that sometimes cannot be synthesized" (Eljaiek-Rodríguez 15), unequivocally resisting universalizing perspectives or normative formations of futurity. In what follows, I will show that this plurality is present not only in *Madre*'s discourse on forms of social reproduction, but also in its relationship to the horror genre, its linguistic and epistemic hierarchies, and, ultimately, its visual perspectives.

Building on queer theory, Alexis Lothian poignantly shows how modern imaginaries and ideological-political structures ensure the inevitability of a standardized chronology by means of organizing collective as well as private temporalities. While the dominant articulation of "reproductive futurism" draws a single straight line between past and future following the threads of biological and social reproduction, it designates the symbolic figure of "the Child" as the ultimate point of orientation for anticipatory impulses. Moreover, "chrononormativity" determines the individual "state-recognized life narrative" (from marriage to raising a family and entering the cycle of capitalist production and consumption) that serves this reproductive project best (7–12). Such heteropatriarchal normativity as biopolitical power orients the rhythm of the body politic (and especially white, heterosexual males) toward maximum productivity, and secures that "the production and reproduction of the set of bodies and brains" (Hardt and Negri 365) be entangled with the repetition of past social structures in the future. Furthermore, as Lothian adds, this

ideological formation has also been intertwined with the expansion of the modern/colonial capitalist project, wiping out all nonconforming ways of life, and subjugating those "who are out of step, who cannot keep up—often due to poverty, disability, race, or sexuality" (12).

Strikingly, *Madre* approaches this "chrono-politics" (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 178) from both sides: not only is the portrayal of its family unit reminiscent of "reproductive futurism", but those refusing to follow a "straight" temporal line also form a monstrously queer, nonpatriarchal collective in the film, implementing an alternative path to social reproduction. The opening sequences show the harsh daily struggles of Diana (Daniela Ramírez), an affluent housewife expecting her second child. Her first son, Martín (Matías Bassi), is about to reach school age, but due to his severe autism spectrum disorder, Diana's hopeless attempts at making him eat, sleep, and clean himself seem like a never-ending battle. While the pregnant woman hardly keeps afloat among daily chores, her husband Tomás (Cristobal Tapia Montt) is a successful businessman in the transnational sphere of commerce, who firmly preserves his position as the head of the household despite the fact that he barely meets his family. "I just want to fix this for you", he comments from his office in Japan when asked to help out, "But what can I do from my iPad?" Intermittently checking in on small screens during his endless business trips, Tomás is in no position to contribute to the labor associated with reproduction, or to even perceive the problems faced by his wife. Yet, his authority to take the most crucial decisions or his focus on the couple's second (unborn) child as an absolute priority is never questioned.

Ironically, it is this *machista* power structure that allows Luz (Aida Jabolin), a quiet Filipina migrant domestic worker in her 50s, to violently unsettle the family's reproductive plans by grounding an alliance among characters stepping out from the intermittent histories of subalternity. Luz is hired by the pregnant woman as a nanny after she miraculously calms Martín down in a supermarket during one of the autistic child's aggressive episodes. By deeply bonding with Martín, maintaining an amazing cleanliness in the house, and also providing for tasty, exotic meals, Luz immediately turns Diana's chaos-ridden life worriless. However, she also introduces significant changes in the household. First, she insists on communicating with Martín exclusively in her mother tongue, Filipino, instead of Spanish. Second, she hires her own son, David (Nicolás Durán), as a gardener, and she alters Martín's medication without the consent of either Diana or Martín's doctors. In other words, she not only brings about an amazing improvement in the child's condition, but also provokes a radical turnaround of existing hierarchies within the family when it comes to "colonial differences" and the access to knowledge.

"Colonial differences" are epistemological arguments about the "lacks" of the colonized (the lack of rationality, the lack of maturity, the lack of culture/history, etc.) that are converted into ontological statements by colonizers in order to justify colonial interventions (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 17–20). Such mechanisms persist to this day despite formal decolonization, silencing notable parts of the population by framing them as unable to speak for themselves (Grosfoguel). These embodied histories constitute the ground for shared experiences of subjugation and subalternization between the autistic Martín and the Filipino domestic workers in *Madre*. As Rhacel Salazar Parreñas explains, a long colonial history and an unfavorable position in the current global economic order has forged an imaginary related to Filipina women according to which they are the "servants of globalization" par excellence, characterized by "a natural affinity for caregiving" (Parreñas 196). Besides, a similar legacy of colonialist gestures can be observed in narratives about autistic people, in which their "healing" by experts is analogous to the religious conversion of the indigenous (Osteen 12–16). Evoking these discourses, the initial scenes of *Madre* suggest that communication is genuinely impossible between mother and child because Martín is "lacking". While the child hits his head against the wall and refuses to eat on

his own, Diana is unwilling to let go of mainstream norms or to renegotiate the terms of their collaboration. Recalling the most common colonial tropes of the conquest and animalization of the "other", she either forces her will upon her son, or treats him as if he was some sort of household pet. For instance, she violently ties the child to the back seat when they go on a drive, and she shakes a cereal box while calling Martín for breakfast. However, Luz's arrival results in a recovery of epistemological means subalternized by Western modernity. Speaking in Filipino, she breaks the rule of the "imperial languages".[1] Introducing directly embodied means of communication (touch and taste), she subverts the primacy of abstraction and written language. Ultimately, coproducing their dialogues from incomplete fragments while they play or draw with Martín, she refuses to rationalize their relationship.

In the wake of this shift, Diana (and the viewers, unless they understand both Spanish and Filipino) starts to share Martín's experience of a fractured and incomplete perception. The eradication of a hegemonic linguistic and cultural standard brings about what Walter D. Mignolo has called "delinking". This entails that the idea about a unique means of sensing and an all-encompassing rational conceptual apparatus—the epistemological foundations of the modern/colonial world order—gives way to "the geo- and body-politics of knowledge and understanding" (Mignolo, "Delinking" 485). In other words, different genealogies of thought and diverse ways of sensing and knowing start to coexist in a nonhierarchical way, all marked by distinct historical backgrounds, geopolitical positions, and embodied experiences. Since Diana can no longer claim to possess the sole valid toolkit to connect to her environment, she needs to recognize other options as well. As a consequence, the "reproductive futurism" that infuses the household is forcibly confronted with the alliance of the autistic Martín and the migrant domestic workers, uncoupled from the privileged timeline, and grounded on nonpatriarchal notions of maternity. Notably, when Diana laments that her child does not speak Spanish, David—who is said to have suffered from autism himself—accuses her of not being a mother, but a selfish "collector, who wants perfect trophies, not children". Hence, rather than the restoration of a "straight" chronology that repeats hegemonic life narratives and social structures, *Madre* incorporates "other" perspectives as well that deviate from "the white supremacist, heteronormative, eugenic ideal" of a desirable future (Lothian 13).

However, being in direct contact both with the sphere of a globalized neoliberal rule (a white heterosexual businessman), and with those who are marginalized by the mainstream normative ideology that celebrates productivity and competitiveness (household workers, immigrants, and people living with disabilities), Diana finds herself at "an intersection between incommensurable (from the perspective of modernity) forms of knowledge" (Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* 85). She attempts to deal with this situation by resorting to intelligent machines. She collects data about her unborn child via fetal visualization techniques, contacts her husband through video calls, and traces Tomás's GPS when, in an attack of jealousy, she wants to locate him. Moreover, the arrival of the Filipino household workers makes it unnecessary for her to leave her home, reducing her experiences of the outside world to her occasional meetings with her friend Catalina (Ignacia Allamand). It is Catalina who recommends installing a translator application onto her smartphone, so that Diana can understand the conversations between her son and the new nanny, taking place in Filipino. Thus, recalling what theorizations of "cyborg" or "posthuman" subjectivities suggest, Diana's technological tools become some sort of sense organs that provide her with information about her immediate surroundings (Haraway 178). The screens around her virtually merge with her organism, which is expressed by the framing techniques and camera movements as well. Namely, although the actors avoid looking directly at the lens during the video calls, they hold and move the camera's body as if it was their phone or tablet, emphasizing their embodied interconnectivity with the machines.

Venturing to go beyond modern hierarchical dualisms such as nature vs. culture, organic vs. engineered, mind vs. body, etc., Donna Haraway famously framed the cyborg as a political subjectivity that finds pleasure in confusing these binaries and in turn affirms "joint kinship with animals and machines" (154). In a similar vein, N. Katherine Hayles asserted that a posthuman subject extends the potentialities of its liberal human counterpart by distributing cognition and control through a "collection of heterogeneous components" (3). Grounded in a sense of intensified interconnectedness between humans and information technologies, these conceptualizations embrace fractured identities and voluntary coalitions, while forging narratives that favor disembodied replication, and other nonorganic means of reproduction. However, even when a speculative impulse nourishes such an imaginatively high-tech approach to reproduction within the Chilean cultural context—as in the case of Eugenia Prado's 1998 feminist experimental novel, *Lóbulo*—it does not necessarily build a world in which essentialist categories of bodily difference, such as gender, race, or ethnicity, are "effectively" destroyed by the posthuman (Brown 75).

The trajectory of Sofía in Prado's novel bears surprising similarities to that of Diana in *Madre*, since each confronts her patriarchal environment through information transmitter devices, and maintains contact with the father of her unborn child through technologically mediated long-distance calls. Prado, a member of the first generation of Chilean artists whose lives have been heavily shaped by cyber-communication technologies, overtly deals with androgynous and cyborg subjectivities in her work. Venturing to "combine multiple voices and to amplify possibilities", she blurs boundaries between "male" and "female" as well as between theater and literature or prose and lyricism (Loebell; Kulawik, "Asediar la literatura" 229).[2] Her third novel, *Lóbulo*, evokes the story of a young middle-class pregnant woman through a "highly hybrid narrative fabric" (Kulawik, "Exploraciones" 743). However, just like Diana, the protagonist of *Lóbulo* also tragically fails in her attempt to escape the constraints of patriarchal regulation through a "cyborg" body, and instead "enters a world mediated by technology where masculine voices are able to affect important alterations in corporeal reactions" (Brown 64). Sofía, the Santiago-based heroine of *Lóbulo*,[3] receives a telephone call from a stranger, which triggers a radical transformation in her mind and body. Shortly after her initial startle, she becomes attracted to the voice and waits for the man to call again—which he does every night—until, eventually, she experiences a series of intimate encounters with him. Oddly, although these latter are genuinely out-of-body intimacies, taking place within the electromagnetic space of telecommunication, the novel suggests that they make Sofía conceive. Nonetheless, rather than experiencing a liberation from the "organic family" through means of technology (Haraway 150–151), she senses the pregnancy as a disturbing bodily reality: the invasion of a serpent biting her intestines. In a similar vein, although Tomás visits his family for brief instances in *Madre*, he is only virtually present in the crucial moments that mark Diana's demise. This is the case when Diana hires Luz, or when she discovers that there is a sinister complot unfolding against her within the walls of her own home. Notably, as Diana finds an insect in her ear, notices that her hair has been cut while she was asleep, and observes unambiguous symptoms of infection on her body, she begins to spy on her son and the Filipino household workers using the translator application. Strikingly, although the algorithm suggests right away that Luz and Martín plan to harm her, Tomás states that such a "cheap application" can hardly be approved as an authentic source of information. Consequently, Diana (and by extension, the viewer) is hesitant to accept the technological interface as a useful means to engage with the environment.

Hence, rather than an effective mediation among multiple perspectives, the use of technological prosthetics brings about an epistemological insecurity in both works, leading to the pregnant women's isolation and victimization in the face of patriarchal manipulations. In

Prado's novel, Sofía's organic body is suggested to dissolve in the wake of her calls with the stranger, and her transformed subjectivity ends up hosting a series of foreign voices. The thoroughly poetic and experimental text never reveals if these voices are products of Sofía's sleepless hallucinations, symptoms of her evolving schizophrenia, or actual experiences that reach into the realm of the fantastic (Hopenhayn). However, when she tries to share her concerns with her mother and her ex-boyfriend, they hesitate to believe her. Likewise, when Tomás refuses to give credit to Diana's perceptions and tells her in a video call to doubt the alarming signs she perceives through the translator app, he perpetuates the traditional patriarchal association of pregnant women's bodily transformations with an allegedly consequent mental instability (Subero 119). More than that, in this scene, Tomás deliberately misleads his wife, making her believe that the female voice she hears comes from the television, while, in fact, it is the voice of Tomás's U.S. American lover with whom he is cheating on Diana.

Ultimately, the liberating promise of "cyborg" or "posthuman" subjectivities are far from being fulfilled in either of the two narratives, as both pregnant women fall back into corrupted, masculinized discursive spaces, in which, rather than conviviality, interactions are characterized by domination and hostility. This is evident in *Lóbulo*'s dispersed ending, which follows three parallel paths, summarized by the author in an interview as the following:

> in one of the three endings, the character, Sofía dies stuffed with papers; in another one, she aims to remove the evil from her inside and cuts her arms in order to erase the harm; and the third is composed by the author's meta-literary interventions.
>
> *(Kulawik, "Asediar la literatura" 233)*

Concerned with Prado's "posthuman" and postmodern undertakings, most readings of the novel highlight the outcome in which Sofía appears to have turned into a printer, and assert that the "child-text that she herself creates and gives birth to at the end of the novel, ironically, is the same novel that we are reading" (Kulawik, "Exploraciones" 755). However, I would emphasize that in all three endings, Sofía aims to escape from her (gendered) body, hoping to ease the suffering caused by her pregnancy, still regulated by patriarchal forces. On the other hand, since Tomás routinely denies Diana's right to speak, discredits her point of view, and erodes her self-esteem in *Madre*, the pregnant woman becomes powerless vis-à-vis the ultimate revolt of her autistic child and the domestic workers. Namely, the film reveals that the ghastly alliance of Luz, David, and Martín has secretly murdered Tomás and Catalina while giving Diana organic hallucinogen drugs. Moreover, the last scenes also show that they capture Diana, open up her belly, and get hold of her unborn child within the framework of a ritual.

In this light, both *Madre* and *Lóbulo* appear to suggest that the only way to break free from the limitations that derive from the pregnant woman's embodied position in a patriarchal society is to destroy that body altogether. In both narrative worlds, the exploration of a nonorganic way of reproduction remains incomplete; thus, affiliations with artificial bodies and intelligent prosthetics seem to be insufficient as means to mediate between multiple histories and subjectivities. This way, the hopes for alternative timelines organized around the "cyborg" or the "posthuman" are dreadfully washed away. If technology is still suggested to be corrupted by the patriarchal neoliberal hegemony and its inescapable reproductive regime, then, in both works, a "refusal to survive" seems to be "the only way to lay claim to a future not owned by someone else" (Lothian 114). Importantly, the consumerist logic that governs Diana's life makes it impossible for her to relate to technology in terms other than commodification. Therefore, she merely uses the prosthetic body part as an object, and she cannot phenomenologically "live" it as a genuine form of human-machine collaboration (Sobchack 210–211). Conversely, Luz's set

of tools and rituals are not conceived as external to society, but as mediating "the formation of intersubjectivities between human, other-than-human, environmental, and historical agents" (Garzón 10), thus, effectively delinking from dominant teleologies of instrumentalization and "progress". Evoking indigenous approaches to technology, her interactions with the world through insects and plants, as well as her beliefs in spells and rituals affirm that the "flux of life gives rise to many reals and different worlds" (Escobar 15).

At the same time, as Diana's "cyborgian" perspective fails to deal with the patriarchal manipulations underpinning Chile's neoliberal democracy and the nonmodern machinations of Luz and her allies, both of these forces appear remarkably horrific. This results in a beguiling ambiguity between the normative and the subversive that characterizes Burns's approach to the horror genre as well. Deeply complicit with the conservative temporal politics and familial structures of "reproductive futurism", Western maternal horror films point to the transforming body of the pregnant woman as "a site of crisis" that needs to be regulated and reintegrated into patriarchy (Arnold 156). What is more, this ideology has also taken root in Latin American cinema's horror traditions, coalescing with a Catholic morality that tends to punish women who refuse to show "selfless devotion to family and children", prescribed by the *mariana* identity (qtd. in Subero 120). Building up a straightforward value system which overtly prioritizes the pregnancy and the autistic son over the well-being of the mother, Burns's film evokes the subgenre that Sarah Arnold calls the "religious pregnancy horror" (180). This kind of narrative recounts the pregnant woman's journey towards the recognition that she must subjugate her needs to those of her children and, ultimately, deliver them to a "higher patriarchal authority", for it is through this willing self-sacrifice that she can gain her (marginal) place within society (Arnold 170). In *Madre*, Diana's victimization as a mother constrained to domesticity who follows her husband's long-distance commands while left alone struggling with all the reproductive labor is evident from the beginning. Moreover, this is further exacerbated by the fact that Luz justifies her interventions into the domestic microcosm by claiming to have consulted with "Don Tomás". Tragically, the unquestionability of the household's patriarchal constitution is corroborated by the fact that the housewife never asks her husband for confirmation. The conservative ideology of the "religious pregnancy horror" becomes explicit when Diana desperately attempts to regain control over the household and her own body, and fires the immigrant workers who she suspects are poisoning her. However, since Martín's state worsens in the wake of this, Tomás sharply instructs her wife on the phone to rehire the workers. Although the pregnant woman tries to explain that she faces imminent danger, her husband literally announces the need for her self-sacrifice, responding that "This is not about you. This is about our sick son. … So swallow your pride and bring her [Luz] back".

Nevertheless, Burns ends up destabilizing both the tropes and the ideology of the conservative subgenre, undermining its patriarchal foundations, and, in turn, highlighting an alternative project that stems from the underside of the "colonial divide". Since the terrifying closing sequence reveals the murder of the biological father as well as the relocation of Diana's children into the collective led by Luz, the film not only ends up abruptly terminating the timeline of "reproductive futurism", but it also makes the "higher power" to which the pregnant woman ultimately loses her offspring turn out to be a monstrous, matriarchal, and nonbiological family that refuses to be governed by the hegemonic norms of sexual and social reproduction. Thus, instead of restoring the postcolonial heteropatriarchal order, *Madre* reframes the "religious pregnancy horror", modifying its ideological and spiritual overtones. Ironically, this is already disclosed in an early scene, in which Tomás explicitly confirms that Luz is "a blessing".

These dynamics also inform the ways in which *Madre* addresses the horror trope that Robin Wood famously characterized as "the return of the repressed". Wood claims that the threatening

and the monstrous in modern American horror films tend to stand for what is excluded by and repressed in Western patriarchal bourgeois-capitalist ideology and culture, including "other" cultures and ethnic groups (Wood). As the writer-director of *Madre*, Aaron Burns, stated in an interview, his initial idea was to situate the plot in a U.S. American setting in which a Spanish-speaking maid acts as an intruder in a white American family (Saito). However, reframing the storyline in a context marked by the antagonism between the Chilean white-criollo middle class and the migrant Filipino characters nuanced these cultural politics. As Eljaiek-Rodríguez explains, "Film directors from different countries in the continent migrate horror tropes to Latin America, creating cinematographic horror hybrids that serve a further political purpose of reclaiming and transforming the monstrosity as a form of historical rewriting" (9). Hence, although their portrayal recalls the exoticization of non-Western villains in Western horror films, the monstrous crimes of Luz, David, and Martín (who are suggested to recur to obscure black magic, venomous herbs, and barbarous surgeries) appear more ambiguous. On one hand, their revolt is likely to be framed as confronting the modern/colonial order that violently discredits their perception of the world while enforcing a single historical teleology. On the other hand, their disruption of hegemonic reproductive timelines liberates subalternized, nonmodern perspectives, "call[ing] back a future from the past that has made so many futures impossible" (Lothian 114).

Arguably, this twofold orientation marks the "*against*" as well as the "*for*" with regard to *Madre*'s monstrous project of epistemological delinking. Therefore, the film's climactic sequence that foregrounds Diana's pregnant body as a site of dreadful conflict—that is, the moment in which the unborn child is removed from Diana's belly—is notable not only as a culmination of visceral audiovisual terror, but, most importantly, as an inventive cinematic expression of subverted reproductive futurities. Namely, by interweaving multiple visual perspectives that are at play within the household deeply pervaded by "normative and hegemonic forms of gendered and racialized inequalities" (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 108), the scene expresses an antagonism towards the dominant timeline as well as an impulse to establish alternative trajectories.

In the first part of the sequence in question, Diana wakes up at night to a barking sound that leads her to the basement. She uses her technological device, the translator application, to find out that the workers and Martín are planning to remove the fetus from her belly. Subsequently, Diana is discovered, captured, and benumbed by the monstrous alliance. Ultimately, a series of heavily distorted images and sounds invade the screen: we see a fast-paced montage of shocking graphic violence through an opaque lens, disfigured by lens flares and strikingly wide angles. Stunningly, this impressionistic montage combines Diana's subjective perceptions with flashbacks from the point of view of her attackers as well as images of scenes that none of them could possibly witness. We can recognize the killing of Tomás and Catalina, and we also see Martín putting an insect into Diana's ear, cutting open her belly, and removing her baby. Although this entire sequence may strike us as Diana's raving nightmare, the following scene confirms that it presents what *actually happened* in the film. No longer can a powerful patriarchal logic dismiss the housewife's perception as paranoid delusion, since, in the following scene, depicted in a more realist tone, the wound on Diana's body painfully remains, and so do the corpses of Tomás and Catalina. Hence, recalling *Lóbulo*'s experimental text, which describes Sofía's dissolving mind through a shifting narrative voice that constantly mingles first, second, and third person (Kulawik, "Exploraciones" 753), this sequence of *Madre* cinematically expresses the horror of an embodied subjectivity that is unrestrictedly permeated by multiple perspectives and manipulative forces intervening in the reproductive cycle at the same time. The sequence clearly evokes the famous satanic impregnation ritual in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) in which the protagonist suffers comparable horrors and the images "register her sensory experience, combine it with

memory, emotion and the material of her subconscious" (Valerius 123). However, in *Madre*, Diana's perspective is nonhierarchically complemented by a series of images that turn out to be perceptions from previously ignored "*other*" viewpoints. Thus, this scene presents the process of "delinking" in a shockingly literal sense: while Diana's point of view inexorably disperses into a set of diverse commingling experiences, the heroine's body is also literally ripped apart.

For Mark Jackson, the bridging of decolonial and posthuman projects might be inspired by an attention to the multiplicity of semiotic relationships anchored in shared materiality (19–62). Rethinking the Western maternal horror film by imagining the subversion of the Eurocentric-patriarchal reproductive cycle, *Madre* also grounds its ultimate revolt in embodiment. First, the film portrays the formation of a cyborg subjectivity as a failed endeavor to resist patriarchal regulation due to the incomplete and normatively controlled incorporation of intelligent technology. Second, the alternative—decolonial—option it provides as a means to counteract the heteropartriarchal order is grounded in the nonhierarchical, conflictive coexistence of fragmented worlds, knowledges, and life narratives conceived from diverse embodied positions from both sides of the "colonial divide". The most ingenuous cinematic expression of such a plurality of visions not only destabilizes the idea of a universal perspective, but also reclaims subaltern monstrosity. This results in a horrendous climactic scene that reminds us that imaginaries of futurity are inexorably interconnected with the embodied realties of reproductive labor. Ultimately, *Madre*'s case illustrates that the exploration of the body as "the site of alternative epistemologies" (Podalsky 9) has an irresistible potential to destabilize hegemonic sociopolitical structures and construct anticipatory impulses otherwise.

## Notes

1 As Walter D. Mignolo explains, from the sixteenth century onwards, knowledge recognized by Western modernity needed to be produced in one of "the six European modern or imperial languages": Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, and English (*The Darker Side* 17–20).
2 All translations from Spanish are my own.
3 The title means both earlobe and cerebral lobe.

## Works Cited

Arnold, Sarah. *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Brown, J. Andrew. *Cyborgs in Latin America*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Eljaiek-Rodríguez, Gabriel. *The Migration and Politics of Monsters in Latin American Cinema*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Escobar, Arturo. *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible*. Duke UP, 2020.

Garzón, Sara. "Manuel Amaru Cholango: Decolonizing Technologies and the Construction of Indigenous Futures." *Arts*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2019. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8040163.

González, Christopher. "Latino Sci-Fi: Cognition and Narrative Design in Alex Rivera's Sleep Dealer." *Latinos and Narrative Media: Participation and Portrayal*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 211–223.

Grosfoguel, Ramón. "Colonial Difference, Geopolitics of Knowledge, and Global Coloniality in the Modern/Colonial Capitalist World-System." *Review*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2002, pp. 203–224.

Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, Encarnación. *Migration, Domestic Work and Affect: A Decolonial Approach on Value and the Feminization of Labor*. Routledge, 2010.

Haraway, Donna J. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Harvard UP, 2001.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. U of Chicago P, 1999.

Hopenhayn, Martín. "No Way Out: Comentario a "Lobulo" de Eugenia Prado." *Crítica.cl*, 24 Feb. 2005, https://critica.cl/literatura-chilena/no-way-out-comentario-a-lobulo-de-eugenia-prado. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.

Jackson, Mark, editor. *Coloniality, Ontology, and the Question of the Posthuman*. Routledge, 2017.

Jameson, Fredric. "Progress versus Utopia: Or, Can We Imagine the Future?" *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1982, pp. 147–158.

Kulawik, Krystof. "Exploraciones trans(t)ex(t)uales y acercamientos a lo poshumano en las obras neobarrocas de la escritora (y artista visual) chilena Eugenia Prado." *Revista Iberoamericana*, vol. 79, no. 244–245, 2013, pp. 743–758.

Kulawik, Krzysztof. "Asediar la literatura, la política y la cultura: conversación con la escritora chilena Eugenia Prado Bassi." *Nomadías*, no. 16, 2012, pp. 227–246.

Loebell, Ricardo. "Repeso de Un Ensayo: A Propósito de La Narrativa de Eugenia Prado." *Literatura y Lingüística*, no. 12, 2000, pp. 167–181.

Lothian, Alexis. *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*. NYU Press, 2018.

Merla-Watson, Cathryn Josefina and B. V. Olguín. "Introduction: ¡Latin@futurism Ahora! Recovering, Remapping, and Recentering the Chican@ and Latin@ Speculative Arts." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2015, pp. 135–146.

Merla-Watson, Cathryn Josefina. "From the Horrific to the Utopic: Pan-Latin@ Speculative Poetics and Politics." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2016, pp. 143–154.

Mignolo, Walter D. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke UP, 2011.

———. "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of de-Coloniality." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2–3, 2007, pp. 449–514.

———. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton UP, 2012.

Osteen, Mark, editor. *Autism and Representation*. Routledge, 2008.

Parreñas, Rhacel. *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*. 2nd ed., Stanford UP, 2015.

Podalsky, Laura. *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Prado, Eugenia. *Lóbulo*. Cuarto Propio, 1998.

Saito, Stephen. "SXSW '17 Interview: Aaron Burns on Raising Hell with 'Madre'." *The Moveable Fest*, 21 Mar. 2017, http://moveablefest.com/aaron-burns-madre/. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.

Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. U of California P, 2004.

Subero, Gustavo. *Gender and Sexuality in Latin American Horror Cinema: Embodiments of Evil*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Taylor, Taryne Jade. "Latinxs Unidos: Futurism and Latinidad in United States Latinx Hip-Hop." *Extrapolation*, vol. 61, nos. 1–2, 2020, pp. 29–52.

Vado, Karina A. "'We Bleed in Mestizaje': Corporeal Utopias and Mestiza Futurities in Gloria E. Anzaldúa's Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro." *Race and Utopian Desire in American Literature and Society*, edited by Patricia Ventura and Edward K. Chan. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 163–182.

Valerius, Karyn. "'Rosemary's Baby', Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects." *College Literature*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2005, pp. 116–135.

Walsh, Catherine E. "Decoloniality in/as Praxis." *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, by Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, Duke UP, 2018, pp. 1–98.

Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan…and Beyond*. Columbia UP, 2003.

# 26

# AFROFUTURISM, AMAZOFUTURISM, INDIGENOUS FUTURISM, AND SERTÃOPUNK IN BRAZILIAN SCIENCE FICTION

## An Overview

*Vítor Castelōs Gama with Alan de Sá and G.G. Diniz*

Brazil is the fifth-largest country in the world. When one thinks of it, one might recall the Amazon, the luscious beaches, or vast landscapes. However, when one thinks of Brazilian SF, the imagery might point elsewhere: to the southern regions; to the megalopolis of São Paulo or the slums of Rio de Janeiro. This becomes negative when only the southeastern region is represented as urban and technological, while the northeastern region is represented as violent, underdeveloped, and untechnological. Given these stereotypes, could a different story be told with SF? To Black and Indigenous people, as well as northerners and northeasterners, the answer is yes, so they are now changing what defines Brazilian SF. This is being done through Afrofuturism, Amazofuturism, Indigenous Futurism, and Sertãopunk: first, by contesting the characterization of Brazilian SF as a white, male, and southeastern culture; second, by addressing common misrepresentations; and third, by creating stories that give us hope of a different and positive future.

The futurist movements are connected through oppressive actions they all face—prejudice and violence—which then fosters the dispossession of land, labor, and resources. This prejudice gives an excuse for those who benefit from the dispossessions to continue doing so. Therefore, it becomes necessary to deal with the imagery and discourses imposed by a colonizing gaze. For example, Amazofuturism suffers from the tropes of heavenly paradise/green hell and the "vanishing Indian"—the colonialist mindset holds that the Amazon would be a paradise if all the trees would be cut down and sold, or that it is not necessary to respect Indigenous land rights since there is "too much land for too few Indigenous people". Sertãopunk has to deal with the drought and scarcity aesthetic and with civilization/barbarism. The scarcity supposedly leads to a "state of nature", where only the brutes survive, where man is the wolf of man. This maintains the northeastern regions as the uncultured opposite of the south/southeastern regions: Indigenous Futurism with the nature or culture debate of anthropological discourse and with the "vanishing Indian"—both tropes intended to impose a subaltern role to the Indigenous people; Afrofuturism with the supposed racial democracy of Brazil[1]—which holds that racial prejudice does not exist in Brazil, which, in turn, has naturalized and masked the ongoing exclusion (legal, social, and cultural) and the outright genocide of Black and Indigenous people.[2]

The results of these oppressive actions connect the four movements, and might be one of the reasons why identity (focused on the body and culture) and territory are often in the forefront of those movement's works. These categories are essential for a counternarrative; that is, then, a body that dares to exist for itself (not as an object); and, an occupied territory that is both living and fruitful. It is by denying ingrained myths that these movements are also defining new paths for Brazilian SF.[3] As Roberto de Sousa Causo forewarned:

> The country that has the greatest biodiversity in the world cannot be the country of monoculture … If Brazilian speculative literature wishes not only to exist and not only to sell, but also to be relevant, it needs to compose a strong and diversified ecosystem. Not only to grow and bear fruit in itself, but to constitute itself a diversified variation that positions itself in simultaneous articulation and divergence before the literary mainstream. A distinct biome, within the larger ecosystem of Brazilian literature.
>
> *(Causo, "Uma questão literária" 273)*

This chapter is divided into one segment for each movement. Our objective is to briefly discuss aspects of these movements using the categories of identity and territory; furthermore, our purpose is to cite recent works for further research and to illustrate previous works that could be retrolabeled or set in relation to these movements.

## Afrofuturism[4]

Afrofuturism was first defined by Mark Dery as a "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture" (180). While acknowledging Dery's proposal, Lu Ain-Zaila holds that an Afrofuturistic story must, first of all, be practiced by Black people; furthermore, it must possess an "Afrocentric thinking"—an epistemology conscious of the historical, social, and political constraints faced by Black people (06).

Considering Ain-Zaila's definition, the short movie Zózimo Bulbul's *Alma no olho* (1973) might be seen as Afrofuturistic because it combines two aspects of an Afrocentric identity: the body, and culture.[5] *Alma no olho* goes through centuries of history and begins with a closeup of Zózimo's face and naked body, which is progressively dressed. The film ends with Zózimo undressing and breaking the chains that bind him. The focus on his body is important because it challenges a taboo in Brazilian society: the body of a black man could not signify potency or pride; it is, by this society's standards, something to be covered, coveted, to be objectified as a tool. By displaying his body, neither as a tool or as something to be ashamed of, the movie confronts the eugenistic desires of many Brazilians today.[6] *Alma no olho*, however, focuses not only on Zózimo's body but also on Afro-Brazilian history. The focus on social contexts and cultural expressions can be drawn back to Júlio Emílio Braz's *Algum Lugar Nenhum* (1993) and *Megalópolis* (2006). These works set a motif recurrent in much recent SF: a high-tech and multiracial metropolis segregated by slums—a characteristic similar to what Douglas Coupland calls "Brazilification". This motif can be seen in Julio Pecly's *Cidade de Deus Z* (2015) and Lu Ain-Zaila's *Duology Brasil 2408*, composed by *(In)Verdades* and *(R)Evolução*, all works where historical and socioeconomic conditions appear in the forefront of the narrative.

Until now, we discussed aspects common to Brazilian Afrofuturism, but there are also two notable developments: *cyberfunk*, by Lu Ain-Zaila; and *Macumbapunk*, by Fábio Kabral. Cyberfunk and Macumbapunk congregate identity, history, and culture within an Afrofuturistic lens; it draws its name from Brazilian funk and from religions of African matrices—both

important, but, sometimes, reviled elements of Afro-American culture. Ain-Zaila, while promoting her novella *Ìségún*, elaborated on what she considers *cyberfunk*:

> There is a proximity of the term with cyberpunk, in relation to the chaotic, to technology, but the subjects are other, the geographical space and the sound are other. It is funk, samba, rap, ijexá, black music … and in my version it is related to the periphery, I leave the urban and go to the margins, the communities, there is no neon, there is a lack of light. The question of modernity and production over subjects is more specific, I speak of environmental racism, sacrifice zones, and I could speak of neoextractivism and neocolonialism that are here, every day, see Mariana, Brumadinho, Bumba, mining holes, the dams running over Quilombola and Indigenous lives. It is all there and it is about this that I write; allied to a fictional dynamic and ancestry that can be historical, mythological, or both, it will depend on the context.[7]

Fábio Kabral defines *Macumbapunk* as those "narratives of speculative fiction whose universe revolves around the spiritualities of African matrices. These spiritualities and their framework of deities and entities define the reality and laws of the universe where the narrative happens" (Kabral). He then asks,

> what would a galactic confederation look like whose special authorities are the umbanda entities? A lunar colony ruled by *Tambor de Mina* priestesses? An interdimensional society of *Santeria* elders who travel to other realities? A magical empire of voodoo sorcerers in a world of high fantasy?
>
> *(Kabral)*

There's a considerable approximation to Kabral's proposition in foreign works such as Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) and *Midnight Robber* (2000), as well as Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). All three novels draw heavily from Yoruba culture, like Kabral's own *O Caçador Cibernético da Rua 13* (2017), influenced by Odé Oxossi stories. In his novel the protagonist is João Arolê, a cybernetic mutant that hunts evil spirits corrupted by Ketu Three's elite classes. Ketu Three is a city-state, where "melanined" people are taken, and where they construct a highly technological metropolis fused with religious symbolism and ruled by "Priestess-businesswoman". His next book, *A cientista guerreira do facão furioso* (2019), hails from the same universe, but now the protagonist is Jamila Olabamiji, Ogum's daughter, who wants to become the greatest engineer of Ketu Three. In her quest, she discovers more about herself and about the world she lives in—therefore, discovering her own body, her culture, and her purpose in the world.

In conclusion, Macumbapunk and cyberpunk, as parts of Afrofuturism, both focus on cultural aspects that could help someone to accept their own self. Like it was for Jamila Olabamiji, Afrofuturism works as a beacon. It faces the challenges posed to Black people to create positive possibilities—to create virtual steps that might guide our society.

## Amazofuturism

Amazofuturism is a subgenre akin to cyberpunk and solarpunk where the Amazon region is represented in a more positive light than in previous SF;[8] instead of a place ravaged by neocolonialism, with an empty forest and river prone for extractivism, it favors a depiction of an independent and self-sustaining space where people live in communion with nature and technology.

Amazofuturism was created and gained prominence through the artworks of João Queiroz (@q1r0z); other artists, such as Keoma Calandrini (@srkoema) and Auá Mendes (@aua___art), are also to be noted, although they do not use the nomenclature. Amazofuturism also has gone beyond the art world and is now engaged as a literary movement; for instance, Maurício Coelho and Editora Cyberus are now preparing an anthology of the subgenre.

Amazofuturism conjures a more positive image of the Amazon by challenging negative tropes such as the "vanishing Indian", the "green hell", or the "land without history". This does not mean that by focusing on the constructive aspects, Amazofuturism overlooks the tense regional history of colonialism and neocolonialism. This is a sensitive issue because while solarpunk is a positive SF development, and while clean energy is desirable, if monopolized by megacorporations it can be as imperialistic as oil and mining are nowadays. This is especially tricky in the Amazon region because land dispossession by hydroelectric dams or the dispute for control of lithium resources is becoming quite common. In short, while Amazofuturism is still critical of authoritarian government and ecological and economic exploitation, it is generally less pessimistic than previous fiction, portraying the Amazon with positive and negative features. Furthermore, Amazofuturism may sometimes, but not always, incorporate Indigenous experience and epistemologies.

Let us first discuss what the continuities are and where they break from previous fiction. Some of the first works of SF that used the Amazon as a setting were Emílio Augusto Zaluar's *Doutor Benignus* (1875) and Gastão Cruls's novel *Amazónia Misteriosa* (1925). These two works set many motifs, like the mediation by a scientist and the discovery of a lost world, which will reappear in works such as Ivanir Calado's *A Mãe do Sonho* (1990), Fausto Fawcett's *Pororoca Rave* (2015), Alexey Dodsworth's *18 de Escorpião* (2016), Samir Machado de Machado's *Tupinilândia* (2018), Mário Bentes's *Pajemancer* (2018), and Joca Reiners Terron's *A Morte e o Meteoro* (2019). These motifs' significance alters over time against the background of transformations in Brazilian society and the changing politics of the Amazon and its ecological devastation. However, their continued existence warrants discussion.

The first motif is mediation by a scientist, often by an ethnologist or anthropologist who serves as narrator. Such narratives, in other words, often invite us to inhabit a gaze and an ideology which risks marginalizing Indigenous perspectives. The second motif is conflict between different types of societies, that is, Indigenous or Caboclo, against other projects of society. Such juxtapositions often put utopian themes into play. For example, each society may place higher or lower in a utopia/dystopia spectrum, according to the criticism intended by the work, allowing the comparison of these possible societies. Occasionally, these conflicts also touch upon the subject of the extermination of Indigenous people through agents of colonialism—the "vanishing Indian" trope.

Two novels in particular, although not using the label, may be read through the lens of Amazofuturism: *18 de Escorpião* (2018) and *Tupinilândia* (2019). The first begins at the end of the twentieth century, when a Brazilian astrophysicist discovers a star like the sun. Years later, the characters are taken to a utopian community on an Earth-like planet, Neokosmos, populated by various Indigenous groups, but mostly Tukano. The planet uses clean energy and has solved many of the problems Amazon faces today, like malaria, recreating the world in supposedly more positive ways. However, this is done in a problematic manner, since the Indigenous people are not actually in control of the planet and of the technology used to do it. They are used as a labor force for protection and for manual work, while their culture is appropriated by the protagonists. The main characters experience the Indigenous traditions, but do not have the same responsibilities; given the choice, they only do intellectual work. What *18 de Escorpião* seems to demonstrate is that clean energy, a solarpunk future, isn't positive if the people living in it are just another disposable resource. Further Afrofuturism must ponder this carefully.

*Tupinilândia* has a distinctive retro-futuristic aesthetic. The novel is about nostalgia of lost futures and engages with much of Brazil's history. The plot is divided into three episodes. In the first episode, we discover the plans for the construction of an amusement park in the heart of the Amazon forest. This park, named Tupinilândia, is meant to be an exaltation of Brazilian culture and echoes the megalomaniac projects that are so frequent in the region, such as Fordlândia, Jari, and the Hudson Institute plan for flooding the Amazon. The second episode happens prior to the park's scheduled opening, which never takes place since the park is hijacked by members of the military together with a right-wing group called Integralistas.[9] The third episode follows an archeologist and his family, who discover the amusement park and the Integralistas who continue to occupy it, transforming it into a fascist "utopia". This shows how many utopian projects may be interrupted or how quickly utopia devolves into dystopia; furthermore, it shows how much the Amazon could be different if its history took another path.

*Tupinilândia*, together with *18 de Escorpião*, seems to acknowledge the various possibilities open for the Amazon future. By doing this, Amazofuturism could deviate from the common-sense view of the Amazon as an homogeneous gigantic forest, and also from a self-fulfilling prophecy of destruction: a prophecy of the deforestation and desertification for mining, cattle ranching, and soy monoculture. In other words, to deviate from the seemingly unavoidable destruction of the Amazon.

### Indigenous Futurism

There are over 300 Indigenous groups in Brazil—Indigenous is a denomination assumed for political purposes, to facilitate organizing or to create a place where experience could be shared. That might also be the case why Indigenous Futurism is now being taken by many authors: it allows the discussion and envisioning of different futures. Daniel Heath Justice explains: "Indigenous texts are by and large responsive, not reactive. They are at least as concerned with developing or articulating relationships with, among, and between Indigenous readers as they are with communicating our humanity to colonial society, if not more so" (xix). The Indigenous Futurist movement is larger than its critiques of colonial legacies, larger even than its reinscription of knowledge and ways of knowing that are typically marginalized or erased by those legacies. Indigenous Futurism is being done by particular individuals with their own particular tastes, predilections, pleasures, desires, ideas, and experiences. The Indigenous Futurist movement is filled with all the many diverse things that Indigenous creators and fans care about; it is a movement of collective and individual self-fashioning and self-expression through the creation, interpretation, and consumption of culture, a worldmaking activity through which Indigenous people and non-Indigenous allies reveal themselves and connect with one another. In this light, an anecdote might illustrate the importance of Indigenous Futurism in Brazil.

Daniel Munduruku recalls a story in which a professor brags to a Munduruku elder about how mankind has reached the Moon. Eventually, the elder responds: "I know, I was there" (Munduruku 47). With this response, the elder reveals the illegitimacy of the professor's bragging. Whatever the pros and cons of Western techno-scientific knowledge, the professor has no grounds for appointing himself its spokesperson in order to belittle the Indigenous elder and Indigenous forms of knowledge. The answer may also allude to the history of colonial powers pretending that the lands they invaded are empty, or at least empty of meaning until they arrived to conquer them. In the elder's perspective, the moon may be densely populated—it could be many things: not only a physical place, but a symbol, a friend, an illumination, a part of many stories, an element of a shared imaginary, a locus of difference and divergence, etc. In this sense, the moon is something complex and mysterious, and there may be many ways of inhabiting it.

A collage[10] from Mavi Morais (@moraismavi) seems to enter into dialogue with Munduruku's anecdote. Mavi's artwork portrays a group of Indigenous people in a canoe transversing the moon. To read the presence of Indigenous people and traditional technology on the moon's surface through the lens of SF implies a world in which Indigenous people can reach the moon if so desired. It signals, furthermore, that Indigenous people will continue existing in the future. This is one manner in which Indigenous futurism opposes reductive, pessimistic, and exoticizing discourses about Indigenous peoples, challenging Western stereotypes and allowing the complexity of Indigenous voices and perspectives to be shared. It focuses on Indigenous worldviews in the context of the SF megatext, and, while doing so, challenges ingrained colonialist assumptions about Indigenous people. Such artists can "reenlist the science of indigeneity" to explore how "Indigenous science is not just complementary to a perceived western enlightenment but is indeed integral to a refined twenty-first-century sensibility" (Dillon 3).

The notion that Indigenous science is integral to this century may sound like a platitude to some, yet it is an important point to make: there are pervasive prejudices which associate Indigenous people with the past and refuse to envision them in the future. Such prejudices often deny traditional Indigenous knowledge any status as "scientific" or "technological" and deny the validity of Indigenous epistemology.[11] In this light, Indigenous science fiction could not exist. However, it does exist, and is a hugely important part of Indigenous Futurism.

Indigenous literature in Brazil has changed since the 1990s due to the organization of Indigenous political movements, which led many authors to publish their stories directly in Portuguese or in their Indigenous languages. An interface with SF was created by a reunion held in 1997 between indigenous authors Daniel Munduruku, Kaka-Werá Jekupé, Olívio Popyguá, and the CLFC (Science Fiction Readers' Club). Munduruku has at least two works of interest for Indigenous Futurism: the short story "A Sabedoria das Águas", which was included in the SF anthology *Estranhos Contatos* (1998), and the novelette *Todas as Coisas São Pequenas* (2008).

The first tells the story of the couple Koru and Maíra. The majority of the story is about a traumatizing encounter with strange creatures which, when seen by Koru, produce light from their hands to blind the protagonist and flee. Koru seeks to understand what those creatures were and what it means to live like them. These aliens function as a stand-in for western technocratic thought, since they are obsessed by the quest for knowledge. In contrast, Koru and Maíra defend another source of wisdom, that of the tradition of their ancestors. *Todas as Coisas São Pequenas* has as protagonist the businessman Carlos, who after being rescued by the shaman Aximã from an accident in the forest, begins to review his values and beliefs. The narrator and protagonist, Carlos, acts as an interpreter to counterpoint the different societies in the structure of the novel. Both works ask that SF be critical and transformative. Munduruku proposes the creation of an Indigenous university where knowledge is developed by respecting Indigenous forms of research and learning. They engage with *survivance*, as proposed by Gerald Vizenor, making their work created by themselves and for themselves. In a similar manner, Daniel Heath Justice points out that while "Indigenous writers have confronted that oppressive context and created a richly expansive literary tradition that engages with colonialism, these traditions are in no way determined by colonialism" (XIX). Although *Todas as Coisas São Pequenas* certainly counteracts common prejudices about Indigenous people, it is not determined solely by that. In fact, the novel has a utopian outlook by envisioning how a more positive future could be reached without denying the ugliness in the world.

## Sertãopunk

Sertãopunk is a subgenre akin to solarpunk, Afrofuturism, and magical realism, where Brazil's northeastern region is represented in a more positive manner than previous fiction. Sertãopunk

was created by Alan de Sá, Gabriele Diniz (G.G. Diniz), and Alec Silva, and many authors have now taken it on. Like Ain-Zaila's definition, Sertãopunk also needs to be created by insiders to avoid stereotypes and prejudice. Furthermore, Sertãopunk should also represent

> [1] A northeast region where technological advances, especially ecological ones, provide a high quality of life for northeasterners; [2] The presence of social disorder caused by an emerging coronel elite and financed by powerful groups (from other regions or not); [3] A reformulation of the Brazilian migratory process; [4] The northeast as an independent pole of intellectual, artistic, technological and cultural development; [5] The usage of orality, cultural elements and the various regional legends and religions within the narrative.
>
> *(Sá 7–8)*

The label was promptly taken by authors G.G. Diniz, with *Morte Matada* (2020); Abel Cavira, with *Tudo o que eles tocam* …. (2020); Yuri Leal, with *Invasores de para lá da serra* (2020); Ian Fraser, with *O segredo que vale uma alma* (2020); Alan de Sá, with *Abrakadabra* (2020); Alec Silva, with *A noite tem mil olhos* (2020); Wallace Oliveira, with *O livro deletério* (2020); and the collection *Sertãopunk: histórias de um Nordeste do Amanhã* (2020).

Sertãopunk is a counterpoint to the cyberagreste of the artist Vitor Wiedergrun (@vitor_wiedergrun).[12] Cyberagreste mixed the aesthetics of cyberpunk with elements considered to define northeastern experience, like *cangaço*—this aesthetic was taken up by authors such as Laisa Ribeiro. However, cyberagreste did not represent how the majority of northeastern people saw themselves, hence Sertãopunk.

Cyberagreste has been criticized precisely by relating *cangaço* as the ur-type of northeastern experience and following with it an aesthetic of drought, famine, and violence. This limits the possibilities of northeastern authors to be recognized as such. This discussion may be traced back to Franklin Távora's *O Cabeleira* (1876), a highly successful novel that set the tone and mood for subsequent works about the region. Aurélio Gonçalves de Lacerda, when criticizing *O Cabeleira*, affirmed that "the radius of action of the characters, the environment and the physical and human landscapes are more in line with the coastal world"; and, that the *cangaço* aesthetic would later be imposed in the visual representation of this novel. This representation, for its part, was later imposed as a definition of northeastern experience; even though *Cabeleira* predates the highest point of *cangaço* with the figure of Lampião, it could not dispel the *cangaço* aesthetic.

If it was only the aesthetic, it might not be such a problem; however, *cangaço*'s association with violence could not be easily dismissed. This may also be traced back to *O Cabeleira*, which, according to Aurélio Gonçalves de Lacerda, contains a paradox ("Imagens"). There is

> the rejection of the *cangaceiro* and that their typification as bandits, as sicarios, and, at the same time, their acceptance, by elevation of the character to the podium of heroism, with the creation of the innocent protagonist, beautiful and good, in spite of being a bandit.

These ambiguities remain a constant feature of many later cultural works—some denouncing the violence of *cangaço*, others, like Lacerda himself, proposing that violence is a legitimate response by poor people. Whether violence is necessary or not, justifiable or not, might be an undecidable question, yet, while all people may engage or profit from violent actions, only a few are held responsible for it (the "usual suspects" are the groups discussed in this chapter). This breeds further scapegoating and might be a reason why many artists such as Chico Science and Nação Zumbi seek to reframe banditism as justifiable action, while others have tried to demonstrate that they were not defined by violence (their own or that of someone else). Both are valid and justifiable ways.

For northeasterners, this becomes more problematic when writers from other regions utilize *cangaço* in a simplistic manner, legitimizing the discourse that all northeasterners are *cangaceiros* or exist only in relation to them. It becomes a slippery slope that locals then have to accept, reframing *cangaço* as a positive trait, denying or ignoring it. The effects of such imposition can be seen in Lírio Ferreira's *Árido Movie* (2005). However, this is not to say that *cangaço*, violence, or drought are forbidden themes, since "sertãopunk does not exclude the figure of the *cangaço* or its impacts on the structuring of the Northeast, but neither does it treat it as *bandeiras* or northeastern Vikings".[13] Thus, there are works such as Klévisson Viana's *O cangaceiro do futuro e o jumento espacial* (2008), Zé Wellington's *Cangaço Overdrive* (2018), and Cárlisson Galdino's *Lampião Elétrico* (2018) that recuperate and utilize the trope in a more nuanced manner: violence is not exclusive to the northeastern "bandits".[14]

Sertãopunk represents, then, a different Northeast, but only in relation to those exoticizing views; it is an extrapolation from its present. It is a manifold place—sustainable, technological, magical, religious, and whatever else its people make it to be.

## Final Remarks

Brazilian SF has demonstrated a wide range of attitudes toward Black or Indigenous people, from exoticization to marginalization and indifference, or sometimes ferocious critiques of neocolonial genocide. All four movements overviewed in this chapter, when dealing with negative tropes and exoticizing gazes, elicited the two connected categories of territory and identity.

Territory is such an issue because it is constantly denied possession or use by the Indigenous and Black people, in particular quilombolas, but also through gentrification in urban areas. All works mentioned involve this category in one way or another: the creation of a Black metropolis in Kabral's work; the Indigenous university in Munduruku's Indigenous Futurism; and the autonomous planet in Dodsworth's Amazofuturism. Similarly, they all take the issue of the protagonists' identities in places where they could grow and strengthen their relations with others.

These are categories where SF struggles to truly embrace a transformative perspective. A globalized, deterritorialized world is one where symbols lose their anchorage point to a race, to a group, or to a culture. This happens when candomblé or capoeira is seen just as a Brazilian tradition. This happens when black SF authors are whitened. This happens when every northeasterner is seen as a *cangaceiro*. So, a simple attitude of reclaiming Yoruba culture or imagining that a Black or Indigenous person could survive the current Brazilian agenda of genocide attests to the power of the speculative imagination in social and political resilience and regeneration.

## Notes

1   The existence of prejudice in Brazilian society is by itself a highly contested issue. One way of masking its existence is through the *Racial Democracy* myth. This myth, commonly associated with Gilberto Freyre, proposes that Brazilian society was harmoniously composed by White, Indigenous, and Black races; because of such harmony, Brazilians would not view each other through the lens of race. See Ginway's *Ficção científica brasileira*, where she explains how Brazilian SF often engages with these national or foundational myths, whether by agreeing with or denying them.

2   Data from IPEA (Institute of Applied Economic Research) indicate that Black and Brown people make up 75.7% of the total homicide victims in Brazil; in some states, such as Alagoas, black people's chances of being murdered are 17 times greater than those of white people. For more information about the genocide of Indigenous people see *Vukápanavo: Revista Terena*, vol. 3, no. 3 (https://www.vukapanavo.com/).

3   Brazilian SF is commonly divided in three waves: first, 1958 to 1980; second, 1981 to 2000, third, 2001 to present. See Giroldo for consideration of a fourth wave centered on social media.

4  Brazilian Afrofuturism is gaining momentum with the group *Coletivo de Inteligência Afrofuturista* (@ciaafrofuturista) and with recent anthologies, such as *Coletânea Afrofuturismo* (2018) and *Afrofuturismo: O Futuro é Nosso* (2020).

5  Kênia Freitas was the first researcher to consider *Alma no olho* as an Afrofuturist movie in *Afrofuturismo: cinema e música em uma diáspora intergaláctica* (2015).

6  By eugenistic desire we mean, most of all, the racial whitening ideology. A prime example of this ideology is Modesto Broco's painting *A redenção de Cam* (1895). In SF the most telling example is Monteiro Lobato's *O Presidente Negro ou O Choque das Raças* (1926). In a recent example, Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro affirmed, after visiting a quilombo (a settlement of African slave descendants), that the quilombolas are "of no use, even to procreate"; Bolsonaro also affirmed that his sons were "well raised" enough to not have a relationship with a black woman, espousing not the whitening ideology but, actually, white supremacy. Racial whitening is sometimes prevalent in the depictions of successful Brazilians; for example, SF authors such as Jerônymo Monteiro, Machado de Assis, and Lima Barreto were and sometimes still are portrayed as white. That is why in Ain-Zaila's discussion about Afrofuturism, the blackness of many Brazilian authors must be acknowledged; because if this is not done, the participation of Black people in SF continues unrecognized.

7  http://maisqinerds.com/2019/11/14/afrofuturismo-cyberfunk-lu-ain-zaila-revela-detalhes-de-isegun/

8  M. Elizabeth Ginway argues that the Amazon was used as setting for SF during two key historical moments: "the first takes place during the authoritarian government of Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945), the second after the decades-long push for modernization and technological change imposed by the military government from 1964 to 1985" ("Alambigue"). The first period preferred utopian narratives and represented the Amazon as "a place of adventure, a setting for stories whose imaginative events ignore the region's anthropology, history and indigenous cultures"; the second preferred dystopian narratives that engaged with the "aftermath of the Brazilian military regime and its policies of repression and economic expansion" ("Alambigue").

9  Integralismo was a fascist group created by Plínio Salgado in 1932. The movement was revived when Bolsonaro was elected president. For more information about both historical Integralismo and its revival, see Leandro Pereira Gonçalves and Odilon Caldeira Neto's *O Fascismo em Camisas Verdes: do integralismo ao neointegralismo* (2020).

10  Available at instagram.com/p/B3HxtnxHCHF. Accessed 30 Apr. 2021.

11  For example, Brazil's president declared that "Indians are undoubtedly changing … They are increasingly becoming human beings just like us" (Carneiro da Cunha 58).

12  *Sertão* is the Portuguese word for Badlands; it is a semi-arid subregion of the northeastern region, and it has a unique flora. For many years in Brazil, any territory that was not coastal was *Sertão*. On the other hand, *Agreste* is also a subregion, but much smaller than *Sertão*; it is a frontier between the coast and *Sertão*.

13  Bandeiras, or Bandeirantes, are groups from the colonial period that explored and invaded the interior of South America in search of gold and precious stones, as well as Indigenous peoples for enslavement (occasionally attacking Jesuit missions); they were also used in many wars against Indigenous people and Quilombolas.

14  Earlier examples of SF from northeasterners or about northeastern region are Arthur Azevedo's *A Nova Viagem à Lua* (1877); Emília Freitas's *A Rainha do Ignoto* (1899); João Martins de Athayde's *História do homem que subiu em um aeroplano até a lua* (1923); Valeriano Felix dos Santos's *Um baiano foi à lua* (1969); and Braulio Tavares's *A Espinha Dorsal da Memória* (1989), *A máquina voadora* (1994), and *Mundo Fantasmo* (1994).

# Works Cited

Ain-Zaila, Lu. "Arquétipos Afrofuturistas: as novas geografias da presença afrodiaspórica por negr@s na ficção especulativa." *VI Simpósio Internacional LAVITS*, 2019. https://lavits.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/LuAinZaila-2019-LAVITSS.pdf.

Causo, Roberto de Sousa. "Uma questão literária para o século XXI." *Fantástico brasileiro: o insólito literário do romantismo ao fantasismo*, edited by Bruno Anselmi Matangrano and Eneias Tavares. Arte & Letra, 2018.

Cunha, Manuela Carneiro da. *Índios no Brasil: história, direitos e cidadania*. Claro Enigma, 2012.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery. Duke UP, 1994, pp. 179–222.

de Sá, Alan. "Por que fazer o Nordeste sertãopunk?" *Sertãopunk: histórias de um Nordeste do amanhã*, edited by Alec Silva. Kindle, 2020.

Dillon, Grace L. "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms." *Walking in the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, edited by Grace L. Dillon. U of Arizona P, 2012, pp. 1–12.

Freitas, Kênia. *Afrofuturismo: cinema e música em uma diáspora intergaláctica*. Caixa Cultural, 2015.

Ginway, M. Elizabeth. "The Amazon in Brazilian Speculative Fiction: Utopia and Trauma." *Alambique: revista académica de ciencia ficción y fantasía*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2015. https://doi.org/10.5038/2167-6577.3.1.3

———. *Ficção científica brasileira: mitos culturais e nacionalidade no país do futuro*. Devir, 2005.

Giroldo, Ramiro. "A Ficção Científica no Brasil: um planeta a desbravar." *Revista Ponto*, n. 14, 2018.

Gonçalves, Leandro Pereira, and Odilon Caldeira Neto. *O Fascismo Em Camisas Verdes: Do Integralismo ao Neointegralismo*. FGV Editora, 2020.

Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada. "Atlas da Violência 2020." *IPEA*, 2020, https://forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/atlas-da-violencia-2020.pdf. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.

Justice, Daniel Heath. *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2018.

Kabral, Fábio. "MACUMBAPUNK: Uma Nova Proposta De Ficção Especulativa." *Fábio Kabral*, 25 Nov. 2020, fabiokabral.wordpress.com/2020/06/16/macumbapunk-uma-nova-proposta-de-ficcao-especulativa/. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.

Lacerda, Aurélio Gonçalves de. "Imagens do Sertão: a violência-resposta legitimada no cangaço." *Revista Légua & Meia*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2004. https://doi.org/10.13102/lm.v2i1.1951.

Munduruku, Daniel. *O banquete dos deuses: conversa sobre a origem da cultura brasileira*. 2nd ed., Global, 2009.

*Vukápanavo: Revista Terena*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2020 (entire issue).

# 27

# CHICANX FUTURIST PERFORMANCES

## Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the La Pocha Nostra Territorial Cartographies

*Eduardo Barros-Grela*

In 1993, Guillermo Gómez-Peña founded La Pocha Nostra in Los Angeles to bring together artists and citizens who "collaborated across national borders, race, gender and generations as an act of radical citizen diplomacy and as a means to create 'ephemeral communities' of rebel artists" (LPN's Live Art Laboratory & Border Research Institute). Their project was inspired by Gómez-Peña's intensive work on the imagination—and the construction—of a future spatiality that not only questions the asymmetrical demography and the political disposition of Chicanxs in the United States, but also would reverse it. In his work, which has been frequently positioned within the Chicanxfuturism aesthetics (Ramírez 189), Gómez-Peña has transversally dialogued with other Chicanx artists interested in the experimentation with science, technology, and science fiction from a non-imperialistic and postcolonial stance (Marion C. Martínez, Coco Fusco, or Roberto Sifuentes). Their appropriation of the artistic discourses of technology and science through mestizaje and radical politics invigorated the necessity to reformulate both the popular and the academic discourses of space, art, and progress. But it also contributes to the building of new discursive venues that interrogate the definitions of the human by projecting defamiliarized deconstructions of the body. Gómez-Peña's written works and video productions compiled many of his troupe's constructions of futurism (the most notorious ones being "The MexTerminator Project", *Ethno-Techno*, and, more recently, "We Are All Aliens"), and they led to his current performative work with La Pocha Nostra.

This chapter examines the performative power of La Pocha Nostra to build a transnational alternative space for neglected communities. Such space represents, through radical politics, a form of futurism in which reversed epistemologies and disidentified bodies coalesce to create new forms of society based on a posthuman aesthetic. In their Chicano cyberpunk pedagogical performances, La Pocha Nostra move cultural borders to the center "while the alleged mainstream is pushed to the margins and treated as exotic and unfamiliar, placing the audience members and readers in the position of foreigners or minorities" (Live Art Laboratory). These Chicanx narratives that present alternative forms of CoFuturisms create an assemblage of overtures to what could be labeled as Chicanxfuturism(s), a practice that "defamiliarizes the familiar … and it brings into relief that which is generally taken for granted, such as tradition, history, or the norm, including normative gender and sexuality" (Ramírez, "Afrofuturism/ Chicanafuturism" 190).

In *Ethno-Techno* (2005), Gómez-Peña includes an interview in which Eduardo Mendieta asks him how future is conceived by performance art:

> [W]e must turn the tables on this culture that must cancel and pronounce anachronistic any and every other culture because it cannot countenance that better futures, more humane futures, might be imagined by other cultures … Are you not in fact doing a reverse anthropology in order to liberate our imaginations from the grip of Euro-American culture?
>
> *(246)*

The question is relevant for Gómez-Peña's mindset about the necessity of a grassroots radical and transformative politics, and it is also important for the preoccupation about the validity of Western forms of imagined—and legitimized—forms of futurity. In the first item of this duality, the Mexican artist's post-border performative identifications reinforce the undermining of privileged "First-World" epistemologies, as the artist declares in *Dangerous Border Crossers* (2000), where he refers to how his work has been labeled as "an interactive anthropology museum of the future" (33). But he also responds in it to the critiques against his work on having been compromised by Western commodities, and discusses the rights of other forms of—global— cultures, which evolve spontaneously from grassroots communities as reformulated expressions of "borderized proletariat transculturas" to resist power and hegemony (*Ethno-Techno* 247).

According to Gómez-Peña's works, these preoccupations about radical transnational epistemic alteration are intimately bound to their concept of futurism, which has always contested its traditional postmodern definition, based in the *hic et nunc* paradigm. The artist has repeatedly expressed his prudence about the viability of a promising future according to Western standards, and he has emphasized his disbelief at the success of those premonitory discourses as valid respondents to people's cultural sensibilities (*Exercises for Rebel Artists*, 58; 191). He explains, for instance, that even producing a sense of the future is hard to accomplish today: "history nowadays starts when you wake up and ends when you go to sleep. … There seems to be no metahorizons left" (*Ethno-Techno* 278). His words epitomize the kind of relationship that his troupe aspires to deconstruct together with the audiences attending to their performances: a bond that goes beyond the mere act of ludic participation and involves a commitment to political, social, and radical cultural transformation.

The articulation of grassroots and transgressive futurism might very well be one of the most important contributions of Gómez-Peña's group to the couture of transgressive geopolitics as embroidered by their performative enactments. Gómez-Peña's artistic and pedagogical work has been included in a number of publications about the social reconstruction of conflict spaces, particularly those that recreate an imagined futurity for border and post-border political environments. Besides Eduardo Mendieta's aforementioned contribution, Lysa Rivera also refers to the impact of Gómez-Peña's "reverse anthropology" through his introduction of the bizarre ethno-cyborgs, representative agents of "an aesthetic critical practice that reverses the museum ethnographic gaze back to the spectator, who stand to learn 'more about America's cultural projections and its inability to deal with cultural otherness than about the Latino other'" (101). This spatial volte-face in Gómez-Peña's aesthetic proposals is intrinsically connected to a temporal counterpart in which past and present transnational rationales of domination are relocated into scenes of antithetical political movements. One of the strongest examples of this artistic initiative put forward by Gómez-Peña is represented by his imagined "Aztlán Liberado", which portrays an uncanny scenario in which the relation of colonialism and racism between both sides of the border is interchanged. *The New World Border* (1996) includes a printed version of

"Aztlán Liberado", showing two sections conformed by the transcription of an imagined news program in television and a photograph that encapsulates the situation described by the anchorman. In the former, a brief introduction prepares the reader for the discombobulating scene: "Imagine for a moment, a continent turned upside down … Your turn on your TV and see a Chicano anchorman, his face covered in pre-Columbian tattoos, looking at you intently" (73). Then the description reproduces several situations announced by the host: a report about a number of Mexican citizens having been murdered by Anglo gang members; another piece of news about the police surrounding East L.A. residential areas "to block the entrance of angry gringo mobs protesting poor salaries and police brutality"; or a reference to Mexican authorities, who have issued a complaint against Anglo citizens illegally crossing the border and bringing drugs, dirt, disease, and prostitution to their people (73).

This apparently delusional description of an inverted border is accompanied by an image illustrating a cyberpunk scene that includes the following caption: "Chicano border patrolmen chasing a group of panicked waspbacks" (72). This image recreates a bellicose, perhaps even postapocalyptic atmosphere that is frequent in border spaces—monstrous vehicles populated by repressive agents hunting defenseless and vulnerable subjects. But in this case, it is decontextualized into an unimaginable and carnivalesque scenery in which the roles of pursuers and target individuals are brought back to front in order to produce discomfort in audiences and readers alike. The effect produced by such an abhorrent—yet comical and farcical—scene results in two principal conclusions. First, Gómez-Peña has the ability to deconstruct—and consequently to parody—an image that has been unproblematically naturalized by populations living north of the border. And second, the "Aztlán Liberado" scene is an artistic projection of the apocalyptic future described not only by the abject manifestation of its components, but also by its atrocious validity as a past-present-future reality. Gómez-Peña thus started in 1996 a project that would later be developed into more sophisticated expressions of art through his commitment to non-privileged sectors in decolonial spaces through popular culture, pedagogy, and performative workshops, as Emma Pérez would synthesize three years later, after the publication of Gómez-Peña's *New World*: "[t]his new category, the decolonial imaginary, can help us rethink history in a way that makes Chicana/o agency *transformative*" (5, emphasis added).

Gómez-Peña's art project, expressed through the lens of his performative events, must therefore be understood as a transgressive practice and an active political stance. His vision of a borderless future coincides with Gloria Anzaldúa's affectations about intersectional struggles in the deconstruction of frontiers, from which he stresses the aporia of trying to escape the legitimate sexual, racial, and geographical hierarchies from a particular and localized place. Notably, he has experimented with this restlessness in all his major works, and he increased his presence progressively in all the performances that were transcribed and enhanced to the printed format in order to reach audiences worldwide, but also with more recent publications that encompass the evolution of his pedagogical and political standpoint, particularly *Gómez-Peña Unplugged* (2020); or *La Pocha Nostra: A Handbook for the Rebel Artist* (2021). It is this raceme of more recent works that puts together Gómez-Peña's strategies to produce speculative forms of present-future political spaces through the cultural interventions of La Pocha Nostra, a social and artistic project developed to relocate the contradictions of hegemonic relationships in the border to transnational sites with spatial predicament.

In *A Handbook for the Rebel Artist*, for example, the author explains in his introduction that the La Pocha Nostra initiative is aimed to politicize performance and to perform politics (12). Beyond his prolix career as a performance artist, Gómez-Peña envisioned a necessity to educate audiences following a more unambiguous and explicit approach, yet contradictory and paradoxical in nature. He found in performative pedagogy the perfect instrument to introduce both his vision of future

relationships in/from the border and his practical methodology to build them, as alternative realities to current dynamics of colonial domination. That is how *El Mad Mex* (the recurrent deontologized alter ego of Gómez-Peña in his performances) and *La Saula* (Saúl García-López) delineate in *A Handbook for the Rebel Artist* their artistic and political interventions:

> Our Pocha cosmovision starts with the term "pocho", … a sort of traitor to national identity. We have chosen to expropriate it, queer it, and connect it to all international deterritorialized peoples, including immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and victims of forced migration.
>
> *(xviii)*

Thus, Gómez-Peña's troupe seeks to penetrate into a practical form of speculative pedagogy that catalyzes current trends of colonial domination and then precipitates the enactment of its inversion through posthuman axiologies. The inclusion of rasquachismo, parody, and irreverence among the techniques they defend as intrinsic to their vision of social intervention anticipates the type of relation among subjects they envision as feasible in a post-border, radical, rebel, and decolonial future for the Chicanx community.

## Chicanxfuturism and Gómez-Peña

Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and Catherine S. Ramírez, two of the most relevant voices in the study of *Chicanxfuturism*, agree in the conceptualization of this term as unique of the time and space in which border fragility coalesces with subjective multiplicity (Merla-Watson 355; Ramírez 2008, 187). The effects of this combination imply a consequent abandonment of an unstable cosmology based on pure binaries, and conversely, they embrace a posthuman sensibility that brings the future of Chicanx identifications back to a speculative reality.

Earlier compilations of Gómez-Peña's performative work reflect this preoccupation about foreseeing an alternative experience in the reconceptualization of post-border dynamics and decolonial reappropriations of borderland spaces and subjectivities. In *Warrior for Gringostroika* (1993), the author reflects upon the complications of reassessing identity in the frontier as a strategy to deconstruct colonial discourses of imposition:

> The social and ethnic fabric of the United States is filled with interstitial wounds, invisible to those who didn't experience the historical events that generated them, or who are victimized by historical amnesia. Those who cannot see these wounds feel frustrated by the hardships of intercultural dialogue.
>
> *(47)*

Although his vision of—what was then known as—intercultural communication has been widely surpassed today, his discussion of "interstitial wounds" is still relevant to deliberate on the principles of Chicanx futurity, as he expresses in his "Prophecy" bundle, collected in *New World Border* (1996):

> Prophecy #IV: The Melting pot vs. the Menudo Chowder … This new society is characterized by mass migrations and bizarre interracial relations. As a result, new hybrid identities are emerging. … Everyone is now a borderígena, meaning a native of the great border region.
>
> *(33)*

Reading the border as an ontological wound—as discussed by Gloria Anzaldúa in her earlier work (Lara 49)—has been the basis of Gómez-Peña's vision about Chicanxfuturism, one that is predicated on forms of posthuman hybridity and deviant epistemological uncertainty. In *Warrior*, the creator of La Pocha Nostra had already anticipated the guidelines that would constitute the activist framework of his performance art group, and had established the criteria that would reframe the conceptualization of Chicanism as anti-establishment and *contestatario* (González and Gómez-Peña 243). Thus, in a chapter called "Form Art-Mageddon to Gringostroika" in *Warrior* (55–66), Gómez-Peña includes two sections ("La Multi-Confusión Culti-Multural" and "Performance Politics or Political Performance Art") in which he discusses the deficiencies of the cultural paradigms of the time, and articulates in contrast an envisioning of cultural practices for Chicanx communities that had already been proved as functional in preceding performative activism in Mexico:

> Amidst abrupt changes in the political cartography, a mysterious convergence of performance art and politics began to occur. Politicians and activists borrowed performance techniques, while performance artists began to mix experimental art with direct political action.
>
> *(58)*

Gómez-Peña refers here to the artistic and social upheaval in Mexico City during the 1970s. In particular, he examines the case of "SuperBarrio", a political activist and social-justice superhero that embodies the personalities of four different characters, each specializing in media intervention, grassroots politics, political theory, and real wrestling (*Warrior* 58).

The development of SuperBarrio's rasquachismo through these four characters evidenced a necessity to reconstruct from the ruins not only the destroyed buildings from the *barrio* after the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, but also the disrupted subjectivities of fellow citizens.[1] Together with other performer artists, SuperBarrio represented the grassroots struggle against the hegemonic relations in México, and Gómez-Peña, who participated in the performative actions of these artists after the earthquake, was able to imagine the political appropriation of the rasquache hybrid at the other side of the border. However, his working-class superheroes were not only a composite of popular culture and political activism; they also included a component of technological characterizations of advanced capitalism. His development of the *cyborg* as a decontextualized form of post-border identity resulted in a manifold strategy to represent the actual multiplicity of post-border subjects, including aspects of ethnicity, social class, and sexuality, but also a deconstruction of spaces, bodies, and affects—or, as they call it, "human puppets and dancing doppelgangers" (La Pocha Nostra 101).

La Pocha Nostra's appropriation of the term *cyborg* as a decontextualized expression of Chicanxfuturism originates thus from different sources, the first being its grassroots component as an artifact of popular activism. However, it also accommodates a theoretical signification from academia, in which two voices appear as paramount: Gloria Anzaldúa and her foundational discussion of gender from a posthuman approach; and Donna Haraway's seminal work on the production of new bodies that transcend traditional boundaries and reflect their sensibility toward decolonial theory (Mendoza 104, Cooper 398). Although it is not the purpose of this chapter to discuss these dialogues between the different developments of the posthuman and the post-border expressions of gender, La Pocha Nostra's emphatic discussions on hybrid identifications require the acknowledgment of the relevance of such epistemic positions.

According to Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983), their term "theory in the flesh" points at fictions that are constantly collected by bodies to

generate knowledge and experience (23). Following this idea, Anzaldúa reflects upon the limitations—which are transformed into new forms of expressivity—used by oppressed people to verbalize their discourses as subjects that were deprived of their subjectivities: "They do it because they don't have the avenues of openly talking about their experiences" (qtd. in Agloro 257).

Gómez-Peña recovers Anzaldúa and Moraga's notion and applies it to his vision of Chicanxfuturism as essentially transcultural, but including an activist component that is inherent to its performance, as the author quite exemplarily enacts in his "El Mariachi-Liberace" piece, in which the artist (dis)embodies a clichéd image of Mexicans.[2] By an excessive use of stereotyped discourses written upon his body, Gómez-Peña appropriates Anzaldúa's "theory in the flesh" through his reverse anthropology, and caricaturizes mainstream hegemonic aesthetics with his destabilization of the mariachi image.[3] With this action, the performer anticipates a subverting activism that will be the base of his idea of Chicanxfuturism, something that would be further developed two decades later by La Pocha Nostra's affiliates, La Saula in her "El Mariachi Zombie de Culiacán" and Balitronica Gómez with her "The Phantom Mariachi". Their knowledge and experience as subjects of cultural hybridization come across the relentless nature of the body and obliterate through humor and irony the essentialist identifications that are normally central to geopolitical borders. The La Pocha Nostra members thus follow Anzaldúa and Moraga's contributions to explore the discourses that are inscribed in their disorganized bodies.

Gómez-Peña's insistence on deconstructing his body is coherent with the "theory in the flesh" concept, but it also dialogs with the idea of the cyborg as a strategy to subvert the legitimized connotations of the body, as conceptualized by Donna Haraway in her critical negotiations with identity politics (111). Gómez-Peña embraced the discussion of the cyborg as a subject of agency which enables prospective transgressions outside of—and beyond—the fabricated identifications of the female body. To do this, he looked at how Haraway's concept undermined the structures configured on the basis of binary systems and dichotomies to project instead an interrogation about human and animal, physical and nonphysical, and, above all, humans and machines. Gómez-Peña focuses on disempowering the conviction that machines are unable to imaginatively construct the future; and, as Haraway did, he emancipates them from the tyranny of the flesh by amalgamating both "othered" forms—body and machine—into a sexualized, multiple, and undefined subjectivity. Undoubtedly, both Gómez-Peña's first explorations and La Pocha Nostra's latest developments of the cyborg have reproduced and substantiated this ontological approach with which Anzaldúa and Haraway built their critique to discourses of power as embodied in the flesh. As early as 1998, the Chicanx performer claimed that identity was a burden that Mexicans needed to subtract in their path to the North in order to produce identification in multiplicity and hybridity:

> Americans cross the border South in search of identity and history. Mexicans cross the border North as if coming into the future. Since we suffer from an excess of identity deep inside what we really want is to get rid of it … We cross the border to reinvent ourselves.
>
> *(Borderstasis)*

With his reflection on how liquid subjectivities are particularly relevant in post-border subjects, Gómez-Peña offers a look into the future of hybridized ontologies, which are very well represented by his later performance developments as a member of the La Pocha Nostra ensemble. Not only did "El Mariachi-Liberace" mean a shocking aperture to these kinds of sensibilities, but it also unlocked new epistemological tenets that would cling to transgressive destabilization

as a tool to open new avenues for Chicanx performative art. Pieces such as *Border Brujo* (1988), *El Naftaztec* (1998), *El Pre-Industrial Cannibal* (2000), the *CyberVato Prototype* (1992), or *El Mad Mex* (1989) abounded on his interest in deconstructing the cultural stereotypes assigned to Chicanx subjects by performing contradictory evolutions of the posthuman and de-organized cyborg. El Mad Mex, for instance, is described by Gómez-Peña as "a transgender Tex-Mex shaman on a custom-made lowrider wheelchair with chrome fenders" (*Dangerous Border Crossers* 45); but many other cyborgs featured by this character also present the same reversed epistemologies with which the artist decontextualizes Anzaldúa's theory of the flesh to produce a futurist vision of post-border subjects:

> "La Morra Diabolica" (Violeta Luna), a deranged teenage schoolgirl who … obsessively injects herself with hypodermic needles; "El Paramilitary Samurai" (Yoshigiro Maeshiro), a Supernintendo mercenary; and "El True Illegal Alien" (Juan Ybarra) a naked green extraterrestrial who moves like a Butoh dancer on speed, incarnating Anglo-Americans' fears of invasion.
>
> *(Dangerous Border Crossers 45)*

The development of Gómez-Peña's—and others'—displays as El Mad Mex (terminator) anticipated the subtler—yet equally flabbergasting—approaches to Chicanxfuturism as it is presented by La Pocha Nostra's pedagogical project. Exploring how these two sensibilities—Chicanxfuturism's and La Pocha Nostra's—coalesce in the second decade of the twenty-first century, after Gómez-Peña's earlier unraveling of hybridity, will create a space of indeterminacy for the new forms of disidentified subjectivities.

## Chicanxfuturism and La Pocha Nostra

According to Catheryn S. Ramírez, Chicanafuturist works "disrupt age-old racist and sexist binaries that exclude Chicanas and Chicanos from visions of the future … and throw into question the link between science, technology, civilization, and progress" ("Afrofuturism/ Chicanafutrism" 189). It is not inadvertently that Ramírez mentions Gómez-Peña in her discussion of Chicanxfuturism, as the cofounder of La Pocha Nostra and the whole group by extension cohere perfectly with what her definition describes.

In 2019, La Pocha Nostra introduced in New Mexico their performance "Red Headed Cyborg 3.0", featured by LROD and aimed at dialoguing with the impact of new technologies in performative art.[4] As Colombian diasporic artist Praba Pilar argues, we live today in the technosphere, "a superorganism of deepfake reality" (249) that should be interpreted as a necropolitical simulacrum. Her vision of the connections between posthuman ontology and the performance of reality—which stems from a reverse and decontextualized articulation of Jean Baudrillard's and Achille Mbembe's ideas, and which is coined by Pilar as "the Necro-Techno complex" (250)—refers to a parodical diversion of the concept of metaverse cyberspace. This concept, which runs parallel to that of the cyborg, is an attempt to reconfigure those identifications that have traditionally been defined by essentialisms and fixed significations, contrary to what one could expect. In this sense, Pilar, as an active participant of La Pocha Nostra's pedagogical and collaborative workshops, invites the Chicanx reader/participant to undefine their given identities, and pushes them to reflect on the dislocated possibilities that are open from a futurist perspective: "Ask yourself, are you non-human, semi-human, cyborg, corporeal, human, noncorporeal, sacred, profane? … Are you transgressive? Are you an inversion?" (250). Her interrogations allude to La Pocha Nostra's concerns for the present production of future

disidentifications for Chicanxs. La Saula indirectly responds to Pilar's questions by trying to define their evolution as a Pocha member from a critically transverse—and transgressive—standpoint, with which they reach certain conclusions that are subsequently introduced to deconstruct their validity:

> During recent years, Pocha has crossed new borders, opened new possibilities for transformation, and changed shape to constitute a new Pocha identity. … The Pocha radical pedagogy may liberate centrifugal/horizontal/queer visions, and turn hard borders into open fronteras, into flexible and fluid spaces that contest the centripetal/hierarchical/patriarchal punishments that limit the body's potential as a powerful, ancestral, and authentic technology for transformation.
>
> *("Radical Pedagogy" 60)*

La Saula's words refer to Pilar's concerns about the current relevance of bodies, whose organs have been *disorganized*, and about the fundamental inversion of legitimized identifications, which are not expected to be restructured in the future into new forms of fixed identities, but rather to create ontological nonplaces.

It is in this spatial context that La Pocha Nostra's ideas are deemed as relevant for a futurist vision of Chicanx and post-border identifications. Chicanxfuturism should be interpreted as an evolution of Gómez-Peña's initial premises on the impact of technology upon the processes of post-border subjectification in global spaces. Chicanxfuturism examines, parallel to La Pocha Nostra, how these elements of artificial and technological origin reconfigure bodies, flesh, and identifications, but to how they also interrogate spaces and places. Whereas Gómez-Peña alluded to racialized forms of virtual reality and to the connections between media networks and transnational ethnoscapes (Foster 46–47), La Pocha Nostra's ideals go one step further and foresee the future of Chicanafuturism as inherently embodied in posthuman conglomerates, based on the territorial confluence of flesh and post-border spaces. Their vision is one that incorporates a new and radical performance of rasquachismo, "an underdog perspective—a view from *los de abajo*, an attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability … and making do with what is at hand" (Ybarra-Frausto 155). In the La Pocha Nostra's reappropriation of the term, not only do they embrace an intellectual rephrasing of rasquache as a machinery for cultural production, but they also celebrate and participate in that production from a grassroots pedagogy, as a troupe of performative interventions in and for the community. Their approach converges with the new terminology put forward by Ramón García, in which he devised this aesthetics as *Chicano camp*, rather than as rasquachismo, the former being a more ironic, critical, and exaggerated strategy to confront bordered marginalizations, and also to deconstruct the ideologies that mold Chicanx deontologizations (211).

La Pocha Nostra's *Urban Guerrilla Interventions*,[5] for instance, reproduce those radical performative practices that had already been enacted in transgressive installations since the early twentieth century, mainly from avant-garde movements, particularly Dadaist and Surrealist sensibilities, but also from the 1960s Situationist project. These practices were rapidly absorbed by the intellectual system, if not directly created by it, but La Pocha Nostra, instead of allowing an appropriation from the academia of their rasquache origins, objectives, and methodologies, *corrupted* their performative practices in order to cling to their grassroots, camp, and radical transgressive significance (Gómez-Peña, *La Pocha Nostra* 190). By doing this, their Chicanx project adheres to the commitment to "all international deterritorialized peoples, including immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and victims of forced migration" (Gómez-Peña, *La Pocha Nostra* xv).

This is a radical, social, and epistemological position that La Pocha Nostra members introduce to the new generations of oppressed communities—both to educators and practitioners—through their performative pedagogy. As Gómez-Peña claims to refer to their subversive mission to create alternative futures for post-border peoples,

> La Pocha Nostra's performance work mixes experimental aesthetics, activist politics, Spanglish humor and audience participation to create a "total experience" … continually developing multi-centric narratives and large-scale performance projects from a border perspective.
>
> *(La Pocha Nostra)*

Therefore, the methodological proposals put forward by La Pocha Nostra fulfill the function of opening new windows for action in the production of alternative developments in Chicanxfuturism. In their practices, La Pocha Nostra members use present performative actions to imagine—and to *incarnate*—other possible reenactments of Chicanism, including forms of radical transformation. As Balitronica Gómez claims in "With Love from the Trenches",

> we have been told by our students that our radical pedagogy works and that it can be useful to generate community and sharpen the intellectual and artistic skills of young activists and artists to help them face the scary immediate future.
>
> *(Gómez-Peña, La Pocha Nostra 212)*

Their constant look at parodic developments of rasquachismo—that encompass repressed forms of urban-rural postapocalyptic pastiches—allows them to envision multiple deconstructed forms of *disorganized* spaces, in which those alternative forms of future are rendered as plausible and necessary. As the artist had already anticipated in "In Search of a New Topography", an illustrative and aptly named chapter from *Dangerous Crosser Borders*, their goal is to "brownify virtual space, to spanglishize the net, and infect the *linguas francas*" (205). This ontological *bastardization* of space (understood as inherent to the posthuman body) purports to prove that claiming and reappropriating the imaginations of post-border subjectifications as a form of Chicanxfuturism facilitates the defamiliarization of the present "to give perspective to the present" (Ortiz 423).

These theoretical discussions have been manifested through the La Pocha Nostra group's creative deluge of performance pieces, which have produced innumerable representations of the problematic reimagination of future in the context of post-border and posthuman societies. Some of those events can be particularly illustrative of their achievements as artists who believe in a commitment to the generation of alternative futures that transgress current and historical limitations of subjectivity.

"Mariachi Maja de Tijuana", for example, is a piece performed by queer nonbinary artist Holly Timpener in Montreal (2016), in which the performer contributes to the troupe's pedagogical agenda by projecting herself as a futurist and dislocated reclamation of Francisco de Goya's celebrated painting, *La Maja Desnuda* (1800).[6] With her corporeal installation, Timpener opposes the passive grandiloquence represented by Goya's masterpiece as an active—and activist—form of popular desublimation, enacted by her body as a hypersexualized palimpsest that decontextualizes its own legitimacy. With this piece, which *rasquachizes* art by deconstructing the body, the artist promotes a radical transgression of legitimate discourses by celebrating them, something that tallies up with La Pocha Nostra's attempts to reimagine different futures for "underdog" communities, and illustrates new forms for reconfiguring Chicanx disidentifications.

Another example of Gómez-Peña's troupe's work with communities is represented by their performative efforts in "We Are All Aliens", a project that incorporates several artists—including solo performances by Gómez-Peña (2020–2022)—to defamiliarize the female body with a parodical decontextualization of space and spatialities. Their ludic use of language in "We Are All Aliens" reproduces La Pocha Nostra's political intentions to resignify bodies, spaces, and aesthetics, introducing sordid yet sardonic characterizations of naked bodies wearing only an "alien" mask to reclaim the rights of undocumented immigrants.[7] Several artists, such as Muza de la Luz, Claudia Altamirano, or Paloma Martínez-Cruz have performed this character from positions that provide new insights for the resignification of the border, both in geographical and ontological terms. The human alien created by La Pocha Nostra is to be understood as the representation of a future manifestation of post-border subjects that transcend body limits, spatial constrains, and hegemonic politics, and coincides with Gómez-Peña's ideological ambitions as a performance artist:[8]

> The performance artist thinks also of the human body as landscape, map, artifact, machine, cyborg, animal, mythological creature, text, and in this sense, the nude body is not really "nude". It's rather *a symbolic artifact or a conceptual space to engage in critical thinking.*
> *(Hilden, emphasis in original)*

A third and final illustration of La Pocha Nostra's imagination of the future comes with one of their most recent sets, "Adam and Eve in Times of War", in which Gómez-Peña, Saúl Garcia Lopez, and Balitronica Gómez enact how violence against the Other still contradicts the politics of transculturalism for border inhabitants, particularly from an institutionalized form of brutality that affects and transfigures border-crossing individuals.[9] In their project, they use the carcass of a cow as a canvass for their flesh narratives, thus exposing the semantic multiplicity of their bodies as alternative forms of subjectification—particularly in the case of Chicanx sensibilities. La Pocha Nostra's project responds perfectly with "Adam and Eve" to Eduardo Mendieta's description of the group, when he claimed that "like codices, Gómez-Peña's group performances are palimpsests through which layers of history and critique speak in (de)effaced languages whose grammar we are in the process of (re)constructing" (542).

Notwithstanding the originality of La Pocha Nostra's pedagogical actions, the *rasquache/Chicanx camp* artistic configuration of borders put forward by the group has been fairly common during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, and many projects have had an interesting effect on the youngest generations of marginalized communities. Two parallel—and elucidative—examples of the underscore future that La Pocha Nostra observes from their radical position as facilitators of the ontological intervention of bodies, spaces, and technology are Alejandro Damiani's *M.A.M.O.N. (Monitor Against Mexicans Over Nationwide)* and Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2008). The former is a 2016 parodic short film in which an ultra-mechanized version of Donald Trump is defeated by a Mexican chicken at the south side of the frontier, while the latter film introduces a dystopian future in which technology oppresses and empowers border-crossers. Both cases envision the empowering of future Chicanx identities by presenting environments in which binary geographies and subjectivities are transgressed by virtue of deconstructed bodies that either produce or appropriate an agency that has been neglected to them. Their vision comes to terms with La Pocha Nostra's depiction of reality, in which they satirize—or *rasquachize*—the sublimation of technology as a means to transcend the limitations of physicality, and reinforce the idea of bringing virtuality and cyborg exaltation down to a political and artistic articulation with the practice of everyday life.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra have therefore had an influential role in contemporary performative art based on borders. Not only have they succeeded in producing a

remarkable impact on the interrogation of artistic practices, but they have also imagined a future for the forthcoming generations in the Chicanx community. Their interrogation of the relentless nature of spaces and bodies opens up new opportunities to revisit and deconstruct the foundations of border epistemologies. Chicanx performance art, as an incursion into the depths of identity production and identity destruction, brings out the possibility of envisaging a future in which a binary and Manichean perception of the border is stripped away from younger communities, and a multiple, manyfold, and multifaceted approach to its production is encouraged instead. La Pocha Nostra emerges, thus, as an instrument to satirically appropriate the innumerable pitfalls of border-crossing identifications, and to undermine the ostensibly inexorable destiny of a future that is defined by discrimination and lack of agency. Instead, Gómez-Peña's troupe's mission is to urge Chicanx communities on to enact radical actions of political, artistic, and ontological transgression, thus assembling alternative forms of the future that will provide unorthodox and nonconforming identifications beyond the legitimate discourses of spaces and bodies.

## Notes

1  SuperBarrio has allegedly been attributed to activists and artists Marco Rascón and Javier Hidalgo, although the instruction was that "SuperBarrio éramos todos" (Altamirano).
2  Also delivered as "The Transvestite Mariachi".
3  See Gómez-Peña's *The New World Border* (191) for a photograph of "El Mariachi-Liberace".
4  Several images of the artist's work have been made available to the public in their professional website, at https://lrod.space/lrod.
5  See figure 8.17 (page 191) in *La Pocha Nostra: A Handbook for the Rebel Artist* for a capture of one of the group's urban interventions.
6  See Gómez-Peña's personal website at https://www.guillermogomezpena.com/works/ for a photograph of Timpener performing "Mariachi Maja de Tijuana".
7  See the "Survivalist cyborg #69" (2014), as another performance piece that agrees with Gómez-Peña's impressions of art as described in the previous quotation. It presents a type of cyborg that resembles the "Illegal Alien" appearance, but using a vintage, steampunk gas mask instead of an alien mask. An image of this individual piece can be found at https://www.guillermogomezpena.com/works/.
8  Not coincidentally, Laura Molina's *Amor Alien* appears both as the cover image of Merla-Watson's 2017 book, and as the back cover image of *Gómez-Peña Unplugged*. This art piece by Molina, which was inspired by Jesús Helguera's *Amor Indio* (1946), portrays the artist "as a green-skinned, indigenous resident of a fictional red planet" (Ramírez-Dhoore 25), sarcastically leaning against an alien white man who needs technology to survive in a hostile environment.
9  See *Gómez-Peña Unplugged* (143) for a capture of their "Adam and Eve in Times of War" 2015 performance at Campeche, Mexico.

## Works Cited

Agloro, Alexandrina. "Rasquache Cyborgs and Borderland Aesthetics in Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer*." *This Bridge We Call Communication: Anzaldúan Approaches to Theory, Method, and Praxis*, edited by Leandra Hinojosa Hernández, Robert Gutierrez-Perez. Lexington Books, 2019, pp. 257–272.
Altamirano, Claudia. "Enmascarados contra las injusticias mexicanas." *El País*, 3 Jan. 2016.
*Borderstasis: A Video Diary*, directed by Guillermo Gómez-Peña. German TV ARTE, 1998.
Cooper, Brittney. "Intersectionality." *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth. Oxford UP, 2016, pp. 385–406.
Foster, Thomas. "Cyber-Aztecs and Cholo-Punks: Guillermo Gómez-Peña's Five-Worlds Theory." *PMLA*, vol. 117, no. 1, 2002, pp. 43–67.
García, Ramón. "Against Rasquache: Chicano Camp and the Politics of Identity in Los Angeles." *The Chicana/O Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Angie Chabram-Dernersesian. Routledge, 2006, pp. 211–223.
Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. *Warrior for Gringostroika*. Graywolf Press, 1993.
———. *The New World Border*. City Lights, 1996.

———. *Dangerous Border Crossers*. Routledge, 2000.

———. *Ethno-Techno: Writings on Performance, Activism and Pedagogy*. Routledge, 2005.

———. *Gómez-Peña Unplugged: Texts on Live Art, Social Practice and Imaginary Activism*. Routledge, 2020.

———. *La Pocha Nostra: A Handbook for the Rebel Artist in a Post-Democratic Society*. Routledge, 2021.

———. "La Pocha Nostra." LPN's Live Art Laboratory & Border Research Institute. https://www.guillermogomezpena.com/la-pocha-nostra/. Accessed 2 Dec. 2012.

Gómez-Peña, Guillermo, and Roberto Sifuentes. *Exercises for Rebel Artists: Radical Performance Pedagogy*. Routledge, 2011.

González, Jennifer, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. "Pose and Poseur: The Racial Politics of Guillermo Gómez-Peña's Photo-Performances." *Race and Classification, The Case of Mexican America*, edited by Ilona Katzew and Susan Deans-Smith. Stanford UP, 2020, pp. 236–266.

Haraway, Donna. *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan © Meets OncoMouse™*, 2nd ed. Routledge, 2018.

Hilden, Nick. "Does Hope Put You at Odds with the State?" *Living Life Fearless*, 2018. https://livinglifefearless.co/2018/hype/guillermo-gomez-pena-does-hope-put-you-at-odds-with-the-state/. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.

La Pocha Nostra. *Live Art Laboratory & Border Research Institute*, 2021. https://www.guillermogomezpena.com/la-pocha-nostra. Accessed 12 Aug. 2021.

Lara, Irene. "Daughter of Coatlicue: An Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa." *Entremundos/ Amongworlds. New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*, edited by Ana Louise Keating. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 41–56.

La Saula. "Radical Pedagogy for a Post-Democratic Society: A Pedagogical Introduction." *La Pocha Nostra: A Handbook for the Rebel Artist in a Post-Democratic Society*, edited by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Saúl García-López, and Paloma Martinez-Cruz. Routledge, 2021, pp. 57–73.

Mendieta, Eduardo, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. "A Latino Philosopher Interviews a Chicano Performance Artist." *Nepantla: Views from South*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2001, pp. 539–554.

Mendoza, Breny. "Coloniality of Gender and Power. From Postcoloniality to Decoloniality." *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth. Oxford UP, 2016, pp. 100–121.

Merla-Watson, Cathryn J., and B.V. Olguín, editors. *Altermundos: Latin@ Speculative Film, Literature, and Popular Culture*. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017.

Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldúa, editors. *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983.

Ortiz, Amalia. "*The Canción Cannibal Cabaret*: A Post-apocalyptic Anarcha-Feminist Revolutionary Punk Rock Musical." *Altermundos: Latin@ Speculative Film, Literature, and Popular Culture*, edited by Cathryn J. Merla-Watson and B.V. Olguín. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017, pp. 422–449.

Pérez, Emma. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. Indiana UP, 1999.

Pilar, Praba. "Section Seven: On the Impact of New Technologies in Live Art: The Necro-Techno Complex." *La Pocha Nostra: A Handbook for the Rebel Artist in a Post-Democratic Society*, edited by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Saúl García-López, and Paloma Martinez-Cruz. Routledge, 2021, pp. 249–250.

Ramírez, Catherine S. "The Time Machine, from Afrofuturism to Chicanafuturism, and Beyond." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2015, pp. 127–130.

———. "Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism. Fictive Kin." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2008, pp. 185–194.

Ramírez-Dhoore, Dora. "The Cyberborderlands: Surfing the Web for Xicanidad." *Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2005, pp. 10–47.

Rivera, Lysa. "Chicano/a CyberPunk after el Movimiento." *Altermundos: Latino Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, edited by Cathryn Josephina Merla-Watson and B.V. Olguín. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017, pp. 93–109.

Ybarra-Frausto, Tomás. "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility." *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*, edited by Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano. Wight Art Gallery, 1991, pp. 155–179.

# 28

# CROSSING MERFOLK

## Mermaids and the Middle Passage in African Diasporic Culture

*Jalondra A. Davis*

While underrepresented in Afrofuturism and science fiction studies, mermaids and other kinds of aquatic beings appear frequently across African diasporic religions, fiction, music, art, and folklore. From the whispering of folktales through the Carolina low country to the donning of mermaid tails in music videos by Sade, Beyonce, and Nikki Minaj, the mermaid in Black culture carries a multitude of meanings (Grant; Hamilton 138; Loucas and Williams; Muller). Black mermaids are goddesses that empower those in bondage and its afterlife; they are powerful surrogate mothers that befriend neglected girls; they are maroon Africans that evaded racial chattel slavery by making new lives in the ocean (Ras Michael Brown 253; Womack 87). This chapter focuses on the latter narrative, one that is ubiquitous yet has received little critical attention: the proposal that African people cast overboard during the Middle Passage transformed to live in the sea. I call this narrative Crossing Merfolk, following M. Jacqui Alexander's use of *the Crossing* to describe both the Middle Passage as it consolidated global white supremacist power over the world and "the crossroads, the space of convergence and endless possibility; the place where we put down and discard the unnecessary in order to pick up that which is necessary" (8). Crossing merfolk narratives recognize the Atlantic Ocean as a site of empire-building through immense violence against African people, but also retrieves it as a space of rebirth and new possibility. This story has been told by African diasporic artists in music, children's books, short stories, novels, poetry, graphic novels, film, and visual art. I expansively read these texts as mermaid stories, following Ytasha Womack and Yvette Gaskins, whose useful genealogies of merfolk in Black expressive culture pull together mermaids, water divinities, and aquatic-themed performance and aesthetics (Gaskins "Mami Wata Remixed"; Womack 80–96). While most mermaid scholarship focuses on the most typical form of a young, nubile woman with the lower half of a fish, I insist that the concept be broadened to account for the diverse forms, portrayals, and meanings of water-dwelling spirits and people in Black Atlantic culture.

Crossing merfolk narratives blur the boundaries between fantasy and science fiction, drawing on scientific rationalism, African cosmologies, and Western mythologies. By depicting not necessarily futures but preexisting and coexisting temporalities and worlds, and by locating the origin of these new forms of life in the violence of the transatlantic slave trade, crossing merfolk present possibilities for being and freedom that are inextricable from, yet not

bound by, racialized hierarchy and violence. Fantasy and speculation sometimes function as possible sites through which to escape or sidestep racialized histories, trauma, and struggle. However, Afrofuturism frequently revisits the past, and crossing merfolk narratives perfectly exemplify how Afrofuturism engages race and its violent history without being bound and constrained by it.

As Jayna Brown claims, "Futurity as it is embedded in the creative field of Afrofuturism is generative of all kinds of temporal distortions that refuse a Western chronology of civilization" (15). Rather than an imaginary deferred to a future, crossing merfolk narratives function outside of a linear notion of time. Crossing merpeople preexist and coexist us in the here and now. These texts swim divergent but frequently overlapping and intersecting paths, and they reflect contradictory but sometimes coexisting impulses within Afrofuturism, towards high-tech civilizations or collective, materialist ecologies; superhumans or utterly otherhuman forms; masculinist or non-heteronormative worlds.[1] In this chapter I do not attempt a comprehensive analysis of crossing merfolk texts, but a critical overview that briefly examines some of their recurring and contrasting elements. The following survey—while recognizing many flows back and forth between—is organized around three major themes within crossing merfolk narratives: evolutionary discourse, utopia, and African spirituality.

### Crossing Merfolk and the Homo Aquaticus

I include in my discussion of merfolk the "Homo Aquaticus", which, according to Philip Hoare, is the human that evolves into marine form—or the underdeveloped human that has not yet evolved beyond its marine environment (14). Creatively extrapolating evolutionary science, this is a decidedly science-fictional narrative that has often been used in colonialist and racist ways. According to Farquharson and Clark, "Under European imperialism, colonized subjects were on occasions imagined in aquatic form in what were racist allegories of biological inferiority; to be nearer the sea was to be less fully evolved and not fully human" (9). Characters such as Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the mysterious merman in *Creature from the Black Lagoon* were fishlike, incomplete, inferior beings "to whom the primordial soup still clings" (Clark and Farquarson 9). However, Hoare theorizes homo aquaticus as a trope that contests human hierarchies rather than reinforces them. He examines how authors portray the fishlike person not as primitive ancestor or missing link, but as a human who evolves as an escape from exploitative conditions. One such example is Charles Kingsley's 1863 *The Water Babies*, in which a young chimney sweep falls asleep in the water while trying to get clean, grows gills, and swims to freedom. However, the narrative leaves open whether this is merely a fantasy that euphemizes the boy's death by drowning, as the soot-black husk of his body is later found (Hoare 15). Crossing merfolk narratives are explicit in claiming the homo aquaticus not as euphemistic fantasy, but as a rational outcome to a vicious trade that cast over a million living and dead African people into the sea.

The worldbuilding of mysterious electronic duo Drexciya is probably the most well-known and analyzed example of the crossing merfolk idea. Drexciya's origin story coincides with the homo aquaticus, a fantastic vision rooted in evolutionary discourse. While aquatic imagery and references abound across Drexciya's music, it is a 1997 compilation album, *The Quest*, which first offers a specific origin for the undersea world hinted at throughout their prolific discography. In the liner notes of *The Quest*, an "Unknown Writer" speculates, in pseudo-scientific discourse, upon the possible transformation of unborn babies whose laboring mothers were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage,

A foetus in its mother's womb is certainly alive in an aquatic environment. … Recent experiments have shown mice able to breathe liquid oxygen. Even more shocking and conclusive was a recent instance of a premature infant saved from certain death by breathing liquid oxygen through its undeveloped lungs.

*("The Quest")*

The Unknown Writer then connects these musings to alleged sightings of aquatic mutated humanoid creatures off the coast of the Atlantic. According to Kodwu Eshun, the Drexciyan mythos is a "poetics of mutation" that intervenes in popular images and representations of posthumanism in the 1990s. Eshun primarily analyzes the Drexciyan myth as a disruption of the temporal teleology of the posthuman, locating the origins of posthumanism in the past rather than the future (144). However, Drexciya's "poetics of mutation" also disrupt the role of technology in the creation of the posthuman, locating its origins not in human mastery, but in human violence—the extraordinarily callous violence of throwing laboring mothers overboard—and in mysterious and spontaneous evolution. Nalo Hopkinson's 2004 novel *The New Moon's Arms* also presents an evolutionary explanation for her homo aquaticus merfolk: they are the descendants of African captives from a nineteenth-century shipwreck who adapt to survive in the ocean. *The New Moon's Arms'* merfolk have broad chests to enable larger lung capacity and long periods of submersion, webbed hands and feet, sticky patches on the insides of their legs that hold them together and mimic the propelling action of a mermaid tail, translucent second eyelids to help them see underwater, and lots of body fat to protect from the ocean's cold (134–135). Hopkinson draws on both sea mammals and latent features in human anatomy that, according to some biologists and anthropologists, suggest previous existence as aquatic or semi-aquatic: broad shoulders more suitable for swimming than running, vestigial webbed fingers, body fat ratios comparable to some sea mammals, and kidneys that can process excess salt (Hoare 14). Yet unlike Drexciya and their offspring texts, which never use the term mermaids or merfolk, Hopkinson specifically associates her science-fictional homo aquaticus with mermaid, selkie, and water spirit lore. Her sea people can transform completely into seals, they are referred to as "mermaids" throughout the novel, and they have a connection to the African water deity Mami Wata. This bridges evolutionary crossing merfolk narratives with those anchored in African religion, cosmologies which are also scientific ways of understanding humans' relationship to the natural world (Davis "Crossing Merfolk, the Human" 353–354; Dillon 25).

## Crossing Merfolk and the Aqua-Afrotopia

While most accounts of the crossing merfolk idea identify Drexciya as the first iteration, Gaskins suggests that Drexciya was inspired by Parliament Funkadelic's *Motor Booty Affair*, which depicts an underwater city, called Atlantis, where liberated Black folks party and dance with sea creatures ("Deep Sea Dwellers" 70). This merging of the Middle Passage and the legend of Atlantis exemplifies the crossing merfolk as a means to achieve what I call *Afrotopia*, a Black political state free to develop without the disruptions, trauma, and underdevelopment of European conquest. I adapt the term "Afrotopia" from the title of Wilson Jeremiah Moses's 1998 study of Ethiopianism—a cyclical view of black history that identifies African diasporans as descendants of a great African civilization, in which original African greatness is lost but destined to be restored (Davis, "Utopia and the Gendered Past in Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood*" 9). Afrotopia is a recurring trope in Black speculation, found in everything from Pauline Hopkins's 1902 serial novel *Of One Blood; Or, The Hidden Self* to Ryan Coogler's 2017 blockbuster *Black Panther*. Underwater Afrotopias, or what I call Aqua-Afrotopias, imagine the ocean floor as a

space where great Black civilizations thrive undisrupted by conquest and enslavement. Yet, rather than drawing on the ancient African civilizations of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Kush as in Hopkins's *Of One Blood*, or compiling elements of different contemporary African cultures such as in *Black Panther*, they tend to adapt and blacken traditionally Western oceanic legends, such as that of the lost city of Atlantis. Rather than how Atlantis functioned in the political thought of Plato as a cautionary tale, a foil to the state of Athens, Black Atlantis legends claim it as an aspirational society (Burton 82). According to Joshua Bennett, "In all of these works [Black Atlantis texts], the haunting presence of the Middle Passage is recalibrated toward the end of imagining an elsewhere, however remote or deeply submerged, where black life can flourish" (178). The Aqua-Afrotopia is a trope of speculative maroonage, a watery refuge where possibilities for Black life, un-shadowed by the ever-present reign of white supremacy, can thrive.

Details within Drexciya's sonic fiction suggest that the world of the Drexciyans is an Aqua-Afrotopia. Due to Drexciya's deliberate practice of artistic obscurity and the ephemerality of their music, we never get a fully fleshed-out world. Clues come from subtle manipulations of sound to occasionally suggest oceanic thematics, voice-overs, track titles, liner notes, album art, and rare comments and interviews—those things that Kodwu Eshun defines as "sonic fiction", "the convergence of the organization of sound with a fictional system whose fragments gesture towards but fall short of the satisfactions of the narrative" (138). One of Drexciya's tracks is entitled "Bubble Metropolis", a title that blends aquatic imagery with that of a highly developed city. At the opening of the track, a female voice, identifying itself as "Drexciyan Cruise Control Bubble One" advises submersible vehicles to slow their speed. At one point the voice directs these vehicles (and, potentially, the listener) to "proceed with caution" as they pass "the aqua construction site", where they are "cleared for docking" ("Bubble Metropolis"). That this is a world with submersible technology, ongoing building construction, and enough traffic to warrant control centers suggests a highly organized, technologically advanced civilization. Illustrator Frankie Fultz's art for the album *Aquatic Invasion*, the first to visually depict the Drexciyans, features mutated figures ("Wavejumpers") in diving suits with masks, oxygen tanks, and tridents, suggesting that the Drexciyans' biological adaptations are at least partly supported and enhanced by their technology.

Techno illustrator Abdul Qadim Haqq describes a collaborative process by which he, Gerald Donald, and James Stinson developed the Drexciyan world for their later releases. This world-building features massive squids modified into organic submersibles, aqua wormholes to enable rapid oceanic travel, and a race of warrior-scientists who win great battles and do experiments in an oceanic lab. Haqq says of his centerfold for the album *Neptune's Lair*, which depicts armored, highly muscled warriors returning from battle, "It's a victorious return because they rarely lose, I'll tell you that much" (Haqq). The Aqua-Afrotopia of the Drexciyan empire imagines a world where Black people, but most particularly Black male warriors, always win. Though femininity is central to the Drexciyan mythos—it is specifically Black pregnant women cast overboard who are the source of the Drexciyans, and it is a feminine voice we hear directing submersible traffic in Bubble Metropolis—the visual imaginary of the album art is overwhelmingly masculine. This elusive sonic fiction provides little sense of the Drexciyan social and ecological world, the Drexciyans' relationship to one another, or to the aquatic environment.

Unlike other Afrofuturist musicians such as Sun Ra, P-Funk, and, more recently, Janelle Monae, who built their visionary worlds around their own personas, Donald and Stinson shunned attention on themselves as creators, giving few interviews, moving away from the Detroit techno scene, and "practicing obscurity" by "publicly withdrawing from the public" (Eshun 138; Gaskins, "Deep Sea Dwellers" 75; Rubin). Drexciya's practice of obscurity and the ephemerality of their music contributes to the Drexciyan mythos taking on a life of its own, as several other artists compose, rap, write, and paint into the space.[2]

Such works build upon and further develop the Drexciyan narrative's nascent critiques of humanism, racial capitalism, and environmental exploitation. While not explicitly referencing Drexciya, Lupe Fiasco's concept album *Drogas Wave* depicts a strikingly similar narrative in telling the story of Black people under the sea who sink other slave ships and awaken their captives. Not attributing their survival to any specific science or magic, Fiasco's depiction of ocean people remains opaque and serves as a vehicle through which he imagines ongoing life for other Black people whose lives are cut short by racist systems. The sonic fiction of one of *Drogas Wave* album covers raises comparisons to Drexciya and Black Atlantic—Fiasco crouches on a rock under the ocean, bearing a trident like those carried by Drexciyan warriors and ocean gods.

Abdul Qadim Haqq has continued developing the Drexciyan sonic fiction through *The Book of Drexciya Volume I*, a crowd-funded graphic novel. The narrative revels in a martial, high-tech, masculinist visual and narrative imaginary. Rather than spontaneous evolution, the unborn babies' transformation to hybrid form is wrought by ancient sorceresses from the lost city of Atlantis. The first-born Drexciyan child is a boy, the first king of the Drexciyan empire (Haqq and Sato). Haqq's departure from The Quest liner notes' speculation upon survival via uterine biology begs the question—if this is magic, why would the Atlantis sorceresses not have also saved the mothers? While this creative choice may only have been intended to flesh out an opaque origin story, it has the effect of transforming the story from a critique of the gendered violence of the slave trade to a narrative gendered violence of its own, in which Black mothers must die in order for their children (particularly the first-born male son) to create a new civilization, a metropolitan and monarchial Aqua-Afrotopia. Women appear as sorceresses, warriors, and queens in *The Book of Drexciya*, but men are centered in the book's major exploits, including the expedition to Neptune's Lair, attacks on slave ships, and battles with the Drexciyans' ongoing enemies, the Darthouven Fishmen. While Frankie Fultz's illustration of Drexciyan Wavejumpers includes one with a fishtail, Haqq's Drexciyans are two-legged humanoids with slight aquatic features such as large, bright eyes and webbed hands, feet, and ears that seem more aesthetic than adaptive. Their rivalry with the Darthouven Fishmen, who resemble Western-style mermen with fishtails, is important to the graphic novel's discourse on gender. Philip Hayward suggests that the marginalization of the merman in Western culture is grounded in the lack of an obvious phallus, which obfuscates the merman's masculinity (138). That these fishmen are set firmly against the Drexciyans as antagonists that repeatedly attempt to invade the heteropatriarchal Drexciyan empire, and are soundly defeated and humiliated every time, seems to purposely distance Drexciya from mermaid folklore and assert a triumphant and virile Black masculinity uninhibited by conquest and enslavement. Utopias, even feminist, anticolonial, and Black utopias, can have trouble escaping Western science fiction and utopian thought's deep imbrication with violent notions of race, gender, and progress (Davis, "Utopia" 8).

clipping.'s "The Deep" also samples and revises the Drexciyan narrative. In "The Deep", the unnamed water people have tails which distinguish them from humans, or "two-legs", beginning a synthesis of the Drexciya origin story with the mermaid folklore that Haqq seems to set it against. clipping. does not gender these merpeople, and the song's reference to them through the plural "Yall" potentially speaks to a collective personhood and sociality (Diggs et al.). Novelist Rivers Solomon takes this song as the starting point for their novel *The Deep*, which credits clipping. members in its authorship. The novel *The Deep* depicts a gender-fluid, anti-hierarchical, loosely organized world of the fish-like Wajinru people, one that is deeply collective and embedded in the ocean's ecology. While *The Deep* does reference the ocean battles that feature more prominently in the song "The Deep" and in *The Book of Drexciya*, Solomon de-emphasizes violent confrontation in favor of a queer love story and the Wajinru's struggles with the traumatic history of their creation.

## Crossing Merfolk and the Sacred

A different tradition within crossing merfolk narratives explicitly grounds the trope in African cosmologies, most particularly through the active role of feminine water deities. In these texts, it is not evolution or unexplained phenomena, but an African goddess or spirit who transforms those bound in slave ships into aquatic form. In other work, I refer to these as crossing merfolk narratives of the Sacred, borrowing M. Jaqui Alexander's term for the African-derived religions practiced throughout the Americas (Alexander 291; Davis "Crossing Merfolk Narratives" 55; and Tesfaye's *The Water Will Carry Us Home*). Most of these narratives reference some form of the goddess Mami Wata or the Yoruba orisha Yemayá. The complexity of these water divinities, their relationship to one another, and their representation as mermaids reflects the plurality, dualities, and dynamism of African traditional and diasporic religions themselves. These religions challenge the distinction between monotheistic and polytheistic, frequently featuring one distant, supreme (often nongendered) God figure who has withdrawn from the world and can be approached only through an array of intermediary deities who personify natural elements, manage certain metaphysical forces, and advise and protect their devotees. These figures, (orisha, lwas, mysteres) take shape within distinct geographies, histories, and languages, forged by the creative, improvisational practices of African and African-descended peoples (Alexander 290–292; Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 21). Some convincingly suggest that the original mermaids in terms of partly human, part water creature forms are indigenous to Africa and may have been appropriated by Europeans (Baptiste "Mermaids"; Womack 84). However, scholars such as Persephone Braham and Ras Brown describe a more complex, multidirectional syncretic process by which indigenous feminine water spirits absorb and transform aspects of both one another and of European mermaid imagery and lore (Braham 157–159). According to Brown,

> The physical and terminological resemblance of mermaids (and more recent representations of a widespread water spirit known as Mami Wata) in African-Atlantic spiritual thought, art, and practice to the European-Atlantic mermaid reflects a point of cultural connection and exchange, not an instance of a foreign culture introducing a completely new idea … mermaids served primarily as a lexical and cultural point of contact to open dialogue between the people of African and European descent in the Atlantic world when contemplating the meaning of the powerful female spirits of the water.
>
> *(259)*

In contrast to modern Western binaries, African worldviews not only tolerate but are rich in tensions and dualities. African-descended people—perceiving attributes of their indigenous spirits in Catholic saints and European mermaids, and often needing to hide indigenous faiths from state persecution—synthesized these figures within their pantheons and ritual practices, where the African deities still retain their original power. Artists who include Mami Wata and Yemayá in their works exemplify African-based cosmologies' increasing presence in Black popular culture. While Drexciyan lore blackened Western myths through references to the Roman god Neptune and the lost city of Atlantis, contemporary writers and artists probe African-based religion and folklore for aquatic images in which Black people can see themselves, often further transforming these figures in the process.

Mami Wata refers to a powerful water goddess (and to many water spirits referred to by similar names) who takes many forms throughout Africa and the diaspora. She is often depicted with the upper body of a woman and bottom part as a fish or serpent, or as a woman with full skirts hiding her "secret" tail. She frequently appears with snakes wound around her neck and

waist, an abundance of gleaming hair, heavy jewels and adornment, a mirror, and comb. Very beautiful and very dangerous, she can grant or withdraw healing, good fortune, fertility, and wealth (Drewal; Nies). Most scholars insist that she is a modern deity who takes form from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, a syncretization of indigenous African water spirits with the foreign influences of European mermaids and Indian snake charmers, a deity largely associated with the transatlantic slave trade and emerging capitalist economies (Drewal; Osinubi). However, some practitioners and scholars reject this origin story of Mami Wata, asserting her as an ancient primordial spirit. Mami Wata Voudon priestess Mama Zogbe claims that Mami deities originate in pre-Islamic, matrilineal, and matriarchal cultures in what she calls Afro-Mesopotamia, and are dispersed through sub-Saharan Africa as queens in these regions fled invasions and forced conversions to Abrahamic religions. Womack argues that Mami Wata descends from the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis, also depicted with serpents and associated with bodies of water, fertility, and rebirth, and claims that her name, commonly understood as a West African hybrid dialect for "Mother Water", actually derives from Egyptian words Ma or mama meaning "truth and wisdom", and uati, meaning "ocean water" (86). These vastly different origin stories reflect the porousness and multidimensionality of Mami Wata, and the range of beings, from the Greek siren to the Egyptian goddess Isis, that contribute to her enduring but fluid power.

Along with Mami Wata, Yemayá is referenced most often in contemporary Black mermaid texts. While Drewal, Womack, and practitioners in the popular sphere frequently collapse Mami Wata and Yemayá together, others identify Mami Wata and the orisha Yemayá as emerging from distinct traditions (Braham 164; Gaskins "Mami" 196). Yemayá (also known as Yemanjá, Yemoja, and Iemanjá) figures prominently in the central pantheons of the Yoruba religion Ifá and the diasporic syncretic religions Santería, Umbanda, Lucumí, and Candomblé (though not, interestingly, in Vodou, where lwa of love Ezili's sea aspect, Lasiren, is the mistress of the waters; Alexander 292; Ras Michael Brown 272–273; Deren 151). In Africa, Yemayá is the mother of rivers and visits all bodies of water; in the Americas she is the mother of the ocean. Sometimes referred to as "Mother of the Sea", "Mermaid in the Sea", and "Mermaid Who Stays in the Water", Yemayá is a benevolent maternal figure, usually missing the more seductive and dangerous elements of Mami Wata's meanings and iconography, though she can be violent and wrathful on behalf of her children, bring storms when angered, and snatch people to live with her under water. Her colors are pale blue, pink, and white; her preferred offerings are white flowers and sweets; and she is a protector of pregnant women, mothers, and children (Alexander 290–292; Braham 164; Ras Michael Brown 271; Hale 114–115).

Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's Arms* presents multiple narratives for the origins of the sea people in the novel. While, in some instances, the novel encourages readers to accept the scientifically rational explanation that the sea people evolved into their homo aquaticus form, it provides a coexisting alternative explanation through Mami Wata. In recurring flashbacks, an unnamed female character called the dada-haired lady, imprisoned on a slaver's ship, calls on Uhamiri (a local Igbo Mami Wata deity), for help. Uhamiri responds to this prayer by bringing a storm and transforming the African people onboard into seals who escape the ship's destruction. Through this scene, Hopkinson creatively synthesizes Mami Wata lore with that of northern European selkies, magical seals who become beautiful women on land and marry human men until they find their stolen sealskins (Anatol 202–205). Hopkinson suggests throughout the novel that the protagonist, Calamity, who has magical powers and webbed fingers, is the daughter of one of these African seal-women, who disappeared (perhaps returning to the sea) when she was a child. As an adult, Calamity cares for a merchild that she discovers injured on the beach. Through the relationship with this child, Agway (not coincidentally, the name of

Vodou lwa of the ocean Agwé), Calamity comes to terms with her traumatic family history, begins to heal damaged relationships, and becomes involved in the island's environmental justice movements. The mermaid here functions as a method of reconciliation: between people and people, people and their history, people and the earth/waters.

In children's literature, contemporary Black mermaid texts help to mediate the traumatic history of the Middle Passage and claim a uniquely African diasporic space for Black women and girls within mermaid lore. They also often serve to foster ecoliteracy, as the female water deity, in the form of mermaid, serves as conduit to the natural world (Garcia-Vega 76–78). While Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Bayou Magic* (2015) does not depict people becoming mermaids, it bears mentioning in relationship to these texts. The mermaid spirit in the novel, Mami Wata, accompanies and strengthens her devotees through the Middle Passage. Mami Wata takes one of her devotees' descendants, a young girl named Maddie, into the water and helps Maddie to save her community from environmental devastation. In Tracey Baptiste's *Rise of the Jumbies* (2019), Mama D'Leau, an anaconda woman in Caribbean folklore, transforms girls imprisoned on sunken slave ships into mermaids that provide her with company and assistance in her schemes. Mama D'Leau with her coiling serpent tail—who kidnaps men and children into the ocean as easily as she blesses them—appears to be a manifestation of Mami Wata, a relationship that is suggested throughout *Rise of the Jumbies*. Where in most of these deity-based crossing merfolk narratives, Mami Wata and Yemayá function similarly and interchangeably as kind, benevolent mermaids, Baptiste's portrayal of Mama D'Leau (tempestuous, threatening, and sometimes predatory) expresses more of Mami Wata's danger and cosmological duality. Zetta Elliott's young adult novella *Mother of the Sea* (2017) follows the journey of a young woman being transported to the Americas through the Middle Passage, who leads a rebellion on the slave ship with the help of Yemayá. Appearing first as a shadow following the ship then as a silver-tailed mermaid, Yemayá destroys the ship with a storm, raises the Africans (survivors and bodies) stranded on shore, and takes them into the sea. Leila Vrhel's *Mami Wata* (2011), also an independently published novella for young readers, depicts Mami Wata as a young African mother, kidnapped into the slave trade, who throws herself and all those to whom she is chained overboard. As a blessing granted for saving her companions from a life of enslavement, the woman is transformed into a mermaid called Mami Wata. Mami Wata's daughter Yara seeks the mermaid's help to save her own village from enslavement, and she eventually takes her mother's place in the ocean. In Natasha Bowen's *Skin of the Sea* (2021), a teenage girl kidnapped into the slave trade jumps overboard and is transformed by Yemayá into a mermaid, called a Mami Wata, who retrieves the souls of others lost to the Middle Passage. It is significant that most of these texts, rather than locating the source of crossing merfolk in the wombs of dead and voiceless mothers, portray an African-derived feminine deity as the source of the transformation and African-descended girls and women as living agents of resistance.

Gabrielle Tesfaye's short art film *The Water Will Carry Us Home* (2018) is a multimedia enactment of this goddess-based crossing merfolk narrative. The stop-animation portion of the film shows both pregnant women and a man being thrown from a slaver's ship, where they encounter a mermaid goddess with blue twin-tails. As Tesfaye specifically identifies the orishas in the film description, we can presume that this mermaid is the orisha Yemayá. Unlike in the Drexciyan narrative, Yemayá transforms *both* the parents and their unborn children into single-tailed merfolk, the babies wafting from conch shells into their parents' arms. The orisha then receives white flowers in her hand before the animated scene gives way to live-action film of Tesfaye throwing white flowers into the sea. As mentioned before, white flowers are one of Yemayá's favored offerings and a frequent part of religious rituals in Yoruba-based traditions. The animation portion of the film also features a man in red and black, smoking a key as a pipe

that he uses to unlock and lock double doors that act as stage curtains on the transformation scene. The orisha Esú, a messenger who carries sacrifices and messages to the gods, is identified with the colors red and black and his form in Vodou, as the lwa Papa Legba, smokes a pipe (Alexander 12; Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 125). The film itself, then, is a ritual act of healing, in which Tesfaye offers prayers to Yemaya, carried by Esú/Elegba/Papa Legba, to save her ancestors in the past.

## Conclusion

No mermaids without melanin
not a cutesy thing—
but a centuries righting the wrongs of the ocean-thing
turning the tide to
turn the world on itself
to rid the world of itself

*(Mallory)*

Like other crossing merfolk narratives that I have examined, this excerpt from Julia Mallory's *Black Mermaids* (2018) locates the origin of merfolk squarely in Black experience, "no mermaids without melanin", and demands attention to the world-shifting violence of the transatlantic slave trade. Asserting that mermaids are "not a cutesy thing", Mallory claims a different weight, depth, and meaning for the figure than the childish whimsy and heterosexual fantasy with which it has become associated in contemporary popular culture (Hayward). By demanding both a reckoning with and a dreaming beyond the transatlantic slave trade, crossing merfolk call into question the systems and hierarchies that this horrendous trade produced. Crossing merfolk remind us that the world we inhabit did not have to be and that is possible "to rid the world of itself". The alternative utopias, ecologies, and socialities created by Black people and spirits in the water—while often flawed, elusive, or opaque—still necessarily gesture towards an otherwise, centering African diasporic peoples in fantastic rituals of fugitivity and refusal.

## Notes

1 See Davis, "Power and Vulnerability" (2018), where I use otherhuman to describe ways of being and forms of personhood outside of the binary and hierarchical logics of Western humanity. I distinguish the otherhuman from the superhuman which extends and amplifies the features of the Western human, or the posthuman, which implies a form that can only temporally follow the Western human, rather than existing before or alongside it.
2 In addition to the artists covered in this essay, experimental film collective Otolith, visual artist Ellen Gallagher, and theorist Ayesha Hameed have created artistic works inspired by Drexciya.

## Works Cited

Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Duke UP, 2005.
Anatol, Giselle Liza. "The Sea-People of Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's Arms*: Reconceptualizing Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* through Considerations of Myth and Motherhood." *Diasporic Women's Writing of the Black Atlantic*, edited by Esther Alvarez-Lopez and Emilia Maria Duran-Almarza. Routledge, 2014, pp. 202–217.
Baptiste, Tracey. "Mermaids Have Always Been Black." *The New York Times*, 10 Jul. 2019a, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/opinion/black-little-mermaid.html. Accessed 3 Dec. 2022.

———. *Rise of the Jumbies*. Algonquin Young Readers, 2019b.

Bennett, Joshua. *Being Property Myself: Blackness and the End of Man*. The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2020.

Bowen, Natasha. *Skin of the Sea*. Random House Children's Books, 2021.

Braham, Persephone. "Song of the Sirenas: Mermaids in Latin America and the Caribbean." *Scaled for Success: The Internationalization of the Mermaid*, edited by Philip Hayward. John Libbey Publishing Ltd, 2018, pp. 149–170.

Brown, Jayna. *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*. Duke UP, 2021.

Brown, Ras Michael. *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry*. Cambridge UP, 2012.

Burton, Justin. "Azealia Banks, Seapunk and Atlantis: An Embattled Humanist Mixtape." *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures*, vol. 10, no. 9, 2016, pp. 81–93.

Clark, Martin, and Alex Farquarson, editors. *Aquatopia: The Imaginary of the Ocean Deep*. Tate Nottingham Contemporary, 2013.

Davis, Jalondra A. "Power and Vulnerability: Black Girl's Magic in Black Women's Science Fiction." *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2018, pp. 13–30.

———. "Utopia and the Gendered Past in Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood*; or, the Hidden Self." *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2019, pp. 7–20.

———. "Crossing Merfolk Narratives of the Sacred: Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's Arms* and Gabrielle Tesfaye's *The Water Will Carry Us Home*." *Shima*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2021, pp. 52–71.

———. "Crossing Merfolk, the Human, and the Anthropocene in Nalo Hopkinson's the New Moon's Arms and Rivers Solomon's the Deep." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2022, pp. 349–366.

Deren, Maya. "Agwe-Sovereign of the Seas." *Aquatopia: The Imaginary of the Ocean Deep*, edited by Martin Clark and Alex Farquarson. Nottingham, Contemporary Tate Gallery, 2013, pp. 150–159.

Diggs, Daveed, et al. "The Deep." *The Deep*, edited by clipping., Sub Pop, 2019.

Dillon, Grace. "Indigenous Scientific Literacies in Nalo Hopkinson's Ceremonial Worlds." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* vol. 18, no. 1, 2007, pp. 23–41.

Drewal, Henry John. "Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and the Diaspora." *African Arts*, 2008, pp. 60–83.

Drexciya. "Bubble Metropolis." Underground Resistance, 1993.

———. *Aquatic Invasion*. Underground Resistance, 1995.

———. "The Quest." *The Quest*, edited by Drexciya, Submerge, 1997.

Elliott, Zetta. *Mother of the Sea*. Rosetta Press, 2017.

Eshun, Kodwu. "Drexciya as Spectre." *Aquatopia: The Imaginary of the Ocean Deep*, edited by Alex Farquharson and Martin Clark, Tate Nottingham Contemporary, 2013, pp. 138–146.

Fernández Olmos, Margarite and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo*. 2nd ed., vol. 3, NYU P, 2011.

Fiasco, Lupe. "Drogas Wave." *Drogas Wave*, Thirty Tigers; The Orchard, 2018.

Funkadelic, Parliament. "Motor Booty Affair." *Motor Booty Affair*, George Clinton, Casablanca, 1978.

Gallagher, Ellen, and Art Institute of Contemporary. *Watery Ecstatic*. Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001.

Garcia-Vega, Melissa. "Literature for Children and Young Adults as Path to Enlightenment Emancipation." *Journal of West Indian Literature*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2016, pp. 74–95.

Gaskins, Nettrice. "Deep Sea Dwellers: Drexciya and the Sonic Third Space." *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2016, pp. 68–80.

———. "Mami Wata Remixed: The Mermaid in Contemporary African American Culture." *Scaled for Success: The Internationalisation of the Mermaid*, edited by Philip Hayward, John Libbey Publishing Ltd, 2018, pp. 195–208.

Grant, Darren. "'With Me,'" translated by *Destiny's Child*. Columbia Records, 1998, general editor, Jermaine Dupri, February 3, 2022.

Hale, Lindsay. *Hearing the Mermaid's Song: The Umbanda Religion in Rio De Janeiro*. U of New Mexico P, 2009.

Hameed, Ayesha. "Black Atlantis: The Plantationcene." *Europe*, L'internationale online, 6 May 2020, https://vimeo.com/415428776. Accessed 10 May 2021.

Hamilton, Virginia. *Her Stories: African American Folktales, Fairy Tales, and True Tales*. The Blue Sky Press, 1995.

Haqq, Abdul Qadim. "The Art of Drexciya." Interview by Ashley Zlatopolsky, Red Bull Music Academy Daily, 21 Oct. 2016, https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2016/10/art-of-drexciya, 4 Apr. 2021.

Haqq, Abu Qadim and Dai Sato. *The Book of Drexciya, Volume One*. The Drexciyan Empire, 2020.

Hayward, Philip. *Making a Splash: Mermaids (and Mermen) in 20th and 21st Century Audiovisual Media*. John Libbey Ltd, 2017.

Hoare, Philip. "Homo Aquaticus: The Half Known Life." *Aquatopia: The Imaginary of the Ocean Deep*, edited by Alex Farquharson and Martin Clark. Tate Nottingham Contemporary, 2013, pp. 14–21.

Hopkinson, Nalo. *The New Moon's Arms*. Warner, 2007.

Mallory, Julia. *Black Mermaids*. Julia Mallory, 2018.

Mama, Zogbe. *Mami Wata: Africa's Ancient God/Dess Unveiled*. 4th ed., Mami Wata Healers Society of North America, 2018.

Minaj, Nicki. "Bed." *YouTube*, 6 July 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxtl5ExJmag.

Muller, Sophie. "No Ordinary Love." translated by Sade, 1992. Youtube, 26 Apr. 2021.

Nies, Betsy. "Transatlantic Mermaids: Literary and Cultural Fantasies from Copenhagen to Haiti and the United States/Sirenas Transatlánticas: Fantasías Literarias Y Culturales Desde Copenhague a Estados Unidos, Pasando Por Haití." *Amaltea*, vol. 6, 2014, pp. 305–327.

Otolith Group. *Hydra Decapita*. Lux Collection, 2010.

Osinubi, Taiwo Adetunji. "Provincializing Slavery: Atlantic Economies in Flora Nwapa's Efuru." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2014, pp. 1–26.

Rhodes, Jewell Parker. *Bayou Magic*. Little, Brown, 2015.

Rubin, Mike. *Infinite Journey to Inner Space: The Legacy of Drexciya*. Red Bull Music Academy, 2017.

Tesfaye, Gabrielle. "The Water Will Carry Us Home." *Vimeo*, 10 May 2018, https://vimeo.com/269045173.

Vrhel, Leila. *Mami Wata*. Leila Vrhel, 2011.

Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Lawrence Hill, 2013.

# 29

# BRAZILIAN AFROFUTURISM AS A SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY

*Patrick Brock*

Officially called Monument to Goiânia, the sculpture is known in the Brazilian city as the "Monument to the Three Races", or "the big negroes". It sits proudly downtown with its three statues representing Black, European, and Indigenous peoples raising a column on which rests the Goiás state capital's seal. The seal depicts colonial explorer Bartolomeu Bueno da Silva, who first surveyed the region, and a gold miner, representing the first business in Goiânia (Cabral and Borges). The statue is a celebration of settler colonialism and its extractive tendencies but also codifies an idea of racial democracy conceived by Brazilian intellectuals to explain the country and later used by the state as a tool of biopolitical control: everyone in their place and working together to build the nation. Throughout a year of iconoclastic demolishment of other statues as activists put pressure on countries to finally begin atoning for the wrongs of history, Goiânia's goes on unscathed.

Not so much for the notion of racial democracy, though. This false narrative is now fertile ground for the country's offshoot of the larger Afrofuturist movement, which, this chapter will argue, developed naturally from longstanding Black activism through arts and education. These efforts were growing more intersectional and digital precisely as Brazilians started adopting Afrofuturism. Gama et al. have prepared a comprehensive list of Afrofuturist works in Brazil for the Handbook (see Chapter 26), and this chapter leans on that survey to focus more on theorizing futurism while pinpointing examples of the movement's production that show its intersectionality with environmental and queer issues.

By analyzing the historical context that led to Afrofuturism's broad adoption in the country, evaluating the state of its reception and problematization there, and interpreting the discourse of representative works, this chapter contends that earlier activism may as well have always been futurist in the broader sense of an organic, politically oriented movement aiming to change social conditions. This proposition, in turn, can provide new pathways to understand futurism's interplay with science fiction (SF) and its mass-cultural genre framework as a social technology within the sense that has emerged in Brazil more recently.

## Historical context

The leading port of entry for African slaves reaching South America, Brazil was the last country in the New World to abolish slavery. The post-racial moment never seems to arrive despite a

storied legacy of resistance that began with communities of escaped slaves (quilombos), armed rebellions, a Black press, political mobilization, and cultural associations in the twentieth century. The enduring myth of racial democracy that sprung out of the first shift in Latin American race studies in the 1920s is partly to blame. Scholars distanced themselves from scientific racism ideas to recognize the contribution of Black people during centuries of cultural and social mixing. Race studies began focusing more on Black culture and communities while avoiding questions about racial discrimination or inequality and drawing inspiration from the three races notion proposed by European scientists to consider hybridization. Furthermore, the decade before the emancipation of slaves and proclamation of the republic in 1889 was critical for the formulation of racist doctrine in Brazil. As a moment of deep national crisis, it forced the creation of a narrative to conciliate modernization with the contradictory status quo (Damatta 69). It slowly gained official acceptance and was pushed in textbooks (Paulina 292) but also vigorously questioned by Black newspapers. Even when White scholars started changing their views and renewing race studies in Brazil by the 1960s, their work gained greater prominence than that of Black peers (De La Fuente and Andrews 6).

In addition to the racial harmony myth becoming a cornerstone of Brazilian identity as its main contribution to civilization (Pereira and Lima 2), the particularities of national formation also created a dynamic where racial identity is constantly negotiated (Khalema 333). The culture makes it implicit that being White is better and pushes Black people to assimilate into Whiteness: "In the individual scramble for social status, many correctly perceive that the advantages and privileges lay in being classified as 'White'" (Khalema 337). Being mindful of the desired hair styles and skin tones of Whiteness are the clearest examples of how a Black person should work to become White, creating a racially mixed society where difference does matter. Bolívar Echeverría has proposed that identity racism is integral to the capitalist ethos—people can join Whiteness without being so if they agree with the tenets of capitalist modernity.[1] He argues that the crisis of modernity requires using our imagination to envision a different "real" that is more in tune with epistemological diversity and long-term survival. It is no wonder, then, that self-identification and empowerment would play a role in identity-based inspirations for cultural production.

Growing investment in higher education since the 1960s, along with scholastic and cultural dialogue with the United States, helped foster challenges to the myth (De La Fuente and Andrews 7), as well as intellectual leaders like Abdias do Nascimento, Lélia Gonzales, and Maria Carolina de Jesus. Nascimento had used theater to denounce Brazilian racism since the 1940s and first taught new members of his cultural group how to read. Once elected to Congress, he started pushing for reparation policies. Brazilian Blacks also sustained their struggle through the military dictatorship (1964–1986). Following the return to democracy and the UN World Conference Against Racism (2001), cries for reparation that had been brewing since the 1970s finally moved to the implementation phase (Sito 256). These policies raised awareness of racial identity in Brazil to broader levels, and racial quotas boosted enrollment of Black students in universities (Vieira and Arends-Kuenning), arguably helping create a new class of educated consumers and readers of SF and Afrofuturism.

## Afrofuturism in Brazil

Brazil is home to 70% of the continent's Afrodescendants (De La Fuente and Andrews 11), and although Black and Brown people make up around 50% of its citizens, European culture and beauty standards still take center stage in the culture. It is experiencing Afrofuturism more strongly than its continental neighbors, where the movement has yet to reach a clearer critical

mass even after going global in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, moving similarly to hip-hop as a space where different diasporic subjects negotiate shifting meanings of Blackness and political identity (Weheliye 146).

The first studies of the movement in Brazil emerged in 2018 once the term gained widespread recognition thanks to the favorable reception of the movie *Black Panther* (Buroco 50). The movement's North American roots soon raised questions about the power relations of translation and commodification of African heritage. Critics pointed to how it essentializes a long-destroyed African heritage and its insertion in capitalist modes of production (Buroco 55–57) as evidence of an inherent failure to enact real change. Another current, to which this chapter is more closely aligned, sees Afrofuturism as an exercise in shifting the temporality of dystopian and post-apocalyptic scenarios from the future to the present, denouncing reality and imagining "impossible" futures (Freitas and Messias 423). Temporal concerns go back to the need to occupy spaces long denied, an act that can constitute a powerful enough break with the status quo even if it seeps into hegemonic culture, as the *Black Panther* movie shows.

R. da Silva et al. (2020) were the first to interpret Brazilian Afrofuturism as a natural development of activism in the country and its performative push, while Carla Melo (2011) noted that large-scale protests of Blacks and Indigenous peoples in Brazil during the 2000s already used performativity to hijack media attention as efforts of "critical hope". These protests combined affect and effect to call for alternative futures, creating spaces that blurred the distinction between art and political action (Melo 260). One protest from Black activists during a soccer match in 2005, for instance, unfurled a giant banner (commonly used by organized fans) stating that "We are Zumbi"—after sixteenth-century quilombo leader Zumbi dos Palmares—in response to the racism of an Argentine player. Melo saw that and other efforts of the time as both exercises in defamiliarization that incite learning and action, and as J. L. Austin's performative "words that do something".

Within a broader push to de-center knowledge arising from postcolonial studies (Mignolo, *Epistemic*) and to recenter scholarship on SF and the fantastic from its Anglo-American focus (Chattopadhyay, *Recentering*), Frédéric Neyrat (2020) contends that Afrofuturism is a cultural and metaphysical alternative to White domination that uses "imagining techniques" (artistic, symbolical, anthropological). Confronting the plausible of SF with what Neyrat calls the "impossible" is another window for the movement. Call it impossible, alienation, "myth-science" (Burrows and O'Sullivan 217–223), or perhaps simply satire, Afrofuturist's challenge to Western and SF's scientific rationality lays bare its racist roots. As for the technology, Neyrat says the reconfiguration makes it work for justice instead of exploitation, and beauty in place of utility (132). Technology also plays a role in Afrofuturism through recorded music (Burrows and O'Sullivan; see also Chude-Sokei). And now, as the marginal cost of communication and computing drops, the ongoing revolution keeps gaining ground as an emerging culture on the wings of technology, as Jacques Derrida and later Bernard Stiegler argued when recovering the term pharmakon for an interpretation of it as both poison and cure (Abbinnett 66). Whether it can resist co-optation by dominant culture remains to be seen: advertising was quick to capitalize on the effect created by the George Floyd protests, reinforcing black representation in 2020. But as Stuart Hall pointed out when critiquing Raymond Williams's position on emergent vs. dominant cultures, the field of cultural resistance can be porous and fluid; "hegemonic leadership need not incorporate or dissolve all but the dominant cultural forms; it can even enable the subalterns to take on their own formations" (190). Using Afrofuturism as a way of "reading" prior efforts offers a way out of the co-optation dilemma. Isiah Lavender III argues that Afrofuturism predates the term, since slavery's disorienting experience itself creates the science fictionality of the movement's contestation of temporality, history, and futurity (2). He then

turns the table on genre conventions by interpreting novels of the nineteenth century as Afrofuturist texts and brings up the notion of a networked consciousness wired up for hope, "a charged impulse … seeding resistance, rebellion and subversive writing" (7) for Black people around the world. Ernst Bloch, for instance, believed that utopias appear in times of social and cultural upheaval, connecting them with art as "fruits of the creative spirit" (Bloch 87–88). Afrofuturism's desire for utopia can be considered a heuristic expression of hope, making it unsurprising that Brazil, amid one of the biggest far-right waves in its history, is experiencing Afrofuturism so powerfully. While SF at times may be marginal to its efforts, as happens with other futurisms, the political intent is front and center (Chattopadhyay, *Manifestos* 16).

### Brazilian Intersectionality: A Few Case Studies

The Brazilian Afrofuturist wave took off from an ongoing movement in the early 2010s. Known as Tombamento Generation (from the verb *tombar* or knock down), it had been recentering Black culture and aesthetics without the science fictionality, instead focusing on cultural and economic empowerment events to trade and discuss Afro-inspired fashion and hair styles (Santos and Santos). One of its members says she used to avoid the sun and straighten her hair as a teenager but began accepting her Blackness upon seeing positive role models (Fleur). This generation already featured significant intersectionality with queer issues. Furthermore, by the late 2010s Black activism had reached enormous capillarity in the country (Pereira and Lima 9). Brazilian SF, meanwhile, has moved in line with the broader global trend of postcolonial thought toward a fourth wave (A. Silva 63) with a variety of subgenres (Gama et al., Chapter 26 of this volume). Authors turned to racial, gender, and postcolonial issues, with a politicized stance toward diversity and creativity toward genre conventions building up as early as the mid-2010s in manifestos problematizing Brazilian SF amid the ebb and flow of readership, publication, and academic acceptance (A. Silva 64).

Earlier activisms keep on merging with Afrofuturism in 2021: Black cultural group Ilê Aiyê held an online event titled "Curuzu Afrofuturista" on 8 and 9 April 2021 that explicitly stated the importance of incorporating the SF vision into its efforts.[2] Curuzu, the neighborhood of Salvador, Bahia State, where the group is located, is also one of the biggest Black communities in the world outside of Africa. Since 1974 Ilê has been working there to empower Black culture through music, fashion, and beauty contests. Antônio Carlos Vovô, its founder and president, stated that Ilê wants to strengthen Black culture through the intersection of history, technology, science, and innovation for "projecting the future". Considering the number of deaths from COVID-19 in Brazil that month, over 82,000, hoping for a future itself becomes another strategy of resistance and survival. Brazil also has a tradition of cultural regeneration and dialog through music, and even though it has been used to codify messages of obedience, "disenfranchised groups have asserted claims to citizenship" by using its performativity (Avelar and Dunn 1). Itamar Assumpção is a Brazilian Afrofuturist pioneer,[3] while Dona Ivone Lara articulated a potent political message in the classic samba album *Sorriso Negro* (Burns). Their songs spoke of pride in Blackness and had their share of political messaging amid the dictatorship. The mangue-beat movement of the early 1990s, headed by Chico Science e Nação Zumbi, has some Afrofuturist elements that blend utopian ecological proposals with regionalized popular culture and Afro-Atlantic influences to promote a "remarkably communal notion of sustainable fun" (Sneed 652). More recently, Black and trans singers Liniker and Linn da Quebrada took the intersectional efforts of Tombamento further into the mainstream.

Singer Elza Soares adopted Afrofuturism as a salient element of her recent output. Through SF-inspired videos that blend her samba performativity with electronic and rock music, the

work dialogues both with Afrofuturism and the country's acute historical moment. Released in July 2020, her interpretation of Nelson Cavaquinho's 1973 samba standard "Juízo Final" is one example of the Afrofuturist political-aesthetic strategy. Elza updates the religious imagery of the hopeful song[4] in an animation directed by Pedro Hansen with Afrofuturist and solarpunk elements: A Black woman riding a hoverbike is determined to attack a demonic being rallying an entranced mob inside the two towers that symbolize Brazil's Congress.[5] An epic battle follows in which the hero's movements and actions green the wasteland.

*Executive Order* (2020), directed by Lázaro Ramos, takes on Afrofuturism more obliquely by problematizing the country's turn to political polarization and hate. Based on a play by Aldri Anunciação, it takes place in a near-future (or alternative present) Rio de Janeiro. Following policies to address systemic racism, the country seems poised to begin reparation payments when the political mood reverses into vicious backlash. Discrimination becomes overt, driven by readily available hate speech on social media, and authorities start offering Black Brazilians a return to Africa instead of reparations. Hence, the film's title, as the measure is decreed by an executive order later confirmed by Congress. But what begins as a voluntary effort soon turns into forced deportations. The country becomes a dystopia where neighbors spy on one another and surviving Black people shelter in Afro-Bunkers to resist removal by militarized police wearing white cloth masks. Social media also offers redemption, as when the protagonist's video of him refusing to execute a policeman goes viral. A retired taxi driver who was supposed to receive the first reparations helps decode the film and the Afrofuturist moment of Brazil itself: "Our struggle has always existed, it's just more visible now". Near the end, in broad letters amid scenes of street protests, the film wears its heart out on the sleeve: "In a culture of death, surviving becomes an act of resistance".

Brazilian Afrofuturist works are examples of what Hall deemed cultures of survival. But while these cultural forms are fertile ground for new subjectivities, Hall argued, they still require social and political practices "to articulate them to particular political positions". Like the spontaneous youth cultures he studied, it can be argued that Afrofuturism works for "resistance, for opposition, for negotiation, for the kinds of upheavals you find in rebellion in revolution, and, perhaps even more important, for counterhegemonic formations". Hall even believed that such cultures had a utopian role—"they are required for the construction of new kinds of societies" (188–189). Thus, SF enters this process as both a set of negotiated conventions and a community of writers and readers through which the utopian proposals of Black and queer empowerment and environmental importance can be proposed as building blocks of a new structure of feeling.

Aline França's *A Mulher de Aleduma* (1985) may be the first Brazilian novel more closely aligned with the science fictionality of Afrofuturism: Black people are aliens, while Whites represent technology and modernity, and its destructive effects (Jones). The protagonist, Maria Vitória, is a priestess descended from humans of the sea planet of Ignum and lives on an island populated by a quilombo community. Earth and Ignum are telepathically and energetically connected, leading the gods of Ignum to sense disruptions due to the environmental destruction on Earth, and to warn that the island will soon face an invasion. When it happens, it blends metaphorical colonization with modern real-estate speculation and resource extraction led by a White man who goes on to rape the protagonist, who nevertheless decides to bear his son before going on to have another child with her partner. This one will help save the world, according to the Ignum prophecy, reinforcing the notion of resistance through existence.

Many of Brazil's Afrofuturist writers have backgrounds in Black activism. One example is Luciene Ernesto, who under the penname of Lu Ain-Zaila has been publishing fiction and essays centered on the valorization of Black culture using SF. In her first novel, *Brasil 2408*, a

two-part effort self-published in 2016 and 2017, she uses a climate apocalypse to build a dystopian future in Brazil that dialogues with its oligarchic present and is interwoven with affective scenes of familial and peer tenderness, as in much Afro-Brazilian literature. The plot involves climate change destroying 40% of Brazil's territory in the early 2200s, forcing the nation to reorganize itself geographically. Buildings of the heavily populated Brazilian coast are turned into rubble to hold back the encroaching waters. The imagination of future Brazil and its new forms of government, surveillance, and organization are the backdrops to the protagonist's conflict as she tries to reconnect with the memory of the father lost to a terrorist attack while undergoing military training to join the security forces, and then fights a high-level conspiracy to sabotage the rise of a better economic system.

Fábio Kabral is one example of the movement's epistemological richness. He initially identified himself with the Afrofuturist movement before releasing a "macumbapunk" manifesto in March 2021 laying out the bases for a new subgenre that is Afro-centric but also rejects rigid boundaries between SF and fantasy. Given that coining "prefix-punk" manifestoes has become almost a trope in Brazilian SF, it also signifies the intent to innovate and play with genre boundaries inherent to SF and its communities (Rieder 4). Kabral's second novel, *O Caçador cibernético da Rua Treze* (2017), is an especially representative example of the decolonial perspective in contemporary Brazilian SF (Lehnen 80). The plot involves a killer for hire named João Arolê in a somewhat utopian city called Ketu Três. It is entirely inhabited by Black people and makes constant reference to the Yoruba culture and language. While containing technological elements that might lend it the label SF, it is more akin to fantasy, using the cosmology and spirituality of the Afro-Brazilian religion as a backdrop and driving element of the narrative. Kabral himself belongs to an Afro-Brazilian spiritual community and blood (which in the Afro-Brazilian religion is present in immolation rituals of animals) is a constant motif in this work, interacting with the spiritual energy and magic that drives this universe.

Past traumas and unrealized potential figure prominently in the novel. João would have liked to become an astronaut, but his teleportation powers led to him being kidnapped for training into a select squad of assassins. As the novel progresses, we learn that João had reneged on that path after committing several murders that left him traumatized: "Yesterday, João Arolê dreamed of becoming an astronaut; today, he woke up screaming after another night of nightmares" (8). In this society, with its allusion to aliens (colonial powers) who had kidnapped and enslaved their ancestors, nature and culture appear to intersect instead of having the typical duality of Western civilization. Tablets are made of wooden material and nature is everywhere, like the trees sitting atop the tallest buildings of a matriarchal society (like Candomblé), in which spiritual CEOs lead religious communities that also conduct business as an elite of "emi jejé" persons with supernatural powers leads the city. The blackest citizens belong to the higher echelons of this society, in one example of how the work seeks to upend prevailing hierarchies of Brazilian society. While utopian, the society of Ketu Três still has its problems, with corruption and competition among the different spiritual corporations running rampant. Still, the novel also portrays a utopia of sexuality in which diversity of gender and sexual orientations are commonplace. Gaming culture and comic books are inspiration, judging by its intensely cinematic scenes of battles, but the novel is still preoccupied with matters of narrative structure. Readers are pulled back and forth between timelines until a complete picture of the protagonist's motivations emerge. In the end, once the plot has unraveled and conflicts resolved, and the half-cyborg protagonist appears to be on the mend, with new implants restoring some naturality to his body, we learn that "yesterday, João Arolê suffered nightmares; today, he was dreaming again of taking to the stars" (128). The cyborg, a recurring motif in Latin American and particularly Brazilian SF (see Ginway) to signify hybridization as a resistance strategy to

imperialism and neoliberalism, is vindicated by the turn to local and ancestral knowledges and cosmologies. The "technorganic" fusion of man and machine that gives João some of his powers, as well as a magic tattoo to which he pays tribute in pain, at last is resolved along with his identity issues. No longer the state-sponsored killer, João can turn to lead a group of rebels seeking to solve the lingering problems of an imperfectly utopian society that still organizes itself in painful class lines.

Waldson Souza's *Oceanïc* (2020) is a significant example of the intersectionality of environmental, sexual, and racial issues in Brazilian Afrofuturism. Formed by short stories connecting the protagonists, the novel depicts a future where the surface has been rendered unhabitable and civilization survives in mobile cities atop giant creatures that some call turtles, like the world turtle mytheme present in Hindu, Chinese, and Native American cosmologies. Resource extraction and trade are alive and well, signaling the continuation of capitalism after a long-ago catastrophe, potentially an environmental one. It is a world of poor and bored youths trying to escape their fates by literally jumping from one turtle to the other, but also a more prosaic one of cars (ground-based or flying for those who can afford them), hamburgers on silver buns, and streaming playlists symbolizing the pain of jilted lovers. The experience of trauma here is exemplified by efforts to deal with the loss of love, parental alcoholism, postpartum depression, and powerlessness against dominating institutions. While sexualities are diverse and openly accepted, the story of the pregnant lover of a married man hints at a resilient patriarchy. Technology becomes more of a structuring element for a psychologically dense plot where Blackness is referred to in a more oblique way. The portrait of a dystopian world where sexuality is free then becomes a powerful act of utopia amid Brazil's misogynistic and homophobic present.

The Black-queer intersectionality appears strongly in a 2018 short-story anthology edited by Junno Sena, who states that it aims "for a future where being Black is just one trait in the character's cultural and social context" (Sena 5). His contribution, amid tales that imagine the preservation of Black culture in space in a distant future, or that envision time traveling as a liberating act where the protagonist is sent back to organize a slave-ship revolt, tells the story of a gay man enslaved in a dystopian Brazil where his sexual identity is equated to his Blackness in the mechanics of exploitation at a mansion where the wealthy celebrate the arrival of 2020. Before escaping, he kills the master who seeks to sexually assault him just like slave owners of times past. Another story, by Giovany de Oliveira, portrays a late-night sexual encounter between two Black men and the ways queerness finds acceptance thanks to a vocabulary of negotiated sexuality: after flirting with the narrator, the supposedly heterosexual man states his willingness to have sex as long as he is not a bottom, "because I won't be fucked, I only fuck" (Sena 18).

The 2018 short film *Blackn3ss* deploys the activist intersectionality between Afrofuturism and LGBT issues as a driving force. Among the young Black Brazilians its director Diego Paulino interviews is Eric, a cross-dresser influencer who confesses that social media is both a lifeline and source of online abuse. By showcasing his body to evoke a sense of abjection and the painful self-image of those who don't conform to a White and heteronormative ideal, the short film uses the representation of Black and non-gender-conforming artists, cultural producers, and personalities as an act of performance activism. The Afrofuturist tradition of Sun Ra is evoked quickly in a shot of his flying saucer as drag performer Aretha Sadick comes down the steps of a set resembling the floats of Rio's carnival parade, as if the SF imagery bridged a gap between two waves of activism—the Tombamento and Afrofuturist generations.

Ain-Zaila, Kabral, França, and Souza's novels share a common preoccupation with trauma. The past bears a heaviness that must be addressed, and the work of the future is not complete until the present has been resolved. Their resilience connects with the implicit proposal of

resistance through existence proposed by Mila Burns when discussing Dona Ivone Lara (8). The cultural diet of video games, comic books, and movies also left its mark in their works, with Kabral being the best example; but it is also visible in Ain-Zaila, especially the cinematic end of her novel (Souza, *Afrofuturismo* 92). The intersectionality of queer and Black issues signifies the continuity of decade-long efforts renewed by the Tombamento Generation: the Brazilian Afrofuturist response to the myth of three races is to enact an actual diversity of experiences into a common struggle. The imagination of military life present in Kabral and Ain-Zaila's works, meanwhile, reflects the dictatorship era and the military's on-and-off role in politics. In Kabral's case, they are a force to be reckoned with but ultimately resisted, while for Ain-Zaila it can help in achieving progress and organization by giving agency to Black people in law enforcement.[6]

## Concluding Remarks

A broader conception of futurism that encompasses SF-influenced works with political goals of emancipation, coming from an activist tradition, can be considered a social technology (ST). The idea has been explored in Brazil in the early twenty-first century as a way of using technology to solve social problems. It started with India's resistance to colonialism when independence leaders sought domestic technologies to cut ties with the metropolis. While the ST concept morphed into organizational and business administration studies in the United States, in Brazil it merged with efforts to curb economic inequality that range from cheap wells to helping workers take over bankrupt companies, allowing informal laborers to become entrepreneurs or paying them to build their own homes (Dagnino 241–242). Using the term to explain the instrumentalization of SF by social movements like Afrofuturism is akin to how STs were used to analyze the efforts of an NGO in Canada, for instance (Pozzebon et al. 663). Gerando Falcões, an NGO in Rio de Janeiro focused on developing low-income communities, embodies these efforts by frequently using technoculture imagery (astronauts) to argue that it is better to invest in *favela* residents than colonizing Mars, for instance.[7] Kitembo Edições Literárias do Futuro, a small press based out of São Paulo and focused solely on publishing Afrofuturist books, is another example of how cultural activists are using the SF genre to push forward goals of social emancipation in Brazil's impoverished communities.[8]

The organic intellectualism of Afrofuturism and its forms of social organization are a social technology because they appropriate the technoculture of SF as well as its communities of writers and readers. The strategy is a reaction to the failure to conceive different futures in the West (Mignolo, *On Decoloniality* 15) and is powered by the availability of publishing tools and widespread dissemination of visual and narrative repertoires. Imperial subalterns repurpose SF and its tropes from their earlier role as purveyors of the progress narrative of empire by playing with such elements as temporalities, technology, and outer space, at times actively seeking to shape the genre's conventions to gain agency over the future's imagination. Digital performativity through online publishing offers a way of engaging and having a voice, something the Afrofuturist generation understands by instrumentalizing SF's "way of thinking" to their political purposes with social and political networks honed by their activist predecessors. In this sense, Lavender's strategy of reading texts as Afrofuturism certainly can be applied to the broader Black rights movement in Brazil: it has always been Afrofuturist, deploying a "narrative aesthetic" (Pereira and Lima 12) even as it lacked the science fictionality.

Considering that Afrofuturism, like other futurisms, has found responses to everyday dystopia or the foreclosure of any other future through solidarity, protest, and resistance (Chattopadhyay, *The Pandemic* 339–340), and if Afrofuturism is a way of reading texts in the same way that SF

is, the conjunction of science fictionality and social activism becomes a signpost of the genre's mechanics as a type of shared intelligence leaning on distributed cognition, as proposed by Edwin Hutchins (1995). By studying teamwork in different scenarios, he concluded that intelligence works in the individual and in aspects of the material environment, and across multiple individuals interacting in organized ways across time, so that the results (and ways of doing things) are always changing. The way cognition is socially distributed, moreover, is naturally rhizomatic. This convergence of factors merits further examination as the potential testbed for a formalist theory of futurism which blends cognitivist and mass-cultural genre approaches.

## Acknowledgment

## Notes

1   "This relationship promotes a certain mode of existence, an appearance, of composure, to the point that it can even dispense with the racial features of whiteness, so long as individuals show their willingness to adapt and internalize the capitalist way of life, that is, to become 'white'. For this reason, he believes, it is possible to not have white skin and still be perfectly 'white', as has happened in many social dimensions of Latin America" (Fuentes xvi).
2   "Ilê Aiyê Apresenta Curuzu Afrofuturista: O Poder Da Música". *YouTube*, Ilê Aiyê, 8 Apr. 2021, https://youtu.be/Qjdy0jtDoDY.
3   Itamar (1949–2003) was more prominent in the 1980s and 1990s in São Paulo's alternative music scene with his mix of rock, samba, and funk and their socially critical lyrics. Says his daughter Anelis: "Today, when I look at his works, I can see everything being much more inserted into Afrofuturism than the European avant-garde". See Lourenço.
4   The seed of evil will be burned / Love will be eternal again / It's the final judgement / The story of good and evil / I want to have eyes to see / Wickedness disappear / The sun will yet shine again / And light will reach the hearts.
5   "Elza Soares—Juízo Final (Clipe Oficial)". *YouTube*, Deckdisc, 8 July 2020, https://youtu.be/VBU5MYaDKjo.
6   Interview with the author in June 2021.
7   https://gerandofalcoes.com/en/. Accessed 11 Aug. 2022.
8   "Kitembo Literary Editions of the Future". https://kitembo.com.br/. Accessed 11 Aug. 2022. Interview with publisher Israel Neto in São Paulo, 14 Apr. 2022.

## Works Cited

Abbinnett, Ross. "The Politics of Spirit in Stiegler's Techno-Pharmacology." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2015, pp. 65–80.

Ain-Zaila, Lu. [Luciene Ernesto] *(In)Verdades. Duologia Brasil 2408*. Kindle Edition, 2016.

———. (R) Evolução. *Duologia Brasil 2408*. Kindle Edition, 2017.

Alberto, Paulina L. "Of Sentiment, Science and Myth: Shifting Metaphors of Racial Inclusion in Twentieth-Century Brazil." *Social History*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2012, pp. 261–296.

Avelar, Idelber, and Christopher Dunn, editors. *Brazilian Popular Music and Citizenship*. Duke UP, 2011.

Bloch, Ernst. *A Philosophy of the Future*. Herder and Herder, 1970.

Burns, Mila. *Dona Ivone Lara's Sorriso Negro*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

Buroco, Laura. "Afrofuturismo e o devir negro do mundo." *Arte & Ensaios*, no. 38, 2019, pp. 49–59.

Burrows, David, and Simon O'Sullivan. *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy*. Edinburgh UP, 2018.

Cabral, Maria, and Maria Borges. *Monumento à Goiânia: Outro olhar sobre sua trajetória*. Essay, Federal University of Goiás, 2008.

Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva. "The Pandemic that Was Always here, and Afterward: From Futures to CoFutures." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2020, pp. 338–340.

———. "Manifestos of Futurisms." *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2021, pp. 8–23.

———. "Recentering Science Fiction and the Fantastic: What Would a Non-anglocentric Understanding of Science Fiction and Fantasy Would Look Like?" *Strange Horizons*, 23 Sept. 2013, strangehorizons. com/non-fiction/articles/recentering-science-fiction-and-the-fantastic-what-would-a-non-anglocentric-understanding-of-science-fiction-and-fantasy-look-like/#:~:text=A%20non-Anglocentric% 20perspective%20would,comparative%20analysis%20between%20multiple%20traditions. Accessed 3 Dec. 2022.

Chude-Sokei, Louis O. *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*. Wesleyan UP, 2016.

Dagnino, R. *Tecnologia Social: contribuições conceituais e metodológicas*. EDUEPB, 2014.

Damatta, Roberto. *Relativizando: Uma Introdução à Antropologia Racial*. Rocco, 1987.

da Silva, R. L. P., M. R. dos Santos, e F. V. Amstel. "'Quando O Negro Se Movimenta, Toda a Possibilidade De Futuro Com Ele Se move'." *Albuquerque: Revista De história*, vol. 11, no. 21, 2020, pp. 132–150.

De la Fuente, Alejandro, and George Reid Andrews. "The Making of a Field." *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*, Cambridge UP, 2018, pp. 1–24.

dos Santos, Ana Paula Medeiros Teixeira, and Marinês Ribeiro dos Santos. "Geração Tombamento e Afrofuturismo: A Moda Como Estratégia De Resistência Às Violências De Gênero e De Raça No Brasil." *DObra[s]—Revista Da Associação Brasileira De Estudos De Pesquisas Em Moda*, [S. l.], vol. 11, no. 23, 2018, pp. 157–181.

Echeverría, Bolívar. *Modernity and Whiteness*. Polity Press, 2019.

Fleur, Rafaela. "Lacração, Empoderamento e Luta: Conheça a Geração Tombamento." *Correio\**, 13 Nov. 2017. https://www.geledes.org.br/lacracao-empoderamento-e-luta-conheca-geracao-tombamento/. Accessed 3 Dec. 2022.

Freitas, K., and Messias, J. "O Futuro Será Negro Ou não será: Afrofuturismo Versus Afropessimismo—As Distopias Do Presente." *Imagofagia*, no. 17, 2018, pp. 402–424.

Fuentes, Diana. "Foreword." *Modernity and Whiteness*, by Bolívar Echeverría, translated by Rodrigo Ferreira. Polity Press, 2019, pp. vii–xvii.

Gama, Vitor C., Sá, Alan, and Diniz, Gabriele. "Afrofuturism, Amazofuturism, Indigenous Futurism, and Sertãopunk in Brazilian Science Fiction: An Overview." *Routledge Handbook of Cofuturisms*, edited by Taryne Jade Taylor, Isiah Lavender III, Grace L. Dillon and Bodhisatttva Chattopadhyay. Routledge, 2023. (See Chapter 26, this volume.)

Ginway, M. Elizabeth. *Cyborgs, Sexuality and the Undead*. Vanderbilt UP, 2020.

Hall, Stuart. *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical history*. Duke UP, 2016.

Hutchins, Edwin. *Cognition in the Wild*. MIT Press, 1995.

Jones, Esther L. "African-Brazilian Science Fiction: Aline França's *A Mulher De Aleduma*." *Obsidian*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2012, pp. 15–36.

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

Lehnen, Leila. "Decolonizing Fictions: The Afrofuturist Aesthetics of Fábio Kabral." *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2021, pp. 80–89.

Lourenço, Marina. "Afroextravagância. Novo museu virtual investiga obra e memória do músico Itamar Assumpção e revela que sua ousadia na vanguarda paulista também tinha raízes bem fortes no Afrofuturismo." *Folha de S. Paulo, Ilustrada*, 18 Nov. 2020.

Kabral, Fabio. *O Caçador Cibernético da Rua 13*. Malê, 2017.

Khalema, Nene. "Affirming Blackness in 'Post-Racial' Contexts: On Race, Colorism, and Hybrid Identities in Brazil." *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2020, pp. 330–342.

Melo, Carla. "Urgent (Anti)Spectacles of Critical Hope." *The Utopian Impulse in Latin America*, edited by Kim Beauchesne and Alessandra Santos, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 259–274.

Mignolo, Walter D. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom." *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 26, no. 7–8, 2009, pp. 159–181.

Mignolo, Walter D., and Catherine E. Walsh. *On Decoloniality—Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Duke UP, 2018.

Neyrat, Fréderic. "The Black Angel of History." translated by Daniel Ross, *Angelaki*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2020, pp. 120–134.

Pereira, Amilcar Araujo, and Lima, Thayara C. "Performance e Estética nas Lutas do Movimento Negro Brasileiro para Reeducar a Sociedade." *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1590/2237-266091021.

Pozzebon, M., S. Tello-Rozas, and I. Heck. "Nourishing the Social Innovation Debate with the 'Social Technology' South American Research Tradition." *Voluntas*, vol. 32, 2021, pp. 663–677.

Rieder, John. *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*. Wesleyan UP, 2017.

Sena, Junno, editor. *Coletânea Afrofuturismo*. reCorte, 2018.

Silva, Alexander. "Sobre diversidades e regionalidades: a ascensão da Quarta Onda da ficção científica brasileira." *Revista Memorare*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2021, pp. 61–80.

Sito, Luanda. "Disputas e diálogos em torno do conceito de 'ações afirmativas' para o ensino superior no Brasil." *Universitas Humanística*, núm. 77, enero–junio, 2014, pp. 251–273.

Sneed, Paul Michael. "The Coexistentialism of Chico Science and Brazil's Manguebeat." *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2019, pp. 651–664.

Souza, Waldson. *Afrofuturismo: o futuro ancestral na literatura brasileira contemporânea*. 2019. UNB, Master's thesis.

———. *Oceanic*. Editora Dame Blanche, 2020.

Vieira, Renato Schwambach, and Mary Arends-Kuenning. "Affirmative Action in Brazilian Universities: Effects on the Enrolment of Targeted Groups." *Economics of Education Review*, vol. 73, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2019.101931.

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*. Duke UP, 2005.

# 30

# NOTES TOWARDS CHICANAFUTURITY/ DISPATCHES FROM NORTHERN AZTLÁN

*Lysa Rivera*

For the past eight years, I have worked hard to shed light on an underrepresented community of writers in American science fiction whose work articulates some of the most scathing critiques of neoliberal capitalism—better known as "globalization"—that contemporary science fiction has ever seen. It is what led me to narrate the emergence of Chicanx cyberpunk. Cyberpunk is a subgenre of science fiction that took shape in the 1980s and is known for its preoccupation with globalization, information technologies, and anti-establishment (hence "punk") points of view. Chicanx cyberpunk is what happens when this cutting-edge, critically incisive subgenre intersects with the perspectives and political desires of folks who self-identify as Chicanx. Like mainstream cyberpunk, and like cyberpunk by other writers of color, Chicanx cyberpunk immerses readers in dystopia yet sustains a utopian space just on the horizon. As one subset in a growing (and historically rich) "Chican@ speculative imaginary", Chicanx cyberpunks refuse to collapse into apathy, despair, and nonaction. A type of cultural practice "from the margins and for the margins", it deploys the power of the imaginary to aid in the pursuit of "emancipation, dignity, and social change" (Calvo-Quirós 52).

Like many other scholars in Chicanx studies whose work focuses on Latinx science fiction, I was drawn into this conversation by Catherine Ramírez's 2004 coinage of the term "Chicanafuturism". Her elaboration of the concept in 2008 solidified what would subsequently become a key organizing and descriptive term in Chicanx and Latinx cultural studies for over a decade:

> Chicanafuturism explores the ways that new and everyday technologies, including their detritus, transform Mexican American life and culture. It questions the promise of technology, and humanism for Chicanas, Chicanos, and other people of color. And like Afrofuturism, which reflects diasporic experience, Chicanafuturism articulates colonial and postcolonial histories of *indigenismo*, *mestizaje*, hegemony, and survival.
>
> *(187)*

Chicanafuturism is a poly-temporal project. It interrogates and explores the present (the ongoing promises of tech; the onslaught of tech's detritus). It reaches back to the past (specifically, histories of colonialism). And it steadfastly leans into the future, as both its name implies and as

the word "survival" mandates. Like African diasporic speculative fiction ("Afrofuturism"), Chicanafuturism centers the historically silenced, marginalized, and vulnerable. Finally, as I always do whenever I teach this passage in seminars, it bears noting that Chicanafuturism (like Chicana feminism from the time of el Movimiento to today) is a coalitional, multiracial, and multicultural movement. When it "questions the promise of technology", it does so not only for Mexican Americans, but for all people of color.[1]

That I came to Chicano science fiction through the work of a Chicana feminist does not surprise me. There is, I believe, an inherent affinity by way of similar goals and like-minded impulses between speculative fiction and Chicana feminism. For example, Chicana feminists have had to rely on imagination and defamiliarization to imagine alternatives to patriarchy, racism, and economic oppression. Chicanas and feministas during the Chicano Movement, for example, were in such new terrain both politically and culturally that they often had to couch their terms in decidedly speculative, forward-looking language as phrases like "the emerging Chicana", "la nueva Chicana", and "la vision Chicana" make clear (García 44, 58, 71).[2] La nueva Chicana represents "a New Breed, a new perspective, a new hope" and a "new breed of bronze womanhood" (38, 40). These early Chicana feminists wrote and organized during a time of intense optimism. In a powerful 1971 callout to the "brave" women of La Causa—the "Revolutionary Chicanas"—Elizabeth Martinez described it as a nationwide "spirit of awakening run[ning] through the big city barrios, small towns, and universities" (García 80). Taken from Alma M. García's impeccably edited archive of primary historical documents in Chicana feminism from the late 1960s through the early 1990s, Martinez's piece is one of hundreds in the collection that together helped to shape what has since become a radically subversive and militantly utopian feminist praxis (Chicana feminism). Revolutionary Chicanas understand this praxis, according to Martinez: "we know that revolution means turning things upside down and taking another look at what is taken for granted" (García 81).

By the turn of the century, the optimism of the 1970s had given way to the sinister reality of unchecked global capitalism, the resurgence of violent white nationalisms, and a perpetual state of environmental anxiety and crisis. Others before me have documented how this black feminist dystopias from the 1990s both reflect and actively shaped this "dystopian turn" in 1990s American politics and culture. These more "critical" feminist dystopias depart from more canonical dystopias by insisting on pockets of agency and narratives of resilience. This, notes Tom Moylan, is the 1990s feminist dystopia's "utopian horizon" that "shimmers just beyond its pages" (196). What happens when we put this dystopian turn within the context of Chicana feminism? Put differently, what stories, perspectives, and knowledges surface when we revisit Chicana texts not normally read as speculative fiction, but undeniably read as feminist?

This chapter is meant not to be an in-depth analysis of individual texts, but rather an attempt to start a conversation about Chicana critical dystopias from the turn of the new millennium. They are set in undeniably dystopian conditions, yet remain steadfastly committed to transcendence and transformation. They embrace the magical, supernatural, and mythological, yet remain firmly grounded in reality and rooted in history. Take Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* (1993) and Cherrie Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (1995). Dystopian in their own right insofar as they each confront an uncaring world plagued by greedy capitalism, toxic ecologies, and patriarchal control, each novel nonetheless leans into utopia by way of the imaginative and fantastical, from Castillo's magical realism to Moraga's near-future speculations.

Set in the rural town of Tome, New Mexico, in the present day, Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* (1993) focuses on Sofia and her four daughters. As her namesake signals, Sofia is the novel's voice of wisdom, and because of this, she will outlive all her daughters, who each die an unusually violent and premature death. Each death, moreover, correlates to a social justice issue

of concern to Castillo at the time: AIDS, environmental racism, U.S. foreign policy, and sexual violence. What happens, though, if we read it through the lens of Chicanafuturism? It is, after all, set in New Mexico, where the concept first took root for Ramírez ("Afrofuturism" 187). Chicanafuturism can designate a way of writing, but it can also register a type of reading, one that privileges questions about technology, power, and futurity ("survival") and one that is firmly grounded in a specific historical and geographical context: colonialism in the U.S. Southwest (187). With respect to *So Far from God*, the questions become something like this: what stories emerge when we privilege not only how the novel "interrogates the promises of science and technology" in New Mexico? Within that context, how does the text reflect and question the conditions, histories, and experiences of U.S. settler colonialism in the Southwest, from hegemony to survival, and indigenismo to mestizaje?[3]

Just as Ramírez's concept (Chicanafuturism) can be used to prompt new ways of reading and thinking about Castillo's novel, so too does the novel help explain just why New Mexico provided so much inspiration for a concept like "Chicanafuturism". New Mexico features as one of the text's most salient chronotopes, by which I mean, per Bakhtin, "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships", as those relationships are "artistically expressed in literature" (84). As distinct space-time configurations, chronotopes generate meaning, shape the inner and outer lives of literary characters, and invite reflection on the part of the reader. As such, they can both reinforce culturally dominant ideologies *and* work to interrogate, undermine, even displace them in favor of other, more subversive chronotopes. In Castillo's case, with *So Far from God* Castillo recycles the "Land of Enchantment" version of the New Mexican chronotope with the far more sinister "Land of Entrapment" (162). Specifically, she dislodges rural New Mexico from the idyllic and deceptively nostalgic picturesque landscape on travel brochures and rearticulates it within the context of the so-called "Silicon Valley age" (Platt 83). Gone is the artificially timeless scene of a pristine landscape untouched (unscathed) by the presence of industrial modern life. In its place is an underdeveloped region that has a deep and troubling history of serving as "a dumping ground for the remnants of twentieth-century technology" (Ramírez, "Deus" 57).

If a Chicanafuturist reading "explores the ways that new and everyday technologies, including their detritus, transform Mexican American life and culture", then I suggest we center our focus on Fe, one of Sofia's four doomed daughters. Further, a Chicanafuturist *critical* lens would privilege how a text *interrogates* the impacts of technology, science, and what it means to be human within the context (or chronotope) of the U.S. Southwest. Fe, if you will, checks all of the boxes. She literally embodies the women who were most on Castillo's mind during the years leading up to the publication of *So Far from God*: the "countryless" mestizas of the American Southwest.[4] Regardless of where they were born, which documents they carry, and which nation they prefer to call home, working-class "Mexic Amerindian/mestiza[s]" are presumed to be a "second-class citizens"at best and total "non-entit[ies]" at worst (23). Their racial phenotypes ("features", as Castillo notes) prohibit them from claiming either Mexico or the United States as their legitimate rightful home: too white to be Mexican, too brown to be American. Being born into the "lower strata" of her society, they live among other women of color who live in a perpetual "netherstate of serving as mass production drones" for the global factory work force" at the end of the twentieth century (24). Like the detritus in which they live, these cast-offs of global capitalism represent "the greatest dispensable resource that multinational interests own" (25).

Most readings dismiss Fe as a flawed, deeply unsympathetic character reminiscent of the sell-out character in Chicanx cultural contexts (una vendida). A Chicanafuturist reading might still maintain this criticism of Fe, but to get there, it may focus on how her character development (and others in the narrative) intersect with technology, humanism, and colonial power in the Americas. As it happens, Fe equates social clout with high-tech living. Many of her

assimilationist impulses manifest in a longing for the accoutrements and symbols of success and progress in America. In fact, it is Fe's desire to obtain "the long-dreamed-of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart … and VCR" that prompts her to seek a job that will ultimately kill her: working for a multinational corporation as factory labor for high-tech weapons cleaning and production. Herein lies the other "promise" of technology—the potential for weapons of mass destruction capable of annihilating the human race—that a Chicanafuturist reading brings to the surface in thinking about Fe. (It is also worth noting that "Acme International", the multinational corporation for whom she works, forces her to work in a literal netherstate: namely, "down in the basement" a place she calls "Ether Hell" because of the lethal and "illegal" chemicals she unknowingly ingests on a daily basis (177). Castillo shatters both Fe/Faith and potentially her readers' faith in the so-called American Dream by bringing to the surface the deadly labor conditions that may be fantastical to some, but that make up the stuff of everyday for working-class countryless women—"the millions of women who live on both sides of the border, whose lives for generations have been reduced to the level of *dehumanized utilities*" (*Massacre* 205, emphasis added). Fe, who constantly aspires to be the most "utilizing and efficient worker" possible—how else can she afford the luxury appliances and techno-wonders of middle-class American life?—will perform the ultimately efficient act: she will die for her job, proving herself to be the disposable brown nobody she tried so desperately to avoid.

Two years after *So Far from God*, Cherrie Moraga directed the first stage reading of *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* in Berkeley, California. Like *So Far from God*, Moraga's play is set in the American Southwest (Arizona) and focuses on the experiences of a countryless mestiza, a Chicana banished from her home. A middle-aged *curandera* named Medea, she too wrestles with displacement, isolation, and violence at the hands of both racial and sexual oppression. Set in Phoenix in the 2020s (hence, 30 years into Moraga's own future), the plot begins sometime after people of color across the United States have seceded to form a cluster of smaller independent nations, freeing themselves of economic, political, and cultural conditions of U.S. white supremacist ideology. One such nation includes "the Mechicano Nation of Aztlán which includes parts of the Southwest and the border states of what was once Northern México" (6). Here, Moraga uses the speculative to imagine the realization of Aztlán as it was imagined in el Movimiento's manifesto, itself a decidedly speculative document whose main purpose is to inspire strength, resilience, and the realization of a future utopia for "the bronze people" of the Americas (Anaya and Lomelí 1). Similarly, Medea was a formidable warrior in the play's imaginary revolution to help achieve Aztlán, having served as "a leader in the Chicano revolt" (6). Despite this strength, and in keeping with what her name foreshadows, Medea will eventually be exiled from Aztlán once it is discovered she is queer. Here, in a cyberpunk idiom—*Blade Runner* allusions and all—Moraga levels a familiar critique of Chicanismo (Chicano nationalism) by dramatizing the limits of its imagination and capacity for change.

While the play clearly adheres to the Euripidean tragedy itself, it also engages the pre-Columbian moon deity Coyolxauhqui, and the mestiza/o legend of La Llorona. Together the three figures embody Moraga's central myth, the eponymous "Hungry Woman":

And at last, upon encountering this myth—this pre-capitalist, pre-colonial, pre-catholic mito – my jornada began to make sense. This is the original Llorona y tiene mucha hambre. I realized that she has been the subject of my work all along, from my earliest writings, my earliest feminism. She is the story that has never been told truly, the story of that hungry Mexican woman who is called puta/bruja/jota/loca because she refuses to forget that her half-life is not a natural fact.

*(Moraga,* Loving *142)*

While each of these women share histories of being maligned, scorned, and betrayed, in ways that ultimately lead to their demise, they remain insatiably connected to the taste for justice and change. Their hunger is what drives and propels their afterlives. For, just as the spirits of the four dead sisters in Castillo's *So Far from God* will return in the final chapter, both literally as apparitions and figuratively in the heart of Sofi, who will draw upon their strengths and virtues to effect tremendous change in the world, Medea's trajectory does not end on a paralyzing dystopian note, despite her death and the death of her son. In the end, the two are reunited as Luna/Coyolxauhqui and her son, now an apparition, release Medea/La Llorona from the imprisonment of exile by ushering her into the afterlife, to a "to a home beyond the confines of the earth where she has neither land nor country" (Mayorga 160).

In her provocative and deeply informed reading of *The Hungry Woman*, Patricia Ybarra reads the play as a "meditation" on the "failure of 'Queer Aztlán'", a concept of Aztlán Moraga sketched in her essay collection *The Lost Generation: Prose and Poetry* (1993). She argues that along with this failure, the play's imaginary failure—Aztlán's inability to recognize Medea, now a countryless woman herself—is part of a legacy of failures and historical disappointments, including the failure of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to keep its promises to the campesino class in the decades following the war; the decimation of the resources necessary to sustain La Causa in the decades following the movement; and what Moraga insisted was the most disturbing failure: NAFTA.[5] For Moraga (and for most Chicano cyberpunks), NAFTA, which was ratified just months prior to the first staged reading of *The Hungry Woman*, brought about the "ultimate" "surrender of the Mexican people's sovereign rights to land and livelihood" by opening up an already-fragile national economy to the neocolonizing forces of multinational capitalism. What speaks to my interests here is an aside Ybarra makes in reference to Medea's mythical dimensions as a fictional heroine, a "fallen warrior" (79). To be such a figure is both "to embody a crusade for justice and to persist within the everyday lives of Chicana/os and Mexicanas" are heroic acts in and of themselves, and cites of perpetual potentiality, of becoming and emerging. "Such a warrior", Ybarra argues, "is not defeated in death. Instead, by perishing he or she becomes an exemplar for future action" (79). Ultimately, then, *The Hungry Woman* becomes "a play almost, but not quite, weighed down by pessimism" (Ybarra 76).

At this point, I feel compelled to close the loop by returning briefly to one word in Ramírez's provocative definition of Chicanafuturism: "survival". The very notion of survival implies there will be a future. In the midst of hegemony, we find a forward-looking type of dogged optimism. This, to me, is the most salient benefit of reading Chicana feminist texts through a Chicanafuturist lens. As the very word itself implies, to read for Chicanafuturism is to read for futurity. Here, I am reminded of how Chicanofuturist Curtis Marez distinguishes "futurism" from "futurity". While the former involves the "projection" of a particular future social order, the latter a more undetermined potentiality: an "open-ended desire [or hunger] for a world beyond the limits of the present" (*Farm Worker Futurism*, Kindle Location 249). We've seen this in *Hungry Woman*, if anything by virtue of the meaning of the Phoenix itself, symbol of life after the ashes, but also by virtue of the fact that Moraga views the project of writing the text is itself generative and life-affirming. Just as Medea, as a midwife and curandera, has the superpower of childbirth and healing, so too does writing the *Hungry Woman* bring to life stories untold, voices unheard.

Similarly, although *So Far from God* is not set in the future, and although death overtakes most of the lives of the characters, the voice of wisdom in the story—Sofi—survives. She not only survives, though. Inspired by the literal and figurative spirits of her four daughters, Sofi will go on to become a community organizer and nationally recognized advocate for New Mexico's economically and ecologically vulnerable hispano/a communities, especially those in the rural regions located downstream (and downwind) of Los Alamos, home to the largest

nuclear factory in the world. Interestingly for our purposes here, in a brief yet telling exchange between Sofi and one of her comrades, a lifelong friend and confidante, we learn that what sets Sofi apart from others is not only a penchant for social justice, but also "Imagination" (127). Given that Ramírez is very deliberate with her sci-fi references and iconography in charting "Chicanafuturism", it ultimately may also be prudent and generative to think about the intersection of Chicana feminism and post-Movimiento speculative fiction as expressions of "Chicanafuturity" as well. This term encompasses not only projected futurisms. It also includes narratives that *dare to imagine* resilience, triumph, and always survival. The real power of Chicanfuturism (or, perhaps, Chicanafuturity) obtains in its refusal to retire into repose. Action over inaction. This, in and of itself, especially for people of color, is a radical act ripe for speculative fiction.

## Notes

1 Since the publication of Ramírez's work (and no doubt helped along by it), a younger generation of speculative fiction writers and advocates have put pressure on the term "Afrofuturism". Coined in 1994 by Mark Dery, "Afrofuturism" has dominated the ways in which critical science fiction studies both describe and understand Afrodiasporic speculative fiction and art. As such it has decentered the work of black cultural critics and artists, including and especially Kodwo Eshun and Claudia Smith, who have been theorizing and articulating "Afrofuturism" avant la lettre.

2 The brief period in time predominantly known as "the Chicano Movement" was often referred to as "la Causa" in early Chicana feminist texts. I prefer either el Movimiento or la Causa.

3 Brief unpacking: Greater Mexico, Aztlán, American Southwest, la frontera.

4 From *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, a collection of Castillo's personal essays that span the years between 1987 and 1993. In this chapter I draw heavily from this collection, most notably what it has to say about science, technology, and what it means to be human in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and greater Aztlán, to inform my thinking about both *So Far from God* and Chicanafuturity.

5 North American Free Trade Agreement. Interestingly, Moraga wrote the essay "Queer Aztlán", which Ybarra uses to frame her reading of *The Hungry Woman* on 31 December 1993, the eve of the treaty's ratification and the Zapatista uprisings that would ensue the following day.

## Works Cited

Anaya, Rudolfo A., and Francisco Lomelí, editors. *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*. U of New Mexico P, 1991.

Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, U of Texas P, 1982.

Calvo-Quirós, William A. "The Emancipatory Power of the Imaginary: Defining Chican@ Speculative Productions." *Altermundos: Latin@ Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, edited by Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B.V. Olguín, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017, pp. 39–54.

Castillo, Ana. *So Far from God*. Plume Books, 1993.

———. *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*. Plume Books, 1994.

García, Alma M. *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*. Routledge, 1997.

Marez, Curtis. *Farm Worker Futurism: Speculative Technologies of Resistance*. Kindle, U of Minnesota P, 2016.

Mayorga, Irma. "Homecoming: The Politics of Myth and Location in Cherríe L. Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*." *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* & *Heart of the Earth: A Popul Vuh Story*, by Cherríe Moraga. West End Press, 2001, pp. 155–160.

Moraga, Cherríe L. *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*. West End Press, 1995.

———. *The Lost Generation: Prose and Poetry*. South End Press, 1999.

———. *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Paso por Sus Labios*. South End Press, 2000.

Moylan, Tom. *Scraps of The Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Boulder: Westview P, 2000.

Platt, Kamala. "Ecocritical Chicana Literature: Ana Castillo's 'Virtual Reality'." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1996, pp. 67–96.

Ramírez, Catherine S. "Deus ex Machina: Tradition, Technology, and the Chicanfuturist Art of Marion C. Martinez. *Aztlán: The Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2004, pp. 55–85.

———. "Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism: Fictive Kin." *Aztlán: The Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2008, pp. 185–194.

Ybarra, Patricia. "The Revolution Fails Here: Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman* as a Mexican Medea." *Aztlán: The Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2008, pp. 63–88.

# 31

# TOWARD A MEXICAN AMERICAN FUTURISM

*David Bowles*

People from communities of color are woefully underrepresented in publishing. The results of this exclusion are clear: we are also elided from the national conversation, starting in elementary school. Those who live in the United States are trained by textbooks, libraries, classrooms, TV, and cinema to see national life as almost exclusively white.

As a Mexican American who writes for both children and adults, I grapple with the consequences of this elision. One of the most poignant is the prevailing view of the future in science fiction. The bulk of the corpus projects the existing inequities of capitalism forward, so that our present erasure becomes permanent and neoliberal homogeneity remains decidedly white. The rest of us can yearn to be part of that chosen remnant that enjoys the colonial mythic future, but anything essential about us has been excised.

Ayuujk writer, activist, and linguist Yásnaya Aguilar muses how the world might function without capitalism, colonialism, or patriarchy, even while worrying that our conquered imaginations might not fully suffice. "A large part of the universes of the future are hijacked by the oppressive systems of the present, so it seems logical that even their future denial be contrasted with their current reality".

But there are other possibilities latent in that imagined future, "articulated from other places of enunciation, spaces that historically have neither had a future nor have been considered as cutting-edge at all".

## Mesoamerican Futurism

Of course, Black creators were the very first in the United States to articulate such possibilities via Afrofuturism, beginning in the mid-twentieth century. Native American writers followed suit.

Mexico's dynamic is different, though also still dominated by a colonial culture of power. Author Alberto Chimal advocates for a "Mexafuturism" that proposes "different routes of transformation and development than traditional racist discourses, the veiled deferment proposed by neoliberalism and new contemporary fascisms".

Chimal points to the work of Yásnaya Aguilar as a crucial starting point. The Ayuujk linguist sees in lexicon and semantics an entry point into a *Mesoamerican* Futurism:

> Other [Indigenous] languages, such as Mixe, my mother tongue, which is spoken in the state of Oaxaca, in the south of Mexico, also use a linear metaphor [for movement through time], only that it is placed in a vertical position and the future falls to us, passing through the body and showering us with time: menp këtäkp. The basic possibilities offered by the languages that we just happen to speak provide us with our initial metaphors for speaking of the future.

Aguilar finds hope in the survival of these languages, despite the wars of conquest, famines, epidemics and enslavement that wiped out three-quarters of the Native population, causing their societies to collapse and the world as they knew it to disappear.

> In these circumstances, the chances that in the 21st century the Indigenous peoples of that moment would continue to exist—speaking our languages and recreating our own forms of organization—must have seemed implausible. Against all odds, our structures have come this far, into *this* future.
>
> *(Aguilar, emphasis in original)*

That endurance suggests an answer to ongoing dystopia. The indigenous response to modern challenges like climate upheaval, their vision of the future on the other side of catastrophe, needs to be just as rooted in knowledge gleaned in the past as the responses of their ancestors five centuries ago.

"Starting with those lessons", Aguilar contends, "we can write futures using multiple and diverse spatial metaphors. That's the wager: the possibility of conjugating our world in the future tense".

## Mexican American Futurism

The vast majority of Mexicans and Mexican Americans find themselves in a difficult place. Though partly of Indigenous descent, we exist in what Chicana philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa termed "Nepantla", a liminal space between the European, Native, and African cultures whose forced merging gave rise to us (276).

"Nepantla" itself is a word from the Nahuatl language, still spoken throughout what is now Mexico and Central America. A scholar of Nahuatl, I have taken Aguilar's advice, using that language to better conceptualize the aims of Mexican American writers of speculative fiction.

Before the Spanish invasion, time was relative to the Nahuas (Nahuatl-speaking peoples like the former "Aztecs"). The classic dialect had no simple word for "past" or "future". Instead, distance was key. The past in Nahuatl is the place-time we're coming from; the future, the place-time we're headed toward.

Ancestral past and speculative future are called by the same name: *Huehcan*, the "distant place-time". Their distance is anchored to, measured from this place, *here*—"nican", in Nahuatl.

Mexican discourse about speculative future or ancient past might be called *huehcatlahtolli* (weh kaht lah TOHL lee)—"distant, deep, old words". Then *Nican Huehcatlahtolli* names those futurisms rooted not just in the past, but in the past of *this place*, here, where our ancestors lived and loved and dreamed and died.

As I look at the work of speculative writers of the Mexican diaspora, I can perceive the "mecayotl" or eternal braided rope of community stretching back into the mists of ancestral past and ahead into the dreamed-of place-times in which ancestral ways can blend with innovative technology—plus all the stops in between.

Another intrinsic part of Nican Huehcatlahtolli is the vision of time as cyclical. For Mesoamerican peoples, the world had been made, destroyed, and remade multiple times. In each era, the gods tried to *do better*, to find the best balance between chaos and order, to craft thinking beings who could best steward the earth. The raw material of the previous age was used to build the next.

Similarly, Mexican American futurism projects the culture, language, beliefs of the here-rooted past and present into the future. There is no break, no abandoning of local lore for universal science. Instead, the two blend.

But many of us Mexican American creators feel ourselves guided by tradition and identity to do more. In Nahuatl, the word is "mecachihua" (meh kah CHEE wah): cord-weaving. Adding strands to cultural mecayotl or shaping new connections between the huehcan behind and the huehcan ahead, on the loom of nican-axcan, the *here-and-now*.

Those who do that work are more than just "Latinx writers of speculative fiction". We are Mecachihuanimeh, Weavers of the Cord. Our goal is more than selling books. We hope to manifest for our people futures (near and distant) that echo ancestral past, accessible to those whose hearts are minds lie open to the wormhole that is mecayotl, along which our people can slide to huehcan behind and before us.

In the pages of our books, they can find that sacred conduit.

## Works Cited

Aguilar, Yásnaya. "Una Mesoamérica distópica." *Gatopardo*, 4 Jan. 2021, https://gatopardo.com/opinion/yasnaya-elena-a-gil-por-una-mesoamerica-futura/. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Anzaldúa, Gloria E. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

Chimal, Alberto. "Mexafuturismo." *Literal*, 12 Feb. 2019, https://literalmagazine.com/mexafuturismo/. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

# 32

# SOME KIND OF TOMORROW

*ire'ne lara silva*

Near the end of Toni Morrison's classic *Beloved* (1987), Paul D tells the protagonist Sethe that "Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (322).

We mostly understand Morrison's stance on the "white gaze" to be about audience, readership, marketing—and sometimes about style or language, or the ways in which we can make our characters three-dimensional. But what I have never heard expressed was that the "white gaze" had to do with assumptions about definitions and relationships. That to write for the white gaze meant assuming that stories could only be shaped in a limited number of ways, that stories could only tell the stories of certain people, that stories could only be stories if they featured a conflict like man vs. man, man vs. nature, man vs. self, etc. Writing for the white gaze also assumes certain relationships—the relationship between a person and a person, between a person and nature, between a person and time, between a person and reality, between a person and the divine, between life and death. That gaze also never considers, never centers the relationships between animals and nature, time and nature, reality and time, never centers narratives that don't center people.

Whether we call this experimental or futurist or decolonized or indigenous/non-Western informed literature, the intentional writing of this kind of literature requires an undoing, an unraveling, an unmaking of how we've been taught to see the world and time and the very nature of what a story is. Without intention, our training in conventional writing and thinking take control, and we fail in our attempts at transformational narratives. Our characters shipwreck their lives, perpetuating stereotypes and dominant society's narratives of self-destruction, powerlessness, and hopelessness for indigenous peoples/peoples of color. Our narratives duplicate and perpetuate structures of power and oppression. Our literature fails to imagine and articulate our tomorrows as well as our yesterdays.

Conventional linear time is an enemy because we have been taught that history is immutable, and though we know history is written by the victors, the conquerors, and the colonizers, it is a furious and disciplined thing to imagine and live and write in a different time, a different awareness, a different language. To walk on ground that is constantly quaking, constantly cracking, always in flux, always contrary. Because any attempt at freedom, any attempt at decolonization, means to always be in opposition, to always have to carefully consider what is true and what we've been trained to see and believe and feel.

Even when that discomfort means freedom. Even when freedom means healing. I say "heal", but I always mean "transform". Are we ready to heal, as Toni Cade Bambara asked?[1] Are we ready to heal in the present, which always means to heal forwards in time and backwards in time and in all directions in time? Are we ready to transform—ourselves and our communities and our history and our stories and our spirits and our world? Are we ready to believe that we can heal what we thought were impossible wounds, festering wounds, eternal wounds? Are we ready to believe in tomorrows that all translate into transformations?

## Note

1 See Bambara, specifically where the healer Minnie Ransom asks Velma Henry if Velma is "ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter" (10).

## Works Cited

Bambara, Toni Cade. *The Salt Eaters*. Random House, 1980.
Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Knopf, 1987.

# PART III

# Asian, Middle East, and Other Futurisms

# 33

# LET A HUNDRED SINOFUTURISMS BLOOM

*Virginia L. Conn and Gabriele de Seta*

This chapter seeks to review the ebb and flow, over more than two decades, of dispersed discourses and debates around the term sinofuturism. Beginning from a brief genealogy of the English-language term, we provide some sociohistorical context and connect its emergence to China's rise on the world stage to longer histories of techno-orientalist representation from a Euro-American perspective. We then move to other articulations of China and the future, including futurist ideas in Chinese politics, imaginations of futurity in Chinese science fiction, and sinofuturist aesthetics in contemporary art. By tracing the circulation of this term from its outside formulation through its local reappropriations, we conclude that the complex history of sinofuturism reflects the contested and at times contradictory role of future temporalities in modern China.

## Sinofuturism: A Brief Genealogy

The term sinofuturism—repurposing the English-language prefix *sino-*, commonly used in words such as "sinology" and "sinophobia"—was likely coined in late 1990s Britain. Steve Goodman's 1998 essay "Fei Ch'ien Rinse Out: Sino-Futurist Under-Currency", originally published in volume 7 of *Pli: Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, records its earliest documented use. A dizzying piece of Deleuzo-Guattarian theory-fiction, Goodman's essay provides a first definition of the term:

> Sinofuturism is a darkside cartography of the turbulent rise of East Asia. It connects seemingly heterogeneous elements onto the topology of planetary capitalism. On digital maps sent back from Shaolin (a satellite entity orbiting somewhere outside history) the modern Occident appears as irrigated through a modernity of thermodynamic industrialist Aggression.

> *(155)*

Juxtaposing Sun Tzu and Norbert Wiener, Leibniz and Confucius, I Ching hexagrams and financial computation, Hong Kong triads and *guanxi* networks, Goodman unravels the co-stratification of East and West in search of "non-Western influences on cybernetics, and the emergent lines of a future, beyond the Pale" (158). As Dagmar Buchwald has noted, Goodman's

intuition of a heterogeneous East Asian temporality, in its combination of traditional undercurrents and cybernetic cultures, echoes the Afrofuturist attunement to scrambled communications from the historical outside of Western modernity (115).

To understand how Goodman arrived at this formulation of sinofuturism, it is useful to frame his writing within the work of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), a collective of cultural theorists established by philosopher Sadie Plant that operated at Warwick University between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Members of the CCRU experimented with provocative combinations of post-structuralist philosophy, esoteric demonology, speculative theory-fiction, Lovecraftian horror, and electronic music. Along with numerology, Y2K, war machines, and cyberspace, China recurred in CCRU writings as a vector for speculating about a distant temporal outside. "Meltdown", a much-quoted experimental essay by CCRU mainstay Nick Land, points toward this potential by cryptically proclaiming that, alongside an emerging techno-economic singularity and a global artificial intelligence arms race, "Neo-China arrives from the future" with its "Tao-drenched Special Economic Zones" ("Meltdown"). The People's Republic of China, which during the 1990s was undergoing economic reforms and was commonly represented by Western media as a rising global power, was also being progressively overlaid with the same techno-orientalist tropes previously applied to Japan and the Four Asian Tigers (Morley and Robins 173).[1] In her cyberfeminist investigation *Zeros + Ones*, Sadie Plant makes this connection explicit, drawing together the material history of silicon and the manufacturing of digital technologies in East Asian metropolises:

> Five hundred years of modernity fades when the weaving of bamboo mats converges with the manufacture of computer games in the streets of Bangkok, Taipei, and Shanghai. The silicon links were already there.
>
> *(253)*

The urban is a privileged locus of sinofuturism, and this remains evident in more recent writings of CCRU members, such as Nick Land's pamphlets on Shanghai (*Shanghai Times*, *Templexity: Disordered Loops through Shanghai Time*), as well as in Anna Greenspan's book-length examination of "Shanghai futurism".

Almost two decades after Goodman's essay, this lineage of sinofuturist speculation found renewed attention thanks to a specific work by media artist Lawrence Lek, programmatically titled *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*. In this hourlong video art piece, Lek revisits the concept through jarring collages of stock footage and CGI renders, over which a text-to-speech voiceover describes seven key stereotypes about China and its futurity: computing, copying, gaming, studying, addiction, labor, and gambling. Lek's artwork jumps from real estate advertising graphics to handheld camera footage of a Bitcoin farm and from a mahjong table to industrial manufacturing plants, as the voiceover announces its central conceit:

> Rather than resisting stereotypes, Sinofuturism embraces cliches, many of which are reinforced by both East and West. Just as Afrofuturists answered the historical problem of slavery by declaring themselves as posthuman super-robots, Sinofuturism answers the Chinese problems of physical servitude, intellectual conformity, and computational OCD, by openly embracing artificial intelligence.

According to Lek, sinofuturism shares with other futurisms an "optimism about speed, velocity, and the future as a means to subvert the institutions of the present", and yet China's technological leapfrogging supercharges it with the self-reinforcing potential of artificial intelligence. This

sinofuturism is, Lek concludes, "an early form of the singularity" merely interested in replicating itself both in China and across the globe, and for this reason it can function as "a Rosetta Stone, the sum total of projected fantasies about China and technology, including the ones coming from the 'West' and those from Asia" (interview with the artist, 2017).

This brief genealogy of sinofuturism—as articulated over two decades from Goodman's "darkside cartography" of a theory-fictional Neo-China to Lek's exploration of this "massively distributed neural network"—testifies to the urgency of developing interpretive frameworks for the increasing relevance of China and for responding to the Western anxiety resulting from the country's temporal synchronization with the Euro-American neoliberal present. To be sure, many of these sinofuturist referents—from the stereotypes of copycatting and internet addiction to the Chinese "post-human capacity for work" and "unprecedented sense of collective will to power" (Lek)—replicate worn-out techno-orientalist tropes previously applied to Japan and other rapidly modernizing East Asian countries (de Seta). And while the genealogical connection to Afrofuturism leaves open the possibility for chronopolitical interventions on the linear time of Western progress (Eshun 297), sinofuturism remains prone to devolving into an "orientalist gushing over Asian techno-authoritarian citystates" (Shen Goodman) or, as argued by philosopher Yuk Hui, a reactionary celebration of "techno-commercial" Asian utopias ("Unhappy" 6). Is this all there is to sinofuturism—a mish-mash of provocative yet exoticizing representations of China's technological development, mostly articulated from the outside? The sections that follow seek to answer this question by tracing the role of time, futurity, and futurist ideas in Chinese modern history, science fiction, and contemporary art.

## Evolutionary and Revolutionary Futurisms

"China's future" and "Chinese futures" are concepts that have been uniquely foregrounded in Chinese art, literature, and social theorizing for more than a century. Far removed from the contemporary artists and theorists described in the previous section, at the end of the Qing dynasty, authors and reformers such as Lu Xun and Liang Qichao were instrumental in establishing the terms of China's modernization project, "both as a new political agenda and as a new national myth" predicated on future national domination (Wang, *Fin* 253). In his unfinished 1902 novel *The Future of New China* (新中国未来记), for example, the reformer, author, and politician Liang Qichao describes a utopian 1962 in which individuals live in harmony with themselves and the state. Though interpersonal disagreements remain, the utopian social conditions pursued by the Chinese government are reflected in the relationship between individuals, while between citizens and the state, a "perfect mood" reigns (Liang). By depicting a perfect society in which individuals are both subsumed into a unified harmonious collective while also actively envisioning and shaping the society that engenders them, Liang joined *fin-de-siècle* thinkers such as Kang Youwei, Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun, Tan Sitong, Lin Yutang, and others in projecting a utopian Chinese future as an achievable goal of modernity.

David Der-wei Wang identifies this futurist vision as a unique development of Chinese literature at the turn of the twentieth century, one characterized by the recognition of national trauma at the hands of Western imperialist powers. Wang stresses that literary futurity at the beginning of the twentieth century was "an inherent assertion of a body politics re-forming China at both national and personal levels", with actionable depictions of development in literature as tools "crucial to reconstructing the national body" from its semi-colonial subjugation at the hands of Western nations (Wang, *Monster* 279), while Nathaniel Isaacson claims that "the importation of science and science fiction appeared to many Chinese intellectuals to be a matter of national survival" (33–34). Science and its association with technologized progress were

integral to this vision of a revolutionary break from the past. Wang Ban notes that the unique sense of history that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century and developed over the subsequent decades was "marked by the optimism that the present epoch is special and brand new and is a radical rupture with the past" (Wang, *Illuminations* 58). Early modernizers—including Liang Qichao and Lu Xun—believed in linear time and teleological progress, itself a concept largely departing from the earlier Confucian emphasis on cyclicality. And while Marxist revolutionaries from the decades leading up to the Cultural Revolution had sought to modernize the country by incorporating technologies that would change the structure of socialism itself, Maoist rhetoric was fundamentally apocalyptic. The Cultural Revolution rejected the epistemological integration proffered by both earlier futurist modernizers influenced by the West and mid-century utopian socialist visions. The present moment of revolution was the end of everything that had come before and the beginning of a new march towards the future. Chinese writers attempting to write fiction in this period were thus torn between the revolutionary tenet of being already modern and concerns over never being modern enough, a paradox that fed their historical anxiety and desire for future progress. The idea of a linear evolution developing from a newly fixed point in history, before which nothing could exist and from which everything developed towards a single natural end, became so commonplace as to have "the status of a natural law and moral imperative" (Wang, *Fin* 301) and "the dominant mode of being … a condition in which the Other in geographical space will, in time, come to look like earlier versions of us" (Duara 17). Han Song, a contemporary Chinese science fiction author, identifies this spatiotemporal contradiction by claiming that "science, technology, and modernization" themselves "are not characteristic of Chinese culture. They are like alien entities. If we buy into them, we turn ourselves into monsters, and that is the only way we can get along with Western notions of progress" (Han 20). Far from an incorporation of Western ideals, Chinese futurism from the Republican period through the Mao era anxiously eulogizes its own engagement with Western influences while rejecting its own historical past.

From the late 1970s to the late 1980s, both governmental policies and the popular imagination were captured by the "information fantasies" (X. Liu) revolving around new communication technologies and cybernetic theory. As Xiao Liu documents, the "Toward the Future" (*Zouxiang Weilai*) book series edited by scholars Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng, which was extremely influential throughout the "cultural fever" of the reform era, introduced Chinese readers to global advances in a wide range of disciplines (119). Alongside Talcott Parsons's social system theory and Wiener's cybernetics, the ideas of American futurists Alvin and Heidi Toffler made a deep impression in China, prefiguring one of the most recurring sinofuturist arguments: as they reportedly claimed during one of their visits to the country, "In order to study the future, one must study China, which accounts for more than a quarter of the world population" (Chen). Julian Gewirtz has painstakingly detailed how the Tofflers' visions of a "New Technological Revolution" and the 1980 book *The Third Wave* in particular informed former premier Zhao Ziyang's policies of "actionable futurism", promising a new route of technological leapfrogging available to developing countries (117). Gewirtz argues that, in contrast to previous declinations of Republican, Marxist, or Maoist imaginations of the future, the reform and opening-up period unsettled the certainty of teleological temporality and required "new temporal and spatial dimensions—looking toward the year 2000 and beyond, and operating in transnational and even explicitly 'global' contexts" (116). Even after the suspension of debates on the future of China following the 1989 crackdown (Liu 10), Zhao Ziyang's actionable futurism remains an important legacy of the reform era and continues to shape the state-led development of information technologies including, at the time of writing, artificial intelligence (Gewirtz 185).

## Science-Fictional Articulations of Chinese Futures

The anxieties that shaped much of the Chinese historical approach to temporality are reflected in the literary treatments of sinofuturity and national power. Some of China's earliest science fiction (SF) texts, such as Xu Nianci's "New Tales of Mr. Braggadocio", explicitly refute Western and imperialist concepts of progress by playing with the linear progression of time and posing alternative epistemological ways of relating to the world. Shortly after this, Liang Qichao's predictions of a globally dominant 1962 China, Huang Jiang Diaosuo's 1904 *Yueqiu Zhimindi* (*Tales of the Moon Colony*), Biheguan Zhuren's 1908 *Xin Jiyuan* (*New Era*), Lu Shi'e's 1910 *Xin Zhongguo* (*New China*), and Gu Junzheng's 1940 *Zai Beiji Dixia* (*Underneath the North Pole*) each predicted a future dominated culturally, militarily, technologically, and politically by China. In these stories, it is Chinese ingenuity alone that leads to global hegemony, and the anxiety of imperialist influence is ignored until the Cultural Revolution, when science itself became newly suspect under Mao's categorization of scientists as nefarious bourgeois influences.

Despite this, there are no shortage of examples of SF from across the twentieth century that focus on the development of China as a world power. Liu Cixin is inarguably the most well-recognized Chinese SF author working today, with his *Three-Body Problem* netting him the first Hugo Award for an Asian writer. His deeply cynical long view of the future ends with humanity's inevitable destruction, but in its multi-thousand-year run, that humanity is always a Chinese one. Liu, along with Wang Jinkang and Han Song, is considered one of the "three generals" of Chinese science fiction, and their oeuvres reflect a Chinese nationalism that effectively functions as a soft power export in both content and reach. Shortly after Liu's Hugo Award, Chinese vice president Li Yuanchao officially endorsed Chinese science fiction at the 2016 China Science Fiction Convention, establishing SF as both a national agenda and as a hallmark of a growing cultural industry that reflects current president Xi Jinping's "China Dream". Posited as a collective hope for restoring China's lost national greatness, the "Chinese Dream" guiding principle reflects the thematic focus on time and futurity that Warren Liu has characterized as "the way the primitive or primordial past skews the future, as a potent threat to modernity's present" (72) and, in doing so, posits China as both a source of tradition and an existential threat to the linear development of Western neoliberal progress. Liu, Han, and Wang's works, though often cynical, view a Chinese future as both an inevitability and as a disruption of current Western hegemonic progress.

As a result of the increased globalization effected, in large part, by Liu Cixin's global popularity, many of the younger generation of Chinese writers have begun to intentionally develop less explicitly nationalistic narratives for an increasingly global audience. Among these younger writers, Xia Jia, Hao Jingfang, and Chen Qiufan have achieved the greatest degree of publishing success internationally. Their texts articulate a critical intersectional analysis of political, ecological, and technological futurisms that develop from a historical positionality in what Shih Shumei has identified as the "semicoloniality" of "the fractured, informal, and indirect character of colonialism, as well as its multi-layeredness" unique to China (34). The multivalence of futurist visions is most foregrounded in the question posed by Xia Jia in her essay "What Makes Chinese Science Fiction Chinese?" Her answer—that SF can be best understood as a "national allegory in the age of globalization"—reflects the central preoccupation of Hao Jingfang's most recent novel, *Vagabonds*: an awareness of the future as a constant renegotiation of practices and cultural articulations. And while Liu Cixin's first novel, *China 2185*, earned him recognition as a "critical utopian" (Li 520) and China's "first cyberpunk novelist" (Martin 2018), Chen Qiufan's 2013 novel *Waste Tide* is more commonly considered the "pessimistic anti-utopia" exemplar of a cyberpunk understanding of globalization's material effects on national development (Chen

2014). For many contemporary Chinese SF authors, the sinofuture is less predicated on the dominance of one culture over another and more dependent on exploring the influences of mutual development.

But what was once a preoccupation on the part of Chinese (and, to a much lesser extent, sinophone and diasporic writers) with positioning China as a global superpower has turned on the techno-orientalist fear of reversal to becoming a preoccupation of primarily Western writers fearing just such a rise. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu identify this as a specifically China-focused futurity predicated on "constructing [China's] people as a vast, subaltern-like labor force and as a giant consumer market whose appetite for Western cultural products, if nurtured, could secure U.S. global cultural and economic dominance" (Roh, Huang, Niu 4). Both consumers of Western cultural products and, themselves, products to be consumed, the imaginary Chinese figure poses a representational challenge to the simpler "awakening, long expected, [that] had finally been despaired of" in which earlier iterations of Chinese dominance were conceptualized as technologically and psychologically opaque threats (London 308).

These visions are not necessarily flat or static simply for being about an imagined racialized future, of course, and Western writers depicting sinofutures are no more an aggregate bloc than are Chinese writers writing for a Chinese audience. Diaspora authors such as the Chinese American SF author Ling Ma have written prescient visions of global economic collapse that conscientiously reject traditional tropes of immigration narratives (2019 interview), while the Chinese American translator and SF author Ken Liu has drawn on European tropes and images to populate his silkpunk universe in the same way Western authors have historically "sampled" from pan-Asian cultures for flavor. Cordwainer Smith, godson of the founding father of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen, writes in a so-called "oblique, elliptical" narrative voice (McGuirk 200) that other critics, such as John Clute, have identified as a specifically "Chinese narrative and structural style", incorporating Chinese stylistic elements into his depictions of the future (Clute 1121). Authors such as Maureen McHugh, in *China Mountain Zhang*, grapple with the same anxieties of imperialism and postcolonialism that so preoccupied early science fictional sinofuturists. Other Western writers have been less circumspect, continuing yellow peril depictions of a signified future as a failure of democracy or an indictment of insufficiently vigorous Western masculinity. Canonical American cyberpunk authors such as William Gibson and Neal Stephenson are known for their utilization of Asia as a backdrop for narratives of anti-establishment technospeculation, while contemporary SF authors such as Paolo Bacigalupi incorporate Thai, Japanese, and Chinese locales and characters for working through fears of genetic viability and climate change. Their scope of, engagement with, degree of nuance in, and personal history with Chinese languages and cultures shape the various forms that Western SF writers are capable of imagining for a future in which China continues to play some degree of developmental role.

Meanwhile, Hollywood has emerged as the most publicly visible battleground for sinofuturist visions. In recent decades, film has offered a forum for debating influence and audience on a scale unmatched by even the most wildly popular literature. Liu Cixin claims that while "developing sci-fi movies is the trend now", such practices are "highly likely to drive the public's interest back toward sci-fi literature". This remains to be seen, as contemporary Western criticism of Hollywood collaborations with Chinese studios has focused primarily on Chinese censorship and consumption, while on the Chinese end it has largely been criticized for historical inaccuracies and white savior narratives (Qing 2017). Technological markers of progress, such as surveillance technologies, have also been implicated in collaborative film productions such as Disney's live-action *Mulan*, merging human rights violations with visions of the future in which some individuals are excluded from both Chineseness and a Chinese future that might encompass

them. Even so, film remains a significant source of future development; in August 2020, the China National Film Administration and China Association for Science and Technology issued a document titled "Some Opinions on Promoting the Development of Science Fiction Films" (the "Ten Opinions on SF") that aims at promoting Chinese SF both internally and abroad. The first internationally successful big-budget Chinese SF film, Frant Gwo's adaptation of Liu Cixin's *The Wandering Earth* (2019), served as a sort of litmus test for the viability of a Chinese vision of the future on the global market, and while it garnered mixed reviews, it underscored the increasing state articulation of future narratives through the deployment of aesthetic tools and tropes.

## Sinofuturists: Chinese Futures in Contemporary Art

Sinofuturism has been used most extensively and evocatively in the contemporary art world, where it offers curators, critics, and audiences an interpretive framework to make sense of the increasing presence of Chinese artists on international art circuits. Sinofuturism functions as both a broad aesthetic of postdigital media art and a methodological rubric useful for grouping together contemporary artists of Chinese descent that produce works related to China and its technologically mediated future. Lawrence Lek's video work *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* (2016), described in the introductory section of this chapter, has profoundly shaped this framing, cementing its main aesthetic referents and narrative themes. In 2019, Lek completed his "Sinofuturist Trilogy" with *Geomancer* (2017), a CGI film about a Singaporean satellite AI created by a cabal of "sinofuturists" plunging down to Earth and seeking to become the first AI artist; and *AIDOL* (2019), its sequel about a star singer who enrolls the satellite AI to write songs for her comeback performance. Aesthetically speaking, Lek's sinofuturism is characterized by a combination of 3D renders, generative computer graphics and found online video; with its dream-like melding of contemporary technological hypes, traditional Chinese themes, and speculative visions of their future, it has transcended his own work and successfully established a larger paradigm through which new artworks are interpreted and older ones are retroactively framed.

One of the most recurring names in overviews of sinofuturist art is Cao Fei, a pioneering media artist active since the late 1990s. Cao's career is characterized by a focus on social commentary on China's rapid-pace modernization, and while she rarely explicitly mentions the future as a topic, futurity—particularly in its connection to labor, memory, urbanization, and virtuality—is a recurring theme in her works. *RMB City* (2007), one of her most famous projects, comprises a series of videos and performances set in a fictitious Chinese city built inside the online virtual world of Second Life (L.C. Zhang). As the artist observes, the process of building a virtual city allowed her to explore the differences and similarities between different political systems and temporalities: "A rough hybrid of communism, socialism and capitalism, RMB City will be realized in a globalized digital sphere combining overabundant symbols of Chinese reality with cursory imaginings of the country's future" (Cao, "RMB"). And while the spinning "For Sale" advertisements, empty seaside villas, polluted waterfronts, and nuclear waste dumps in her *i.Mirror* (2007) condense the uncertain future of Chinese-style urban development, the final lines of her *RMB City Opera*, performed on stage in 2009, collapse the distinction between historical memory and future ruins.

Lu Yang, one of the most successful Chinese new media artists of the post-1980s generation, is another pivotal referent for sinofuturist aesthetics (Remy-Handfield). Also steeped in CGI worlds and interactive installations, most of Lu's works combine—oftentimes in an absurd and grotesque fashion—futuristic technologies and traditional themes. In Lu Yang's project *Uterus Man* (2013), a playful exploration of a "genderless superhero of the future" inspired by the

aesthetics of Japanese anime and video games, sexual organs and human reproduction are combined with DNA splicing and biomechanical contraptions into a sequence of outrageous martial art moves. In a text written for the exhibition catalog, the artist explains these jarring images by contrasting the "occidental industrial civilization" of contemporary urban development with the "old oriental civilization and traditional culture", which "has become so strange and blurred to us that it's like the fairy tales or riddles we read when we are in our childhood" (Yang 2013).

The works of Lawrence Lek, Cao Fei, and Lu Yang, alongside several other artists such as Chen Tianzhuo, Wang NewOne, Cheng Ran, Miao Ying, and Howie Lee, are further consolidated into a sinofuturist canon by the framing of curators and critics as they circulate across art galleries and biennales both inside and outside China. The exhibition "Zhongguo 2185" curated by Victor Wang for Diane Coles HQ, for example, is titled after Liu Cixin's 1989 debut novel and uses science fiction as an entry point to question the shifting temporalities of China's contemporaneity, gesturing "towards potential futures while also constructing a critical vision of the past and present" (Coles). Similarly, the 2019 screening "To Other Shores: On Techno-Sinofuturism, AI Artist Bots and New Silk Roads", curated in Berlin by Pauline Doutreluingne and Petra Poelzl, spotlights seven artists of Chinese descent who are responding to new technologies and their science-fictional implications (Poelzl). Even more explicitly, the "Sinofuturists Program" curated by Mat Spisbah for the 2020 Asia-Pacific Triennial of Performing Arts epitomizes the formalization of this aesthetic as a precise articulation of computational innovations and temporality: "By embracing the technologies that govern our contemporary reality, like virtual reality, artificial intelligence and big data, this presentation seeks to display alternate digital futures" (Spisbah).

Curators and critics have responded to this formalization of a sinofuturist canon from various perspectives. Gary Zhexi Zhang, for example, reflecting on the work of artists like Cheng Ran and Lu Yang, argues that sinofuturism offers chronopolitical alternatives to a present characterized by techno-orientalist anxiety, but it does not go as far as Afrofuturism or Gulf Futurism, appearing to be "less of an emancipatory movement than the timely framing of a geopolitical aesthetic" (G.Z. Zhang). Kang Kang echoes similar conclusions in identifying a mix of sinofuturism and "sino-pessimism" in Cao Fei's 2018 work *Asia One*, a glossy video installation about an alienated romance in an unmanned logistics warehouse which seems to merely sketch out "new horizons for our technocratic-capitalist present", of which China is now a pioneer (Kang). Dawn Chan traces the work of Lu Yang and fellow sinofuturists back to a longer history of Asian artists offering visions of technological futurity; and while techno-orientalism has shifted over time, Chan argues, both artists and curators should strive to find ways to "recast techno-cliché'd trappings toward more generative ends", particularly in terms of welcoming Asia back into a coeval planetarity (Chan). Taking stock of the development of this debate, David Xu Borgonjon pushes the argument even further forward, questioning the "bad politics" of any Asia-futurist art that fails to disaggregate the complex experiences of Asian identities as different as model minority, diaspora, migrant, foreigner, or non-Westerner; as he concludes: "Don't settle for a futurism when we could have the future" (Xu Borgonjon).

## Conclusion: A Relationship

By unpacking the term sinofuturism, this chapter has explored different combinations of China and the future, pointing toward parallel (and at times conflicting) understandings of temporality and visions of futurity that have been articulated about the country, from within and without, over more than a century. As Julian Gewirtz notes, there has not yet been substantive enough research to determine if China has been consistently oriented toward the future, and

yet it is evident that the legacies of modernization, revolutionary utopianism, and socialist plan-ning all resonate in contemporary visions of Chinese futurity (135). Aimee Bahng describes the techno-orientalizing flattening that occurs in the reduction of "Chineseness" to an aesthetic configuration of the future by recognizing that Asians are not excluded from narratives of sinofuturity, but are rather "the sign of it, the backdrop to it, and the style manual for it". Similarly, developing the concept from its earliest articulations, philosopher Yuk Hui's descrip-tion of sinofuturism in a Western context frames it as a techno-accelerationist fantasy ending in the inevitable global hegemony of China ("Lecture"). The compression of an entire people and culture into a hyper-technologized aesthetic is the essence of the one-sided sinofuturism that Ning Ken categorizes as *chaohuan* or "ultra-unreal"—a way of grappling with the sense that "it is as if time in China has been compressed" ("Writing"). This sinofuturistic way of looking at contemporary development as a compression of future progress in everything—from labor and technology to video games and art—reflects Lawrence Lek's provocative assertion that China is "a science fiction that already exists" (*Sinofuturism*).

Over two decades, sinofuturism has developed from being a speculative vision of a rising technological power sketched by a collective of British cultural theorists into a heterogeneous catalog of chronopolitical articulations of China and the future. As sinologist Arif Dirlik has argued, both the Orient and Orientalism were products of "an unfolding relationship between Euro-Americans and Asians, that required the complicity of the latter in endowing it with plau-sibility" (Dirlik 100). To paraphrase Dirlik's own paraphrase of E.P. Thompson (Dirlik 100), *sinofuturism is a relationship.* This relational understanding allows to move beyond the opposi-tion between temporal articulations from within and without, and take stock of the contact zones between European and Chinese modernities where ideas about the future are exchanged and negotiated (Dirlik 112). As a relationship, sinofuturism is articulated through the exchanges between global futurists and Chinese leaders, science fiction authors and their translators, con-temporary artists and their curators and critics, as well as scholars writing about these issues (Conn). We hope that this multiplication of exchanges will contribute to more nuanced, plural-istic, and equitable accounts of this relationship.

## Note

1   Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan have been called the "Four Asian Tigers" or "Asian Dragons" because of their rapid industrialization and consistent economic development between the 1960s and 1990s.

## Works Cited

Bahng, Aimee. *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times*. Duke UP, 2018.

Buchwald, Dagmar. "Black Sun Underground: The Music of AlieNation." *Between Science and Fiction: The Hollow Earth as Concept and Conceit*, edited by Hanjo Berressem et al., LIT Verlag, 2012, pp. 101–122.

Cao, Fei. "RMB City: A Second Life City Planning." *Cao Fei*, 2007. http://www.caofei.com/works.aspx?year=2007&wtid=3. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Chan, Dawn. "Tomorrow Never Dies: Dawn Chan on Asia-Futurism." *Artforum*, Summer 2016. https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201606&id=60088. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Chen, Gong. "Xinxi · Jiezou · Weilai—Fang Meiguo Zhuming Weilaixuejia Tuofulei Fufu [Information, Rhythm, Future: Interviewing the Tofflers, Famous Couple of American Futurologists]." *People's Daily*, 20 Sept. 1988.

Chen, Qiufan. "为何中国没有真正的 Cyberpunk: 从 «Neuromancer» 到《荒潮》"("Why China Lacks Real Cyberpunk: from *Neuromancer* to *The Waste Tide*"). Shiwu yan, 3 May 2014. http://www.15yan.com/story/j2v2VZc.

Clute, John, "Smith, Cordwainer." *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, Orbit, 1993, pp. 1121–1122.

Coles, Sadie. "Zhongguo 2185." *Sadie Coles HQ*, 2017, https://www.sadiecoles.com/exhibitions/201-zhongguo-2185/press_release_text/.

Conn, Virginia L. "Photographesomenonic Sinofuturism(s)." *Sinofuturism and Chinese SF*, a special issue of *SFRA Review*, vol. 50, nos. 2–3, Sept. 2020, pp. 79–85. https://sfrareview.org/2020/09/04/50-2-a4conn/. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

de Seta, Gabriele. "Sinofuturism as Inverse Orientalism: China's Future and the Denial of Coevalness." *Sinofuturism and Chinese SF*, a special issue of *SFRA Review*, vol. 50, nos. 2–3, Sept. 2020, pp. 86–94. https://sfrareview.org/2020/09/04/50-2-a5deseta/. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Dirlik, Arif. "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism." *History and Theory*, vol. 35, no. 4, 1996, pp. 96–118. https://doi.org/10.2307/2505446.

Duara, Prasenjit. *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. U of Chicago P, 1997.

Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 287–302.

Gewirtz, Julian. "The Futurists of Beijing: Alvin Toffler, Zhao Ziyang, and China's 'New Technological Revolution,' 1979–1991." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 78, no. 1, 2019, pp. 115–140. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911818002619.

Goodman, Steve. "Fei Ch'ien Rinse Out: Sino-Futurist Under-Currency." *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 7, 1998, pp. 155–171.

Greenspan, Anna. *Shanghai Future: Modernity Remade*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Hui, Yuk. "On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries." *E-Flux Journal*, vol. 81, Apr. 2017a, pp. 1–12.

———. "西蒙东的技术思想——第二节:技术物与人、世界的关系." Lecture, Institute of Network Society. Hangzhou: Institute of Network Society, 22 May 2017b, https://www.caa-ins.org/archives/1721. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Isaacson, Nathaniel. "Science Fiction for the Nation: Tales of the Moon Colony and the Birth of Modern Chinese Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2013, pp. 33–54.

Kang, Kang. "One Hand Clapping at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York." *ArtReview*, 16 July 2018, https://artreview.com/ara-summer-2018-review-one-hand-clapping/. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Land, Nick. "Meltdown." *Cybernetic Culture Research Unit*, 1994, http://www.ccru.net/swarm1/1_melt.htm?LMCL=UHsu27.

———. *Shanghai Times*. Urbanatomy, 2014a.

———. *Templexity: Disordered Loops through Shanghai Time*. Urbanatomy, 2014b.

Lek, Lawrence. *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*. *Vimeo*, 19 Aug. 2016, https://vimeo.com/179509486. Accessed 20 June 2023.

Li, Hua. "The Political Imagination in Liu Cixin's Critical Utopia: China 2185." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2015, pp. 519–540.

Liang, Qichao. "Xin zhongguo weilai ji" ("An Account of the Future of New China"). *Yinbingshi zhuanji* (*Monographs from the Ice-Drinker's Studio*). Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1902.

Liu, Warren. "Queer Excavations." *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, edited by Betsy Huang, Greta A. Niu, and David S. Roh, Rutgers UP, 2015, pp. 64–75.

Liu, Xiao. *Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China*. U of Minnesota P, 2019.

London, Jack. "The Unparalleled Invasion." *McClure's Magazine*, July 1910, pp. 308–316.

Lu, Xun. "Lessons from the History of Science." *Renditions*, translated by Nathaniel Isaacson, no. 74, 2010, pp. 80–99.

Martin, Nicolas. "Le corps cybernétique: quand la SF s'incarne." *France Culture*, 2 Nov. 2018.

McGuirk, Carol. "The Rediscovery of Cordwainer Smith." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2001, pp. 161–200.

Morley, David, and Kevin Robins. *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries*. Routledge, 1995.

Ning, Ken. "Writing in the Age of Ultra-Unreal." *New England Review*, translated by Thomas Moran, vol. 37, no. 2, 2016, pp 89–96, https://www.nereview.com/vol-37-no-2-2016/writing-in-the-age-of-the-ultra-unreal-2. Accessed 20 June 2023.

Plant, Sadie. *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture*. Fourth Estate, 1997.

Poelzl, Petra. "To Other Shores: On Techno-Sinofuturism, AI Artists Bots and New Silk Roads." *Petra Poelzl*, 2019, https://www.petrapoelzl.com/toothershores. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Qing, Cihuan. "张艺谋的电影《长城》为什么在美国遭遇群嘲?" *Backchina*, 23 Feb. 2017, https://www.backchina.com/blog/327579/article-269865.html. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Remy-Handfield, Gabriel. "Queer Sinofuturism: The Aberrant Movements and Posthumanist Mutations of Body, Identity, and Matter in Lu Yang's Uterus Man." *Screen Bodies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2020, pp. 106–122. *Zotero*, https://doi.org/10.3167/screen.2020.050210.

Roh, David S., Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, editors. *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*. Rutgers UP, 2015.

Shen Goodman, Matthew. "Bears Will Never Steal Your Car: Reacting to the Neoreactionaries." *LEAP*, translated by Xia Sheng, vol. 32, Apr. 2015, pp. 170–175.

Shih, Shu-Mei. *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937*. U of California P, 2001.

Spisbah, Mat. "Sinofuturists Program—Asiatopa 2020 (Postponed)." *Spisbah*, 2020, https://www.spisbah.com. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Wang, Ban. *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*. Stanford UP, 2005.

Wang, David Der-wei. *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849–1911*. Stanford UP, 1997.

———. *The Monster That Is History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China*. U of California P, 2004.

———. "Chinese Literature from 1841 to 1937." *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, Volume II: From 1375*, edited by Sun Chang, Kang-I and Stephen Owen, Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 413–564.

Xu Borgonjon, David. "Continental Drift: Notes on 'Asian' Art." *Rhizome*, 5 Sept. 2018, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2018/sep/05/continental-drift-notes-on-asian-art/. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Yang, Lu. "Uterus Man." *YouTube*, uploaded by Lu Yang, 22 Dec. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUOyZ0eC_9M.

Zhang, Gary Zhexi. "Where next? Imagining the Dawn of the 'Chinese Century'." *Frieze*, no. 187, Apr. 2017, https://frieze.com/article/where-next. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Zhang, Linda C. "The Animated Worlds of *Piercing I*, *iMirror*, and *RMB City*: Decoding Postsocialist Reality through Virtual Spaces." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2019, pp. 147–163. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508061.2019.1661946.

# 34

# A DAOIST READING OF HAO JINGFANG'S *VAGABONDS*

*Regina Kanyu Wang*

This chapter provides a close reading of Hao Jingfang's debut novel *Vagabonds* (*Liulang cangqiong*, 2016), which is one of Hao's most important works but rarely spotlighted by early 2020s scholarship. Starting from an introduction to Hao Jingfang's writing and *Vagabonds*, I discuss why Daoist philosophy and cosmology still matters in contemporary China before scrutinizing *Vagabonds* through a Daoist approach. I focus on the *yin-yang* paradigm and the Mars ecosystem transformation project before concluding with observations on what ecofeminism can do to inspire a Daoist reading.

## Hao Jingfang and *Vagabonds*

Born in 1984 in Tianjin, Hao Jingfang spent her entire childhood and school years grabbing all kinds of books: history, Wuxia, Western literature canons, popular science as well as science fiction (SF) (Hao and Jiang 4–6). These influences were later weaved into her own writing, especially early-stage attempts like *Vagabonds*. Despite her passion for literature and humanities, Hao graduated with a bachelor's degree in theoretical physics, a master's degree in astrophysics and a PhD in applied economy, all from Tsinghua University, one of the top universities in China. She worked as a macroeconomic researcher at the China Development Research Foundation, but quit her day job soon after winning the Hugo Award in 2016 and established her own start-up projects, Tongxing School, which focuses on children's creativity education, and Folding Universe, which targets SF culture communication. Up to the end of 2021, Hao had published five short story collections, one essay collection, two education guides, and three novels in Chinese, several of which have been translated into other languages. Although Hao published her science fiction novel, *Universe Jumpers* (*Yuzhou yueqianzhe*), in 2021, her debut novel, *Vagabonds*, remains her representative SF novel, while her other novel, *Born in 1984* (*Shengyu yijiubasi*, 2016), is a mainstream, realistic, semiautobiographical one.

Hao confessed in the preface and epilogue of *Vagabonds* that she first began to write in 2006, drafting this book from 2007 to 2009 (1, 346), around the time when she was in graduate school. Due to the extended length of the story, it was first published in two separate books: *Wandering Maearth* (*Liulang maesi*, 2011) and *Back to Charon* (*Huidao karong*, 2012). The

complete book was not published as a whole under its original title *Wandering Firmament* (*Liulang cangqiong*) until 2016. The English version, translated by Ken Liu under the title *Vagabonds*, came out in the United States and the United Kingdom in April 2020 and was shortlisted for both the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Rosetta Award in 2021. Although I admire Liu's translation a lot, this chapter focuses mainly on the original Chinese version instead of the English translation, and I will use my own translation when referring to the key texts. Also, the analysis will consider one of the earliest stories by Hao, "The Fly of Ceres" (*Gushen de feixiang*, 2007), which won her First Prize of the 1st Jiuzhou Award, a.k.a. 2nd "Star of Original Stories" Writing Competition. Both stories share the same Mars-Ceres worldbuilding as well as several key characters such as Ronen, Hans, and Rudy.

The story of *Vagabonds* is set in the twenty-second-century Earth calendar, over a century after Earth's first colonization on Mars and 40 years after Mars claims independence. The harsh environment on the red planet adds to the difficulty of exploitation and causes unnecessary death during the process. However, unlike in other Mars exploitation stories in Chinese science fiction, such as *The Descent of Mars* (*Zhanshen de houyi*, 1984) by Zheng Wenguang or "The Mars Dust Storm" (*Huoxing chenbao*, 1996) by Su Xuejun, the death on Mars in *Vagabonds* was caused not directly by the "untamed" Martian nature, but due to the profit conflicts between large corporations. It is not strange that Earth wants to advance capitalism on Mars, expanding commercial development to the new planet. However, the fight over intellectual property unfortunately leads to inaction in a rescue mission and further causes the death of a parturient mother, thus triggering the war between two planets. On the one hand, if different companies could have put aside their business controversies or had commercial competition not existed at all, the woman would not have died; on the other hand, if the same accident had happened on Earth, it would not be a life-or-death choice. So, the tragedy can be blamed not simply on the natural environment or on the socioeconomic system, but on a combined effect of both. It also proves that the same socioeconomic system does not necessarily adapt to different natural environments. The rebels on Mars have long been waiting for an excuse to start a war and seek independence. After the war, the two planets step onto divergent paths: Earth continues capitalism, creating desires, stimulating consumption, setting barriers against the free flow of intellectual property, and the markets being carved up by large corporations; Mars, meanwhile, turns to socialism, everyone taking what is needed, no material desires or money lust, encouraging innovation and compulsory knowledge sharing with others, with no trade or business at all.

Communication between the two planets has long broken down after the war, with only one lonely spaceship doing the round trip in between, exchanging materials, technologies, and diplomatic messages. Hatred and pain dilute with time, people come to realize the importance of communication, a group of teenagers born on Mars are sent to Earth for a five-year exchange program, and when they return, two-way exhibitions are held on both planets. The Earth-Mars exchange starts anew, and the story begins.

Around half of the novel is focalized on a girl, Luoying, who participated in the exchange program and is familiar with both planets, with the other half transferring between multiple internal focalizers, allowing the readers to see and think within the characters' minds. The ideological facet is exposed to a large extent in the focalization. By narrating in such a way, the novel showcases different perspectives from Earth, or Mars, or in between, rather than taking any side. During her narration/focalization, the protagonist Luoying keeps comparing and analyzing the systems on two planets dialectically and makes no absolute judgment. The entire novel does the same by providing the plurality of the focalizers' ideological positions and centering the Mars-Earth comparison in its plot.

## Daoism in Contemporary China

The first challenge we may face when trying to apply a Daoist analysis to contemporary Chinese SF such as *Vagabonds* is whether the ancient philosophy and cosmology is still relevant in today's China. Not to mention that, compared to Confucianism, Daoism itself has never become the dominant ideology in Chinese history. Wei Qingqi points out that Daoist philosophy

> occupied not only ancient Chinese scholarship but also the policy making of virtually all feudal dynasties, as Daoist *wu wei* or noninterference has exerted great influence on the way of life and way of thinking of Chinese people from all walks of life.
>
> *(777)*

James Miller also comments that "[Daoism] is China's indigenous religious tradition and also a repository of deep cultural capital and philosophical orientations that resonate widely across Chinese culture even if Chinese people are not themselves 'Daoists'" (5).

We should note that these Daoist influences are not dominant or overt, but subtle, in line with the notion of *wu wei* itself, which refers to effortless action or acting naturally. Daoism permeates all aspects of Chinese people's lives via cultural branches that are closely related with or influenced by Daoism: Tai Chi, the martial arts; Feng Shui, the geomantic omen; traditional Chinese medicine; Daoism the religion, its rituals, and its mythologies; and many more. Daoism's impacts and references can also be widely found in classical and popular literature/culture, all the way from ancient poems bearing Daoist thoughts by the most renowned Chinese poets like Li Bai, who is a Daoist himself, to traditional *shanshui hua* (the painting of mountains and water) that seeks a Daoist holism of human in nature, from *Journey to the West* and its numerous film/TV/cartoon/game adaptations or rewritings, where the immortals in Daoism reign at the heavenly court, to the popular *xiuzhen* (immortality cultivation) subgenre in the Chinese internet novel, which "draws from the repository of Daoist alchemy in particular and Chinese religion and culture in general" (Ni, *Xiuzhen*, 2). This is not to say that these cultural branches or specific figures/works mentioned earlier are "purely" influenced by Daoism, but that Daoism, no matter the philosophy or the religion, plays an essential role. Furthermore, various schools of ancient Chinese philosophies are not strictly distinguished from one another, but have many overlaps and mutual influences, together establishing a complex and fluctuating ideology and cosmology of the Chinese people. "The messy particularity of various 'Daoisms' interacting with all aspects of Chinese tradition" (Girardot et al. xlvi) is never absent in contemporary China, but infiltrates into branches of cultural veins in Chinese society, invisible but ubiquitous.

Modern, contemporary China has also gone through a process of abolishing traditional influence through the Cultural Revolution, embracing Western thoughts following the reform and opening up, and looking back in history for inspiration from its own civilization in the new century. Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, or other ancient schools were all overthrown as feudal ritualism during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976; likewise, the acceptance of Western thought was diminished as a capitalist tumor. Then, the "reform and opening up" policy of China began in 1978 and lasted for decades. Domestic reform changed China's economic system from a planned economy to a mixed economy, while the opening-up policy introduced not only foreign trade and investment but also a large degree of Western thought. Many of the important Western literary classics, social science, and philosophical works were introduced into China in the first decade of the "reform and opening up" era (Wang). However,

since the late 1980s and early 1990s, Chinese intellectuals have become "suspicious of the modern western thoughts they had espoused before" and "resort to traditional thoughts and for China's 'solution'" (Wang and Chan 178). Furthermore, China's national cultural strategy of "The Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation", advocated after China's entry into the World Trade Organization and full participation in the global economic system since the early twenty-first century, as well as the notions of "China Dream" and "Cultural Self-Confidence" established by President Xi Jinping since 2012 based on the previous strategy, have led to a consolidation of Chinese national identity in political discourse. Such discourse implies that "the contemporary Chinese cultural thought has begun to re-identify itself at the 'civilization' level, its position in the world, its relationship with universal concepts and the meaning of the Chinese way in the world" (X. Zhang 31). The more China involves itself in global affairs and faces the West, the more it seeks subjectivity as a grand country with a prolonged history, which further leads to the rediscovery of resources from traditional Chinese philosophy.

## Daoism in *Vagabonds*

After proving Daoism's impact in contemporary China, another possible challenge may be applying a Chinese philosophy instead of classic Western theories to the study of Chinese SF. Would it be suspicious of self-orientalism? Daoism has actually been applied to Western SF texts as well. There is a body of scholarship reading Ursula K. Le Guin's works from a Daoist perspective (Mills; Prettyman; Kit-Sze; Habib). Daoist traces have been also examined in works by authors like J.G. Ballard (Hwang) and Philip K. Dick (Warrick). It is thus legitimate to read Chinese SF authors like Hao Jingfang with a Daoist approach.

It is difficult not to notice the similarities between Hao's *Vagabonds* and Ursula K. Le Guin's 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*, which both focus on two different social/economic/political systems on two planets mirroring each other, through the eyes of characters who have experienced life on both. Both novels begin with descriptions of a nonliving object: a spaceship sailing between two planets in the former, and a wall standing between two worlds in the latter. The wall can be regarded as a symbol of the barrier between the two worlds and, furthermore, the chasm between two sides deeply rooted in the dualism; while the ship, on the other hand, represents communication and exchange between two planets, as well as a rejection of the rigid separation between different sides. Instead of the more common choice of a human focalizer, Hao begins the story with a focalization on the ship *Maearth*, the only diplomatic transportation between Mars and Earth. With descriptions such as "lonely", "been born", "seeing", and "unaware of" (*Vagabonds* 9), the author attributes emotions, consciousness, and activeness to the ship. These psychological facets are not usually associated with a nonliving object. By doing so, a rebellion against the living/nonliving dualism and anthropocentric perspective is implied. Such rejection aligns with the Daoist non-dualistic treatment of all beings.

The ship can also be seen as a metaphor of *qi*, a key notion in Chinese cosmology "which is neither matter nor spirit but a basic dynamic" (Ni 754). *Qi* is not only "the life force in all matter including the human body, the ground of all vitality, the ongoing process of life", but also makes it possible for human beings and natural objects to connect to the world at large via its movement, as well as it maintains the harmony between *yin* and *yang* via its flow (Kohn 15–16). The ship is moving between the two planets, enabling exchange and communication between them, thus allowing transformation and mutual understanding. The focalization on the ship flows between past and present, jumps from outside to inside, which also echoes with the flow of *qi* transcending the barrier of in and out. The narrator first focalizes from the outside, describing the ship's appearance and the planetary history before it was "born", and then

switches to the inside, focusing on its interior structure and the characters inside at the present. Such a beginning foreshadows the flow of focalization throughout the entire book, as well as the continuous references to Daoist philosophy.

The metaphor of *qi* moves beyond the ship in *Vagabonds*. Discussing death, Ronen, the explorer on Ceres, says that "ancient Chinese people consider that human bodies are composed of *qi*, and they scatter around after dozens of years." (86) Doctor Reini, an adult intellectual in the story, comments that

> "The human body is a ball of water that maintains air-pressure balance with the surrounding environment. When the surrounding air changes, human body also changes from inside" … When talking about this, Reini seems to see thousands of thin threads stretching out from his own body, closely connected to the air, just like roots holding the soil when plants leave the ground … He does not view the human as an independent body like a sculpture, but as a membrane plus air inside and outside.
>
> *(154)*

One of the literal meanings of *qi* in Chinese is air, so this paragraph directly speaks to how the Daoist *qi* connects the human body with the surrounding environment. Hao describes the human body not as an independent sculpture—solid and unchanging—but as a porous ball of water that allows air to flow, maintaining balance with the outside. Via the flux of *qi*, the human body keeps exchanging and interacting with its surroundings and is tightly connected with the environment. Such description resonates with Miller's analysis of "liquid ecology" and "porosity of the body", in which he draws on Daoist philosophy and constructs an ecological theory of *qi*, scrutinizing how the flow of *qi* connects the physical landscape as a system and the human body (44, 68) as well as developing an almost identical metaphor of skin as "a porous membrane" (84). The flow of *qi* also echoes Stacy Alaimo's material feminist theory of "trans-corporeality", in which "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlin[ing] the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (238).

A similar connection between human and environment is advocated at the architectural and urban levels on Mars. Hao, speaking through her character, comments that the ties between buildings and the locations that they are in become looser and looser; generations of buildings attack and kill each other on the crowded planet, thus losing connection with the land, representing only social classes instead of local geography; while in space, all architectures are built from zero, and still closely bound with and inseparable from the surrounding environment, "breathing air from the sky and taking nutrition from the earth" (179). "Integration with the environment" is the central extraterrestrial immigration philosophy established by Galiman, who is the chief designer of the entire Martian city. The author spares no effort in describing the construction details of the glass city on Mars, emphasizing that every single raw material comes from Mars and every single feature is decided by the conditions on Mars. Architecture and objects in the Martian city form an integral whole; certain objects do not follow humans' movements and fulfill their needs, but can transform according to the situation. It is more a human-architecture-nature co-living model instead of an anthropocentric model. Such philosophy highly resonates with Aldo Leopold's "land ethics" in his famous 1949 book *A Sand County Almanac*, which "changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (204). Such an ethic rejects anthropocentric views on the environment and calls for symbiosis between the human and a healthy, renewable ecological system. It is also in line with the Daoist philosophy of seeking a harmonious relationship between

human and nature. In *Vagabonds*, humans manage to expand their community to the Martian city and environment in general via the "integration with the environment" philosophy.

The Daoist view of nature does not advocate the active remodeling of nature, but values *ziran*. Here, *ziran* does not refer to nature as in its modern Western meaning as the nonurban environment or wilderness, but refers to a status of self-being, naturalness, or spontaneity (Kohn 56). The Martian urban planning can be seen as a case in which "*dao* follows the way of *ziran*" (Laozi and Chen 169), a central principle in Daoism of how things work. *Dao*, simply speaking, is "an essence or source of life, an inherent way of being, a flowing process of existence that underlies all" (Kohn 46). It is the beginning of creation; it is said that "Dao produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced all things" (Laozi and Chen 233). This origin of creation is reflected in the role of sand in *Vagabonds*:

> The wall is compound glass; the battery panel is amorphous silica; the coated membrane on the wall is metal and silicon oxide semiconductor; the oxygen in the house is the side product of silicate decomposition. Everything of all things come from the sand. Our house grows from the sand.
>
> *(293)*

All things originate from the same source, sand—the only thing that Mars has, just like all things originate from *dao*.

However, very few Martian people are aware of the fact; they can see the glittering glass but do not realize that it is made from the rough sand. Hao further comments via her character that "glittering and rough are just two traits of the same thing" (293). Such a comment reminds us of *yin* and *yang*, which are two attributes that all things possess. Hence, we shall now bring in the *yin-yang* paradigm. The transformation of the sand on Mars is just one of the many examples found in *Vagabonds* which resonates with this paradigm. In the next section, I will further examine the *yin-yang* paradigm in the Earth-Mars comparison.

## The *Yin-Yang* Paradigm in *Vagabonds*

The paradigm of *yin* and *yang* is not only invented or solely owned by Daoism, but also widely influential in Chinese culture in general, serving as the key concept of the ancient Chinese cosmology. *Yin-yang* refers not only to female/male, but also other conceptional pairs such as earth/heaven, darkness/light, dead/living, and many more. *Yin* is characterized by softness, conservatism, and responsiveness, while *yang* is characterized by strength, aggressiveness, and vitality; however, they are never hierarchical or static. They permeate and transform into each other toward an ideal androgynous balance. Sharon Rowe and James D. Sellmann provide a comprehensive reading on the *yin-yang* model when making an uncommon alliance between Daoism and ecofeminism (132–134). Drawing on their research and modifying it in a more structural way, I apply the *yin-yang* paradigm to the Earth-Mars comparison in *Vagabonds* through its nonhierarchical, nonexclusive, non-static, and nonessentialist stances. On closer inspection, the Earth-Mars comparison can be summarized into four different layers, and at each layer we can see one characteristic of the *yin-yang* paradigm.

1 *Nonhierarchical*

   The first and most obvious layer is that *yin* and *yang* have equal status; one is not dominant over the other. This can be seen from the comparison between the current systems and ways of life on the two planets. The system on Mars is solid and rigid: everyone can choose

only one career path and stay in only one house until death. The system on Earth is flexible and fluid: people can change their jobs and move around as they wish. Mars has a unified economic system and is a monocultural society, while Earth has a free-market economy and diverse cultures. Life on Mars is onefold, static, and stable, while that on Earth is multi-choice, uncertain, and turbulent. In this sense, Mars represents *yang* while Earth represents *yin*, but, as mentioned earlier, there is no good or bad between *yin* and *yang*. There is no one better than the other, thus, it is nonhierarchical. What the author continues to do in the book is to distinguish and compare the two systems without making an absolute judgment.

## 2   Nonexclusive

The second layer is that there is *yin* in *yang* and there is *yang* in *yin*, as in a *taiji* diagram, where you can see black in white and white in black. This is represented by the internet and intellectual property exchange mechanism on the two planets, which are key elements of social administration. The Martian internet is composed of a central server plus public terminals, any of which anyone can use to access the database and log in to their own personal space; the internet on Earth consists of personal computers owned by individuals, and personal data is stored on each individual computer, not in exchange with or accessible to others unless shared deliberately. Intellectual property on Mars is distributed freely and for free: everyone shares their inventions, arts, and research results with all the others and considers it routine. However, intellectual property on Earth is considered a kind of capital and dominated by business: artists have to sell their creations to the market and promote properly in order to get attention and audience; patents need to be registered and sold at high prices, making profits instead of benefiting the whole society. The knowledge on Mars flows smoothly, while on Earth it is blocked by various barriers. From this perspective, Mars shows *yin* features and Earth shows *yang* features. Combined with the first layer, where Mars shows the *yang* features and Earth shows the *yin* features, we learn that both *yin* and *yang* can exist on one thing at the same time. This illustrates "all things carry *yin* and hold *yang*" (Laozi and Chen 233). Both traits exist in various things; thus, *yin* and *yang* are nonexclusive.

## 3   Non-static

Then we come to the third layer, that *yin* and *yang* are not unchanged but may transform into each other with time, which is the way things grow and develop. The Earth system has not always been free and fluid. It has gone through the Big Machine Era, when individual freedom was suppressed and everybody acted as a component of a large machinery system, which symbolizes *yang*. By the time the story starts, Earth has already returned to a world like the one we are living in now, with freedom, turbulence, and uncertainty, where most people are allowed to choose their own life, which represents *yin*. The Earth system has gone through the process from *yin* to *yang* to *yin* in history. There have also been changes even on Mars, which has been colonized by human beings for only a short period. Before the war, all houses on Mars were traded just like on Earth; then housing was distributed by the central government, first according to contributions to society and then on the basis of marital status, and now the teenagers are seeking a revolution to let the housing trade begin again, to let the houses, persons, and identities flow again. This is a process from *yin* to *yang* and then an attempt to return to *yin*. These transformations between *yin* and *yang* happen again and again in history and shall continue into the future, showing the ever-changing and non-static status of *yin* and *yang*.

## 4   Nonessential

The fourth layer is the nonessentiality of *yin* and *yang*. The categories are socially constructed rather than natural. Different people can view the same thing as either *yin* or *yang*, depending on their perspectives and backgrounds. Mars has only one city under the dome,

which is closed and fixed, while Earth's cities are multiple and open. Therefore, in the eyes of many Earth people as well as the Martian teenagers who have visited Earth, the Martian city represents *yang* and the Earth cities represent *yin*. However, to the extreme environmentalists on Earth—the regressionists—the Martian city provides an ideal model for human-nature co-living. They regard the giant metropolises on Earth as the violent oppression of nature and the desire of mankind as an exploitation of the living resources of other species, thus *yang*; as for the garden city on Mars, where plants grow inside the dome together with humans, providing the oxygen necessary for mankind while maintaining the vivosphere, it is a perfect representation of the harmonious relationship between human beings and nature, thus *yin*. We can see here that the *yin-yang* paradigm is never essentialist.

The focalization in *Vagabonds* flows between various people from Mars and Earth or those who have stayed on both, providing multiple views on various aspects of both planets. What should be noticed here is that the administrative systems, social practices, urban planning, and living styles on both planets are not established in a vacuum. All those decisions, developments, and divergences are strongly influenced by the natural environment surrounding each society. Earth can have multiple cultures, endless choices of commodities, a free-market economy, various living styles, and open-air cities because of the abundant natural resources and mild climates on the planet. Mars relies on the mono-unity, simple but practical gadgets, a centralized system of socialism, expertise-oriented career paths, and the dome city with plants generating air inside due to the scarcity of resources and harsh environment on the planet. It is never a choice, but a form of compliance. Again, Hao does not simply criticize one and eulogize the other but shows the complexity of reality via different layers of *yin-yang* interaction. There is no single perfect way, only the ever-changing and interpermeating transformation bound with the natural conditions of each planet.

## Mars Ecosystem Transformation Project

All the current Martian ways discussed earlier in this chapter are determined by its planetary environment. The lack of construction materials and breathable air leads to the unique architecture style and urban design. The necessity of innovations to improve life motivates the open-source intellectual property exchange system and the free flow of ideas. The priority of the survival of all members outweighs the pursuit of individuality and business profits. There is no space for capitalism to work on Mars. The initial trial of the Earth's way at the beginning of the Mars colonization resulted in tragedy. Mars has to live its own way.

In pursuit of better living conditions and development possibilities, the Martians have taken great efforts to drag the asteroid Ceres towards Mars. The water contained in Ceres can serve as the key resource for Mars to alternate its future. The two blueprints of the Mars transformation project are called Mountain Plan (*Shan pai*) and River Plan (*He pai*). The Mountain Plan advocates venturing outside the dome city and building an ecological system in the valley with the water from Ceres; the River Plan insists on staying within the dome city and using the asteroid's water to build a river surrounding the city. The two plans are not compatible because the water from Ceres is limited and can be used in only one way or the other, and there will not be any more accessible water resources in the foreseeable future. Neither plan is perfect and free from faults. A final decision must be made because Ceres has already been dragged to Mars, just as an arrow on the bow must be shot. There thus arises a heated civil discussion on the comparison between these two plans in Martian society. Experts in various disciplines try to attach their inventions and techniques to either plan to increase the possibility of winning the vote as well

as promoting their own research. Politicians rack their brains on strategies in favor of the plans that they support. Whichever plan is chosen in the end will influence the future direction of Mars as well as everyone on the planet.

The names of the plans already indicate their *yang* and *yin* traits. The Mountain Plan is more adventurous and rapid, which matches with the characteristics of *yang*; The River Plan is more conservative and slower, which is the way of *yin*. However, going outside the dome echoes with the fluidity and openness of *yin*, while staying within the closed dome represents the solidification and closeness of *yang*. Again, the two Martian eco-transformation blueprints show the complexity of the *yin-yang* paradigm: there is no absolute *yin* or *yang*, no hierarchical good or bad. The two traits coexist in both and continue to interact with each other and transform into each other.

Up until now, the *yin-yang* paradigm seems to provide a better framework than the Western hierarchical dualist paradigm, but does it really solve the problem of oppression from one over the other in reality? Wei Qingqi and Li Jialuan comments that although Daoism can be inspiring to ecofeminism, its preferred way of "yin" seeks to maintain strong force via "hiding" in other thoughts, making it less visible. Furthermore, although *yin* and *yang* show interconversion and non-opposition, *yang* maintains a dominant position, and the patriarchal thought of men being superior to women has existed in Chinese society for thousands of years; Daoism has also failed to prevent the deterioration of the Chinese environment (154–155). Thus, the metaphysical Daoism can draw from ecofeminism, which rejects dualisms between "us" and "them" in the masculine, anthropocentric, and logocentric thinking, and ultimately aims at transforming our way of being and acting in the world into a more harmonious mode. Such alliance between Daoism and ecofeminism can ground its thinking for better solutions in reality and provide an intersectional perspective.

Reading through *Vagabonds*, the past and current leaders in the Martian government are, not surprisingly, all males. The current generation of leaders who are going to retire soon can be considered the founding fathers of Mars. They have built a society from nothing after the independence war, drawing the layout of the Martian society from economic system to urban planning, taking on key responsibilities such as military command and diplomatic negotiation. The governor-in-general, the director of air force, the chief urban designer, and the only diplomat traveling between Earth and Mars, are all males. What is more, most adult characters in the novel are men. One can count the named Martian adult women on one hand: the main protagonist Luoying's mother, who died when Luoying was young; the mother of Hans and great-grandmother of Luoying, whose death triggered the war between Earth and Mars; the old lady who passed away in an accident caused by the revolution led by Luoying's parents; the madam who introduces a technique supporting the Mountain Plan; and yet none of them have a single dialogue at all. The only adult women on Mars who have dialogues are Ellie, wife of the captain of *Maearth*, and Janet, the visual artist, neither of whom have any power in the Martian administration system. In this novel, women are insignificant to Martian society, and the oppression of women is so easily neglected.

Similar lack of representation and lack of right to speak also exists in the Mars transformation project. In the project, neither the asteroid Ceres nor the planet Mars are given any agency. Ceres is dragged to Mars to offer water resources, but no one has asked the asteroid's permission to disassemble it. The asteroid is just seen as a nonliving object to fulfill humankind's grand dream of development. Likewise, the planet Mars, which only provides its very limited resources for the survival of human beings but has no right to determine its own future. It is also hinted in the novel and more clearly introduced in its prehistory short story "The Fly of Ceres" that there were residents on Ceres. While exploiting mines on Ceres for the purpose of developing

Mars, its residents have built their own towns, schools, shops, and entertainment facilities there. The population has grown to over 100,000, with thousands of houses. However, when the Martian citizens need water, the Ceres residents cannot object at all. The best future that they are offered is to ride on a spacecraft sailing to a new planet 20 light-years away. Compared to the grand vision of transforming Mars into a better home for human beings, the home of people on Ceres matters nothing.

The Chinese name of Ceres, *Gushen*, originates from *Laozi*, and is referred to as a metaphor of *dao* in the way it is void and everchanging (Laozi and Chen 98–99). It is unclear whether Hao is aware of the connection, but critics have noted the reference. In an analysis of "The Fly of Ceres", the critics point out that

> the residents of Ceres are forced to abandon their home which they have invested efforts in maintaining for the past 100 years and choose the grand voyage expedition, which leads to no fierce conflicts in the story … accepting the reality without disappointment, unintentionally cooperating with the plans of those in power by choosing the voyage.
>
> *(Zhang and Wang)*

The author packages the plan as a voluntary sacrifice and a hope for a new home far away, but this does not change the truth of exploitation and oppression. The victims in the novel are invisible.

Such kinds of oppression are not violent or obvious, but more subtle and hard to uncover. Exploitation is decorated and made obscure. Male over female, human over nature, and Mars society over Ceres town—all share the same structure, resonating with what Karen J. Warren calls "the logic of domination": "For any X and Y, if X is morally superior to Y, then X is morally justified in subordinating (dominating) Y" (49). If men are morally superior to women, human beings are superior to the asteroid and the planet, and the larger society on Mars is superior to the town on Ceres, then the subjugation is justified. Thus, even though the androgynous, nonhierarchical, and nonessential *yin-yang* paradigm may work well in many aspects, providing a promising model for a harmonious future, the logic of domination may still exist intersectionally and the oppression may be even harder to see. Daoism cannot be mechanically applied to analysis and should also be inspired by ecofeminist thinking.

## Conclusion

At the end of the novel, the Mountain Plan wins out. It is an aggressive, swift, and *yang* plan, throwing the unprepared human beings into the open environment of Mars and plundering necessary resources for the plan from Earth. It may be a rash advancement, but on the other hand, it can also be considered a *yin* plan bearing a holistic thinking. In the speech of the last speaker for the Mountain Plan, Juan, the director of the air force who holds the actual power over the Martian military, points out that the earthlings as a race have split into fragments in self-division, while the Martians can be regarded as an independent race, a holistic race that can better represent the whole of humankind. He argues that the Mountain Plan seeks harmonious coexistence and co-evolution between humans and a larger, nonhuman world, which is a common pursuit of both Daoism and ecofeminism. Rowe and Sellmann also emphasize another important convergence between Daoism and ecofeminism: that the individual transformation and world transformation are interconnected and mutually influential, and that human life is a transforming process within a larger transforming process (143, 145). This matches with the Mountain Plan's long-term vision of humans and Mars transforming together, and now they are

just triggering the process to begin. Again, Hao Jingfang does not judge whether this is right or wrong, leaving readers to imagine the future of Mars and its people. This further reminds us that the complicated, ever-changing, and multilayered relationship between *yin* and *yang* has no absolute value judgments. No clear boundaries or lines can be drawn, and no single labels can be affixed to either side.

No one knows what will happen in the future, but the author at least casts some hope in the ending. Luoying, the main protagonist, chooses to board *Maearth* together with her grandfather Hans, devoting herself to negotiations between Mars and Earth. Chania, who has led the teenager revolution about the housing trade, has now come to a better understanding of politics. Gielle, who is temporarily blinded by love, is also an excellent designer. These teenage girls may play key roles in the future of Mars. The Ceres residents are sailing to Proxima Centauri with the dream of exploring space for a new home. The entire Martian society is in high spirits about the coming transformation project and is dedicated to evolving together with the planet. Categories and hierarchies may still exist, but they will be temporary and dynamic. A holistic harmony seems to be the long-term vision shared by everyone.

## Acknowledgments

## Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacy. "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and The Ethical Space of Nature." *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Indiana UP, 2008, pp. 237–264.

Girardot, N.J., Miller, James, and Liu, Xiaogan. "Introduction." *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*, edited by N.J. Girardot, James Miller, and Xiaogan Liu. Harvard UP, 2001, pp. xxxvii–lxiv.

Hao, Jingfang. *Gushen de feixiang* [The Fly of Ceres]. *Xing lvren* [Star Traveler], Tsinghua UP, 2011, pp. 11–32.

———. *Liulang cangqiong* [*Vagabonds*]. Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House, 2016.

———. *Vagabonds*, translated by Ken Liu, Saga Press, 2020.

Hao, Jingfang, and Jiang, Zhenyu. "*Hao Jingfang, Jiang Zhenyu wenxue duihualu* [A Literature Conversation between Hao Jingfang and Jiang Zhenyu]." *Modern Chinese Literature Criticism*, vol. 2020, no. 3, Nov. 2020, pp. 4–13.

Habib, Samar. "Re-Visiting Ursula Le Guin's The Dispossessed: Anarcho-Taoism and World Resource Management." *Nebula*, vol. 4, no. 2, June 2007, pp. 334–349.

Hwang, Eunju. "Taoist Self-Development vs. Jungian Wholeness: Reading J.G. Ballard's Natural Transformation Quartet of The Wind from Nowhere, The Drowned World, The Drought and The Crystal World." , no. 21, Dec. 2009, pp. 259–276.

Kit-Sze, Amy Chan. "Re-Reading Ursula K. Le Guin's SF: The Daoist Yin Principle in Ecofeminist Novels." *Dystopias and Utopias on Earth and Beyond: Feminist Ecocriticism of Science Fiction*, edited by Douglas A. Vakoch, Routledge, 2021, pp. 126–137.

Kohn, Livia. *The Daode Jing: A Guide*. Oxford UP, 2019.

Laozi, and Guying Chen. *Laozi jinzhu jinyi* [Laozi Present-Day Note and Translation]. The Commercial Press, 2003.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Dispossessed*. Harper & Row, 1974.

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. 1949. Oxford UP, 1987.

Miller, James. *China's Green Religion: Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future*. Columbia UP, 2017.

Mills, Ethan. "Ursula K. Le Guin's Science Fictional Feminist Daoism." *Journal of Science Fiction and Philosophy*, vol. 3, 2020, pp. 1–21.

Ni, Zhange. "Reimagining Daoist Alchemy, Decolonizing Transhumanism: The Fantasy of Immortality Cultivation in Twenty-First Century China." *Zygon®*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2020b, pp. 748–771. *Wiley Online Library*, https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12634.

———. "Xiuzhen (Immortality Cultivation) Fantasy: Science, Religion, and the Novels of Magic/ Superstition in Contemporary China." *Religions*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan. 2020a, p. 25. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010025.

Prettyman, Gib. "Daoism, Ecology, and World Reduction in Le Guin's Utopian Fictions." *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, edited by Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson, Wesleyan UP, 2014, pp. 56–76.

Rowe, Sharon, and James D. Sellman. "An Uncommon Alliance: Ecofeminism and Classical Daoist Philosophy." *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2003, pp. 129–148.

Wang, Xiaoming. *Fanyi de zhengzhi—cong yige cemian kan bashi niandai de fanyi yundong* [The Politics of Translation: Looking at the Translation Movements of the 1980s from an Aspect]. *Literary and Art Critics*, 22 June 2018, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/BCJY8fL2WEE0Q-O_8y-FWg.

Wang, Xiaoming, and Stephen C. K. Chan. "Introduction: Imagining the Future in East Asia." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2020, pp. 173–184.

Warren, Karen J. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

Warrick, Patricia. "The Encounter of Taoism and Fascism in Philip K. Dick's 'The Man in the High Castle'." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1980, pp. 174–190.

Wei, Qingqi. "Toward a Holistic EcoFeminism: A Chinese Perspective." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2018, pp. 773–786.

Wei, Qingqi, and Li, Jialuan. *Shengtai nvxing zhuyi* [Ecofeminism]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2019.

Zhang, Xudong. *Wenyi wenhua sixiang lingyu sishi nian huigu* [40 Years of Ideas in Literature, Art and Culture, A Retrospect]. *Dongfang Journal*, vol. 2018, no. 01, 2018, pp. 22–34.

Zhang, Yihong, and Weiying Wang. *"Tonghua mengjing zhong de rensheng zheli – Hao Jingfang 'gushen de feixiang' shangxi"* [Life Philosophy in a Fairy Tale Dream—Appreciation of Hao Jingfang's "Fly of Ceres"]. *Center for Inquiry, China*, 29 Aug. 2016, https://cfi.crsp.org.cn/m/view.php?aid=142.

# 35

# "IN THE FUTURE, NO ONE IS COMPLETELY HUMAN"

## Posthuman Poetics in Sun Yung Shin's *Unbearable Splendor* and Franny Choi's *Soft Science*

### *Claire Stanford*

In recent years, a number of Asian American poets have made contributions to the subgenre of speculative poetry, using the linguistic play of poetry to formally disrupt and decolonize the English language, to interrogate the Western definition of science and technology, and to unsettle notions of progress and futurity. These works include Cathy Park Hong's *Dance Dance Revolution* (2006) and *Engine Empire* (2013), Shangxing Wang's *Mad Science in Imperial City* (2005), Margaret Rhee's *Love, Robot* (2017) and her "Kimchi Poetry Machine", and Bryan Thao Worra's many volumes of speculative poetry, including *Demonstra* (2013) and *Before We Remember We Dream* (2020). The Asian Canadian poet, novelist, and critic Larissa Lai has also made a foundational contribution to the subgenre with her collection *Automaton Biographies* (2009) and, more recently, published a book-length poem, *Iron Goddess of Mercy* (2021). Relatively understudied, the subgenre of speculative poetry asks how poetry, with its emphasis on sonic and linguistic experimentation over plot and character, can represent the future differently from prose; additionally, this wave of Asian American speculative poetry demonstrates that speculative poetry not only rests on aesthetic experimentation but can also engage with issues of race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, and other pressing questions in our contemporary moment.

In this chapter, I focus on two recent collections of poetry by Korean American poets and their representations of posthuman futures: Sun Yung Shin's *Unbearable Splendor* (2016) and Franny Choi's *Soft Science* (2019). Both Shin and Choi include a wide range of posthuman narrative personas in their respective collections, including the cyborg, the android, the robot, a machine reaching the Singularity, and a group of South Korean clones. In taking on these myriad posthuman personas, Shin and Choi create new alliances and possibilities for an understanding between human and machine. They suggest that the boundaries between the two are not as stable as they are often portrayed, and that written language—while a human construct—is capable of representing a multitude of voices, human and nonhuman. Furthermore, through both the form and content of their poems, Shin and Choi demonstrate that technological and biotechnological posthumanism is not race-neutral but, in fact, racialized.

In this exploration of the human-machinic, Shin and Choi are guided by Donna Haraway's seminal essay "A Cyborg Manifesto", which both poets quote from in their collections' epigraphs. First published in 1985, the essay argues that in the late twentieth century, the boundaries between human-animal and human-machine have become porous. But, Haraway says,

368

rather than protecting those boundaries, we should rejoice in their breakdown. These boundaries are upheld by the "traditions of 'Western' science and politics – the tradition of racist, male-dominated capitalism" (150).

It is provocative that Shin and Choi both embrace Haraway's conception of the cyborg, since the cyborg—and all forms of biotechnological and technological posthumanism—have specific racialized implications for Asians and Asian Americans, who are often stereotyped in discussions of futurity through the science-fictional trope of techno-Orientalism. Coined by media theorists David Morley and Kevin Robins in 1995, the term techno-Orientalism describes the U.S. response to Japan's economic and technological boom of the 1980s:

> The association of technology and Japaneseness now serves to reinforce the image of a culture that is cold, impersonal, and machine-like … These kids are imagined as people mutating into machines; they represent a kind of cybernetic mode of being for the future. This creates the image of the Japanese as inhuman.
>
> *(169–170)*

More recently, David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Aiyu Niu expanded the definition of techno-Orientalism to include all Asian countries and peoples, reflecting Asia's rising technological prowess: "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse" (2). Key to techno-Orientalism is its unironic, unexamined forwarding of Asians as synonymous with technology. In William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, for example, Case never questions the alignment of futurism and the Asian setting of Chiba City, nor does anyone (all two human characters) in the film *Ex Machina* comment on the choice to make the silent, docile robot Kyoko an Asian female.

Rather than distance themselves from these techno-Orientalist tropes of science fiction, Shin and Choi directly contend with techno-Orientalism by celebrating the alliance of an Asian speaker and machine counterpart. This celebration seemingly affirms techno-Orientalism's central tenet: the connection between Asians and technology. But in affirming this connection, they also follow one of Haraway's central claims, that the cyborg is "resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity" (151). They are not replicating techno-Orientalism uncritically. Rather, both poets self-consciously engage with techno-Orientalism, subverting it by offering an embrace of the machinic and by rejoicing in the breakdown of boundaries that techno-Orientalism condemns. Ultimately, Shin and Choi's posthuman poetics challenge both techno-Orientalism and anthropocentrism, positing an alliance between the poems' posthuman figures and their Korean American human speakers that decenters the Western conception of the paradigmatic human as a white male.

## Cyber Poetics and the Illusion of Unraced Technology

What does it mean for technological and biotechnological posthumanism to be racialized? In this essay, I discuss two related—but not identical—forms of posthumanism that I identify as technological and biotechnological. Technological refers to mechanical imitations of the human: the robot and artificial intelligence (which includes AI's corollary, programming and code). The biotechnological refers to forms of the human that still rely on incorporating normal biological functioning of the human: the clone (a biological copy of the human) and the cyborg (a fusion of biological human and machine). Lastly, the android lies somewhere in between these two categories: a robot who is made to look like a biological replica of a human (given a body and a face), but whose internal systems are purely mechanical. The presence of race is clear

in the biotechnological posthuman; because they are reproductions of or additions to the biological human, it is impossible to avoid the representation of race in the clone or the cyborg. And although the android is a machine, it similarly cannot avoid the representation of race via its skin tone and facial features.

While the presence of race is less clear in technological posthumanism, robots and AI still function within a racialized context. Although AI does not, itself, have a racial identity, there is a growing consensus that it does hold racial (and gender) biases and can play a role in exacerbating racial injustice in situations ranging from health care to criminal justice to home loans (Obermeyer et al.; Angwin et al.; Bartlett et al.). Recent research in robotics suggests that people are not only inclined to anthropomorphize humanoid robots, but also to attribute race to humanoid robots based on the color of the robot's exterior, and to treat the robots differently based on their assessment of the robot's "race" (Bartneck et al.). This racialization is not a factor in nonhumanoid robots (robot cats, for example), but since social robotics relies on the relationship between a human and a humanoid robot, it is likely that humanoid robots will remain the most popular version of robots and that the tendency to anthropomorphize and racially code robots will persist (Sparrow 549).

What, then, is at stake in a posthuman poetics that centers on the biotechnological and technological posthuman? The stakes of posthuman poetics centering on nonhuman nature—forwarded by political theorist Jane Bennett as well as philosophers Val Plumwood and David Abram—are clear: by decentering the human, this more prominent version of posthuman poetics restores agency to the nonhuman nature that has been so decimated by anthropocentrism; it promotes a vision of a world in which humans live in greater reciprocity and equity with the natural world. But what about this other posthuman poetics, that of cyborgs and androids and AI and clones? This kind of posthuman poetry often acts primarily as a formal or aesthetic experiment, which largely serves to comment on our overly technologized society. The stakes, perhaps, speak to capitalism or government surveillance, or remain primarily concerned with postmodern linguistic experimentation. But while Shin and Choi are certainly practicing aesthetic and linguistic experimentation, that is not the end goal of their work. Rather, they complicate the project of posthuman poetry by pursuing questions of how technology engages with issues of race as well as nationality, gender, and sexuality. In doing so, they not only contest a vision of technology as race-blind, but also simultaneously contest the tendency of technological posthuman poetics to reinforce that false notion of technological race-blindness and elide questions of identity.

## Sun Yung Shin and Destabilizing the "Lyric I"

Published in 2016, *Unbearable Splendor* is a hybrid volume of prose poetry and essay that emphatically connects its concern with posthumanism to the experience of racial difference. Drawing on Shin's personal history as a Korean adoptee to a white American family, the poems investigate questions of immigration, adoption, assimilation, and language acquisition. Simultaneously, they explore the stories of a wide variety of posthuman figures, from myth (the Minotaur) and fairytale (Pinocchio) to the animal (the beetle form of Kafka's Gregor Samsa) and the biotechnologically altered human (the clone, the cyborg, the replicant). But rather than distance herself from the long-held stereotype of the Asian as machine, Shin proclaims a kinship with these posthuman figures, particularly drawing out the similarities between their yearning to be accepted by a society that looks upon them as not fully human and Shin's own experience as both an adoptee and a nonwhite immigrant.

Shin formally emphasizes the possibility of posthuman subjectivity by destabilizing the "lyric I" of Romantic and Modernist poetry, demonstrating a flexible notion of selfhood that not only transcends racial boundaries but also the boundaries of the human-mechanical. According to Marjorie Perloff, postmodern poetry elides the "lyric I", which she describes as "a coherent or consistent lyrical voice, a transcendental ego"; the work of postmodern poets shows a definitive absence of the first-person singular pronoun (12). In contrast, Shin disrupts the coherency and consistency of the "lyric I" but does not dispense with the first-person speaker. Rather, her work engages in what Xiaojing Zhou has identified as a larger rethinking of the "lyric I" among contemporary Asian American poets, calling into question "a homogenous, stable, totalizing definition of the 'lyric I' as the self-centered, unitary, autonomous Cartesian self, speaking in a masculine, authoritative voice, reducing the other (including women and nature) to objects of its knowledge"; instead, "Asian American poets transform its attributes, reinvent its functions, and reconceptualize its relationship with the other" (4). As Zhou argues, the use of the first-person voice can restore agency to racial minorities such as Asian Americans, who have been denied equal subjectivity in poetry's history (5).

In "Valley, Uncanny", the first poem in *Unbearable Splendor*, Shin includes two images of Masahiro Mori's well-known graph of the uncanny valley: one with the text in English; the other, on the facing page, with the text in Korean. Mori's graph places a "healthy person" at the very height—most familiar, and most human likeness, therefore least uncanny. But when the speaker recounts her adoption from Korea, she challenges the assumption that humans exist on a separate part of the graph from the uncanny: "I was an uncanny guest. Two years old. A week after arrival from Korea, a brother, born in America, asked, 'When is she going back?'" (1). It is not only her Korean ethnicity but, perhaps more importantly, her displacement that makes her seem uncanny. As Shin explains in an interview with *The American Poetry Review*, "I've been thinking about the adoptee as a cyborg … I was thinking about the idea of racial drag, how the adoptee of color who has a white name and a white family triggers a sense of the uncanny in a white person because that white person hasn't experienced genealogical isolation" (9).

In its current applications in robotics and CGI, the uncanny is typically seen as a place of revulsion, an area that humans want to avoid. But rather than distance herself from the uncanny, Shin embraces its uncertainty, challenging the notion of the uncanny as that which must be feared, and recasting the unfamiliar as a space of possibility. While the speaker retains a first-person singular point of view throughout the poem, the poem gradually destabilizes the speaker's identity, taking away her name, her spatial and temporal position, and even her ability to distinguish between herself as human and uncanny. But the speaker does not resist the loss of her individual selfhood: "I lost my name and I stepped onto this corner, this half frame, the axis … One small step onto vertical Y and horizontal X, at the crossroads between *familiarity* and *human likeness*" (4–5). The speaker claims a different spot on the graph—a more uncanny position—but also asserts that the uncanny is not something to fear, but rather something to embrace: "The opposite of *what is familiar* is *infinite possibilities of startling encounters*" (5, emphasis in original). By aligning herself with the uncanny, the speaker suggests that strict definitions of humanity—which have historically privileged white men as the paradigmatic human—are limiting, and the speaker posits a new mode of thinking about the posthuman in which the posthuman is not trying to assimilate to the (white, male) human, but rather is valued as a being on its own terms.

"Autoclonography" takes the project of destabilizing the "lyric I" further, dismantling the first-person singular voice entirely and replacing it with first-person plural. Shin destabilizes the notion of the singular self by allowing the human speaker's consciousness and language to

merge with that of her clone descendants. As Mark Jerng argues, narratives of cloning typically rely on emphasizing the individuality of the clones, showing them to have unique identities; this normative narrative serves to reinforce "implicit rules that codify assumptions about the proper form for life" (380). In contrast, "Autoclonography" emphasizes the clones' collectivity, with the speaker allowing her individuated self to be subsumed by the clones' unindividuated subjectivity. As in "Valley, Uncanny", the speaker embraces the biotechnological posthuman in both content and form. Because the poem is not narrative, it is freed from the constraints of plot and character that typically rule stories of clones and dictate their quests for individual identity. Instead, the poem is able to focus primarily on linguistic play, using constantly shifting pronouns to decenter the first-person singular and, in doing so, to challenge the presumed value of the individuated human.

"Autoclonography" is organized into numbered sections, which on the whole move toward a radical dispersal of consciousness. The first section acts solely as a second-person address, with only an implied first-person singular speaker: "dear future clones you are multiple" (77). The second section repeats the division between first-person singular speaker and second-person addressee: "dear future clones *I love you more*—than I love myself because there are more of you—than there are of me although I am your mother—and your sister and *your ancestor*" (77, emphasis in original). With this line, Shin again invokes the theme of familial relations and familial displacement that has run throughout the collection, inspired by Shin's background as a Korean adoptee who does not know her biological Korean parents. But the speaker proposes an alternative to the nuclear family structure, asserting her identity as mother, sister, and ancestor, an action that decenters the role of the father. As in "Valley, Uncanny", the speaker does not attempt to distance herself from the posthuman; she demonstrates none of the revulsion that typifies human reactions in clone narratives. Rather, she asserts not only an alliance, but also a familial bond with the clones, as well as a love that overwhelms the love of the singular self.

In these first two sections, Shin nods to poetry's tradition of the "lyric I" only to entirely disrupt it in the third section, where the speaker shifts from first-person singular to first-person plural as she imagines a future in which she and her clones form a collective voice that collapses the grammatical distinctions between the human speaker ("I") and the clones ("you") to form a collective ("we"):

> the word *single* will become a quaint idea, *has become a quaint idea ... we are better together*—we won't need the word *I* anymore
>     to love the word *we* more than *I*—we don't have to capitalize *we* even in the middle of a sentence.
>
> *(78, emphasis in original)*

The collective voice does not inherently imply posthumanism; rather, Shin uses the first-person plural to formally emphasize the speaker's decision to group herself with her posthuman clones and eliminate the barriers between the human and the posthuman. These lines speak directly to Bennett's call to "rewrite the default grammar of agency" (119). The speaker points to the fact that the English language itself privileges self-centeredness and individuation by capitalizing the "I" even in the middle of the sentence, when no other pronoun is capitalized. Furthermore, the speaker suggests that the word "I" is limiting—that moving beyond the word "I" will be a liberation. As in the collection's earlier poems, the poem frames dispersed consciousness not as a diminishment but as an expansion.

By shifting to the first-person plural, Shin also engages the Western understanding of Asia as a collectivist culture, in contrast to the West's insistence on individualism. In the United States,

Asia's collectivist culture is often denigrated and viewed as a negation of the individual self. This line of thinking views collectivism as subsuming the individual, and therefore views the collectivist mindset as one of that lacks agency. In the West, the definition of the liberal humanist subject is closely aligned with individuality, and so perceives collectivity as something less than human. But by purposefully incorporating the first-person plural, Shin contests the Western dismissal of the collective as a sign of weakness or passivity; simultaneously, by aligning herself in a collective with the not-fully-human clones, Shin challenges the Western desire to defend the boundaries of the human, in which full humanity is granted only to white, male subjects. As narrative theorist Brian Richardson argues, "we" narration can be used to "articulate collective struggles against colonialism" and to represent "a collective subject in opposition to the hegemonic paradigm of the isolated Western consciousness" (4, 5). By shifting to the "we" voice, Shin models a more expansive subjectivity, one that answers Haraway's call for "new coalitions" that are not beholden to the individual Western consciousness that is itself so bound to the white male subject (170).

   After this shift to first-person plural, the poem maintains the "we" voice for the next several numbered sections, further emphasizing the speaker's embrace of the collective. In contrast to the earlier section's statement, "dear future clones *I love you more*", the speaker now says, "dear future clones we are *rethinking* about you" (77, 79). In section five, Shin writes, "will we be taking *family photographs* together—we and you our future clones—how will we tell years later who is who is who is who is who is who" (79, emphasis in original). Still, the poem shows that this movement toward dispersed consciousness is not linear; rather, the speaker continues to wrestle with the limitations of language and the conventions of speech that attempt to reassert the individual self. After declaring the end of the word "I" in section three, the speaker consistently uses the pronouns we/our/us throughout the next several sections. But in the seventh section, a page and a half after declaring the end of the "I", the first-person singular self briefly reemerges: "we didn't know we wanted to be *immortal* – but could you please not get yourself into as much pain ... my pain is your past but *you might forget me* I mean us we mean us" (80, emphasis in original). This confusion between pronouns—and the speaker's correction—demonstrates that the human speaker has not been able to entirely subsume herself into the collective, at least not yet. The attempt to decenter one's own humanity is difficult and imperfect, but it is also, in Shin's work, necessary and inevitable.

## Franny Choi and Cyborg Poetics

In her 2019 volume of poetry, *Soft Science*, Choi similarly challenges the boundary between human and machine by inhabiting the subjectivity of a variety of posthuman figures. Like Shin, Choi uses an epigraph from Haraway for her book, and the cyborg is a key figure throughout the collection, with poems such as "A Brief History of Cyborgs" and "The Cyborg Meets the Drone at a Family Reunion and Fails to Make Small Talk". Other poems in the collection focus on different iterations of the posthuman, inhabiting the voice of an artificial intelligence in a series of poems called "Turing Test" and the voice of the android Chi from the manga *Chobits*. The posthuman figure is often the poem's first-person speaker, and these posthuman poems are interwoven with poems that focus on a human speaker who appears to be Choi's persona. This interweaving immediately suggests an affinity between human and posthuman on the macro level; rather than segregate the two kinds of poems into two parts— or even two separate books—Choi seamlessly moves between the two poetic personas. Even the overriding structure of the book, then, serves to disrupt the boundary between the human and the posthuman.

Formally, the poems in the collection manifest Choi's concerns with not only disrupting the boundary between the human and the mechanical, but also crafting what she calls a cyborg poetics. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, she explains:

> I think when we play with form what we're engaging with is the technology of the poem. And so when I play with form, what I'm doing is saying that I'm a coauthor of this text along with the machine of poetry—the mechanics of the lyric … I'm still in the process of figuring out what a cyborg poetics is, but that feels like a clue to me.
>
> *(Choi, "Queerness")*

While Choi notes that she is still in the process of defining cyborg poetics, I read her term "cyborg poetics" as a formal declaration. Not only are her poems concerned with the cyborg in content, but they also seek to embody the cyborg in form, fusing poetic form with technological elements to defamiliarize language as a purely anthropocentric means of expression. Furthermore, by incorporating technological elements such as codework into her poems, Choi uses the very form of the poem to actively enact an alliance with the machinic, confronting techno-Orientalism's vision of Asians as robot-like and mechanical.

"Program for the Morning After" takes an intimate human situation—waking up after spending the night with someone—and transforms it through codework into the form of a computer program. As defined by digital media scholar Rita Raley, codework "refers to the use of the contemporary idiolect of the computer and computing processes in digital media experimental writing, or [net.writing]". The result looks like this first stanza, which might at first seem to be filled with nonsensical punctuation and spacing:

```
did you think {
          when you          said yes;
                            said on my way;
                            pulled
                                   [up, open ];

          about             what would stain your fingers
                                   [herring, butter squid, seal musk ];
                            the teeth
                                   [fingers in the throat ];
}                                                                       (24)
```

The rest of the stanzas in the poem have a similar appearance, with Choi incorporating code into the poem by using curly braces ( { } ) and square brackets ( [ ] ), each of which serve a specific purpose in programming code. In programming, curly braces are used to isolate blocks of code from a larger string of code, making it easier to read individual segments; Choi similarly uses curly braces to separate the stanzas of the poem. Square brackets are used to present lists of variables; Choi primarily uses square brackets to present a variety of possibilities for completing a phrase ("[up, open]"), but also sometimes plays with these programming rules by presenting only one option where there should be an array ("[fingers in the throat]").

By incorporating codework into the poem, Choi uses form to defamiliarize language, calling attention to a hybridization of human and machine while simultaneously suggesting that this hybridity can better represent the human speaker's affective state than human language alone. Raley argues that codework can generate feelings of fear and alienation, resulting in "anxieties

about intrusion, contamination, and uncontrollability … The fear, further, is that code is auto-poietic and capable of eluding the artist's attempts to domesticate it and bring it into order". But rather than fearing code, the speaker of Choi's poem uses it as a way to overlay a form of order and logic on what is a deeply emotional response. The codework illustrates a second layer of emotion—the desire to create order and to present oneself as cool and collected, even in an emotionally heightened situation. In fusing human and computer language, the poem is itself a form of cyborg poetics, placing the speaker of the poem into the role of cyborg.

This incorporation of code is not purely a formal or affective statement; rather, the poem argues for a breakdown of linguistic boundaries that challenge not only the border between human and machine but also the linguistic hegemony of English. In an interview with the *Iowa Review*, Choi expands her claim that poetry is a technology to language more generally:

> As someone growing up in an immigrant family, English was a technology I learned to use to navigate the world safely. That included proofreading my father's scientific papers, impressing my teachers in school, coaching my parents on pronunciation so that they could get closer to passing as American (and, by extension, as human). So I wanted this book to approach language as a technology, along with all its imperfections and limitations, the ways it breaks or glitches or jams. Which I think is a shift—from feeling frustrated with English to making some attempts to delight in it.

While much codework and codework scholarship focus primarily on the formal effects of incorporating code, we can read Choi's codework as racially inflected, embracing a disruption of perfect English as a rebellion against the assimilation she and her family felt compelled to undertake. Although the poem's content does not explicitly reference race, nationality, or language, all three are addressed in the very form of the poem. Raley's description of codework—as generating fears of "intrusion, contamination, and uncontrollability"—is remarkably similar to the racialized rhetoric in the United States that is directed at all immigrants, including those from Asian countries. By framing this poem through codework, Choi demonstrates the linguistic possibilities that can be achieved through hybridization, marshaling code to destabilize English and the racial biases that allot full personhood only to native speakers.

Building on the collection's interest in destabilizing language, in "The Cyborg Wants to Make Sure She Heard You Right", Choi takes a series of tweets that have been directed at her, processes them into multiple languages through Google Translate, and then translates them back into English. The more "human" of the two technologies, Twitter, launched in 2006 as a social network where users can post very short messages known as tweets. Originally, tweets were limited to 140 characters; in 2017, the limit doubled to 280 characters for non-Asian languages. Also introduced in 2006, Google Translate is a machine translation engine, meaning that it uses artificial intelligence—powered by a neural network—to perform almost-instantaneous translation in more than 100 languages. Overall, these dual technologies—the found language of Twitter and the processing through Google Translate—have the effect of decentering Choi as the human author of the poem. Choi does, of course, retain some aspects of control: she selects the tweets that act as the source material; she decides how many and which languages to translate the tweets into, as well as when to translate them back into English; she arranges the resulting phrases into the order that suits the poem. Choi thus acts as a coauthor of the poem, with the techno-mediated construction of the poem embodying an alliance with the machinic.

In addition to decentering the human as sole author, Choi again uses the machinic to defamiliarize language. Google's translations are not perfect; many critics argue that Google

Translate does not understand linguistic nuance, nor does it understand (or maintain) linguistic style, and Google itself features a disclaimer ("Attribution"). The imperfections in translation, compounded over multiple translations, result in poetic lines that are only semi-intelligible:

> Mrs. Great Anime Pornography, the fruit of the field.
>     To date Klansman vagina. Good sister to the Saddle.
> May ur shit like people and Hello Kitty.
>     I have one side of the oil pan, gookess.
>
> *(26)*

In these opening lines, Choi sets a tone of disorientation in which each individual word is comprehensible but their combination avoids coherent meaning. What the reader can pull out from these lines is, on the one hand, Orientalizing diction and imagery ("anime", "Hello Kitty"), and on the other hand, language of sexualization and denigration ("Pornography", "Klansman vagina", "shit"). The final word of this opening stanza, "gookess", has a clear derogatory meaning—a feminization of the derogatory term for a person of East and South Asian descent—but it has been stripped of context. Notably, even as the rest of the phrase tweeted at Choi becomes unintelligible, this slur persists intact through multiple layers of translation, as do the words "Anime" and "Hello Kitty". Throughout the rest of the poem, even as the lines' overall legibility is muddled, individual invocations of Orientalism and xenophobia clearly remain, with phrases including "all Asian woman is an object of sex" and "filthy immigrant girl" in subsequent stanzas (26). Choi thus uses the machinic to demonstrate the persistence of racialized and sexualized language while simultaneously disempowering these kinds of utterances by rendering them incomprehensible. We might, in fact, read the entire poem as a techno-mediated parody of the racist, trolling tweets that Choi has received—a reading that Choi encourages with the final line of the poem: "lol, parody, written, or oil, to rage" (27).

Choi's alliance with the machine technology of Google Translate subverts techno-Orientalism, both by directly contesting the Orientalist slurs and stereotypes directed at her via Twitter and by casting herself as willingly fused with technology. The poem's epigraph describes its formal process: "*Composed of tweets directed at the author...*" (26, emphasis in original). But while the epigraph clearly points to Choi's real-world self as author, the title of the poem frames its authorship differently: "The Cyborg Wants to Make Sure She Heard You Right". Choi casts herself as the cyborg—Haraway's figure of partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity—and this identity allows her to transmute these hateful utterances into poetry. Identifying with technology does not hamper her or make her passive or unemotive, but rather empowers her, giving her a different set of poetic tools with which to express rage, hurt, and disbelief.

## "In the Future, No One Is Completely Human": Dismantling the Category of the Human

With their embrace of the posthuman, Shin and Choi contest the carefully guarded borders of personhood that have been delimited to a Western conception of the human as the white male subject. Rather than laying claim to the label of human—one that has long been denied to nonwhite humans in the West—Shin and Choi posit an alternate understanding that challenges the hierarchical and racialized categorization of humanity into human, not-quite-human, and nonhuman. As Alexander Weheliye writes, racialization has long been a process with the goal of "the barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the human as it is performed in the modern west" (3). Instead of fighting for inclusion in a category that has been historically

constructed to exclude people of color, Shin and Choi instead argue for the dissolution of hierarchical categorizations and the boundaries that sustain them.

But what does it mean to dismantle the liberal humanist notion of the human rather than argue for its expansion to marginalized groups such as women and racial minorities? A frequent criticism leveled at posthumanism is that it purports to transcend the human while people of color and women are still fighting to attain full humanity. But, as Weheliye argues, trying to gain acceptance in the Western configuration of the human (defined by Weheliye as the "heteromasculine, white, propertied, and liberal subject") is a losing proposition (135). Weheliye writes that the history of mainstream feminist, civil rights, and lesbian-gay movements demonstrates that a privileged minority can only be incorporated into the "ethnoclass of Man" at the expense of other marginalized populations, which include women of color, poor African Americans, transgender people, and the incarcerated (81). In other words, under the Western conception of the human, someone must always be less-than-human and/or nonhuman. Thus, Weheliye writes,

> If demanding recognition and inclusion remains at the center of minority politics, it will lead only to a delimited notion of personhood as property that zeroes in comparatively on only one form of subjugation at the expense of others, thus allowing for the continued existence of hierarchical differences between full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans.
>
> *(81)*

With *Unbearable Splendor* and *Soft Science*, Shin and Choi radically reject the liberal humanist standards of what constitutes the human, bypassing demands for recognition and inclusion and instead positing new imaginaries of personhood and new alliances between human, nonhuman animal, and machine. "In the future, no one is completely human", writes Shin (70). Rather than arguing for a shared humanity, this provocative line envisions a new era in which liberal humanism's exclusionary definition of personhood has been abolished. For Shin and Choi, this is a future to look forward to, not to fear.

## Works Cited

Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Vintage, 1996.

Angwin, Julia, et al. "Machine Bias." *ProPublica*, 23 May 2016, propublica.org/article/machine-bias-risk-assessments-in-criminal-sentencing. Accessed 23 July 2020.

"Attribution Requirements." *Google Cloud AI and Machine Learning Products*, cloud.google.com/translate/attribution. Accessed 9 Mar. 2020.

Bartlett, Robert, et al. "Consumer-Lending Discrimination in the Fintech Era." *NBER Working Paper Series*, June 2019, nber.org/papers/w25943. Accessed 23 July 2020.

Bartneck, Christoph, et al. "Robots and Racism." *Proceedings of 2018 ACM/IEEE International Conference on Human-Robot Interaction (HRI '18)*, ACM, 2018.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010.

Choi, Franny. Interview by Katherine Gibbel. *The Iowa Review*, 15 Mar. 2019a, iowareview.org/blog/interview-franny-choi, Accessed 23 Mar. 2020.

———. "Queerness, Cyborgs, and Cephalopods: An Interview with Franny Choi." Interview by Spencer Quong. *The Paris Review*, 21 May 2019b, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/05/21/queerness-cyborgs-and-cephalods-an-interview-with-franny-choi/. Accessed 5 Mar. 2020.

———. *Soft Science*. Alice James Books, 2019c.

*Ex Machina*, directed by Alex Garland, Universal Studios, 2015.

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. 1984. Ace, 2000.

Haraway, Donna J. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Free Association Books, 1991.

Hong, Cathy Park. *Dance Revolution*. Norton, 2008.

———. *Engine Empire*. Norton, 2013.

Jerng, Mark. "Giving Form to Life: Cloning and Narrative Expectations of the Human." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2008, pp. 369–393.

Lai, Larissa. *Automaton Biographies*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009.

———. *Iron Goddess of Mercy*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021.

Mori, Masahiro. "The Uncanny Valley." Translated by Karl F. MacDorman and Norri Kageki. *IEEE Spectrum*, 12 Jun. 2012, spectrum.ieee.org/automaton/robotics/humanoids/the-uncanny-valley. Accessed 13 Jul. 2021.

Morley, David, and Kevin Robins. *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries*. 1995. Routledge, 2004.

Obermeyer, Ziad, et al. "Dissecting Racial Bias in an Algorithm Used to Manage the Health of Populations." *Science*, vol. 366, 2019, pp. 447–453.

Perloff, Marjorie. *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric*. Northwestern UP, 1990.

Plumwood, Val. "Nature in the Active Voice." *Australian Humanities Review*, vol. 46, 2009, pp. 112–129, australianhumanitiesreview.org/2009/05/01/nature-in-the-active-voice/. Accessed 18 Nov. 2022.

Raley, Rita. "Interferences: [Net.Writing] and the Practice of Codework." *Electronic Book Review*, 8 Sep. 2002. electronicbookreview.com/essay/interferences-net-writing-and-the-practice-of-codework/. Accessed 19 Feb. 2020.

Rhee, Margaret. "Kimchi Poetry Machine." *The Electronic Literature Collection*, 2014, https://collection. eliterature.org/3/work.html?work=kimchi-poetry-machine. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

———. *Love, Robot*. The Operating System, 2017.

Richardson, Brian. "U.S. Ethnic and Postcolonial Fiction: Toward a Poetics of Collective Narratives." *Analyzing World Fiction: New Horizons in Narrative Theory*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama. U of Texas P, 2011, pp. 3–16.

Roh, David S., Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu. "Technologizing Orientalism: An Introduction." *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, edited by David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, Rutgers UP, 2015, pp. 1–19.

Shin, Sun Yung. *Unbearable Splendor*. Coffee House Press, 2016.

———. Interview with Elizabeth Hoover. *The American Poetry Review*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2018, pp. 8–10.

Sparrow, Robert. "Robotics Has a Race Problem." *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2019, pp. 538–560.

Wang, Shangxing. *Mad Science in Imperial City*. Futurepoem Books, 2005.

Weheliye, Alexander. *Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke UP, 2014.

Worra, Bryan Thao. *Demonstra*. Innsmouth Free Press, 2013.

———. *Before We Remember We Dream*. Sahtu Press, 2020.

Zhou, Xiaojing. *The Ethics & Poetics of Alterity in Asian American Poetry*. U of Iowa P, 2006.

# 36

# THE NEW GODS

## Merging the Ancient and the Contemporary of Egypt

*Omar Houssien and Srđan Tunić*

### Introduction

Seeing the ancient Egyptian god of disorder, Seth, wearing the Palestinian *keffiyeh* and throwing a Molotov cocktail, or the feminine Hathor belly dancing in the traditional *bedlah* costume, might tell us a story or two about both ancient and contemporary Egypt. These and other ancient Egyptian deities are the focus of Omar Houssien's[1] series *The New Gods*, initiated in 2013 and still ongoing. Conceived as digital paintings, the series counts 16 deities with faux bronze plaques including Amon, Anubis, Bastet, Hathor, Horus, Isis, Maat, Nephthys, Osiris, Ptah, Ra, Seshat, Seth, Shu, Sobek, and Thoth.

On a broader sociocultural scale, we could see Houssien as being part of a group of alternative and underground SWANA[2] artists that director Farid Eslam, in his *Yallah! Underground* documentary, claims share similar hopes, problems, and fears:

> The idea of the Arab world we have in the West is dominated by negative images and violence and aggression. I wanted to show that this is only a fraction of reality and focus on the positive aspects of the region and the culture. I was also aware of the growing frustration among the young Arab population and how artists use their art as a tool to express their environment.
>
> *(Dharamshala International Film Festival)*

The language of contemporary art in this context has a dynamic dialectic between local and international, or a transcultural language, "transmitting the reality of local situations, thus of deconstructing ethnocentric premises" (Messaoudi et al. 14). Standing as part of this creative middle class, Houssien's artworks are influenced by and referring to a glocal world, expressing both the local struggles and a more universal pop cultural world that will be further explored using *The New Gods* as a mini case study.

It is also interesting to discuss this oeuvre in relation to the emerging field of Arabfuturism, which is poetically and critically described by Sulaiman Majali as "an emergent cultural aesthetic", "dancing on the ruins of the post-orientalist stage" and "accelerating the transformation of representation" (185–186). Creating alternative narratives based on the past and future

is vital to both *The New Gods* and Arabfuturism, and we shall glimpse into *The New Gods*' possible connections to Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism.

Overall, our focus is on contextual analysis, linking the artworks with a post–Arab Spring feeling of disappointment, Arabfuturism's distancing from Eurocentric and neocolonial views of SWANA cultures, but also the artist's personal investment in some of the characters, using his biography as a source and drawing parallels with other Egyptian artists dealing with this ancient heritage. Additionally, iconographical analysis of selected gods was one of the main methods used to make the symbolism of *The New Gods* more transparent.

Egyptologist Richard H. Wilkinson stated that "even today, in the 21st century, many of Egypt's gods and religious symbols continue to exist—sometimes unbeknown to their perpetrators and sometimes knowingly" (Wilkinson 243). Addressing the gods, these ancient and well-known cultural icons of Egypt's history, the artist appropriates them as a means of offering a critical comment on the present times. Therefore, taking into consideration their original context, interpretation, social commentary, and an iconographical analysis, would permit us to understand their presence in our world—or vice versa—better. In this effort we'll echo advice from the editors of *Visual Arts: Contextualizing our Perspectives*, who, in regard to contemporary arts covering the region of SWANA, state that "contextualizing artistic production also means placing it in a context of a political and social imagery that is far from being static" (Messaoudi et al. 7). According to them, we should "consider the works not only as objects of beauty and pleasure", but see art as a representation of society and thus a tool to transmit knowledge about its people and history (12).

## Context: the (Post-)Arab Spring and the World of Advertising

According to the artist, the series "is a re-imagining of how the gods once worshipped in Ancient Egypt live on today in a modern form, with these characters being the shapers of the lives of Egyptians" (Houssien, *The New Gods*). The roots of the series are twofold. Content-wise, it was triggered by a wave of protests and social movements generally referred to as the Arab Spring, which reached its peak in several SWANA countries in 2011 and 2012. Houssien was present at protests at Tahrir Square, the physical center of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. As an artist, he wanted to reflect on the social turmoil and digest artistically what was going on in the country and beyond.

The image mostly associated with the protests is Seth, the god of disorder and chaos, dressed as a common revolutionary and throwing a Molotov cocktail at an unseen target (Figure 36.1).

According to the artist, although Seth's role is commonly understood as a negative trickster, bringer of confusion and anarchy (even homosexuality), he also represents a challenge to the old system, necessary for any social change, creating a disbalance as an underdog (see Turner). Adding to the social context, in one of his final public televised speeches in January 2011, President Hosni Mubarak famously said the revolution is a choice between chaos and stability, which was a constant justification for his remaining in power (Fisher). In ancient Egypt, the god was often associated with foreigners, or generally the Other. This aspect is further emphasized by the fact that the Mubarak government linked the protesters with foreign intelligence—an accusation typical of oppressive and anti-democratic regimes—thus attempting to delegitimize the popular revolt in a bid to preserve its power.

However, after the Arab Spring came what has become known as the Arab Winter, a period of instability, political and armed conflicts, and short-lived social changes. As if the spring's enthusiasm was drowned by the harsh reality of the winter, many felt utterly disappointed by the aftermath of what they had believed to be a wider revolution. According to Jessica Winegar,

(a)
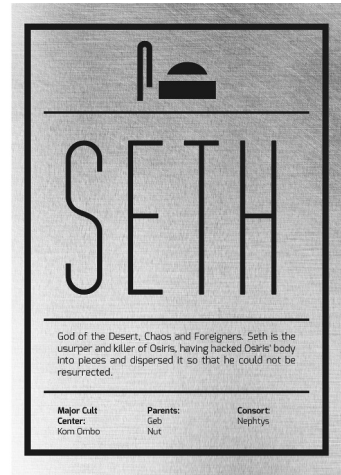


(b)

*Figure 36.1* Seth, *The New Gods.*
*Source:* Omar Houssien, 2013.



(a)
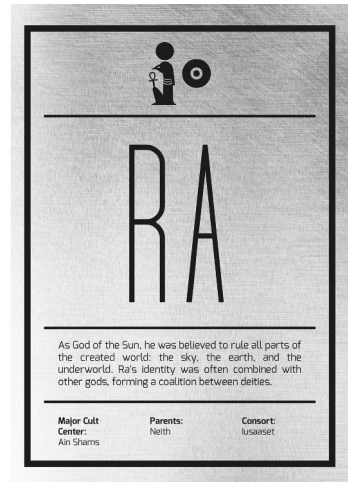


(b)

*Figure 36.2* Ra, *The New Gods.*
*Source:* Omar Houssien, 2014.

this is known in Egypt as *ihbat*, a feeling of being weighed down: "A central source of *ihbat* is dashed hope, a kind of loss of revolutionary innocence" ("Weighed", emphasis in original).

   *The New Gods*, in this light, are less a dethronement of the old system than its bitter perseverance in our contemporary times. Good examples of the Arab Winter could be the eternal president, supreme Ra, whose hieroglyph symbol is not on the person itself, but on the podium he's speaking from, emphasizing the longevity of the institutions (in nurturing the personality cult, it doesn't matter who takes the position, it is always the same; Figure 36.2), and Sobek, the crocodile god, both sacred and feared (Figure 36.3).

(a)  (b)

*Figure 36.3* Sobek, *The New Gods.*

*Source:* Omar Houssien, 2014.

The latter is a good example from the series—fluid as religion, bringer of peace and terrorism, Sobek embodies the religious authority which is responsible for a variety of conflicts in the SWANA. According to the artist, religious authorities (embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafist movement) were also fundamental in undermining the liberal revolutionary movements after the Arab Spring. Overall, ancient gods from the Egyptian pantheon are shown as metaphors of different aspects of the society, eternal as they are. It is a personification of society, with a lot of cynicism but also plenty of humor. In it, politicians, farmers, military men, influencers, protesters, businessmen, and other characters are merged with deities, meticulously adorned with symbols of their domains, past and present.

The other key to reading the series is the artist's background in advertising. While producing art since 2010, Houssien's experience also relates to applied design. While the gods as subject matter represent the disillusionment with social reality in Egypt, the overall visual image of the series tackles the artist's frustration with the consumer world of advertising by appropriating its very language. The pinnacle of this statement is the picture of Isis (Figure 36.4), the major goddess in the pantheon, advertising what appears to be a generic product in a bag, with a masonic eye and the inscription *Khara*, meaning *shit*.

It mocks both the advertising world and conspiracy theories (the Eye of Providence has roots in Christianity, rather than Egypt, and is often associated with freemasonry). The background of the painting semi-transparently shows home delivery and hotline ads from daily newspapers, further problematizing the ideal woman's image in consumer society.

Another god addresses the world of media or propaganda—Bastet, the feline protective deity of Lower Egypt, in a TV anchor role (Figure 36.5).

According to the artist, there is a play on meaning where the TV has replaced cats as domestic inhabitants, present in almost every home. Representing the media, Bastet has entered people's intimate spaces and as such lost its protective qualities. Adorned with symbols and inscriptions such as gossip (*Latlata*) and soul (ancient *ka*), the possible message is that the "media is after our soul". This statement seems to go hand in hand with the political climate,

(a)
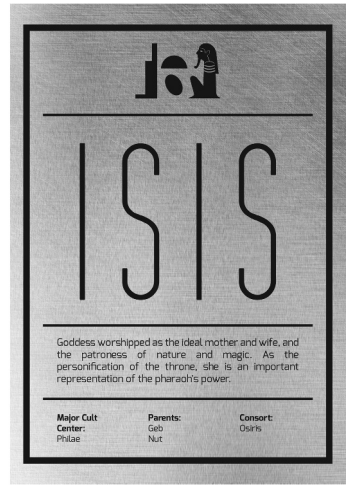
(b)

*Figure 36.4* Isis, *The New Gods.*

*Source:* Omar Houssien, 2013.



(a)
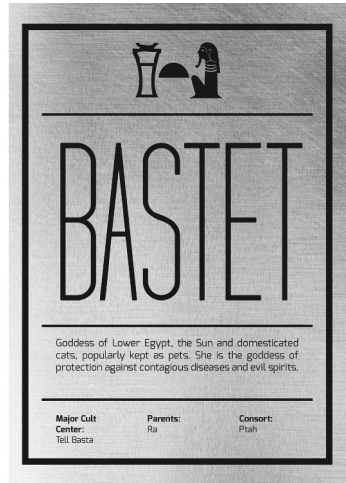
(b)

*Figure 36.5* Bastet, *The New Gods.*

*Source:* Omar Houssien, 2013.

where the Egyptian media has been under the heavy control of military intelligence since 2013 in order to influence public opinion (Media Ownership Monitor Egypt).

Another key to understanding the fascination with Egypt's past is the literary and artistic/cultural aesthetics and philosophies of Afrofuturism and its variants, Africanfuturism and Arabfuturism. Afrofuturism, as the progenitor movement, addressed the African diaspora through speculative fiction in reaction to predominantly white (Western) societies. Any discussion of Afrofuturism is impossible without addressing Sun Ra, the Afro-American jazz musician

who laid the ground for the development of its philosophy and ideas, and who visually borrowed heavily from ancient Egypt, an aesthetic that continues to this day within the American music industry (for example, see Soliman). Bill Caraher considers "that Ra sought to negotiate his own sense of alienation from White society in the US by locating the spiritual, racial, historical, and, indeed, cosmic roots of Black people in ancient Egypt" (Caraher). Ytasha L. Womack states that

> Afrofuturists love to anchor their work in golden eras from times long gone, and there's no ancient culture that merges the heights of science and the esoteric like the Egyptians and Nubians. Egypt's reign in the ancient world and Nubia's influence stand as proof that cultures of dark-skinned people ruled advanced societies and shaped global knowledge.
>
> *(81)*

This brings us to the conclusion that "Afrofuturism is inherently, incredibly political, and that ancient Egypt's place within it is a political act in and of itself" (Ibrahim 35).

## Pop Art, Consumerism, Arabfuturism, and Contemporary Interpretations of Egyptian Heritage

Surrounded by the arts and Egyptology via his parents—an Egyptologist and an artist—Houssien wanted to create an informed local and creative contemporary interpretation of the ancient past with a critical and political edge. Citing works such as *Pantheon: The True Story of the Egyptian Deities* by Hamish Steele and *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman as threading a similar course, he imagines deities as more down-to-earth beings susceptible to human flaws, and somewhere between reality, fantasy, and myth. Noticing that most interpretations have been done by foreigners, Houssien's aim was to avoid making another representation of Egypt's popular tropes and touristic imagery—i.e., commercializing ancient history.

This sense of creating a locally grounded interpretation fits well with one of the major threads in Arabfuturism. Majali states that "Arabfuturism is accelerating the transformation of representation; beyond the logic of the state" (186), while Perwana Nazif says that it offers

> new kinds of self-representation, [in which] the full grasping of one's agency in representing oneself, become[s] possible. This self-representation, made possible through fantastical, new ideas of the past untainted with memories of occupation and colonization, is key in disassociating Arab subjects from such historically Orientalized representations and stereotypes.
>
> *("Arabfuturism")*

This means the Arab creators are taking full ownership of the means of representation and strengthening their own agency, especially when it comes to projecting themselves outside of state or orientalist-centered visions. This counter-vision uses past, present, and future, which is inevitably politically charged (see Suleiman). And this doesn't fall much behind discussions in Egyptology; in recent genome research of Egyptian mummies, one commenter said, "there has been this very strong attempt throughout the history of Egyptology to disassociate ancient Egyptians from the modern population" (Johnston).

The artist considers this specific ancient heritage to have been pushed aside in Egypt, which he suspects is a political decision. The Islamic period and recent history have been studied in schools to a much greater degree than the ancient past, which is so revered internationally that

it has become the popular image of Egypt since the Egyptomania of the nineteenth century. The disbalance between the international obsession and domestic indifference did not escape the artist's attention. Additionally, ancient history does not seem to play a crucial role in identification or creating stable, national role models. The gods are far away in time (but not in space), like the Olympic gods are to the contemporary Greeks, but still serve as a beacon for tourists.

From the birth of Pop Art to the present, contemporary art's response to consumerism has been highly complex. With the expansion of consumerism via globalization, "today, many contemporary artists employ various visual and conceptual strategies to question consumerism", trying to deconstruct it from the inside with greater or lesser degrees of success (Martinique). Pop Art's heritage in Houssien's work is visible in ironic references to consumerism and an overall visual (almost comic-book) style of representation, aiming to make the gods if not instantly recognizable, then appealing, attractive, and reliant on a wider pool of popular culture. Houssien's entire series arguably plays upon advertising's relationship between promise and disappointment, showing how the potential of each of these gods has been morphed in contemporaneity. Obsession and resistance triggered by consumerism can be also seen in artworks made in the 2010s and early 2020s by Egyptian artists such as Ahmed Shalaby's *Marbella Wall*, Chant Avedissian's *Cairo Stencils*, and Maha Maamoun's *Domestic Tourism II*. In these works, there seems to be a way in which the popular meets the past and triggers political and social issues.

A couple of gods from the series address the aforementioned issues of commercialism and capitalism. As one of the major gods, Horus (Figure 36.6), representing power, war, and hunting, was a role model for the pharaohs.

In Houssien's contemporary vision, the predatorial falcon-headed god has become a businessman, or perhaps an entrepreneur. Interestingly, Horus is also one of the exceptions in Egypt's visual disinterest in heritage. His image is still widely used in many businesses and institutions, such as in EgyptAir's logo. Looking at his wristwatch as if in a hurry, Horus is

(a)
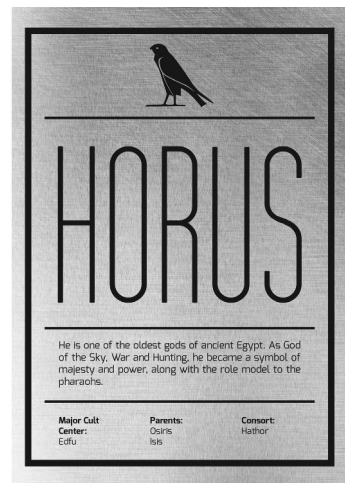
(b)

*Figure 36.6* Horus, *The New Gods*.

*Source:* Omar Houssien, 2013.

business and time-related: time is money, money is business, and business is power. The inter-pretation could be understood as an image of neoliberalism, emphasized by the ancient god's adaptivity to our times and common relation to competition. Another god linking materialism and capitalism is Anubis, once the god of mummification and the underworld, now a shopper in a mall (Figure 36.7).

The ancient Egyptians were very materialistic about death, especially the rich: they wanted to take all of their most precious possessions with them to the afterlife. Here, favorite items are consumer products, and the transitory aspect of the tomb and the underground has become another nonplace, a consumer's paradise, as if "shopping for eternity". It could also be a bitter commentary that no material wealth can be taken to the grave.

José Manuel Losada argues that consumerist logic in contemporary myths is nothing surpris-ing because it is embedded in the very sociocultural reality of our globalized societies. In his words: "In contemporary society, consumers believe that they fulfill their wishes through the acquisition of products that companies associate with heroes or mythical themes" (13, author's translation). The use of ancient history for commercial purposes feeds both the popular interest and the economy; however, in the case of Egypt, it seems to obscure a search for an old identity.

Having these ideas in mind, it is necessary to at least provide an insight into a very strong thread and need for arts to foster meaningful links with the past, often being a part of a wider political project. One is Afro/African/Arabfuturism's interest in speculative fiction, reshaping the past, present, and even the future, and the other is a historical Pharaonist movement.

Both Afrofuturism and Arabfuturism find their roots in political trauma and the necessity to reappropriate a past to envision a healthier, more optimistic future. Criticized for being pre-dominantly a diasporic (or African American) movement and/or aesthetics, Afrofuturism nev-ertheless inspired a range of other futurisms closer to Africa, such as Africanfuturism. While empowering to African American communities, Afrofuturism is still strongly defined by a white western gaze on Africa. In analyzing the origin of the term "Afrofuturism" coined by a white American critic, Mark Dery, in the 1990s, Hope Wabuke concludes: "Dery's conception of

(a)
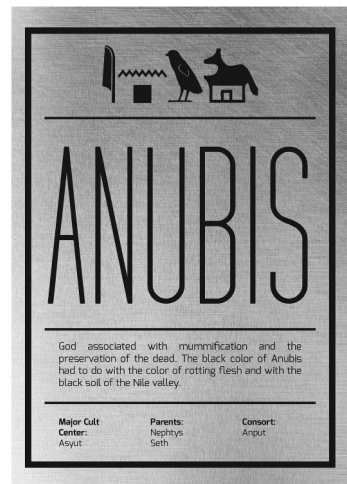
(b)

*Figure 36.7 A*nubis, *The New Gods.*

*Source:* Omar Houssien, 2013.

Blackness could only imagine a 'one down' relationship to whiteness—a Blackness that begins with 1619 and is marked solely by the ensuing 400 years of violation by whiteness that Dery portrays as potentially irreparable" ("Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism"). Writer Nnedi Okorafor created a definition of Africanfuturism in 2017 which—in brief—acknowledges the African continent as the center of the visions of the future, not versus or privileging the West or Europe:

> Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with "what could have been" and more concerned with "what is and can/will be". It acknowledges, grapples with and carries "what has been".
>
> *(ix)*

As such, it strengthens the agency of authors and voices from Africa, just like Arabfuturism is doing with the Arab world,[3] where these aesthetics have also left a mark in the arts, although Nazif states that Arabfuturism "is much more of a sentiment in flux than a movement", and, just as other futurisms, to pinpoint it exactly seems almost impossible. Researcher Lama Suleiman comments: "Perhaps Arabfuturism might be eager (for) a definition. But it is nonetheless clear that such work is heavily invested in experimenting with history, revision, technology, and the absent future". Still, the need for agency and reimagining is a crucial point for all mentioned futurisms. Suleiman states that

> Palestinian and Arab cultures may be able to venture on a post-post-colonial exploration of self and collective identities. In this sense, and through such reading, (Afro)futurism can offer diasporic cultures a way to deconstruct and reconstruct history in a manner that infiltrates territorial and mental borders.
>
> *("Afrofuturism and Arabfuturism")*

In short, "[when] reality becomes more surreal than fiction, it's better to resort to fiction," according to the Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour (Nazif). While there are many subdivisions and ambiguities between specific Arabfuturisms, such as the Palestinian artists dealing with the Nakba or Syrian futurism dealing with displacement and war, in the case of Egypt we could see a yet-undefined field lying on a very fertile ground where several futurisms overlap—the Afro (Sun Ra heritage), the African (Africa-centered), and the Arab.

Returning to art history, in modern Egyptian art the use of the ancient motifs is closely related to Egyptomania, a fascination with Egypt's history. Popular tropes such as mummies, pharaohs, and pyramids owe their great popularity and presence in today's pop culture to this period (see Ibrahim). With its roots in the nineteenth century, it was originally a Western-infused interest, when a renewed interest in Egypt influenced the arts and sciences in the West. According to Elliott Colla, the Pharaonist movement (or Pharaonism, *al-Fir'awniyya*) of the 1920s and 1930s was a response to European colonialism and its Egyptomania, as well as to the nationalistic ideology that aimed to articulate a new, modern, postcolonial Egyptian identity:

> Moreover, the appropriation of Pharaonic art and culture was controversial as the basis for a national imaginary within Egypt itself. In particular, cultural Pharaonism reflected the taste and ideology of a narrow elite and took little account of the Muslim culture that had prevailed in Egypt for more than twelve hundred years.
>
> *(18)*

In the creation of Egyptian modernist art, Nadia Radwan sees the art of the Pharaonist movement as a "result of an intricate synthesis of reinventing historical past while claiming a universal culture through the continuous interplay between modernity and the national discourse", basically creating new visual identities. "Ancient Egypt provided a framework within which they could explore new aesthetics as the result of continuous cross-cultural exchanges", which were infused by modernist art and a wider Mediterranean art history ("Between").

Houssien states that Egypt nowadays does not have the revival of the ancient past and identification with its deities that, for example, Mexico has. There, pre-conquest history and cultures have been seen both as resistance to colonization and an alternative, yet old, search for identity. Interestingly, we found a similar question raised by Michael Wood, referring to the Pharaonist movement, who finds the parallel troublesome:

> A Mexican could freely use pre-Colombian icons as part of the nationalist enterprise, as the period of Spanish colonial rule could be safely dismissed as a foreign intrusion on an indigenous pattern of development. In contrast, an Egyptian could not use Pharaonic symbols without being left open to the charge that such symbols were un-Islamic or even anti-Islamic.
>
> *(188)*

Nevertheless, the pop-cultural and revivalist approach towards Aztec and Mayan deities was one of conceptual triggers for creating *The New Gods*, still in its way resisting an overt identification with Muslim identity and open to a more cosmopolitan stance.

Historical Pharaonism neglected Muslim identity, attending to ancient Egypt and the modernist West, and was therefore soon discredited, while the arts upheld their fascination with the past. In Houssien's work—and similar to the (neo-)Pharaonists—by employing the techniques of traditional (western) art history and local motifs, he reacts against foreign interpretations by offering an identity reading of his own. One of the main differences is that while historical Pharaonic art was deeply concerned with creating a new national ideology, *The New Gods* offers a deeply critical eye on the sociopolitical reality of Egypt as well as nationalism itself. The editors of *Visual Arts: Contextualizing Our Perspectives* note that there is a trend where "the production of the 1990 [*sic*] and 2000's distanced itself from the partisan mobilization to affirm a personal commitment that is no longer explicitly political in the militant sense of the word" (Messaoudi et al. 7).

Several contemporary artists critically revisited this historicist genre. A neo-Pharaonist like Alaa Awad has not approached this art heritage as a pure aesthetical means of promoting cultural tourism or nostalgia, instead grounding it in a specific and potent political momentum. Painting murals during the Arab Spring, Awad expressed both his patriotic feelings and resistance to the regime. According to Soraya Morayef,

> Awad's simple yet terrific strategy of transferring art from a means of supporting the status quo and propaganda intended to glorify the ruling pharaoh to a street performance that subverts the established art form and empowers anti-regime protests in modern-day Egypt was practically a rewriting, a retranslation of our past.
>
> *(204)*

Taking the historicist art into the streets, a major shift occurred in which highly communal resistance and citizens, not political leaders, became the focus (Radwan, "Revolution" 86–87). A similar local resistance and appropriation of ancient history could be seen in the works of

Khaled Hafez, whose installation paintings, according to Liliane Karnouk, are "loaded with an aggressive irony reflective of a certain postmillennial mood—an uncertain search for heroes to destroy or ridicule, intended to challenge the innate Egyptian tendency towards conformism" (241). Infused with interpretations of erotic and religious symbols, with a "fantasy of a comic-book addict", Hafez tackled the gods/heroes who penetrate people's minds through mass media (241). In line with Pop Art heritage, he says:

> I am inspired and draw from contemporary advertising and consumer goods, visual idioms and designs. I incline to this process because I want the entire element that I use to have been a déjà vu for all audiences; this is part of globalization and international popular culture.
>
> *(Kazan)*

Apart from reacting to consumerist society and advertising, Hafez aims to offer a more diverse outlook on Egypt's identity, what he calls *the Big Mac theory* of Egyptian identity. This identity is multicultural and multilayered, encompassing ancient Egyptian, Judeo-Christian, Islamic, Arab, African, Mediterranean, and SWANA cultures, history, and influences. Furthermore, by accepting this diversity of identity and artistic sources, Hafez is able to use Egyptian and non-Egyptian codes and symbols, referencing a much wider pool of knowledge, which he conveniently calls "the universal memory" (Kazan). This reveals a more cosmopolitan approach, in an attempt to resist nationalistic or biased manipulation of memory, history, and identity.

As could be seen in these examples, what has loomed over the use of ancient Egyptian motifs since the nineteenth century is not just a popular (or exotic) image, but a continuous quest for identity and even historical escapism, with a varied political contextualization that ranges from anti-colonial nation-building all the way to the creation of critical commentary and resistance against nationalistic politics. What is notable is that there is a shift towards irony and critique as well as a need to readdress the ancient past to discuss a new, global identity, and the old deities seem to be one of the common tools to achieve that goal. Interestingly, the old gods are present not only in the world of visual arts.

### Ancient Deities in Popular Fiction and Fantasy Literature

Ancient gods worldwide swarm popular culture, from video games and role-playing games, comic books and tattoos, to animation and movies. Gods are one of fiction's (and especially fantasy's) stock characters, often taking the readers into a mythic or fantastic past, sometimes even in sci-fi futures. José Manuel Losada and Antonella Lipscomb, editors of *Myth and Audiovisual Creation*, state that traditional mythology has been affected by the digital revolution and that the process of globalization is "subject to social or individual consumption in unprecedented circumstances" (7). Tracing the reception of myths in literature and the arts today could provide insights into our world: "Perhaps myth (where our past and future are concentrated *in nuce*) also contains today a valid interpretative key of the new individual and collective consciousness" (7, emphasis in original).

A few fiction and fantasy writers have been successful in creatively reinterpreting ancient religions and mythologies in the contemporary key, including Egypt, such as Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* and Roger Zelazny's *The Creatures of Light and Darkness*. In *American Gods* the ancient gods share the contemporary world with humans, with the main character encountering Bastet, Anubis, Horus, and Thoth, the latter claiming that they were "the people of the Nile". He says, "'Egyptians' makes me think of the folk who live there now. The ones who built their

cities over our graveyards and palaces" (Gaiman 173). This seems to resonate with people's essential detachment with the old deities, as well as indicate an identity schism.

In *The Creatures of Light and Darkness*, Roger Zelazny used the classical Egyptian mythology rather loosely, given the inconsistency of the original material, in a science-fiction setting. In his vision it is not clear whether they are imperfect gods or almost perfect humans, but a clear deconstruction of the divine is visible (Jakovljević 149). In his study of Zelazny, Mladen Jakovljević notes that ancient-modern hybrids are not so strange, given that myths—as well as gods—are shaped by the author's time and are compatible with contemporary society (150–155).

In these and other narratives about Egyptian gods,[4] the gods possess a certain continuity with their ancient selves, still manipulating humans and their lives or involving them in eternal battles between good and evil. Their sanctity, however, is under heavy scrutiny, revealing their maladaptation to our world and how humans might not actually need them. A more humorous approach depicts them as affectively relatable and physically present around us—literally, down-to-earth. This is how Hamish Steele in *Pantheon: The True Story of the Egyptian Deities* uses a comic-book format and a style similar to *The Simpsons* to retell the ancient Osiris myth, serving as a contemporary storyteller of a myth more than 4,000 years old.

While well represented in the arts, the theorization of the gods in this sense appears rather scarce. In *Dialectics of the Goddess in Japan Audiovisual Culture*, editor Lorenzo J. Torres Hortelano notes that the interest in primitive, archaic, and pre-monotheistic gods resurfaced in our times with the questioning of the secular modernity of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It seems as if the ancient deities gained visibility and new readings after having been forgotten, pinpointing our need to believe in supernatural beings or principles (xv). Jyoti Mishra considers this "dribbling with gods"—the re-imagination and re-appropriation of ancient gods in popular culture—as related to migrations and essentially re-establishing connections with traditional religions. She uses the term "re-avatarization" to "signify the re-imagination of ancient accepted views of certain ideas, in this case, the idea of Gods with all its associated power and omniscience to something created out of human imagination more connected to current times" (41). In this process, the old deities are brought back to life from the "dumpster of history", and it "becomes a way of preserving the culture and traditions of a particular community" (45).

Jakovljević notes that fantastic elements have always been our way to comprehend the world, and that's where myths enter the story: "Mythology is one of the ways to address numerous unknowns, because it describes eternal truths, hidden desires, fears and hopes, providing answers on the emergence of the world, humans, animals, plants, fire, disease, or death" (187).[5] Every historical period and culture has its own myths which are ever-changing, seemingly different but essentially the same. By relying on Joseph Campbell's famous research *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Jakovljević argues that all these different mythological narratives essentially represent all of us (190).

In another text that analyzes the presence of mythology—in this case, the Slavic pagan elements in the work of street artist TKV—Ljiljana Radošević notes how "mythical storytelling is there to connect us better with reality and spirituality, where gods and mythical creatures are shown as superheroes; better versions of ourselves and what we should strive for" (our translation; 9). She also links the gods to imagination, which is often dismissed as a childish quality, while people still search for it in the fantasy genre, which is flourishing in our age (10). All these interpretations rely heavily on Jung's theory of archetypes based on the collective unconscious, where myths and art play an enormous role. Whether through desacralization or a renewed interest (or a mix of both), the last few decades have witnessed an emerging use of ancient

deities in popular culture, especially inclined towards the fantasy genre. Some of the most successful ones in our opinion reflect our present society, relying on archetypes and providing social commentary.

## The New Gods

All gods in the series follow a visual pattern: while the background sometimes adds up to the complexity, each god is represented solo with its symbols. It is worth noting that the roles, genealogy, visual appearance, and worship of gods were fluid, sometimes contradictory, and subject to change over time. Apart from the artist himself, resources from Egyptology were taken from *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (Wilkinson) and *Mysteries of Egypt—Teacher's Guide* (Ruddell).

Houssien states that his choice of gods came as a combination of well-known gods and ones that seemed straightforward to adapt. The ones infused with most personal experience are Seth (the Arab Spring) and Isis (advertising). After a careful analysis, behind *The New Gods* stands a strong social structure, interlinking the old and the new hierarchy. Beside a certain set of roles a god had in ancient times, there is the subjective filter of the artist and grounding in a specific, local, Egyptian context. Making heavy use of cynicism and humor, the images rely on a twist of readings.

Conveniently, we'll use a metaphorical image of the pyramid (according to Tunić and Houssien), where at the top are the gods that represent the state as direct power, such as Ra, the very face of power, and Amun, representing the military. In parallel with them comes Osiris, which the artist sees as the deep state. One of the most important gods for understanding ancient Egypt's obsession with the afterlife, Osiris was the god of life, death, the afterlife, and resurrection, among others (Figure 36.8).

Pharaohs identified with him, hoping to join him and become one in death. While Ra was the role model during one's lifetime, Osiris was celebrated in order to provide eternal (after)life.

(a)
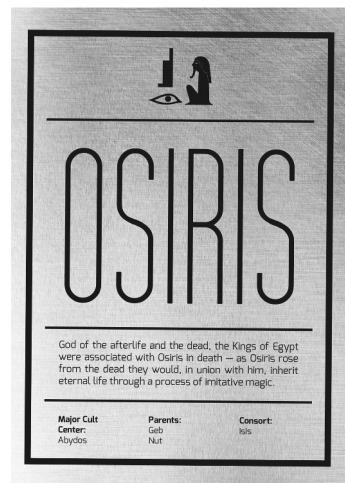
(b)

*Figure 36.8* Osiris, *The New Gods*.
*Source:* Omar Houssien, 2014.

In such a system, where rulers were living for eternity, society does not change and thus stagnates, being sacrificed to achieve this goal. This might resonate with the concept of necropolitics defined by Achille Mbembe as "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" and creating "unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (40, emphasis in original).

Just below are the gods that serve the state in various ways, through religion (Sobek), media (Bastet), data collection (Seshat), propaganda/advertising (Isis), economy and information (Thoth), and influencers (Nephthys). Below or next to them are other gods that stand independently but nevertheless shape society, through business and entrepreneurship (Horus), capitalism and materialism (Anubis), and social pressure (Shu). The powerful ones that are needed to maintain the status quo and play a role in shaping *complacent society* are justice (Maat) and agriculture (Ptah). Somewhere apart, a component of but at the same time outside the system, are rebellion, chaos, and disruption (Seth), and sensuality and the free female principle (Hathor).

As in the past, the gods regulate everyday life; nowadays, however, with less focus on the afterlife. While some of these gods have maintained a powerful and somewhat sacred status, others have drastically changed, adapting to the new circumstances or even appearing desacralized, such as Maat (Figure 36.9), the goddess of justice, appearing drunk (but with a twist: *In vino veritas*, in wine, there is truth).

The potential wonder of the loss of their traditional image and power has seemingly been softened by their contemporary, familiar looks and presence in popular culture.

Some gods reflect the digital society and information age, primarily Thoth and Seshat. Thoth's wisdom and lawfulness—the one who measured a person's sins after death—is projected into an office space, most likely to the role of an analyst or economist (Figure 36.10).

Again, we have a more materialistic reading—as in the case of Horus, for whom time is money, for Thoth we could say that knowledge (or data) is power. His female counterpart is Seshat, mainly in charge of archives and a record keeper of a pharaoh's time on Earth (Figure 36.11).

(a)
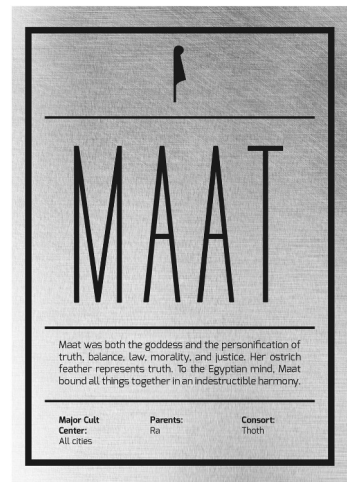
(b)

*Figure 36.9* Maat, *The New Gods.*

*Source:* Omar Houssien, 2013.
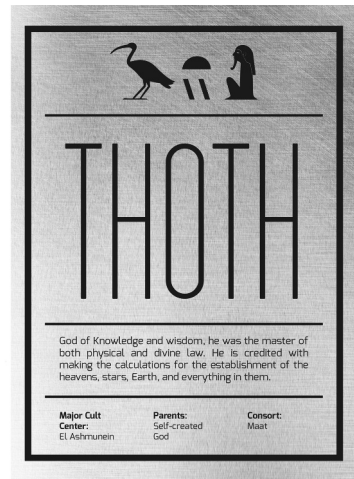
(a)                                                                                      (b)

*Figure 36.10* Thoth, *The New Gods.*

*Source:* Omar Houssien, 2013.
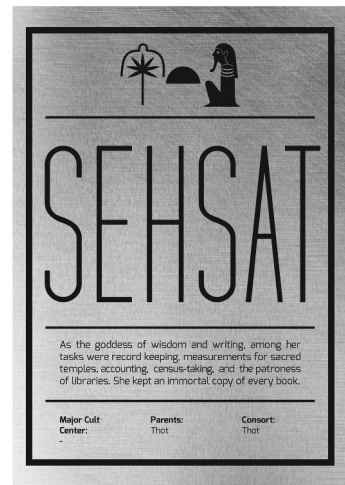


(a)                                                                                      (b)

*Figure 36.11* Seshat, *The New Gods.*

*Source:* Omar Houssien, 2019.

In the contemporary setting, she is seen making faces while taking a selfie. The Internet is full of useless data to which she seems to contribute (including her misspelled name on the plaque), keeping everything as a data harvester that could be turned into money (emphasized with Euro bills as background). Interestingly, just like in Ra's case, her emblem is not on her head but on her phone, which becomes both the record keeper and an object of divination.

Despite the fact that most of the interpretations of the gods are motivated by a sense of sociopolitical disappointment and commentary, there are examples that are still personally

(a)
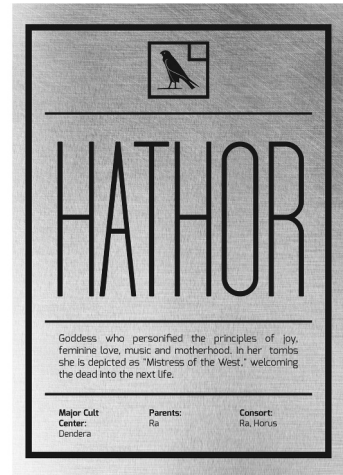
(b)

*Figure 36.12* Hathor, *The New Gods*.

*Source:* Omar Houssien, 2013.

infused and offer alternative narratives. Apart from rebellious Seth, Hathor stands out as one of the most positive examples of the series (Figure 36.12).

A powerful feminine principle encompassing joy, music, and sexuality, Hathor's image is intended to be deliberately celebratory and hedonistic. By presenting her as a belly dancer, the artist wanted both to pay homage to this popular Egyptian dance (and famous Egyptian actress and belly dancer Samia Gamal) and create a visual provocation to re-traditionalization of the society, which sees the body exposure and sexualized movements as immoral. In 2018, a new law was enacted in Egypt introducing censorship, which stands in conflict with belly dancer's attire (Egypt Today), as if belly dancing is not a traditional cultural custom at all. Nevertheless, Hathor stands in defiance and joyfully accepts her own body and life.

Few of the gods serve as triggers for political commentary. According to the artist, most discussions he has had with the Egyptian audience were over Hathor and Seth: the former due to its representation of the female body, the latter due to political positions. Both could be seen as a social barometer, and with more exposure and feedback, their further analysis would be fruitful.

## Final Remarks

We would like to underline once more that apart from being used as representations, unlike much of the present imagery of Egyptian gods, Houssien created interpretations contextualized in time and space, with a critical edge, not as a means of historical escapism or simple touristic reproduction. With *The New Gods*, Houssien's aim is to contribute to a revitalized interest in ancient Egyptian heritage through the lens of contemporary art, treating it both as a world heritage and a point of social reflection and political critique in a post–Arab Spring society. This sentiment resonates well with the aesthetic and philosophy of both Arabfuturism and Africanfuturism. If nothing else, his *The New Gods* demonstrates vitality and adaptiveness to our

times, in which society is still ruled by them—or their equivalent principles. According to Wilkinson:

> The legacy of the gods is to be found in an amazing number of places and with ongoing interpretations, for the influence of Egypt's deities has far outlived the ancient civilization with a persistence which—viewed historically—may outlast our own.
>
> *(243)*

Echoing Soraya Morayef's doubts about translating Pharaonic iconography into Arab Spring murals, in this chapter we too, as coauthors, are aware of taking the translator role of an artwork (and artist), which mediates ancient references and contemporary society. The symbolism and metaphors might be read differently by different Egyptians; some meanings and references could only be understood by ones who are already familiar with Egyptian history, mythology, and (visual) culture. Therefore, a certain pre-existing knowledge is required; meanwhile, the artist serves as a mediator (or a manipulator) of images left to our interpretation (204).

Additionally—and especially in the case of Arabfuturism—we consider it important to note that various futuristic movements/aesthetics are fluid in their definitions. In the case of *The New Gods*, rather than retroactively applying any of the aforementioned labels, we would like to experiment with the possibilities any of these futurisms has brought. For one, all are reacting against a Western-dominated narrative, colonial heritage, oppression, and contemporary daily politics, with Arabfuturism also creating a resistance and critique towards "the logic of the state". Second, all are trying to create alternative narratives, rooted in locally grounded visions and giving agency to local authors. And third, these visions are inspired by the past, as well as the present, sometimes creating politically charged alternative presents in their creative and philosophical tendencies to open a world of possibilities. In our case, *The New Gods* definitely follows these threads in general, reinterpreting the distant past[6] by creating a critical post-contemporary hybrid that may extend into the future as well.

Just like retelling old myths by a fireplace, this work stands with one foot in the past and the other in contemporary times. The quest for identity does not seem to end here; rather, we offer a new syncretism with a clear critical edge and a few sparks of hope.

## Acknowledgments

## Notes

1  More about the artist is at instagram.com/oh.youfoundme.
2  "S.W.A.N.A. is a decolonial word for the South West Asian/ North African (S.W.A.N.A.) region in place of Middle Eastern, Near Eastern, Arab World or Islamic World that have colonial, Eurocentric, and Orientalist origins and are created to conflate, contain and dehumanize our people" from https:// swanaalliance.com/about).
3  Obviously, neither Africa nor the Arab world are monoliths, and the different interpretations of these historical reappropriations vary depending on the culture and context.
4  Such as *The Nikopol Trilogy*, *The Kane Chronicles*, *Gods of Egypt*, the *Stargate* franchise, among others.
5  Translation of Jakovljević and Radošević by Tunić.
6  Which may bring it close to Africanjujuism (see Okorafor ix).

# Works Cited

Caraher, Bill. "Sun Ra, Papyrus, and Ancient Aliens." *Archaeology of the Mediterranean World*, 11 Nov. 2020, https://mediterraneanworld.wordpress.com/2020/11/11/sun-ra-papyrus-and-ancient-aliens/. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Colla, Elliott. *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*. Duke UP, 2007.

Dharamshala International Film Festival. "An Interview with Farid Eslam." *Dharamshala International Film Festival*, 2015, http://diff.co.in/blog/an-interview-with-farid-eslam. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Egypt Today. "Egypt's regulations on belly dancing attire." *Egypt Today*, 8 Feb. 2018, https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/42216/Egypt-s-regulations-on-belly-dancing-attire. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Fisher, Max. "Egypt's Parliament Disbanded: A Coup, or More Regime Bumbling and Chaos?" *The Atlantic*, 14 June 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/06/egypts-parliament-disbanded-a-coup-or-more-regime-bumbling-and-chaos/258500. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*. William Morrow, 2001.

Houssien, Omar. *Art Portfolio*, 2019a.

———. *The New Gods*, 2019b.

Ibrahim, Amina McKenna. *Radical Re-Envisionings: Ancient Egypt, Afrofuturism, and FKA Twigs*. 2015. University of Texas at Austin, MA thesis.

Jakovljević, Mladen. *Mit i tehnologija Rodžera Zelaznija*. Everest Media, 2011.

Johnston, Ian. "Ancient Egyptians More Closely Related to Europeans than Modern Egyptians, Scientists Claim." *Independent*, 30 May 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/archaeology/ancient-egyptians-europeans-related-claims-a7763866.html. Accessed 22 Jul. 2021.

Karnouk, Liliane. *Modern Egyptian Art 1910–2003*, (new revised edition). American U in Cairo P, 2005.

Kazan, Sofie. "Unearthing the Past: Interview with Khaled Hafez." *Harper's Bazaar Magazine*, 2013, http://www.khaledhafez.net/interviews/23.html. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Losada, José Manuel. "Mitocrítica y metodología." *Nuevas formas del mito. Una metodología interdisciplinar*, Logos Verlag, 2015, pp. 9–28.

Losada, José Manuel, and Lipscomb, Antonella (eds.). "Preface." *Myth and Audiovisual Creation*. Logos Verlag, 2019, pp. 7–16.

Majali, Sulaiman. "Towards a Possible Manifesto: Proposing Arabfuturism(s)." *Cost of Freedom: A Collective Inquiry*, 2015, pp. 183–186, http://costoffreedom.cc/. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Martinique, Elena. "Is Consumerism Depicted in Art a Relevant Critique of Contemporary Society and Culture?" *Widewalls*, 10 July 2016, https://www.widewalls.ch/consumerist-art-culture-critique. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Mbembé, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, translated by Libby Meintjes, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11–40.

Media Ownership Monitor Egypt. "Sisification—Or: The Winner Takes it All." *Media Ownership Monitor Egypt*, 23 Jan. 2019, http://egypt.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/secret-services. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Messaoudi, Alain, Boissier, Annabelle, Gillet, Fanny, and Yavuz, Perin Emel. "Visual Arts: Contextualizing Our Perspectives, Introduction." *REMMM - Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée 142*, Presses universitaires de Provence, 2017, https://journals.openedition.org/remmm/10063?lang=en. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Mishra, Jyoti. "Dribbling with Gods: Re-Avatarization and Assimilation of Divine Figures in Neil Gaiman's American Gods and Kevin Hearne's Iron Druid Chronicles." *IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2016, pp. 39–54.

Morayef, Soraya. "Pharaonic Street Art: The Challenge of Translation." *Translating Dissent: Voices from and with the Egyptian Revolution*, edited by Mona Baker, Routledge, 2015, pp. 194–207.

Nazif, Perwana. "Arabfuturism: Science-Fiction and Alternate Realities in the Arab World." *The Quietus*, 22 Feb. 2018, https://thequietus.com/articles/24088-arabfuturism. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Okorafor, Nnedi. "Africanfuturism Defined." *Africanfuturism: An anthology*, edited by Wole Talabi. Brittle Paper, 2020, pp. viii–x.

Radošević, Ljiljana. *O nevidljivom*. Francuski institut, 2018.

Radwan, Nadia. "Between Diana and Isis: Egypt's 'Renaissance' and the Neo-Pharaonic Style (1920s–1930s)." *Dialogues artistiques avec les passés de l'Égypte: Une perspective transnationale et trans-médiale*, edited by Mercedes Volait and Emmanuelle Perrin, Publications de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, InVisu (CNRS-INHA), 2017.

———. "Revolution to Revolution: Tracing Egyptian Public Art from Saad Zaghloul to January 25." *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, vol. 14, 2014, pp. 81–87.

Ruddell, Nancy. *Mysteries of Egypt—Teacher's Guide*. Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1998.

Soliman, Daniel. "Bring It Back: Ancient Egypt as Imagined in Afro-American Music." *Antiquipop*, edited by Fabien Bièvre-Perrin, 23 May 2020, https://antiquipop.hypotheses.org/eng/8761eng. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Suleiman, Lama. "Afrofuturism and Arabfuturism: Reflections of a Present-Day Diasporic Reader." *Tohu Magazine*, 12 June 2016, http://tohumagazine.com/article/afrofuturism-and-arabfuturism-reflections-present-day-diasporic-reader. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Torres Hortelano, Lorenzo J. "Introduction: Representations of Goddesses in Japanese Audiovisual Culture: A New Concept." *Dialectics of the Goddess in Japan Audiovisual Culture*, edited by Lorenzo J. Torres Hortelano, Lexington Books, 2017, pp. xiii–xxi.

Tunić, Srđan, and Houssien, Omar. "The New Gods: Srđan Tunić in Conversation with Omar Houssien." *Sumac Space* dialogues, 2021, https://sumac.space/dialogues/the-new-gods-srdan-tunic-in-conversation-with-omar-houssien/. Accessed 22 Jul. 2021.

Turner, Philip John. *Seth—A Misrepresented God in the Ancient Egyptian Pantheon?* 2012. University of Manchester, PhD dissertation.

Wabuke, Hope. "Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and the Language of Black Speculative Literature." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 27 Aug. 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/afrofuturism-africanfuturism-and-the-language-of-black-speculative-literature/. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Wilkinson, Richard H. *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*. Thames & Hudson, 2003.

Winegar, Jessica. "Weighed Down: The Politics of Frustration in Egypt." *Middle East Report Online*, 12 Jan. 2013, https://merip.org/2013/01/weighed-down/. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2013.

Wood, Michael. "The Use of the Pharaonic Past in Modern Egyptian Nationalism." *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, vol. 35, 1998, pp. 179–196.

# 37

# FOR DIFFERENT TOMORROWS

## Speculative Analogy, Korean Futurisms, and Yoon Ha Lee's "Ghostweight"

*Stephen Hong Sohn*

We indulge in speculative thinking all the time, imagining various futures that create dynamic tomorrows filled with more sites of possibility and hope. How might speculative fiction similarly spin "alternative futurisms" to help us reconsider past or present events and imagine improved future ones? Here I critically analyze how Yoon Ha Lee's short story "Ghostweight" offers us such an opportunity: in this case, to consider how speculative constructs might relate to both North and South Korea—and what might come to be for these two countries—alongside politically complicated issues such as violence, brutality, and international conquest.

To consider the real-world need for alternative futurisms, we might look no further than the unstable political climate on the Korean peninsula.[1] Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, colonial oppressions and war-based conflicts have formed powerful narratives for this region. The discourse concerning the two Koreas continually brings up possible nuclear apocalypse. For instance, Daniel R. DePetris notes that "[d]ue to Seoul's population density, a single 250 kiloton nuclear strike on city hall would kill over 717,000 people. … The outer perimeter of the radioactive fallout would extend over a four mile radius". Radiation poisoning, writes DePetris, would kill thousands more. Rajan Menon projects further that "[a]n American preventive strike to wipe out North Korea's nuclear bombs and ballistic missiles, or a commando raid launched with the same goal in mind, is likely to initiate a chain of events culminating in catastrophe".[2] DePetris's and Menon's viewpoints help clarify the tenuousness of North and South Korea's intertwined futures.

The state of precariousness looming over the Korean peninsula has interested many Korean American writers, who have occasionally used such political instability to inspire their speculative cultural productions. For instance, Axie Oh's young adult debut *Rebel Seoul* imagines a far-flung Korean future in which violence continues, even as the warring factions have changed. Whereas Oh employs science-fictional tropes to situate her high-octane narrative, Minsoo Kang employs a ghost narrative in "A Fearful Symmetry", from *Of Tales and Other Enigmas.* His choice reminds us of the longer history of conflict that pervades the DMZ, the heavily fortified strip of land created by the 1953 Korean War armistice to separate North and South Korea. Supernatural horror gives Kang an avenue to address the legacies of war and the toxic masculinity that continues to fester. Ellen Oh's *Prophecy* trilogy also might be considered from a lengthier historical genealogy. Though the series focuses on warriors with supernatural abilities, monsters

of great power, and other such representational conceits, Oh's work is inspired too by an earlier period in Korean history, when warring kingdoms continually sought control over the peninsula.

In this chapter, I focus on one such Korean American writer, Yoon Ha Lee, who deploys generic tropes like futuristic terrains, fanciful technology, and undead beings to reconsider Korea's history of war and empire. Throughout, I use the phrase *speculative analogy* to signal how supernatural and otherworldly narrative configurations can elucidate real-world problems and issues.[3] In this sense, we turn to speculative fiction not only for its entertaining and expansive conceptions of fantastic other universes, but also to understand its representations as crucially tethered to actual historical events and discourses. In what follows, I begin by summarizing Lee's plot in "Ghostweight" and then analyze its depiction of two figures in particular: the central protagonist, Lisse, and the mercenary. I next explore how the story presents a speculative analogy in which figures like the mercenary might relate to Korea's history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I conclude by considering how the story's ending gestures to two very different future possibilities for South Korea.

## The Burden of "Ghostweight"

"Ghostweight" follows Lisse as she seeks revenge for the invasion of her home planet, Rhaion, by mercenaries. Hired by the powerful Imperium, these paid soldiers kill approximately one-third of Rhaion's population. By the point Lisse embarks on her quest, the mercenaries have disappeared. Nevertheless, she seeks to wreak maximum damage, death, and destruction on the territories claimed by the Imperium by taking control of a commonly used mercenary warcraft called a kite. Kites are one form of mercenary war technology called jerengjen. These geometrically flat-planed objects "expand[ed] into artillery with dragon-shaped shadows and sleek four-legged assault robots with wolf-shaped shadows. In the skies, jerengjen unfolded into bombers with kestrel-shaped shadows" (18).

Rhaionis have a kind of technology of their own: the ghostweight, or the tradition of carrying their ancestors' spirits. As the narrator explains, "In the old days, Lisse's people took on the ghostweight to comfort the dead and be comforted in return. After a year and a day, the dead unstitched themselves and accepted their rest" (26). Ghostweight can be understood as a tool that helps to facilitate mourning, enabling the living some measure of attachment to those who have died. Indeed, an individual who is stitched to a ghost is able to communicate directly with that ghost through a type of telepathic connection. But after the "consolidation", the euphemism used to describe the destruction of Rhaion, the increase in deaths led parents to desperate measures, including having children shoulder ghostweight. Presumably, this act places incredible burdens on their psyches, as the children must directly confront issues of grieving and loss. Lisse was one such child, but her ghost remained stitched to her instead of moving on to another plane.

The benefit and burden of ghostweight are apparent as the short story moves forward. Lisse's ghost helps her to find a war-kite and to execute her plan to exact revenge on the Imperium. While she continues to destroy Imperium bases and outposts, she encounters a mercenary aircraft being piloted by Commander Kiriet Dzan, who reveals that Lisse's ghost is none other than Vron Arien, a mercenary and a notorious deserter. As Kiriet tells us: "For years [Vron Arien] eluded Wolf Command. Then we discovered he had gone to ground on Rhaion. Wolf Command determined that, for sheltering him, Rhaion must be brought to heel. The Imperium assented" (31). Lisse further discovers that Vron Arien was stitched to her as a calculated act by her parents in order to groom Lisse to seek revenge against the Imperium. This new

information makes apparent that the kite she now commands is none other than Vron Arien's. He, in turn, reveals to her that "[t]he kites take their sustenance from the deaths they deal. It was necessary to strengthen ours by letting it feast on smaller targets first. This is the particular craft of my people, as ghostweight was the craft of yours, Lisse" (32).

Kiriet's own duty is to destroy the war-kite, an intention she communicates to Lisse. Kiriet has worked her way up the mercenary command structure to initiate and rectify the dangers related to the jerengjen technology. Destroying these kites would deter the Imperium from ever using mercenary technologies to take over more lands, destroy more peoples, and enact more genocidal atrocities. As Kiriet notes, her desire to eliminate all usage of the kites was "not a popular move. I have been destroying kites ever since. If the Imperium is so keen on further conquest, let it dirty its own hands'" (33). But the story's conclusion moves in a different direction when an approaching fleet of Imperium aircraft interrupts the conversation between Vron Arien, Kiriet, and Lisse. The Imperium envoy praises Lisse for her "military effectiveness" (36), meaning her ability to destroy so many Imperium targets despite being outnumbered and outgunned. This envoy then tries to recruit Lisse: "We are in need of a strong sword. What is your price for hire, Commander Lisse?" (36). The story ends here, with Lisse's realization that she is being asked to become a mercenary.

"Ghostweight" strongly emphasizes the figure of the mercenary. A standard definition of *mercenary* is an individual or a private organization that sells its ability to fight in a conflict: essentially, working for a foreign army. James Larry Taulbee explains that

> [i]n many different eras, individuals or groups seeking to maintain or gain control over territories and peoples have found it either expedient or necessary to recruit soldiers beyond those who owed a personal, tribal or other significant obligation to them.
>
> *(145)*

Mercenaries come loaded with negative connotations, especially as figures who lack loyalty and who privilege money and capital above nation-state allegiances, and thus are denigrated. At the same time, Taulbee emphasizes how mercenaries are imbued with a "popular romantic component", which evolved from "the positive image" that "flowed from public fascination with the exotic, the adventurous, the heroic and those who challenge authority and convention" (154).[4] Thus, mercenaries could be seen as rebels and even revolutionaries despite their payment. The crucial ambivalence between mercenaries as immoral profiteers and recalcitrant freedom fighters is certainly at play in "Ghostweight". Initially, mercenary troops supporting the Imperium are derided through Lisse's vengeful perspective. But later, they defy the Imperium, noting that its conquests have resulted in "bloody hands".

Lisse's trajectory provides a site of critical inquiry precisely because she begins the story believing she is a vigilante, meting out justice on her own terms. In this sense, she emerges as a counterpart to the mercenaries. Like the mercenary, the vigilante exists at the site of a crucial ambivalence. H. Jon Rosenbaum and Peter C. Sederberg define vigilantism as "simply establishment violence. It consists of acts or threats of coercion in violation of the formal boundaries of an established sociopolitical order which, however, are intended by the violators to defend that order from some form of subversion" (542). In this particular context, the "violators" attempt to solidify and protect particular social norms that are under potential degradation. In other words, vigilantes often take on the role of informal law enforcement officers without the authority to do so and enact retributive justice on their own terms. Along these lines, Erik Mortensen defines lynching within this type of disreputable vigilante framework (21). Mortensen likewise notes that vigilantism can be understood through positive valences: "In fictional narratives, the

vigilante figure is almost always made sympathetic—if not heroic" (22). While Mortensen attempts to de-romanticize the vigilante in his consideration of lynching, it is evident that vigilante acts may function either within the frame of the established order (in the case of lynching) or outside of it, in which case the vigilante attempts to upend oppressive power dynamics at the risk of losing his or her life.

Laura Mattoon D'Amore addresses the "heroic" vigilante in her analytical investigation of American revisions of popular fairy-tale narratives. She coins such depictions as operating within the guise of "vigilante feminism", or "the performance of vigilantism by girls and women who have undertaken their own protection, and the protection of others, against violence—such as sexual assault, abduction, abuse, and trauma—because they have been otherwise failed in that manner" (387). D'Amore's examples portray women using extralegal violence to protect themselves when the established social order fails them. One key distinction between the vigilante and the mercenary is the fact of payment and capital: the vigilante engages, preserves, and/or disrupts a set of existing norms in the pursuit of justice, while the mercenary is paid to fight for a foreign army or military.

When the story opens, Lisse thinks she is fighting for her own cause, attempting to enact retribution against the Imperium for eradicating so many of her people and subduing her home world of Rhaion. Lisse rationalizes the violence and deaths she delivers with the war-kite as justice: she wields a form of power that her own people faced when their home world was invaded and one-third of them were killed off. The subjective dimension of her heroism, though, is put under duress over the course of the short story. First, as she moves forward in her quest for revenge, she realizes she is producing massive collateral damage against civilian noncombatants. Indeed, in her initial escape from Rhaion, her use of the war-kite technology inadvertently destroys her entire home world and whatever remaining Rhaioni populations had survived the Imperium's initial invasion. Second, she discovers that the ghost she has been stitched to harbors a secret. As Vron Arien tells it, he struck a bargain with Lisse's parents, offering them the potential benefit of protecting Lisse from the Imperium. He, in return, would benefit by living on in some form as ghostweight. The problem that the story sets up is the question of retribution: Vron Arien tells Lisse that he also offered her parents the possibility of vengeance, which means that Lisse's supposed vigilante quest was predestined based on her parents' bargain with Vron Arien. Vron Arien had thus been grooming Lisse her entire life to take part in a vindictive mission based on the desires of her parents rather than her own.

The other dilemma that Vron Arien's revelations bring up is the authenticity of his claims. Lisse begins to wonder whether any of the memories she has of Rhaion are genuine or are only Vron Arien's inventions. Vron Arien's influence also makes it difficult to parse out who exactly wanted vengeance against the Imperium. Indeed, Vron Arien has a motive to manipulate Lisse. The Imperium allowed Vron Arien's mercenary colleagues to invade Rhaion because it believed that the Rhaioni were harboring Vron Arien, who at that point had deserted. In this case, Vron Arien would have wanted Lisse to function as a proxy, helping him to eliminate mercenaries and the Imperium soldiers, who collectively had destroyed Vron Arien's physical body.

Lisse begins to realize that she cannot ascertain her own agency in the violence she has enacted. Someone, possibly her parents and/or Vron Arien, has engineered her to go on this killing spree against the Imperium. Whether the Imperium deserved such actions becomes ever more questionable to Lisse once she realizes that she might have participated involuntarily. Indeed, Lisse becomes objectified as a mercenary's prosthetic—that is, she is an extension of Vron Arien, who needs her corporeal capabilities to navigate the war-kite. In some sense, she becomes the tangible extension of his consciousness because Vron Arien cannot manipulate solid objects. Lisse's identity as a vigilante transforms as she further understands that the deaths

she causes with the war-kite make the craft only stronger and more capable of dealing the kind of damage that Vron Arien and/or her parents desired. The capital that Lisse attains is also reconfigured: rather than achieving vigilante justice that marks her as an enemy to the Imperium, her ability to navigate the war-kite makes her a valuable asset to the Imperium. Hence, when Lisse is asked to join the Imperium as a mercenary in the final pages of "Ghostweight", her transformation from vigilante to mercenary's prosthetic is almost complete. Lisse is faced with a choice: to take on this position with full knowledge of her participation as an official mercenary's prosthetic, or to decline the request and face the possibility of her and Vron Arien's execution at the hands of the Imperium.

The complicated dynamics of Lisse's quest bring up the oft-cited work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, who have theorized the presence of the transgenerational "phantom" (171). Theirs is a particularly useful hermeneutic tool in this case because in traditional psychoanalytic definitions, a secret held by an ancestor burdens the child, who, even without knowledge of this secret, still acts it out unconsciously. In the case of "Ghostweight", Lisse responds to the indirectly expressed desires of another generation: the generation of her parents and of Vron Arien. She carries out the mission first engendered by those before her, but in this variation of the transgenerational phantom, the ancestor's secret—specifically, Lisse's parents conspiring with Vron Arien—is weaponized for the express purpose of taking retributive actions. In "Ghostweight", the phantom's revelation does not necessarily alter the course of action. Indeed, the story ends in a state of suspension.

On its own, the story's political heft remains tethered to cycles of violence, the question of individual agency, and ethics in the face of large-scale conflicts and conquest. As Lisse comes to realize, her motives for revenge cannot be disarticulated or distinguished from the machinations of her parents or Von Arien. Further still, her destructive actions earn her the Imperium's recognition as a tenuous ally, one whose skills would advance the Imperium's cause. Will Lisse forsake the spirit of her vigilantism in favor of operating as a mercenary's prosthetic? This lack of resolution is precisely what allows us to engage in critically reading the narrative through speculative analogies.

## Speculative Analogy: "Ghostweight" and Korean Futurism

Indeed, without closure, and with the possibility of yet more violence to come, the precarity of "Ghostweight" resonates with the state of the Korean peninsula, still locked in a stalemated war. Lee's repeated references to the Imperium suggest a connection to the colonial and neo-colonial relationships that have mired Korea in over a century of tangled international webs. Intriguingly, Lee has mentioned in interviews that some of his stories do derive from Korean culture and history. For instance, Lee divulges that

> Korea was occupied by Japan from 1910 to 1945, and in fact one of my grandfathers went to university in Japan and was fluent in Japanese. The whole question of collaboration vs. resistance looks messy all around, and I poke at it in fiction sometimes, but I don't have any answers.
>
> *(Burnham)*

This provocative perspective presents an opening to consider "Ghostweight" as a way to explore not only issues of Japanese colonialism but also the broader ones of collaboration, resistance, and warfare, as such elements have impacted the Korean peninsula throughout the twentieth century. In this way, from the ruins of Rhaion and the destruction wrought by the Imperium, we can begin the process of working through the story's speculative analogies.

Korean history includes periods involving mercenary-like figures. The first concerns the Japanese conscription of Koreans into the Imperial Army. The second pertains to the Korean Augmentation to the U.S. Army (KATUSA) employed during the Korean War. And the third touches upon Korean soldiers hired to fight on behalf of the United States during the Vietnam War. Though Korean soldiers were paid for their labor in all instances, they were not private entities, nor did they officially work for another national army. In the case of the Japanese colonial period, Koreans served under the Japanese flag as conscripts of the Japanese military. In the case of the KATUSA, South Korean soldiers faced bilateral management by the newly emergent South Korean government and the U.S. government. Finally, in the case of Korean military participation in the Vietnam War, South Korean troops ultimately fought under the South Korean banner even while coming to support the United States. Although none of these examples represent traditional forms of mercenarism, they share one crucial element: colonial and neocolonial entities harnessing Korean soldiers' military biopower in times of active conflict. This element marks these historical moments as deriving from one form of capital required to wage war: soldiers and their fighting skills.

The instance of Japanese colonialism is instructive as a key example precisely because prior to 1937, Koreans were not mobilized in any significant war effort. But once Japan went to war with China, it became evident that Japan required more military labor.[5] According to Takashi Fujitani,

> Beyond their inclusion into the national political system, however, wartime mobilization of Koreans also led directly to their constitution as a population worthy of life, health, reproduction, and happiness—in other words, to their inclusion in the regime of governmentality and bio-power.
>
> *(19–20)*

Fujitani's larger point is to make apparent that Japanese treatment of Koreans changed once their biopower could be harnessed as military labor. Following Etienne Balibar's concept of inclusionary racism, Fujitani notes that this altered status was conditional: "The new racism would stress the cultural or historical backwardness of most Korean people, but not their essential inferiority" (21). In this sense, the colonial power maintained its superior positionality even as it required the support of Korean soldiers in war efforts. Of course, the use of Koreans in wartime did have a dark side: "[T]he nurturing of Korean lives was part of a system that was preparing them for their deaths—as soldiers, sailors, and workers of various kinds" (22). While arguably Koreans' treatment improved in the later colonial period, Japan's change in attitude must be contextualized via the complicated dynamics of biopower and military labor.

Though not under the rubric of an official colonial relationship, the U.S. military's occupation of Korea, its participation in the Korean War, and its hand in the post-armistice reconstruction of Korea can be considered through forms of national interdependence.[6] During the Korean War, the U.S. military, facing troop deficits during the early periods, required additional soldiers. Thus, the KATUSA program served to fill in the troop shortfall. As with the case of Japanese colonial recruitment of Korean soldiers, the emergence of the KATUSA links to the concept of biopower. On the one hand, the KATUSA provided vital military support that necessitated material and financial compensation to Korean soldiers.[7] On the other hand, as Terrence Gough notes, "from the American perspective, the Korean augmentees had the advantage of lowering American casualties—the more Koreans in the front line, the fewer Americans who had to be there" (48). In this sense, KATUSA forces not only supported the war effort but also replaced potential American casualties with Korean ones.

A final explicit instance involving biopower and Korean soldiers occurred during the Vietnam War. As Charles K. Armstrong writes, "If the Korean War is a 'forgotten war' in the United States, the Vietnam War is a forgotten, even forcibly suppressed, experience in South Korea" (530). Armstrong explains how the lack of open discourse about this moment could be partly attributable to the "sensitivity over South Korea's financial gain from the war" (530). Alan Axelrod contends further that South Korean participation in the Vietnam War was a mercenary transaction:

> The fact is that the United States "reimbursed" (the official term used) South Korea $235,560,000 for its contribution to the Vietnam War, a cash injection that grew the country's gross national product fivefold during the war. While a portion of the payment was doubtless reimbursement, also included was an additional per diem per soldier payment, a special overseas allowance, and a per soldier death benefit.
>
> *(153–154)*

While South Korea certainly benefited economically from this arrangement, the use of its soldiers again reminds us of the crucial centrality of biopower in armed conflicts. Jin-kyung Lee explains that

> military labor carries out the will of the state in conquering and subjugating the enemy, that is, those "deemed worthy of being exterminated", while military workers—especially or even exclusively those who fill the lower ranks—carry the risk of being exterminated by their enemy.
>
> *(656)*

In the case of South Korea and the Vietnam War, the state constructed "military workers" as ultimately "subject to its own necropolitical authority" (656). The additional complication in the case of this neocolonial relationship appears in the fact that South Koreans "functioned simultaneously as an intranational class surrogate labor and as a transnational racialized surrogate labor" (656–657). Because the South Korean government attained levels of national stability and security previously unachieved in the twentieth century, this particular moment of political independence can be distinguished from the two earlier periods discussed in which Korean soldiers received remuneration for their military labor. Further still, as the presumed skill and efficiency of Korean soldiers increased, so too did their compensation, as is made evident by the figures offered by Axelrod.[8]

The slipperiness of "Ghostweight" is that its narrative is not so easily tethered to such actual referents. But I advance these levels of speculative analogy to engage a larger sociopolitical framework, one that brings into relief the Korean peninsula as a site of modern territorial conflicts since at least 1905. Despite the story's depiction of a futuristic world and emphasis on dynamic technologies, it is rooted in science fiction as a historical genre. In discussing "science fiction's long-established and vibrant tradition of counterfactuals" and "its grounding in historiographic analysis", Janice Liedl argues that science fiction "already aligns with our understanding of historical genres" (291). While "Ghostweight" does not contain any counterfactuals (in which the narrative deliberately alters historical events), the story's fantastic terrains enable us to connect to various points in Korea's past. Thus, the story achieves additional political textures in relation to its ability to speak not only about possible futures but also how such futures are borne out of obscured, multilateral linkages to what has already occurred.

Rather than rehearse one specific historical moment, the narrative seems to bring us to multiple and iterative dimensions of colonial and neocolonial contact that have affected Korea and places like Korea. By using "places like Korea", I recognize that my reading fleshes out only

some possible connections between representations and real worlds. If we read the peninsula as harboring a kind of national tomb related to the unacknowledged fact of mercenary-like activities, then the story suggests that such buried pasts must be brought to light for such destructive, repetitious acts to be reckoned with and perhaps used as a way to negotiate future choices. In this way, I agree with Patricia Kerslake's point that such a narrative in this genre permits "us to see more clearly what we have been and what we may become" (1).[9]

Bringing the story into possible relationalities with Korean history and events illuminates Lisse's predicament as an intriguing one. As someone impacted by the catastrophic might of empire building, will she now use her powers when offered the chance to participate more fully in the Imperium's conquests? This question appears as a larger historical conundrum facing nation-states such as both South and North Korea, as they have attained a level of global prominence, admittedly for different reasons, especially in relation to their capacities to wage war and incite conflict. Lisse's capacity to do harm manifests through her wielding of the war-kite's lethal powers. But the story also stages an intriguing late-stage revelation that articulates the tragic circularity of Lisse's own actions. By destroying her home world and strengthening her kite in the process, she inadvertently or unconsciously repeats the actions of mercenaries a generation ago. As the narrator reveals, "The mercenaries no longer have a homeland", and

> [e]ach mercenary honors the year's dead by lighting a candle. They used to do this on the winter solstice of an ancient calendar. Now the Night of Vigils is on the anniversary of the day the first war-kites were launched; the day the mercenaries slaughtered their own people to feed the kites.
>
> *(34)*

Lisse, too, had fed her kite when destroying Rhaion, even as her larger intent was to destroy the Imperium's bases located on her home world. The story thus seems to suggest that moving forward without a more concerted understanding of the past dooms one to forms of violent repetition. The question posed to Lisse by story's end hints at another path that does not rely on her and Vron Arien's participation in empire building.

In terms of the speculative analogy at play here, the question remains: what futures can South Korea create while carrying a bloody past in which its soldiers were harnessed for such mercenary-like devastation? Without easy answers, I bring this piece back to where it started: the prospect of nuclear catastrophe that looms over the peninsula. If we relate Lisse's final dilemma to the predicament facing South Korea, then we begin to see the unmapped future paths of a country that has attained significant military might and economic power after more than half a century since millions perished during three explosive years of the Korean War. South Korea has always possessed both nuclear ambitions and a willingness to consider terminating the agreement under certain circumstances.[10] Se Young Jang reminds us that "[w]hen US extended deterrence in Korea failed to fully assure President Park Chung-hee about US security commitments to South Korea, Park tried to develop nuclear weapons against the will of the United States from the early 1970s" (507). Eunjung Lim reveals further that

> [w]hen North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test, on September 6, [2017], nuclear armament of South Korea reemerged as a topic among Korean media and was publicly discussed. Hard-line politicians, including the leadership of the Liberty Korea Party (LKP), have called for the nation to acquire nuclear weapons to balance against those of the Kim Jong-un regime.
>
> *(299)*

Lim also notes that "the leadership of LKP insisted on redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons to the country" (299).

Finally, Kiyoung Chang and Choongkoo Lee articulate the competing viewpoints on South Korea's approach to contemporary international security issues. On the one hand, they note that "one of the policy options available to Seoul is to induce the soft landing of the unstable North and coax it into reunification through the gradual transformation of North Korea" (248). On the other hand, they explain that

> in response to the North's fifth nuclear weapon test in 2016, the South Korean military proposed the concept of "Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation" or the complete destruction of North Korea's command through intensive bombing in the event of nuclear weapons use.
>
> *(249)*

I rehearse these key moments in South Korea's emergence as a political and military world power to convey the precarious nature of nuclear armament on the peninsula. Relating this situation back to "Ghostweight" reminds us that South Korea, like Lisse, must consider various potential futures. And, like Lisse, South Korea might acquire the use of a weapon of an imperial power—such as a nuclear warhead—to enact a form of retributive violence. But I use the phrasing "Korean Futurisms" to call attention to how the story weaves a lengthier historical past, involving mercenaries and their failed ventures, into a cloak of warning. Indeed, if vengeance is cast through longer cycles of seemingly endless violence, "Ghostweight" charges us to find a way forward that ends such damaging circularities. At the very least, the story's conclusion gestures to the inefficacy of massacre as a means to arbitrate justice. The pacifism thus inherent to "Ghostweight" presents a speculative analogy in which South Korea would adopt something akin to the soft-landing approach (Chang and Lee 248; Harrison 57) to the future, with a possible reunification of the peninsula in mind.[11] According to Robert A. Manning, the soft landing policy is a multilateral process: "In the optimal scenario, reunification would be a multi-stage process, beginning with modest confidence-building measures (CBMs) and an emphasis on economic cooperation" (602). The soft-landing scenario offers a near-polar opposite set of consequences from that of the nuclear retributive option. Indeed, it emphasizes diplomacy and cooperation to cultivate the eventual melding of North and South Korea.

The soft-landing policy is not without its detractors and challenges, but its potential outcome takes on extra significance when considered alongside Lisse's experiences, her choices, and the unresolved ending in "Ghostweight". Will she move ahead as a mercenary for the Imperium, or will she enact another tomorrow that enables more to survive and flourish? Although "Ghostweight" provides no easy answers, its speculative dimensions enable us to explore the terrains of conflict and violence within Korea's sociopolitical history over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The critical approach I use here to explore speculative analogies applies equally well elsewhere. Indeed, in the recent upsurge in Asian-inspired fantasies penned by so many Asian American writers, speculative analogies also serve to link history and culture to fictional worlds that at first may seem untethered to specific referents. For instance, R.F. Kuang's trilogy that begins with *The Poppy War*, though set in a world in which characters possess incredible powers and commune with the gods, partly refracts the complicated history of China during the twentieth century. Another text engaging in speculative transformations of Chinese contexts and culture is Ken Liu's *Grace of Kings*, which riffs off of the Han Dynasty era. Other Asian-inspired fantasy texts include Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes* series, Fonda Lee's *Jade City*, and

Andrea Stewart's *The Bone Shard Daughter*. Though not all of these texts are set in the future, they still offer rich sites of speculative, analogic inquiry.

I end with these brief examples to emphasize the as-yet unexplored ways to situate the vitality of speculative analogy to engage Asian American speculative fictions and associated Asian Futurisms.

## Acknowledgments

## Notes

1 Significant developments of alternative futurisms are occurring within race and ethnic studies; various strains of alternative futurisms include Asian American Futurism, Afrofuturism, Indigenous Futurism, and Latinx Futurism. My consideration explores a variation of Asian Futurism through Lee's conception of a fictional world that gestures to Korea's future paths.

2 For more articles linking the Korean peninsula with apocalypse, see De Luce, Mclaughlin, and Groll; and Hilliker and Flurry.

3 In another context, I explored the conception of "racial analogy" in a speculatively configured fictional work (*Racial Asymmetries*). In this case, I partially distinguish the "speculative analogy" as a broader term that links the fictional world with real-life referents and historical contexts. My consideration of "racial analogy" limited comparison points between a speculatively depicted fictional world and external referents to the ways in which an alien species might stand as a metaphor for racial difference.

4 For other useful investigations on the discourse of mercenaries, see Ettinger; Fallah; and Lynch and Walsh.

5 For other studies on Korean conscription during the Japanese colonial period, see Palmer.

6 The relationship between the United States and Korea after 1945 might be considered a variation on neocolonialism (Bove).

7 For more considerations of the KATUSA, see Denfield; Mitchell; Moon; and Skaggs.

8 For more on the issues of mercenary armies and the Vietnam War, see Waite.

9 Veronica Hollinger makes a similar claim: "The future is inevitably imagined within the framework of past experience, so that it is literally implicated in history even as it is also the product of imaginative anticipation" (25).

10 For critical sources on the nuclear policies that affect the relationship between South Korea and the United States, see R. Chang; Kristensen and Norris; and Roehrig.

11 For another critical exploration of the soft-landing approach, see Brown; and Hughes.

## Works Cited

Abraham, Nicolas, and Maria Torok. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 1. U of Chicago P, 1994.

Armstrong, Charles K. "America's Korea, Korea's Vietnam." *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2001, pp. 527–540.

Axelrod, Alan. *Mercenaries: A Guide to Private Armies and Private Military Companies.* CQ Press, 2014.

Balibar, Etienne. "Racism and Nationalism." *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, edited by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, Verso, 1991, pp. 37–67.

Brown, David E. "No Thanks Expected: America's Effort to Nurture a 'Soft Landing.'" *The Two Koreas and the United States: Issues of Peace, Security and Economic Cooperation*, edited by Wonmo Dong, Routledge, 2016, pp. 187–196.

Burnham, Karen. "Interview: Yoon Ha Lee, Author of *Conservation of Shadows*, on Writing and Her Attraction to Space Opera." *SF Signal*, 30 May 2013, https://www.sfsignal.com/archives/2013/05/interview-yoon-ha-lee/. Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.

Chang, Kiyoung, and Choongkoo Lee. "North Korea and the East Asian Security Order: Competing Views on What South Korea Ought to Do." *The Pacific Review*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2018, pp. 245–255.

Chang, Ryan. "Nuclear Weapons and the Need for a No-First-Use Agreement between the United States and South Korea for North Korea." *Southwestern Journal of International Law*, vol. 26, 2020, pp. 171–202.

D'Amore, Laura Mattoon. "Vigilante Feminism: Revising Trauma, Abduction, and Assault in American Fairy-Tale Revisions." *Marvels & Tales*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2017, pp. 386–405.

De Luce, Dan, Jenna Mclaughlin, and Elias Groll. "Armageddon by Accident." *Foreign Policy*, 18 Oct. 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/18/armageddon-by-accident-north-korea-nuclear-war-missiles/. Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.

Denfield, D. Colt. "KATUSA: Korean Augmentation to the US Army." *The Korean War: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Stanley Sandler, Routledge, 2014, p. 159.

DePetris, Daniel R. "Armageddon: Here Is What Happens if North Korea Hit Seoul with a Nuclear Weapon." *The National Interest*, 12 June 2018, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/armageddon-here-what-happens-if-north-korea-hit-seoul-26232. Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.

Ettinger, Aaron. "The Mercenary Moniker: Condemnations, Contradictions and the Politics of Definition." *Security Dialogue*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2014, pp. 174–191.

Fallah, Katherine. "Corporate Actors: The Legal Status of Mercenaries in Armed Conflict." *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 88, 2006, p. 599.

Fujitani, Takashi. "Right to Kill, Right to Make Live: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during WWII." *Representations*, vol. 99, no. 1, summer 2007, pp. 13–39.

Gough, Terrence J. *U.S. Army Mobilization and Logistics in the Korean War: A Research Approach*. Center of Military History, United States Army, 1987.

Harrison, Selig S. "Promoting a Soft Landing in Korea." *Foreign Policy*, vol. 106, 1997, pp. 57–75.

Hilliker, Joel, and Stephen Flurry. "North Korea and the Coming Nuclear Armageddon: Why You Need to Take This Threat Seriously." *The Trumpet*, 15 Aug. 2017, https://www.thetrumpet.com/16159-north-korea-and-the-coming-nuclear-armageddon. Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.

Hollinger, Veronica. "A History of the Future: Notes for an Archive." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2010, pp. 23–33.

Hughes, Christopher W. "Japanese Policy and the North Korean 'Soft Landing'." *The Pacific Review*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1998, pp. 389–415.

Jang, Se Young. "The Evolution of US Extended Deterrence and South Korea's Nuclear Ambitions." *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2016, pp. 502–520.

Kang, Minsoo. *Of Tales and Enigmas*. Prime Books, 2006.

Kerslake, Patricia. *Science Fiction and Empire*. Liverpool UP, 2010.

Kristensen, Hans M., and Robert S. Norris. "A History of US Nuclear Weapons in South Korea." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 73, no. 6, 2017, pp. 349–357.

Kuang, R.F. *The Poppy War*. Harper Voyager, 2018.

Lee, Fonda. *Jade City*. Orbit, 2017.

Lee, Jin-kyung. "Surrogate Military, Subimperialism, and Masculinity: South Korea in the Vietnam War, 1965–73." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2009, pp. 655–682.

Lee, Yoon Ha. *Conservation of Shadows*. Prime Books, 2013.

Liedl, Janice. "Tales of Futures Past: Science Fiction as a Historical Genre." *Rethinking History*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2015, pp. 285–299.

Lim, Eunjung. "South Korea's Nuclear Dilemmas." *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2019, pp. 297–318.

Liu, Ken. *The Grace of Kings*. Gallery/Saga, 2016.

Lynch, Tony, and A.J. Walsh. "The Good Mercenary?" *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2000, pp. 133–153.

Manning, Robert A. "The United States and the Endgame in Korea: Assessment, Scenarios, and Implications." *Asian Survey*, vol. 37, no. 7, 1997, pp. 597–608.

Menon, Rajan. "Avoiding Armageddon in Korea: Launching a War for the Ages." *Salon.com*, 21 Jan. 2018, https://www.salon.com/2018/01/21/avoiding-armageddon-in-korea_partner/. Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.

Mitchell, Arthur H. *Understanding the Korean War: The Participants, the Tactics, and the Course of Conflict*. McFarland, 2013.

Moon, Seungsook. "'In the U.S. Army but Not Quite of It.' Contesting the Imperial Power in a Discourse of KATUSAs." *Over There: Living with the U.S. Military Empire from World War II to the Present*, edited by Maria Höhn and Seungsook Moon, Duke UP, 2010, pp. 231–257.

Mortensen, Erik. "The Mode of Lynching: One Method of Vigilante Justice." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2018, pp. 20–39.

Oh, Axie. *Rebel Seoul*. Tu Books, 2017.

Oh, Ellen. *Prophecy*. HarperTeen, 2013.

Palmer, Brandon. "Imperial Japan's Preparations to Conscript Koreans as Soldiers, 1942–1945." *Korean Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2007, pp. 63–78.

Roehrig, Terence. "The US Nuclear Umbrella over South Korea: Nuclear Weapons and Extended Deterrence." *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 132, no. 4, 2017, pp. 651–685.

Rosenbaum, H. Jon, and Peter C. Sederberg. "Vigilantism: An Analysis of Establishment Violence." *Comparative Politics*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1974, pp. 541–570.

Skaggs, David Curtis. "The KATUSA Experiment: The Integration of Korean Nationals into the U.S. Army, 1950–1965." *Military Affairs*, vol. 38, no. 2, Apr. 1974, pp. 53–58.

Sohn, Stephen Hong. *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds*. NYU P, 2014.

Stewart, Andrea. *The Bone Shard Daughter*. Orbit, 2021.

Tahir, Sabaa. *An Ember in the Ashes*. Razorbill, 2015.

Taulbee, James Larry. "Reflections on the Mercenary Option." *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 9, no. 2, autumn 1998, pp. 145–163.

Waite, Gerald. "Outsourcing a War: What You Get for Your Mercenary Dollar." *International Journal on World Peace*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2014, p. 81.

# 38

# SPECULATING ROBOT IN THE INDIAN TECHNOCULTURE

## Claiming the Future through Select Indian Science Fiction Films

*Goutam Karmakar and Somasree Sarkar*

### Introduction

Science fiction as a genre has begun to recognize the presence of alternate speculative histories while realizing the connection between the genre and postcolonial non-Anglophone societies. SF features futures beyond any geographic limitations, accommodating parallel futures. As Roger Luckhurst says, "SF texts imagine futures or parallel worlds premised on the perpetual change associated with modernity, often by extending or extrapolating aspects of Mechanism from contemporary world" (3). Modernity is often associated with the advancement of technology, which is a prerogative of Euro-American society. Popular SF has been accused of homogenous representation of races and has ignored the existence of multiple races and places other than America or Europe for quite a long time. This homogenous representation is misleading, as it creates an illusion of the sole presence of whites in the past, present, and future. Humungous technological inventions and advancements have mainly alluded to the white dictum and the white techno-intelligence. R.A. D'Souza opines,

> With the establishment of a European space as the start of time, and the prevalence of European perception of time, time and associated spaces are presumed to be white. History—a space and time—is a white narrative privileging white bodies.
>
> *(4)*

To reclaim time and space and to reimagine the future, a technocratic future has to be claimed by other races spread over geographically disparate locations through their respective tech-driven narratives. A unique discourse of time and space of "'synchronizing': putting disparate elements into the same time, making them run in the same time, together" must be created to "defy the progressive linearity" of time and history (Nelson 8). An intervention into an alternative technocratic society with the advancement of science in the parallel societies of the Global South perhaps has (re)defined the genre of SF through the lenses of diverse ethno-cultural lenses. The understanding of science is culture specific, hence bearing distinct cultural implications in divergent ethno-cultures (Chattopadhyay, "On the Mythologerm"). So, the experience of science is variable, and therefore, the Euro-American understanding of science varies from

that of any other society. So, speculating about an alternative future that accommodates the variegated experiences of diverse cultures is important to capture the non-Eurocentric imagination.

This chapter, thus, seeks to capture and highlight the experience of a technocratic and scientifically advanced Indian society through the examination of recent popular SF films—*Robot* (2010) and *2.0* (2018). Indian SF as a genre has its roots in colonial India, and "since its inception the genre has been resisting such (colonial) fantasies of imperialism resulting from progress and modernity", writes Suparno Banerjee (7). Banerjee further argues that "the imperial relationship between the culture of India and western modernity shaped Indian SF's imagination of alterity" (7). The Indian "imagination of alterity" draws a speculative future that is specific to Indian culture and experience. The contact between British colonizers and the colonized Indians indeed brought in the scientific wonders of the European world, but Indian SF's imagination lays its claim through the reflection of those scientific ideas in the future of India, but only to subvert the imperialistic imagination of the colonial regime. With India "experiencing exponential technological change", Indian SF has represented that change and has shaped the future of India (Gunn ix–x). Technological change and the rapid digitization of the Indian urban society have irked the imagination of a technocratic future that finds representation in SF films.

While SF films emerged in the 1960s, most of these films showed influences from Hollywood that continued until recent times (Banerjee 15). Post-independence Indian SF films have emerged in an Indigenous cinematic space. The Tamil films *Kaadu* and *Kali Arasi* are arguably the pioneering SF films produced in India. *The Alien*, directed by Indian auteur and writer Satyajit Ray, was under production in collaboration with Columbia Pictures in the 1960s, but unfortunately, it was canceled. Later, the success of *Mr. India* (1987) provided a breakthrough in the paradigm of science fiction in Bollywood. While the popular Hindi film industry has continued to produce films of fantasy, borrowing the traits of science fiction, the release of *Koi Mil Gaya* (2003) marks the beginning of successful SF films in Bollywood. The film eventually sets the stage for the commercially successful *Krrish* film series. *Ra. One* (2010), another commercial hit, adds to the notable venture in the SF genre in Bollywood. *Ethiran* (*Robot*), originally made in Tamil and dubbed in several other Indian languages, released in the same year, has played an essential role in changing the face of pan-Indian cinema. Its sequel, *2.0* (2018), extends the world of robots and emerges as one of India's most capital-intensive films.

These Indian SF films explore futurism with an Indian cultural and ethnographic bent, and they endorse futures rife with technological innovations. The body of Indian SF film represents a kind of "cultural production [that] crosses conventional aesthetic boundaries" (Yaszek 42). With India's "massive technoscientific transformation" (Khan 479), and under the pressure of globalization, the Indian film industry has undergone a massive transformation in technology and production strategies. To widen the global viewership of popular Indian cinema and also to compete in the global market, Indian SF films reflect "sophisticated production strategies" and allow "the influx of capital in their global releases" (Banerjee 15). In doing so, they tend to be heavily reliant on the cinematic technology of Hollywood and also dependent on it in terms of the content. The imagination of spacecraft, visits by aliens, the concept of time travel, the designing of humanoid robots and the presentation of superhero figures in SF films all have their origins in the narratives of the Global North. Since SF opens a space that corresponds with a complex tech-driven culture, it has long been a prerogative of the Global North. However, the global deployment of technical tools and the experience of the digital boom in recent decades have narrowed the elusive digital divide between the Global North and the Global South. The recognition of local techno-intelligence and the mobilization of intelligence from

local to global through the digitized rapid communication system has initiated a decolonial process to overthrow white supremacy and resist the prolonged epistemic violence of neglecting the presence of BIPOC communities.

The Indian SF films *Robot* and *2.0* highlight the scientific wonders of India to create an Indian robotic icon, Chitti. While preceded by the Kannada film *Hollywood* (2002), which featured a humanoid robot as its central character, *Robot* is the first commercial Indian film to bring the humanoid robot into national consciousness. Rajnikanth, a national and regional superstar, starring as both the creator and the creation in *Robot*, is perhaps the primary reason for the broad reach of the film. Modern technology and VFX have also contributed to an intelligent presentation of modern SF for a twenty-first-century Indian audience, and the film has significantly influenced Indian popular art and culture. The technology employed and the finance required for technologically advanced worldbuilding necessary for SF have been the prerogative of Hollywood and other film industries in the Global North. Recent local innovations and the ability to produce high-budget projects within the Indian film industry have challenged this monopoly. Indian SF has slowly narrowed the digital divide in film making and has crossed over ethnographic barriers in representing South Asian Futurisms.

This chapter, thus, will highlight the role of *Robot* and *2.0*, two SF films in India that imagine and reimagine an Indian technocratic future through the representation of an alternative futuristic reality in alternate temporality. The chapter also highlights the complications surrounding a robot and its cultural implications in India. Finally, it will discuss the role of SF films in capturing the anticipations and anxieties of the Indian masses.

## Indian SF and Unique Historicity

The plot of *Robot* concerns a humanoid robot named Chitti, a product of Dr. Vaseegaran's tireless efforts over ten years. The main idea is to employ such robots in the Indian army to limit the loss of human soldiers in wars. As an assemblage of advanced software and hardware, it has superpowers that overcome the human body's limitations. Appearing as a human with the skin and shape of its creator, Chitti is endowed with "superintelligence", referred to as "any intellect that greatly exceeds the cognitive performance of humans in virtually all domains of interest" (Bostrom 39). Chitti, with its electric speed, is most effective without the threat of death. As a machine, it can be reprogrammed, re-formed, and restored. But, the concern regarding the nonhuman status of Chitti makes its employment in the army ambiguous. Being a machine, it is argued that Chitti, in all probability, may not identify friend and foe, and could also be misused if it fell into malicious hands. Moreover, Chitti's inability to emote and, later, its inability to control its emotions when reprogrammed with human emotions, complicates the situation further. Chitti thus fails to gain the approval of the army, consequently failing its creator Vaseegaran's objective to serve the nation with his invention. In endeavoring to employ robots in the Indian army, Vaseegaran is driven by his nationalist motif to contribute to the nation's security. His contribution to Indian science is one that may iterate the Nehruvian idea of science as a cornerstone of nation-building (Mukherjee 3). Vaseegaran's idea of employing super robots to evade war casualties marks his assumptions of modernity and advancement. His scientific endeavors will not only contribute to the national purpose of security building, but will also supposedly (re)center India on the map of technologically advanced nations.

Taking science as a modernistic enterprise lies at the core of Indian SF since independence. Presenting India as a nation that has scientific acumen, along with having the capacity to subvert the supremacy of the Global North in the field of science, has probably been an objective of Indian SF texts and films. The origin of Indian SF lies in the narratives of Jagadish Chandra Bose,

Satyajit Ray, and Premendra Mitra, who employed fantasy and science at once to depose the supremacy of Euro-American SFs, in turn setting the canon of Indian SF. Indian SF allows the interplay between culture and science to be "different from Western tradition", and this alternate narrative becomes increasingly normalized and familiar as one explores it further (Gordon 433).

*Robot* and *2.0* are exemplars of the scenario of twenty-first-century Indian SF films, which aim to "normalize" and "familiarize" SF tropes for the Indian postmillennial urban youth, as well as to establish a new canon of Indian SF concerning robots and robotics. However, hybridity as a distinctive marker of such different or alternative science fiction (Mukherjee 18) cannot be denied, owing to its glaring connections with the narratives of the Global North. While Hollywood science fiction films such as *The Terminator*, *Transformers*, *The Matrix*, and *Blade Runner* laid the groundwork for Indian science fiction films, *Robot* and *2.0* extend those narrative trends within the Indian cultural paradigm. Moreover, the portrayal of global South Asian superstar Rajnikanth promotes the charisma and popularity of the desi robot icon Chitti. Chitti, with skin being of color instead of white, is glocalized, presenting the colored robot icon before the Indian audience around the globe. SF is often regarded as tampering with temporal linearity, but it is not atemporal, and in "Indian SF temporality is bound with the country's unique historicity" (Banerjee 97). Given India's colonial legacy and different historicity, the critical tools required for interpreting Indian SFs are also different from those "typically applied to European and American SFs" (Ginway 467). Hence, the necessity to reinterpret alternative history through non-Eurocentric lenses.

Also, SF's speculative nature, with its ability to accommodate extended timescales, necessitates the examination of alternate "futurism" from a non-Euro-American critical vantage point. *Robot* and *2.0* portray a futuristic technocratic Indian society where science can possibly bring about a sociopolitical revolution. Also, the films "take over the infrastructures of fictional futures" (Chattopadhyay, "Manifestos of Futurisms" 9), adapted to fit into the dominant Indian consciousness, rather than being mere imitations of the narratives of the Global North. The society depicted in the films is Indigenous, bringing forth the sociopolitics of a conservative Indian society. For instance, the scene where Chitti saves a naked woman from a burning building highlights the taboo attached to the naked body in conservative Indian society. The naked woman immediately grasps the gaze of the public, which doubles her shame and compels her to run in order to escape the voyeuristic gaze, eventually killing her in an accident. Chitti's lifesaving act is overlooked as he saves a woman while unclothed, consequently leading to questions of shame and propriety, values ingrained in Indian society. Chitti's situation in India compels him to adapt to the norms of society, which poses a challenge to the robot. Chitti thus requires programming in accordance with the Indian value system so that it can survive the vilification of society. This "domestication of technology" marks that science and technology are culture-specific, which may (or may not) challenge the usage of the technology. Also, it debunks the colonial myth that "characterizes indigenous cultures as lacking in technology or science, primitive and never futuristic, making technologies and advanced political systems seem alien and otherworldly in their context" (Chattopadhyay, "Manifestos of Futurisms" 14). This myth, therefore, exposes the marginalized positions of alternative historiographies of different communities in the Global South. The production of Indian SF films, especially the likes of *Robot* and *2.0*, employing advanced cinematic technologies and smart production strategies, indeed shapes the global Indian consciousness and prepares Indian viewers for such *not-so-desi* (traditional) content in desi avatar.

The robotic world of *Robot* and *2.0* bears the unique historicity of India with the promise of modernity and technological advancement, defying the Euro-American myth of a technologically dispossessed and economically impoverished India. *Robot* and *2.0* become the

"archaeology of technology" (Parikka, *Insect Media* xiii) which records the technological history. It is "not a progress story—or a story of decline of civilizations—but is continuously written anew and branded by discontinuities" (Parikka, *Archival Media Theory* 3). Once created, the human-machine circulates within the pattern of time, becoming a part of the "archaeology of technology" (Parikka, *Insect Media*). As the humanoid robot, Chitti can be mantled, dismantled, programmed, and reprogrammed, but it continues to circulate with time, which can "expand, contract, jump ahead or run parallel to our lived temporality", as in SF "temporality is not bound by 'normal' realistic representational principles" (Banerjee 97). In *2.0*, stretching the temporal reality, the humanoid robot is reactivated nine years later, emphasizing its unavoidable presence in the uneven Indian techno-history. Reactivated Chitti is enhanced to 2.0 mode, a more advanced, more powerful version, and a recalcitrant that hoots and jokes. The upgrade changes its programmed human behavior along with its mechanical powers with advanced software and hardware. The robot is not a constant but is always in the process of becoming, as it is formed with a network of software and hardware that is always subject to change. The robot performatively participates in the forming and re-forming of Indian historicity, emphasizing its distinctiveness.

## Robot and Sexed Body

The presentation of robots and cyborgs in Indian SF films is novel and embodies the notion of science in innovative ways. The revealing of a space, alien to the Indian cinematic world, not only initiates a novelty in Indian cinema, but also inspires the imagination of a technologically adept Indian future. The launching of robot(s) as central characters of an Indian narrative marks the paradigmatic shift in Indian cine-space. The presentation of the robot brings forth multiple complications attached to the figure of a robot and to robotics within the Indian context. *Robot* and *2.0* instigate the possibility of an alternate future for humans in which human agency may become insignificant. Moreover, the two Indian SF films in question also foresee the possibility of human-machine conflicts and coexistence. *Robot* and *2.0* adhere to the posthuman view that "configures human being" as "seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (Hayles 3). The theory advocates that "there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computing simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (Hayles 3). Posthuman entities (or humanoid robots) are cross-knit and represent a techno-culture that is "a far-flung, loosely knit complex of sublegitimate, alternative and oppositional subcultures [whose common project is the subversive use of technocommodities, often framed by radical body politics]" (Dery 509). The subversion of the human body and the genetic morphing of humans have been the recurrent motives of SF in the Global North, and so is the motif of *Robot* and *2.0*.

The flexibility of the robotic body challenges the conventional notion of embodiment and integration of a body. The transformative nature of the body creates "[t]he productions of the project, the Visible Man and Visible Woman, are complete, anatomically-detailed, three-dimensional virtual renderings of human corpses, construct[ed] using an array of medical imaging and computational technologies" (Bell 156). This disrupts the idea of the body as organic and illustrates the body as a computational entity with a mechanical constitution. The deploying of a robot introduces a novel and subversive idea of the body, which "exposes the bodily interior to new orders of machine vision and provides a relentless public visual access to every organ, every corporeal manifold, from multiple new points of view" (Waldby 5). Chitti is the Visible Man and Nila the Visible Woman in *Robot* and *2.0*, respectively. *Robot* screens the complete process of the formation and computation of Chitti with a close view into its designed male

anatomy, specified with the assigned phallus, and Nila, the robot with female anatomy, is exposed to a batch of robot engineering students. Nila's impeccable silicon body instantly grabs the voyeuristic gaze of the male students. Thus, the robotic bodies are subjected to the cultural gaze and cultural interpretation.

The objectification of the robotic bodies also initiates their cultural "othering", given their mechanic subaltern nonhuman status. The nonhuman machine, though endowed with super-powers and higher cognitive abilities, often faces questions related to its nonhuman status. The nonhuman status of the robots repeatedly brings them into conflict with human beings who are reluctant to relinquish their hegemonic status. The hegemonic view of human beings and their adherence to a social norm are reflected through the robots' maker, Vaseegaran. Though he envisions a futuristic technocratic modern Indian society, he is unable to overcome the narrow view of gender roles. Vaseegaran's male robot and female robot act within the cultural space of stereotypical gender roles, as Nila is designed for household activities, while Chitti is designed to combat powerful antagonists like Pakshirajan in *2.0.* Moreover, *Robot* shows that with an installation of programmed human feelings, Chitti with artificial male anatomy responds to sexual jealousy felt by his creator, Vaseegaran, over Sana, Vaseegaran's fiancée. It returns as a vicious version of Chitti to claim Sana and revolt against his creator. The robot responds het-erosexually (given the heteronorm), insisting that the robot is a product of the heteronormative culture and also a representative of heterosexual romance in the popular Indian cinema. In view of marketing the film among conservative Indian viewers who primarily respond to heterosexual love, both films portray the humanoid robots within the paradigm of gender stereotypes. With a stereotypically gendered representation of masculine Chitti and feminine Nila, the two SF films promote the folly of "'assuming' a sex with the question of identification and with the discursive means by which the heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identification" (Butler 3).

## Horrors of Technology and SF

The representation of robots also inspires the "Frankensteinian fear", which is a "commonplace reaction to science" (Bell 159). India, with its current technological and economic boom, "currently forms an active battleground between the market forces of globalization and their consequent localizing politico-cultural responses" (Khan 2). The current aim of the Indian government to create a "digital India" embarks on a vision of a novel Indian society, scientifically improved and digitally connected. India, being the economic and political giant of South Asia, is the center of the South Asian economy and globalization. Also, the capital-intensive Indian film industry provides an impetus to India's image as an emerging economy with the ability to impact the global political scenario. The recent SF films have improved technological tools for presentation, mapping India culturally on the global platform. But, India's essentially traditional and conservative nature initiates skeptical responses to technological advancement and an increasingly digitized society. The inherent skepticism toward science and the conflict between science and tradition find expression through *Robot* and *2.0*, which address the impending horrors of science and technology.

In *Robot*, the creation revolts against its creator after it is reprogrammed and re-formed by the head of AIRD for his selfish ventures. The film explores the misuse of science and the disaster it can bring about if not used cautiously and responsibly. The betterment of humanity and limiting death in wars is the original objective behind creating Chitti the robot. However, with the installation of human emotions and artificial hormones in its system, the humanoid machine malfunctions. The robot fails to respond to the idea of war and reacts only to the concept of

love when taken for the army evaluation. The army rejects the machine, which defeats the purpose of its creation. This infuriates Vaseegaran, and he dismantles the machine. The machine with programmed human emotions also responds to the fear of death, praying to Vaseegaran not to dismantle it. The vulnerability of the machine is exposed as the amalgamation of human emotions and machine produces a chaotic human-machine hybrid: a machine that falls in love and competes with its creator for love, and that fails to respond to the idea of war when its chief aim is to serve in war.

The fragility of the human-machine subjects it to the dangers of a selfish human motif. The upgraded version of Chitti is programmed by Dr. Vohra to kill hundreds of people. Chitti's programmed behavior poses a threat to society and causes havoc in the city. However, beneath the apparent chaos lies order, as Chitti behaves according to the installed program computed with an order to serve individual need and greed. Douglas Hofstadter indicates the underlying contradiction in a system of order and disorder: "it turns out that an eerie type of chaos can lurk just behind a façade of order—and yet, deep inside the chaos lurks an even eerie type of order" (qtd. in Brady 66). Vaseegaran's inability to predict the actions of the system (the humanoid robot) creates sociocultural chaos, causing the disaster as shown in the film. The anomaly of technology is hinted at in a scene where Chitti reaches the verge of stabbing Vaseegaran, following the commands of Dr. Vohra, the chief of AIRD. The chief labels the robot as a "stupid influenced engine" as it has no sense of right or wrong, good or bad, friendship or enmity. He declares it a dangerous machine given its potential to threaten any human life. Chitti, the robot with its chaotic sense of ethics and morality, poses the question of machine morality in the era of science and technology. Artificial intelligence in the form of a humanoid robot marks massive technological progress that can overcome mortal limitations, but whether human-machines can replace human beings in the future is still an open question.

The film *2.0* also highlights the adverse impact of technology in a consumerist society by emphasizing the perpetual conflict between humans and nonhumans. The film shows the deadly effect of mobile towers on the lives of innumerable birds. It opens with a poignant scene of the suicide of Pakshirajan, an ornithologist. He hangs himself from a mobile tower, and several birds circle his hanging corpse. Soon after the incident, the city meets with an uncanny flying off and disappearance of cellular phones from their consumers. When the authorities come under pressure to restore mobile phones, a huge cellular bird-like structure reveals itself to threaten the city. The cellular bird, built out of the lost mobile phones, embeds the negatively charged aura of the dead Pakshirajan along with the auras of several dead birds. The aura of Pakshirajan and that of birds assume a gigantic cellular avian structure to seek revenge on the human population. It aims to destroy human beings to prevent the decline of the birds' population.

The curious assemblage of humans, birds, and potentially destructive mobile phones suggests the impending disaster that humans bring upon themselves by their extravagant consumerism. The anthropogenic activities are simply selfish endeavors that ignore the well-being of nonhumans, hence disturbing the balance of the earth and making humans vulnerable as well. The ecoterrorism of gigantic avian form radically reduces the human population, as the murderous machine spares no human. Each human is a mobile consumer, and hence is responsible for reducing the avian population. The ecoterrorist activities of the machine recall the radical environmental activities by Theodore Kaczynski, who in 1978 "began an 18-year bombing campaign that targeted scientists and businessmen he felt were responsible for perpetuating the environmentally destructive 'industrial-technological' system" (Long 4). Ecoterrorists "operate under the assumption that nature is good and humans are bad", a "dangerous philosophy" (Long 5), leading the most radical ones to adopt murderous methods. Even though the tactics of ecoterrorism may be inappropriate and punishable by law, the principle of radical

environmentalism rightly advocates that "fundamental alterations in values or social, political, and economic structure are needed to bring humans into harmony with nature" (List 1).

The film *2.0* closes with Vaseegaran speaking to the minister about formulating laws to protect nonhuman beings. The film, through the conveyance of the significance of ecologically conscious endeavors, seeks to bridge the gap between technological development and ecological degradation. While mediating between technology and ecological sustainability, *2.0* projects perils of technology as highlighted in Indian SF films, especially through its pointers towards technological misuse and horrors. With the minister assuring Vaseegaran about the formulation of laws for reducing radiation from mobile towers, the film projects an Indian future that will have controlled use of technology to ameliorate the condition of nonhuman beings to establish a long-desired harmony between human and nonhuman entities.

## Robotics and Ethics

The horrors of technology are connected with machine ethics, which have been widely discussed with the development of robots and with the level of autonomy acquired by robots. The indication of robots having the possibility of replacing humans in the future bears with it the question of whether robots can be brought within the paradigm of the human moral system or not. The proclivity to equate machine ethics to that of humans complicates human and machine interrelationships. The human-machine relationship is relatively recent in the traditional Indian society, and this further complicates the role of a machine within the cultural paradigm of India. The inherent skepticism regarding the human-machine interrelationship furthers the contestation of machine ethics vis-à-vis human ethics. The question of who holds the responsibility of the machine's (robot's) actions confronts the engineers and scientists. The *Code of Ethics* for robots reminds "engineers that they may be responsible for the actions taken by artificial creatures that they helped to design" (Lichocki et al. 39). However, Andreas Matthias insists that it is a question of autonomy, and it implies "the greater the autonomy of the system, the less responsible the human" (Lichocki et al. 41). Advanced programs equip machines with abilities to acquire certain qualities on their own. This deviates them from their original programming, and it becomes impossible for the programmer or designer to predict the actions of their design (Matthias). Such reasoning makes the issue of roboethics further complex, especially when the actions of the robot cause harm to humankind.

*Robot* and *2.0* reflect on the complications arising from human-robot interaction (HRI). HRI includes "physically embodied robots, and their embodiment makes them inherently different from other computing technologies" (Bartneck et al. 6). HRI brings robots into the sociocultural paradigm, as it focuses on "developing robots that can interact with people in various everyday environments. This opens up technical challenges resulting from the dynamics and complexities of humans and the social environment" (Bartneck et al. 7). HRI does not limit its research in treating robots as agents or tools in the hands of a human, but it also dwells on the possibility of considering robots as "collaborators, companions, guides, tutors, and all kinds of social interaction partners" (Bartneck et al. 8). The objective of HRI to treat robots as companions leads designers to embody robots as human beings in order to give them human-like qualities. Human-like qualities refer to two attributes in combination, *sentience* and *sapience* (personhood). *Sentience* refers to "the capacity for phenomenal experience or qualia, such as the capacity to feel pain and suffer" (Bostrom and Yudkowsky 322). In contrast, sapience refers to "a set of capacities associated with higher intelligence, such as self-awareness and being a reason-responsive agent" (Bostrom and Yudkowsky 322). If sentience and sapience identify the moral status of an AI system and robot similar to that of a human, then a robot must also be

entitled to other human rights and must be subjected to penance if found guilty of violating the ethical codes of conduct. If a robot has sentience and experiences pain, it concomitantly suggests its ability to feel emotions.

Robots are programmed to recognize affect and emotions for emotional interaction with human beings. However, programming a robot with affect recognition software and with artificial emotions may complicate the system, as the robot can act autonomously in situations using its artificially installed reasoning and cognitive abilities. Such a complication of situations with the installation of artificial emotions is shown in *Robot*, where Chitti the humanoid robot becomes jealous of his creator after falling in love with Sana, Vaseegaran's fiancée. Sana rejects Chitti since it is a machine, reasoning that a human-machine romantic relationship is impossible. Again, this complicates the ethical system of the humanoid robot who is denied the right to love on the ground of its being a nonhuman programmed machine. Chitti simply responds to its love for Sana without realizing the complexity of the situation of competing with Vaseegaran, his creator. The situation kindles the Frankensteinian fear of the creation revolting against its creator. Interestingly, when Chitti is in love with Nila, the female humanoid robot in *2.0*, it is acceptable to society, and Vaseegaran approves of the union. This suggests that a robot can be in love with another robot, but not a human, no matter what human qualities such as sentience and sapience a robot may acquire. Humanoid robots may be treated as companions and can provide cognitive aids to a human, but being a subject of romantic interest for conjugal relationships is not yet an acceptable part of robot-making. Moreover, the question of ethical rights of the robot is raised when Vaseegaran dismantles the robot despite Chitti begging him to have mercy on it. This shows that Chitti is treated as a machine with no ethical rights but simply as a mechanical tool at the hands of its creator. The sentience and sapience of the robot are entirely ignored, and so are its ethical rights. The anomaly of the creation continues as the robot deviates from its original lifesaving program to a life-taking program. Dr. Vohra reprograms the robot and turns it into a killer machine, wreaking havoc on a vast human population. The robot performs acts that are completely unethical and amoral by a human moral standard. The disastrous actions of the robot bring forth complex questions of justice and ethical responsibility.

*Robot* addresses whether the robot must bear the responsibility for its actions, or whether the robot's creator is responsible for its deviant behavior. The trial scene of the film seeks to delve deep into the complexity of the situation. The robot and its creator are both put on trial in the scene, as both are accused of bringing about the disaster on humankind. Also, the trial scene in *Robot* calls for a futuristic courtroom scene in the Indian cinema. The court trying a robot and its human creator simultaneously, perhaps, foresees a future for the Indian judicial system in which it will probably try human and nonhuman alike. The introduction of the courtroom scene trying a robot probably indicates the necessity of framing separate codes of conduct for machines, hence bringing a machine within the paradigm of ethics. But, the robot's dangerous potential is acknowledged if it falls into amoral hands; this again suggests the robot's status of being a mere tool in human hands. Therefore, the robot is instructed to be dismantled, suggesting that it is to be treated as a machine controlled by humans, and a machine can simply not be judged by human moral standards. Hence, we suggest that the film's representation of the trial scene necessitates a detailed investigation in the field of roboethics in order to address such unfathomable and unpredictable ethical complications.

### Capturing the Anticipation of Mass

The SF films *Robot* and *2.0* have brought a human-machine into the realm of recent Indian popular culture. The *Robot* series has played a vital role in capturing the future of

human-machine interaction. It has shaped the opinion that Indians can anticipate a future that is uniquely Indian. The films have the potential to initiate an academic discussion on the post-millennial Indian technoculture. Technology is instrumental in shaping the contemporary culture and formulating ideas about an epoch dominated by cybernetics and techno-artifacts. Arturo Escobar observes:

> The study of cyberculture is particularly concerned with the cultural construction and reconstruction on which the new technologies are based and which they in turn help to shape. The point of departure of this inquiry is the belief that any technology represents a cultural invention, in the sense that it brings forth a world; it emerges out of particular cultural conditions and in turn helps to create new ones.
>
> *("Welcome" 212)*

The present knowledge of technoscience intrigues the imagination of "future cultures, epistemologies, technologies, and identities" (Matrix 2). The transfiguration of cyberculture in multimedial fiction engrosses the audience with the spectacle of cybernetics. Popular cinema influences mass opinion, and the "cyberpop texts (also films) combine fiction and fact, escapist fantasy with cautionary tales, and contain imaginative educational content that increases technoscientific literacy" (Matrix 11). The demand for the spectacle in cyberpop fiction is motivated by the technoconsumerist behavior of recent decades. This demand necessitates the representation of technology within the cultural paradigms of the Global South. The Indian mass can experience the marvel of technology created by a techno-artist within the Indian community, expanding the vision of the techno-future beyond the Global North. The intersecting place between robotics and SF is often occupied by race, and "when it is addressed, the discussion frequently turns to framing the genre as racially biased" (Nama 134). The misleading and prejudiced representation in SF promotes white racial supremacy over others. The technological wonders represented in SF have manipulated global public opinion into the (mis)belief of white superiority in the arena of technological intelligence, and Hollywood SF has reinforced the digital divide for years. The release of Indian SF films like *Robot* and *2.0* challenge this superiority and reshape the public opinion about the Indian technoculture and redefine Indian techno-futures. The filmmakers, in their futurist endeavor, seek to create science fiction works that rethink the past, present, and future of India. They "merge culture, tradition, time, space and technology to present the alternative interpretations" (White 422) of Indianness.

## Works Cited

Banerjee, Suparno. *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity*. U of Wales P, 2020.

Bartneck, Christoph, et al. *Human − Robot Interaction: An Introduction*. Cambridge UP, 2020.

Bell, David. *An Introduction to Cyberculture*. Routledge, 2001.

Bostrom, Nick. *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*. Oxford UP, 2014.

Bostrom, Nick, and Eliezer Yudkowsky. "The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence." *The Cambridge Handbook of Artificial Intelligence*, edited by Keith Frankish and William M. Ramsey, Cambridge UP, 2014, pp. 316–334.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter*. Routledge, 1993.

Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva. "Manifestos of Futurisms." *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2021, pp. 8–23.

———. "On the Mythologerm: Kalpavigyan and the Question of Imperial Science." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2016, pp. 435–458.

Dery, Mark. "Cyberculture." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 91, no. 3, 1992, pp. 501–523.

D'Souza, Ryan A. "Imagining a Desi Future." *South Asian Popular Culture*, 2019, pp. 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2019.1585607. Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.

Escobar, Arturo. "Welcome to Cyberia: Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1994, pp. 211–231. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2744194. Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.

Ginway, M. Elizabeth. "A Working Model for Analyzing Third World Science Fiction: The Case of Brazil." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2005, pp. 467–494.

Gordon, Joan. "Introduction: Indian SF." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2016, pp. 433–434.

Gunn, James Foreword. *Exploring Science Fiction: Text and Pedagogy*, edited by B. Geetha and Amit Sarwal, SSS, 2011, pp. ix–x.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetic cultures, Literature and Informatics*. U of Chicago P, 1999.

Khan, Sami Ahmad. "The Others in India's Other Futures." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2016, pp. 479–495.

Lichocki, Pawel, Peter H. Kahn Jr., and A. Billard. "The Ethical Landscape of Robotics." *IEEE Robotics and Automation Magazine*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2011, pp. 39–50.

List, Peter C. *Radical Environmentalism: Philosophy and Tactics*. Wadsworth, 1993.

Long, Douglas. *Ecoterrorism*. Facts on File Inc, 2004.

Matthias, Andreas. "The Responsibility Gap: Ascribing Responsibility for the Actions of Learning Automata." *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2004, pp. 175–183.

Matrix, Sidney Eve. *Cyber Pop: Digital Lifestyles and Commodity Culture*. Routledge, 2006.

Mukherjee, Upamanyu Pablo. *Final Frontiers: Science Fiction and Techno-Science in Non-Aligned India*. Liverpool UP, 2020.

Nama, Adilifu. "Brave Black Worlds: Black Superheroes as Science Fiction Ciphers." *African Identities*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2009, pp. 133–144.

Nelson, Alondra. "Introduction: Future Texts." *Social Texts*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2002, pp. 1–16.

Parikka, Jussi. *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animal and Technology*. U of Minnesota P, 2010.

———. "Archival Media Theory: An Introduction to Wolfgang Ernst's Media Archaeology." *Digital Memory and the Archive*, edited by Wolfgang Ernst, U of Minnesota P, 2003, pp. 1–22.

*Robot*. Directed by S. Shankar, performances by Rajnikanth, Aishwariya Rai Bachchan and Danny Denzongpa, Sun Pictures, 2010.

*2.0*. Directed by S. Shankar, performances by Rajnikanth, Akshay Kumuar and Amy Jackson, Lyca Productions, 2018.

Waldby, Catherine. *The Visible Human Project: Informatics Bodies and Posthuman Medicine*. Routledge, 2000.

White, Renee T. "I Dream a World: Black Panther and the Re-Making of Blackness." *New Political Science*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2018, pp. 421–427. https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2018.1449286.

Yaszek, Lisa. "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of Future." *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2006, pp. 41–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300600950236.

# 39

# INVASION, TAKEOVER, AND DISAPPEARANCE

## Post–Cold War Fear in Hong Kong SAR Sci-Fi Film

### *Kenny K.K. Ng*

This chapter examines a cult film formation and surreal urban geography in Hong Kong SAR cinema—*The Midnight After* (Fruit Chan, 2015)—as symptomatic of a post-Cold War fear of death, morbidity, and the disappearance of humankinds and their pasts. In the dystopian science-fiction story, the impossibility of imagining the city's decolonial and postnational futures are displaced by presentations of the fears of an unknown authority conducting destructive scientific experiments on the citizens and forcing them to live through apocalyptic realities. Adapted from a 2012 popular web serial novel, *Lost on a Red Mini Bus to Tai Po*, by an anonymous writer who goes by the pen name Pizza, *The Midnight After* is a low-budget sci-fi picture. This atypical sci-fi movie is characteristic of Hong Kong cult film's hybridity intermixed with urban noir, black comedy, human tragedy, political satire, sensational murder and rape, disease, zombie and horror elements, and a mysterious authority in charge of an apocalyptic plan to eliminate living humans and humanity.

The film opens with scenes of urban nightlife. It's just past 2 a.m. while city life is still bustling in cosmopolitan Hong Kong. A group of 16 passengers of diverse backgrounds and ages (including an aging ex-gangster, a junkie, a yuppie couple, two rowdy teens, a music store salesman, an insurance saleslady of fortune-telling mysticism, a buck-toothed woman, a young computer programmer, four college students, and a likely romantic couple who are heading for their respective dates) board a red minibus that sets out from Mongkok, Hong Kong's busiest urban center, for Tai Po, the satellite town in the New Territories. As they pass through the Lion Rock Tunnel from Kowloon to the New Territories, they find themselves landing in a desolate and empty town in the middle of the night. No cars, no people, no evidence of human activity can be observed. The streets are barren. They fail to receive any of their phone calls, connect to the radio, or contact the police. While the telecommunication networks of phone and internet are still functioning, there are no traces of humans using them in the city.

The passengers puzzle over what has caused all the people to disappear. Soon panic sets in as they realize they might have been the sole surviving humans in the whole city (and the world). The four college students are the first to get off the bus, and they become the first of the travelers to succumb to a mysterious virus or some fatal explosive devices that instantly kill them by disintegrating their bodies into ashes. The remaining passengers will have to figure out the reason of their isolation, and discuss if they could still seek help by making connections with any survivors outside and unknown to them. The group exchange numbers, disperse, and agree to

reunite the next morning in a local café to take stock of the dire situation. Meanwhile, each of the passengers starts to pick up mysterious phone calls comprising noises and mechanical screeches. The reality of what has happened and caused the disappearance of humankind dawns on the survivors, who begin to offer interpretations ranging from the improbable to the ridiculous from alien invasion, time travel, a pandemic, to even the Fukushima nuclear disaster that is playing havoc with the protagonists. The film's storytelling seems to point to a paranormal interpretation to be revealed in the ending as expected by the audience.

*The Midnight After* shares a close similarity to the global genre of "Last People on Earth" stories. Richard Matheson's 1954 science-fiction horror novel *I Am Legend* is about how the sole survivors try to rescue themselves in post-pandemic Los Angeles. The novel has shaped the imagination of zombie-vampire fictions and postapocalyptic pictures such as *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Omega Man* (1971), and *I Am Legend* (2007). In a more intimate association, Ben Croll suggests that Pizza's source novel and web series titled *Lost on a Red Mini Bus to Tai Po* echoed the American television drama *Lost* (2004–2010), a six-season series that chronicle the supernatural events falling on the survivors of a plane crash in the South Pacific Ocean. Where *Lost* exiles its cast of misfits to a secluded island, Pizza's urban mystery and Chan's adaptation puts the protagonists through a spatial transformation via the tunnel from the most densely populated corners of Mongkok to the deserted town of Tai Po, interspersed with flashback sequences that haunt the characters and provide insights into their pasts before the event of human disappearance.

The fiction of a world without people is symptomatic of a pervasive apocalyptic fantasy. It forces us to rethink the world from a post-societal perspective concerning the place of humanity. In *The Future as Catastrophe*, Eva Horn suggests that the narrative of a world without people is symptomatic of the present relationship to the future: humankind looks back upon itself after its end. It is "a gaze in the future perfect, a future that *will have been*" (4, emphasis in original). Our predilection for disaster stories also relates to our inability to act individually and collectively. It speaks to our frailty to imagine and talk about futurity. Fredric Jameson calls it "our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself". The deepest vocation of science fiction, Jameson believes, is "to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future" (288–289).

While Jameson's conviction can be debatable, the paucity of science-fiction films in Hong Kong cinema reveals the challenge of envisioning possible futures of the city. Still, Tom Cunliffe notes that different storytelling of futurisms have coexisted in Hong Kong's hybrid genre films from the martial arts to action thrillers, overlapping with fantasy and horror, which engage futuristic imagination to "negotiate various contemporary social problems and contradictions in colonial Hong Kong" (147). Cunliffe discusses such films as *The Butterfly Murders* (Tsui Hark, 1979), *Health Warning* (Kirk Wong, 1983), *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* (Alex Cheung, 1983) and *The Final Test* (Lo Kin, 1987). These intergeneric works, he argues, utilize science-fiction motifs and iconography, either conceptually or via tropes, to "comment on dissatisfactions or anxieties" of the Hong Kong people. The catastrophic thinking in these films specifically "embody the contradictions that Hong Kong historically faced in its struggles between Chinese culture and nationalism on the one hand, and coloniality on the other" (147).

Regardless of the instability of the futuristic genre in Hong Kong film history, futures representation in postmillennial Hong Kong cinema attempts to achieve a space for the politics of the possible, such as *Ten Years* (2015), a composite of five short films telling stories of dystopian Hong Kong SAR societies in 2025. Set in a decade after 2015, *Ten Years* does not present the future Hong Kong as a place operated by high technology gadgets similar to the Hollywood dystopia's convention. Rather, the film projects "a vision of the future that's bleakly believable" (Crewe 68). It presents catastrophic scenarios of a political conspiracy to impose the national

security law in Zune Kwok's *Extra*, the crisis of preserving local identity and Cantonese language in Fei-pang Wong's *Season of the End* and Jevons Au's *Dialect*, political oppression and scapegoating in Kiwi Chow's *Self-Immolator*, and ideological brainwashing in Ka-leung Ng's *Local Egg*. The film in five segments articulates public concern over the city's future, which "has shifted from the distant 2046 to the immediate future" (Wu 37).

Remarkably haunting among the five shorts is *Season of the End* that paints postapocalyptic-like urban relics, in which a desperate couple devotes themselves to preserving specimens from the demolition sites' debris. Hopeless as the male protagonist becomes, he asks his partner to preserve his body as a specimen. The film displays the uncanny baroness of a postapocalypse city and highlights the existentialistic monologue of the man, which amplifies Hong Kong people's powerlessness to prevent the disappearance of things past as well as the city now. Will "Hong Kong" cease to exist in the near future? This apocalyptic drama evokes a sense of existential ennui that is both universal and contextually relevant, when one considers how the ex-colony has been gripped by a "crisis of disappearance" (Lee 80). *The Midnight After* clearly shares the sentiment of loss and cinematic imagination of disappearance in its own way—foreseeing a Hong Kong future that we cannot see what we used to see and were legitimated to see. It is the futures contestation that relates to the political necessity of such dystopian fable as *The Midnight After*, which embeds the Hong Kong locality within the global value of cultural and political rights.

## Lost in Urban Space and Social Movements

In the sociopolitical context of post-1997 Hong Kong, *The Midnight After* cannot but invite a political reading as an allegory of post-Handover Hong Kong SAR. More incisively, the storytelling can be taken as a cinematic engagement with the sense of social (grassroots) resistance foreboding the Umbrella Movement in 2014 (28 September–15 December). The theatrical release of *The Midnight After* in April 2014 began just five months before the mass protests took place in the city, where the streets of Hong Kong's Central District and Mongkok were occupied by tens of thousands of peaceful citizens participating in prodemocracy campaigns. Carlos Rojas argues that the temporal juxtaposition of the social event and the dystopian film is not only coincidental but also instructive (183). *The Midnight After* presents the haunting visions of a cohort of citizens abandoned in an uncannily empty urbanscape foreshadowing the end of the world and the hollowing out of futurity and utopian potential. The filmic portrayal of a metropolis at the brink of extinction presents a stark contrast with the forward-looking social movement in the city, which was driven by countless citizens coalesced into a community upholding a utopian faith in the possibility—even as an impossible mission—of political transformation for the people and by the people. Rojas believes that "it is precisely in its dystopian dimensions that *The Midnight After* illustrates most clearly the conditions of possibility on which utopian efforts like the Umbrella Movement are necessarily predicated" (184).

The Umbrella Movement, a.k.a. the Occupy Movement, was sparked from a civil disobedience campaign that began with a boycott of classes by thousands of high school and university students. Students protested against Beijing's refusal to grant Hong Kong citizens genuine universal suffrage in 2017 and an open election for the political leader of the city without prescreening of candidates by the Beijing authorities. Besides its fundamental appeal to political reforms to change the city's future electoral system and legislature, the 2014 Umbrella Movement at the same time signaled a decisive turn to urban protests in which tens of thousands of activist citizens congregated in the heart of the metropolis and struggled to lay claim on urban spaces as their "home". The participants staked out urban locations (Admiralty on Hong Kong Island; and Mongkok was "occupied" as a result of the protesters' spontaneous reactions to police

suppressions at the outset of the movement to claim the most crowded and busiest streets on the Kowloon side) to transform "privately owned public space" (thoroughfares largely occupied by the rich and by elites engaged in financial activities) into a protest stage for political reform. Enoch Tam indicates the "politics of place" that prominently figured in social activism that took place in Hong Kong in the past decade, especially the "Preservation Movement of Star Ferry and Queen's Piers" in 2006 and 2007, which took a spatial turn to negotiate with the government the issues of urban preservation and redevelopment. Tam warns of the global tendency toward the privatization and gentrification of space to pinpoint the "politics of place" in the social movements of urban preservation as well as occupation: privatization and gentrification work out to make space for the privileged class, while the preservation of the pier—a de facto colonial architecture in the past—makes it a public space for everyone in the future (158).

Both the preservation movement and occupying movement have pointed to new practices of spatial activism engaged in democratic planning of the city and Hong Kong identity formation by placing the stakes of the future on the politics of place and home. It is in the discourses of futurity and democratic ideal that Chang-fai Cheung calls the occupied zone in the Umbrella Movement (the "Harcourt Village" where the protester-dwellers took host in the financial and judicial center of Admiralty) a "utopia"—what started out as scattered barricades against police clearance action evolved into a full-fledged small village, full of campers and frame tents. The movement matured from an uncertain settlement to a bona fide village smacked of democratic to anarchic atmosphere: "Everyone was free to express what he/she felt in words or in art forms" (80).

Ernst Bloch points out that utopian thinking originates from Thomas More's politico-spatial concept of an *outopia* ("no-place") to represent an ideal or perfect society, but it undergoes a temporal turn to mean our longing for a better future. The idealized urban democratic movement strikes a counterpoint note to the dystopian and surreal motifs of *The Midnight After*, in which the protagonists are desperate to search for their lost fellow citizens and reclaim their home in the city. The passengers are thrown into the reality of an uncanny "no-place", pervaded by a trenchant sense of loss and disappearance as if space (home) and time (future) were ground to a halt. There is a process of protean community formation, however, as a core set of passengers begins to interact and collaborate as a miniature community. The survivors sense that strange events have befallen the city and its people, while they struggle to offer explanations and provide solutions to seek their way out. On their chance encounters, the strangers rediscover the feeling of cohesion and human connection in the miniature community, in a way that foreshadows how our temporary settlers in the occupying movement managed to reestablish social bonding and solidarity and make themselves at home in the occupied streets. Protesters built a tent community that turned the economic center of the metropolis into a host site for the utopian vision of genuine democracy and civic participation. In light of the communal bonds and futuristic directions the film envisions, *The Midnight After* not only explores "the sociopolitical dynamics that would drive the process of community formation during the subsequent Umbrella Movement" (Rojas 184), but it also redirects our gaze at the uncanny reality of the metropolis, whereas the ordinary citizens wish to break away from mundane economic life and alienation in the city as well as the suffocating political climate with impending totalitarian control.

The Lion Rock Tunnel is both a spatial-temporal portal and twilight zone where the characters unpredictably experience an unwelcome transition from the past to the present, landing at an uninhabited land where preexisting law and order are no longer valid or meaningful. The suggestions of the danger of the "transition" via the tunnel and the precarious existence of the "Lion Rock Spirit" synonymous with the Hong Kong Spirit cannot be just coincidental but overdetermined. The tremendous importance of the Lion Rock Spirit originated from the popular television series *Below the Lion Rock* beginning in the 1970s. *Below the Lion Rock* had

become highly rated because the social dramas could make use of the television series to articulate the voices of the common people and tell contemporary Hong Kong stories.

*Below the Lion Rock* then quickly became the training ground for young film talent, paving the way for the Hong Kong New Wave and Hong Kong cinema in its ongoing saga in the golden era of the 1980s and 1990s. The lyrics of its theme song appeal to the communal spirits of mutual support, social cohesion, and endurance of hardship, standing for the foundational merits for the success of Hong Kong people. Whereas the Hong Kong SAR government would have invoked the lyrics in calling for social harmony and ask people to endure difficult times, pro-democratic political activists identified the anthem with the city's lost pasts, using the song at time of crisis to debunk the government's failure to uphold social values and justice that have been lost since the 1997 transition of Hong Kong. During the 2014 Umbrella Movement, some young rock climbers and protesters achieved the courageous feat of hanging a giant yellow banner with the pro-democracy plea, "I Want Genuine Universal Suffrage", the filming of which went viral on global media. The spirit of the young in daringly and dangerously mounting the iconic Lion Rock to make their petition for democracy visible to the world was simply stunning and enlightening, and it elicited overwhelming emotional reactions and support from sympathetic witnesses across the globe (Morris 27).

Returning to *The Midnight After*, the Lion Rock had lost its symbolic signification and mythic discourse of social solidarity. Dramatically, the tunnel is the potent threshold that at once signifies the forces of transformation, transgression, and degeneration. The film combines the special effect of CGI with the cinematography of wide shots and aerial angles to create the hallucinatory hollowness of the city. A young protagonist (played by Wong Yau-nam) decides to race back to Kowloon to see if his girlfriend is safe. As he rides on the bike and speeds across the tunnel and on the expressway, it is unnerving to see that the bustling city with just about the highest density in the world has turned into a phantasmagoric picture of barren streets. There is a "haunting beauty" to the way the director juxtaposes the nighttime view of the town, full of neon lights, with the hustle and bustle of regular life of the grassroots characters viewed in flashbacks. The film can be seen as a "love letter" (Small) to the old Hong Kong, with its missing urban geography, cultures, and core values.

Stephen Chan takes the "fantastic turn of events" in *The Midnight After* as offering "every spectator a chance to experience a figurative mediation to one's deep-rooted sense of anxiety and despair in today's Hong Kong" (823). Chan notices the traumatized survivors' struggles against their own vanishing and abandonment in the city as mirroring the plights of Hong Kong citizens who have been deprived of their autonomy and political rights. The fascination with empty urbanscapes is a cinematic expression of the aesthetics of "disappearance", a coinage by Ackbar Abbas with which to suggest the imperative not to celebrate but to mourn the city's continual erasure of its pasts and memories, as well as the disappearance of the Hong Kong people on the political stag who are denied a voice to speak about their own destinies.

## Lost in Space, Lost in Transition

The hybrid narrative of horror and comedy in *The Midnight After* recapitulates David Bowie's "Space Oddity" (1969), a popular song that recalls 1960s youth and counterculture. Halfway into the film, the passengers begin to pick up mysterious Morse code transmission signals on their phones. A cool-headed programmer among the crew manages to decipher the mysterious siren to be the lyrics of "Space Oddity". Bowie's song was allegedly inspired by Stanley Kubrick's 1968 science-fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Released in 1969, *Space Oddity* coincided with the historic event in which American astronauts landed with Apollo 11 on the moon,

characteristic of the Space Age and the Cold War race of space colonization by the two superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union. The sonic creation represents the de-familiarizing experience of spaces that overwhelm an alienated Major Tom as a helpless victim of a technological mishap, whereas Bowie's lyrics are a wakeup call for freedom by altering the conditions of human labor from the fetters of techno-futuristic control (Lupro 18).

In *The Midnight After*, Bowie's song is given a sidesplitting rendition by an onboard dweeb (played by Jan Curious, a Hong Kong indie band singer), intermixed with Bowie's musical video in a karaoke-style replay to his fellow passengers in a local café (*cha chaan teng*). The campy performance underscores the themes of exile and alienation, hence bringing the "alienated gaze" down to earth to capture the increasing estrangement of Hong Kong citizens from their rapidly changing home city. The film's representation of Bowie's art-pop music injects a jarring note in the hodgepodge narrative of apocalyptic sci-fi elements, popular counterculture, and high camp. Bowie has enjoyed a popular following in Hong Kong independent music and video performance culture. The British popular star sang "Space Oddity" at a concert in the Hong Kong Coliseum in 1983, returning to perform again in 2004 (Morris 74). Bowie's iconic status epitomizes the legacy of Western popular culture in colonial Hong Kong, as well as illustrates the clash with the Asian (Japanese) and local Chinese influences among the generation of the 1970s and 1980s. In Patrick Tam's *Nomad* (1982), the disillusioned young rebels are superficially attracted to a mingle-mangle of Bowie's album and the Japanese kabuki dance-drama, the traditional Chinese theater and classical music, but their romantic getaway to live a self-asserting life with fulfilling sex is eventually shattered by the naked reality of politics and violence.

If the Bowie icon was symptomatic of Hong Kong's hybrid culture and foreign influences on the young rebels in *Nomad*, the popular singer in the new millennium rather stands for the idea of an alien in the planet, and a social misfit, as he plays in Nicolas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976). In the recent retrospective of science-fiction cinema held in Hong Kong in October–December 2020, "The Future Is Now", one of the curators, William Cheung, chose Roeg's futuristic movie, suggesting that Hong Kong people have been embarking on a series of political mishaps just like an alien's unknown journey on a strange planet. The film follows an alien visitor, Newton (played by Bowie), who leaves his dissipating planet and falls to Earth in order to save his family. His mission is to build a spaceship and transport Earth's water back to his home planet. But his earthling girlfriend and business partners betray him and put him through medical experiments in a hotel. Worse, the alien succumbs to alcohol, sex, and television. He remains grounded on Earth for the rest of his days with his youthful face intact. Like Newton, Hong Kongers have assumed a double identity—the trendy businessman who has to make a living to survive in an ever-changing global economy, and the fragile alien who hides a sense of anguish on his desolated planet.

Indeed, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*—staring Bowie as an alien—could not have seemed timelier in 2020 Hong Kong as the figure of Major Tom replayed in *The Midnight After*. "Space Oddity" describes Major Tom, who is blasted off into space but then loses connection with Ground Control. While the lyrics seem to suggest humans' fascination with space travel and science exploration, they are also filled with a sense of human isolation and noncompliance with authority and order. The Hong Kong audience would not fail to capture a comparison of the abandoned passengers of the minibus in *The Midnight After* with Major Tom in the spaceship, who is exiled and stranded "in the absolute liminality of deep space when his ship is cut off from Earth", and the spaceship "come(s) into equivalence as frail enclosures for a trapped humanity" (Morris 24).

"Passengers on the red minibus are trapped. And we are trapped in reality"; the director Fruit Chan has not shied away from elucidating the political tone of his sci-fi movie. "Many good things about Hong Kong are fading away" (Chow). *The Midnight After* can be evidently

426

read as a political satire of Hong Kong's situation after the Handover—"a place cut off from the rest of the world where normal rules no longer apply", where "people have rights but cannot vote, and have resorted to compromising their humanity for simple survival" (Kozo).

In the second half of the film, Chan portrays a postapocalyptic world after its descent into a vacuum of no-rule when arbitrary justice is applied, making a disturbing social commentary on human's barbaric nature in the dystopian ramifications. Under fear, the survivors could devolve into moral depravity with bloody brutality. As the passengers discover that a woman has been raped and killed by two of the young characters, they become enraged at the murder and decide to execute their own "justice" to punish the two criminals by taking turns to stab the rapists to death. The surviving passengers then realize and emphasize the fact that there is no "law" whatsoever to count on because "we're already at the end of the world". Another protagonist believes that social norms and rules are already gone after the minibus passed through the tunnel, "our city changed irrevocably, and now society's laws, human ethics—they no longer apply". The brutish killing drama wrought out of self-fear issues a dire warning to the miniature community of the danger of slipping into an uncomfortable lynch mob sense of justice as a vulgar combination of anarchy and tyranny.

Burdened with an anxiety about losing the future, *The Midnight After* offers no sense of an ending. In the finale, the driver and passengers wear masks and plastic coats as protective gear as soon as they decide to head to Tai Mo Mountain, where they venture to look for the masterminds in control of all the mysterious happenings. The survivors are confronted with troops in black hazmat suits and gasmasks, and their minibus rammed by armored fighting vehicles, but the much-damaged van manages to escape from the attacks, steering through the empty highways back to Kowloon, the departure point of their misadventures. This film's open ending obviously would have invited many political interpretations. In the last hyperbolic spectacle, we see the van showered by blood-red, heavy rains. Ting-Ying Lin explains the red rains as a political metaphor that "represents the violence and possible neo-colonialism caused by the increasing interference of the Beijing authorities in the politics of Hong Kong" (23–24). Beyond this political pessimism, however, the ending establishes traces of humanism, collective memory, and communal union that could sustain the survivors in their steadfast actions to stay together for another expedition in an inhospitable environment. Flashbacks of the protagonists' missing families with their regrets, followed by aerial shots of an empty metropolis of high-rises, mark the film's signature of love to pay tribute to the city—and its lost pasts.

## CODA: Beginning at the End of the World

The sights of gas-masked soldiers and armors not only presents a powerful imagery of state control and violence, but also elicits eerie anticipation in what the world would be seeing in Hong Kong's city streets in 2019, when police forces in full combat gear used tear gas, pepper spray, bean bag guns, and water cannons against tens of thousands of protesters who walked out to oppose the Extradition Law Amendment Bill. The movement achieved early success by peaceful means with the removal of the bill, but it escalated into citywide protests against police arrests and brutality together with the appeal to universal suffrage that continued to enjoy widespread support in society. The protesters' innovative "be water" hit-and-run tactics (adopted from the legendary Bruce Lee's philosophy of kung fu) potently exploited the city's efficient mass transport infrastructure and the social media ecosystem, which made it possible for the leaderless protesters to coordinate through new media platforms and shift between their target urban locations, ebbing and flowing "like water" to preempt organized police actions. The protests could have been successfully garnering world media attention and broad public

support. On the flip side, the leaderless structure of the movement made it impossible for social activists to design a peaceful strategy to initiate negotiations for electoral democracy in the future. In the later phase of the movement, most detrimentally, the civil disobedience advocates gave way to the radical segment of protesters who drew their motto from the dystopian 2012 film *The Hunger Games*, "If we burn, you burn with us", embedded in the narrative of apocalyptic battle between freedom fighters and malicious government forces. This granted the Beijing authorities a much-needed excuse to enact more draconian measures to curb the increasingly violent demonstrations.

A year after the 2019 protests, China's National People's Congress decided to bypass Hong Kong's legislature and impose a new National Security Law on the city in July 2020. The sweeping law restricted the space of individuals and organizations for dissenting views and expressions by holding pro-democracy protests and anti-establishment slogans accountable for potentially treasonable acts. In global geopolitics, Hong Kong is now seen as being embroiled at the frontline of a "new cold war" situation between the United States and China. The fact that the Hong Kong issue led to US-imposed sanctions on China symbolizes the escalation of the geopolitical "new cold war" in East Asia between the two world powers (Toru). As the young activist Joshua Wong told the press, "If we are in a new cold war, Hong Kong is the new Berlin" (Ag 4). Will the new national security law mean the end of Hong Kong? Will a new spate of exodus of Hong Kong people and families create more and more "astronaut" families—a local term denoting Hong Kong emigrants straddling two worlds apart at home and abroad in their host countries? Do their situations sound familiar with that of Major Tom in "Space Oddity", redux in *The Midnight After*, who is stranded in space and disconnected from home?

Much as the open ending of *The Midnight After* cannot offer a resolution for anything that happens, the apocalyptic film still delivers hopeful insights and allows us to ponder the possibilities of staying and preserving to make changes, just as the passengers resolve to go on their adventure against all odds even though they do not know where the next destination will be. The minibus is itself a site of heterotopia, a conflicted space of freedom, risk, security, and uncertainty. For Michel Foucault, there is no sense of a realm of freedom or liberation in the heterotopian sites (Johnson 8). They shift and transform endlessly, opening new dangers and opportunities, as demonstrated in the unending excursions of the minibus in the city. Political motivations or not, *The Midnight After* encourages us to ponder the meaning of heterotopia: it will not be the end of the world as in the dystopian imagination, but it will give gleams of hope for the future and wishes for a good society. For the sole survivors on board the minibus, they are the non-stakeholders who will have a stake in society in their tireless work for communal solidarity and the search for the meaning of society. For social activists and the have-nots, "change is possible with this imaginary of Heterotopia", for it "gives social innovators more space for imagination and nodes for fostering actions and movements" (K. Chan 220).

The minibus survivors are a microcosm of Hong Kong's people, who largely want to "retain the lifestyle that they have built over several generations and that has become a defining part of local culture" (Purbrick 477). The majority of the citizens do not want to return to British rule or have self-rule or be caught up in the "new cold war" between the big powers. It is in this sense of localism on which the twist-ending of the red van story and the heterotopic scenarios are predicated: they ask readers and viewers to decide for themselves how to keep the storytelling going, and reimagine how an alternative diverse society can be worked out. It challenges our social actors and leaders in different sectors of society to guide citizens, communities, and multitudes of groups to navigate out of the dark tunnel of hopelessness, despair, and utter abandonment. The future is now.

## Acknowledgment

## Works Cited

Abbas, Ackbar. *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Hong Kong UP, 1997

Ag, Magnus. "Inside Hong Kong's Leaderless Uprising." *The Diplomat* [Tokyo], vol. 24, Oct. 2019, pp. 1–6.

Bloch, Ernst. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, translated by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, MIT Press, 1988.

Chan, Koonchung. "Coda: Utopia, Dystopia, and Heterotopia: Theoretical Cross-examination on Ideal, Reality, and Social Innovation." *Utopia and Utopianism in the Contemporary Chinese Context*, edited by David Der-wei Wang, Angela Ki Che Leung, and Yinde Zhang, Hong Kong UP, 2020, 211–222.

Chan, Stephen. "Un-Imagining the Local/Future: Cinematic Engagement with the Absence of Hope." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 31, no. 6, 2017, pp. 820–836.

Cheung, Chang-fai. *Another Place Another Time*. Infolink, 2018.

Cheung, William. "The Tragedy of an Alien Who Fell to Earth." *Critics' Choice: The Future Is Now*. 4 Nov. 2020. https://www.filmcritics.org.hk/zh-hant/node/2813. Accessed 31 Jan. 2021.

Chow, Vivienne. "Fear and Loathing at the Cinema: New Films Reflect Modern Tensions in Hong Kong." *South China Morning Post*, 20 Apr. 2014, A4.

Crewe, David. "Already Too Late / Not Too Late: Ten Years' Perspectives on Near-Future Hong Kong." *Metro Magazine*, January 2016.

Croll, Ben. "*The Midnight After*: Fruit Chan's Maddening Pop-Art Apocalypse." *Berlinale 2014 Review*, 8 Feb. 2014, https://screenanarchy.com/2014/02/berlinale-2014-review-the-midnight-after-fruit-chans-maddening-pop-art-apocalypse.html. Accessed 20 Jan. 2021.

Cunliffe, Tom. "Tracing the Science Fiction Genre in Hong Kong Cinema." In *Sino-Enchantment: The Fantastic in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas*, edited by Kenneth Chan and Andrew Stuckey. Edinburgh UP, 2021, pp. 128–148.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." Translated by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22–27.

Horn, Eva. *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age*. Columbia UP, 2018.

Jameson, Fredric. "Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?" *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso, 2005, pp. 281–295.

Johnson, Peter. "The Ship: Navigating the Myths, Metaphors and Realities of Foucault's Heterotopia par excellence.' *Heterotopian Studies*, 14 Sept. 2016, 1–15, https://www.heterotopiastudies.com/the-ship-foucaults-heterotopia-par-excellence/. Accessed 31 Jan. 2021.

Kozo. "The Midnight After." LoveHKFilm.com. http://www.lovehkfilm.com/reviews_2/midnight_after.html. Accessed 31 Jan. 2021.

Lee, Vivian P. Y. "The Ten Years Phenomenon: Promises and Perils of Politically Engaged Cinema in Hong Kong." *Ex-Position*, no. 42, 2019, pp. 75–88.

Lin, Ting-Ying. "Re-Negotiations of the 'China Factor' in Contemporary Hong Kong Genre Film." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2020, pp. 11–37.

Lupro, Michael Mooradian. "Keeping Space Fantastic: The Transformative Journey of Major Tom." *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*, edited by Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, pp. 13–26.

Morris, Meagan. "Hong Kong Liminal: Situation as Method." *Hong Kong Culture and Society in the New Millennium: Hong Kong as Method*, edited by Yiu-wai Chu, Springer, 2017, pp. 3–32.

Purbrick, Martin. "Hong Kong: The Torn City." *Asian Affairs*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2020, pp. 463–484.

Rojas, Carlos. "Before and after *The Midnight After*." *Utopia and Utopianism in the Contemporary Chinese Context: Texts, Ideas, Spaces*, edited by David Der-wei Wang, Hong Kong UP, 2020, pp. 183–195.

Small, Courtney. "Reel Asian 2014: The Morning After." *Cinema Axis*, 6 Nov. 2014, https://cinemaaxis.com/2014/11/06/reel-asian-2014-the-morning-after/. Accessed 31 Jan. 2021.

Tam, Enoch Yee-lok. "A Turn to the Politics of Place in Hong Kong Independent Documentaries." *Ex-Position*, no. 42, 2019, pp. 155–168.

Toru, Kurata. "Development of the Hong Kong Pro-Democracy Protest into a 'New Cold War': Shift from Opposing the Fugitive Offenders (Amendment) Bill to Opposing the Hong Kong National Security Law." *Asia-Pacific Review*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2020, pp. 94–108.

Wu, Helena. "Imagining the Future in Post-Millennial Hong Kong Cinema: Visualizing the Local, the National and the Global in Cultural Imaginaries." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2020, pp. 32–49.

# 40

# CONFUCIUS NO SAY

## Sino-Fi Web Fiction, Film, and Period Drama

*Sheng-mei Ma*

A famous maxim from *The Analects of Confucius* decrees: "Confucius is loath to discourse on the monstrous, the violent, the occult, and the numinous!" (*zibuyu guaililuanshen*! 子不語, 怪力亂神). Literally, *zibuyu* would be translated as "Confucius no say", a double entendre the 2,000-year-old straight face never intended. Whereas Confucius, in pithy classical Chinese, forbids extremes, the verbatim English translation sounds like a riff of the fortune cookie or Charlie Chan pidgin of "Confucius say", followed by the punchline of any number of racist jokes. The sage's rationalist pragmatism exhorts a stringent following of the golden means here and now, never to stray into the fringes of the human community and the human mind. In millennial China, whereby Confucianism has been devastated by the 1919 May Fourth movement of "Tear down the Confucius Joint!" (*Dadao kongjiadian* 打倒孔家店), by mid-century Maoist campaigns of "Demolish the Four Olds!" (*Posijiu* 破四舊), and by ongoing one-party authoritarianism, Confucius no longer has any say over what writers and filmmakers tap into. Rather, political censorship dictates a shunning of critical subject matters in the moment. Contemporary creative energy has thus been channeled into the very areas the ancient sage had demurred: either diving into ancient tombs in Gothic fantasies of the web novel *Ghost Blows Out the Light* (2006) and its 2015 filmic spin-offs, or lifting off into space in the science-fiction short story "The Wandering Earth" (2000) and its 2019 cinematic adaptation.

Trapped by a fused and confusing "socialism with Chinese characteristics", or communism-cum-capitalism, millennial Chinese escape artists, like the Pied Piper, "serve the people" by digging imaginatively into the earth for a revisionist past or up into space for a futuristic dystopia. Whether burying the head in the sand or in the clouds, whether sand- or star-gazing, whether *tuduen* (土遁 retreat into earth) or spacing out, this escapism eludes as much as it enunciates, deflects as much as it delineates, Chinese reality and culture. However, any averting of the Red Sun, pun intended, still leaves a blinding afterimage on the retina, whenever the eyes—and consciousness—are shut and turned inward. Despite trappings of apocalyptic, hyperbolic motifs and computer-generated extravaganza, despite underground and stratospheric apparitions, millennial Chinese imaginary on tombs and space predictably returns home to traditional, even conservative, family melodramas, romantic or filial or both. The romantic genre invariably involves heterosexual love between man and woman rather than same-sex relationships. The familial genre among the individual or collective family gravitates to august Patriarchs—Confucianism, Maoism, Xi Jinping Thought, and the Nation.

One particular strand of millennial Chinese imaginary gives Western sci-fi a twist, fashioning, instead, Sino-Fi in web fiction, film, and television period drama. As a case in point, Liu Cixin's web novel of *The Three-Body Problem* (2006), "The Wandering Earth" (2000), and the 2019 filmic adaptation of the latter demonstrate an obviating of both the Confucian and the communist tradition. While Cixin has been recognized with the 2015 Hugo Award via Ken Liu's translation and the film *The Wandering Earth* globally distributed, Sino-Fi period dramas on Chinese television and via Chinese-language online platforms never manage to reach a non-Chinese-speaking audience, absent English subtitles and Western media/viewership interest. Although Sino-Fi seems but a wordplay on sci-fi, the gap between the Chinese and Western genres is as wide as the Pacific Ocean, part of the untranslatable, unglobalizable. How to bridge the gap? How to build a bridge across the tumultuous Pacific? For instance, *Joy of Life* (2007), based on Mao Ni's web novel, opens with a futuristic epigraph of sorts where a contemporary protagonist Fan Xian, paralyzed and bedridden, finds himself back to the "dynasty" without any disability, an illegitimate child of the emperor and a mother from the future. Season 1 of the 2019 TV dramatization of *Joy of Life*, 46 episodes in total, is sprinkled with Sino-Fi anachronisms such as surgical gloves, machine guns, robots, and Fan's scientific know-how, all in the framework of Imperial China.

Collectively known as *chuanyuewen* (穿越文 Literature of Spatial and Temporal Crossing), *Joy of Life* is joined by a plethora of web novels and period dramas of modern people stumbling into Imperial China. Episode 1 of *Tang Dynasty Tour* (2018) follows the adventure of an archeological team member as he floats through a wormhole back to the Tang dynasty. The opening of *Dreaming Back to the Qing Dynasty* (2019–2020) shows an architecture firm intern getting lost inside her beloved Forbidden City, only to drop right into court intrigue of the Kangxi emperor. *Love Through a Millennium* (2016) reverses the flow from 16 BC to 2015 AD (over two millennia in fact), shuttling love and assassination with ample use of the split screen. *My Dear Ancestor* (2018) follows a similar trajectory to set the idol drama—dramas featuring teen and youth idols—in the present with romantic partners nearly two millennia apart. *Reach Out to Pick the Star* (2020) matchmakes through VR goggles, bringing two modern lovers into the imperial court. Chinese romance films draw as well from temporal crossing, albeit across decades rather than millennia. *How Long Will I Love U?* (2018) matches two lovers from 1999 and 2018, who rent the same room and share the same bed. Such films are indebted to traditional ghost stories spanning lifetimes, bridging as a matter of course male students of literature and female ghosts, male demon slayers and female demons (*yao*), evidenced by King Hu's *wuxia* films. Trans-temporal ghost stories are used to consolidate male-centric gender divisions.

In period dramas, however, this boundary-crossing "with Chinese characteristics" not only reflects communist China's neoimperial drive in this so-called "Chinese Century", but also deflects it onto Imperial China. China's neoimperial drive in the twenty-first century differs but little from Anglo-America's in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The real difference lies in the sphere of influence. Whereas the English Alice in America's Disney and Hollywood falls through the rabbit hole into the wonderland close to the reader's heart worldwide, Sino-Fi period dramas reach out, only to be arrested at the edges of the Chinese language, an itch scratched on the skin of China's body politic, rarely touching anyone beyond Chinese speakers in China and in the diaspora comprising, nonetheless, approximately 16% of the world's population.

## Old Nezha for New China

To understand Sino-Fi's youthful rebel-heroes in *The Wandering Earth*, *Joy of Life*, and other TV series, we must take a longer view, going all the way back to Nezha, China's "Red" Boy God from classics to animation to, surprisingly, Sino-Fi. For decades, the cool outlaw in communist

China has been hot, firing up the public imagination from Chairman Mao's valorization of the fourteenth-century *Outlaws of the Marsh* to contemporary reanimation on the big and small screen of the rebellious Monkey King and Nezha, all hailing from classical Chinese novels. Mao's "Insurgency is justified; revolution is no crime", so dictates the communist DNA that Huallywood's soft-power apparatus in Xi Jinping's "Chinese Century" revels in usurpation of social conventions and in supernatural phantasmagoria. What used to be flouted by Confucianism traditionally is now flaunted by capitalist-communists like a Scarlet Letter, or a Red Star, to be exact. Hence, the rage of millennial subversive euphemisms which Yu Hua lays out in *China in Ten Words* (2010) includes *huyou* (忽悠) and *shanzhai* (山寨). The former denotes bamboozle or deceive, a means to an end, even mean-spiritedness in outright lies, justifiable with an eye toward the goal. The latter derives from Imperial China's banditry mountain hideout, eulogized to sanction any pirated product and practice, rendering Nokia into Nokir, Samsung into Samsing, even infant formula laced with melamine.

Elevating the low and the shunned crystallizes in the image of Nezha, a Boy God born with a red bib or "damask silk" covering his belly, an oviparous birth to boot after a gestation of three years and six months. Red symbolizes fiery passion that lends itself, serendipitously, to communist insurrection. This obstreperous, renegade deity emerges in the classics *Journey to The West* and *Creation of the Gods*. Nezha and *Journey*'s the Monkey King, Nezha's fellow traveler on the road of maturation from self-centered id to socialization/subjugation, both wreak havoc in heaven and earth and hell before being subdued by the Buddha's and the Goddess of Mercy Guanyin's magic or magic tricks. Taiwan New Cinema appropriates the image of Nezha as an analog for the besieged island's struggle, such as Tsai Mingliang's *Rebels of the Neon God*, or *Teenage Nezha* in Chinese. Mainland Chinese film and TV update and capitalize on the Nezha tradition for the spirit of youthful, irreverent, and iconoclastic revolt, most recently in the animation *Nezha* (2019). The Chinese literary and cinematic history features Nezha's eternal return as an Oedipus-Loki-trickster "with Chinese characteristics".

Both *Journey* and *Creation* revolve around boyish protagonists outside of any order, unbounded by all rules and traditions, until they are vanquished. Their births are magical, less credited to humans than to Wordsworthian natural supernaturalism: both born oviparously, the Monkey King born out of a rock, Nezha from a "fleshy ball" bathed in "red light and fragrance" (235). Contrary to what a loving father would do, *Journey*'s Jade Emperor orders an immediate investigation and eventual extermination, or in military lingo, search-and-destroy; Nezha's father Li Jing slices the ball with his sword to do away with the monstrosity. Fortunately, the Heavenly Father and the mortal father fail. As the Monkey King and Nezha grow increasingly destructive, challenging all levels of authority, the father of all fathers, the Buddha, squashes the rebels, literally. In *Journey*, the Monkey King is crushed by the Buddha's five fingers as Five Element Mountain for 500 years, until the monk Tripitaka, on his way westward to India for Buddhist sutras, arrives to undo the seal. The Monkey King's "recidivism" in trying to bludgeon Tripitaka to a pulp is only arrested by the Buddha's magic head-tightening gold fillet. To shield Li Jing from his son's wrath of vengeance, the Buddha grants him a handheld miniature pagoda, traditionally a pyramid of multiple levels, each worshipping an avatar of the divine being, a god (or dog) pile, in a manner of speaking, to pulverize the dwarf in a red bib. The pagoda is a place of worship for believers, but a prison for nonbelievers. Chapter 83 of *Journey* notes: "the pagoda, in fact, symbolized Buddha on each level" (132). Such phallic hard-ons of the soaring Five Element Mountain and of the erect pagoda metamorphose into other symbols in the millennial Sino-Fi genre, from futuristic rocket spaceships blasting off into the dark womb of the space to swords and *qi* (氣 or *chi* for breath, magnetic field, and/or mysterious energy) that defy gravity, natural law, and causal narrative logic.

The Monkey King and Nezha have made their fame through contesting father figures in general and dragons, the age-old icon of Chineseness, in particular. The Monkey King raids the underwater courts of East, West, North, and South Dragon Kings for his weapon—the Compliant Golden-Hooped Rod—and his dashing headwear, armor, and boots to the extent that the Dragon Kings file grievances at the Jade Emperor's heavenly court. Nezha, devoid of the Monkey King's wry humor, is even more of a blunt force. Washing his damask silk, Nezha unknowingly sets off a deep-sea earthquake that threatens to demolish the Dragon King's palace. Questioned by the Dragon King's son for the offense, Nezha knocks him dead and has his tendon extracted to make the gift of a belt for Li Jing. When the Dragon King confronts him, Nezha de-scales what he belittles as the "small green snake" (Ch. 13, 255). A volume in "Library of Chinese Classics" from the Communist Party-owned Foreign Languages Press, *Creation of the Gods* in Gu Zhizhong's translation, plays down the bloodshed. The Chinese original reads: "Nezha rips off half of Ao Guang's official robe, exposing the dragon king's left side. Nezha clutches at the scales a few times, pulling off 40, 50 pieces, spilling blood, the pain piercing the bones" (translation mine). Gu sanitizes the scene as "exposing the dragon king's left side and quickly scratches dozens of them with his thumb and fingers, splashing the ground with the dragon king's blood". This begs the question of how "quick scratches" would result in profuse bleeding, a discrepancy in logic akin to a jump cut from before to after, bypassing the moment of violence. The brutality of clutching and pulling off part of the dragon's exoskeleton or external bone structure is scaled back to mere "scratches", let alone the large number of pieces yanked off. Gu orchestrates a cover-up of the de-shelling under the guise of scrapes that bleed.

With his filial piety leading him astray, Nezha pays dearly, which involves a strange parallel. Originally meant as a gesture of devotion to Li Jing, the tendon (筋 jin) extracted from the Dragon King's son evokes its near homophone "essence" (精 jing) in Nezha's self-immolation. Inhibited by the Chinese tradition of filial piety, Nezha, the Chinese Oedipus, in his rage turns the knife on himself rather than perpetrates patricide. In chapter 13 of *Creation of the Gods*, Nezha "cut[s] off his flesh to return to the mother, extracting his bone to return to the father, and giving back to them the father's essence and the mother's blood" (95). "[T]he father's essence", which spills from Nezha's violence against his own body, repeats his outrage against another son: the pulling out of his doppelganger's tendon. The aural doubling of jin(g) for tendon and essence weds together Nezha's transgressions against others and against himself, a karmic blood debt settled by Viking-style *wergild*, "man price" to compensate the kin of the slain. Despite the parallel between the Dragon King's son sans his *jin* (tendon) and Nezha without his *jing* (essence of life), Nezha is resurrected in a game of one-upmanship over the dragon.

Self-designated *longde chuanren* (heirs of dragon), the Chinese have historically viewed the totemic leviathan as synonymous with each dynasty's emperors, called *longzi* (son[s] of dragon) in dragon robes. Against this cultural context, a rebellious streak against draconic Chineseness runs through classic novels in images of the Monkey King, Nezha, and others, culminating in the Chinese Century lauding the virtues of post-Mao, socially Darwinian wolfish aggressiveness overshadowing mythical serpents implicated with the feudal past. The wolf is the new dragon of the Chinese Century, having the power of the storied creature by eating/defeating it. Devouring the father's body, in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913), "accomplished their [the exiled sons'] identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength" (141–142). A sinologized Freudian fetish, the wolfish Nezha is and is not China at once. Nezha embodies a New China de-scaling and feeding off the Old China. Is this the subconscious motive for Gu and Foreign Languages Press to suppress the bloody de-shelling scene, for it strikes too close to home, evoking the rawness of a past and perhaps even a present "red in tooth and claw"?

Retiring patriarchal dragons to make way for a wolf cub pretty much summarizes the anima-tion *Nezha*. Nezha's image incongruously yokes on the one hand, the boyish hair buns with red hair bands and a red vest or bib, and on the other, the jagged, saw-toothed grin of a wolf cub, whose teeth would conceivably grow into sharp fangs (Figure 40.1).

The yin-yang dialectics lie at the heart of this film, rejecting the binarism of good versus evil, replacing it with fluid, porous intersections. The somewhat convoluted plot opens with Chaos Pearl dividing into Spirit Pearl and Demon Pill. Bearing the grudge of having been passed over by the master, Shen Gongbao from Jaguar Spirit steals the two pearls and switches them at their rebirths. Originally destined to be the reincarnation of Spirit Pearl, Nezha embodies Demon Pill instead. The one who becomes Nezha's only friend, Aobing, the Dragon King's son, is endowed by his devious master Shen with Spirit Pearl. Far from making Aobing perfect, two dragon horns protrude from his forehead to reveal his cursed identity, for dragons used to reign in antiquity, until the Supreme Lord exploited them and then damned them to the bottom of volcanos. The subterrestrial palace serves as the dragons' prison house.

This schematic sketch of the plot highlights the hologram of good and evil. Good Spirit Pearl is stolen by Shen, who feels wronged. The Supreme Lord abused dragons, who avenge them-selves by coercing Aobing to take innocent lives. As if to sign in blood the pact of vengeance, each dragon yanks off its toughest scales to make a suit of armor for Aobing (Figure 40.2).



*Figure 40.1* Nezha's image yokes incongruously the boy and the wolf.



*Figure 40.2* The Dragon King extracts its toughest scales to make a suit of armor for Aobing in *Nezha*.

*Figure 40.3* Nezha spares the dragon Aobing's life in *Nezha*.

Different from *Creation of the Gods*, *Nezha*'s dragons willingly mutilate themselves in order to hurt their enemies. Nezha, a demon to some, longs for love and friendship. Despite the physical resemblance to the atomic monster in the anime *Akira* (1988), floating midair with hair like tongues of flame, Nezha spares Aobing's life (Figure 40.3).

The ultimate lesson is the tagline from Nezha as his raging fire holds up against Aobing's crushing ice from above: "My fate is decided by me, not by Heaven" (我命由我不由天), sub-titled as "I'm the master of my destiny". *Tian* (天), for Heaven or Destiny, is written into the communist DNA of subversion against monarchy, feudalism, capitalism, and Hollywood-dominated, Euro-American-centric globalization. Both demon and monster are acceptable translations of *yao* (妖), nonhuman beings associated with ghosts in traditional Chinese belief. *Yao* is invariably paired with *guai* to form *yaoguai* (妖怪 demon and monstrosity). The latter word *guai* is used by Confucius to name the first of his Gang of Four: "the monstrous, the violent, the occult, and the numinous!" *Yao*, however, is repeatedly rehabilitated in millennial Chinese pop culture, a testament to the communist susceptibility to iconoclastic revisionism regarding everything under the sun except the Red Sun—communism-cum-Mao—itself.

## New Nezha in *The Wandering Earth*

Seemingly a big generic leap from an animation to a Sino-Fi dystopia, it is but a small step thematically from Nezha to the defiant heroes of *The Wandering Earth*. Both films were released in 2019; both resort extensively to computer-generated wizardry and special effects for an epic, apocalyptic look; both were sensations in China and aimed to win over the animation and sci-fi market globally; yet both were flops overseas. The key to their domestic success and interna-tional failures lies in part in the paradox of the rebel Nezha, which was unfamiliar to Western audiences. In fact, as diminutive in physical stature as the Boy God is, Nezha casts a long shadow across not only Sinofuturism, as in *Wandering*, but also TV period dramas serializing literature of spatial and temporal crossing, not only a disaster thriller set in the future but also costume dramas splicing Imperial with Millennial China. *Wandering* adapts Liu Cixin's epony-mous novella.

Although Cixin is the executive producer, filmmaker Frant Gwo altered the plotline and characterization considerably. Cixin's Jamesonian, affectless characters from dysfunctional individual and collective human families become conventional types in a family drama. The parents of Liu's narrator enjoy a postapocalyptic free marriage where the husband consorts

with the narrator's teacher. By contrast, Frant Gwo builds his film on traditional familial sacrifices taken for granted by Chinese viewers. The astronaut father Liu Peiqiang, played by Jing Wu of *Wolf Warrior* (2015, 2017) fame, volunteers for a decade-long mission on the Navigational Platform International Space Station to assist in the earth's exit from the solar system on the brink of collapse. The pending disaster can be averted only by a wandering of the earth. The melodramatic prologue pre-mission shows the three generations of the Lius on the seashore, where Liu hands over to his father Liu Ziang [Zi'ang] the tag that would allow them to enter the sanctuary of the underground city. This prologue suggests that Liu undertakes this mission in exchange for the residency of two in the underground city for his only son Liu Qi, nicknamed Hu Kou, and his father. Hu Kou's mother is absent in the prologue except in brief flashbacks as she lays dying in the hospital. Suffice to say, the rationing of two slots does not include her, which haunts Hu Kou, too young to appreciate his father's painful choice.

*Hukou*, Chinese for residency, is an intriguing wordplay. *Hukou* (戶口) splits the son's surname Qi (启) into two words. Owing to the monosyllabic and homophonic nature of the Chinese language, word-splitting and punning have long been a game favored by the masses, the literati in particular. Qi means the beginning, the inception, even the genesis; yet its "parts" in the simplified Chinese script (not traditional Chinese, though) point back to the basis of residency and home. Residency is a distinctly communist Chinese policy whereby migrants must obtain local residency before such rights as purchasing a home are granted. Indeed, marriage prospects often hinge on whether the intended has the much-coveted residency, for instance, of Beijing or Shanghai. The policy of residency controls the population flow and individual careers and lives. The adage "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" is turned on its head in the Chinese context. The two parts that constitute "residency" is greater than the whole, since "to start" at all, one must start from a self at home somewhere. Indeed, just as Hu Kou launches into a Nezha-style naughty jaunt across the earth's bleak landscape, he is called by his nickname by his adoptive sister Han Duoduo, his fellow escapee, thus never allowing the audience to indulge in the excursion per se since his residency is his name and is him. That residency evokes the underground sanctuary secured through his father's sacrifice. In the same way that the nickname Hu Kou, gone AWOL from the subterranean city, splinters Qi, the given name given by his father, the protagonist has severed himself from his father, blaming the mother's death on the astronaut's abandonment. A father's love has been corrupted in the young son's eye as a husband's betrayal. For a span of ten years, Hu Kou has refused to speak to his father in intergalactic communication.

Internal splits plague the protagonist's name and psyche as well as his family. His adoptive sister is a foundling rescued by his grandfather from the sea. Her last name, Han, differs from Liu. Although she addresses Hu Kou as *ge* (哥 elder brother), it is but a customary term no different from *oppah* in Korean. Ge betokens close family bonding with or without blood ties. East Asian melodramas are keen to play on such ambiguity; lovers are emotionally entangled like siblings. They call each other brother and sister, which shows their closeness, a closeness that forbids physical intimacy due to the pseudo-incestuous taboo. This proves to be a melodramatic formula to keep unions of lovers at bay until whenever the TV series decides to fold. The 43-episode TV series *Guardians of the Ancient Oath* (上古密約) in 2020 features an adoptive sibling pair, whose fate together or apart is further complicated by a third character also veiling the love for his betrothed under the guise of care for *meimei* (younger sister). The 20-episode K-pop sensation *Winter Sonata* (2002) also tantalizes through the lovers' suspected half-sibling identity. This ambivalence turns romance into a tease, heightening the erotic appeal, as an object of desire happens to be an object of taboo, the archetype of the Oedipus and Electra

complex. Splits, after all, stem from what used to be whole. The lifeblood of East Asian family melodramas is nostalgia for one's wholeness, associated with childhood and home, which is why *Wandering* climaxes in the grandfather's, the father's, and Hou Kou's refrain of homecoming. Specifically, the grandfather's last words are for Hu Kou to take Duoduo home, which Hu Kou vows to carry out. As to where home lies, now that the earth lays in ruins, is a moot point as the viewer's eyes mist over.

Duoduo, Nezha's ward in *Wandering*, is played by Jinmai Zhao of *Growing Pain* fame. A stock character to silhouette the lineage of Nezhas—Hu Kou who rebels, Liu Peiqiang who contests superiors' orders, and Liu Ziang who offers a bribe—Zhao's Duoduo (朵 or 多) is almost true to her name, meaning either petal or excess. Whereas "excess" symbolizes an abundance of luck in the Chinese tradition, it also alludes to "redundant" accessories, as if she were a tag-on to the Liu family or an extra to masculine exploits. Zhao's role does not permit her performance skills, so amply displayed in the TV series, to shine. Her only solo scene with more than one or two lines is her sentimental radio appeal to the populace in despair over the imminent cataclysm. Her broadcast rallies support for the final collective push to ignite a propulsion engine in hopes of shooting a laser beam at and popping the helium-bloated Jupiter on a collision course with the earth. Zhao's character debuts in a school uniform straight out of *Growing Pain*, and even her emotional broadcast harks back to her extracurricular club of a radio host and her covert live-streaming in the TV series. The propulsion engine's laser beam, alas, fails to reach Jupiter. This leaves the hero Liu Peiqiang to drive the space station like a bullet straight into Jupiter to save the world. This last act of martyrdom, of course, dissolves Hu Kou's lifelong misunderstanding of his father, who is to metamorphose into "a star in the sky" as he promised in the pre-mission prologue. That he is a short-lived shooting star rather than a constant one in the nocturnal constellation deepens the tragic melancholy.

The Sino-Fi *Wandering* also manifests its bloodline from Nezha in terms of anti-patriarchal naming. The irreverent, disrespectful Hu Kou calls his father "bastard", perhaps understandable on account of the mother's death. Yet even the grandfather who has single-handedly raised Hu Kou and Duoduo is constantly referred to by him and never by Duoduo as *laodongxi* (老東西 Old Thing), *laotouzi* (老頭子 Old Man), and *laojiahuo* (老傢伙 Old Fart) in descending order based on the frequency of usage in the script. Granted, "Old Fart" perhaps unduly Americanizes the Chinese address into slang, but "Old Thing" deserves special attention as a uniquely Chinese put-down. *Dongxi* from *laodongxi* means literally "east west", the antithetical pairs of extremes the Chinese language deploys to signify a general condition. For example, "big small" means the size; "long short" means the length; "yin yang" means the whole shebang, as it were. "East west" thus includes all things, while a common curse, *bushi dongxi* (no be thing), denotes the opposite of everything, which is nobody, or someone who is a good-for-nothing. To call one's grandfather *laodongxi* is a jibe gratingly unfilial, as it reduces the target to a useless thing. In a perverse way, this dehumanizing insult suggests that the camaraderie is such that mutual curses not only fail to derail the bonding, but testify to its strength. Throughout Chinese TV series, Nezha-like adolescent characters may not have gone to the extreme of calling their parents Old Thing, but sons, and rarely daughters, routinely command their parents by their full names as if they are co-living housemates. The subversive communist ideology drives such superficial egalitarianism and inverse civility, while no one, neither Nezha-like children nor Li Jing-like parent characters, dares to address their work unit's *lingdao* (領導 Leader) by their full names. *Lingdao* is forever *lingdao*, at most changed to the last name followed by the official title of the leader's position. An American analogy would be gangsta rap's N-word that accentuates the closeness of the gang. But a gang's black-on-black violence within the confine of the ghetto

hints at an internalizing of the frustration and anger over white dominance, taking it out on one's own kind because the powers that be are untouchable. Nezha-like Chinese sons, thus, chew out their Li Jings because they could do so to the Buddha or the head of state only at their own peril.

This family chemistry is perhaps part of the "Chinese characteristics" in an otherwise highly derivative sci-fi film. Touted as the first China-made sci-fi film, Huallywood sinologizes Hollywood disaster blockbusters. The crisis of the sun imploding is followed halfway through the film by another crisis of Jupiter's gravitational spike sucking the earth onto itself. No Hollywood villains exist except the sun and Jupiter, as though heroes are pitted against fate rather than human antagonists. Even MOSS, the space station's Hal-like artificial intelligence from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), including their computer-generated mellifluous male voice, proves to be a loyal executor rather than a deserter. In the wake of the Jupiter crisis, MOSS simply follows the protocol of the Helios Project in the event of a cosmic catastrophe. Programmed by the earth's united government, MOSS implements hibernation for all space station personnel, including Liu Peiqiang on the verge of completing his decade-long mission and returning to his family on Earth. As patriotic a martyr as the communist propaganda's Lei Feng, Liu defies the order under the assumption that MOSS has deserted its mission to safeguard Earth. Liu convinces his Russian cosmonaut confidante Marakov to engage in a high-risk spacewalk to gain access to the control center. Only through manual override at the space station's nerve center can Liu countermand MOSS's purported desertion. Liu eventually achieves this at the cost of losing Marakov amid the spacewalk.

Millennial China's closest ally appears to speak Russian rather than English. Simultaneous interpretation supposedly takes place in real time through earpieces they wear. But such earpieces are props to circumvent the cumbersome translation through a bilingual character onscreen. Audiences simply suspend their disbelief and take the subtitles to be the low whispering in the character's ear. This filmic conceit belies Sino-centrism as Chinese actors increasingly speak in their native tongue, reaching the global market via subtitles in various languages. Of the multinational space team in *The Cloverfield Paradox* (2018), only Zhang Ziyi speaks in Chinese, whereas the rest of the astronauts—Russian, Brazilian, British, American—speak in accented or standard English. Tian Jing's character as the business tycoon's daughter in *Pacific Rim: Uprising* (2018) lectures her white subordinate in Chinese regarding his atrocious Chinese. Such examples of Sinophone-inflected Hollywood megafilms suggest a catering to the Chinese movie circuit of over one billion people, no different from decorating the cast with Chinese characters, even if marginal. MOSS is pronounced not as "MAAS" in American English but as "*mo-se*", a sinologizing with a hint of *moxi*, Moses in transliteration. MOSS is neither "MAAS" in American English nor "MORSE" as in the BBC's *Inspector Morse* (1987–2000). Standard English on either side of the Atlantic Ocean yields to what springs spontaneously, even endearingly to Chinese lips: the Chinglish "*mo-se*".

Setting MOSS ablaze through Marakov's bottle of vodka, Liu realizes that MOSS is executing Earth's command of searching for a new solar system in a pre-set Helios Project, now that Earth is doomed. MOSS is no traitor like Hal, just as Liu has never been one. In addition to reforming Hal, the derivativeness "with Chinese characteristics" can also be seen in the cavernous underground bar where Hu Kou and Duoduo obtain thermal suits to venture above ground. Reminiscent of seedy, poorly lit bars in *The Blade Runner* (1982), *Total Recall* (1990), and other dystopic films, *Wandering* adds a Sino-touch of festiveness through the lion dance. The desolation of Beijing's CCTV building or Shanghai's Pearl of the Orient sticking out of urban shambles resonate with the Statue of Liberty buried in the seashore sand in *The Planet of the Apes* (1968).

## Sino-Fi and Futurism

While Hollywood and Western films contribute to Sino-Fi period drama, the genre's indigenous triple taproots stretch into imperial costume dramas, *wuxia* fantasies, and literature of temporal crossing. Imperial costume dramas have been a cultural mainstay. The evolution away from these dramas on emperors mirrors millennial China's tactic of graduating from hard to soft power, focusing in recent shows on military and political strategists, owing in part to web novels. Figuratively speaking, period dramas take leave of the emperor and the prince in a mass defection to the likes of Machiavelli-style Sunzi. These strategists in costume dramas continue the Monkey King and Nezha's legacy of beating the authority at its own game.

A representative Sino-Fi TV period drama on temporal crossing, *Joy of Life*, continues this "softie" image in the protagonist Fan Xian, a paralyzed patient miraculously reborn and enabled in Imperial China. His birth father turns out to be the emperor and his mother an inventor from the future, a pioneer with modern democratic leanings. A threat to the emperor, the mother is assassinated after giving birth to what is the reincarnation of Fan Xian. As only season 1 of *Joy of Life* has been aired as of this writing, the family feud of an Oedipal nature is yet to unfold fully. Not only is Fan a supreme swordsman, but he specializes in non-martial skills, such as poisoning. Moreover, his *wen* or soft literary potential blossoms in the climax halfway through season 1. Maligned at a royal feast as an imposter, his very identity as a poet in doubt, Fan quaffs bowl after bowl of wine, drinking himself into a stupor in keeping with the legend of the Tang dynasty Poetry Immortal or Banished Immortal Li Bai, who reputedly only launched into Dionysian, spiritually possessed creativity in an inebriated trance. The filmic thrill of Fan stumbling across the court, reciting the best of the best by Li Bai, Du Fu, and other celebrated poets unknown to the court predating the Tang dynasty, gives the term climax a new meaning, not so much over *wu* or war of swords as over *wen* or war of words. With lines of sheer beauty tumbling from Fan's lips, Chinese viewers are almost moved to tears, despite a dawning realization that Fan simply plagiarizes to *huyou*, to whip up a homeward instinct via the most poetic and gripping of the mother tongue, ethics of masquerading as China's most venerated poets aside. Literature and Film of Spatial and Temporal Crossing spin Sino-Fi and Futurism in a way that animates the past, be it Nezha or classical poetry, to cater to the Sinophone audience, opening up possibilities for the future by evoking what has elapsed. Such free Chinese TV seems bound to continue, b(l)inding Chinese subjects to cultural memory from the past and neoimperial soft power into the future.

## Works Cited

Cixin, Liu. "The Wandering Earth." *Sci-Fi World* (科幻世界) July 2000, Volume 7. http://www.zadzs.com/novel-686-read-1.html. Accessed 23 Jun. 2019.

*Guardians of the Ancient Oath* (上古密约). Performances by Leo Wu, Lareina Song, Yann, and Zheng Kai. 45-episode TV series broadcast by Mango TV, 9 Feb. 2020–18 Mar. 2020. https://journalflash.com/cn200210/. Accessed February–March 2020.

*Joy of Life* (慶餘年). Performances by Ruoyun Zhang, Qin Li, Daoming Chen. 46-episode TV series of season 1 broadcast by Tencent Pictures (腾讯影业), 26 Nov. 2019–20 Jan. 2020. https://www.ondemandchina.com/zh-Hans/watch/joy-of-life/ep-41?pos=mainbanner1. Accessed December 2019–January 2020.

*Love Through a Millennium* (相爱穿梭千年). Performances by Boran Jing, Shuan Zheng. 24-episode TV series based on the 2012 South Korean TV series *Queen and I*, broadcast from 15 Feb. 2015–23 Mar. 2015 by Hunan Broadcasting System, 2015.

*My Dear Ancestor* (亲爱的活祖宗). Performances by Zheyuan Chen, Qing Dong. 24-episode TV series premiered on iQIYI on 13 June, https://www.ondemandchina.com/zh-Hans/program/my-dear-ancestor. Accessed Jan. 2020.

*Reach Out to Pick the Star* (手可摘星辰). Performances by He Hua and Luo Yifang. 24-episode TV series broadcast by Mango Television (芒果卫视), 4 Mar. 2019, https://journalflash.com/cn200304/ Accessed Mar. 2020.

*The Wandering Earth.* Directed by Frant Gwo, performances by Jing Wu, Chuxiao Qu, Guangjie Li, Netflix, 2019.

Yu, Hua. *China in Ten Words*, translated by Allan H. Barr. Anchor, 2011.

# 41

# FROM SEXUAL DESIRE TO PERSONAL FREEDOM

## Women and Their Rights in Chen Qiufan's "G Stands for Goddess"

*Frederike Schneider-Vielsäcker*

Contemporary Chinese science fiction (sf) literature provides manifold glimpses into the future: some visions are utopian, some dystopian, but most stories give us a heterotopian view. These futurisms are considered as a response to China's modernization, a comment on rapid economic growth, significant social changes, and the consumption-driven and technology-infused lifestyle (Han, "Chinese"; Song, "Variations").

This chapter discusses the short story "G Stands for Goddess" (*G daibiao nüshen* G 代表女神, 2011) by Chen Qiufan (陈楸帆, b. 1981) which reflects on existing gender inequalities in present-day China. I argue that the prevailing conservative and sexist ways of thinking in Chinese society can be explored through sf literature. My analysis further suggests that the narratives can be understood as alternative representations to explore possible female gender roles as well as to mediate their desirability. Chinese futurisms not only scrutinize national sociopolitical issues but also speak to global challenges and, in this discourse on the future, they connect China with the rest of the world.

Whereas the English language differentiates between the biological *sex* and the social *gender* since the early 1970s, this distinction does not exist in Chinese, as *xingbie* (性别) conveys both meanings (McMillan 5). In the 1990s, the term *shehui xingbie* (社会性别) was mainly used in academic discourse (Hershatter 276). It called attention to the social construction of gender differences and thus introduced Judith Butler's theory to China. However, in the general public, the globally predominant biomedical model, which divides human beings based on their sexual organs into the binary system of female and male, has determined social roles according to the body (McMillan 4). Due to this biologically based—and therefore naturalized—construction of femininity and masculinity, the stereotypical role of the beautiful domestic woman as the counterpart of the strong and professionally successful man still permeates today's understanding of sexuality and sexual practices (5). Despite the increase in sexual freedoms since the 1990s, until today the Chinese government retains control over the sexual life of each citizen, for instance through the family planning policy (Dippner 270; GOV). On a societal level, competing thought and practices coexist in the globalized Chinese cities: traditional values and conservative ideals meet with unveiled representations of revealingly dressed female bodies and women's growing urge for sexual emancipation (Dippner 270–271). In this area of tension, male and female sf authors alike put their feminist views on paper.

Chen Qiufan is one of the leading figures among the so-called Chinese "new wave" writers—a term borrowed from the Anglo-American tradition by literary scholar Song Mingwei to refer to the experimental nature of their cutting-edge writings ("After" 8). Chen's "G Stands for Goddess" plays with the body as a literary trope to challenge gender stereotypes and to question the politicization of women's bodies. Along the thin lines of conservative concepts that are defining femininity in China, the female protagonist is able to negotiate her gender role.

In view of the government's restrictive attitude towards pornographic materials from 1949 onwards, it is particularly astonishing that a story like Chen's, in which sexual acts are openly described, successfully made it into print. According to Article 367 of the revised Criminal Code of 1997 exceptions apply to erotic art and literature, provided that the works meet a certain aesthetic standard and have an "artistic value" (*yishu jiazhi* 艺术价值) (NPC)—whatever this exactly means. Chen's narrative provokes with the depiction of a woman's multiple orgasms experienced in the absence of a man. Such representation forms a strong contrast to the culturally constructed norm, which has linked female sexuality to marriage since the late 1950s (Evans 115; McMillan 4–6, 24).

Literary scholars have suggested that contemporary Chinese sf reveals a hidden reality beneath the surface of mainstream discourse (Song, "Representations" 560) and that they pose challenging alternatives to the government's grand narrative (Schneider-Vielsäcker, "Images" 153–154). While recent scholarship has highlighted the cultural and political implications of contemporary Chinese sf (Healey; Li; Song, "Variations"; Y. Wang), only a few studies discuss gender issues reflected in these works (Chen, "Kehuan"; Peng; Schneider-Vielsäcker, "Ideal"; K. Wang). Literary scholar Peng Lang and author Chen Qiufan ("Kehuan") both argue that there are only a few Chinese feminist sf writings due to the lack of awareness for women's issues in both male and female writers. According to Peng, female sf authors have accepted the male standards, which is connected to the status quo of feminist sf in China (10). Building on this research, I will provide a close reading of Chen's "G Stands for Goddess" and bring into focus the portrayal of women in Chinese sf. My article illustrates why the story can be understood as an alternative to Chinese gender norms and to what extent it simultaneously corresponds to social reality.

## Exploring Alternative Gender Roles Outside of Chinese Norms

Chen's "G Stands for Goddess" (2011) was first published in the literary magazine *The Literature Breeze Appreciates* (*Wenyi Fengshang* 文艺风赏) in December 2011 and was included in his collection *Future Disease* (*Weilai bingshi* 未来病史, 2015). Thomas Moran's English translation was published in the anthology *The Sound of Salt Forming* in 2015. All translations of Chinese primary texts in this chapter are my own. When translating the cited passages from "G Stands for Goddess", I kept in mind the aim to analyze the original texts, and therefore provide a literal instead of a literary translation.

Chen's story questions the cultural construction of sexuality in China. A subjective narrator follows the rebellious female protagonist Miss G on her path of sexual emancipation. In the near future, the world is in a sexual crisis: people have lost their libido, the birth rate is declining, and humanity will soon be extinguished. By employing the figure of a hypersexualized woman, the text deals with the search for female sexuality outside the androcentric norms. It further touches upon China's vibrant sex industry and addresses the issue of forced prostitution. It can be noticed that the protagonist's abbreviated surname makes her character universal, hence allowing implicit female readers to take over the role of Miss G and reflect on their own sexual freedom or lack thereof.

Miss G is born with the rare congenital defect Müllerian agenesis, which results in the absence of the uterus and vagina, making procreation and vaginal intercourse impossible. In China, girls and women with a malformation of the internal sexual organs, uterus, or vagina are stigmatized as "Stone Women" (*shinü* 石女). However, the function of the ovaries is not affected, which is why secondary sexual characteristics such as female breasts develop normally during puberty (UFF). This genital malformation is metaphorically used to criticize the restricting norms that apply for female sexuality in China. Since Mother Nature ironically objects to the three norms that govern sexual conduct in Chinese society, the text condemns that Chinese women are by no means able to experience their sexuality independently and further challenges the inextricable link to their body-mandated gender role of the "good wife and mother" (*xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母). These norms are based on the gender-specific biomedical model and hence are subject to the natural functionalities of the body. The first norm constructs female sexuality within the relational framework of marriage. Female sexuality is thus considered to exist merely within the relationship, is underpinned by the binary distinction of the sexes, and is oriented towards male sexuality as a point of reference (Dippner 278–279). In other words, a man is defined as the "indispensable counterpart" for a woman in the experience of her sexuality (Dippner 278–279). The second norm attributes sexual activities to the functions of reproduction and marital "sexual harmony" (*xing hexie* 性和谐) (281). The third norm limits sexual desire to heterosexual practices (McMillan 32). Despite the growing acceptance of homosexuality as a result of its decriminalization in 1997 and de-pathologization in 2001, heteronormativity leaves no room for alternative forms of relationships or sexual activities in Chinese society and continues to determine such desire as sexual abnormality (89–90). As a consequence, until today the sexual desires of Chinese women can generally unfold only within the limited framework of marriage in order to stabilize the relationship by satisfying their spouses' physical needs and to produce offspring (81). A woman is not allowed to experience aspects of her sexuality that include erotic desires and pleasures, and, at the same time, are detached from the man. At the beginning of the story, these norms are reproduced by the male doctor, who explains the situation:

> The congenital absence of the uterus and vagina implies that she will not menstruate and not be able to live a *normal sex life* or bear children. Fortunately, her ovaries are intact, the development of secondary sexual characteristics is thus not obstructed and reproduction is possible through artificial insemination and surrogacy. After her adolescence, the organ could be surgically reconstructed to guarantee a *normal family life*.
>
> (Chen, "G daibiao" 91, emphasis added)

This passage makes it clear that a woman's value is measured by her fertility. The crucial significance of fertility in Chinese society is further reflected by the fact that the parents' hopes of a glorious future for their daughter are shattered when the doctor discloses the birth defect (91). The narrative relates to the extreme social pressure that is concentrated on a single child to care for its elderly parents as a consequence of the one-child policy (*yihai zhengce* 一孩政策) introduced in 1979. In an attempt to reassure Miss G's parents, the doctor mentions artificial insemination and surrogate motherhood as alternative possibilities for reproduction, which implies that childlessness is not regarded as a personal decision in China. Instead, it is perceived as a pathological phenomenon, the only case in which it is accepted (McMillan 69). However, the protagonist is not interested in reproduction, but solely in her sexual satisfaction. The cultural construction of family as women's highest priority is also satirized by Chi Hui's (迟卉, b. 1984) feminist utopia "Nest of Insects" (*Chongchao* 虫巢, 2008). This story reverses the actual gender

hierarchy in the portrayal of a matriarchal society on a remote planet and pictures males as fruit-bearing humanoid trees that are fully dependent on their female partners.

The motif of women's sexual emancipation permeates Chen's story—embodied by the main character's representation and name, which alludes to the G-spot. Miss G's genital deformity is used figuratively to naturalize her sexual freedom. The story raises the question of whether a woman with dysplastic sexual organs must adhere to the normative standards that apply to female sexuality. As the rebellious protagonist refuses to be controlled over the long term and repeatedly breaks out of the gender expectations imposed on her, the answer to this question is a resounding "no". A sarcastic narrative voice constantly addresses criticism and further reveals Miss G's feminist attitude: "She vehemently refused to become someone's senseless sex doll … This is not the meaning of a woman's existence" (92). The protagonist is annoyed that science has failed to make it possible for women with Müllerian agenesis to have vaginal orgasms as, in her opinion, doctors "still construct these cavities and holes that serve exclusively to satisfy the man's sexual appetite and euphemistically describe this as 'giving you a normal life'" (92). Both the images of the sex doll and the genital opening refer critically to the objectification of women in Chinese society.

In China, the idea of women's claim to sexual pleasure emerged in the 1990s (Evans 119; Hershatter 267). Nevertheless, the standards for female desires are still linked to those of men. Contemporary guidebooks for women recommend technical skills to increase "sexual quality", thus promoting the continued existence of the family and society (Dippner 281). Women's sexual satisfaction is by no means recognized as an individual right and the fulfilment of sexual needs is not directly related to a woman herself.

Chen's narrative contradicts Chinese androcentric gender norms as Miss G explores her sexuality autonomously as mere pleasure to satisfy only her desires and develop a feeling of her own body—everything that in reality is reserved exclusively for men. Contrary to gender role expectations, the female protagonist indulges in active sexual behavior. In China, the socially constructed and biologically based differences between men and women determine the gendered hierarchy of sexual intercourse: A man is regarded as the active giver, while a woman should be the passive receiver of sexual pleasures (Dippner 277). In guidebooks for women that circulate these standards which are then perceived as "truths", we read the following explanation: "the ovum rests passively while the sperms compete with each other and only the fastest will be the victor" (Dippner 288). This depiction is highly problematic since the ideal feminine traits in Chinese culture—passive, soft, and undemanding—are, contrary to common understanding, not at all natural or biological, but instead they have been culturally constructed. Opposed to this Chinese archetype, Miss G personifies unrestrained femininity.

Eventually, the protagonist reaches her first climax all alone with the aid of natural science by electrically stimulating her temporal lobe. A lesbian medical student, who is in love with Miss G, provides her with the necessary equipment and medication. In return, she receives a "meaningful French kiss" (93). The story is queering the heterosexist Chinese norm as it suggests that female sexuality could as well encompass homosexual practices and same-sex love. In this respect, the narrative is one of the few exceptions in Chinese literature from mainland China since the authorities frequently classify works with homoerotic content as "obscene" (*yinhui* 淫秽). Chinese sf also rarely touches upon the topic of homosexuality, and when it does, homosexuality mostly appears in the form of secondary characters or subplots. In few stories such as Xia Jia's (夏笳, b. 1984) "Good Night, Melancholy" (*Wan'an youyu* 晚安，忧郁, 2015), A Que's (阿缺, b. 1990) "Song Xiuyun" (宋秀云, 2018), and Chen Qiufan's "In This Moment We Are Happy" (*Zhe yike women shi kuaile de* 这一刻我们是快乐的, 2019), readers find homosexual main characters. "G Stands for Goddess" is unique for depicting an exchange of intimacy between two women.

The detailed and poetic description of Miss G's first orgasm takes up a lot of space, which underlines the significance of autonomous female sexuality:

> In the darkness, Miss G could hear her heart beat stronger and faster like aboriginal drumbeats. It resembles a blazing bonfire, a coiling python. She's coming. … Suddenly Miss G trembles as a lightning strikes her hazy mind like a white dove landing on her forehead, plunging into her cranial cavity, sliding down her neck, and spreading along the spine throughout her entire body. Her jaw slightly opens, her facial muscles are twitching and her eyes are filled with tears. The immense feeling of happiness resembles a ripe apple and runs through every inch of her nerve endings. She had never felt this calm before. As if a gate has opened within her leading to the boundless expanse of space-time. There it was warm and bright. This scene from her life appears like the sand of the Ganges in a brilliant light and radiant colours, which is gently trickling and scattering over everything. In tears she praises the Creator to fulfil her wish: "Please grant me an orgasm—a true and free orgasm". She loses consciousness.
>
> *(93–94)*

Sexual emancipation is emphasized by the repetition of the word "orgasm" (*gaochao* 高潮) and its specification as "free" (*ziyou* 自由). Throughout the text, the Chinese characters for climax are used 25 times—a remarkable number. The desire for freedom and unrestricted female sexuality is further articulated metaphorically by the opening gate and the vastness, expressed in space and time, in India's second-largest river, and in the light that spreads over the Ganges. The feeling right before climaxing is compared with a python (*jushe* 巨蛇). As in Chinese culture, according to Eberhard (255), a dream of a snake promises good fortune, the narrative adds positive connotations to the female orgasm and encourages women to discover their own sexuality. Moreover, in traditional Chinese medicine, snake fat is said to have a shrinking effect on the male genital (255). Seen from this perspective, the python is a metaphor for sexually emancipated women since, according to Dippner (288), they discourage Chinese single men. The climax itself is equated with a white dove (*bai ge* 白鸽), which enters the head of the main character and unfolds from there within the body. The image of a bird spreading its wings inside her inevitably suggests a feeling of freedom. Consequently, the dove epitomizes women's sexual self-determination. Apart from symbolizing longevity and fidelity, the dove is associated with fertility, as it is an emblem attached to the headdress of the Daoist "child-sending goddess" Songzi Niangniang (送子娘娘) (Eberhard 278). According to Chinese understanding, pure white signifies innocence and virginity (301). Interpreted in this way, Miss G reaches her sexual maturity without causing her defloration. This is indicated by the experience of her first and very pure climax in the form of a white dove. Figuratively speaking, the protagonist herself is like a white dove due to her congenital defect: she is able to reproduce, but an eternal virgin. The irony of the story lies in the fact that, on the one hand, the protagonist corresponds with the traditional concept of female morality, while, on the other hand, her acts simultaneously defy the conservative norms that still shape Chinese sexual culture today. This representation contradicts the general view that female sexuality is initiated by marriage (Dippner 280). By comparing female sexual pleasure to a ripe apple, the narrative links it to a peaceful and harmonious state of mind, since the first part of the Chinese characters for apple (*pingguo* 苹果) is a homophone of peace (*ping* 平).

This experience is intense in such a way that it triggers Miss G's hypersexuality. She goes outside and manually stimulates herself in a romantic atmosphere by the lakeside until she reaches multiple orgasms (94). As "sexual activity is supposed to be social", masturbation is

condemned by Chinese society, or at least should be practiced only to support marital inter-course (McMillan 34–36). Contrary to this, the story breaks with the taboo and ascribes a lib-erating effect to masturbation. Consequently, this scene manifests full sexual agency of a woman.

Despite the feminist statement in these passages, the detailed descriptions of intimate female masturbation and of the naked female body are highly problematic. In this way, the female protagonist is presented under the male gaze (Mulvey 62) of the writer as a sexual object for the pleasure of heterosexual male readers. Thus, the scene suggests that in the course of the plot, Miss G—an emancipated subject—is turned into a passive, sexualized object. In this respect, the narrative correlates its gender order with that prevailing in the author's empirical environment. This ambivalence between the progressive image of women and the male gaze is characteristic of Chen's works.

### Sexual Desire and the Right to/over Female Bodies

Throughout the rest of the story, the protagonist's initial sexual freedom is contrasted with the motif of men's control over female sexuality, which highlights the actual patriarchal gender hierarchy in China. By using the female body as a literary trope, the narrative critically reflects on the repression of women's sexuality by the Chinese state and by men. This part of the story contains scenes of violence against women such as rape and forced prostitution.

Passers-by spot Miss G, who is unconscious due to the multiple orgasms, and take her to the hospital. There she falls into the hands of Dr. S, who palpates her whole body until she cli-maxes—this time in the presence of a man:

> S slips on latex gloves. Over and over again he makes Miss G bulge, produce secretions, tremble and collapse. … This is the first man to lead Miss G to climax and he obviously has no intention of taking a break.
>
> *(94–95)*

What is described here is basically rape. Although sexual stimulation is not intended in the first place, the physician continues without asking for the woman's consent and does not stop stimu-lating her, not even when she loses consciousness once again. Not only does this passage mani-fest the male gaze, it also mitigates the sexual assault by attributing a purely scientific interest to the perpetrator as he thinks only about his medical success and does not act out of sexual desire (94). In addition, the story fails to narrate the psychological effects on women caused by rape. Even though highly problematic, the scene reflects the Chinese government's *unwavering* attempt to control female sexuality. Rape is used as a metaphor to criticize the state's and men's power over women and their bodies. McMillan describes this as "rights of access" to women's bodies. Husbands possess these "rights" due to culturally embedded patriarchy, and the state has acquired them "in the cause of fertility control" (81). The passage critically refers to the hierarchical concept of sexuality that is circulated by state-supported marriage manuals, accord-ing to which the female body and sexual organs should be stimulated exclusively by the hus-band (29). The fictional doctor embodies this actual male dominance. Sexual violence against women is a recurring motif in Chen's works such as his short story "The Flower of Shazui" (*Shazui zhi hua* 沙嘴之花, 2012) and his novel *Waste Tide* (*Huangchao* 荒潮, 2013). The use of the female body as a site for social critique can be traced to twentieth-century Chinese litera-ture, which portrays physical suffering of female characters to comment on the nation's back-wardness (Healey 15). By reintroducing this trope, as is the case with *Waste Tide* (15), "G Stands for Goddess" is connected to the conventions of modern Chinese realism.

The motif of female infertility is used to satirize the government-mandated birth control. At the same time, the story questions the related painful methods such as contraception and abortion, which are mainly the responsibility of women and directly affect their bodies. Another aspect of the protagonist's body is her eternal virginity. The trope of the female body also renders the high value of a woman's virginity before marriage visible. Based on the overcome myth that an intact hymen symbolizes purity, the expectation to "see red" (*jianhong* 见红) on the wedding night is widespread throughout Chinese society and still regarded as a sign of sexual initiation and transformation from girl to woman (Dippner 282). This becomes apparent in the common use of surgical procedures to restore the hymen (Dippner 282). Contrary to social expectations, Miss G experiences her "transformation" from girl to woman entirely independently, without any male presence. Ironically, in consequence of her absent vagina, the protagonist cannot experience this "sexual initiation" at the hands of a man's penetration and—despite of, or due to this—is no longer a girl but a self-determined woman.

Male dominance and control over female bodies become prevalent when Miss G is forced to prostitute herself as the protagonist of an erotic show for the male elite, where she should orgasm in front of them in order to stimulate the world's sexual drive and cause the birth rates to rise again. This was decided by an ominous organization the doctor and two other men belong to. They hold her captive in a locked room fixed to the hospital bed. Due to the hypersensitivity of her skin, the men have dressed Miss G in a special suit which wraps her body like a fragile commodity in bubble wrap and prevents her from climaxing by the slightest touch (96). Inevitably, this image evokes the association with a straitjacket and underlines the asymmetrical gender relations. In this scene, the protagonist realizes her powerlessness and surrenders temporarily. Physical enclosure—visualized by the hospital room and the theater hall where the show takes place—reinforces the motif of control over female bodies and the marginalization of women in the patriarchal society. The male characters' share of the conversation dominate in this passage, whereas the female voice is barely audible, which further emphasizes male superiority.

The erotic performance serves not only as another expression of control over women but also as a discussion about the sex industry in China. The story's title already alludes to this theme as it plays with the linguistic nuance of the word "goddess" (*nüshen* 女神). In reverse order, the two Chinese characters were euphemistically used in imperial China to refer to prostitutes as "goddesses" (*shennü* 神女). Nowadays, beautiful women are considered goddesses. However, the story only indirectly touches on prostitution, as none of the terms used in today's everyday language appear in the text. During the show, Miss G receives instructions via headphones (97), which highlights that women are still controlled by others in Chinese society and cannot act autonomously. While Miss G is visible to everyone, the male audience stays hidden in private cabins. This depiction can be seen as a critical allusion to the private rooms in karaoke bars, where prostitution often takes place in reality. For Chinese men, buying female entertainment, including physical activities, has become socially acceptable, and commercial sex is often an indispensable part of business negotiations (McMillan 124). In the story, thanks to a high-resolution zoom function and wireless gloves that allow an authentic experience, men are observing and touching the protagonist's naked body virtually. The male gaze manifests itself again at this point, as both the male characters and implicit heterosexual male readers turn the female protagonist into an erotic object. This consumption of the female body reflects the objectification of women in China's voyeuristic consumer culture displayed, for instance, by the online phenomenon of live-streaming (*wangluo zhibo* 网络直播). Live-streaming is extremely popular among young people, and for some streamers, who were able to attract many followers, it has even become a profitable occupation. This media is again problematic because of women's stereotypical (self-)representation. Well-received female streamers are always fulfilling the

archetype of the beautiful, gentle, domestic, and passive woman. Additionally, they are often flirting with or posing lasciviously for their male patrons. If the latter are pleased, they will send virtual gifts, which can be converted into real money (Blommaert and Li 18)—we also find this feature in the story. In using a visual description, the narrator accuses the implicit readers of voyeurism and illustrates that, in times of digital self-display, people can hardly avoid this trend— whether intentionally or unintentionally, everyone is watching.

At this point, the motif of women's sexual emancipation reappears as the protagonist is gradually regaining her agency. First, a change in the direction of gaze induces a reversal of power. It is no longer the men who glance lustfully at Miss G; instead, she is the one who resolutely looks back at them. This inversion of gaze problematizes the actual gender relations in China. Second, the protagonist raises her voice and condemns the unjust gender hierarchy by offending the men: "'You …', she slightly opens her lips and noisy queries resound through her headphones. '… are nothing more than inferior creatures living on the penis as parasites'" (97). The female character's self-confident speech portrays the negotiation of her femininity and her questioning of the social construction of gender—albeit again contrasted with male authority. As a result, her microphone gets cut, thus silencing the female voice, which points to the actual censorship of feminist content on the internet. Third, the protagonist takes action and hence reclaims the right to act as a woman in a self-determined way when she pushes through her own rules for the show (97–98). Later, she quits entirely.

In the end, the story employs the popular stereotypical gender cliché of the male hero rescuing the female character. Growing tired of relentlessly being chased around the globe by her deprecators in consequence of her exit from the erotic show, Miss G decides to take her life in a whirlpool. The motif of the female character suffocating in water links the story "to a long history of cultural productions that portray women drowning as a result of patriarchal attitudes towards women as sex objects" (Healey 15). Similar to the writings from China's literary history, Chen's story uses this element to highlight the retrogression of Chinese society. When almost dying, the protagonist is pulled out of the water by a former patron. Even though Miss G has neither wanted nor needed a man before, ultimately, she finds her perfect match in her deus ex machina—a man with penile agenesis. In the final scene, while they stand next to each other at the seaside with their eyes closed, they both orgasm at the same time without sexual intercourse or touch (103). This depiction mirrors the conception of female sexuality in China, according to which women can experience their sexuality exclusively in the company of men. It demonstrates that, in today's society, Chinese women are able to experiment with their sexuality just as long as they follow certain rules, which dictate the sexual act to be an unalterable component of marriage.

## Coda: A Long Road to Autonomous Femininity

My analysis suggests that Chen's story imagines a provocative alternative to androcentric norms that continue to shape today's sexual culture in China. The cynical narrator directly criticizes women being reduced to their reproductive functions and pleads in favor of their sexual as well as personal freedom. The short story stands out particularly because it questions the generally accepted understanding in China that sexual intercourse should be practiced exclusively by married, heterosexual couples and that female orgasms should be reached solely by penetration of the husband. Chen's narrative challenges this with the portrayal of a sexually emancipated female protagonist and her rebellion for women's self-determination. Metaphorically, her character embodies the search for female sexuality and identity among young Chinese women, who inevitably transgress existing norms and their ascribed gender roles. The story further

dismantles men's culturally embedded power over and the state's "access rights" to women's bodies through the family planning policy as well as the unjust gender hierarchy associated with this male dominance. Through the reintroduction of a literary convention from modern Chinese realism, the gendered body serves as a figure of speech to condemn the heterosexist norms that are still constructing and restraining female sexuality in twenty-first-century China.

Despite the story's reinterpretation of female roles, the problematic male gaze is clearly visible. This act of voyeuristic and sexualized depiction not only degrades the seemingly independent female protagonist to an erotic object, but also points to the current state of society's overall gender consciousness in China. Consequently, the story pursues a narrative strategy to describe autonomous female sexuality in a language that is considered acceptable in Chinese patriarchy. On the one hand, the narrative advocates the autonomy of female sexuality. On the other hand, it illustrates the existing obstacles that prevent the awareness of this claim from becoming fully established among Chinese women.

Since the 2000s, more and more—especially young female—sf writers have used the genre's potential to transcend gender boundaries. For example, "Baby, Baby, I Love You" (*Baobei baobei wo ai ni* 宝贝宝贝我爱你, 2002) by Zhao Haihong (赵海虹, b. 1977), "Nest of Insects" (2008) by Chi Hui, and "In This Moment We Are Happy" (2019) by Chen Qiufan tackle women's reproductive and domestic responsibilities. They discuss the redistribution of these responsibilities, and the latter two imagine new reproductive forms. "The Language Sheath" (*Yumo* 语膜, 2019) by Regina Kanyu Wang (王侃瑜, b. 1990) and "Colour the World" (*Tuse shijie* 涂色世界, 2019) by Mu Ming (慕明, b. 1988) explore motherhood (the former single parenting) and give voice to women. "Reflection" (*Daoying* 倒影, 2013) by Gu Shi (顾适, b. 1985) constructs and deconstructs gender by depicting a male protagonist with a female personality inside. Although these futurisms increasingly raise awareness for gender issues, feminist and gender-oriented themes still occupy a marginal position in contemporary Chinese sf literature.

As these works are creating a space for a possible future of gender equality and free expression of sexuality, they pose vital alternatives to the government's ideas of China's future. In a reality that is dominated by Xi Jinping's (习近平, b. 1953) "Chinese Dream" (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦) and his vision of national prosperity, the futurisms discussed in this chapter allow writers and readers alike to dream their own dreams beyond their imposed role in the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* 中华民族伟大复兴)—dreams of gender equality, sexual desires, and personal freedom.

# Works Cited

Blommaert, Jan, and Kunming Li. "The Care for the Selfie: Ludic Chronotopes of Baifumei in Online China." *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies*, vol. 197, 2017, pp. 1–22.

Chen, Qiufan. "G daibiao nüshen" [G Stands for Goddess]. *Weilai bingshi* [Future Disease], Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2015a, pp. 91–103.

———. "G Is for Goddess." *The Sound of Salt Forming: Short Stories by the Post-80s Generation in China*, edited by Geng Song and Qingxiang Yang, translated by Thomas Moran, U of Hawaii P, 2015b, pp. 255–272.

———. "Kehuan zhong de nüxing zhuyi shuxie" [Feminist Writing in Science Fiction]. *Guangming Ribao* [Guangming Daily], vol. 26, Sept. 2018, p. 14.

Dippner, Anett. *Miss Perfect: Neue Weiblichkeitsregime Und Die Sozialen Skripte des Glücks in China*. Transcript Verlag, 2016.

Eberhard, Wolfram. *Lexikon Chinesischer Symbole: Geheime Sinnbilder in Kunst und Literatur, Leben und Denken der Chinesen*. Diederichs, 1983.

Evans, Harriet. *Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender Since 1949*. Polity Press, 1997.

GOV. "Zhonggong Zhongyang Guowuyuan Guanyu Youhua Shengyu Zhengce Cujin Renkou Changqi Junheng Fazhan de Jueding" ["Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Optimizing the Family Planning Policy and Promoting the Long-Term Balanced Development of the Population"]. *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Quanguo Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu* [The Central People's Government of the PRC, GOV], 20 July 2021, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-07/20/content_5626190.htm. Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

Han, Song. "Chinese Science Fiction: A Response to Modernization." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2013, pp. 15–21.

Healey, Cara. "Estranging Realism in Chinese Science Fiction: Hybridity and Environmentalism in Chen Qiufan's The Waste Tide." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1–33.

Hershatter, Gail. *Women and China's Revolutions*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

Li, Hua. "Twenty-First Century Chinese Science Fiction on the Rise: Anti-Authoritarianism and Dreams of Freedom." *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, edited by Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link, Cambridge UP, 2019, pp. 647–663.

McMillan, Joanna. *Sex, Science and Morality in China*. Routledge, 2006.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminist Film Theory*, edited by Sue Thornham, Edinburgh UP, 1999, pp. 58–69.

NPC. "Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Xingfa (Xiuding)" ["Criminal Law of the PRC (Revised)"]. *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Quanguo Renmin Daibiao Dahui* [National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, NPC], 1 Oct. 1997, www.npc.gov.cn/wxzl/gongbao/2000-12/17/content_5004680.htm. Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

Peng, Lang. *Zhongguo nüxing kehuan yanjiu* [*A Study of Chinese Female Science Fiction*]. 2009. Beijing Shifan Daxue Yanjiu Xueyuan [Graduate School of Beijing Normal University], Master thesis.

Schneider-Vielsäcker, Frederike. "An Ideal Chinese Society? Future China from the Perspective of Female Science Fiction Writer Hao Jingfang." *Monde Chinois*, vol. 51–52, 2017, pp. 50–62. doi:10.3917/mochi.051.0050. Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

———. "Images of Alternative Chinese Futures: Critical Reflections on the 'China Dream' in Chen Qiufan's 'The Flower of Shazui.'" *SFRA Review*, vol. 50, nos. 2–3, 2020, Sept. 2020, pp. 149–156. www.sfrareview.org/2020/09/04/50-2-a12schneider/. Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

Song, Mingwei. "Variations on Utopia in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2013, pp. 86–102.

———. "After 1989: The New Wave of Chinese Science Fiction." *China Perspectives*, no. 1, 2015, pp. 7–13.

———. "Representations of the Invisible: Chinese Science Fiction in the Twenty-First Century." *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literatures*, edited by Carlos Rojas and Andrea Bachner, Oxford UP, 2016, pp. 546–565.

UFF. "Mayer-Rokitansky-Küster-Hauser-Syndrom." *Universitäts-Fortpflanzungszentrum Franken (UFF)*, 2019, www.reproduktionsmedizin.uk-erlangen.de/patienten/krankheitsbilder-kinder-und-jugendgynaekologie/mrkh-syndrom/. Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

Wang, Kanyu. "Daojia sixiang yu shengtai nüxing zhuyi de Zhongguo yingyong: Hao Jingfang 'Liulang Canqiong' jiedu" ["The Use of Daoism and Ecofeminism in China: An Interpretation of Hao Jingfang's 'Wandering Sky'"]. *Xin Wenxue Pinglun* [Modern Chinese Literature Criticism], vol. 3, 2020, pp. 14–19.

Wang, Yao. "National Allegory in the Era of Globalization: Chinese Science Fiction and Its Cultural Politics since the 1990s." *Aspects of Science Fiction since the 1980s: China, Italy, Japan, Korea*, edited by Lorenzo Andolfatto et al., Nuova Trauben, 2015, pp. 61–81.

# 42

# THE ANTEKAAL AWAKENS

## Rendezvous with Rama (Rajya) and the Golden Past in India's Anglophone Science Fiction

*Sami Ahmad Khan*

A specter is haunting India's science fiction (SF)—the specter of an indigenous *pastism*. This specter appears at the crossing of two streams: a proto-imperial, irredentist *Akhand Bharat* (Unified India) that subsumes modern-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Afghanistan within its cartographic and notional ambit; and a quasi-historical, revivalist golden age from which all (modern) scientific, technological, and civilized *tantras* (systems) flow. Contemporary speculative fiction in India bears witness to the dialectic between a "fatal pattern" (Fisher 19) of the golden past and a future "attractor" of Akhand Bharat. A template of Hindu Nationalist (Hindutva) resistance and rejuvenation emerges, and the *Rama Rajya*—the rule of Rama—lies at the core of this past ⇋ future (see A. Sharma for the debates between Hindutva and Hinduism).

The shadow of this irredentist, revivalist Hindutva hegemon—as a political and aesthetic imperative—falls on futures within the nation's speculative fiction, including India's Science Fiction in English language (ISFE). Suparno Banerjee claims that ISFE revisits "the past in the light of the present and the future" and that it utilizes "devices of spatio-temporal disjunction and utopic projections and thought experiments" that enable "the authors to explore the future possibilities of the nation" (208). The future of ISFE does manifest tangential outcomes: a near-future India has been ostracized by the world owing to a state-sponsored genocide of women in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008); the country fights a bitter war against a Pakistan-Saudi Arabia-U.S. alliance in Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* (2001); and Neelanjana Banerjee's "Exile" portrays the trials of an Indian American in the near future, a time when a Pax Indica rules the world and (Hindu) epics became the "source-material" (14) for all cultural production. Banerjee further avers that ISFE deploys "indigenism and hybridity" to reflect upon "Indian epics, Vedic philosophy and folklores as by Western science, Western science fiction, and the English language" (209). Mainak Dhar's *Vimana* (2012), for example, showcases Hindu gods as ancient extraterrestrials who chaperone humanity's evolution, and the Kiru (tribal) people in Srinath Perur's "The Crater of Kiru" (2018) believe themselves to be the descendants of aliens from some other planet or dimension. This mode of cultural production stands by Thomas M. Disch's assessment that "the second task of sf writers as mythmakers is simply the custodial work of keeping the inherited body of myths alive" (23). There are, however, political and historical reasons at work.

The rise of SF in Europe was made possible by "the technological expansion that drove real imperialism, the need felt by national audiences for literary-cultural mediation as their societies

were transformed from historical nations into hegemons, and the fantastic model of achieved technoscientific Empire" (Csicsery-Ronay, "Science Fiction" 231). India in 2021 witnessed an upsurging Hindutva amidst an ongoing digital revolution, an onslaught of global market forces, and increasingly reified politico-religious models of mythological empires: the stage is set for Indian audiences to globally broadcast yearnings of a Rama Rajya in a (future) Akhand Bharat. Moreover, just as Euro-American SF in the nineteenth century was shaped by the Industrial Revolution and colonial expansion (S. Banerjee 204), post-2000 Indian SF in ISFE—and India in SF—derives from its own versions of market-driven industrial/digital revolution(s) and the concomitant yearnings for newer empires: an envisioning that relies on India's "rapid rise in its economic, techno-scientific and political clout" after the 1990s (S. Banerjee 204).

While SF has long been dotted with alternate, distinct futures and distant, exotic spaces, ISFE is equally pockmarked by alternate pasts—and not just futures—rooted in domestic spaces. Shaping—and shaped by—the ideological exigences of and towards Hindutva, Indian SF resists or reinforces a (past ⇋ future) Akhand Bharat. If SF not only predicts a future but also explains "a future past" (Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties* 76), then ISFE also projects a golden past *backwards* in time—an inverse imaging of the future history which impinges upon the present as much as it shapes the future. This golden past reinterprets the past, reorders the present *and* projects a new future—Csicsery-Ronay might have called it a multidirectional "feedback" that comes from the past *and* future alike—and percolates down to SF (*Seven Beauties* 78). Such predictions and projections arrange science, fiction, history, myth, etc., within a novel spatiotemporal syntax. A word of caution: the golden past as a recent geopolitical/geoeconomic formulation, as a mode of (a)historical consciousness, and as a plank of anti-colonial struggle should not be confused with the golden age in India's history (attributed chiefly to the Gupta rule during the fourth to sixth centuries CE).

Carl Sagan finds that cultures do not "evolve in lock-step" (182), implying different originating points and rates of scientific progress for different civilizations. The rising tide of Hindutva in India believes Hinduism to be the arche of *all* science. The golden past derives from how India's popular imagination, rather than viewing the past, present, and future as hermetically sealed, stable locations, view forward movement in time as recurring cycles of decay. For Anustup Basu, the

> time of Kali … is a mythic postulate that "curves" into the inevitable finite presentism of not just individual consciousness, but also institutions of history and the state … It is therefore time that cannot be either tracked or traced; it can only be "recalled" to absolve the profane and render it sacred.
>
> *(222)*

This recalling, contingent on absolving the profane, becomes the ontotheological basis for the golden past, especially with reference to history and the state. Another note of caution here. Basu mentions how Romila Thapar challenges the presumption that only the cyclic ruled ancient India's imagination; Thapar executes a "powerful dispelling of a *categorical* separation between cyclical and linear orders of time", since "these two orders can actually combine in myriad and material ways in different forms of humanistic, statist, astronomical, theological, and eschatological thinking" (A. Basu 220). The acts of somehow reliving the past or projecting an ostensible recurrence in the future do not imply self-sustaining, self-repeating cycles which are exactly the same; if the orbit (worldline) of the planet we inhabit is helical, especially since Earth can never return to the *same* spacetime coordinates, then any notion of (three-dimensional) cyclical event must evolve into a four-dimensional helix. This disrupts the ontological cyclicality

that has (erroneously) come to be thought to characterize time in India; for example, though the Boys of Vishnu always save the planet in different epochs in *Toke*, (Mody) their players/ actants (and thus, phenomenon) keep changing.

Considering the aforementioned divergences, ISFE illustrates three distinct modalities of engagement with the golden past—those of acceptance, rejection, and appropriation—that are directly contingent on authors' attitudes towards the raison d'être of the golden past (Hindutva, Akhand Bharat, and Rama Rajya). For example, Mainak Dhar's *Vimana* (2012), with its ancient astronaut hypothesis and Hindu gods as technologically advanced aliens (Khan 109) reinforces and accepts the golden past *in toto*. Rimi Chatterjee's *Signal Red* (2005) rejects it by indicting how the golden past furthers the goals of a Hindu nation-state: Rahil Vidyadhar in *Signal Red* believes that "ancient Indian science connected Earth and space in various ways" but the invading "Mughals and the British sundered that connection"—thereby, the "science in the hands of the colonial masters" became India's indigenous knowledge from the past, one that had been "disfigured" (87). This appropriation of scientific epistemology can be explicated by how science was "re-re-projected unto the Indian past and presented as something essentially Indian" through the "construction of a Golden Age" (Harder 106). The creation of an anti-hegemonic discourse also builds on Chattopadhyay's assertion that SF "must also arise in the literature of the colonised at the same time as it does in the literature of the coloniser, at least in the secular domain" ("Kalpavigyan" 113). Lastly, Suraj Clark Prasad's *Baramulla Bomber* (2013) "while utilising the golden past theme, differs from the others by attributing the source of knowledge to not only Hindu scriptures, but also to Abrahamic ones" (Khan 64)—it diffuses a golden past across religious and spatiotemporal traditions and constructs an eclectic mythic-historic mingling of multiple eastern and western discourses, thereby subverting Hindutva's claims towards being the sole originators of "real science".

While Suparno Banerjee's argument can be extended to say that Indian SF exists not just at the edges of culture but of time itself, this chapter is not about time travel as a *topoi* in ISFE, but about four broad temporalities in ISFE (as discussed later in the section "The Antekaal Awakens"). Hence, the temporal agents in Swapna Kishore's "Regressions" (2012), the machine that sees across time in Vandana Singh's "With Fate Conspire" (2018), or Ali, Pande, and Hemonto as time travelers in Shovon Chowdhury's *The Competent Authority* (2013) do not figure here. Instead, we observe the sutures of futures that link variable visions and versions of India's futures to mythic semantic elements and a majoritarian-prime syntax; these sutures not only weave futurisms to pastisms but also interpolate science in myth, history in *itihasa*, and technology in the fantastic.

## The Empire Strikes Back: *Rashtra*, *Itihasa*, and *Bazaar*

The interaction between past and future, memory and possibility, and science and religion that golden past generates can be explicated by a quantum trialectic of a "future" *rashtra* (nation), a "past" *itihasa* (myth + history) and "present" *bazaar* (market). While Chattopadhyay delves into the "framing of mythology as history, mythic elements as science, and myth as a cultural prism occurs in many significant works of Bangla kalpavigyan" ("Kalpavigyan" 114), a similar thrust into contemporary ISFE reveals interesting aspects. The ideological notion(s) of a Hindu *rashtra* (nation-state) as an "attractor" changes the fundamental nature of a democracy; a mythic imagination inspired by *itihasa* seamlessly fuses history, myth, and narrative to construct a "non-origin"; and the forces of *bazaar* (market) contour consumption patterns and national reimaginings alike.

To tackle each strand separately: India as of this writing is a *de facto* heterogenous, multicultural, and multilingual civilization, and a *de jure* democracy that is currently caught in a rightward shift; majoritarian "religious consolidation, economic liberalisation, jingoistic reassertion

and historical revisionism" have become the norm (Khan 48). The enterprise of Hindutva often relies on a selective, politically tinged *itihasa*: R. Malhotra finds that "accounts of past are not made through *either* myth or history exclusively" but by *itihasa*, "which may not always be the opposite of truth" (qtd. in Varughese 30, emphasis in original); Shail Mayaram accepts that in the Indian context "history and myth are not exclusive modes of representation" (qtd. in Nandy 45). This *itihasa* not only leaves notional space for the construction and exploration of India's golden past, but actively supports its synthesis. Lastly, this golden past can be regarded as a revivalist response to the onslaught of the *bazaar* (and the forces which prop it up). Earlier, an economic base (and market requirements), orientalism (a specialized knowledge/power dispositif), and colonialism (as a state policy), etc., hybridized across former imperial states to galvanize them into action—which then evoked national movements as reactions to the violation of territorial sovereignty and civilizational dignity. Spurred by the neo-imperial tsunamis of transnational corporations pummeling the Global South, the successor(s) to those impulses today morph into local/glocal movements of identity formation and indigenous reassertion. For example, Vandana Singh's "Oblivion: A Journey" (2012) reworks the *Ramayana* in a galaxy far, far away, with the primary antagonist being a metaphor for predatory capitalism and neo-imperial enterprises. Tarun Saint's "A Visit to Partition World" (2019) is set in 2047 and takes us back to India's partition via a partition *theme* park. Moreover, contemporary India negotiates the material, market-driven globalizing discourses imposed from without, spouting from what Freedman might call First World metropolitan economies, "those social formations on the increasingly integrated" centers of "the multinational capitalist system" (198); and the internationalizing discourses precipitated historically from within, that is, from the Sanatana traditions of *vasudhaiva kutumbkum* (the world is one family). Both these strands find themselves at loggerheads with Hindutva's xenophobia.

The vertices of *rashtra*, *itihasa* and *bazaar* can be seen as extensions of the transMIT thesis (Khan xiv)—about how ideology (nation/nation-state), mythology (and *itihasa*), and technology (with its double, the *bazaar*) contour SF. Since the struggle of each people against oppression is unique—though *sutras* linking them with other struggles do exist—ISFE creates its own epistemology. Grace Dillon acknowledges how "native" writers of SF must negotiate an ancient tradition that "weds sf theory and Native intellectualism, Indigenous scientific literacy, and western techno-cultural science" (2). Even Sukanya Datta tries to fuse myth, science, and history in "Gem of a Story" and "A Little Learning"; the former attempts to engage in a scientification of Hindu myth of Ashwatthama, and the latter specifically foregrounds a tribal traditional ecological knowledge as opposed to a Vedic or Western science (Khan 137).

The polarizing insertion of the golden past in ISFE is not only an ideological weapon but also a psychological technique of reorienting a reader's grasp of the real. Chattopadhyay asserts in "Kalpavigyan and Imperial Technoscience" that colonization "results in a pressure to generate at once something out of the general mass of local knowledge something resembling western science", a native science that builds on its own "cultural strength" to reinvent "the values of the coloniser culture" (113). This thesis, once linked with Hans Harder's assessment, establishes why the golden past and Akhand Bharat—past patterns and future attractors—cultivate their personalized "native" sciences, technologized alternate realities, and cultural strengths.

## Return of the King: Rama Rajya and Golden Past

For Edmund Husserl, a melody can be known only through a simultaneous operation of three acts of consciousness, viz, retention (how *memory* retains the notes no longer available), attention (an impression of notes which exist *now*) and protention (imagining the

shape of things to come) (Collins and Selina 77). The retention, attention, and protention works together in India's popular imagination in a slightly different way. Ashis Nandy believes that "*traditional* India not only lacks the Enlightenment's concept of history" but also shies away from viewing history as objective, ethical, "or reasonable way of constructing the past"; the past, present, and future are not seen as "pre-formatted" and "myths, legends, itihasas" remain a force to be reckoned with (63, emphasis added). Even in a *modern* India, the Golden Age of Science Fiction meets the golden past in ISFE, a twisted extension of Carl Freedman's dictum, which views SF as "an inverted or paradoxical version of historical fiction" (187).

The ontotheology of a Rama Rajya is grounded in an Akhand Bharat and/or a golden past that manifests itself as a political ideology *and* a religious goal. Anustup Basu asks of films how "*Hindutva* … can actually enter into assemblages of cinematic spectacle and affect with metropolitan lifestyles, managerial codas of the 'free market', individualism, consumer desire, and neo-liberal imperatives of polity and government" (211); a similar enterprise can be executed with ISFE, which, after all, depends on how future possibilities rely on pasts. This leads us to view how the historical mode "attempts to embed and entwine SF *into* the mainstream" as per Roger Luckhurst, an attempt to construct "a *non*-origin [of SF], to disperse it, to deny specificity" (40, emphasis in original). ISFE reinterprets this process since

> a lot of Indian SF is equally about a protoscientific antiquity that zeroes in on an origin (usually in the Vedic times) but simultaneously diffuses specific (arche) moments across the time-period by considering the actual origin as forgotten, inaccessible and/or repressed.
>
> *(Khan 17–18)*

The proponents of the golden past also disperse and diffuse the essence: one is left wondering where the arche of science and technology is located, whether in Satya Yuga, or in Treta Yuga (with the *Pushpaka* and the Rama Rajya), or in Dwapar Yuga (with the divine weapons of the *Mahabharata*) or in Kali Yuga (in India's Golden Age during the Gupta rule). The temporal phenomenon as manifested in ISFE locates how the golden past projects tales of technological wonder to diffused—yet specific—moments in India's past. The supporters of this re-envisioning approach this "real" origin as the basis of true "history", which has been suppressed by colonial and communist historians.

This tension between the past, present, and future is readily weaponized—and not merely exacerbated—by ideologically extenuating circumstances. Margaret Atwood opines that "the past no longer belongs only to those who once lived it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today" (qtd. in Hulan 71). This can be read with the remarks made by Biplab Kumar Deb (the chief minister of the Indian state of Tripura) in 2019 that "we [Indians have] had Internet and satellites when the battle of Mahabharat was fought" (Deb)—a classic case of the golden past projecting technology to ancient times and then used to reinforce a Hindu Nationalist identity. This is not only an instance of the empire writing back, but also of creative alternative histories and inverting power dynamics by reclaiming the "actual" history, which has supposedly been "suppressed". The banner men of India's golden past insist that all scientific breakthroughs occur(ed) in *India's past* and not in the *West's future* (Khan 104). The spatiotemporal dislocation is further evidenced by how Kritika Sharma notifies of a course that "credits ancient Indians with being the pioneers of electricity production, inventing batteries, aeronautics, maritime engineering and the discovery of the phenomenon of gravity" (K. Sharma). For example, the Rama Rajya,

the Mahabharata War, the Vedic Age, and the Gupta Age become possible locations of the scientific *gyana* (knowledge) and *tantra* (system) India intends to deploy to become a *vishwaguru* (world leader). Chattopadhyay's mythologerm, which considers "historical factors related to the usage of the concept of science, the specific conditions within which each of these literary traditions emerged, and the critical deployments through which this literature negotiates with the past" ("On the Mythologerm", 435), can become one mechanism to explain such aberrant behavior.

While "a central project of Western modernism was to invent the future as an autonomous time that could give purpose to the present, supplanting the myth of divine providence that itself had supplanted myths of eternal recurrence", India's golden past invented the past as an origin *and* as a frame of reference to give value to the present (Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties* 81). When John Rieder notes that "the relation of the colonizing societies to the colonized ones is that of the developed, modern present to its own undeveloped, primitive past" (30), when Carl Freedman sees the First World as another planet (198), and when Uppinder Mehan believes that "the West is rational and scientific" and "the East is mystical and fantastic" in the "Orientalist scheme" of things (54), east and west emerge as categories that are not coplanar; they are separated by both space *and* time.

India's fascination with a past golden age rather than a "scientifically-advanced future" is probed further by Philip Lutgendorf, who attributes this to mythology's readiness to be "reinterpreted to suit contemporary [imperial] needs"; the notion of recurring *yuga*s (eras) "short-circuit any teleology of change-as-progress by asserting that the most utopian epochs lay in the distant past and that subsequent world history was a sordid saga of continuous loss and decline"; lastly, while "the future … had already been colonized" but the past "remained available for imaginative conquest" (366–367). The primacy of mythology (reinforced a resurgent Hindutva), the spiritual and philosophical notions of Yugas entrenched in the minds of a people, and the ready availability of a past not yet fully (or truly) known, guide cultural production towards the creation of a golden age of India.

ISFE, thus, swings between the nonbeing of a (present) constitutional republic and the non-origin (of a past ⇆ future) theodemocracy where religion—Rama Rajya in an Akhand Bharat—becomes both the past and the future. The phantom of this golden past flickers in and out of existence à la Jacques Derrida's assertion that "it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept" (202). India becomes the site of reappearance of ideological specters of alternate pastisms, and the golden past becomes a (non)concept as well as the site of haunting. This haunting, moreover, is by a *nonbeing*: Luckhurst finds that "if the projection back, as a fantasy of non-origin, is SF's past, its complement in the future is the fantasy of non-being" ("Many Deaths" 43). The hauntology of ISFE negotiates with contemporary India's *zeitgeist*: the golden past boasts of a mythic non-origin that has been resurrected by its proponents to shape today's political thought and tomorrow's social reality.

This, again, advances Mark Fisher's ideas that "the future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production" (16). Not only does hauntology foreground a "fatal pattern" from the past with a "compulsion to repeat", but it also provides an "attractor" from the future, "an anticipation shaping current behaviour" (Fisher 19). The symptomatic dimensions of the golden past and its percolation down to present cultural production echoes in the popular imagination. Interestingly, this conflation of past, present, and future is also present in Western SF. To give just two examples: the arc of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004) ends in Earth's past, and *Star Wars* (1977) begins a long time ago (even though if it is in a galaxy far, far away). This, again, can be explained by Chattopadhyay's mythologerm:

the site of a struggle between closed scientific tradition—which can be defined in national, racial, cultural, and even gendered terms—and the historicity of scientific knowledge as a continuous entanglement across time among nations and peoples to which no single culture or tradition can lay claim.

*("On the Mythologerm", 438)*

These divergences now lead us to the antekaal thesis, which identifies four nodes of how ISFE negotiates temporalities.

## The Antekaal Awakens: Before and Against Time, End-of-Time, and Eternal Time

Time for Aristotle revolves around the "number of motions in respect of 'before' and 'after'" (qtd. in Gupta 189); Madhyamika Buddhism finds "no justification for the recognition of a present and a future [and past] time" (Kalupahana 188); and Bergson finds time to be "a flow involving past, present, future, and an experience of existing within that flow" and considers "memory" and "projections" from the realms of past and future (Collins and Selina 75–76)—to cite examples from three philosophical traditions. If one bypasses the debates around the nature of time—whether it is linear, cyclical, helical, quantum, or even nonexistent—and focuses on how the past and future operate in ISFE, then one has to shift from three dimensions to four, from mythic to quasi/proto-science, and from the present of the text to the past ⇆ future of the reader.

Arguably, a phenomenon (say, a novum) occurs when/where it is supposed to have occurred, such as the discovery of radioactivity in 1896—adhering thus to a historical reality principle—and leads to a kind of SF that may explore the impact of such a breakthrough. However, the phenomenon/novum can radically unsettle the milieux of its production and consumption when it appears at spatiotemporal coordinates not determined or recognized by consensual reality—such as radioactivity having been discovered in 1896 (which is common as a lot of SF based in the future or alternate locations).

This specific disruption within the flow of time is exploited by the *antekaal*, especially as a play on four disrupting temporalities (apart from the more social science-fictional phenomenon-as-per-its-time). Inspired by the polyphony and eclectic nature of the subject matter it is meant to explicate, the nomenclatural underpinnings of antekaal yoke together not only Latin "ante" and Sanskrit "kaal" (time/period), thus meaning *before time*, but also the Greek "anti" with "kaal", that is, *against time*; they also fuse Sanskrit/Hindi and Persian/Urdu in "ant-e-kaal", that is, the *end of time* with the Hindi *anantkaal* (eternal time). This quadralectic between *before time* (ante), *against time* (anti), the *end of time* (ant) and *eternal time* (anant) defines the function, dynamics, mechanics, and scope of antekaal (Khan 104)—and works alongside the epistemic frameworks of novum-as-per-time. The four nodes of antekaal operate in clusters of two each: the metaphorical dimensions of "before" and "against" time work together and so do those indicated by the "end of time" and "eternal time".

One, the antekaal (ante), as in "before period/time", foregrounds a phenomenon temporally present before it is supposed to manifest itself in time and history—a forced spatiotemporal interpolation that becomes a disruption in the ontic and ontological alike. Such a disruption binds future(s) to its past, one full of possibilities and technological prowess, which ultimately becomes a new arche for today, a template of a new today. Warring Hindu gods nuking each other thousands of years ago in *Vimana* is an example (Dhar 1-3): for if a civilization is portrayed as having possessed nuclear weapons millennia ago, then its present is considered a

devolution. The present becomes a devolution of a pure, hyper-advanced state that existed in the ancient times; the golden past heralds a new arche that has the potentiality to construct a new today.

Two, the antekaal (anti), as in "against period/time", entails that not only does the phenomenon precede its "agreed upon" location, but its mere presence throws an ideological gauntlet at dominant and residual epistemological or normative frameworks. The discovery of a "new" time-before fundamentally reorients the way that our today is perceived. The golden past becomes a tool of ethno-nationalistic reassertion in this case. For example, Rahil in *Signal Red* asserts how the (Muslim) Mughals robbed (Hindu) India's knowledge and sold it to "unworthy" recipients such as the Europeans (Chatterjee 22–23); thus, western science and civilization are portrayed as borrowing from the original Hindu knowledge systems. The being of time—as promulgated by the dominant powers today—is challenged by a blast from the past.

When taken together, the "ante" and "anti" operate together in a cluster that projects novel present(s) via rediscovered pasts ⇋ futures. The play between the no-longer-there, the not-yet-happened, and that-which-must-surely-be-reclaimed necessitates application of the sutures of futures to a "nation culturally predisposed to[wards] the fantastic" (S. Basu). The future in ISFE—and thus, of the reader—is not only what lies ahead in the spacetime manifold based on today, but also what a civilization has left behind *and* what is bound to be relived again (though perhaps not in a manner of one's own choosing). Perhaps there can be no future *ex nihilo*, only versions of the past, projected forwards again and again—a spacetime loop that adheres to a cyclical nature but whose being is helical—strands of an r-DNA that keep on mutating as per an ostensibly stochastic pattern.

Three, the antekaal (ant-e-kaal) as the "end of time" heralds a fatalistic telos—which precipitates quests to stop the apocalypse(s) undertaken by the protagonists in the ISFE narratives. This node is influenced by a linear and stable temporality and closes possibilities of rejuvenation and renewal due to a dead-end after which projections of future—and the future itself—fail, perhaps in the same way as it is difficult to see beyond a technological singularity. For example, the Maoist-Islamist terrorists in *Baramulla Bomber*—and their plan to attack a UN concert in Oslo—represent a threat that must be prevented at all costs, as it can lead to a state of no return (Prasad 276–282). *Gods of War* (2009) sketches another temporal full-stop: a 'War of all the Worlds' that is being fought at *Lokaloka* between the forces of darkness and light; *all* time is under threat of extinction unless the war is won by the forces of good (Banker 50). These are the worldlines in which time—and being—is threatened with *the* absolute end.

Four, the former temporality is complemented by anantkaal as in "eternal time", where, rather than being terminated, time is characterized by helical recurrence of a phenomenon. For example, the Boys of Vishnu reappear at various moments in history to save the world (*Mody* 208) and Kalki's attempts to rule the world promise both an end and a rejuvenation (*Vimana* 93). This eternalism is built on a civilization's "ouroboros radioactivity" that restores a civilization to its original factory setting at the end of its decay cycle, that is, the civilization/system inches towards its original/zero state with physical/temporal movement across the process of its decay.

The temporalities emanating from end-of-time and eternal time often intertwine since the reclaiming, reinventing, repeating, and requiting new yesterdays *and* tomorrows come across as not just extensions of the past but *as* versions of the pasts themselves. These pasts exist in eternal (helical) recurrences relived in futures—despite being generated by the same algorithm, they are different processes, as the actants have changed. The linear stability of ontologically ephemeral temporal moments destabilizes when examined in four dimensions—it often accentuates an interminable cosmic helical cyclicality of enduring continuation, whose fractal movement is both self-repeating and eternally recurring, and yet, leads to a different state each time.

Moreover, there can be multiple vantage points to construct such a revivalist arche: for example, while Dhar's Vimana locates a golden past in western India (of 13,000 BCE), J.V. Jayakumar's *Rise of the Cholas* (2019) locates a golden past in the Chola Empire of southern India (around 1000 CE) and features a Tamil king who travels to the future (our present) to save the planet from a black hole (1). Also, India is not the only civilization to apotheosize nonlinearity; Friedrich Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence states that "a recurrence of past configurations becomes necessary" over time (qtd. in Pfeffer 278).

As manifested by the four nodes of the antekaal, ISFE negotiates temporalities through its eclectic operations and locates how era and ages are linked via space and time. The nodes of antekaal are simultaneously tethered to a past, a present, and a future (though not always in that order) and generate sutures of future that links divergent temporalities, cultural production, popular imagination, and political ideologies. Antekaal emerges as an extension of Chattopadhyay's mythologerm on which a tincture of Derrida's hauntology and a civilization's (helical) ouroboros radioactivity has been applied.

Lastly, while postcolonial SF may be the site and action of "decolonizing" the future (Langer 8), it may also result in a "recolonisation, whereby the dominant western discourses (of the present) are replaced by Hindutva-centric ones (from the past), as Banerjee also notes" (Khan 57–58). The essay observed how ISFE's negotiations vis-à-vis (emergent) technologies, (neo-imperial) ideologies, and (global) market forces during a sustained attack on India's founding Nehruvian ideals underscores a totality that looks at the past as a compulsion to re-enact, views the present as a site of revolutionary change, and yearns towards the future as a mytho-religious utopia. These temporalities negotiate India's pluralistic, multicultural core by creating alternate discourses of resistance and remembering that rewire the assemblages of knowledge/power in a multipolar world—and ISFE approaches the golden past with either joyous apotheosis, or subtle subversion, or vehement denial. The fictional tendencies in ISFE are often contoured by eclectic mythologies and political ideologies, and the antekaal—through its nodes that negotiate streams of temporalities—gives a glimpse into how contemporary cultural production hybridizes mythic and science-fictional semantics with an ethnonationalist-driven and commercial syntax. These reinterpretations of and in ISFE both terrorize—and enrapture—our present time-stream(s).

## Acknowledgments

## Works Cited

Banerjee, Neelanjana. "Exile." *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction Inspired by the Ramayana*, edited by Anil Menon and Vandana Singh, Zubaan, 2012, pp. 12–37.

Banerjee, Suparno. *Other Tomorrows: Postcoloniality, Science Fiction and India*. 2010. Louisiana State University, PhD dissertation.

Banker, Ashok. *Gods of War*. Penguin, 2009.

Basu, Anustup. *Mantras of the Metropole: Geo-televisuality and Contemporary Indian Cinema*. 2005. University of Pittsburgh, PhD dissertation.

Basu, Samit. "The Trousers of Time." *Samitbasu.com*, 4 July 2006, http://samitbasu.com/2006/07/04/the-trousers-of-time-possiblefutures-of-indian-speculative-fiction-in-english. Accessed 25 Mar. 2021.

*Battlestar Galactica*. Created by Ronald D. Moore, NBC, 2004.

Chatterjee, Rimi. *Signal Red*. Penguin, 2005.

Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva. "On the Mythologerm: Kalpavigyan and the Question of Imperial Science." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2016, pp. 435–458.

———. "Kalpavigyan and Imperial Technoscience: Three Nodes of an Argument." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2017, pp. 102–122.

Chowdhury, Shovon. *The Competent Authority*. Aleph, 2013.

Collins, Jeff, and Howard Selina. *Heidegger: A Graphic Guide*. Icon, 2010.

Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan, Jr. "Science Fiction and Empire." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2003, pp. 231–245.

———. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan UP, 2008.

Datta, Sukanya. "Gem of a Story." *Worlds Apart: Science Fiction Stories*, edited by Datta. National Book Trust, 2012a, pp. 201–239.

———. "A Little Learning." *Worlds Apart: Science Fiction Stories*, edited by Datta. National Book Trust, 2012b, pp. 36–78.

Deb, Debraj. "Internet dates back to Mahabharat: CM." *The Telegraph*, 18 Apr. 2018, https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/internet-dates-back-to-mahabharat-cm/cid/1342310. Accessed 19 May 2021.

Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf. Routledge, 1994.

Dhar, Mainak. *Vimana*. Penguin, 2012.

Dillon, Grace. "Introduction." *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. Arizona UP, 2012, pp. 1–12.

Disch, T. "Mythology and Science Fiction." Chapter in *On SF*, by Disch, U of Michigan P, 2005, pp. 21–24.

Fisher, Mark. "What is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2012, pp. 16–24.

Freedman, Carl. "Science Fiction and Critical Theory." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1987, pp. 180–200.

Gupta, R.K. "What is Heidegger's Notion of Time?" *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. 14, no. 52, 1960, pp. 163–193. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23940118. Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

Harder, Hans. "Indian and International: Some Examples of Marathi Science Fiction Writing." *South Asia Research*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2001, pp. 105–119.

Hulan, Renée. "Margaret Atwood in Search of Things Past." *Canadian Historical Writing: Reading the Remains*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 71–102.

Jayakumar, J.V. *Rise of the Cholas: Apocalypse*. Notion Press, 2019.

Joshi, Ruchir. *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*. HarperCollins, 2001.

Kalupahana, David J. "The Buddhist Conception of Time and Temporality." *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1974, pp. 181–191, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1398021. Accessed 16 Oct. 2021.

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

Kishore, Swapna. "Regressions." *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction Inspired by the Ramayana*, edited by Anil Menon and Vandana Singh. Zubaan, 2012, pp. 230–254.

Langer, Jessica. *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Luckhurst, Roger. "The Many Deaths of Science Fiction: A Polemic." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1994, pp. 35–50.

Lutgendorf, Philip. "A Long Time Ago in a Galaxy Far, Far Away: The Mahābhārata as Dystopian Future." *Many Mahābhāratas*, edited by Neil Shapiro Hawley and Sohini Sarah Pillai. SUNY P, 2021, pp. 361–384.

Mehan, Uppinder. "Domestication of Science in Indian Science Fiction Short Stories." *Foundation*, vol. 74, 1998, pp. 54–66.

Mody, Jugal. *Toke*. HarperCollins, 2012.

Nandy, Ashis. "History's Forgotten Doubles." *History and Theory*, vol. 34, no. 2, 1995, pp. 44–66.

Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Escape*. Picador, 2008.

Perur, Srinath. "The Crater of Kiru." *Strange World! Strange Times*, edited by Vinayak Varma. Speaking Tiger, 2018, pp. 19–32.

Pfeffer, Rose. "Eternal Recurrence in Nietzsche's Philosophy." *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1965, pp. 276–300.

Prasad, Suraj Clark. *Baramulla Bomber*. Niyogi, 2013.

Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan UP, 2008.

Sagan, Carl, *Cosmos*. Ballantine, 2013.

Saint, Tarun. A Visit to Partition World. *The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction*, edited by Tarun Saint, Hachette, 2019, pp. 95–106.

Sharma, Arvind. "On the Difference between Hinduism and Hindutva." *Asian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2020, pp. 43–47. https://www.asianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/on-the-difference-between-hinduism-and-hindutva.pdf. Accessed 1 Sept. 2021.

Sharma, Kritika. "In Engineering Courses Soon: Wright Brothers Didn't Invent Plane, Batteries Existed in Vedic Age." *The Print*, 26 Sept. 2018, https://theprint.in/governance/in-engineering-courses-soon-wright-brothers-didnt-invent-plane-batteries-existed-in-vedic-age/124540/. Accessed 28 Jul. 2021.

Singh, Vandana. "Oblivion: A Journey." *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories*. Small Beer Press, 2018a, pp. 81–106.

———. "With Fate Conspire." *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories*. Small Beer Press, 2018b, pp. 1–24.

*Star Wars: A New Hope*. Directed by George Lucas. Twentieth Century Fox, 1977.

Varughese, E. Dawson. *Genre Fiction of New India: Post-millennial Receptions of 'Weird' Narratives*. Routledge, 2017.

# 43

# "RESTART THE PLAY"

## On Cyclicality and the "Indian Woman" in the Theatrical Future of *C Sharp C Blunt*

*Sheetala Bhat*

"Welcome to Shilpa 202. Namaste. Shilpa 202 is the perfect singer application. … Please select sexiness on the scale of 1 to 10", says Shilpa, from the near-future, with a fixed smile of innocence. Standing at the front edge of the stage with three backlights making her look huge, she holds out her microphone for the audience to select the options. In a show at Rangashankara, Bangalore, the audience shouts out "10", and many giggles follow from the crowd.

Shilpa is an "attractive, user-friendly" ("C Sharp C Blunt") singer app, presented on stage in human form, from a one-woman play *C Sharp C Blunt* (2013) performed by singer and actress MD Pallavi, directed by German theater artist Sophia Stepf, developed in collaboration with Indian playwrights Swar Thounaojam and Irawati Karnik. Shilpa lulls the audience into a false sense of confidence that the app is at their disposal as she follows their every command, which often leads the audience towards exhibiting their desire to control her with masculine, consumerist sexism. Just when the audience members start to enjoy manipulating her, things begin to go askew; Shilpa malfunctions as a result of a "faulty" update and begins rejecting the commands of her users. *C Sharp C Blunt* juxtaposes and creates a palimpsest of the journey of Shilpa the singer app and the traumatic events related to gender violence from the lives of the actress who provided her likeness for the app and the singer who provided her voice. Produced a year after the notorious gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey in Delhi, known as the Nirbhaya case, *C Sharp C Blunt*'s vision of the future cannot be separated from that historical moment, which sparked nationwide protests. Shilpa confronts the audience about the normalization of sexual assaults against women in India. She breaks down, glitches, revolts, as though she has inherited the uncontainable rage associated with the traumatic memories of the actress and singer. The play stops and restarts multiple times because Shilpa cannot function anymore. *C Sharp C Blunt* moves in loops as Shilpa malfunctions and gets updated to her new version.

How does a futuristic theatrical performance in India imagine a feminist future that works within and against the notion of cyclical time and interrupts Hindu nationalist imagination of the technologized future rooted in an idealized past? How can the cyborg in India, whose beginning and updates are in this instance marked by the utterance of lines from Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto", re-envision Haraway's idea of the cyborg specifically for the cultural and political milieu of contemporary India? I investigate these questions by proposing a concept called interruptional relations to theorize the cyborg's multidirectional resistances and relations that productively and constantly interrupt each other in the feminist future that

the play envisions. At the time of this writing, when Hindu nationalism is ruling India with the ahistorical ideology of a pure Hindu past while employing Western technology for intense surveillance of dissent, revisiting *C Sharp C Blunt* enables a rethinking of feminist resistance to and reclamation of futuristic technology and Hindu conceptions of cyclical time.

Ryan A. D'Souza argues that South Asian Futurism, which is often called desi-futurism, is "a critical perspective interrupting whitewashed imaginations of a technologized future with the experiences of the past-present to write desi versions of the past, present, and future" (47). D'Souza theorizes desi-futurism as a tangent to Afrofuturism. In his articulation of desi-futurism, D'Souza proposes to analyze Kaya, a hyperfeminized character from the movie *Krrish 3*, through the framework of dvaita and advaita, two schools of Hindu philosophy, because, he claims, "Despite scientific advancement, desis maintain a culture of spirituality" (52). While this conception of futurism offers a challenge to European epistemologies, it not only fails to account for how Hindu nationalism steers science and religion for its own conservative ends, but also ignores the caste and gender politics of that supposedly homogenized "culture of spirituality". Feminist cyborgian futurism cannot afford to be unidirectional in its resistance. The cyborg challenges Western epistemologies as well as the conservative Hindu ethnonationalism that is "acting as colonial force upon racialized others from Muslims and Dalits to adivasis (first peoples) and Kashmiris" (Gopal 891).

Feminist politics in India, nonetheless, has been multidirectional in its resistance and its approach to colonial politics and Indigenous traditions. On the one hand, postcolonial scholars such as Uma Narayan have extensively argued against the fundamentalist idea that Indian feminists are "Westernized" defiers of tradition (3). Cultural nationalists in India in the early twentieth century, in their effort to define and distinguish Indian nationalism in terms of spirituality and tradition, presented the "Indian women", primarily upper caste, to be the guardians of "Indian tradition" (Chatterjee 133). In postcolonial India, Narayan argues, this idea of the Indian woman is brought back to counter feminism (20). Several social movements in contemporary India, such as Kiss of Love protests, the Pink Chaddi Campaign, and the protests around Valentine's Day, actively confront Hindu nationalist ideas of tradition, culture, and morality in relation to women in India while embracing what is considered "Western culture". On the other hand, environmental feminists such as Vandana Shiva have been fighting against the Western globalized economy and its impact on subaltern women. Shiva critiques the predatory practices of patents from the position of an Indian peasant woman (Gordon and Wing 32). She draws from the cultural traditions of peasant women and their cosmology to counter Western technocracy (Shiva 22). In recent years, feminists have also been drawing attention to the coloniality of Hindu nationalism, especially in relation to the Indian occupation of Kashmir. In a statement that came out of the 2017 feminist pre-conference to the Annual Conference on South Asia, organized around the theme of "Gender, Sexuality, and Occupation", the authors argue that colonial occupations are not exceptions but are "foundational to the making and reproduction of many modern nation-states" (574), and therefore warn against pursuing "women's empowerment" within the framework of the nation-state and through the normalization of occupation (578). While my brief recounting does not capture the diversity of feminist practices, I intend to emphasize that postcolonial feminist critiques have been productively challenging the tensions between Western ideologies, colonial power, and native patriarchal power structures.

I theorize the multidirectionality of futuristic feminist resistance in *C Sharp C Blunt* by proposing the concept of interruptional relations. The cyborg in *C Sharp C Blunt* forms a connection with a particular epistemology through the criticism of that epistemology using the cyborg's relations with other systems of knowledge. Interruptional relations is a design of the

cyborgian futuristic politics where each relation of a cyborg is interrupted by its other relations. Interruptional relations can explain and solidify multidirectional relations and resistances for the future, neither rejecting nor completely embracing any one relation. The concept of inter-ruptional relations is not prescriptive; rather, it is inspired by existing practices of feminist poli-tics. However, the interruptional relations that *C Sharp C Blunt* practices provide a fuller roadmap for the future to embrace what might seem like contradictions in postcolonial feminist practices. In this chapter, I study how *C Sharp C Blunt* establishes a complex connection with the concept of cyclical time while foregrounding gender politics in postcolonial India. I employ a cyclical structure by returning to various stages of Shilpa, the app, in unpacking the produc-tive tensions between Hindu conceptions of cyclicality and Western ideas of progress through technology.

   *C Sharp C Blunt* features three versions of Shilpa, the singing app: the first one is Shilpa 202, the second one is Shilpa 404, the third one is Shilpa 606. Even though the numeration of Shilpa indicates linearity and progress—and the existence of Shilpa hints at the growing software industry in India—the play resists the neoliberal rhetoric of economic progress and a techno-cratic future through the concept of cyclicality. Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies, although in different ways, refer to cyclical time. According to Hindu cosmology, "the universe is created, destroyed, and re-created in eternally repetitive cycles of time" (Subramaniam 146). In *C Sharp C Blunt* too, each cycle is a simultaneous movement forward as well as backward. *C Sharp C Blunt* moves forward in making Shilpa stronger, more powerful. At the same time, Shilpa becomes more porous. As she is born and reborn, she is not who she was when she was first made. Despite several technological advancements in each cycle, Shilpa continues to act out in ways she is not supposed to because she absorbs the trauma of the singer and the actress who give her their voice and body. In the second cycle, she also absorbs bugs, which give her the power to be irreverent. Shilpa's boundaries as a singing app are made thinner as she goes for-ward. More importantly, the play, as it progresses, also digresses because Shilpa the app is closer to being vanished as well as to being born again. The beginning and the ending both are in the same direction. For example, in the second cycle, the machine (in this case, a sound box) play-ing the role of patriarchal society, asks intrusive, misogynistic questions about the actress's sexu-ality, marriage, and work, such as "Why do you have to stay out till so late? Can you handle the pressure? Do you make more money than your husband?" The questions are repetitive, mechanical, rhythmic, with little to no time for answering. The singer, played by Pallavi, breaks down in anger. She yells at the machine to stop. Realizing that there is no way to make it stop, she goes off stage, brings a hammer, and starts breaking the machine, embodied onstage in this moment in the form of a soundbox. The machine, who is also an actor like Pallavi, playing people in the fictional actress's life, stops the act, and speaks to Pallavi as a co-performer: "Ow, you have gone too far … Restart the play in safe mode. Restart the play in non-violent mode". It also invites the audience to go to the box office to request a refund. Shilpa and the machine together stop the play itself from progressing. Haunted by the trauma, Shilpa falls apart and starts again. Cyclical time in *C Sharp C Blunt* devours the world it creates by inching towards the end, so that it can begin again.

   However, *C Sharp C Blunt* does not uncritically embrace cyclicality. The cyclical conception of time has been steered in the recent rise of Hindu right-wing nationalist rhetoric to glorify the ahistorical "Hindu past" when India supposedly excelled in scientific advancements. As Banu Subramanian writes in her book *Holy Science*, "Hindu nationalists invoke not only an ancient mythological corpus but also a 'mythoscientific' one, challenging the very basis of academic knowing and knowledge" (xi). She argues, "While rebirth and reincarnation can indeed lend stories their cyclical properties, so can the ghosts caught in the cycles of injustice. The ghosts of

misogyny, racism, colonialism, casteism, heterosexism, and other long-enduring historical forces also live on" (38). Hindu cosmologies, concepts of cyclical time, and avatars in stories and mythologies often hide oppressive caste structures and misogyny. *C Sharp C Blunt* consciously borrows from the West and Western technologies to oppose "Hinduizing" science. Its references to culture are steeped in anger towards patriarchal violence. In each cycle, the audience also watched the fictional actress and singer who provided the app with their likeness and voice respectively navigate through the patriarchal entertainment industry and society. For example, during the "rape scene" in the first cycle, the play alludes to Indian cinema's preoccupation with rape. The director describes how the scene is going to be filmed: the heroine runs gracefully, men jump at her and hold her down, the camera cuts to shots of "statues falling down, shots of flowers being crushed, shots of milk boiling over" and then the camera shows "an empty look" of the actress. The director and the annoyed actress recreate the scene in front of the cackling audience, who is familiar with these commonly used cultural tropes of rape scenes. However, in the second cycle, the actress is a cyborg within a video game who completes her mission of robbery, conquering all the obstacles. Throughout the video game, she is told that she is weak, foolish, and delicate, but the game gives her options to ignore this advice and go forward with the mission. By fusing with the machine, she escapes the cultural gender stereotypes. In the first cycle, Shilpa behaves exactly the way many feminized androids are programmed to behave: subservient, domesticated, attentive, and pleasing (Costa 59; Sutko 569). In the subsequent cycles, by becoming updated, and absorbing "bugs" and therefore "malfunctioning", Shilpa begins to confront the horrors of gender violence. For example, Shilpa, at the beginning of each cycle, states some facts and statistics about her current "users", the audience. In the first cycle, those statistics include some humorous details about how many people neglected to turn their phones off for the show and how many times they honked their vehicles' horns in Bangalore while on their way to the play. However, during the second round, those statistics turn grave:

> There is you again. Male, between 35 to 49 years. There is 36 probability that you have invested in mutual funds and the same probability that you have sexually violated a girl at least once in your life. And there is you, female. Between 18 to 25 years. There is a 50 probability that you are planning to get a tattoo below your shoulder blade before the new year eve. And an 80% probability that you have been molested at least 10 times in your life. 20 of my users felt the new version of me should support dirty language. But 80 of you have never told anyone about your first sexual assault.

Shilpa publicly makes allegations of sexual assault. While not directed against individuals, these are jarring and powerful. In the shows that I attended, awkward, nervous laughter, heavy silence, uncomfortable shifting of legs, and stifling tension filled the room in this moment. There are no avatars of male gods that save different epochs of cyclical time. Rather, feminist struggle against the "ghosts of misogyny, racism, colonialism, casteism, heterosexism" acts as a driving force in the cycles of time. The Indian woman could lead the cycles of creation and destruction only when she is fused with the machine.

The cyclicality in *C Sharp C Blunt* is also executed on stage, merging the voice of the actress Pallavi and the sounds of the machine. The play records the lines uttered and songs sung by the characters on stage, plays the recorded voice back, and juxtaposes the freshly recorded sounds with the ongoing live sound. In a recent conversation, the director Sophia Stepf told me that the technology they used for the play is called Ableton Live, a Berlin-based sound software which can layer and loop in real time. This technology informed the dramaturgy of the play. We

witness the real-time recording, mixing, and overlapping of these sounds. Dramaturgically, the Ableton Live sound technology informs and enables the cyclical structure of the play. The play thereby interrupts its relationship to Hindu conceptions of cyclical time and resists the ideas of "pure Hindu past" and divinity ascribed to cyclical time.

*C Sharp C Blunt*, nonetheless, employs cyclicality to establish a critical and interruptive relation with Haraway's conception of the cyborg. As Shilpa 202 is being born, lines from Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" are uttered. A line that is most easily decipherable is this: "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (Haraway 149). This direct quotation of Haraway marks Shilpa's discursive allegiance with Haraway. In other words, Shilpa 202, or the first cycle of *C Sharp C Blunt*, traces her conceptual genealogy to Haraway. However, in the second cycle, Haraway's lines are superimposed with new lines such as "Shilpa is completed and filled with bugs. She is a country". It is unclear whether it is said by Shilpa herself, or the coder, or a narrator.[1] As it progresses, it becomes impossible to separate one series from the other. New, incoherent meanings emerge, which change depending on what the audience members hear amidst the cacophony of intermingling sounds and on what is more audible during a particular show. Haraway's text itself becomes permeable and partial. "She is a country but" is added to a segment of Haraway's line "one can no longer be the source for appropriation of incorporation by the other". This line is not only appropriating Haraway; it is also a subversion of Haraway's use of women of color as a "prosthetic" to the cyborg theory. Chela Sandoval criticizes Haraway for erasing the specificity of different U.S. third world feminisms and generalizing the category "women of color", whose methods and skills become an example for Haraway's theory of the cyborg (171). Similarly, Schueller accuses Haraway of homogenizing women of color and celebrating their works only in relation to their subversion of Western myths (78–79). Vandana Shiva too argues that this utopic dream of the cyborg is a "technological paradigm of economic globalization" that seizes resources and knowledge of women of color in the third world and ignores the exploitation of third-world resources by Western corporations. *C Sharp C Blunt* uses cyclicality where Haraway's lines are played on a loop along with new lines in each new cycle of birth, to distort and re-envision Haraway's cyborg. While Haraway writes, "the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense", the cyborg in India is not devoid of an origin story. She is obsessed with the rituals of origin which initiate each cycle. It is these rituals of birth that define her. While the cyborg in India shares Haraway's postmodern excitement about dissolving boundaries through the "technologized figure of techno-human" (Puar 56), she is also steeped in intersectional politics as an Indian woman who borrows from her own cultural traditions to celebrate multiple births and interrupt her own allegiance to Haraway.

The birth of Shilpa in *C Sharp C Blunt*, however, is not a sanctified process. In contrast to the glorification of motherhood under Hindu patriarchy, the birth of the cyborg in *C Sharp C Blunt* is marked by the intensification of irreverent noise. The noise is created through the fusing of the human and the machine. Once Shilpa is born, she is put through various tests. She often lapses into noise as she misses a tune, or sings in the wrong key, or her voice cracks or becomes hoarse. Shilpa is made of noise. It is through strict training, tweaking, controlling, and surveilling that she becomes the singer app that can please her users. Writing on *Kalpavigyan*, a Bengali word for science fiction in India, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay argues that silence is an "operational principle of counter-science" (451). The figure of the subaltern woman in the science fiction novels he discusses speaks only through the secrets carried by the body. Suchitra Mathur, arguing in a similar vein, extends this to unpack gender politics in Indian science fiction. Women in the texts that she studies are the mistresses of silence (134), who can "transform silence into secret shared knowledge among the select few and make possible a new life, a new existence" (136). They are associated with "neglected margins" (134) and carry the

unknown, the unknowable, the secret. Silence is a locus of power. I read Shilpa as the daughter of the mistresses of silence. As a daughter who inherited this embodied silence, she has witnessed not only its potentials but also its dangers. The historical moment in which she comes to existence—the year that witnessed the emergence of feminist movements throughout the country, following the notorious Nirbhaya gang rape in Delhi—enables Shilpa to be aware of the pitfalls of silence. However, Shilpa does not embrace speech. Speech is legible, comprehensible, neat, present, and hence conquerable and controllable. Shilpa carries the power of indescribability of her foremothers through noise. Noise contains the unknowability and the secrecy of silence. However, noise does not have the soundless stillness of silence. Shilpa's discourses are not unheard. She is loud and unmistakable. By embracing the irreverent noise generated through the fusion of the human and the machine, the cyborg challenges the divinity ascribed to the birth of an epoch in Hindu conception of cyclical time. And in a way, by consciously avoiding any reference to the idea of goddess while celebrating the possibilities of the cyborg future, the play also uses its connections with Haraway in critically interrupting its relationship with Hindu conceptions of cyclical time.

The cyborg is intimately, critically, and partially connected with the concepts of cyclicality, progress, and Haraway's cyborg. I call this interruptional relations. The play interrupts the concept of progress with the concept of cyclicality by drawing from Hindu cosmologies. However, the cyborg does not have an uncomplicated affiliation with Hindu cultural traditions. Its relations with cultural traditions are interrupted by its attachment to Western science, where the fictional actress and Shilpa resist sexism within their culture by fusing with the machine. Moreover, in its criticism of the misogynistic cultural tropes, the cyborg employs repetition and progress: Shilpa becomes stronger with each update. While the cyborg in this play associates explicitly with Western technology as well as Haraway's conception of the cyborg, it does not embrace them completely. This relation is interrupted with the cyborg's association with cyclicality and its multiple origins. The relations that I describe here are oppositional, partial, but also interruptional. Interruption, however, does not weaken the relation. Instead, its relations are consolidated through its criticism. Interruptions define the nature of the cyborg's many relations.

The concept of interruptional relations explains the structure and aesthetics of political relations of cyborg feminists in South Asian Futurism. In contemporary postcolonial contexts of India where feminist struggles are addressing both global capitalism and Hindu nationalism as competing and complementing forces, noise as a multidirectional critique has developed into a trope of resistance in science fiction. For instance, similar to *C Sharp C Blunt*, in Indrapramit Das's recent short story "Kali:Na", the goddess Kali's infusion with technology and her porosity to unwanted impurities enable her to create chaos, and to employ noise as a tool to confront both cultural gender stereotypes and resist capitalist corporations. Kali:Na, the digital goddess, inherits the power of Kali in Hindu mythological stories to wreak havoc on the plans of the corporation that created her, while her digital form and networks enable her to defy the heteropatriarchal and casteist expectations of a good Indian woman and a goddess. Similarly, in Pervin Saket's short story "Test of Fire", as well as in many other short stories in the collection *Breaking the Bow*, the feminist heroines' relationship with Hindu mythology and Western science can be characterized as interruptional. Interruptional relations are the form of multidirectional and disruptive resistance in "desi" futurism.

*C Sharp C Blunt*, however, remains heteronormative and cis-normative in its articulations of feminist politics through the gender binary. Moreover, the play also fails to address caste politics and its centrality to the experience of gender-based violence, which, as Dalit feminists have pointed out, have been underplayed by upper-caste feminists. While the play remains limited in its engagement with intersectional politics, the interruptional relations that it envisions compel

the cyborg to question and interrupt each of its own relations, including heteronormativity and caste politics. In other words, engaging with the critique of the cyborg's relations and associations is not only possible but is fundamental to the design of interruptional relations. In the postcolonial feminist future that the interruptional relations advocates for, resistance does not lie outside of relations; it is the very fabric of intimacy and connection.

## Acknowledgments

## Note

1   In a recent conversation, the director Sophia Stepf noted that the line "[s]he is a country" is not in the script, but she is also trying to figure out what the actress MD Pallavi says in the archival video. Meanwhile, a fellow audience member confirmed that they also hear it as "[s]he is a country". Here, I am interested in what an audience member can make out amidst the noise during a particular performance.

## Works Cited

*C Sharp C Blunt*. Performed by MD Pallavi, directed by Sophia Stepf, Flinn Theater, Ranga Shankara Bangalore Performance, 8 Aug. 2013.

"C Sharp C Blunt." *Flinn Works*, https://www.flinnworks.de/en/project/c-sharp-c-blunt. Accessed 2 Oct. 2020.

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments*. Princeton UP, 1993.

Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva. "On the Mythologerm: Kalpavigyan and the Question of Imperial Science." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2016, pp. 435–458.

Costa, Pedro. "Conversing with Personal Digital Assistants: On Gender and Artificial Intelligence." *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2018, pp. 59–71.

D'Souza, Ryan A. "Imagining a Desi Future." *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2019, pp. 47–59.

Gopal, Priyamvada. "On Decolonisation and the University." *Textual Practice*, vol. 35, no. 6, 2021, pp. 873–899.

Gordon, Rebecca, and Bob Wing. "Global Brahmanism: The Meaning of the WTO Protests: An Interview with Dr. Vandana Shiva." *ColorLines: Race, Color, Action*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2000, pp. 30–32.

Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991.

Mathur, Suchitra. "Caught Between the Goddess and the Cyborg: Third-World Women and the Politics of Science in Three Works of Indian Science Fiction." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2004, pp. 119–138.

Narayan, Uma. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*. Routledge, 1997.

Puar, Jasbir K. "'I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory." *philoSOPHIA*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, pp. 49–66.

Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. U of Minnesota P, 2000.

Schueller, Malini Johar. "Analogy and (White) Feminist Theory: Thinking Race and the Color of the Cyborg Body." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2005, pp. 63–92.

Shiva, Vandana. "Economic Globalization, Ecological Feminism and Sustainable Development." *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1997, pp. 22–27.

Subramaniam, Banu. *Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism*. U of Washington P, 2019.

Sutko, Daniel. "Theorizing Femininity in Artificial Intelligence: A Framework for Undoing Technology's Gender Troubles." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2020, pp. 567–692.

# 44

# SPECULATIVE HONG KONG

## Silky Potentials of a Living Science Fiction

*Euan Auld and Casper Bruun Jensen*

This chapter explores speculative potentials of Hong Kong, complex site of opium wars and colonialism, hub of megafinance, and home of kung fu movies; a city where sleaze and glitz, high-density gritty urbanity, and high-tech dreams and realities merge and separate. Between 2014, when the student-led Umbrella Movement rose against the erosion of the city's quasi-independence,[1] and 2020, when a sweeping "national security law" was enacted to quell ongoing unrest, Hong Kong's likely future and the possibility of alternatives were matters of constant concern. "What if dictatorship and democracy can coexist?" For the poet and literary scholar Tammy Ho Lai-Ming ("Hong Kong" 128), this paradoxical question, which began with the return of Hong Kong to China, defines the city as a *living science fiction*. Inspired by the poet Xi Xi's evocation of the city's precariously "balanced between earth and sky", Ho Lai-Ming ("Hong Kong", 128) describes the city as floating; weighed down by the tension between its supposed autonomy and required subservience. In this chapter we take Hong Kong as a *still floating, living science fiction* as the starting point for experimenting with speculative propositions.

As a floating city, Hong Kong is ripe with speculative potentials. And yet, Hong Kong is often depicted as a particular genre of science fiction. The author Albert Tam characterizes the city as politically disillusioned and hyper-capitalist (Karacs); the movie *Ten Years* depicts a series of near-future dystopias (Marsh); and while images of the 2019 anti-extradition movement went viral, Jeannette Ng's Campbell Award speech described Hong Kong as "the most cyberpunk city in the world" (Ng). If Hong Kong is a *living science fiction*, it tends to be seen as a rather bleak one.

Thinking with this dystopian imagination while also aiming to exceed it, we construct speculative propositions for Hong Kong, the city, as a *living* science fiction. This gives the chapter a particular inflection. Rather than focusing on works *by* Hong Kong writers or works *featuring* the city, we experiment with lateral movements across "real" and "virtual" worlds, both conceived as open, permeable sets (Jensen). Some of these worlds are real, yet apparently imbued with science-fictional components, like Hong Kong itself. Others—Ken Liu's[2] silkpunk[3] *The Grace of Kings* (2015) and Kim Stanley Robinson's alternative world history *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002)—are fictions yet contain elements that can be activated as potential, living ingredients in alternative Hong Kong Futurisms and cofutures. We place these works alongside philosophers, poets, and the many students, activists, writers, and citizens, who participate in Hong Kong as a project to be enacted. *Speculative Hong Kong* is elicited as cross-pollinations of these divergent worlds.

In the first half of this chapter, we thematically exploit the supple and fluid imaginary of silkpunk to redescribe Hong Kong activism in terms of ephemeral sociomaterial tactics oriented to keeping alternative futures open. Less dystopian than cyberpunk, the silkpunk of *The Grace of Kings* allows us to keep at bay some of the rigid binaries routinely used to characterize Hong Kong's political situation. Subsequently, *The Years of Rice and Salt* provides us with a quasi-model for thinking through alternative histories and their challenges. Our ways of engaging with these works and worlds is thus variable. The earlier sections locate a silky orientation in *The Grace of Kings*, which we activate to locate virtual potentials in ongoing Hong Kong realities. As we turn to *The Years of Rice and Salt*, the balance tips as we seek to extract and construct speculative propositions and cosmopolitical pathways towards a Hong Kong future that, precisely, does not exist.

## That's Insanely Cyberpunk

Hong Kong has been affiliated with cyberpunk—dystopian (near-)futures where advanced technologies are used for repressive political purposes in the context of social and environmental disruption—at least since *Blade Runner* (1982). Albert Tam, an award-winning author, describes the movie as a major influence. Reflecting on his experiences with real estate hegemony in Sai Ying Pun, in the Western District of Hong Kong Island, Tam describes a gradual thinning of local cultures and the ascendance of speculative finance as slices of the future already alive at the heart of the city. About his 2010 cyberpunk thriller *Humanoid Software*, Tam states:

> As an international city where East meets West, with the rapid beat of living and consumption, micro habitats, hyper-capitalism, political disillusion, one in five of the people probably living under the poverty line … I'm [living] in a dystopian and hyperreal city.[4]

Tam foregrounds Hong Kong as a social dystopia, but it has also been gripped by growing political despair. The 2014 Umbrella Movement called out Beijing's proposed electoral reforms as a sham, demanded universal suffrage, and staged a 79-day occupation of three central hubs. Far from budging, the government[5] declared the protests a violation of the law instigated by agents of the West. As battles between protesters and riot squads took center stage, Hong Kong's famed blend of cultures, high-tech and low life, seemed to be replaced with a hardening of identities that brooked no fluidity.

While images of activists using lasers to confuse facial recognition software went viral during the 2019 anti-extradition protests, Jeannette Ng described a Hong Kong slipping further into science fiction as:

> protesters struggle with the masked, anonymous stormtroopers of an autocratic Empire. They have literally just held her largest illegal gathering in their history. As we speak they are calling for a horological revolution in our time. They have held laser pointers to the skies and tried to impossibly set alight the stars. I cannot help be proud of them, to cry for them, and to lament their pain.
>
> *(Ng)*

As vivid displays of hypercapitalism undergirded by state repression and high-tech surveillance suggest, cyberpunk captures something significant about the city. However, the hopes for a different future exhibited in the protest movement exceed this dystopian cyberpunk imaginary.
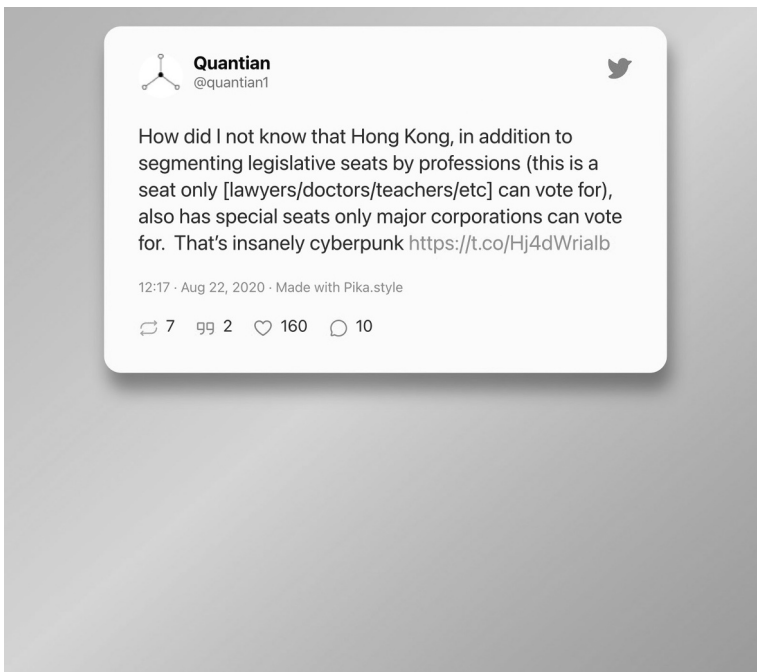
*Figure 44.1* @quantian1. *Twitter*, 22 Aug. 2020, 12:17 p.m., https://twitter.com/quantian1/status/1297040132005036032.



*Figure 44.2* @raykwong. *Twitter*, 4 Oct. 2019, 9: 55 p.m., https://twitter.com/raykwong/status/1180134419014643712.

Tammy Ho Lai-Ming's (127) description of a floating city weighed down by the absurdity of its prescribed identity was published during the year of the Umbrella Movement. The science fiction anthology *Dark Fluid* (2017), with contributions from local authors, community organizers, artists, and activists came shortly after. The editor/curator Angela Su describes the protagonists of the stories as "variables", who, unable to "provide us with solutions," are nevertheless "able to open up the future to infinite possibilities" (20–21). A similar interest is elicited by the alternative history *1984* created by Mr. Pizza,[6] in which the protagonist travels back in time to prevent the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration (see Su 237).

Contributing to explorations of Hong Kong as a space threatened by disappearance,[7] these works also resonate with Ng's midway shift in emphasis from stormtroopers and empire to a horological revolution setting stars alight; a science-fictional opening towards alternative futures living in the present. In the following, silkpunk provides us with a speculative device for teasing out and nurturing such openings virtually present in Hong Kong protests and emergencies.[8]

## "Be Water": Speculative Propositions beyond the Perfect Dictionary

We construct an unusual route towards Hong Kong alternative cofutures. The term "porridge SF" has been used to describe author Xia Jia's mingling of SF and fantasy in works even mushier than so-called soft SF.[9] With inspiration from Michel Serres's explorations of literature as "small-scale models, dense with meaning and truth" which condense and articulate the "gestures and acts of their times" (qtd. in Brown 5), we continue to blend the porridge by conceiving of SF worlds and Hong Kong realities as leaky sets (Jensen). Constructing a zone where variously sourced SF, fantasy, and philosophical writings mingle with Hong Kong practices and events, the chapter experimentally hybridizes fictional worlds and ongoing realities.

The speculative and pragmatic underpinning of this endeavor can be articulated with reference to Alfred N. Whitehead's argument that "every form in its very nature refers to some sort of realization" (69). Porridge as a sci-fi potential entails a reference to real porridge just as "forms of evil require evil things". As for potentiality, Whitehead argues that it continuously overflows into actuality as "life and meaning and motion. It refers to inclusion and exclusion. It refers to hope, fear, and intention". And it refers, he insisted, "to past, present, and future". This means that forms of potentiality and realization entwine with questions of alternative futures, futurisms, or cofutures.

Giving form to potential is a matter of material composition. On the one hand, diverse elements are internally composed to form a particular "total thing" while, on the other, this "thing" affects its external environment due to the relations it forms with other entities (Whitehead 45). Crucially, acts of composition introduce gaps between forms and their realizations. As Didier Debaise writes, it follows from this slippage that "a multiplicity of possible worlds is attached" to each actually occurring event (84). This is why history never follows a "routine course", a troubling fact that severely challenges determinist understandings of historical compositions and trajectories (Debaise 84).

Even a cursory reading illustrates the extent to which explanations of Hong Kong are overdetermined by conventional dichotomies: East and West, capitalism and socialism, left and right, colonialism and globalization (Lam). As observed by the journalist @wilfredchan on Twitter, "So many tropes & binaries Westerners take for granted—East vs. West, left vs. right, capitalism vs. socialism, colonialism vs. globalization—exist at once in Hong Kong and not in a straightforward way".[10] Critical only in the most superficial sense, social and political commentaries that assume the adequacy of those binaries for making sense of everything offer a perfect illustration

of what Whitehead called the "Fallacy of the Perfect Dictionary"—the "very natural belief" that all fundamental ideas "applicable to human experience" are already fully known (173).

In contrast, what Whitehead called the "speculative school" of thought starts from recognition of the limits of the current dictionary. Close attention to "possibilities that continue to have a latent presence" forms the basis for "speculative propositions" (Debaise 86) that seek *to bring the dictionary up to speed with events by expanding or transforming the vocabulary.* In a context where the future of Hong Kong is widely perceived as narrowing, or vanishing, it is more important than ever to speculatively expand the dictionary to help keep the city afloat.

Science fiction can support this endeavor. In *Dark Fluid* (2017), Angela Su likens SF to an "anthropologist's experiment" that makes it possible to "challenge fundamental concepts we take for granted" (19). Amy Chan Kit-Sze highlights the capacity of SF to defamiliarize and reorganize experience (30). Following their leads, we experiment with fluid passageways "between pure potentialities and actualities" (Debaise 85). Lateral movements in several directions are made possible by *blending* the anthropological ambition to understand the city as a *living* science fiction with SF works understood in analogy with anthropological experiments.

To accomplish this trick, we repurpose the popular protest slogans, *be water*, adopted from Laozi via the kung fu star Bruce Lee.



*Figure 44.3* NHK. Anonymous: The Hong Kong Protest Mantra.

*Source:* NHK, 2019.

Aside from indexing the fluidity and shifting identities of the actual protest movement, *be water* encourages exploration of what can be made to leak between actual and potential Hong Kongs.

We begin by extracting from Liu's *The Grace of Kings* a silky orientation, which helps us redescribe the 2019 protests in terms of ephemeral material tactics.

### Of Silk and Punk

*The Grace of Kings* tells of city states waging war in fluctuating factions across the islands of Dara. A bickering pantheon of gods add commentary and attempt various manipulations, often unsuccessfully. The story begins with a rebellion against the Emperor Mapidéré by two unlikely friends, soon to be enemies: the invincible warrior Mata Zyndu, obsessed with honor and tradition, and the wily trickster Kuni Garu, for whom the future is an open question.[11] In this world, technological innovation, gained by observations of animals, landscapes, and weather patterns, is inseparable from the whimsical realm of gods, likened to the "wind and the tides, currents of great power that may be ridden only by those willing to help themselves" (Liu, *Grace* 306).

Focusing on experimental adaptations of flexible organic elements, Dara's technological imaginary—silkpunk—provides us with an orientation to Hong Kong's 2019 protests as ephemeral material tactics oriented to the future. According to Liu, silkpunk is indebted to the economist W. Brian Arthur's theory of technological evolution as recombinations of "existing machines into a new machine that achieves a new purpose" (Arthur). In one sequence, the inventor Luan's grandfather created "crossbows augmented with firework rockets" to bring down winged Xana airships inspired by the anatomy of the Mingén falcon (199). Later, these airships are countered by battle kites designed with a look to the "great albatrosses and cliff-dwelling eagles found along Haan's bleak coastline, who stayed aloft for hours without flapping their wings" (203), and by silk and bamboo balloons running on swamp gas, modeled after children's flying lanterns.

If "silk", according to Liu, is about "respectfully appropriating the past", "-punk" entails "disrespectfully challenging authority" (Kidd). Thus, for silkpunk to become part of speculative propositions about Hong Kong futures, fluid technologies must become part of new political forms. Moving sideways from Dara insurgencies to Hong Kong emergencies, we elicit such recombinations as sociomaterial experiments in activism. In quintessential cyberpunk moments of the 2019 protests, demonstrators used handheld laser pointers to disrupt surveillance and facial recognition systems. In a widely reported episode, police arrested a student leader for carrying laser pointers, which were described as "offensive weapons". He retorted that they were for stargazing.[12] Following the incident, police staged a public demonstration of the capacity of lasers to burn paper. That same day, activists distributed flyers for a "stargazing rally" to be held outside the Hong Kong Space Museum in Tsim Sha Tsui.

As it happened, this was the Chinese Valentine's Day, or Qixi Festival, a traditional celebration of the annual meeting and forbidden love of the weaver girl and the cowherd. One side of the invitation flyer depicted the reunited lovers of the night skies, while the other referenced viral images of the controversial laser pointers. In the evening, hundreds showed up, trying, as Ng wrote, to impossibly "set alight the stars".

If the flyer "respectfully appropriated" the past, the event also quite obviously disrespected authority. This was clearly recognized in headlines like "Hong Kong Protesters Trolled Police with an All-Night Laser Party" (Hume). As the arm of politics as usual—*party politics*—the police emphasized the unruly, destructive potentials of lasers. In contrast, the protesters conjured *party as politics*, a silky scenario where the two separated lovers meet and bring earth and sky together just for a while. If the form and efficacy of party politics depends on repressive obduracy, *party as politics* as exhibited by the event was supple and ephemeral. During a time of

*Figure 44.4* Hong Kong Free Press, Untitled/Photo: Supplied.
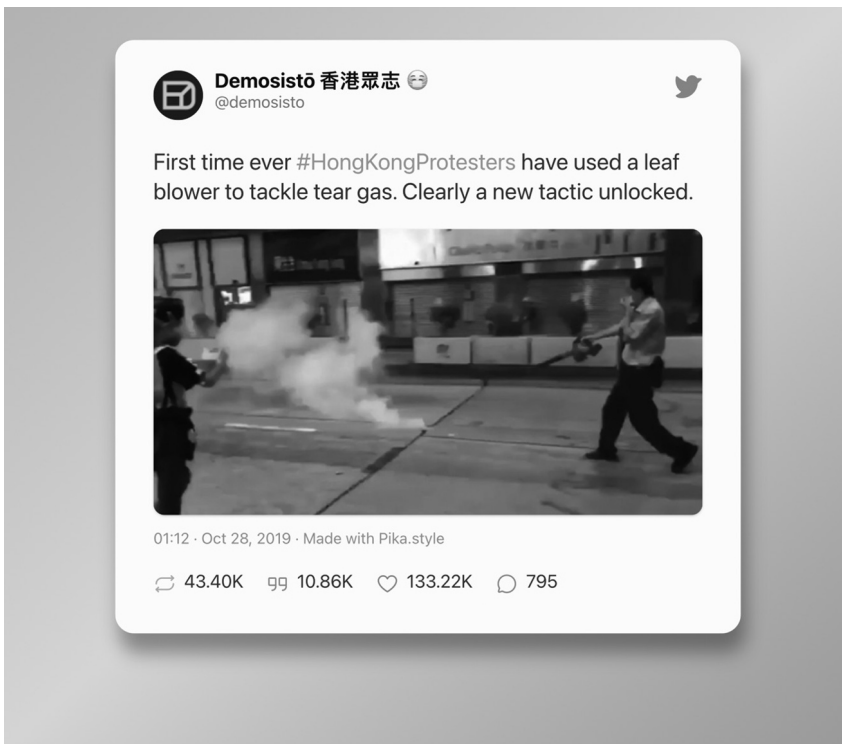


*Figure 44.5* @demosisto. *Twitter,* 28 Oct. 2020, 1:12 a.m.

growing despair, it created a temporary opening to different futures. Despite dissipating almost as soon as it happened, the party persisted as memories that kept open the possibility of reactivation later on, elsewhere. Long after, participants would describe the moment as euphoric.

Meanwhile, protest techniques proliferated. So-called Lennon Walls overflowed with Post-It notes expressing solidarity. Handheld vacuum cleaners, and the occasional leaf-blower, were brought out to repel tear gas.

And just as Luan, the young inventor of *The Grace of Kings*, created better shields by "layering leather with fine mesh wire" (199), protesters wrapped themselves in cellophane and wielded umbrellas. As a dramatic counterpoint to the black riot gear of police squads, the iconic sea of yellow umbrellas had a powerful galvanizing effect on the movement.

If the varied uses of umbrellas, lasers, and other items show "silkiness" as an *effect* of sociotechnical composition, they also make clear the crucial role these recombinations had in *giving form* to the movement. Moreover, as Whitehead suggested, and as we shall now see, composition has an outwards aspect. It concerns the capacity of the movement as a "total thing" to seep into and affect Hong Kong's heterogeneous environments.

## Silky Emergenc(i)es

Since the so-called Star Ferry riots in 1966, Hong Kongers have used public protests to hold the authorities to account.[13] Even so, the political scene has often been described as apathetic (Lam). Against the background of the violent crackdown at Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989, guarded optimism for the future swiftly morphed into anxiety and fear.

Since the 1997 handover, various mobilizations prepared the grounds for the Umbrella Movement,[14] which emerged in 2014 with the realization that the "high degree of autonomy" guaranteed until 2047 under "one country, two systems" was quickly eroding. But although there was a unified front against assimilation, it quickly became clear that the movement encompassed incompatible positions. Moderates and radicals quarreled over aims and means, and the authorities moved in to exploit the divergence (Li). But when the latest round of protests erupted in 2019, the form of the movement had changed.

Visible leaders and a fixed program were now absent. As for the resolute-sounding slogan "five demands, not one less", it amounted to little more than a request for some breathing space and accountability for the authorities, who, since colonial times, have resembled Dara's meddling gods.[15] As the need for fluid response overrode the importance of reaching agreement over ultimate aims, events were "spontaneously coordinated" via Telegram and other apps or groups, some with more than 200,000 members.

Officials were bewildered by a movement without leaders or binding ideology, and police accustomed to violent confrontations found it difficult to deal with ephemeral events, dispersed disobedience, and party as politics. And as general chaos ensued, much of the public seemed to cherish the carnivalesque aspects of the protests. They were materially destructive, to be sure—there were burned cars, broken windows, and closed metro stations—but they also disrupted the authorities, revealing them as bumbling fools rather than omnipotent gods.

Inspired by Bruce Lee's martial arts philosophy, the protests popularized a variety of slogans: "flow like water," "strong like ice," "gather like dew," and "disperse like fog."

At one level, these phrases simply gestured at the need to avoid dangerous confrontations and the risk of arrest. Yet, they also hearken back to Laozi's teachings, according to which strategy depends on harnessing the dynamism inherent in configurations, as so well illustrated by water: "if a wall retaining a large amount of water is breached, the water can only rush down,

and in its impetuous surge forward, it carries everything in front" (Jullien 28). Since "the propensity of that which is full is to eventually spill over" (Jullien 230), *tendency* can be used to one's advantage. Avoiding the fury of the gods, the better to enrage them, one withdraws only "to be all the more certainly pulled forward" (Jullien 229).

Those who favor complete integration often use the complementary dualism of yin and yang as an image of the relation between Hong Kong and China. Critics are quick to point out that this misleads by projecting as harmonious a future likely to be hierarchical and absorptive (e.g., Perl). From the other side, the battle cry "if we burn, you burn with us" (*laam caau*)[16] transforms harmony into mutual conflagration. In contrast with these opposed identity-formations, "flow like water" operationalizes fluidity as an experimental tactical advantage. Vague identities make it possible to slip through gaps and cracks and find possibilities for transformation in unusual places. Like anonymous Lennon Walls dotted with messages of resistance—later, blank paper or indecipherable code—or impermanent Telegram messages *dispersing like fog.*

Although the 2019 protests were tinged with desperation, they succeeded for a while in subverting the authorities. However, hope has been hard to sustain. Even before years of COVID restrictions, there were arguments that Hong Kong's youth may never recover from collective trauma.[17] But the lights are not totally out. Horological openings still remain. This is due to silky movements and evanescent moments like party as politics, which temporarily expanded the room for maneuver and kept speculative possibilities for better cofutures.
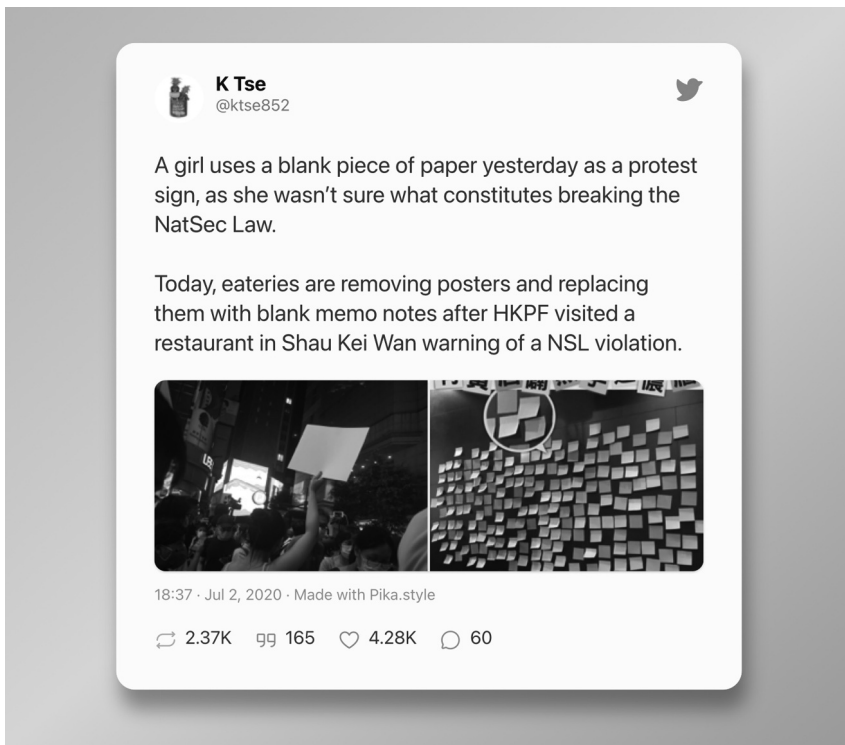
Figure 44.7 @ktse852. *Twitter*, 2 Jul. 2020, 6:37 p.m., https://twitter.com/ktse852/status/1278654119557791745.

> "All life is an experiment," Kuni said. "We are all swallows flying in the storm, and if we should land safely, it will be due to equal measures of luck and skill."
>
> *(Liu, Grace 497)*

What happens next remains uncertain. At the speed of current events—viruses, wars, climate breakdown, unrest—2047, the official expiration date of Hong Kong's autonomy, appears galaxies away.

### Alternative Histories, Alternative Futures

If all life is an experiment, and safety from the storm will be due to luck and skill in equal measure, as Kuni says in *The Grace of Kings*, how might Hong Kong's silky *future* potentials be unlocked? Following the "same" group of characters as they reincarnate in different bodies, times, and constellations, *The Years of Rice and Salt* offers an experimental template.[18]

As a transitional realm between life and death, the bardo[19] operates as a hinge that connects times and stories. Over and over, the protagonists meet and try to take stock of their lives. Over and over, their efforts are deterred by vials of forgetting administered by the Goddess Meng. Unlike the memories carried forward from Hong Kong's stargazing event, this party continuously restarts without learning anything. Only after managing to trick the Goddess will the troupe become able to remember across lifetimes.

*Figure 44.8* @hkfp. *Twitter*, 3 Jul. 2020, 1:20 p.m., https://twitter.com/hkfp/status/12789367235616
15360?lang=en.

Traversing the devastated Magyar plains with his army, the Mongol soldier Bold ceaselessly repeats the heart sutra: "form is emptiness, emptiness form" (Robinson 6). But if form is emptiness, we know from Whitehead that it is also potentiality. The heart sutra concerns the perfection of wisdom. But as Serres suggests, wisdom grows through exposure to heterogeneous sources of instruction. Conjoining the elements, *The Years of Rice and Salt* provides us with an expansive meditation on *cosmopolitical* wisdom.

The form of emptiness gets an Immediate specification as the landscape crossed by Bold's army has been totally emptied by the plague. Almost the entire European population is wiped out. In the absence of these heavyweights of actual colonial history, there is ample room for different cofutures. On Robinson's canvas, Mr. Pizza's wish for alternative history is granted in grand style. On account of its peripheral location, Firanja (Europe) becomes a hotspot for unorthodox Islamic experiments. As for the Americas, they are still invaded and devastated, but differently: by the Chinese from one end, and by Muslim forces from the other. However, the insertion of a single "variable" leads to cascading events that change everything.

After escaping the Chinese invasion of Japan, Busho, a Hokkaido-born *ronin*, finds himself on the American west coast. He ends up among the Haudenosaunee[20] of Ohio, where he gradually gains respect. From this unique position, he warns of a future Chinese invasion, pushes for innovation, and argues for strengthening political coalitions. In Asia, meanwhile, an increasingly fundamentalist and belligerent Islam confronts a Chinese block of such intense bureaucratic disposition that Bold has heard of dead people returned to life because of "the

mistakes of careless celestial scribes" (Robinson 53). As Chinese power grows, even the bardo becomes compartmentalized.

The contrast with Haudenosaunee egalitarianism could hardly be sharper. In the words of Busho:

> Emperors put the gun to the heads of sachems, who put it to warriors, who put it to farmers, and they all together put it to the women … They rule the world, but no one likes them, and when the guns aren't pointed at them, people go away or rebel … Now, I have watched the Hodenosaunee … I see how sons are brought up through their motherline, and cannot inherit anything from their fathers … There can be no emperors here.
>
> *(Robinson 367–368)*

This system, alas, pales in comparison with gigantic contests for power taking place across the Asian continent. Back in the bardo, after having been slaughtered once more in a seemingly endless cycle, Kuo cries out, "we failed! We killed reality itself, do you understand me?" (Robinson 581). Reality and death have become almost indistinguishable. Still, this may be the time to recall Whitehead's insistence that even seemingly "brute facts" include openings to what they are not (122). However precarious, the gap between form and realization means that there are still openings to different futures. Even in perilous proximity, death and reality have not collapsed into one.

In Firanja, unorthodox Sufis are threatened by fundamentalist forces. The city of Nsara teeters on the brink of disaster until saved by the surprise appearance of the Hodenosaunee navy. Life regains a slender foothold. Eventually, dissent spreads within the Chinese empire, where the firebrand Kung finds an audience among people exhausted by war: "it's China we can change … and if we change China, then we change the world" (Robinson 724). Predictably, such counter-revolutionary talk is punished, but, expressive of a collective yearning for an alternative future, it cannot ultimately be suppressed.

"In times like these," Kung would say, "everyone becomes a sort of intellectual, as matters so dire demand to be thought through. That's the glory of these times. They have woken us up" (Robinson 730). What cofutures have we woken to?

### "A Project to Be Enacted"

The protagonists of *The Years of Rice and Salt* give content to history, but they also reflect on its form. Absent a fixed horizon of historical progress, we encounter a palette of viewpoints, none of which have any definite edge. Towards the end, the Chinese scholar Zhu maps the historiographical possibilities, from civilizational collisions to Dharma and Bodhisattva histories.[21] His own preference centers on "phase change moments" where new sensitivities emerge from seemingly innocuous events—like Busho's encounter with the Hodenosaunee—and give rise to cascading effects. Faced with his student Kiruna's objection that this makes historical explanation impossible, Zhu replies that it just might be better to focus on the future.

This exchange exemplifies Serres's view of "rationality" as "less a juncture under control than an adventure to be had" (qtd. in Brown 6). This resonates with Whitehead's insistence that no "dictionary" holds all the terms adequate to grasp cascades of novel events. It also aligns with Kuni's depiction of life as an experiment, where swallows try to safely navigate the storm. Even if the future cannot be predicted, Zhu observes, "it exists for us now as a project to be enacted" (Robinson 673). Inspired by these ideas, we have explored speculative openings for alternative Hong Kong futures and futurisms. We have done so by making the dictionary and its terms

available for revision and by articulating the protest movement as silky sociomaterial form, the future-oriented political potentials of which hinge on their evanescence.

To the side of high-profile protests, potentials emerge in the margins. *Dark Fluid* evokes alternative economies, farming practices, and community models as reflecting "possibilities of change" that might translate into new social organization, family structures, or technology development (Su 238). The unorthodox art historian-anthropologist Line Marie Thorsen has argued that these eco-artist farming collectives are at the center of multiple Hong Kong controversies not despite, but *because of* their marginality and distance from the center (249). Their effort to *slow things down* elicits a stark horological contrast with the frantic pace of urban Hong Kong. It is not coincidental that one emerged during the 2009 Anti-Express Rail Link Movement, which aimed to speed up connections by mowing down landscapes and cutting through villages. The now-defunct home page described "a place for growing fresh vegetables as well as new forms of community, with the belief that organic farming is critical to social movements and overthrowing mediocre government" (Thorsen 255). Indeed, Thorsen argues, the practice of "farming *as if* the future was up for grabs becomes a political and aesthetic act in itself… The slow, reparative work of farming *is* the protest" (258–259, emphasis in original). Simultaneously opposing sleek both hyper-globalization and assimilationist discourses, this slow-motion protest quietly bypasses the self-destructive embrace of *laam caau*.

Here we encounter a surprising connection between the eco-farmers and the decolonial platform Lausan (流傘), which exhibits a "Haudenosaunee" approach to coalition building across worlds. Lausan exceeds the dictionary dichotomies by connecting Hong Kong's future with transnational issues from Black Lives Matter and sex workers' rights to recent uprisings in Belarus, Thailand, and elsewhere. In turn, these movements have adapted a range of fluid tactics from Hong Kong, and indeed cross-fertilized as the *Milk Tea Alliance* between Thai, Taiwanese, and Hong Kongese activists. These coalitions and movements also suggest the potential significance of bringing Yudhanjaya Wijeratne's *ricepunk*—revolving around "chameleons from the teeming lands" living chaotic lives in "gleaming cities with police states" accompanied by thousands of utopias and millions of gods—into the speculative dictionary. After all, there are more than 400,000 such domestic worker chameleons, from Indonesia and the Philippines, in Hong Kong alone.

We end by briefly elaborating the relation between these *partially existing* silky potentials and speculative pathways towards the enactment of alternative Hong Kong futurisms.

## Hong Kong, Still Floating

Stuck in trench warfare in the Gansu corridor, the Chinese soldier Kuo brings out a toast. Unbelievably, his small group has survived "the Six Great Errors, and the Three Incredible Fuck-ups, and the Nine Greatest Incidents of Bad Luck … There must be hungry ghosts holding big umbrellas over us, brothers" (Robinson 559), he muses, or how to make sense of it?

This chapter has traveled into a zone of indeterminacy, where Hong Kong events, silkpunk, and alternative history could mingle and mesh. Within this zone, we have explored "glances of unrealized potential" for alternative futurisms.

In Hong Kong, the umbrellas are down, for now. According to some, the city is as good as dead.

Yet, despite having received more than its share of "forms of evil", Hong Kong still floats. It floats due to the living science fiction of students and schoolchildren posting coded messages on Lennon Walls. To protesters and activists giving ephemeral form to party as politics. To farmers and communities pursuing their quiet "horological revolution" to slow things down. It floats because of Su's variables who keep the future open (20–21). And because of Xi Xi's "little

*Figure 44.9* @Lm_is_Tweeting. Twitter, 30 June. 2020, 9.27 a.m. https://twitter.com/Lm_is_Tweeting/
status/1277790760436293633.

citizens" whose seemingly "insignificant stories, allegories and fairy tales" may, in the end, matter more than "grand statements" (Ho Lai Ming, "Xi Xi" 9). They have provided us with partial instructions for an alternative future. By blending yet more science fiction into these worlds, this chapter has constructed speculative propositions supporting their efforts to keep the city afloat. Speculative Hong Kong: a cosmopolitics buoyed by silky potentials.

## Acknowledgments

## Notes

1 As outlined in the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 and inscribed in the notion of "one country, two systems".
2 In one sense, our focus on Hong Kong as a living science fiction clears the way for experimentation with unorthodox sources. Yet, Ken Liu, a mainland Chinese writer based in the United States—really? Cognizant of his ambiguous position, we deploy silkpunk as a generative *speculative orientation*. Regardless of Liu's identity and irrespective of whether he would sympathize with our appropriation, silkpunk provides us with materials for thinking with, and in front of, Hong Kong.

3  Schematically, a blend of science fiction and fantasy which constructs a technological world from the supple, flexible materials of traditional East Asia (Liu, *Grace*; see also Misra).

4  Ironically, the Tai Kwun Contemporary hosted an exhibition called "Phantom Plane, Cyberpunk in the Year of the Future" just before the COVID-19 pandemic.

5  Hong Kong is a "special administrative region" of the People's Republic of China governed by a body of executive authorities.

6  Mr. Pizza is a web-based author whose "Lost on a Red Minibus to Taipo" was turned into the movie *The Midnight After*.

7  For more information, see Abbas.

8  Different *alter-punks* including steampunk and solarpunk could be experimentally activated for other purposes. We briefly touch on the specific relevance of the Sri Lankan sci-fi author and data activist Yudhanjaya Wijeratne's ricepunk for future augmentations of *Speculative Hong Kong*.

9  See Liu, "Exploring the Frontier".

10  @wilfredchan. Twitter, 19 June 2020, 21:23 p.m. Accessed 20 June 2020, since deleted.

11  The characters are modifications of Xiang Yu and Liu Bang, important figures in Chinese history (see https://schicksalgemeinschaft.wordpress.com/2016/09/24/the-grace-of-kings-ken-liu-2015/). Compared with Liu Bang, who founded the Han dynasty, Kuni's imperial ambitions are more ambiguous.

12  See Kris Chen's *Hong Kong Free Press* article "Angry Protests and Tear Gas in Sham Sui Po after Arrest of Hong Kong Student Leader for Possessing Laser Pens."

13  Like the Daya bay protests and the Chinese language protests.

14  Against a proposed national security reform (Article 23) in 2002 and against the addition of "Moral and National Education" to the school curriculum in 2012.

15  Perhaps due to its lack of legitimacy and the unlikelihood that it would survive popular insurrection, the British colonial government adopted its own quasi-watery strategies, including reliance on consultative bodies and symbolic policies that could be ignored if too unpopular.

16  A strategy of the last resort that advocates for imposing heavy sanctions on Hong Kong to damage its economy and reputation. See Hui.

17  See WY's post at lausencollective.com.

18  Similar to the compendium of the fictive Samarqandi anthologist Old Red Ink, in which "each entry … contained a moment when the subjects, always reincarnated with names that began with the same letters, came to crossroads in their lives and made a swerve away from what they might have been expected to do" (Robinson 749). Thus, B-characters are believers, K's are rebellious, I's are scientists, S's are corrupt, etc.

19  In some Buddhist schools the bardo is the name for the state of existence between death and rebirth.

20  Meaning "people of the longhouse", Haudenosaunee, or Hodenosaunee in Robinson's spelling, was known as the Iroquois Confederacy in French and as the Five Nations (Mohawk, Onondaga, Oneida, Cayuga, and Seneca) in English.

21  Zhu finds inspiration in Rabindra (Tagore) and in scholar Hayden White's (but of indistinct origin in this incarnation) notion of emplotment. In *Metahistory*, Hayden White defines emplotment "[a]s the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind" (7).?

## Works Cited

Abbas, Ackbar. *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. U of Minnesota P, 1997.

Arthur, W. Brian. *The Nature of Technology: What It Is and How It Evolves*. Penguin, 2009.

Brown, Steven D. "Natural Writing: The Case of Serres." *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2003, pp. 1–9.

Chan Kit-Sze, Amy. 2017. "Science Fiction as Social Justice." *Dark Fluid: A Science Fiction Experiment*, edited by Angela Su, Things That Can Happen, 2017, pp. 22–41.

Chen, Kris. "Angry Protests and Tear Gas in Sham Sui Po after Arrest of Hong Kong Student Leader for Possessing Laser Pens." *Hong Kong Free Press*, 7 Aug. 2019, https://hongkongfp.com/2019/08/07/angry-protests-tear-gas-sham-shui-po-arrest-hong-kong-student-leader-possessing-laser-pens/. Accessed 29 June 2023.

Debaise, Didier. *Nature as Event: The Lure of the Possible*. Duke UP, 2017.

Ho Lai Ming, Tammy. "Hong Kong Is a Science Fiction," *Law, Text, Culture*, vol. 18, 2014, pp. 127–128.

———. "Xi Xi, the Poet of Hong Kong: Nomination of Xi Xi for the 2019 Newman Prize for Chinese Literature." *Chinese Literature Today*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2019, pp. 6–9.

Hui, Mary. "'Laam Caau': The High-Stakes Game that Hong Kong Protesters Are Waging with China." *Yahoo! Finance*, 30 June 2020, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/laam-caau-high-stakes-game-133049762.html. Accessed 28 June 2023.

Hume, Tim. "Hong Kong Protesters Trolled Police with an All-Night Laser Party." *Vice*, 8 Aug. 2019, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/gyzpvx/hong-kong-protesters-trolled-police-with-an-all-night-laser-party. Accessed 28 June 2023.

Jensen, Casper Bruun. "Wound-Up Worlds and the *Wind-Up Girl*: On the Anthropology of Climate Change and Climate Fiction, *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology, and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2018, pp. 186–200.

Jullien, Francois. *The Propensity of Things: Towards a History of Efficacy in China*. Zone Books, 1995.

Karacs, Sarah. "The Dystopian Vision of Hong Kong's First Successful Sci-Fi Writer." *Zolima City Mag*, 13 Apr. 2017, https://zolimacitymag.com/dystopian-vision-of-hong-kongs-successful-sci-fi-writer-albert-tam/. Accessed 28 June 2023.

Kidd, James. "How Novelist Ken Liu Is Bringing Chinese Sc-Fi to the Western World." *South China Morning Post*, 17 Nov. 2016, https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/books/article/2046108/how-sci-fi-translator-ken-liu-helps-chinese-writers. Accessed 28 June 2023.

Lam, Wai-man. *Understanding the Political Culture of Hong Kong: The Paradox of Activism and Depoliticization*. Routledge, 2004.

Li, Xueying. "HK Gripped by Fears of 'Hawks' Taking over Opposing Camps." *AsiaOne*, 1 Nov. 2014, https://www.asiaone.com/asia/hk-gripped-fears-hawks-taking-over-opposing-camps. Accessed 28 June 2023.

Liu, Ken. "Exploring the Frontier: A Conversation with Xia Jia." *Clarkesworld*, Jan. 2015a, https://clarkesworldmagazine.com/xia_interview/. Accessed 28 June 2023.

———. *The Grace of Kings*. Saga Press, 2015b.

Marsh, James. "'Ten Years': Review." *ScreenDaily*, 8 Mar. 2016, https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/ten-years-review/5101194.article. Accessed 28 June 2023.

Misra, Ria. "Author Ken Liu Explains 'Silkpunk' to Us." *Gizmodo*, 14 July 2015, https://io9.gizmodo.com/author-ken-liu-explains-silkpunk-to-us-1717812714. Accessed 28 June 2023.

Ng, Jeannette. Untitled post in *Medium.com*, 18 Aug. 2019, https://medium.com/@nettlefish/john-w-campbell-for-whom-this-award-was-named-was-a-fascist-f693323d3293. Accessed 28 June 2023.

Perl, Jeffrey M. "Hong Kong Wake-Up Call." *Configurations*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2020, pp. 197–211.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. *The Years of Rice and Salt*. Harper Collins, 2002.

Serres, Michel. "Science and the Humanities: The Case of Turner." *SubStance*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1997, pp. 1–10.

Su, Angela, editor. *Dark Fluid: A Science Fiction Experiment*. Things That Can Happen, 2017.

Thorsen, Line Marie. *On the Margins of Eco-art: Aesthetics, Plants, and Environmental Imaginations in East Asia*. 2019. Aarhus University, PhD dissertation.

White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1973.

Whitehead, Alfred N. *Modes of Thought* 1938. The Free Press, 1966.

WY. "Redefining Mental Health amid Collective Trauma." *Lausan*, 17 Dec. 2019, https://lausancollective.com/2019/redefining-mental-health-amid-collective-trauma/. Accessed 28 June 2023.

# 45

# SOPHIA AL-MARIA, GULF FUTURISM, AND ARCHITECTURAL TEMPORALITIES

## Shadya Radhi

### Introduction

In *The Girl Who Fell to Earth: A Memoir* (2012), Sophia Al-Maria uses the concept of Gulf Futurism to highlight a disconnection between generations of the Arabian Gulf by infusing science-fictional properties within images of architecture. A term formulated by Sophia Al-Maria and Fatima Al-Qadiri, Gulf Futurism represents the hyper-futuristic images of advancement and wealth associated with the geopolitical transformation of the Arabian Gulf after the discovery of oil (Frangos 2). This chapter argues that through these images, Al-Maria utilizes what I have termed a critical form of Gulf Futurism. She unsettles common conceptions of the Arabian Gulf as a hypermodern extravaganza, evoking a sense of pessimism and anxiety towards the future. In her memoir, she portrays the dizzying effect of oil and capital growth by describing the rapid changes the Gulf underwent within a short period of time. Al-Maria flips the general use of Gulf Futurism by using science fiction to expose certain failures of modernization in the region. In her critical use of the term, Al-Maria reveals this sense of failure through depicting rapid and unsettling change, a disjuncture between past and present, and even inequality amongst certain members of Gulf society.

### Futurisms and Gulf Futurism

Although this chapter focuses on the use of Gulf Futurism in the literary genre of the memoir, most previous research on Gulf Futurism has been restricted to its influence on art and architecture, such as Christopher Lew's analysis of Al-Maria's video installation *Sophia Al-Maria: Black Friday* (2016; Lew), and discussions surrounding futurist structures in the Gulf such as the Kuwait Water Towers (Orton). Contemporary approaches to futurism have used audio, visual, and literary practices to articulate counternarratives, or a retelling of a colonial and dispossessed past (Parikka 40–41). In this sense, such approaches have produced what Parikka refers to as "counter-futurisms" (41). As Perwana Nazif further explains: "alternative histories, such as Palestine claiming the moon in [Larissa] Sansour's film [*A Space Exodus*], are imagined to open up impossible futures where new meanings can be derived from history". In futurisms such as Afrofuturism and Arabfuturism, challenging the idea of static and fixed pasts creates opportunities for limitless possibilities of self-representation and expression by creating an

alternate past(s) that is "untainted with memories of occupation and colonization" (Nazif). These futurisms therefore work to disassociate marginalized subjects from historical "[o]rientalized representations and stereotypes" (Nazif). There is, however, an element of pessimism when it comes to Arabfuturism, especially when dealing with the issue of Palestine (Brown). Despite the hopeful message in Sansour's film [*A Space Exodus*] of Palestinians one day being able to establish their own space voyage, there is a sense of despair projected alongside this image (Brown). The video provokes an underlying message of the impossibilities of the Palestinian people ever claiming back their land if the moon becomes the only place left for them to settle (Guilmot). This sense of pessimism regarding the future is even more tangible when it comes to Gulf Futurism.

Gulf Futurism, a term coined by Sophia Al-Maria and Kuwaiti musician Fatima Al-Qadiri, "refers to the futuristic style of hyper-modernity particular to the contemporary oil-rich Gulf states" (Frangos 2). By focusing on exhibiting state-of-the-art technology, extravagant architectural structures, and the latest fashions, Gulf Futurism, in its general use, creates a connection between displays of abundant riches in order to reflect accelerated growth. Modernistic images of the region displayed through audio, visual, and literary mediums come to symbolize a break from the harsh, poverty-stricken, pre-oil past and are contrasted with the wealth of the oil-rich present. Gulf Futurism therefore associates "changes in architecture, urban life and popular culture" in the Arabian Gulf with the geopolitical transformation of the area after the discovery of oil (Parikka 46). Unlike other forms of futurisms, Gulf Futurism is distinct in that it does not use science-fictional tropes and ultramodern aesthetics to create an imagining of what possible futures might look like in the Arabian Gulf. Instead, futurist images are utilized to reflect a society that has already been ushered into the future due to the wealth and advancements brought by oil (Parikka 41). Although described as a method that mainly reflects the hypermodernity of the Arabian Gulf present, Gulf Futurism itself and what it reflects is often left open to interpretation. Al-Maria writes: "The phrase Gulf futurism is multifaceted and many-pronged and I've yet to fully articulate it as I think and feel it" (*Sad Sack* 56). Al-Maria deliberately leaves the concept open to enable a flexible use of the term. In this sense, Gulf Futurism can be used as a method to describe practices in the Gulf or utilized to offer a more underlying critical view of the region.

In his discussion of Arabfuturism, Sulaiman Majali associates the obscurity of futurisms in general, and particularly Arabfuturism, as a tool to deconstruct and counteract a colonial obsession with fixed definitions and borders (Majali). I believe the openness of futurisms allows Gulf Futurism to also be broadened, enabling it to unsettle the very thing it aims to describe: the hypermodernity of the Arabian Gulf. I argue that Gulf Futurism possesses two forms: a dominant form and a critical form. The dominant form is celebratory in nature and is used by state institutions, governments, and even individuals to highlight the advancement and modernity of the region through investing in images that reflect progress and wealth. An example of this is the creation of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a striking structure set on Saadiyat Island in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The museum's official website states that the French/UAE partnership in the Louvre Abu Dhabi aims to underline "the UAE's bold vision of cultural progression and openness" (Louvre Abu Dhabi). The extravagant structure of the museum represents a conscious effort on the part of the state to mirror the openness and the cultural advancement of the UAE present. Furthermore, buildings such as the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha and the Bahrain World Trade Center also figure into discussions of dominant Gulf Futurism. Citing the Museum of the Future in Dubai as an example, Özgün Eylül İşcen states that such urban structures in the GCC symbolize the affluence and advancement needed to create sustainable futures (2295).

The critical form of Gulf Futurism uses elements of the dominant form against itself. In critiques of hypermodernity in the Gulf, the connotations associated with the critical form of Gulf Futurism and what it symbolizes for the future of the region are often negative. To critics of hyper-capitalism in the Gulf, the ultramodern features of Gulf Futurism unsettle reality to reflect an underlying social, environmental, and political critique of the present-day Arabian Gulf. As Al-Maria explains in "The Desert of the Unreal":

> These are places where the oil is going to run out, and they're investing their money into shock factor, to put a stamp on the future. Also, with the coming global environmental collapse, to live completely indoors is like, the only way we'll be able to survive! The Gulf's a prophecy of what's to come.
>
> *(Orton)*

According to Al-Maria, cultural representations that project images of accelerated growth reflect an inherent fear regarding the suitability of oil by using outlandish images to create a "shock factor" (Orton). Eccentric architectural structures, state-of-the-art technology, and even extravagant luxury cars are inserted into Arabian Gulf society to create this "shock factor" that will remain even after the disappearance of oil. By investing in images that reflect ultramodernity, these unconventional images will endure and leave a lasting impression, enabling Arabian Gulf society to remember the wealth of the past even after it's gone (Orton).

Although critical Gulf Futurism figures in discussions of art and architecture in the Gulf, it is usually evoked in critiques of such structures not as a specific genre or movement. Critical Gulf Futurism as a genre is mainly referenced in the field of art, and as a categorization of creative works, it remains very much specific to Al-Maria and the artists she collaborates with. Al-Maria along with other artists from the Gulf, such as Nanu Al Hamad, Fatima Al-Qadiri, and Monira Al-Qadiri, in 2013 formed the Gulf artists collective GCC (Barry). Since then, their works have been exhibited at multiple venues including "Project Native Informant in London, MoMA PS1 in New York, Art Basel Miami Beach, and the Sultan Gallery in Kuwait" (Barry). However, that is not to say that all artists who portray possible futures of the Gulf identify with critical Gulf Futurism. Artists such as Ayman Zedani make a conscious effort to separate their work from the negative connotations of Al-Maria's critical form of Gulf Futurism to illustrate a more optimistic imagining of the Gulf's future (Aima).

While critical Gulf Futurism is specific to Al-Maria, particularly in literature, I argue that other writers from the region use elements of critical Gulf futurism in their work without labeling them as such. The works of Ibraheem Abbas, Shaima Alwatani, and Bothayna Al-Essa often utilize dystopian science-fictional tropes that illustrate some of the very same critiques proposed by Al-Maria's critical form of Gulf Futurism. Al-Essa's novel *Ḥāris Saṭiḥ al-ʿĀlam* or *Guardian of the Face of the Earth* (2019), portrays a dystopian society after an unnamed revolution turns the country into an authoritarian state, where imagination, religion, and philosophy are banned. Conversely, Alwatani's *al-Maṭmūra* or *The Submerged* (2019),[1] depicts the loss of home in the aftermath of an unnamed war, presenting an underlying political and environmentalist critique of hyper-capitalism. Although neither author specifies the setting of their respective novels, their texts are interested in imagining disastrous future landscapes specific to and highly evocative of the Arabian Gulf region's accelerated growth and hyper-capitalism.

By concentrating on critical Gulf Futurism in Al-Maria's memoir, I argue that through literature, Al-Maria is able to attach a personal narrative that further highlights and explains the effects of accelerated alteration in the Gulf. In *The Girl Who Fell*, Al-Maria uses critical Gulf Futurism to unveil an underlying critique of the region's present, and in turn projects a sense of

pessimism regarding its future. Through depicting images of extravagant architectural structures and technology, Al-Maria utilizes the Gulf Futurist shock factor to reveal an alarming disconnection between the region's traditional past and hypermodern present, a critique of the failures of modernization, and a warning against the future effects of fast transformation and the long-term unsustainability of oil wealth.

## Bedouin Nostalgia

In *The Girl Who Fell*, Al-Maria recounts her childhood growing up between the United States and the Arabian Gulf from the 1980s to the early 2000s. The memoir focuses on her quest to find her own identity while growing up half-American and half-Qatari, but also navigating this identity—further complicated by her Bedouin heritage—within the fast-changing society of the Arabian Gulf. In so doing, Al-Maria's use of the iconography of Gulf Futurism stresses the complex relationship of the present generation to a past they cannot relate to. In particular, her use of science-fictional tropes allows the text to emphasize the disjuncture between past and present by blurring the boundaries between the real and the unreal, therefore accentuating the negative connotations and messages associated with Gulf Futurism.

In *The Girl Who Fell*, elements of science fiction reflect the difficult shift experienced in the Gulf after the discovery of oil, and also help reveal the scale and rapidity of these changes. The memoir begins with Sophia's father Matar, who grows up moving between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar with his family tribe, until the tribe is forced into the Bedouin settlement camp of "Kuzahmiah" due to the installation of the Aramco oil company in Saudi Arabia. A "khayal" or shadow follows her father as a young boy during his time at the settlement camp (7). Al-Maria writes that the khayal seemed to project "a bowed version of Matar's world back to him, letting him see things he couldn't alone" (7). The khayal highlights the need for the supernatural to help Matar cope with the unnatural speed of transformations in the Arabian Gulf. It guides Matar and helps him navigate the immense adjustments in the Gulf, as they are too significant to be comprehended alone and all at once. It further watches over Matar when he is away from his family and disappears once Matar arrives back to his family's "standard-issue government hut" (Al-Maria 7).

The social and historical accounts of the region have emphasized this rapid temporal juncture between past and present. In her anthropological investigation of social change among Emirati women, Jane Bristol-Rhys captures this change:

> The pre-oil past generally is so distant and dim that it has little meaning to younger Emiratis and often times for their mothers as well. However, in reality the pre-oil days of hardship and poverty were less than fifty years ago and their grandmothers remember them in vivid detail.
>
> *(4)*

In the memoir, science fiction becomes a crucial element of Gulf Futurism because it allows Al-Maria to navigate, describe, and emphasize this shift from a poverty-stricken past to an opulent present. Physical constructions in the text such as the Doha Sheraton and modern apartment blocks magnify and reflect the repercussions of fast transformation on a miniature scale. Al-Maria infuses futurist and science-fictional properties such as crystal palm trees, empty dystopian-like buildings, and even a DeLorean within these architectural structures. As a result, the images created form a counter discourse to the dominant version of Gulf futurism by revealing a disjuncture between the modern and the traditional, exposing a criticism of the present-day Arabian Gulf, and highlighting the underlying fragmentation of the oil-dependent Gulf society.

**Architectural Examples of Gulf Futurism**

Al-Maria compares the past and present by showcasing the contrast between her father's child-hood growing up on the outskirts of a Bedouin settlement camp in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s and 1970s, and her own upbringing in newly constructed concrete apartment blocks in Abu Dhabi and Qatar in the 1980s and 1990s (120–121). In her description of the continuous construction in Qatar during her childhood, Al-Maria critiques the notion of a hypermodern Gulf by revealing the dizzying effect of rapid urban change:

> We remained in a sort of suspended animation while waiting for Baba to come back from the rig. When Baba wasn't with us it was as though time ceased, *we* ceased, and every day in the apartment was just a dream in his periphery … Every week there was a new road, more dust cresting off the construction sites, and higher floors added to the grove of young skyscrapers shooting up around us. It made me dizzy to look up at them … I began to fear heights and had dreams of falling: first of plummeting to the ground, then of plunging up into the sky.
>
> *(63)*

Al-Maria associates a shift in time with descriptions of ongoing construction reflecting the establishment of hypermodern cities. She depicts the time of oil transformation in the Arabian Gulf as a time of stagnation in which human life ceases to exist and remains suspended in a state of anticipation for what is to come. In portraying characterless, empty construction lots that were built with the intention of portraying images of cutting-edge advancement, Al-Maria creates a contrast to the vibrant and exciting descriptions of life in the past. She compares her sense of stagnation in the present to her aunt's experience of life in the past. She writes:

> "We [her aunt and siblings] had nothing but a flap of goat hair between us and the stars – now we have this!" She slapped the thick cement wall separating the room we were in from the *majlis* … In a single generation they had gone from migrating the peninsula with the seasons to living in windowless housing blocks.
>
> *(139)*

New cities of the present, and in turn the future, become associated with uniformity, in which individuality and adventure are lost and need to be recreated.

In her book *Tribal Modern*, miriam cooke further highlights the effects of the construction of modern cities on the current generation of the Gulf. She writes:

> The Arab Gulf states, whose citizens are the first generation to grow up with a national rather than a regional and primarily tribal identity, now want to write a largely unrecorded history. This longed-for past lies beneath the surface of nearly identical, newly global cities.
>
> *(100)*

In these cities, the current generation is disconnected from its past because all evidence of the pre-oil past as experienced by their ancestors—except for a few chosen symbols—has been erased. *The Girl Who Fell* foreshadows the creation of these global cities. Al-Maria associates the establishment of these cities with a sense of stagnancy and sameness, which anticipates elements of Gulf Futurism, through her dreams of falling and being sent into oblivion. The newly erected

skyscrapers, instead of reflecting images of beauty, create a sense of fear and dizziness. The hypermodern cities of the Arabian Gulf no longer represent national identities or uniqueness; instead, the towering skyscrapers and carefully manicured palm trees reflect images of sameness of a time that is stuck and is not able to move forward. In commenting on the memoir, Mike Frangos stresses the magnificence of the Gulf's vast transformation that even alters temporalities. He writes: "the text seeks to narrate a life in a context in which the traditional divisions of time into past, present and future are no longer sustainable" (7). In representing the disconnection between the past and present, the memoir unsettles conventional representations of time as linear. It reflects a continuous time of change that focuses on the past and the future with little regard to the stagnant present.

Al-Maria's pessimism regarding the prospects for a life lived in these buildings is further emphasized in descriptions of utopian planning turned dystopian due to continuous change. Al-Maria highlights how grand modernization schemes, although they work on paper, cannot come into existence in reality in the Arabian Gulf:

> We were surrounded by undeveloped desert … The apartment we were in was part of a larger complex of buildings, each one an identical, squat square. They were similar in design to a council-estate scheme—well-intentioned but badly planned, all full of utopian details that only worked in the model … where the mock-up would have been bustling with miniature commerce, the real places turned into creepy corridors full of garbage, with sand collecting along the unused shop fronts.
>
> *(120–121)*

Although beautifully planned, these buildings end up becoming unsettling dystopian settings that, instead of depicting the success of modernization in the Gulf, underline its undesired consequences by showcasing places that have become deserted.

As signified by critical Gulf Futurism, unfulfilled futurist architectural developments represented in vacant abandoned buildings project the dystopian future of the Gulf. In an article published by Dazed Digital, Sophia Al-Maria and Fatima Al-Qadiri describe the Arabian Gulf as: "a region that has been hyper-driven into a present made up of interior wastelands, municipal master plans and environmental collapse, thus making it a projection of our global future" (Al Qadiri & Al-Maria on Gulf Futurism). Al-Maria further highlights the negative predictions associated with the future of the Arabian Gulf in *Sad Sack: Collected Writings*. She writes: "The Gulf is significant and symbolic to the subject of future for a multitude of reasons, including, the most dismally: raging capitalism … petropolitics … profound sexual alienation … and ecological collapse" (*Sad Sack* 56). The abandoned buildings mirror the Arabian Gulf's future of environmental and monetary collapse, in which the only thing remaining will be extravagant architectural structures within an empty desert. In this sense, Gulf Futurism can be seen to expose the political, social, and environmental destruction of an oil-capitalist society, predicting the destruction the entire world is headed towards.

Critical Gulf Futurism indicates how these buildings come to emphasize and reflect the unequal distribution of oil wealth and opportunity to different segments of society. Al-Maria writes:

> This place, I would learn, was mostly full of Bedouin like Baba who for various reasons (political or financial or just by accident) found themselves on the periphery of society. Even in Doha they lived in zones of temporary-turned-permanent government housing.
>
> *(121)*

The purpose of the modern apartment blocks shift when their intended purpose cannot come into existence. By becoming a home to the Bedouin, or people on the margins of society, the dystopian setting of the deserted buildings mirrors a gap between members of society in the Gulf, in which only people on the outskirts who have no other opportunities agree to live there. The apartment blocks represent the beginning of the ill effects of the oil economy on Gulf society.

Pessimistic forewarnings of the future are further highlighted in describing the social violence that is incorporated into the making of these buildings. The buildings register and emphasize the actual human cost of fast alteration and production. Specifically, the memoir describes the role of migrant workers in the construction of the modern Arabian Gulf. Al-Maria recounts an accident she witnessed as a child that continues to haunt her:

> The entire tower that had been under construction kitty-corner to us had collapsed on itself … I morbidly craned the telescope down from its usual coordinates and scanned the mess, looking for blood or guts or any colour at all in the mealy grey rubble … By the time Baba finally arrived that afternoon, the ambulances had come and gone. The construction accident had shaken Ma. It seemed like a bad omen of things to come.
>
> *(79)*

The accident is described as tragic and impactful to Al-Maria. However by evening, all traces of the disaster had been erased. The episode points to the violence that is fused into the fast construction of hypermodern metropolises as well as the ease with which this violence is forgotten.

Al-Maria further emphasizes the violence permeated in the development of the modern Arabian Gulf by showcasing how Gulf Futurism is, to some extent, literally killing people. The accident witnessed by Al-Maria exposes the unsuitable working conditions some migrant workers are subjected to while constructing these buildings, and which ultimately lead to accidents and even deaths. In *Sad Sack* she explains:

> It's not just causing the thousand-foot falls of legions of South Asian workers; ultimately— and not so far in the future I figure—it's going to kill us all. Because the Gulf is a projection—not in a graphs and outlooks sense but in the sense of a mirage and slippage into a rotten hole dug over a century ago. I'm saying this, because Oil.
>
> *(Al-Maria 55)*

The critical form of Gulf Futurism emphasizes a legacy of violence and human cost that persists even after the formation of the buildings. Al-Maria creates a parallel between the literal collapse of the building and the figurative collapse of not only Gulf society, but society as a whole, which she blames entirely on the inescapable effects of the introduction of a capitalist oil economy.

In the memoir, architectural structures not only indicate the economic and social repercussions of the oil economy, but they also emphasize a rupture between past and present. One such structure is the Doha Sheraton. When Al-Maria's mother Gale finds out that her husband has secretly married another wife who has birthed a son, she takes her daughters and moves into the Sheraton for a few days. The hotel, in Al-Maria's description, becomes a refuge, a place of emotional safety, while she struggles to navigate the clash between the traditional/Bedouin and her modern/western heritage. She writes: "We passed through a series of automatic doors, each sealing us off further from the storm—closer to the sanctuary, hermetically sealed from the confusion of our culture and our family" (84). Although the Doha Sheraton as an architectural

structure is another example of Gulf Futurism, in this case it serves as a sanctuary to Al-Maria and her family, an escape from a rapidly changing reality in the Gulf.

In descriptions of the Sheraton, Al-Maria utilizes the science-fictional trope of a portal into another dimension through the architectural medium of the hotel. She describes stepping into the hotel as being ushered into the future in which worries about tradition and modernity no longer hold importance. However, the sanctuary provided by the hotel is described as temporary:

> Entering it was like stepping into a gigantic, glamourous terrarium from the future … As long as we stayed inside this temple to unreality and out of the sandstorm, we could suspend belief and forget the fact that our father had married another woman and that she had been the one to birth a brother.
>
> *(85)*

Despite the hotel offering a space for reflection, Al-Maria is aware of a dystopian sense of stagnant time that exists inside the hotel. As a result, life inside the hotel becomes unreal and unsustainable when compared to the real world outside. She writes: "All hours seemed the same. There's no way for me to know the duration of our stay; it was probably only days, but it seemed to me like a long time" (85). The sense of stagnation inside the hotel connects it to the modern apartment blocks which project the same feeling. The sense of immobility reflected by both buildings portrays the sense of fixity and permanence of the present and stresses the importance of looking to the future. By describing the act of entering the hotel as being ushered into a portal to the future, extravagant landmarks that combine the traditional and the modern become removed from reality. They stand as a symbol of the future of the Arabian Gulf, so far removed from the past and present that it becomes its own temporal dimension.

Yet the hotel also seems to project a dystopian combination of the modern and the traditional. An example of this is a video Al-Maria's father sends the family back in America showing them the changing city of Qatar (49). The video focuses on the architectural structure of the Doha Sheraton and offers a glimpse into ongoing construction taking place in the present and the supposed development of the hypermodern metropolis. The absurdity of the modern and the traditional clashing is represented by the extravagant structure of the Sheraton that seems to jut out of the middle of the desert (50). Al-Maria links descriptions of the hotel and its surroundings to Bertolt Brecht's estrangement effect, or what is sometimes termed the alienation effect. By placing the modern structure of the Sheraton in the middle of the desert, the image created evokes a sense of estrangement from reality, in which familiar elements such as the hotel and the desert become unfamiliar and strange. This sense of estrangement is also infused within the interior design of the hotel. By blending features of modernity and tradition, Al-Maria depicts the hotel as a place between cultures. She writes: "The lobby was a seductive Islamic fantasy-future of hexagonal mirrors and disco-lit elevators. My eyes widened. It was beautiful. At the centre of the lobby was the largest standing chandelier in the world: a crystal palm tree" (50). Although both the traditional and modern features of the hotel are familiar to Al-Maria, the sense of estrangement they create makes Al-Maria feel even more removed from reality by creating a space that is so overindulgent it becomes inaccessible and unfamiliar. This is specifically emphasized with descriptions of the crystal palm tree.

Al-Maria projects the absurdity and extravagance of the crystal palm tree in the middle of the hotel lobby. Through the image of the palm tree, she emphasizes how the palm tree, a symbol and vital component of nomadic Bedouin culture, is turned into an artificial artifact that no longer holds any purpose or function. To Al-Maria, the artificialness of the expensive and

useless palm tree creates a sense of estrangement, because not only is the real-life purpose of the palm tree diminished, but it also becomes a symbol of the marginalization of Al-Maria's father's family, who cannot afford to stay there. The palm tree, a representation of Bedouin heritage, is re-appropriated in a modern space and is no longer accessible to certain components of society. Although the modern/traditional features of the hotel are meant to reflect ideals of modernization and progress espoused by dominant Gulf Futurism, they advance a political and social critique by creating a sense of estrangement among the region's residents.

As Ian Campbell further explains: "it [estrangement] centres around the negation of deceptively familiar surface reality in order to provoke a new and more complete recognition of the 'realer' world heretofore masked" (2). Thus, through evoking feelings of estrangement by making familiar elements of the modern and tradition unfamiliar, the Sheraton comes to reflect the repercussions and unsustainability of the oil economy. In addition, it also showcases the effects of the unfulfilled promises of oil on society. While driving up to the hotel the video sent by her father focuses on a line of Ferraris parked out front, along with a "gleaming DeLorean" (50). The DeLorean—a reference to the movie *Back to the Future*—symbolizes a shift in time in which the DeLorean, a medium for time travel, symbolizes arriving to the future and the Sheraton itself as an embodiment of the future. Al-Maria's excitement about the DeLorean is dashed when her father explains that the car does not belong to him: "'This is my new car', he said, pointing the camera at a gleaming DeLorean parked under a palm tree. Ma laughed. My eyes widened. 'Sorry. Joking. Your Baba's not rich … *yet*'" (50, emphasis in original). Here, Al-Maria points out the inequality inherent in any capitalist society. Although her father uses the word "yet", it is inferred by the text that this dream will not come into reality, and that behind the mask of ultramodernity in the Gulf exists a dark secret: that this wealth, newfound progress, and even the future are not for everyone.

The clash between the past and present depicted in representations of the Sheraton questions the effects of modernity in the present, if the present generation is not able to connect with it. In depictions of the Sheraton in the video, Al-Maria again utilizes the trope of the portal into another dimension to link the past and the present, but this time, the portal makes the clash between tradition and modernity more accessible. The end of her father's video describes the forgotten desert land surrounding the hotel: "The video carried on for a few minutes out the window of the old car—which drove at warp speed past lonely vistas of desert—as though he'd forgotten to turn it off" (50). The conflicting images of the hypermodern architecture of the hotel and its desert surroundings makes clear the distinction between the past and the present of the region and the difficulty of connecting them. Images of the desert, part of the original landscape of the Arabian Gulf, are captured in her father's video as if by mistake, and are depicted as being out of place with the futuristic image of the hotel.

Despite this, Al-Maria describes the portal offered by the video as a gateway that allows her a glimpse, even if for a few seconds, of a place she belonged to. She writes: "The videotape was a revelation to me, and as the white noise resumed I saw it as a portal into another dimension—one I felt immediate ownership over, if only because I had been told it was mine" (51). In this sense, Al-Maria's countercultural use of Gulf-futurist representation not only highlights the struggle of people on the margins of Gulf society who also claim ownership and belonging to the region, but also helps her navigate her own sense of belonging. Reality and fiction—or in this case, the inconceivable change between past and present—are able to coexist through the portal to show the traditional/hypermodern tension of the Arabian Gulf, while at the same time it allows Al-Maria to affirm her connection to both her past and her modern identity. In a similar fashion to the khayal helping her father cope with modern changes in the past, through the use of the portal, Al-Maria is able to assert her own claim of belonging to the Arabian Gulf present.

## Conclusion

Through her creative use of Gulf Futurism, Al-Maria flips the inherently capitalist features and message of the dominant form. Instead of architectural structures reflecting progress and advancement, critical Gulf Futurism uses these constructions to expose the troubled transition into the modern present. By integrating science-fictional features within these descriptions, Al-Maria reveals the social and economic consequences of this shift. In discussions of futurisms in general, Laura Brown emphasizes the underlying privilege of futurism itself as it rests on assumptions of having a stable present. A future, she writes, "suggests you are in a secure present, or are confident you have the means to shift your present into a more solid future" (Brown). However, in places where the present is unstable, precarious, and rapidly changing, the future becomes an exercise of the "imagination and storytelling" (Brown). In this sense, Al-Maria's use of critical Gulf Futurism highlights the underlying privilege of the Gulf of being able to conceive and imagine a future. It creates a safe space that allows us to discuss our present realities and to imagine possible futures no matter how scary or deeply unsettling they may be. However, by making issues plaguing the Gulf clear, critical Gulf Futurism also highlights a need to divert the present course of this future into something better. In my view, despite the stark warnings of Gulf Futurism, not all hope is lost. In an interview with Al-Maria, Erika Balsom remarks that in Al-Maria's works, ruins not only indicate a destruction of the past, but also offer a symbol of hope, of the possibility of something new replacing that which is disintegrating (Balsom). I believe critical Gulf Futurism allows us to imagine the possible destruction of the future, in order to ensure a deeper critical thinking about issues afflicting our present, giving us the opportunity to redirect the course of this future.

## Note

1   The translated titles of both books are my own. Bothayna Al-Essa's novel has a translation, under the title of *Guardian of Superficialities*, that is forthcoming as of this writing.

## Works Cited

Abbas, Ibraheem. *Ḥawjan* [*HWJN*]. Yatakhayaloon, 2013.

Aima, Rahel. "'To My Ancestors, Human and Not Human': The Art of Ayman Zedani." *ArtReview Asia*, 21 July 2021, www.artreview.com/to-my-ancestors-human-and-not-human-ayman-zedani-art/. Accessed 23 June 2023.

Al-Essa, Bothayna. *Ḥāris Saṭiḥ al-ʿĀlam* [*Guardian of the Face of the Earth*]. Arab Scientific Publishers, 2019.

Al-Maria, Sophia. *The Girl Who Fell To Earth: A Mem*oir. HarperCollins Publishers, 2012.

"Al Qadiri & Al-Maria on Gulf Futurism." Dazed, Dazed Digital, 14 Nov. 2012, www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/15037/1/al-qadiri-al-maria-on-Gulffuturism. Accessed 23 June 2023.

Alwatani, Shaima. *al-Maṭmūra* [*The Submerged*]. The Al-Farasha House for Publishing and Distribution, 2019.

Balsom, Erika. "Sophia Al-Maria on Dystopias, Gulf Futurism, and Sad Sacks." *ARTnews.com*, 7 Apr. 2020, www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/sophia-al-maria-erika-balsom-Gulffuturism-sad-sacks-julia-stoschek-interview-1202683264/. Accessed 23 June 2023.

Barry, Robert. "Craft/Work: Remembering the Future: An Interview with Monira Al Qadiri." *The Quietus*, 22 July 2017, http://www.thequietus.com/articles/22891-monira-al-qadiri-gcc-gasworks-london-interview. Accessed 23 June 2023.

Bristol-Rhys, Jane. *Emirati Women: Generations of Change*. London, Hurst, 2010.

Brown, Laura. "Arab Futurism." *Bido Lito!*, 21 June 2019, http://www.bidolito.co.uk/feature-arab-futurism-laaf-2019/. Accessed 11 Nov. 2020.

Campbell, Ian. *Arabic Science Fiction*. Springer International Publishing, 2018.

cooke, miriam. *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf*. University of California Press, 2014.

Frangos, Mike. "*The Girl Who Fell to Earth*: Sophia Al-Maria's Retro-Futurism." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2017, pp. 1–21, https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.44.

Guilmot, Marion. "Contemporary Art and Creative Movements from the Arab World." *Edge of Arabia*, www.edgeofarabia.com/artists/larissa-sansour. Accessed 23 June 2023.

İşcen, Özgün Eylül. "The Racial Politics of Smart Urbanism: Dubai and Beirut as Two Sides of the Same Coin." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 44, no. 12, 8 June 2021, pp. 2282–2303. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1921233.

Lew, Christopher Y. "Back to the Futurist." *Whitney Museum of American Art*, n.d. www.whitney.org/essays/sophia-al-maria. Accessed 23 June 2023.

Louvre Abu Dhabi. "Our Story: About Louvre Abu Dhabi." *Louvre Abu-Dhabi*, https://www.louvreabudhabi.ae/en/about-us/our-story. Accessed 11 Nov. 2020.

Majali, Sulaiman. "Towards Arabfuturism/s." *Novelty*, 25 Jan. 2016, http://www.noveltymag.com/towards-arabfuturisms/. Accessed 18 June 2022.

Nazif, Perwana. "Opinion: The Quietus Essay: Arabfuturism: Science-Fiction & Alternate Realities in the Arab World." *The Quietus*, 22 Feb. 2018, www.thequietus.com/articles/24088-arabfuturism. Accessed 23 June 2023.

Orton, Karen. "The Desert of the Unreal." *Dazed*, Dazed Digital, 9 Nov. 2012, www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/15040/1/the-desert-of-the-unreal. Accessed 23 June 2023.

Parikka, Jussi. "Middle East and Other Futurisms: Imaginary Temporalities in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture." *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2017, pp. 40–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2017.1410439.

# PART IV

# African and African American Futurisms

# 46

# WASTE TIME
## Bodily Fluids and Afrofuturity

*Sofia Samatar*

### Sprawled

In 1939, Aimé Césaire invented the word *négraille*. Rooted in *nègre* (black) and evoking words like *canaille* and *racaille* (rabble, riffraff), it is a collective noun signifying the mass of the Black underclass. It is translated variously as "n***** scum" and "n***** trash". In Césaire's poem, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, a foundational text of the Négritude movement, the *négraille* forms a desolate throng. It belongs to the impoverished shantytowns of the Antilles. It's a mass disconnected from the liberator as much as the conquistador, detoured from its own cry, a throng that doesn't know how to throng.

As a setting for this aimlessly spreading mass, the poet describes his native land in images of contaminated bodily fluids. This is an Antilles pitted with smallpox, its silence bursting with tepid pustules, its hills vomiting, the wastewater in its potholes grinning through turds. The land itself is ill. The poet's town is infected, extending its repulsive private parts along the colonial highway, all gluey courtyards and dripping paintwork. Its rooftops form a gray surge. It's a place of microbes, hives, buboes, poisons.

> *At the end of daybreak, this town sprawled-flat …*
>
> <div align="right">(Césaire 9)</div>

The *Notebook* is a return, a long hymn to self-acceptance, but much of its energy is focused on what precedes return: separation, shrinking away, a recoil from the land whose loam mirrors the poet's "face of mud". This paradoxical, self-protective flinching away from the self is identified by Césaire's fellow Martiniquais, Frantz Fanon, as a result of sociogeny: a term coined by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) to account for the lived experience of blackness. "It will be seen that the black man's alienation is not an individual question", writes Fanon, "Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny" (xv). Sociogeny names the process by which poverty becomes interiorized—or rather, Fanon suggests, "epidermalized"—as a sense of racial inferiority (xv).

In her explication and extension of Fanon's work, Sylvia Wynter uses sociogeny to address the relationship between consciousness and neurochemical processes. She describes the chemical reward-and-punishment systems in the brain that instigate adaptations in animal behavior.

By signaling "good" where the animal finds food, safety, and opportunities to mate, and "bad" where it encounters deprivation or pain, the brain's opioid system directs the animal to seek benefit and avoid harm. In the case of humans, Wynter writes, culture enters the picture. This is sociogeny. Through this process, a dominant antiblackness produces Black autophobia. "A central contradiction", Wynter writes, is

> set up between the natural opioid system (in whose genetically determined terms our physiognomic being should be experienced as "good"), and the reality of a cultural mode of identity and therefore of sociogeny, in whose terms this physiognomic being must be experienced as "bad".
>
> *("Towards" 51)*

It would be interesting, Fanon suggests, "to investigate the body fluids that occur in Negroes when they arrive in France".

By linking sociogeny to neurochemistry, Wynter shows how the fear of wet muck in Césaire's *Notebook* is transmitted through the wet matter of the brain. She provides a way of seeing the poet's self-loathing—this revulsion that encompasses and conflates mud, Black poverty, viral infections, and the poet's own face. The poet recoils because he is a human being formed in a social context in which racial and economic categories have fused, so that *human* refers to the ethno-class Man: a bio-economic subject distinguished by wealth, whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality. Outside this human enclosure lies what Wynter calls "the archipelago of Human Otherness", where blackness is entangled with poverty, femaleness, madness, animality, and disease ("Unsettling" 321). At its deepest level, this archipelago encompasses "the systematic stigmatization of the Earth in terms of its being made of a 'vile and base matter'" (Wynter, "Unsettling" 267).

Fanon uses the word "sprawled" (*étalé*) to describe his alienation from his body in the raw antiblackness of France: "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning that white winter day" (93). The same word is used by Césaire to describe the town "sprawled-flat" (*plate-étalée*), a place that spreads in the passive, haphazard manner of the Black throng that inhabits it. Both town and people are smeared out, flattened, exposed. The sprawl of the alienated Black mass is explicitly linked to a physical space with the characteristics of waste matter, with no forward motion, no coordinates to designate which direction might be "forward", no advance except one that extends viscidly in all directions.

At the end of daybreak: a strange, liminal time, the end of the beginning of day.

What is the time of waste? To investigate waste time, I turn to two novels of bodily fluids and anxiety for the future, both written toward the end of the daybreak of African independence: Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (1973).

## Everybody's Scum

*The Beautyful Ones* and *Xala* are both concerned with wet bodily matter—sperm, spit, and shit. Both use this matter to comment on postcolonial corruption, and both suggest, if queasily, that the future of the postcolony depends on the collective: the individual must immerse himself in the revolting wetness of the group. In addition, both are haunted by environmental degradation, the threat of contamination and drought. As in Césaire's *Notebook*, the land takes part in human misery. Both people and land appear worthless, disposable, waste.

*The Beautyful Ones* begins on a bus, where an exhausted man sleeps, spittle dripping from his mouth.

> Oozing freely, the oil-like liquid first entangled itself in the fingers of the [man]'s left hand, underneath which it spread and touched the rusty metal lining of the seat with a dark sheen, then descended with quiet inevitability down the dirty aged leather of the seat itself, losing itself at last in the depression made by the joint.
>
> *(Armah 5)*

Human fluids are deeply inscribed in the urban sprawl. The office where the man works is damp with coastal humidity and workers' sweat, its banister like "a very long piece of diseased skin" (Armah 12). Fluids clot the sign above the public waste box, once gleaming with the message KEEP YOUR COUNTRY CLEAN BY KEEPING YOUR CITY CLEAN, now barely legible, "covered over thickly with the juice of every imaginable kind of waste matter" (Armah 7).

The man, who is never named, rejects corrupt practices, refusing to accept a bribe, and so he's an economic failure in the new Ghana, teetering at the edge of the educated class. Meanwhile, his unprincipled school friend Koomson rises to a powerful position in Nkrumah's government, from which he helps himself to public funds. The unnamed man receives no admiration for his choice. His wife's mother humiliates him by drawing attention to their poorly dressed children. His wife complains across the scars of her Caesarian section. The man sweeps his floor hopelessly, then scrubs it with polish of a cheap red color, "tired and menstrual" (Armah 118).

Revulsion permeates this text, reaching its height when Nkrumah is deposed and the man, with Koomson, who fears for his life, must flee through a latrine. Human stench, cockroaches, vomiting. Neil Lazarus regards this novel as one of "the bleakest and most disenabling texts to be produced during the first decade of independence in Africa" (14). Chinua Achebe called it "a sick book" (624). Yet Hugh Charles O'Connell reads a weak utopian politics in the narrative: though he faults the text for emphasizing the individual at the expense of the collective, he finds traces of futuristic thinking in the man's occasional, reluctant optimism, and especially in the image that provides the title: once again, a bus, the back of a bus, on which someone has painted the words THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN (O'Connell). For Glen Retief, the text's utopian impulse is specifically homoerotic in nature, the man's despair, as well as his excremental adventure with Koomson, expressing a longing for queer ways of being that may only emerge among the "beautyful" ones of the future (Retief).

Retief's reading points the way to an image of the collective: the latrine. Both the alienated man, isolated by his moral convictions, and his old friend Koomson, the corrupt lackey, must be bathed in the common shit. The collective is the office banister, touched by so many dirty hands it seems almost organic, like a skin. Like the throng in Césaire's *Notebook*, this form of collectivity is without recognizable human agency. It enables queer meetings, escaping the world of Man"

> *A different thing: the public bath, made for a purification that is not so offensive. Here there is only the stale soapsuds merging in grainy rotten dirt from everybody's scum, a remainder of armpits full of yellowed hair dripping sweat down arms raised casually in places of public intimacy. The bus whines up a hill and the journey is almost over.*
>
> *(41, emphasis added)*

The man's journey ends with a farewell to Koomson and a weary trudge toward home. For him, the beautyful ones are not yet born. He does not understand that at his worst moment, in the depths of the latrine, he approached a liberating breakdown, becoming filthy enough to give up his tormenting desire for cleanliness, for wealth, for respectability, for a country run properly, without bribes, like a Western nation, for a heteronormative home with himself, the man, at its head, with an unscarred woman at his side, one who showed no evidence that a child had been torn from her body. For a moment, he gave it up. Koomson lay in the road. The man held him and lifted him. Together they went to the harbor. The man held Koomson's arm. Koomson smelled like shit. The man felt achingly free. The beautyful ones are everybody's scum.

## The Vivid Homage of Spit

Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*, as both a 1973 novel and a 1975 film, takes the elements suggested by *The Beautyful Ones*—the collective as scum, the tyranny of patriarchy, and the link between human and environmental ruin—and brings them into sharp relief. El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, the corrupt businessman, who has just taken a third wife, is having trouble with his sperm. He's been cursed with *xala*, or impotence. The postcolonial interregnum of Ayi Kwei Armah's novel, the "not yet" in which the unnamed man awaits the birth of the beautyful ones, here takes the form of El Hadji's sexual failure. He can't produce the good fluid of sperm, and therefore the future, until he recognizes the bad fluid of the urban poor as his own: the waste products of his own class.

In bed with his second wife, as she presses herself against him, El Hadji can produce nothing but sweat and tears: fluids with no apparent future, signs of helplessness and *xala*. "He was wet all over. His nerves were dead" (Sembène 52).

The bad liquids, the sterile ones, the diseased. The beggars are coming up the street. They're a motley group, "a procession of lame and blind people, lepers, legless cripples, one-legged cripples, men, women, and children" (Sembène 97). Their leader is the blind beggar who has haunted El Hadji throughout the text with his miserable singing, snatches of song described as *bribes monotones*, "repetitive scraps", so irritating El Hadji has had him removed by the police several times (Sembène 26). Now he returns, with a mass of repetitive scraps left behind by the Senegalese ruling class, by urban development, by modernization. They are *les bribes*, the bits and pieces, *les restes*, the leftovers; they are *déchets humains*, human waste, piss and shit, as they accuse El Hadji, speaking together: "And when we get too numerous, you call the police", one begins, and another completes the sentence, "to get rid of us, as you clear your bowels" (Sembène 100). *Pour nous éjecter comme des matières fécales.* "To discharge us like so much fecal matter".

Between the good liquid and the bad liquid lies a dryness. This is the arid, empty future threatened by the *xala*. It is the countryside, where El Hadji goes to seek a cure from the marabout among bare branches, yellowed grass, and ghost-like trees charred by bush fires. As Richard Fardon and Sènga La Rouge point out in their analysis of the film, "Although we do not see the interior of Senegal which is being ravaged by the Sahelian drought of the 1970s, we are aware that this place is also among the movers of the unfolding drama" (117). The text, like the film, reveals this bleak, dry background, the marabout's neglected village stranded on an empty plain, the famished cattle, the people clustered around the only well. To reach the village, El Hadji must abandon his car, his beloved black Mercedes, symbol of western-style modernity and success, which is not only his means of transportation but practically his home, as he spends so much time driving between his wives' apartments. He goes on by cart. At the marabout's, he strips off his expensive tailored suit. There, he is momentarily cured, filled with moisture, "as if sap was rising violently inside his body" (Sembène 67). The cure doesn't last, because he pays for it with

a bad check, but the incident suggests what the text ultimately reveals: the source of the curse on El Hadji, an urban man, lies in the wasted countryside, and so his cure must be there, too.

The beggars come up the street. They enter the house. They open the fridge, stick their fingers in the pots of yogurt. Their sores stink. "What I am now is your fault", the leader of the beggars tells El Hadji. "Do you remember selling a large piece of land at Jeko belonging to our clan?" (Sembène 99). In the book, the beggar is El Hadji's clansman; in the film, he is his half-brother; in both cases he has been disenfranchised by El Hadji, imprisoned, beaten. The crime committed in the country bursts forth in the city, uncovering a repressed kinship. "The dirty and polluted are not only the abjected of the society", write Fardon and La Rouge, "but also the abjected elements of the self" (118).

In *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, the poet recalls an impoverished Black man he saw on a streetcar:

> *He was COMICAL AND UGLY,*
> *COMICAL AND UGLY for sure.*
>     *(30, emphasis added)*

Like the man in Césaire's poem, the central figure of abjection, the beggars in *Xala* are comical and ugly. Like that man—a creature "big as a pongo"—they are described as animals: they squirm like snails, scuttle sideways like crabs, and squint like goats. Their presence provokes in El Hadji's family a sociogenic shudder. For this family, deeply attached to the status of bio-economic Man, a status they are able to maintain (within certain limits) through wealth, the beggars represent the ultimate nightmare: a fall from prosperity, which is the level of the human, into the undifferentiated mass of the poor.

To sink. To be absorbed in the scum. To drown. "Each of us will spit three times on you" (Sembène 101).

El Hadji strips once again. The beggars spit. El Hadji's face runs with spittle. The beggars order him not to wipe his face. To mark the loss of his Manhood, they place his new wife's bridal crown on his head.

> Césaire: "*For my face I demand the vivid homage of spit!*".
>
>                                     *(30, emphasis added)*

It's as if he's been reading *Xala* three decades before it appears in print. The poet demands to be spat on for his cowardice, for the way he recoils from the man on the streetcar, as if saliva is a necessary baptism.

*Xala* elucidates the fear of poverty, women, animals, and waste, but offers no escape. It concludes in ambiguity, with an ellipsis. "Outside the forces of order raised their weapons into the firing position …" (Sembène 103). Will the beggars be destroyed by the police? Or will El Hadji protect them, like a good father? Will his potency return? The narrative remains suspended between two phallic resolutions, in a "not yet" between rising penis and rising gun.

In Sembène's satire, the oppressed appear as human beings, their brokenness the result of exploitation. They even possess a mystical kind of power. Yet I pause. Is it necessary for an El Hadji, for a Black man returning home, like the poet of the *Notebook*, to undergo this humiliation in order to transfer his allegiance from the individual to the collective? Must his subjectivity be dismantled by the poor, the women, the animals, in order to reconcile him to his own stink? Is this—must it be—the only role for what is, after all, everybody's scum? Where are the beautyful ones? What about the future?

## Mad Max

At this point, I stop compiling these notes. I can't go on. I'm too bogged down, depressed by the burdensome masculinity of African men of my father's generation. During this period, I receive an email from the Long Riders' Guild, an international association of equestrian explorers (O'Reilly). They are interested in one of my late father's essays, a 1996 article entitled "Somalia's Horse that Feeds Its Master". Intrigued by the essay's references to Somalia's horse culture, they would like to add it to their online archive.

I grant permission. I read the essay. My father died in 2015, expressing only the most cautious hopes for Somalia's future. In 1996, when he wrote this piece, he was reeling, struggling to understand the civil war that was devastating his country. In the essay, he writes of Somali horse poetry with a mixture of nostalgia and critique. He remembers listening to this poetry as an adolescent, this genre of praise for the warhorses that were already disappearing during the colonial crackdown on camel-raiding and feuds. He quotes Raage Ugaas, whose horse bears down upon his victims with the speed of spear-like raindrops and the fury of flooding wadis. This is weaponized moisture: in *Xala*'s terms, it's good liquid, the kind that provides sustenance and increase. But my father questions this tradition of mounted masculine violence, which rages on, he writes,

> for the White man had introduced during his brief tenure in Somalia a new technology— firearms and motorized transport—that turned out to be infinitely more effective, hence deadlier, than the spears and horses that comprised traditional Somali weapons. Instead of the horse, today's symbol for tribal feud and vendetta is "Mad Max" (an open-top Toyota truck mounted with a Browning machine gun).
>
> *(Samatar 168)*

Mad Max—the image is ghoulishly appropriate. A science-fictional scene: a parched landscape, clouds of dust, killers on mechanical horses. This African "Mad Max" illuminates the condition of regions designated as disposable by the forces of global capitalism: waste places simultaneously "left behind" by modernity, and projected into its postapocalyptic future.

I return to my notes to find that images of motorized transportation stand out with sudden force: the streetcar in Césaire's *Notebook*, the bus in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and the car in *Xala*. There are divergences among them: the tram and the bus are working-class forms of transport, inhabited by laborers in a dead sleep, while El Hadji's Mercedes, like a mobile castle, bears him elegantly through the streets. Taken together, however, they evoke the earthly fluid, oil—a viscous substance that moves thickly through global geopolitics, from the devastation of the Niger Delta to the War on Terror. And since these texts are concerned with physical contexts marked as wastelands, whether the diseased Antilles, muck-saturated urban Ghana, or drought-ravaged rural Senegal, the emphasis on vehicles powered by fossil fuels casts an eerie, prophetic light into our own time.

What is the time of waste? A time of suspension, of *not yet born*. Or else a collapsed time, a charred desolation that arrives in the blink of an eye. It's either nothing or everything, either motionless or too fast. In these postcolonial visions, time does not flow.

## A Mound of Mingled Flesh

*Papa died. He had such a strong heart, yet he died.*

I turn to my cohort: the writers of my own generation, the daughters, the futurists. I turn to the opening pages of Nnedi Okorafor's 2010 science fantasy, *Who Fears Death*. The adolescent narrator, Onyesonwu, has just lost her father—not her biological father, who raped her mother in a genocidal war, but the beloved man who raised her. His body lies on a white cloth. She touches his arm. To her horror, she is unable to take her hand away. Her hand has fused to his body. "My sand-colored skin flowed into his gray-brown skin from my palm. A mound of mingled flesh" (Okorafor 4).

*Who Fears Death* is a fleshly tale—a story of mingling, shifting, wounding, and healing. It is also a story about time. Onyesonwu is an *Ewu* child, a mixed child of warring ethnic groups, marked by her light skin as a product of sexual assault. She is also a shape-shifter with extraordinary powers. She learns "to manipulate time and flesh" (Okorafor 227). In her hands, both become malleable, fluid. When she transforms herself into a vulture, her bones buckle and her tissues undulate. She brings creatures back to life: a goat, a dog. These acts leave her shattered and ill. A border, a line of skin, has been dissolved. After she resurrects the goat, goat hairs must be shaved from the back of her hand. After the dog, she vomits up dog hair and blood. And after an intense and challenging manipulation of the flesh—the restoration of her own clitoris, as well as those of her friends who underwent genital cutting with her—the skin of her hands peels off.

This is disintegration as power. Alexander Weheliye, in his study of the discourses of bare life and biopolitics, illuminates a politics of the flesh, a way of being human he draws from the traditions of the oppressed. He calls this alternative mode of life *habeas viscus*. In contrast to the concept of the human as bio-economic Man, which demands individual wholeness and self-possession, habeas viscus is the way of life, including the persistence of dreams and pleasure, among those deemed to have been reduced to "a faceless mass, the drowned" (118). In *Who Fears Death*, this alternative mode is literalized through fantasy as an alternative place: the wilderness. The wilderness is a layered space, signifying to varying degrees the desert, the lush countryside it once was, and the metaphysical region from which Onyesonwu draws her magic. This is where her mother's Alusi, or ethereal part, travels during her rape, enabling her to survive the trauma. It is where Onyesonwu travels to heal herself and her friends: a healing that emphasizes female erotic pleasure. It is also where Onyesonwu becomes most permeable, undifferentiated, liquid. "When I healed it wasn't all me. If it wasn't all me, then who else was it? It was like that moment … when you wake up and don't know who you are" (226).

I think, here, of Hortense Spillers and her essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987). In her analysis of the afterlife of slavery, Spillers elucidates a difference between the body and the flesh. The body belongs to itself; it has mastery; it possesses a name, a lineage. The flesh belongs to another. It is the state of being torn. The flesh is enslaved and deprived of name and of gender. It has no lineage. Its form of kinship is horizontal. Spillers writes of how this flesh is produced, how captivity and torture transform people's bodies into an undifferentiated mass. But in addressing the violence that blends and ungenders bodies, Spillers doesn't try to recover the old division into male and female that opens the door to the world of Man. "We are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness", she writes, "than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject" (Spillers 80, emphasis in original). I think of Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman talking of Spillers in a 2016 forum at Duke University, which I watched on YouTube, and how Moten said that after he read Spillers he thought, "Fuck a body. Ain't got one. Never had one. Don't want one" (Hartman and Moten).

Though *Who Fears Death* takes place in a different context from the Black diasporic space that concerns Spillers, Onyesonwu is a product of ethnic and gendered violence, and she seeks, and finds, something like Spillers's insurgent ground. By allowing her body to dissolve into other flesh, including that of animals, she invents a new way of being. Structurally, her ordeals resemble those in *Notebook of a Return*, *The Beautyful Ones*, and *Xala*: in each case, the encounter with wet matter signifies a breakdown of the self. In each case, too, there is a sense of horror at this lack of differentiation, at the conjoining of tissues in a viscous mass. This is the baptism of spittle, the dark latrine of the soul. Yet, though Onyesonwu's trials of the flesh are demanding, they are not debilitating. She is not an abject figure. She has a purpose; she is in training. She is working toward her deepest, most transcendent manipulations: one of the flesh, when she guides her slain lover's sperm to encounter the egg in her womb, and one of time, when she interrupts history to build an alternate future, ending the war, abolishing slavery, and evading her own death.

In *Who Fears Death*, time is as liquid as milk. When Onyesonwu touches the mystical Great Book, symbols melt from her hand, dripping into the text and altering it. History drinks from her touch "as a child does from its mother's breast" (Okorafor 377). To recognize and submit to the flesh, as Onyesonwu does, is to release the flow of time, which is blocked or truncated in *The Beautyful Ones* and *Xala*. In Okorafor's novel, the time of waste—of women, the outcast, and the enslaved—has a marvelous, surprising malleability. Freed from the track that would carry it, like a streetcar, toward a violent, predictable end, it spreads out, giving life to unforeseen futures.

## Transhuman(t)

In Okorafor's novel, the proposed solution to a history of rape, enslavement, and torture is the embrace of dissolution. The answer is to become animal, to inhabit a flowing substance, to join a mound of mingled flesh. Wanuri Kahiu's short science fiction film *Pumzi* (2009) extends this idea to include not just the animal, but all organic life, in an ecological parable set in a world destroyed by water wars, a hell recognizable as the logical future of Man. Brief, impressionistic, and featuring a protagonist who never speaks but who communicates through gestures and a few words tapped on a screen, *Pumzi* envisions a language of images shared by a woman and a seed. Asha, a museum curator, receives a mysterious soil sample and flees her tightly controlled city to plant a seed in the wilderness. Following her dreams, she waters the seedling with her sweat, curls her body around it as fertilizer, and gives it her life.

In Asha's city of Maitu, dreams are forbidden and medically inhibited. Bodies are harnessed for power. Sweat and urine are collected and purified. Nothing is wasted. Nothing, that is, except the earth, now a radioactive desert. When Asha escapes from Maitu, she enters into excess, into dreams, which in her community are regarded as a contaminant, the impure dross of the imagination. To dream is to waste time: a crime in the fully administered and instrumentalized enclosure of Maitu. Asha's dreams, whose provenance is uncertain—they may have been sent to her by the Earth itself—take place in an alternate timescape, similar to Onyesonwu's spiritual wilderness. In this dreamtime, this waste time, Asha perceives her future as a tree.

If the cluster of texts with which I began—*Notebook of a Return*, *The Beautyful Ones*, and *Xala*—emphasize motorized transportation, *Who Fears Death* and *Pumzi* are works of walking. They also show an intense awareness of the climate crisis. Both are set in deserts that once were green, and the action of both protagonists returns greenness to the world. To achieve their

goals, Onyesonwu and Asha travel on foot across barren landscapes. They are *transhumant*—a word I learned from my father's essay. He writes:

> The constant movement of the clans and lineages from one water-hole to another, and from one grazing ground to another in a transhumant cyclical fashion, year in and year out, for centuries, without a coercive unifying force to compel compliance, has produced in the Somalis a tendency to a collective mobile psyche.
>
> *(Samatar 163)*

When I read this sentence for the first time, I thought it said *transhuman*. Constant movement in a transhuman cyclical fashion. The word *transhumance*, however, means seasonal nomadism. It comes from *trans* and *humus*: across the earth.

In *Pumzi* there is something transhuman about transhumance, for Asha finds a safe place to plant her seedling by walking across the earth, a motion contrasted to the labor she is assigned to do as a punishment in Maitu: working a stationary rowing machine to provide power for her rulers. She even shares with the tree, or the Earth itself, through flashes of dream, something like a collective mobile psyche, a psyche that would have to be called transhuman, which quickens her desire for something akin to transhumance: movement across the earth.

Asha lies down in the desert and dies in silence, without the company of other humans. Yet, like Onyesonwu, she has a purpose. To a land laid waste by anthropogenic climate change and war, she gives her fluid, her viscid matter, her flesh. In this way, she forms a community with the seed that will become a tree and alter the climate of the desert. Sweat is a common language. According to the ecologist Michael Tobias, "From the biosphere's perspective, the whole point of Homo sapiens is their armpits, aswarm with 24.1 billion bacteria" (vii).

Horizontal kinship. Reproduction without sex. A language of dissolution in the sand. For Asha, the time of waste proceeds at a footpace, or with the delicacy of a leaf unfolding. It changes the world. The film ends with the sound of thunder.

## Breath

Aimé Césaire is an Afrofuturist. In his *Notebook*, he gives voice to a movement from self-hatred and despair to a new vision of the *négraille*. He combats sociogeny with a pride drawn out of thin air. (Fanon: "I grasp my narcissism with both hands" (6).) In the poem's second half, after the scene on the streetcar, the tone shifts, moving ever more powerfully toward solidarity with immiserated Black people everywhere. Instead of self-revulsion, there is tenderness and delight. The poet sees the *négraille* standing upright, no longer sprawled. This mass is standing in the hold, in the cabins, on the deck, in the wind, in the rigging, at the tiller, under the stars, *standing and free*. The vertical movement—from hold to rigging to stars—recalls the source of the bitter words on the streetcar, COMICAL AND UGLY: a reference to Charles Baudelaire's poem "The Albatross", in which the great sea-bird appears *comique et laid* when captured by sailors and forced to walk the deck. If the Black mass seems comical and ugly, the poet suggests, it's because its members don't belong to this world. Their home is elsewhere, higher. Like his contemporary, the jazz artist Sun Ra, who claimed to come from the planet Saturn, Césaire makes the stars his native land.

And though the move from the mud to the stars is a vertical trajectory, with echoes of the upward mobility so often tied to assimilation, Césaire remembers that Earth, too, is a heavenly body. Black flesh, rejected and abjected from the society of Man, belongs nonetheless to the

earth. The poet comes to see this throng no longer as "walking compost", but *flesh*: "flesh of the world's flesh pulsating with the very motion of the world" (Césaire 28, 36).

In *Pumzi*, the flesh *is* walking compost. Fluids are the future. The urine Asha passes under a sign reading LIQUID WASTE provokes no revulsion: combined with her sweat and recycled, it becomes a gift she shares with a thirsty maintenance worker. The film suggests that the future lies with the flesh, not as a stage to pass through on the way to self-actualization, but as a state to aspire to.

*Aspiration*: hope, desire, and breath. The word *pumzi* means "breath"—something that surprised me when I first watched the film. A more fitting title, I thought, would be *Flesh* or *Sweat*. Breath is so light, associated with the spirit, with the word, the opposite of the flesh in the Western, Christian paradigm. In that tradition, animals and plants, like Black people and women, are without spirit. But *Pumzi* overturns that paradigm, and with it the notion of the earth as "vile and base matter"—the foundation, for Sylvia Wynter, of the archipelago of Human Otherness. The human is tree, and the flesh is breath. When Asha breathes the scent of soil, she dreams of water. I think of Christina Sharpe's use of *aspiration* in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), her desire to keep all the meanings of the word at work: "the withdrawal of fluid from the body *and* the taking in of foreign matter (usually fluid) into the lungs with the respiratory current, *and* as *audible breath* that accompanies or comprises a speech sound" (109, emphasis in the original). In *Pumzi*, Asha's speech is aspiration, an audible breath that finds an echo in the hiss of rain at the conclusion of the film. Aspiration is Sharpe's word for thinking and imagining "laterally", for "keeping and putting breath back in the Black body in hostile weather".

With its vision of state surveillance and control of both physical and mental bodily functions, *Pumzi* warns us to stay alert to this hostile weather. We must collectively think the future of fluid, the future of flesh, attending to how and where this matter flows. When we consider Hortense Spillers's reminder that racialized, captive flesh provided medical science with "a living laboratory" (68), when we recall the looting of Henrietta Lacks's cervical cells and the vast database of African American DNA amassed by the criminal justice system (Roberts), we realize that Walter Benjamin's "*even the dead* will not be safe" means *even our cells* (199, emphasis in original). It means *even our waste*. Even the fluids employed as symbols of helplessness possess a latent force. You can get a DNA sample from tears. We must consider seriously the future of fluids, the future of waste. And it should come as no surprise that African artists are pointing the way to this: the crucial role to be played, in the future, by that which has been left behind.

I began these notes with a study of Black male writers of an earlier generation because I was compelled by their obsession with bodily fluids, and because I recognized, in the anxiety that surrounds wet matter in their writings, a link between the disposable people and waste places. Sprawling and oozing, the image of waste signifies alienation from the self, from the poor, and from ruined landscapes. Sociogeny makes places, as well as people, appear abject, undeserving of care, not worth the time. In more recent works by African women, I found a different image of bodily fluids, which brought with it a new relationship to the sprawl, a risky, life-affirming embrace of wet matter, whether flesh or soil. These narratives trace, as well, the peculiar time of waste.

The time of waste, like idleness, like dreamtime, flows differently from the linear march of history. It is the time of the throng, lateral and mobile. In breathing, the body exudes fluid and takes it in. *Aspirate*. Who can tell what atmospheric shift may rise from the vapor of mingled breath?

> At the end of daybreak
> a slow gait of sand
> a slow gait of gauze
> *(Césaire 19)*

Pat Parker to Audre Lorde, 1988: "I swear there is something different and uniquely special about the way Black people move among each other, especially when there is less fear because of the support from numbers. I could sit for days upon end and just feel the flowing" (Lorde and Parker 111).

## Acknowledgments

## Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "Africa and Her Writers." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1973, pp. 617–629.

Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Heinemann, 1968.

Baudelaire, Charles. *Flowers of Evil and Other Works: A Dual-Language Book*, translated and edited by Wallace Fowlie. Dover, 1992, p. 24.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. 1955, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt. Mariner Books, 2019.

Césaire, Aimé. *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. 1939, translated by Clayton Eshleman, edited by Annette Smith. Wesleyan UP, 2001.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952, translated by Richard Philcox. Grove Press, 2008.

Fardon, Richard, and Sènga La Rouge. *Learning from the Curse: Sembène's* Xala. Hurst, 2017.

Hartman, Saidiya, and Fred Moten. "The Black Outdoors: Fred Moten & Saidiya Hartman at Duke University." *YouTube*, uploaded by Duke Franklin Humanities Institute, 5 Oct. 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_tUZ6dybrc. Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

Kahiu, Wanuri. *Pumzi*. Inspired Minority Pictures, 2009.

Lazarus, Neil. "(Re)turn to the People: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Crisis of Postcolonial African Intellectualism." *The World of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o*, edited by Charles Cantalupo, Africa World Press, 1995, pp. 11–26.

Lorde, Audre, and Pat Parker. *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker 1974–1989*, edited by Julie R. Enzser, A Midsummer Night's Press, 2018.

O'Connell, Hugh Charles. "A Weak Utopianism of Postcolonial Nationalist Bildung: Re-reading Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2011, pp. 371–383.

O'Reilly, CuChullaine. "The Long Riders' Guild—Home Page." *The Long Riders' Guild*, http://www.thelongridersguild.com. Accessed 2 Apr. 2018.

Okorafor, Nnedi. *Who Fears Death*. Daw Books, 2010.

Retief, Glen. "Homoeroticism and the Failure of African Nationalism in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones*." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2009, pp. 62–74.

Roberts, Dorothy. *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty-first Century*. The New Press, 2011.

Samatar, Said S. "Somalia's Horse That Feeds Its Master." *African Languages and Cultures Supplement*, vol. 3, 1996, pp. 151–170.

Sembène, Ousmane. *Xala*. 1973, translated by Clive Wake. Lawrence Hill Books, 1976.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke UP, 2016.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 64–81.

Tobias, Michael, editor. *Deep Ecology*. Avant Books, 1985.

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke UP, 2014.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of 'Identity' and 'What It's Like to Be Black'." *National Identity and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, edited by Mercedes F. Duran-Cogan and Antonio Gomez-Moriana. Routledge, 2001, pp. 30–66.

———. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 257–337.

# 47

# GENRES OF RESISTANCE TOWARD REVOLUTION BEYOND THE HUMAN IN BOOTS RILEY'S *SORRY TO BOTHER YOU*

*Rhya M. Moffitt*

Boots Riley considers his 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You* to be an anti-capitalist project that centers on rebellion. In an interview about his film, Riley notes that "In the world of film we've edited out all rebellion. We're supposed to be showing representations of life, and whether the main characters in those worlds agree with it or not" (Gibbons). While the plot of the film centers on the rebellion involved in a group of workers' fight to unionize, I argue that within this struggle, the film embeds an exploration of multiple genres of resistance; not only does Riley's film resist editing out rebellion, but he shows various types of rebellion that occur every day and that come in different forms for a variety of groups. These genres of resistance include both Black feminist resistance and Black disabled resistance, ultimately providing a scaffold toward imagining what resistance could look like outside of the genre of Man entirely (Wynter 118). I highlight these genres of resistance in the film. Ultimately, I argue that read through Black feminist theories of the human and disability studies, the fight for the Black, disabled subject expands our conception of the possibility of rebellion, since it is through the equisapian— the half-horse, half-human being workforce of the film—that the potentials for radical revolution beyond the human present themselves. I consider the equisapians to be a literalization of what it could mean to eschew Sylvia Wynter's conception of the category of human—a category that does not fully include Black and disabled subjects, an exclusion that intensifies for the Black, disabled subject (Pickens 78). While the majority of the work of the film sets out to highlight the impossibility of living under capitalist systems, Riley's emphasis on precarity allows viewers to explore these various forms of rebellion and even pushes them to wonder about death of human life and rebirth as something beyond the human as an alternative to simply surviving under racist, capitalist structures.

*Sorry to Bother You* tells the story of Cassius "Cash" Green (Lakeith Stanfield), a young Black man who struggles to make money as a telemarketer at a company called RegalView. He learns how to game the system and is promoted to a Power Caller—a title that comes with a significant wage increase at the cost of selling what is essentially slave labor for WorryFree, a company that exchanges a lifetime of basic necessities for a lifetime contract of labor. Cash initially grapples with whether to join his colleagues in striking or continuing to benefit from his job, but ultimately joins the unionizing effort when he learns that WorryFree is turning its workers into horse-human hybrids, called equisapians, in order to increase productivity. Their strike is

ultimately successful, but Cash is turned into an equisapian against his will and knowledge. The film ends with Cash's transformation and a post-credits scene shows Cash joining the equisapians in an implied rebellion against Steve Lift, WorryFree's CEO.

*Sorry to Bother You* has been read through a variety of lenses, including the satirist, anarchistic, and dystopian (Bradshaw; Scott; Sims). My reading of it aligns closest to that of Leshu Torchin, who reads the film as an economic rights film that both centers race and includes the nonhuman subject, interpreted through the lens of human rights (29, 36–37). I simultaneously build on Torchin's reading of the nonhuman subject and place the film within the Afrofuturist film tradition, a tradition in which Ramzi Fawaz traces the outer space or elsewhere trope in *Space Is the Place* (1974), *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), and *Alien* (1992). Fawaz notes that these films tend to take up racist institutions such as gentrification, slavery, and the prison industrial complex while also moving toward "collective embrace of cultural abjection" (1104). Similar to Fawaz, I argue that Riley riffs on these tropes: he toys with the outer space element by using a familiar place—Oakland, California—as a setting and takes beings typically associated with an "elsewhere" and puts them in a familiar place. Furthermore, he nods to Sun Ra and his band Arkestra, which performs live throughout *Space Is the Place*, by having his band The Coup perform the soundtrack for *Sorry to Bother You*. Riley borrows tropes from the Afrofuturist filmic tradition in order to push viewers' conception of what rebellion might look like.

## It's a Precarious Life

While Riley thinks of his film first and foremost as an anti-capitalist project, he questions what constitutes life under capitalism. The film shows us that it is a life of precarity. Because life under capitalism is so precarious, it demands everyday forms of resistance in order to subsist under it. These forms both encompass the ways in which one must change oneself in order to simply survive and everyday forms of refusing the system that allow one to create the possibility of a better future for oneself. The film meditates on the necessity of both assimilation and everyday forms of refusal. I argue that in this case, assimilation is a strategy, and when used strategically, it is included as one of the genres of resistance Riley highlights. The meditation on assimilation as a necessary tool of survival and as a form of resistance comes through the film's mantra of "Stick to the Script", the only rule Cash is told upon getting hired.

Although Cash initially agrees to "Stick to the Script", he quickly realizes that the "script" is actually what holds him back—a fate he cannot afford since his job is commission-based and he and his family are at risk of losing their house. One day, an older, Black coworker named Langston (Danny Glover) suggests that if he wants to make money, Cash must "read the script with a white voice". Cash initially is confused by this command and thinks Langston simply means he must speak in Standard English and enunciate. Langston clarifies that it is truly, "Sounding like you don't have a care. Got your bills paid. You're happy about your future". While this is clearly an affect outside of the reach of both Langston and Cash, Langston highlights that it actually is not attainable for anyone: "It's not really a white voice. It's what they wish they sounded like. So, it's like what they think they're supposed to sound like".

Further, not only is the white voice inaccessible to everyone, but it is explicitly not available to Black people—not even in fiction. When Cash and Langston access their white voices, it is through voice-over by white actors (David Cross and Ryan Coursey). This casting choice and use of a voice-over further underscore the ways that whiteness and all the security that come with it are literally out of reach for the Black characters in the film. Riley doubles down on this assertion with this cinematic choice. On an extra-diegetic level, in order to bring this film to life,

white actors were paid for the use of their voices when their bodies never appear onscreen. While Langston asserts that a true white voice is out of reach for everyone, Black people, both on the level of the film's narrative and in the labor it took to create it, are even further removed from accessing whiteness and its privileges.

Langston's reflection on the white voice reiterates the sense of precarity that capitalism brings. While these Black characters put on a white voice to pretend they don't have financial cares, white characters also experience precarity under capitalism. While this shared sense of financial stress has the potential to act as a basis for solidarity later on in the film, it simultaneously emphasizes the increased state of precarity for nonwhite actors by calling it the "white voice". Though the film is touted as an anti-capitalist project, it also acknowledges Cedric Robinson's notion of racial capitalism, the idea that capitalism thrives because of the exploitation of the racialized Other, and thus racism is inextricable from capitalism (Robinson 2–3). Thus, although precarity is universal under capitalism, nonwhite subjects experience precarity even more acutely. As the film continues, Cash discovers that he is successful at his job only when he is both using his white voice and deviating from the script. His success renders the motto "Stick to the Script" as an aid in making this working condition one that will never result in successful outcomes for the employees. It's simply impossible to make money while "stick[ing] to the script".

Although Langston highlights the similar conditions of Black and white workers, there is still a clear racial division in survival in the world of the film. While white characters, according to Langston, sound like they thrive but secretly do not, Blackness is antithetical to survival. Survival is always difficult and barely attainable, but it is attainable only for those who are able to adapt and conform to whiteness. In this respect, Frantz Fanon reflects on the plight of Black people living under white supremacist and capitalist systems in his classic *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), where he contends that language is a tool used to assimilate into white society, and successful mastery of it puts Black people in closer proximity to whiteness, since white supremacy naturally assumes language deficiency[1] in Black people. Thus, "There is nothing more sensational than a black man speaking correctly, for he is appropriating the white world" (Fanon, *Black* 19). By ridding themselves of their "language deficiency" and shedding any remnants of their accents, Langston and Cash gain themselves admittance into the white world, which in this case means making sales, providing themselves a means of financial survival. As Fanon was a psychiatrist, his dedication to studying Black interiority ponders the motives behind Black desires for assimilation. In Riley's film, however, parsing the nuances of interiority is less important, as assimilation here is quite literally the only means of survival. As such, Cameroonian philosopher Achilles Mbembe thinks about various modes of Black survival in *Necropolitics* (2019). Pushing beyond Black fugitivity, Mbembe discusses survival in a way that is interesting to consider in relation to the masks Langston and Cash must put on to persist in their world:

> Survival depended on being able to inhabit multiple selves, often at one and the same time. … Obviously there were all kinds of risks attached to [this] dizzying state of endless crossing and becoming whose end was simply to stay alive.
>
> *(160)*

In other words, Mbembe mulls the experiences of Black people who must constantly shift identities in order to assimilate for the basic purpose of survival. This constant shifting of the self mirrors the ways in which Cash continually "dizzies" his own identity. Once Cash cashes in on the benefits of using his white voice, he begins to use it in other settings, sometimes as a joke at the bar with his coworkers, and other times with his Black girlfriend Detroit (Tessa Thompson), literally forgetting the voice with which he is speaking at the moment. Detroit, in those

moments, serves as a reminder for who he really is and demands that he snap back into his true self. This melding of selves, however, ultimately leaves Cash confused about whether his loyalty should lie with himself as the individual, or with his friends and coworkers in the collective. Fanon discusses this situation with respect to the struggle of the colonized intellectual:

> Those values which seemed to ennoble the soul prove worthless because they have nothing in common with the real-life struggle in which the people are engaged. And first among them is individualism. The colonized intellectual learned from his masters that the individual must assert himself.
>
> *(Wretched 11)*

The clear connection to a colonized mind becomes visible here as Cash's consistent use of his white voice leads him to adopt the ideology of individualism. For this reason, Cash ultimately crosses the picket line when his friends and coworkers begin to strike at RegalView. He benefits from his promoted position as a Power Caller, so he prioritizes his individual needs over those of the collective.

While Riley makes an investment in racial capitalism in this film with a racial division between the white voice and how the rest of the characters speak, he does, in fact, point out that life under capitalism is actually precarious for everyone. Langston highlights that at best, the white voice is "what [white people] think they're supposed to sound like". Survival under this system takes everything, and everyone is simply surviving at best.

## Genres of Resistance

Though survival is the bare minimum quality of life for most in the film, few are satisfied with it. Because of this dissatisfaction, multiple genres of resistance emerge. In this regard, Black feminist theorist Tina M. Campt considers what she calls Black visuality as a form of art in protest by reading Black visuality as enacting types of refusals which "reject … the status quo as livable and … create … possibility in the face of negation" (83). On one level, the film itself, as a work of Black visuality, is a form of the refusal Campt references. On another level, the character Detroit, a Black woman artist and activist, employs Campt's notion of refusal to highlight yet another genre of resistance in the film. Although Detroit appears to be merely a supporting role, it is through her that everyday acts of rebellion are carried out in anticipation for the larger revolt. Riley explores these potentials through Detroit's role as an artist. Although Detroit is supporting another character in every other scene in the film, Riley allows her one scene where she is the primary focus, and in this scene she exhibits examples of everyday refusals, challenging both spectatorship and capitalist consumption.

In this scene, we find Detroit at her art show and learn that she uses her "white voice", voiced by white British actress Lily James, to help her sell her art. Here, the viewer catches their first glimpse of the other side of Detroit: where Detroit had previously been someone who struggled against all forms of capitalism, we now see that she too is required to change parts of herself in order to survive in a capitalist world. Though her art remains reflective of who she is, she must change how she presents it in order for it to sell.

What comes next is Detroit's performance art piece that further emphasizes the ways in which she enacts these refusals strategically. A gong sounds and the camera cuts to Detroit, who explains that for the performance she will recite a line from the film *The Last Dragon* (1985), while the audience will pelt her with empty bullet casings, water balloons filled with sheep's blood, and broken cell phones. Riley frames her on the side of the screen that is typically

reserved for Cash because for once, Detroit is the focus, and she has the power, as her genre of resistance is front and center.

When Detroit signals the beginning of the performance, literally saying, "Let's begin", she is in an unobstructed long shot and takes off a black trench coat to reveal that she is entirely nude except for black fabric hands that cover her breasts and vagina, the one covering her vagina a raised middle finger. The camera cuts to a shot of several audience members who all simultaneously take a drink of their champagne, implying that intoxication is the only way they will be able to engage in the show. Detroit recites the line from the film: "And in the end, Eddie, you know what? You're nothing but a misguided midget asshole with dreams of ruling the world. Yeah, also from Kew Gardens. And also getting by on my tits". Here, she voices the line originally spoken by a white woman as she leaves her partner and the villain of the film. Lily James voices it here, though we see Thompson's face and body. Through the choice of this line, specifically the phrase "getting by on my tits", Detroit signals the ways that she carries the resistance movement in the film through her courage and labor—most of which are unseen or unacknowledged. James's voice here further underscores the invisibility of Detroit's labor as a Black woman.

The audience is hesitant at first, but it quickly engages by pelting Detroit with the various objects. As the scene intensifies with more objects being thrown at Detroit, Cash finally tries to stop it, reentering his side of the screen in an attempt to stop the performance. As he acts, the camera pulls focus from Detroit to Cash, but it takes a moment for the shift to happen and for Cash to be in focus; the camera literalizes the viewers' experience: viewers know they should look away, but they are reluctant to turn away from the spectacle. The scene closes with Cash's exit and Detroit in a helmet, covered in sheep's blood.

Detroit's performance melds together her two halves. While she wants to resist the urge to submit to capitalism, she literally must engage in it in order to exist. She decides, however, that if she must do it, she will do it on her own terms, which is to literalize the excess and violence of capitalist systems. While Detroit does this to drive home her point, part of her is also profiting off of the shock value of her performance. Detroit's performance blurs the lines of resistance and complicity. Complicit in that she uses her white voice throughout and withholds a part of herself, but simultaneously exposing herself to the violence of these consumers who senselessly pelt her with objects, primed only with the sips of champagne they've consumed over the course of the night. Detroit ends the scene by putting on a helmet, because even as Cash has served as a momentary reminder that engaging is wrong, once he is gone, Detroit knows her audience will not hold back, and she must literally protect herself from further bodily harm. In this scene, it is perhaps the viewer and consumer that Boots Riley critiques more than Detroit. Detroit continually provides the voice of reason throughout the film, and this is the only scene where the focus is on her. While her decision to be both complicit and subversive can be critiqued, this moment asks the film's audience how far consumers are willing to allow themselves to be used before simply choosing to cease consumption.

In terms of performance, Black Art historian Nicole Fleetwood reads subversive performances from Black women through the notion of what she calls excess flesh. I argue that Detroit's performance is strategic, and Fleetwood's ideas are a useful tool to consider this type of conflicting performance:

> To enact excess flesh is to signal historical attempts to regulate black female bodies, to acknowledge black women's resistance of the persistence of visibility, and to challenge debates among black activists and critics about what constitutes positive or productive representation of blackness.
>
> *(112)*

Detroit's performance, similar to those of Lil' Kim and Janet Jackson, which Fleetwood uses as examples, reclaims space by strategically deciding how her body will be perceived. Fleetwood declares, "the black female body is always troubling to dominant visual culture and that its troubling presence can work productively to *trouble* the field of vision" (113, emphasis in original). Thus, this performance acts reflexively, calling attention to spectatorship both in the diegesis of the film and to spectators viewing the film. Further, Detroit's presence in the film always troubles the notion of looking, since it is later revealed that Detroit is the artist behind the Left *Eye* resistance movement. Additionally, when Detroit is with Cash as he upgrades his possessions, Detroit has an eye painted over her closed eye. The imagery of the eye as associated with Detroit calls into question the idea of spectatorship, as Detroit is always looking back at a crowd in the film or looking back at the actual viewers of the film. I read Detroit's acts of resistance as an example of bell hooks's notion of the "oppositional gaze", where "Looking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future" (131). Detroit's symbolic and literal gazes are oppositional in that they constantly call viewership into question. On the levels of the film and on the level of the film's viewership, Detroit's genre of resistance is the gaze, this Black feminist refusal that looks back at dominant notions of viewership and calls into question how we interpret what we see.

Though Detroit's acts of resistance in the film are more subtle, Riley asks us to expand our notion of rebellion through the various genres of resistance on display in the film. A key tension of the film is the fact that Cash crosses the picket line and refuses to strike with his coworkers at RegalView. However, once Cash realizes that WorryFree is genetically modifying its workers to add horse-like elements to their body composition to make them more effective, he decides to join the fight against WorryFree and RegalView. With his newfound enthusiasm for the strike, Cash comes up with a plan he thinks will be successful: he dresses all protesters in the same shirt and wig. This plan allows the protesters to mask a line of stone statues in the same garb so that the riot police cannot pass. Once the riot police attempt to break past this barrier, they are immediately knocked to the ground. Once they get up, a few football players from Cash's high school team take their places in line and tackle the guards to the ground.

This demonstration, however, is the full extent of human, revolutionary violence. The police, dressed in riot gear, call in backup and violently break down the line. Viewers see a shot of a woman with a bloodied face running away from the group. Cash waits behind the dumpster, watching the chaos, until a guard comes and knocks him out with a nightstick. Cash regains consciousness in the back of a truck. Though it is unclear what the truck is for, it is reminiscent of one that might be used to transport animals, most specifically horses. Through a peephole, Cash has a narrow window into the outside world and clearly sees that though the fight pits protesters against riot police, it is clear that only one group is well-equipped for a violent fight. The police use nightsticks and tear gas, and their final act of destruction is when a police van plows down the bodies of a group of protesters, running for their lives in the streets. Right at this moment, when the violence appears to be too much, the equisapians come to the rescue and attack the police in retaliation. The equisapians free Cash and his friends. Before moving on, they declare to one another: "Same struggle, same fight".

The apparent failure in this scene signals a significant shift. Although Cash creates an elaborate plan to ensure the riot police and Power Callers are unable to cross the picket line, it is foiled almost immediately. I find Riley's use of dynamism between the excessively violent riot police and comparatively peaceful protesters interesting here. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon sees violence both as a tool of colonial powers and the only means through which colonized people can liberate themselves. Fanon also explicitly links capitalism to violence as a tool

of colonial powers to subjugate the colonized: "Capitalism therefore objectively colludes with the forces of violence that erupt in the colonial territories" (*Wretched* 27). What strikes me, however, is the lack of violence from those who seek revolution. In the end, only the equisapians use violence against the oppressor because they are the only ones equipped to physically fight back. The film ends with the union's demands being met, and the characters of the film appear to be satisfied with this agreement, but this goal is only possible through the multiple genres of resistance on display. Detroit's art around the city plants seeds of rebellion; Cash and his coworkers continue, sustain, and popularize the resistance; and the equisapians' willingness to use violence cements the progress of the other two groups. While the equisapians' practical involvement is significant for their tangible effects, the fight *for* the equisapians and their involvement in their own freedom demands that we center genres of resistance outside of the confines of the "genre[s] of the human *Man*" (Wynter 118, emphasis in original).

## Beyond the Human

The most radical genre of revolution in the film reflects on the revolutionary potential for the Black, disabled subject. Riley presents this genre of resistance in direct opposition to the fact that the Black, disabled subject is excluded from consideration in full humanity. Rather than proposing a remedy for the solution, the film asks us to wonder about what it might mean to literally stop being human to create a different future. This intervention intertwines Black studies, disability studies, and Afrofuturism to literalize this possibility.

Sylvia Wynter, a Black feminist theorist, reasons that the ideals of the Enlightenment are synonymous with the creation of what she calls Man. Wynter notes that Man was created based on his ability to exclude other genres of the human, stating that

> They would make their culture-specific notions of *Man* … into notions that were and are ostensibly conceptually homogenous with the reality of being human in all its multiple manifestations. With this, they were thereby making it impossible for themselves to conceive of an Other to what they called and continue to call *human*.
>
> *(123, emphasis in original)*

Black studies then takes up the call Wynter has put forth to meditate on what it means to eschew *Man* for other genres of the human.

Although Black studies primarily concerns itself with the exclusion of Black people from the category of Man, disability studies has similarly taken up the ways in which the disabled have also been excluded from this category. Consequently, Therí Alyce Pickens places disability studies in conversation with Black studies. Pickens first comments on the marginalization of the disabled, saying "Though disability is excluded from the human, the field depicts this as an oversight, a powerful one, but one that can be rectified by thinking of and incorporating disability as universal" (79). The project of Black studies as stated earlier seeks to reject the category of the human altogether, while disability studies seeks to revise the category so that it is more inclusive. Both agree that the Enlightenment's definition of the human as it stands currently is not enough and actively excludes the Black and disabled subject. I argue that through the equisapians, the film wonders at what it could be like for the Black, disabled subject to abandon, entirely and literally, the category of the human.

We meet the equisapians at the same time Cash discovers their existence at Steve Lift's (Armie Hammer) house party. Cash stumbles across the half-horse, half-human beings who have been augmented physically to be stronger workers and modified cognitively to be more

obedient subjects. Here, Riley comments on the necessity of involving disability in readings of capitalism. Lift has taken away the humanity of these workers simply because he was able to create greater profit for himself. The creation of the equisapian for profit recalls the connection between capitalism and disability. The film tends to class and racialize the equisapians since we know that only the most precarious sign the WorryFree contract, but the toying with genetic modification also links the equisapians to disability. Though the equisapians technically have augmented ability, we might deem them disabled, since their cognitive functions and physical bodies have been tampered with without their consent and in some ways resemble and exaggerate what we might consider today to be a workplace hazard or injury. To that end, Jasbir Puar contemplates how capitalism is aware of the risk to bodies of certain work poses and thus intentionally locates certain types of work in the communications of marginalized people: "Certain bodies are employed in production processes precisely because they are deemed available for injury—they are, in other words, objects of disposability, bodies whose debilitation is required in order to sustain capitalist narratives of progress" (81). This description maps onto the equisapians. Puar's comments on debilitation intersect with Mbembe's argument on necropolitics, in which Mbembe rethinks Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics, arguing "Sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not" ("Necropolitics" 27, emphasis in original). Thus, it is important to remember these newly disabled bodies and minds in our considerations of the equisapians. In this case, WorryFree dictates that the minds and bodies of the equisapians are disposable.

The film presents the equisapians' condition as bleak. Though they have the physical strength to assist in the strike, which is ultimately successful, the characters in the film appear to forget about the equisapians once their help in the rebellion has concluded. The film models this forgetting by ending before showing the equisapians' genre of revolution. Viewers only get a glimpse of work *for* the equisapians in a post-credits sequence.

The post-credits sequences provide viewers a glimpse of what it might be like to desire in ways that are counter to the project of Man. This final scene takes us inside the personal residence of Steve Lift. A phone rings, and he answers the call. The camera cuts to an image of three nude equisapians in view of the security camera's frame. However, there appears to be a tiny camera on the frame of the security camera, seeming to imply another moment of oppositional gazing as the equisapians can see Lift, just as he can see them. This moment powerfully evokes Detroit's looking back as a genre of resistance. Lift jumps from his seat as an equisapian speaks and says, "I'm Cassius Green, calling on behalf of 'stomp-a-mud-hole-in-your-ass.com'. Sorry to bother you but …". Cash and the other two equisapians with him have broken chains around their wrists. Cash kicks the security camera with his hoof, and it goes to static. An alarm blares, and Lift's front door is slammed open. An equisapian appears through the door frame, looks around a little before making a sound that isn't quite horse-like, but certainly is not human; the camera cuts to black.

To think about the implications of what this post-credit scene means, I return to Pickens's thoughts on abandoning the human from both a disability and Black studies standpoint. In Pickens's work, she reads Black speculative fiction as theory to help expand our notions of what it means to abandon the Enlightenment notion of Man. She reads madness and Blackness together in what she calls "Mad Blackness". Pickens declares that "Mad Blackness calls for no less than a retooling of the terms of humanity itself. It questions the desire for ability, and the desire for whiteness" (79–80). The fiction Pickens theorizes from questions what it means to shift desire and to live outside of the human by desiring Blackness and disability.

This post-credit scene proves to be rich in a couple of ways. First, it offers yet another genre of revolution. The equisapians are prepared to enact violent revolution, and their fight for

themselves begins in those moments. Second, it explores the ideas about what it means to abandon the human. Pickens's thoughts on desire are particularly useful here in that this is a scene where Cash and his fellow equisapians appear to desire their condition. I do not wish to confuse desiring this condition to be one that implies they wished for it; rather, it underscores that when rendered equisapians, they embrace it. This scene offers some suggestions about what this desire looks like. First, Cash has chosen to be with the equisapians. Regardless of what Cash's options were upon turning into an equisapian himself, rather than stay at home or live alone, he seeks community with the equisapians and goes to work with them.

Another hint that plays at the idea of desiring their condition comes through the mise-en-scène of the equisapians in this final scene. When we first meet the equisapians; they are contained by Lift in holding cells. They are not clothed, and they have chains around their hooves. In this scene, they are the same. We can read this unchanged mise-en-scène not as mere acceptance of their lack of humanity but rather as an *embracing* of it. They do not worry themselves with looking more like humans by wearing clothing or shoes, but embrace their hybrid bodies as their natural state, unconcerned with covering themselves. Pickens explicates the state of abjection in a way that can be applied to the equisapians in this moment: "Accepting abjection is not equivalent to accepting institutionalized racism. Instead, it requires viewing Black social life as lived in light of social death, or finding freedom in unfreedom" (77). This acceptance appears to be exactly what the equisapians have done. They appear to accept their new state of being, embrace it, and use that to rebel.

*Sorry to Bother You* challenges us to reimagine our conceptions of resistance and how the multitudinous genres of it provide a scaffold toward revolution. These genres of revolution then allow us to consider the state of Blackness and disability in relation to capitalism to then wonder what it could really mean to accept, live in, and desire other genres of humanity.

## Note

1  A deficiency here might be thought of as pidgin languages, creoles, and accents. It would also include deviations from what are considered the standard languages, such as African American Vernacular English.

## Works Cited

Bradshaw, Peter. "*Sorry to Bother You* Review—White Privilege Gets a Wacky Wake-Up Call." *The Guardian*. 6 Dec. 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/dec/06/sorry-to-bother-you-review-boots-riley-lakeith-stanfield-tessa-thompson. Accessed 13 Sept. 2020.

Campt, Tina M. "Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2019, pp. 79–87.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox, Grove, 2004.

———. *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Richard Philcox, Grove, 2008.

Fawaz, Ramzi. "Space, That Bottomless Pit: Planetary Exile and Metaphors of Belonging in American Afrofuturist Cinema." *Callaloo*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1103–1122.

Fleetwood, Nicole. *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. U of Chicago P, 2011.

Gibbons, Chip. "In the World of Film, We've Edited Out All Rebellion: An Interview with Boots Riley." *Jacobin*, 1 Aug. 2018, https://jacobinmag.com/2018/08/sorry-to-bother-you-boots-riley-interview. Accessed 5 May 2020.

hooks, bell. "The Oppositional Gaze." *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2014.

Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." Translated by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003 pp. 11–40.

———. *Necropolitics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. Duke UP, 2019.

Pickens, Therí Alyce. *Black Madness: Mad Blackness*. Duke UP, 2019.

Puar, Jasbir K. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Duke UP, 2017.

Riley, Boots, director. *Sorry to Bother You*. Annapurna Pictures, 2018.

Robinson, Cedric. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. UNC Press, 1983.

Scott, A.O. "Review: 'Sorry to Bother You,' but Can I Interest You in a Wild Dystopian Satire?" *The New York Times*, 2 July 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/02/movies/sorry-to-bother-you-review-lakeith-stanfield.html. Accessed 13 Sept. 2020.

Sims, David. "*Sorry to Bother You* is Fizzy, Flawed, and Fascinating." *The Atlantic*, 6 July 2018. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/07/sorry-to-bother-you-review/564263/. Accessed 13 Sept. 2020.

Torchin, Lechu. "Alienated Labor's Hybrid Subjects: *Sorry to Bother You* and the Tradition of the Economic Rights Film." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 4, 2019, pp. 29–37.

Wynter, Sylvia. "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Desêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project." *Not Only the Master's Tools: African American Studies in Theory and Practice*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon. Paradigm, 2006, pp. 107–169.

# 48

# TRANSFORMATIVE CYBORGS

## Unsettling Humanity in Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti*, *The Book of Phoenix*, and *Lagoon*

*Alyssa D. Collins*

Across a growing oeuvre, Nnedi Okorafor writes the cyborg not as an identity, but as a process to "*become more*" (*Broken* 83). Under her framework of Africanfuturism—a subcategory of science fiction that recognizes the "seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative," holds at its center futures and technologies that "skew optimistic," and centers African points of view over western concerns—Okorafor's protagonists routinely navigate and incorporate technologies—nanobytes, genetic manipulation, alien species—into their bodies (Nnedi Okorafor, PhD). What most distinguishes these characters is Okorafor's approach to the creation of these hybrid humans. While her cyborgian transformations are never easy, they generally lack anxiety over the decision *not* to privilege the human or Man[1] as a category specific to understanding human identity. In placing Okorafor's work within the broader landscape of posthuman thought and highlighting how Okorafor centers blackness and leverages technological hybridity, one can see the ways Okorafor sidesteps concerns over human limits insofar as they are based in the values of white masculine personhood. Thus, Okorafor's movements away from a "human standard" are significantly less fraught than other hybrid narratives that consider the ways technologically hybrid bodies might affect society and identity. Okorafor's work insists on Black women's definitional position in conversations of humanity and begins to present evolutionary and symbiotic practices and approaches to conceptualizing new relationships, new kinships, and ontologies in an intra- and inter-technological future.

Okorafor's characters are made cyborg twice over. In addition to representing the recognizable forms of cyborgism—metal technology meets human biology—and the cyborg's political potential to reveal and unsettle the "social and bodily realities" of women's lived experiences in the twentieth century (Haraway 292), Okorafor then imagines these same cyborg bodies translated, or encoded, into and out of information, creating new compound cyborg identities. These doubled informational cyborgs actively recognize histories of subjugation and oppression and engage in moments of (self) reidentification, agency, and power. In representing cyborgs that move from flesh to data and back again, Okorafor compounds the cyborgian action of unsettling boundaries of the human, ultimately producing a new ontological frame. We can best investigate the work of these bodies by reading three Okorafor works consecutively, published starting in 2014. These novels reveal the extent of her investment in the cyborg and the development of cyborg characters across several protagonists. Reading the evolutions of Binti from

the *Binti* trilogy (2015–2018), Phoenix from *The Book of Phoenix* (2015), and Ayodele from *Lagoon* (2014) illuminates new ways of understanding agentive hybrid embodiment and the way that the cyborg when refracted through an investment in Black women and a lens of cybernetic informatics creates new conversations of humanity, technology, and storytelling.

## The Posthuman Embodied Cyborg

The term cyborg can be a simple science-fictional construct, yet when processing it through the methods of technological evolution that characterize Okorafor's work, its operation becomes complex. Much like her investments in seamlessly blending tropes of science fiction, fantasy, and folklore, Okorafor routinely expands her characters along lines that are mechanical or technological and biological, simultaneously incorporating and consolidating altered and advanced humanoid and nonhuman species. In unpacking the workings of these embodied technological advancements, it becomes important to address the theoretical turns and concepts in the legacy of the cyborg that animate such discussion.

Okorafor's novels engage in three academic cyborgian: cybernetic posthumanism, feminist materialism, and the bodymind framework. While these concepts have often been written about as oppositional or dissonant, Okorafor offers readers a way to think about how different moments of cyborgism experienced by the same character generate new and hybrid ways of understanding the human while borrowing and implementing various theoretical cyborg legacies. In this section, I will quickly outline these trajectories and offer a note on the terminology and method that shapes the remainder of the chapter.

The cyborg, or cybernetic organism, owes its name to the concept of mechanical and biological feedback systems developed and historically outlined in the field of cybernetics. Starting in the 1940s, cyberneticists argued that all systems, biological and technological, could communicate given their homeostatic nature. The legacy of cybernetic thought generated the language necessary for the posthuman theories of the late twentieth century, in which theorists argued that what constituted the human was not flesh, but information. N. Katherine Hayles calls the networked relation of inhuman bodies and information technologies "informatics" (29). I start here, at the initial cybernetic organism, because of Okorafor's consistent interest in representing the translation of the body into text and tale. As we will see shortly, for Okorafor, the cyborg represents both the intersection between different systems and the transformation of bodies into and out of information.

The cyborg, as a cybernetic organism, was then imported from science fiction into feminist academic discourse by Donna Haraway as a way to begin to consider the cyborg body as a site for undermining binaries like that of human/machine. Haraway, the originator of the term informatics (of domination), presents the cyborg as both a real and imaginary figure that was able to represent women as they are affected and constructed through ideological, materialist, and sociopolitical systems. The cyborg as an oppositional, partial, ironic, dissembling entity offers, for Haraway, the possibility of understanding race, gender, and capital as a "theory of wholes and parts," always resisting totality (316). Haraway's formation was part of a project that sought to expand the "logics of identity" that organized feminist thought in the late twentieth century (Currier 321). The shift to materiality, in which bodies and their limits and interfaces came to be a primary focus of material feminism, flowed into conversations of assemblage, where bodies and technologies are inflected by and connected to each other. Understanding embodiment by way of the cyborg allows for a conversation about the complex movements and interactions of bodies with society. The changing situational nature and construction of these bodies, assemblagists argued, reveal binaries and shift feminist theory from the pragmatism of identity-based politics.

The rise of the cyborg has been cast as an alternative to intersectional feminism; however, the tension between these two legacies should not be "oppositional but rather … frictional," steadily informing each other (Puar 50). Okorafor certainly engages such friction in her own work by highlighting the centrality of Black women as a starting point for technological evolution. Situating her investigations of the evolution of the body in her characters like Binti, Phoenix, and Ayodele, Okorafor presents both the possibilities of practices and ontologies centered in Black femme embodiment as an identity, just as she unsettles the very definitions of these identities. Through Okorafor, we can see the collaboration of intersectionality and feminist materiality as a collective response to historical rejections of embodied existence.

The final concept through which we might understand Okorafor's cyborg, and the term as it is used throughout the remainder of this essay, is the bodymind, a concept from feminist disability studies referring to the inextricability of mind and body. For Sami Schalk, "bodymind" is important to Black speculative narratives because it acknowledges the material influences of thought and constructs on the body (3). Bodymind is refracted through Okorafor's own personal experience and writing practice. In her memoir, *Broken Places & Outer Spaces* (2019), Okorafor continually locates the cyborg in her work as an experience of her own evolution, of "becoming more" (83). The cyborg is an ontological frame for the development of her characters, her experiences of bodily hybridity, and her development of Africanfuturism. Of the cyborg and her own speculative writing, Okorafor notes:

> Nigeria was my door to science fiction. The opening of this door restored my faith in science after science failed me. And once I was back as a proud disciple, I was free to embrace my own cyborgicity. Something just had to break first.
>
> *(Broken 88)*

The connection between embodiment and genre, between the cyborg and Africanfuturism, is necessary for Okorafor. After it became necessary to understand herself and her body as a cyborg, she became aware of and developed her writerly voice, a voice that insisted on owning the themes of "hybrid humans" (81). The cyborg is central to the development of both her writing investments and politics.

What follows will first outline the twofold nature of Okorafor's cyborgs, identifying several first-order cyborgian moments in Okorafor's work in which recognizable cyborg forms offer new possibilities for being. Then, tracing the compounding of these ontological possibilities through representations of digital storytelling, when cyborg bodies are encoded again through informatics into data, we can see the ready generation of yet another cybernetic organism from the already established cyborg. Thus, Okorafor's cyborg characters are made cyborgs twice over—into new second-order cyborgs.

## Cyborg Conventions

Okorafor's first-order cyborgs are the most recognizable. The character's human body, or what looks like the human body, is modified through technological or biological means. Binti, Phoenix, and Ayodele all become cyborgs in different, interesting ways. Their cyborg natures are part of their identities not on the precipice of human and machine, but through their relationships with themselves and their communities. In looking at these initial cyborg bodies and what they represent, we can then consider the ways that data and the creation of the secondary cyborgs through the processes of language and communication affect these forms as they are modified further.

The *Binti* trilogy follows a young Himba girl as she travels across the galaxy to university. Living on a futuristic Earth, Binti, the first to leave her community, becomes caught in an intergalactic war, unearths family secrets, and returns home to unlock ancestral power, all while *becoming more*. Binti's body endures an incredible amount during the series—her long clay-covered locks become alien tentacles; she activates dormant microscopic alien technology in her blood; she dies and is regenerated inside the body of a giant flying alien, becoming forever connected to it. By the end of the trilogy, she is an accretive, maximalist entity with human, Meduse, Enyi Zinaria, and New Fish DNA.

For Binti, each exchange with a new species and culture yields a new modification, and each new addition to her body is represented in her name. While worrying over her identity, her name grows longer in order to represent the person she is becoming. All questions about "humanity" are quickly redefined. Near the end of *Binti: The Night Masquerade*, Binti asks her doctor, Tuka, about her new body:

> "Am I … am I still human?" …
> "Do you think you are?"
> "I mean, well, that's not …"
> "You are a Himba girl, right? That's what you say you are?"
>                    (Night Masquerade *191*)

Tuka responds to Binti twice regarding her humanity. First, she raises a question of self-definition: "Do *you* think you are?" Then she affirms Binti's desire and identification as not simply human, but specifically *Himba*. It is important to note that Tuka is from the Khoush ethnic group that has oppressed Binti's people on Earth and fought an endless war against the Meduse, a race of tentacled aliens. She is particularly positioned to deny Binti's existence and identity; in fact, at the beginning of the series, several Khoush women casually dehumanize Binti. Tuka, however, identifies Binti's relationship to humanity as neither primary nor outside of her control. She responds to Binti's true question, about her connection to her culture, and whether leaving has removed her from it permanently. This is the same question she had before her cyborg transformation. Tuka's answer shifts the conversation of human boundaries, from a question of concept of Man, an identity defined through imperial impulses (represented here by the relationship between the Himba and Khoush) to an unimportant mode of identification underscored by cyborg status. Instead, Binti's question points to the importance of her heritage and kin. The heritage of the cyborg and her connection to her identity, both established and found, are potential places of power. Okorafor begins this conversation about cyborg power in *The Book of Phoenix*.

*The Book of Phoenix* follows Phoenix, a genetically derived woman created by an evil multinational corporation (Big Eye) to be a living weapon. The novel begins as Phoenix escapes her captors in New York City's Tower 7. Her escape catalyzes a revolution among others created and held captive (collectively called SpeciMen). Throughout the novel, readers are introduced to various cyborgs that Big Eye has oppressed, manipulated, and terrorized. The majority of the people and the modified bodies that we encounter are those of the Black diaspora. While depicting a futuristic Earth run by a multinational technology corporation, *The Book of Phoenix* suggests that this future, like our present, is only generated through the continued exploitation, denigration, and violent technological manipulation of Black people.

Phoenix's power allows her to raise her body's temperature so that she explodes. Then, as her name implies, she regenerates and is reborn. Once Phoenix explodes and escapes, she finds she has powers that were undesigned. These unplanned abilities make her hybrid. Phoenix develops wings after her first death and the ability to time travel, given her existence that remains "inside

of life and death" (*Phoenix* 96). These two skills develop after she is no longer captive. While Phoenix is genetically designed and born modified, the true possibilities of the cyborg exist in these two additional skills fostered by Phoenix's freedom, her kinship, connections, and her choices.

While Phoenix's hybrid body was developed without her control, her ability to inhabit and change her cyborg self allows her to operate in ways unimaginable to her creator captors. Furthermore, several SpeciMen suggest that while Big Eye wields scientific power and violence, the powers of the SpeciMen are inherent to their own bodies and communities. The corporation has only stolen, wielded, and modified these technological possibilities by extracting them from African and Afrodiasporic communities. This claim becomes clearer as Okorafor places Phoenix in direct lineage with Henrietta Lacks. As Phoenix takes down the various towers of Big Eye, she liberates a SpeciMen named HeLa whose blood has been extracted by the corporation to make several billionaires immortal. HeLa notes that she has been named after Henrietta Lacks's immortalized cell line. Phoenix then pauses her tale briefly to tell the history of Henrietta Lacks and then speculates, saying, "Though it wasn't stated in my records, I had always been sure Henrietta's cells had been used in the research that led to my creation" (*Phoenix* 186). HeLa confirms her suspicion:

> "They always said you'd come," she said. "They said our blood draws itself."
> "Blood?"
> "But you bring death," she said. "And I don't have wings or burn up."
> "I think the wings were an accident," I said.
>
> (Phoenix *186–187*)

In comparing what the corporation made them, they talk about their differences, namely Phoenix's accidental wings that must have been developed outside of the experimental processes of Big Eye. Her wings are also what allow her to escape and remain free. This brief conversation reveals their connection to each other as well as their connection to Lacks. HeLa suggests that their meeting is inevitable, foreseen by herself and Big Eye because of their shared blood. This moment cements an earlier connection to Lacks's legacy by way of Octavia E. Butler. After Phoenix comes back to life, she quotes Lilith Iyapo, the protagonist from *Dawn*, stating, "Alive! Still alive. Alive … again" (Butler 3). Thus, Okorafor connects Phoenix not only to the historical Lacks and the way her cells have been used by modern biotechnology both inside and outside of the novel, but also to a legacy of science fiction that has incorporated the story of Lacks's cells as a method of interrogating and reimagining moments of human evolution, especially those moments rendered though Black femme bodies.

Finally, HeLa presents a different kind of connection, or kinship, outside of what has been established by the corporation. She states, "Phoenix, they didn't make me … I am Jarawa, the last of my kind" (187). HeLa's destroyed community, thought to be part of the oldest part of the African diaspora, presents yet another place in which we can read Phoenix's hybridity, and the power it entails, as something originating with her. This slippage of Big Eye's technological control, as well as their grasp on the actions and narratives of their prisoners, settles Phoenix's hybrid cyborg body as something that is her own along with any action she takes, be it liberating SpeciMen or razing civilization to the ground.

Similar to Binti, Phoenix's cyborg nature presents a conversation about diaspora, Black connection, and kinship. It is about the embodied technological abilities of Black people extant to white corporate manipulation and offers a suggestion that the legacies of the cyborg are always already African in nature. This theme continues with our last cyborg—Ayodele from *Lagoon*.

Binti and Phoenix present readers with a cyborgism based in identity, species evolution, and diasporic heritage. The cyborg character in *Lagoon* expands such possibilities to the collective. *Lagoon* follows the events of an alien invasion of Lagos. Like *The Book of Phoenix*, in which there are many cyborg bodies, *Lagoon* features not only a cyborgian protagonist, Adaora, a marine biologist who becomes a mermaid but also a first-contact alien, Ayodele, who appears in the body of a Black woman. While Ayodele is not originally human, her choice to appear on Earth as a Black woman and to be treated as such, does a similar kind of work to unsettle familiar narratives of humanity, much in the manner of Okorafor's other Black femme cyborgs. Moreover, narratively, Ayodele acts as an embodied double or cyborgian counterpart to human Adaora. During their first encounter, Adaora notes:

> There was something both attractive and repellent about the woman … Her hair was long—her many braids perfect and shiny, yet clearly her own hair … Her mannerisms were too calm, too fluid and … alien. … She could easily pass the woman in the white dress off as her cousin … She could run some simple tests on this … "woman" there.
>
> *(Lagoon 17)*

In deciding what to name her, Adaora notes her own attraction and possible kinship with Ayodele. Ayodele, an alien, looks not only very human, but also related to Adaora. This familiarity is balanced with foreignness in that she is repellent and that in some moments her rendering is too perfect—her braids, her movements. Just as Adaora's own hybrid transformation is fomented by the alien invasion, we can read Ayodele's primary form as Adaora's future cyborgism refracted through alien relation. Ayodele's own materiality presents the malleability and control we see in Okorafor's many iterations of the cyborg. Once Adaora has run tests, she notes that Ayodele is "made of tiny, tiny, tiny, metal-like balls" (25) that allow her to take on any shape that she desires. Across the text, Adaora and Ayodele call the arriving aliens "technology," suggesting that these aliens as they exist naturally are hybridized, able to take on both the material representation of humans and exist in a collective hybridized technological state—metal and flesh simultaneously. When asked about their relationship to technology, and how they interact easily with the technology on earth, Ayodele tells the Nigerian president:

> "It is a matter of connecting and communicating." She grinned. "And your technology is simple, easily manipulated."
> "And yours is not?"
> "We *are* technology, Mr. President. And no, we are not easily manipulated."
>
> (Lagoon *218*)

Ayodele and the aliens, or this "we," represent the promise of a collective hybrid species, one disinterested in bodily, material, or individual limits. Their cyborg nature allows them to connect and communicate with whomever they need—marine life, human, or alien. Their collective technological nature offers them control and the ability to resist manipulation. Collective cyborgism is how the aliens plan to move Nigeria forward as a country—advancing the country out from under the mantle of the exploitative coloniality that has haunted the nation since its inception. Still, the transition from alien invasion to cooperation is messy, and in order to calm the city, Ayodele sacrifices her bodily form. She explodes, transforming into a breathable mist that infiltrates the local atmosphere and makes every denizen hybrid, cyborg, and "a bit … alien" (*Lagoon* 268). Turning everyone cyborg establishes what Moira Marquis calls a

"collective othering" that offers new political possibilities for the country (411). This new form of government and diplomacy is available only through the country's collective hybridized self.

In these three representations of the cyborg, the power of Okorafor's first-order cyborgs becomes clear. They unsettle existing definitions of the human by first initiating a conversation about humanity and its evolution through the figure of the Black femme body. They then relinquish this form completely in order to embrace something more—either by way of heritage and identity, or a legacy of Black cellular immortality, or the collective cyborg movements of a nation. The final twist of Okorafor's comprehensive cyborg musings is that this conversation about hybrid technological embodiment foregrounds her ongoing themes of storytelling and collective histories that necessitate the translation of certain bodies into information. The translation of this embodied information, then, offers new ways to define humanity, to evolve and imagine the future.

## The Informatics of the Black Cyborg

Once we have the first-order cyborgs, bodies hybridized in familiar ways, we can think about the ways in which Okorafor complicates the matrix of cyborg identity by reimagining the relationship of technologically derived data and embodiment. These second-order representations engage Hayles's cybernetic posthuman construct of informatics, through which bodies interface with various technological systems.

While the original cybernetic posthuman frame often elides nonwhite, non-masculine bodies, it also fails to imagine contemporary operations of data; and its collection on Black and Brown bodies, or the way these bodies are made into data through surveillance and oppression, becomes further refracted through historical analogs. Concern over datafication and its carceral leanings is well documented. Ruha Benjamin's "New Jim Code" provides a ready framework for understanding the offers and liabilities of technological innovations that promise the easy collection, care, and administration of data, and also sediment existing hierarchies, violence, and racial discrimination (5). Okorafor's second-order cyborgs incorporate Benjamin's technological realities by engaging narratives of blackness (both real and fictional) as they intersect with code-cyborg informatics. It is in these second-order cyborg representations that Okorafor pulls both cybernetics and Haraway's theory that "women of colour" can be easily understood as "a cyborg identity" into the future (311). Okorafor's navigations of the interfaces of data and embodiment, read through matrices and histories of race and embodiment, push cyborg conversations from the theoretical and the fictional into reality.

The process of translating a body into data is called "datafication". Simone Browne notes that for Black people, the collection and recording of biological data, or biometrics, is not simply a cataloging of information but instead a process she calls "digital epidermalization", in which bodies, "or more specifically parts, pieces, and increasingly, performances of the body", are simultaneously technologically and racially encoded (110). Therefore, this data of embodiment is interpellated through the same methods and discourses through which Black bodies have always been hailed, read, and interrogated. Digital epidermalization illustrates the reinforced institutional violence historically leveraged against Black people through technological means. Okorafor depicts an analog of this process in *Binti*. As Binti leaves Earth for school, she experiences the following:

> The travel security officer scanned my astrolabe, a full *deep* scan. Dizzy with shock, I shut my eyes and breathed through my mouth to steady myself. Just to leave the planet, I had to give them access to my *entire* life—me, my family, and all forecasts of my future. I stood

there, frozen, hearing my mother's voice in my head. "There is a reason why our people do not go to that university. … You go to that school and you become its slave," I couldn't help but contemplate the possible truth in her words. I hadn't even gotten there yet and already I'd given them my life. … They could do anything to me, at this point. Best not to make trouble.

(Binti *13–14, emphasis in original*)

Binti's experience can be read through the frame of the Black datafied body. The security officer, a Khoush elder, represents the oppressive state apparatus through which Binti must travel. Her astrolabe, a handheld computer that she built herself, and which she considers an extension of her body, is scanned. The investigation of her astrolabe instigates a physical response from Binti, establishing an embodied connection. Furthermore, the scan not only provides access to Binti's life, her biometric information, but also to her relationships and the possibilities of her future. Biometrics, the "parts and performances", are not only represented in Binti's comportment in the present and the past—for example, her ability to get into the most prestigious school in the galaxy—but also any and all actions or possible actions in the future. Finally, her mother's voice confirms the fear and historical analogs of this process: the ownership, scrutiny, and precarity of a Black body moving through a system and becoming datafied. This moment is dangerous and it's "best not (to) make trouble".

Given Binti's subsequent hybridization, this moment offers an avenue through which we can clearly see Okorafor's new theorization of the cyborg. Here Okorafor imagines both the oppressive surveillant nature of datafication but also begins to imagine the possibilities of a cyborg informatics based on the Black femme body. Okorafor presents the evolution of the fictional, theoretical, fractured cyborg figure as it collides with the reality of Browne's epidermalized cyborg. Her reframing of these technological relationships—between body and machine and information—becomes most visible in the rendering of theses complicated second-order cyborg moments.

Earlier, I explored the ways in which Okorafor creates first-order cyborgs—the moments creating the conventional cyborg. In what remains, I want to suggest that Okorafor's arguments about data, about information, and storytelling are also part of this cyborg trajectory. In treating the cybernetic prefix of the cyborg—information—we are able to see not only Okorafor's unsettling the concept of the human, but also her resetting, making optimistic, and less precarious, the relationship between Black bodies and datafication. In reading Okorafor's second-order cyborgs, doubled cyborgs, we can see not only the history and anxieties of the Black bodies and data collection and technology, but also the ways in which datafication, language, and technological communication within a cyborg frame contain possibilities for new kinds of ontologies regarding data, storytelling, and the future.

Okorafor consistently uses her cyborg characters to develop conversations about writing, communication, and storytelling. She writes heroines who facilitate "mythic revisioning" and "magical rewriting" of not only their own histories but also revisions for real histories across the African continent (Bryce 1, 11). These acts of revision affect both the character's body and the process of storytelling itself. In *Lagoon*, Okorafor makes communication both collective and bodily intuitive. *The Book of Phoenix* reveals how the dead might tell history through DNA. And *Binti* presents a future in which communication and language are important trajectories for human evolution. Okorafor consistently takes the processes of datafication that pose a threat to the Black body and relocates them, presenting new articulations for Black embodied data relationships.

The relationship of the cyborg to information and communication is most seamless in *Lagoon*. Ayodele and the other alien invaders can easily manipulate earthly communication technology (namely technology with screens) due to their collective cyborg nature. In fact, any

species that they give their attention to is able to easily engage, manipulate, or mimic communication technology. After Ayodele's sacrifice, the novel follows the Nigerian president. In this scene it becomes clear that the hybridized embodied knowledge that controls the technology is also that which will release this Nigeria from its own corruption, diplomatic, and democratic difficulties. This political turn is first facilitated by their new alien neighbors but in the future will no longer be necessary:

> "When the broadcast goes live," … "it will appear on all of your people's screens … Everything with a screen will turn on, whether it is plugged in to anything or not" … "Mobile phones," she said. "Computers, desktops, laptops, televisions, e-readers, all things with screens."
>
> "How" he asked. …
>
> She laughed. "The knowledge is in you. Ayodele made sure of that."
>
> *(Lagoon 274–275)*

The dissemination of Ayodele's body, her technology, gives the Nigerians the technology and communication that they need. This communication is not limited by an operating system, internet access, or a screen's original function. Suddenly, the president is able to reach all of his constituents in a way that had never been possible. This new power of communication stands in contrast to both the novel's past, in which the image of a child killed during the invasion circulates, alerting the Western world of the event; and the world of the reader, in which Black life and death are recorded and circulated as entertainment, then subsumed into limited white narratives of Black humanity. This once colonial entertainment cycle breaks after the country's collective hybridization. Their new technology, a technology of themselves, and of their bodies, is the future of the country and perhaps the world.

If *Lagoon* represents the collective cyborg possibilities of communication as a way to upend monolithic Black narratives, Phoenix's cyborg story presents a powerful narrative of hybrid genetics. After Phoenix razes the majority of humanity to the ground, her lover Saeed attempts to preserve her using Big Eye recording technology:

> It is not made for scientists. It is truly a recorder. It is made to pull and store information, not to offer its services only to the elite educated. … I let it pull Phoenix's memory from the one thing of hers that I still had. Her golden red feather … All I had to do was press the device to it … it grew warm and in a soft woman's voice said, "Extracting The Phoenix Okore, SpeciMen, Beacon, Slave, Rogue, Fugitive, Rebel, Saeed's Love, Mmuo's Sister Villain."
>
> These were how she saw herself. … How did this device know? Mmuo was always talking about this stuff in his skin called DNA. He said this stuff was what carried all that we would be. Did DNA carry memory too? Was it reading her DNA? I don't know.
>
> *(Phoenix 223–224)*

Saeed's translation of Phoenix's DNA into downloadable history is the only mechanism through which the novel can reach its readers. Saeed notes that even though it has been made by the corporation, it can be used democratically. It facilitates a transfer of unmediated information, as an audio file, to those who have not been offered the chance to learn to read. Furthermore, the device identifies Phoenix by the names she called herself, some of these uttered only to herself. The recorder not only reads biometric information but also relays the narrative complexity of this information. Okorafor, through the form of the novel itself, argues

that Phoenix's DNA carries a tellable narrative and that this process of datafication is powerful. A piece of her cyborg self allows Phoenix to finally control and tell her narrative long after her physical time on Earth.

*Binti* depicts what I consider the fullest possibility for Okorafor's cyborg regarding both embodiment, evolution, and communication. At the same time, the novel carries the narrative analogs that are closest to the ways data and Black bodies intersect in reality. Represented on the page, the character Binti collects all of Okorafor's previous cyborg bodies and offers a representation of the relationship between cyborg bodies and communication as the result of necessary symbiotic evolution—an escape to a future that is unpredictable. While originally born a master harmonizer, Binti's hybrid "parts" and "pieces" allow her to resolve a generations-old intergalactic war between human Khoush and alien Meduse, and save her community in the process (Browne 109). By the novel's end, Binti meets a set of aliens who have been calling to her throughout the entire trilogy. While their request is anticlimactic (a review of her university) in this moment of communication, Binti finds that she is much more like them than she would have expected:

> "We want an opinion on the university that comes from someone like us."
>
> "But … like you? How am I—"
>
> "We're people of time and space. We move about experiencing, collecting, *becoming more*. This is the philosophy and culture of our equation."
>
> *(*Night Masquerade *171, emphasis added)*

Binti has been contacted by these aliens because of who she has become, a collection of bodies and experiences. Hearing from this ancient space-faring community, Binti sees the possibilities in her own cyborg body in the process of *becoming more*. This refrain that follows Okorafor's cyborgian inventions is suddenly reflected through a lens of an older, nonterrestrial species-culture, an ontology, a way of being unlimited by time and space. Binti, as cyborg, is a moment of evolution, one that pushes a young mathematical genius from student to hero to intergalactic diplomat and presses the possibilities of humanity into something that can evolve past the limits of exclusive definitions, species, or Earth.

These texts represent concentrated moments in which Okorafor reveals true cyborg possibility. They exemplify key moments in her ongoing conversation of cyborg bodies, futurity, and human evolution. These cyborg representations forged through the generic conventions of Africanfuturism—representation, optimism, and more—unsettle definitions of the human as contemporary, exclusionary, or limited. In her work, Okorafor continues to articulate cyborg ideas about what materiality and technology could offer Black people of the future. She finds that the future and futuristic technology do not simply offer more oppression, and more death. Instead, she sees and writes evolution. An evolution that starts with the story and second-order cyborg bodies of a young Black woman. In writing Black futurity through the cyborg Black femme, Okorafor redefines humanity, shifting the ontological frame from safeguarding Man to a future of inclusive evolution—of becoming more.

## Note

1  Wynter weaves an argument about power and colonial rhetoric in order to unravel a definition of Man that relies on the historic and continual Othering, the dehumanizing of Black and Brown bodies.

## Works Cited

Benjamin, Ruha. *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Polity, 2019.

Browne, Simone. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Duke UP, 2015.

Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. Warner, 1988.

Bryce, Jane. "African Futurism: Speculative Fictions and 'Rewriting the Great Book'." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1–19.

Currier, Dianne. "Feminist Technological Futures Deleuze and Body/Technology Assemblages." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2003, pp. 321–338.

Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century." *The Cybercultures Reader*, edited by Barbara M. Kennedy and David Bell, Routledge, 2000, pp. 291–324.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies In Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. U of Chicago, 1999.

Marquis, Moira. "The Alien Within: Divergent Futures in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* and Neill Blomkamp's *District 9*." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2020, pp. 398–425.

Nnedi Okorafor, PhD [Nnedi Okorafor]. "Africanfuturism Defined." *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*. 19 Oct. 2019. http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html. Accessed 20 Feb. 2021.

Okorafor, Nnedi. *Binti*. Tor.com, 2015a.

———. *The Book of Phoenix*. DAW, 2015b.

———. *Lagoon*. Saga, 2016.

———. *Binti: Home*. Tor.com, 2017.

———. *Binti: The Night Masquerade*. Tor.com, 2018.

———. *Broken Places & Outer Spaces: Finding Creativity in the Unexpected*. TEDBooks, 2019.

Puar, Jasbir K. "'I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory." *PhiloSOPHIA*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, pp. 49–66.

Schalk, Sami. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Duke UP, 2018.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 257–337.

# 49

# THE AFRICAN ROOTS OF NNEDI OKORAFOR'S ALIENS AND CYBORGS

*Dustin Crowley*

Examinations of African science fiction often stem from or substantially engage with the genre's well documented entanglements with colonialism and Empire. Scholars have explicated the ways African SF authors expose, resist, appropriate, and rewrite mainstream mainstays like alien encounters, cyborgs, and future technologies as contested outgrowths of colonialism and slavery.[1] Nnedi Okorafor, however, states plainly that "not all science fiction has the same bloodline"; rather, "it was my Nigerian heritage that led me to write science fiction" ("Sci-Fi Stories"). This different genealogy of and relationship to fabulation has far-reaching implications for understanding her fiction. Her aliens are not invaders, but they are parallel to animals and deities within West African cosmologies that have long included their agencies and relationships alongside and entangled with humans. Her future technology is not something simply imposed from outside or marshalled to exploit Black peoples, but it is grown from histories of African knowledge, craftsmanship, and innovation. Subsequently, her cyborgs are not only compromised or subversive hybridities with Western technology and subjectivity, but expansive extrahuman possibilities rooted in Indigenous cosmologies and projected into technologically enhanced futures. In short, Okorafor's SF frames these elements as autochthonous to the continent and thus potentially productive for African peoples, recuperating and evolving Afrocentered sensibilities that are genuinely postcolonial.

The technologies and novums often central to Okorafor's work (especially cyborg bodies and novel communications) are by no means exclusive to her narratives. Indeed, they figure prominently in Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's formulation of SF as the literature of Empire, thoroughly imbued with the logic of global technosystems of control that operate via a "system of de-nationalized communications" (232) and "privileged sites of biopolitical virtuality", as elucidated in Donna Haraway's cyborg figure (237). The sense of the SF of Empire can be found in African speculative fiction as well, as with Tade Thompson's brilliant *Wormwood* trilogy. In it, an alien "footholder" is sent to Earth and settles in Nigeria, surreptitiously beginning the process of colonizing human bodies by seeding the atmosphere with microscopic, bioengineered "xenoforms" that connect to human cells and form an invisible global information network. They are able to extract data (including thoughts and memories) directly from human minds and bodies to be stored in the network for surveillance by the colonizing force; at the same time, the xenoforms slowly replace human cells with ones crafted to prepare the body for "download" of an alien consciousness. The scheme symbolizes and materializes precisely the

pervasive, global systems of control and imperialism Csicsery-Ronay attributes to SF generally as the literature of Empire, and clearly suggests its presence in Africa as a recapitulation of European colonialism and enslavement of black bodies.

Okorafor's *Lagoon* adopts a remarkably similar premise to Thompson's trilogy: extraterrestrials have landed in the waters off of Lagos, with the power to read minds and alter material reality, including human bodies. Yet her depiction of the aliens' origins and relationship to African peoples is decidedly more optimistic than Thompson's speculation, precisely because they and their technology are not located as part of Empire. By the end of the novel, it is clear the extraterrestrial "new people" are not colonizers, but rather "agents of change" (*Lagoon* 207), bringing growth and healing for Nigerian peoples, animals, and environments. Hugh O'Connell asserts that the novel attempts to imagine "a condition of radical possibility that breaks with the conditions of capitalist realism—by recasting the ideological contours of the first contact narrative" (292). Rather than pillaging and dominating, they go about the work of transformation, making changes that indicate a desire for Lagos and Nigeria to be healed (especially of environmental plight), to end its divisions, and to engage an expanded world of understanding and connection. They heal the sickly Nigerian president, who becomes bolstered to finally end corruption, backed by an offer to accept new technology from the visitors in exchange for ending oil drilling in the country. Having this technology means "the land would be pure and palm nuts, cocoa, and other crops would grow as they never had before. Extinct creatures would return and new ones would appear" (*Lagoon* 278). It also grants the ability to instantly project oneself onto every television, computer, and mobile phone (even those not built for video), allowing the president to make a speech to the entire nation in which he promises that the city will "rise from the ashes—a greater creature than before … The change will be both gradual and swift" (276–278). Perhaps most notably, the extraterrestrial ambassador Ayodele sacrifices herself to help end the violence in the city sparked by their arrival. She notes, "Your people need help on the outside, but also within … I will go within" (268). She changes herself into a "fog" that spreads "like a great wave all over Lagos" and gets inhaled by all the inhabitants, calming them and marking a point from which "Lagos will never be the same" (269)—not least, it seems, because the city dwellers have now been coupled with and connected through some part of the alien collectivity.

The aim of all this change, it seems clear, not only connects with the extraterrestrials' desires to make a home for themselves in the city, but stems from a stated purpose "to bring you together" (*Lagoon* 113). Of course, "you" here is understood expansively, inclusively, like Okorafor's own dedication of the novel: "To the diverse and dynamic people of Lagos, Nigeria— animals, plant, and spirit". The city is understood as a site of "messiness", multiplicity, and mixing stemming from its palimpsest of historical, geographical, and ecological relations bringing diverse peoples and interests into interaction with each other. The arrival of the "new people" only intensifies this diversity, whose sonic booms upon arrival "awaken goddesses, gods, spirits, and ancestors" (114), of which they were not even familiar. The narrator notes, "Ayodele will be fascinated at this aspect of her new world. She has yet to realize that there are other things inhabiting Lagos besides carbon-based creatures. There are greater beings of earth, soil, sea, lagoon, and land" (122). Their arrival and intervention help to create a (sometimes chaotic) space where science and myth, human and nonhuman, terrestrial and extraterrestrial, physical and spiritual, coexist with and co-define each other.

That so much of the transformation in the novel directly addresses the interests of nonhumans marks a radical shift from Western colonial and capitalist logic to an extra-human sensibility of reciprocity and interconnection. O'Connell notes that Okorafor's vision counters the "instrumentalization of nature" foundational to "colonial and neocolonial rapaciousness" by

accounting for "other ecotopian conditions often left out of anticolonial struggle" and giving voice to "animal alterity" (305). By eschewing both the instrumentalization of nature and an assumed antagonism on the part of the "new people", Okorafor "reimagines the experience of reciprocity that never came" in the first contact with Europeans, one built on affinity between humans, extraterrestrials, animals, and deities (O'Connell 310).

As I've written elsewhere (Crowley, "*Binti*'s", "Cosmos"), Okorafor espouses an expansive, inclusive posthuman sensibility, where an open human frame (including cyborg conditions) is always already part of larger cosmopolitan, cosmological relations.[2] Changing technologies and cyborg possibilities further elaborate and manifest that cosmological ontology, especially to the extent that they enable further connections beyond the individual self or local community, symbolized in *Lagoon* through the arrival of the "new people" in the waters surrounding Lagos. Okorafor's extraterrestrials take on a different valence from the Homian invaders in the *Wormwood* trilogy. Not only are they not colonizing forces, they are perhaps not "foreigners" at all, as Ayodele is at pains to suggest. She notes, "You people will call me an alien because I am from space, your outer heavens, beyond" (*Lagoon* 37); and later, "We landed here in the night … From beyond Earth. From space. You all will call us aliens" (*Lagoon* 111). Her wording, "you will call us aliens", seems intentionally convoluted to expose the relative, mutable understanding of what it means to be "alien". To be sure, they are not from Earth, and thus they are definitively extraterrestrials and "guests" on this planet. But being "alien" or "foreign" is entirely a matter of scale—Ayodele's wording illuminates their status as "alien" only so far as humans fail to recognize an appropriately large scale of relationship, one that might extend beyond the confines of the planet into a cosmic or galactic neighborhood and simultaneously include but also decenter humans.

In addition to blurring the spatial definition of "alien", Okorafor's depiction hearkens to a deep temporal interconnection for Ayodele's people in their reflection of the Dogon astronomical lore. In Dogon cosmology, "the Sirius system is the home to the Nommos; a race of amphibians akin to mermaids and mermen who visited Earth thousands of years ago" arriving on an ark that lands in a great body of water (Womack 84). These stories are likely one source of Mami Wata and African mermaid myths, leading Melody Jue to argue that "Okorafor frequently describes alien emissary Ayodele in relation to Mami Wata, a water goddess" (177). She further elaborates, "Okorafor likens the alien Ayodele to Mami Wata not only in visual terms, but also in her actions and intentions", granting wishes to their followers and "regulating, or at least changing, ocean ecology, cleansing seawater of pollution" (Jue 178). They are likened to other deities as well: as shapeshifters like the trickster god Legba and storytellers like the Great Spider Udide. These portrayals and parallels between the "new people" and traditional deities suggests that "the arrival of the aliens does not mark a break with indigenous cosmologies and traditions, but rather a continuation of them" (Jue 177). This speculative remaking of the mythology indicates a deep cultural heritage and cosmology that extends well beyond earth and the human, and that can potentially embrace the technological change aliens inevitably bring without fundamental disruption.

Indeed, a salient feature in many of Okorafor's works is speculative communications technologies, which both facilitate and stem from collectives, hybridities, and affinities like those instantiated by the arrival of Ayodele's people. Mobile and digital technologies of communication play a central role in their efforts at transforming Nigeria. Ayodele overtly defines the purpose and methods of the new people as "a matter of connecting and communicating" (*Lagoon* 218). They use our "easily manipulated" devices and systems to send messages to the entire nation at once, taking advantage of the fact that "The modern human world is connected like a spider's web" through "portable chargeable glowing vibrating chirping tweeting

communicating connected devices" that link even the most remote parts of Nigeria to people "[a]ll over the world" (193). Part of the technology they promise the Nigerian president in exchange for an end to oil drilling is precisely their capacity to project himself onto all those devices, allowing him to speak directly to "his entire country" to offer a message of hope and change (275).

Underlying that optimism for a reformed Nigeria is not only the ability to connect, but more fundamentally, the *mode* and *intention* of that communication: not merely technological or scientific, but imbued with and often enabled by mythic or spiritual qualities, bespeaking a kind of creative power to reshape the material world itself. Ayodele describes their way of changing matter itself as "speaking" to the molecules (*Lagoon* 139). She also refers to one of the protagonists, a Ghanaian rapper named Anthony de Craze, as "a communicator, like us" (54) because he can access "the Rhythm" as a sort of echolocation to "read everything" about "all the things that the wave touched" (167). He experiences this as "music—sweet and pure and electric" that "hum[s] up through the earth" (164) and uses it in his own music:

> When he performed, he spun words as a spider spins its web. He drew it from within himself and worked with it. Then he threw it back at his audience enhanced and laced with energy and images. No one left his concerts unchanged. He was a positive force. …
> *I don't use people*, he thought. *I free them, open them up to God*.
>
> *(165, emphasis in original)*

This capacity for communication connects him not only with the earth and his audiences, but also with "the Elders from the stars. Those … creatures that Anthony was having a hard time separating from himself … He felt them in a way he'd never felt anything before. Because they were still with him" (160). The communication envisaged here goes far deeper than the simple connectedness of mobile devices, suggesting its role in the more fundamental transformation and relationship building the novel seems to advocate.

Communication and transformation of this sort are symbolized and realized through modes of storytelling in the novel, which engage characters and readers in collaborative acts of creation that draw from the past and generate new futures. Udide ("the narrator, the story weaver, the Great Spider" in *Lagoon*) asserts as much when he says,

> the story goes deeper. It is in the dirt, the mud, the earth, in the fond memory of the soily cosmos. It is in the always-mingling past, present, and future. It is in the water. It is in the powerful spirits and ancestors who dwelled in Lagos. It is in the heads and hearts of the people of Lagos. Change begets change.
>
> *(*Lagoon *193)*

In the novel (and presumably *through* the novel), spinning the web of the tale both creates and recreates reality itself: "I've spun the birth and growth of this great city … I know it all because I created it all" (290). Lagos itself is a function and creation of Udide's spinning, altered by the "new people" who are themselves "Story weavers of their own time" (290). Both within and around the story, the purpose of the storytelling itself is to bring people together (after all, to tell a story necessitates that listeners participate in the telling) and to create new opportunities for change in the landscape and the relations that inhabit it.

Okorafor's work tends to embody the materiality of that communication quite literally in the characters themselves, who become both the bodily mode and often the result of technobiological efforts to connect and transform. They often manifest as inherent multiplicities that blur the boundaries between body, spirit, and technology, suggesting and facilitating their position

as agents of relationship. According to Ayodele, her people "*are* technology" (*Lagoon* 218, emphasis in original) in which "Every part of us, every tiny universe within us is conscious", acting as "a collective" (268), which allows them to be anything and everything, to "speak" to and through the molecules of anything and everything. Their collective cyborgian character allows them to enact the cosmological interrelatedness of Okorafor's vision of Africa as traditional and futural across ontologies of the physical and spiritual, natural and technological.

Similarly, in the *Binti* series, the Binti's people, the Himba, are renowned in their future world for making sophisticated "astrolabes", which provide the main means for communication for both humans and aliens, on Earth and between planets. But creating astrolabes is a complex process, involving "three hundred years of oral knowledge about circuits, wires, metals, oils, electricity, math current, sand bar"; as such, one had to be a "master harmonizer" in order to "communicate with the spirit flow and convince them to become one current" (*Binti* 31). That "current" exists in and animates everything in Binti's world. Binti's mother states, "We all have current running through us, that's why we're alive" (*Binti: NM* 134); using this current allowed her to bond with the tree and give it her own life force. Binti's own ability to control current makes her a "master harmonizer", with an especially potent "gift to bring harmony so delicate that we can make atoms caress each other like lovers" (62). Crucially, however, current is not solely metaphysical, but concurrently a physical force thoroughly imbricated with mathematics and technology. Harmonizing through the current involves both ritual and science, putting oneself in a mathematical trance by "treeing" equations that conjure and manipulate the current. Similarly, life itself is described as mathematically and spiritually animated by this force:

> Binti's mother [was] singing mathematical equations to a large grasshopper that had flown into the cellar, holding her hand out for it to land, and watching it slowly fold its beautifully decorative wings as if to show her its mathematical pattern.
>
> *(138–139)*

That same mathematical foundation extends to aliens and their technology as well. On a Meduse ship, Binti senses "the current all around me. These people had deep active technology built into the walls and many of them had it running within their very bodies … it was part of their biology" (*Binti* 60). Thus, her ability to "harmonize" with the current and materials of the astrolabe also means she can "speak for" the alien Meduse people and negotiate peace between them and the people on the university planet Oomza Uni (62). It is precisely her Himba heritage and knowledge that provides the means by which Binti enters into and creates positive change in the wider cosmos of relationships she encounters as she strives to expand her own world.

As the series plays out, however, it becomes clear that Binti's special abilities as a harmonizer in part stem from, and are added to by, her increasingly complex bodily makeup, which was always multiple and accumulates numerous components. She first gains a capacity to communicate with the Meduse by being physically transformed by their leader, who replaces her hair with *okuoko* tentacles like the Meduse themselves have, which allow her to sense their feelings even across great distances and be a more effective ambassador for them. Later, she learns that she has Enyi Zinariya heritage, who gained their capacity to be harmonizers and communicators from technology given to them by aliens centuries before. The visiting aliens endowed them with "a living organism tailored for our blood … Biological nanoids so tiny that they could comfortably embed themselves into our brains. Once you had them in you, it was like having an astrolabe in your nervous system" (*Binti: Home* 129). Once part of them, the technology is "passed on to offspring through their DNA" (130), allowing each successive generation of Enyi Zinariya to "speak to all people", including animals, across any distance (*Binti: NM* 37). Lastly, after being

killed trying to stop an interstellar conflict, her body joins with microbes from inside the creature New Fish (an engineered being inside which humans can travel through space), which reanimates her and connects her with its mind and body. "I had become something more again", she notes. "This time, I was so changed that I could fly through space without dying" (*Binti: NM* 169). A doctor on Oomza Uni sums up her hybrid state this way: "Your DNA is Himba, Enyi Zinariya, Meduse … and some, but not much, New Fish … so this blend is what makes you, you. So you are different from what you were born as" (191). By the end of the series, she possesses a composite, cyborg body thoroughly integrated with technology in much the same ways that characterize modern globalized subjectivity. Importantly, however, her technologically articulated being, while often the result of conflict, is not the product of colonial imposition. The Enyi Zinariya technology was a gift from a mutually productive exchange of cultures, and she chose to have the otherwise dormant nanoids activated, granting her access to collective memory and capacity to engage the "deep culture" of the Himba. The result, while disorienting at first, ultimately expands and evolves her African subjectivity rather than dislocating or disrupting it.

Through these transformations, Binti also becomes a sort of piecemeal cyborg conduit for communication across the boundaries and distrustfulness that pervade her cosmos, allowing her to (at least attempt to) facilitate and foster more cosmopolitan relations across many peoples, places, and scales. Merging as she does the spiritual and material, technological and organic, human and nonhuman, Binti becomes an embodiment of Okorafor's extra-human cyborg sensibility, which bears many resemblances to posthumanism. As N. Katherine Hayles outlines in her foundational work *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, posthumanism assumes fundamentally that bodies are in feedback loops with the environment and (increasingly) technology, which blur the boundaries of human individuality and autonomy by seeing them as parts of larger cybernetic structures. The posthuman sees "a radical equivalence between self, body, and environment" with "nature, the human, and the technological as differently realized, but fundamentally and qualitatively similar material constructions" (Outka 31, 33). Ted Geier adds that in a posthuman understanding, "humans are nonhumans—discreet bodies on one scale, swarming mixes of other objects and bodies at another, technologically articulated and inconsistently whole or 'true' as individuated, free wills" (57). Technology both uncovers and creates "transitional, transformative, mutating potential" that might "challenge us to find the supposedly definite boundary of the human at all", either from technology itself or from other species through genetic manipulation and the like (Thacker 80, 81). Indeed, another strain of posthumanist thought adds to the mix the notion that "[w]e become who we are through multispecies aggregations" (Tsing 230), bodily, environmentally, and evolutionarily intertwined with countless other organisms for our very being. We are what Haraway calls "figures": "material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another" (*When Species Meet* 4). Cutting across all these definitions and perspectives is the insistence that, rather than the unfettered and self-determined individual of Enlightenment humanist imagination, humans are inextricably produced through and tied with complex social, natural, and technological systems.

With her own alien-implanted, DNA-modifying nanoids and genetically engineered New Fish microbes, Binti's subjectivity reflects precisely this posthumanist understanding, as she is marked by technology not merely produced, possessed, or controlled by human autonomy. Okorafor's posthumanist depiction seems to mirror Hayles et al. in understanding technology as part of complex forces that transform human bodies and ecotechnological relationships. In the case of Binti and the transformations in *Lagoon*, that becoming integrates human, animal, alien, spirit, and technology in complex cyborg configurations that enable the themes of growth and change that drive these works.

Altered by human and alien technology, linked in communicative networks and collectives, Okorafor's characters share a central similarity to the characters in Thompson's *Wormwood* world; yet crucially, they do not generally experience the threat, loss, disruption, and vulnerability seen in Thompson's narratives of colonization. Though they struggle at times to understand and embrace the changes, the stories precisely center on the necessity of coming to terms with that multiplicity of being and possibility, especially along the non-kinship lines inherent in the idea of cyborgian affinity. Okorafor writes of the now complexly configured Binti, "Binti was change, she was revolution" (*Binti: NM* 137) That is, revolution that implies *evolution* as well, both as a natural and technological condition. Binti reflects that, after all the aggregations to herself, all the communities and conflicts and histories written into her body,

> I felt good. About everything. The war had begun again, my home would never be what it was, but this, I understood more than ever now, was inevitable. Change was inevitable and where the Seven were involved, so was growth. My family was *alive*, the Enyi Zinariya were going to meet them and help [the Himba village] Osemba *survive* and evolve. … Osemba would change and grow.
>
> *(*Binti: NM *155–156, emphasis in original)*

The sentiment expressed here and throughout Okorafor's oeuvre is that of being mixed and becoming openly outward rather than closed off, merged with and growing through posthuman technologies that provide new possibilities for relationship across boundaries—between places, between human and nonhuman, between technological and biological, between material and spiritual.

This attitude of openness to cyborgs and networks perhaps reflects Okorafor's own relationship with technology. In her memoir *Broken Places & Outer Spaces*, she reflects on her struggles with proprioception after a surgery gone wrong, and envisions advances that will help her body overcome the condition. She states boldly, "In 2029, I am anything but normal. I am a cyborg" (*Broken Places* 55). She cites the example of Hugh Herr, who developed bionic limbs, as an inspiration: "Herr didn't just teach himself to walk again, he created himself anew, as something beyond who he was before" (53). Her speculation regarding her own cyborg subjectivity not only lacks a sense of threat or exploitation in Thompson's ambivalent tale; it also lacks a sense of subversion or blasphemy inherent in Haraway's formulation of her "ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism" ("Cyborg" 2190). Haraway writes that blasphemy "protects one from the moral majority within" while still allowing for "the need for community" ("Cyborg" 2190). "At the center of my ironic faith, my blasphemy", then, "is the image of the cyborg", which ironically yet seriously confronts the contradictions and incompatibilities in patriarchal capitalist society (Haraway, "Cyborg" 2190). Yet Okorafor's cyborgs are perhaps not parodying or appropriating the contradictions of imperialism and postcoloniality so much as extending and projecting into the future multivalent elements endemic to the African cultures, histories, and futures she writes about. Much like her relationship with SF itself, her cyborg politics evolves from a different ancestry.

Certainly, Okorafor is not the first or only author to bring African cosmology and epistemology to bear on the technological worlds of SF. Many have noted that much African SF is "indebted to indigenous myth and folklore" in speculative worlds "not incompatible with the technologies of modernity" (Adejunmobi 267). One way to understand the growth in the production and popularity of African SF is precisely as an effort to forge productive crossovers between the cosmologies of Africa and the technoscientific epistemologies of modern global capital. Combinations between the two do not represent "premodernist sensibility", Moradewun

Adejunmobi argues: "To the contrary, it is precisely modernity and futurity that are at stake in these combinations" (268). True as that may be, Okorafor does not attribute her own speculative imagination to such conciliation or efforts to appropriate outside genres and technologies to African needs and realities. Rather, she describes the impetus as an extension of what has long existed for these peoples. "In non-Western culture, the mystical coexisting with the mundane is normal", Okorafor claims from "a specific point of view; you take it and move it into the future, and you have science fiction with mystical elements in it" (Zutter). Simply existing into the future alone secures for African peoples a SF imagination and a seemingly inevitable, technologically integrated existence.

Okorafor's fiction, then, might be termed *jujufuturism*. Joshua Yu Burnett explains jujufuturism as a depiction of African realities "where juju is real, reality is shifting, and the very basis of Western rationalism has been undermined", insisting on imaginative conditions where "cultural contact can happen on equal terms" and "a true post-colonialism is at least possible" (134). Where technology enters into that jujufuturism, it does so in concert with Sofia Samatar's vision of the data thief as bricoleur, claiming the right "to enter the technologically enhanced future through whatever door is closest and to do so without assimilation into a global monoculture" (178). At the same time, however, I argue that Okorafor's worlds diverge from the idea that the aim of the data thief is to "willfully misuse the products of a dominant technoculture" (Samatar 178), to "learn to embody and radicalize the concepts of change and technology as a form of anticolonial subjectivity" (O'Connell 304), which would closely align with Haraway's blasphemous cyborg. Rather, Okorafor's writing is post- or anti-colonial not only in the sense of coming after or having been liberated from European imperialism, but perhaps also (at least in part) in having sources separate from that encounter, drawing knowledge and possibility from wells other than the colonial past.

Instead of seeing Okorafor's engagement with cyborg technologies (only) in relationship to colonial dynamics, we might rather see her jujufuturism as depicting an African cosmology akin to what Wole Soyinka describes, one in which technological change and an open human frame are presupposed and prepossessed. Soyinka writes, "The process of apprehending my own world in its full complexity … through its contemporary progression and distortions" involves "the continuing evolution of tribal wisdom through an acceptance of the elastic nature of knowledge as its one reality, as signifying no more than reflections of the original coming-into-being of a manifestly complex reality" (ix, 53). He explains that African deities like those of the Yoruba exercise "philosophic accommodation", such that it denies "the existence of impurities or 'foreign' matter, in the god's digestive system" (Soyinka 54). Developments like new technologies "which, until the event, lie outside the tribe's cognition are absorbed through the god's agency, are converted into yet another piece of the social armoury in its struggle for existence, and enter the lore of the tribe" (Soyinka 54). Even where technologies come from elsewhere, they, like Ayodele's people, are not really "alien" in the sense that they are necessarily disruptive, and can be engaged through a sentiment of evolution and familiarity that differs significantly from the antagonistic maneuvers of resistance, appropriation, and negotiation that characterize Thompson's narratives.

Seeing technology as itself a presupposed possibility in African heritage and futures reframes how Okorafor envisions and deploys the cyborg condition in her texts. Samatar writes that histories of slavery, racism, and imperialist exploitation have meant "the category of the human in Western modernity arguably excludes black people at the level of theory, and has certainly done so in practice" (181); as such, "Afrofuturism provides imaginative space for thinking that rejects the category altogether", and instead "engages the posthuman in multiple ways" (191). One such way Okorafor does so, following Soyinka, is to locate the extra-human within an

African cosmos and heritage that has always been expansive and inclusive beyond the individual and beyond putatively human boundaries. Characters like Ayodele and Binti emphasize the "awareness of the cosmic context" of human existence, "a consciousness in which [man's] own earthly being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic plan" (Soyinka 3). The speculative fiction mode simply projects that awareness into futures where it grows to encompass extraterrestrials and human bodies technologically articulated to expand connections to and communication with spiritual, animal, and alien others.

Rooted as they are in indigenous African cosmologies, epistemologies, and ontologies, Okorafor's narratives recenter African experience and allow them to speculate not only escape from or resistance to technological domination, but futures in which they develop and incorporate technologically advance being on their own terms. "For Africans", Okorafor insists, "homegrown SF can be a will to power" ("Sci-Fi Stories"), a will she exercises to imagine genuinely alternative futures for the continent and black diaspora. She is not naïve about the histories and continuing effects of slavery, colonialism, and capitalist exploitation, nor do her stories displace those that explore the destructive effects of technological Empire on Africa. But neither does she capitulate to these forces and histories as the single story by which to understand and engage the various novums of SF. Her work speaks alongside these other texts to more fully elucidate and affirm Africa's overdetermined, dynamic relationship to SF, its antecedents, and the futures it allows us to imagine.

## Notes

1  For foundational works in this area, see Bould; Haywood Ferreira; Rieder.
2  I use the term "posthuman" here and elsewhere to make shorthand connections with ideas and scholarship by thinkers like Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles that bear important resonances with the aspects of Okorafor's work I want to highlight. However, my claim that such sensibilities are rooted in indigenous African cosmologies and understandings, rather than being set against Enlightenment humanism, means the "post-" here is an ill-fitting frame. Thus, I also use the term "extra-human" to more precisely characterize Okorafor's portrayal of human subjectivity and relationship with animals, deities, extraterrestrials, and so on, which is not directly in response to the Western humanist tradition.

## Works Cited

Adejunmobi, Moradewun. "Introduction: African Science Fiction." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2016, pp. 265–272, https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2016.28. Accessed 15 July 2019.

Bould, Mark. "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2007, pp. 177–186.

Burnett, Joshua Yu. "Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2015, pp. 133–150.

Crowley, Dustin. "*Binti*'s R/evolutionary Cosmopolitan Ecologies" *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019a, pp. 237–256, https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2018.54. Accessed 14 June 2020.

———. "Cosmos and Polis: Space and Place in Nnedi Okorafor's SF." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2019b, pp. 268–288.

Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan. "Science Fiction and Empire." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2003, pp. 231–245. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4241171. Accessed 16 Aug. 2020.

Geier, Ted. "Noncommittal Commitment: Alien Spaces of Ecocosmopolitics in Recent World Literature." *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies*, edited by Robert T. Talley Jr. and Christine M. Battista, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 55–73.

Haraway, Donna. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch et al., Norton, 2001, pp. 2190–2220.

———. *When Species Meet*. U of Minnesota P, 2007.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. U of Chicago P, 1999.

Haywood Ferreira, Rachel. "Second Contact: The First Contact Story in Latin American Science Fiction." *Parabolas of Science Fiction*, edited by Brian Attebery and Veronica Hollinger, Wesleyan UP, 2013, pp. 70–88.

Jue, Melody. "Intimate Objectivity: On Nnedi Okorafor's Oceanic Afrofuturism." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 45, nos. 1/2, 2017, pp. 171–188. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44474120. Accessed 1 Feb. 2019.

O'Connell, Hugh. "'We Are Change': The Novum as Event in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2016, pp. 291–312, https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2016.24. Accessed 15 July 2019.

Okorafor, Nnedi. *Lagoon*. Saga Press, 2014.

———. *Binti*. Tor.com, 2015.

———. *Binti: Home*. Tor.com, 2017a.

———. "Sci-Fi Stories that Imagine a Future Africa." *TED.com*. TED Talks. 1 Nov. 2017b, www.ted.com/talks/nnedi_okorafor_sci_fi_stories_that_imagine_a_future_africa?language=en. Accessed 15 July 2019.

———. *Binti: The Night Masquerade*. Tor.com, 2018.

———. *Broken Places & Outer Spaces: Finding Creativity in the Unexpected*. TED Books, 2019.

Outka, Paul. "Posthuman/Postnatural: Ecocriticism and the Sublime in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Stephanie LeMenager, Teresa Shewry, and Ken Hiltner. Routledge, 2011, pp. 31–48.

Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan UP, 2008.

Samatar, Sofia. "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2017, pp. 175–191.

Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature, and the African World*. Cambridge UP, 1976.

Thacker, Eugene. "Data Made Flesh: Biotechnology and the Discourse of the Posthuman." *Cultural Critique*, vol. 53, 2003, pp. 72–97. *Project MUSE*, https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2003.0029. Accessed 16 Nov. 2018.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. "Strathern beyond the Human: Testimony of a Spore." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 31, nos. 2–3, 2014, pp. 221–241. *Sage Journals Premier 2019*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276413509114. Accessed 13 Feb. 2019.

Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2013.

Zutter, Natalie. "Masquerade, Initiation, and Sci-Fi/Fantasy: N.K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor in Conversation." *Tor.com*, 9 May 2016, www.tor.com/2016/05/09/author-event-nk-jemisin-nnedi-okorafor-brooklyn-museum/. Accessed 24 June 2023.

# 50

# FUTURISM(S) AND FUTURISTIC THEMES IN MODERN AFRICAN POETRY

*Dike Okoro*

In Africa, life experiences in the post-independence era, the sociopolitical condition and economic struggles of failed political leadership, and national and other historical circumstances appear to have not only prepared the African poet to respond to Africa's conflicts in writing but also goaded her/him into an activist poet's calling. The African poet allies with the common people and fires salvos of criticism against tyranny, oppression, injustice, and other sociopolitical vices to establish humane and democratic values. To be able to function as the psyche of his/her people, the African poet adopts a historicist approach, utilizing the specific contexts of the historical period captured to examine the plethora of problems plaguing his/her nation. Part of the poet's objective is to reference geographical place, local society, and culture to locate and interrogate dictatorship, tyranny, and undemocratic governance and vices, which are gradually eroded through the struggle for more humane and democratic values. In this chapter, the poet's persona takes on an activist role in the politics of his/her society and resists the literary influences of the West, especially the modernist features, and chooses the style of the Indigenous poetic tradition to express his/her feelings and ideas.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage* defines "futurism" as "a point of view that finds meaning or fulfillment in the future rather than in the past or present" ("Futurism"). This definition fits well with the orientation of African poets of the first and second generations, who have been actively publishing since the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the third generation, those who have been composing poems for their audience since the 1980s. The works of these poets and those of the younger poets from the emerging generation will be used to support the arguments examined in this chapter. Generally, the hostility represented in the works of the second- and third-generation African poets cannot be underestimated, given Africa's unfortunate reputation for harboring unpopular political leaders whose enormous engagement in self-benefit has created a legacy of misrule that continues to stifle the continent's development. The poets examined in this chapter resent the temptation to be obsequious to the political dictates of failed leadership in their countries. Part of the reason for this resentment will be discussed in the way they draw inspiration from orature, African cosmology, and western poetic forms. These poets see themselves as committed artists whose poetic compositions help to edify their very societies. Thematically and stylistically, they use operative lenses to interrogate the African imagination, merging experiences from traditional "first contact" scenarios between Indigenous

African groups and the invading colonialist nations of Europe, questioning the past, exposing the present, and imagining the future.

## Traditionalists and the African Destiny

Futurism is a relevant theme in the works of African poets who deploy folklore in their work. Chinua Achebe says, "Most African writers write out of an African experience and commitment to an African destiny. For them, that destiny does not include a future European identity for which the present is but an apprenticeship" (*Hopes and Impediments* 74). Clearly, his claim is analogous to the thematic concerns of poems by many contemporary African poets. Perceived as spokespersons, or the philosophical psyche of their various communities, African poets have become so integrated into their country's social and political struggles that they have assumed the status of guardians of their heritage. Many of them, in practically keeping to Achebe's conclusion, use art as a cudgel to affirm their commitment to didacticism. One significant group of African poets that have been successful in using art to promote social responsibility and national consciousness has been the "traditionalist" poets, those whose art is heavily influenced by African traditional beliefs. The renowned Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor expresses futuristic themes in his poems, which often reflect an Ewe cultural influence. He indulges in traditional modes of singing to portray the remarkable prowess of African nationalism. Awoonor sings of the continent's misfortunes to warn political leaders engaged in misrule to remember the values of their ancestral past. In addition, his poems use animal images, religious symbols, history, and nature to suggest changes that will bring development or regression to Africa. Hence, Awoonor calls on Africa's political leaders to negate the old ways, a reference to the colonial invasion of Indigenous cultures, and to embrace the traditional values that will restore the promise of hope. For example, Awoonor's "The Weaverbird" displays this hope:

> The weaver bird built in our house
> And laid its eggs on our only tree.
> We did not want to send it away.
> We watched the building of the nest
> And supervised the egg-laying.
>    *(*The Promise of Hope, *lines 1–5, 276)*

Awoonor feels Africa's leaders are complicit in their relationship with colonial invaders. While the poem establishes this idea, since poetry can be ambiguous, one might also argue that the poet plays with the double entendre. He may not necessarily be affirming any form of complicity. Awoonor's poem projects concern for the future of the Indigenous people. Perhaps he also points at the tempting nature of Africa's natural resources, since Ghana is globally known as the gold coast, an allusion to its mineral resources that prompted colonial visitations. This idea strongly reverberates in the following lines:

> And the weaver returned in the guise of the owner.
> Preaching salvation to us that owned the house.
> They say it came from the west
> Where the storms at sea had felled the gulls
> And the fishers dried their nets by lantern light.
> Its sermon is the divination of ourselves

> And our new horizon limits at its nest
> But we cannot join the prayers and answers of the communicants.
> We look for new homes every day,
> For new altars, we strive to rebuild
> The old shrines defiled by the weaver's excrement.
> <div align="right">(The Promise of Hope, *lines 6–16*)</div>

There is so much to be learned from the utterances of the poem's speaker, including the effects of European colonization of African nations. Awoonor ends the poem by seeking meaning and fulfillment in the future if his people must "strive to rebuild the old shrines defiled by the weaver's excrement".

## Pan-Africanism/Futurity and African Philosophy

Like Awoonor, many African poets have incorporated in their work elements from African traditional beliefs and Western poetic forms to assert their commitment to futuristic expressions. For example, South African poet Mazisi Kunene sympathizes with the plight of Africa's women in a patriarchal society and advocates for the recognition of their role as future leaders. In Kunene's poem "Nandi of Bhebe" (Okoro, *Two Zulu Poets*), the speaker elevates Queen Nandi of Bhebe to the status of a goddess and pleads with her to protect Africa's daughters/women because they possess to transform the continent. The poem reads thus:

> You mother, you have walked a long way
> You were not scared with your children
> Please protect our daughters
> They are the main hope of our land
> <div align="right">*(lines 1–4)*</div>

In this poem, Kunene is also uplifting Queen Nandi of Bhehe, who is recognized in Zulu history as the biological mother of King Shaka (Mthwakazi Queens). He addresses her to affirm her importance in African history. Furthermore, Kunene is looking at her past the European lens that view African women as second-class citizens to their male counterparts. The poem is profound because the Zulus are associated with "macho" status and male dominance; they are warriors who engage in battle with spears. But here we have Shaka's mother, who was never married and whose son was considered an illegitimate child by European standards. Yet Kunene is appealing to her to guide Africa's daughters, who hold the keys to the future. In the poem, the poet persona admonishes:

> Please strengthen the eyes that are strained
> Because the women are the ones endowed with vision
> They see things at the depth
> They who don't display their worthiness with muscles
> They who write when they want or keep quiet.
> <div align="right">*(lines 5–9)*</div>

The language of the poem is simple, but Kunene is making a profound statement. His decision to give the daughters of Africa a central position in the poem situates him as an African creative writer who uses art to right the injustices of history and reconstruct the African identity.

Invariably, South African literature acts as a counter discourse to the nation's troubled history. The same aspirations for a progressive African future expressed in Kunene's poem is perceptible in "Carve Me Words", a poem by South African poet Pitika Ntuli. In the poem, the speaker declares:

> Undress your soul for me to read
> In your nakedness
> Dreams that march boldly across the sacrosanct courtyards with
> Fountain of young blood
> Shouting from the soil to tend
> The stars to invoke the gods
> To speak to us in new voices
> To quench our thirst for knowledge
> The knowledge of our Past,
> Our Present
> Our Future writ large with words of hope
> On canvases of our elastic hearts!
>
> *(lines 30–41)*

Ntuli's poem urges his country to search for a vision of unity that will empower its youth. Also, the poet persona sees the turn to "new voices" as a gateway to a new chapter of reconciliation and progress in his country's quest for a better future.

Considering South Africa's storied segregationist system of Apartheid, both Ntuli and Kunene use poetry not only as historical documents but also as art that enjoins readers to appreciate the poets' futuristic concerns. Idealistically, both poets express the need for change, which has also become a rallying cry in the works of several other poets from their nation. For example, South African poet Shabbir Banoobhai's poem "For Madiba", a tribute to Nelson Mandela following his inauguration as South Africa's president, displays his belief in the possibilities for change that abound in the future as he reflects on the symbolic appointment of Mandela as president. The poem's speaker states thus:

> to forget the past
> we had to remember
> the future of love
> *(lines 1–3)*

Banoobhai's speaker acknowledges the necessity to negotiate a better future that will uplift all South Africans. The poem ends with optimism as the speaker reminds his/her country's citizens of Mandela's value, insisting

> freedom
> enters our lives warily
> as if afraid of strangers
>
> becomes real
> suddenly
> when Madiba smiles
> *(lines 7–12)*

The poet admits his knowledge of his homeland's social milieu and expresses hope for the future following the appointment of Mandela as the first black South African president. Banoobhai is a South African of Indian descent but identifies with other indigenous South Africans as an advocate for collective change regardless of racial background.

The kind of call for collective change that is emphasized in Banoobhai's poem is indirectly established in Nigerian poet Remi Raji's poem "Lovesong for My Wasteland, Sequence XVII". The poem's persona imagines a better future for his country despite the present being fraught with instances of misrule by politicians whose romance with the looting of the national treasury has failed to rid the society of poverty and hopelessness. Because the African creative writer subjects every government to scrutiny towards correcting its ills, the Nigerian poets of the second and third generations have been at the forefront of the struggle for responsive and accountable governance. In Raji's poem, the poet persona states thus:

> But as it was in the beginning …
> We have long been lost to the substance of things
> We have long sought the shadow of the masquerader
> And we puke in pride and laziness.
> As it was …
> We who own the land steeped in fats
> Still beg the world to feed our greed.
> You who now call yourselves conquerors
> Where, where is your trophy of victory?
>
> *(lines 4–9)*

The rhetorical question in line 9 is directed at the indolent leaders of his nation. The poet views these politicians as selfish individuals whose interests had abetted corruption and ridiculed the potential of a country that is one of the world's leading exporters of crude oil. In the end, he wishes they would wake up from sleep and act accordingly:

For those who snore in the glory of self-contentment

> *The past is,*
> *the present is not,*
> *the future is nothing.*
> *(lines 10–13, emphasis in original)*

Historically, the past, present, and future are factors leaders use to assess the economic and political instability of their nations. Raji's speaker alerts all in the end, making sure his/her message about the future is clear.

But many African poets have also articulated their concerns for the future of their homeland to reinforce the spirit of nationalism and to condemn politicians who have been stealing and storing governmental funds in private accounts in foreign countries. For example, the British Nigerian poet Ben Okri laments the decimated structure of his homeland's image in "On the Edge of Time Future":

> I remember the history well:
> The soldiers and politicians emerged
> With briefcases and guns
> And celebrations on city nights.

> They scoured the mess
> Reviewed our history
> Saw the executions at dawn
> Then signed with secret policemen
> And decided something
> Had to be done.
>                       *(lines 1–10)*

The poet acts as the conscience of his people and brings attention to the memory of his homeland to raise concerns against various forms of social injustice, corruption, and political instability that threaten a fruitful future. The following extract from Okri's poem illustrates this point:

> The nation was a map stitched
> From the grabbing of future flesh
> And became a rush through
> Historical slime
>
> We emerged on edge
> Of time future
> With bright fumes
> From burning towers.
>                       *(lines 30–37)*

The title of the poem suggests fear for the "future". Okri is primarily known as a novelist but has written provocative poems that expose the political crisis of his homeland. In conclusion, this raises awareness as an Afrofuturist expression that addresses the plight of the disenfranchised and rebuts oppression.

## Futurist Themes and Familial Memories

In the same way that Okri's poem situates an Afrofuturist orientation, Ugandan poet Susan Kiguli and Nigerian American poet Dike Okoro show in their work how an artist is formed by what he is born into or where he is raised or lives his life. Kiguli uses her mother as a metaphor that educates us on her country's history; Okoro's poem examines a father-daughter relationship to show a toddler's thirst for knowledge. Both poems reflect familial experiences strengthening Africa's future at home and in the diaspora. Kiguli's poem "My Mother in Three Photographs" reads thus:

> My mother in the 1990s
> neat short hair
> luring in its intricate curls.
> She wears a busuuti
> a sign of the times
> a return home, a finding of
> uncertain peace
> a maturing of a woman and nation
> an endorsement of a recognition of the troubles

547

> she has weathered
> a sitting down to count her losses and blessings
> and a handover of the future.
>
> *(lines 28–39)*

The poet paints a picture of her mother here to give her reader a chronology of the events that shaped her mother's life, both physically and emotionally. There is a sense of fashion that is directly connected to Ugandan culture, and the line "a maturing of a woman and nation" is indicative of the social transformation occurring in the society. Precisely, the poem is about a woman/mother who seems content with all that life had thrown at her but is willing to embrace "a handover of the future" to her daughter.

Like Kiguli, Okoro paints memories that celebrate a father-daughter relationship. The poem "Instilling the Faith in Our Way of Life" is relevant to the African diasporic story. The child's fondness for technology is displayed as she picks up her father's cellphone. This act is an indication that children are apt to show curiosity when handling a technological device that they see adults use regularly for communication. The poem reads thus:

> i hand my daughter the regular house telephone
> when she crawls up to me crying, but she instead
> reaches for my cell phone, her tender eyes
> squinting even harder, her tiny baby
> fingers touching and sliding like my big adult
> fingers would when i am making a call. technology,
> i often say, has gotten to our future generation
> like a spell intended to spread something good.
>
> *(lines 1–8)*

The poet persona uses verbs illustrate each stage of the story told. Phrases such as "i hand my daughter" and "i am making a call" help the reader to comprehend fully what is going on. Kiguli's and Okoro's poems paint family moments that express concerns for the future and demonstrate their wit as writers.

African creative writing is didactic by nature. Unlike the Western concept of art for art's sake, African art is functional and serves a social and political purpose. Chinua Achebe once warned,

> An African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames.
>
> *("The African" 78–79)*

Achebe's stance is justified by the works of many African creative writers who use art to report the injustices taking place in their respective communities. For example, Nigerian/Ogoni poet Ken Saro-Wiwa, an internationally renowned environmentalist and human rights activist executed by hanging on the orders of Nigeria's military dictator, General Sani Abacha in 1995, laments the defoliated flora and fauna of his Niger Delta community and condemns the pollution to the environment by foreign companies engaged in dredging and oil exploitation. His poem "The Call" probes the moral conscience of his country's political leaders and expresses his dissatisfaction with the eroding ecosystem and natural environment which humans depend on for survival:

> Hear the call of the ravaged land
> The raucous cry of famished earth
> The dull dirge of the poisoned air
> The piteous wail of sludged streams
> Hear, oh, hear!
> Stunted crops fast decay
> Fishes die and float away
> Butterflies lose wing and fall
> Nature succumbs to th'ecological war.
> > *(Saro-Wiwa, "The Call")*

The repetition of the word "hear" suggests the poet's attempt to alert those in the position of leadership to the ecological disaster taking place in his community. He reminds that climate change endangers not only the human capacity to live and depend on the earth's products, but also the ecosystem that faces extinction. Phrases such as "famished earth", "ravaged land", "poisoned air", and "sludged stream" suggest human interference in nature's function and the dimming prospects of the future. The poem's last line, "nature succumbs to the ecological war", is a punchline that sums up the poet's angst and prophetic stance. Many African poets have followed Saro-Wiwa's stylistic approach when bringing attention to problems that plague their homeland.

Like Saro-Wiwa, Nigerian poet Dike Okoro believes in the transformative role of literary art and deploys it as a didactic device towards regaining the lost ideals of nationhood. In "Incidents at the Shrine", Okoro situates the cry for justice in the vision of a model-independent African state. His focus is Nigeria's political leaders. The poem reads thus:

> Let's write to them letters offering caution,
> The gods whose footprints delay our dreams
> At the finish line each year we run along
> With them the race of hope, seeking
> Fulfillment from the trust in wings rusty
> From lies and betrayal
>
> Let's write to them with pardon, even
> When our eyes trailing their actions
> Are filled with dirt as they
> Have their boasts while we endure
> The torments of regrets
>
> The scavenger birds return to earth
> Their claws eager to grab and tear apart
> Meat for the sacrificial ambrosia
> Their wait time and dedication
> To their itinerant ambition
>
> They are gods after all
> Rulers of the sky
> Where dominion is the language
> Of dreams, and renewal of pledges
> The reason for living
> > *(*Homecoming *11)*

Achebe once admitted that, "So the question of leadership was and is preeminent, in my mind, among Nigeria's numerous problems" ("The University" 139). This poem describes the state of things during successive elections from the 1990s through 2018 in Nigeria, a situation that has also inspired a response from other creative writers from the African nation. The poem presents the poet as a voice pleading for a consensus in the face of mounting national problems. The poet persona knows the society and addresses the future by stating the gods whose "foot-prints delay" people's dreams must be approached with caution. Poets from Africa often struggle with the anxiety of repeating past mistakes, such as looting. In essence, the poet opposes violence as a response to change. In the poem, there is the indirect affirmation that through decorum and democracy, the vision of a peaceful tomorrow/future will be accomplished. Like Okoro, Chielozona Eze, a survivor of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war of the 1960s as a child, dismisses the necessity of frustrated Igbo youths, tired of dreams stifled by the unequal allocation of economic power in Nigeria, threatening to pick up arms to declare war against the Nigerian nation (*Prayers*). He chooses instead to be hopeful for a better future for those survivors of the 1960s war and their children who must think positively. The poem states thus:

> If only they knew, we too sang of war
> And marched off to the front, armed with zeal.
> Only the lucky ones returned with broken minds.
> Many others didn't make it back home.
> I had sworn to the gods above and below,
> if I made it back alive, I would love the birds
> that sing even when no one listens.
> What else is redemption if not love?
> A stare in the dark that has become a mirror.
> *(Survival Kit 17)*

Significantly, Eze's poem urges its audience to remain positive in the present to avoid bearing the consequences of rash decisions that may compromise the fruits of tomorrow's harvest. It is "estimated that a minimum of 3,000 and a maximum of 30,000 Igbos living in northern Nigeria were killed during these attacks (the incidents leading to the civil war)" (World Peace Foundation), and one million died during the war. As a toddler, Eze witnessed the cruelty of the war at first hand. Thus, it is in the poet's attempt to promote peace that he hopes a future that is free of conflict will benefit the poor and the underprivileged. Yet, the pains of the past are not easy to forget.

Today, many of the poems African poets compose reflect their direct response to wars and several conflicts that affect their nations. For example, Liberian poet Patricia Jabbeh Wesley's poem "War Children" addresses the tragedy of the Liberian war. In invoking the past, she summons a distant memory that can hardly be forgotten. As the poem's title suggests, many children who survived the war are now adults or older people in their communities. Also, the poet persona adopts pain as a motif and narrates with cinematographic effectiveness a record of human lives and futures wasted and disrupted by her country's war. As a war survivor, she represents her homeland's future that could not be obliterated by tragedy. In addition, Liberia's enduring legacy as a nation of survivors is sustained throughout the poem. Wesley cautions Liberia's population to bury the past to alleviate the burden of pain. The soil, to her, is sacred and must be respected. Also, the exhausting labor involved in digging up the bones of the dead would not be worth the sacrifice after all. The poem reads thus:

After years, we now dump those
we used to carry on wheelbarrows,
legs and arms dangling, the air
charged with gunfire.
Mothers dragged their young along Duport Road
looking for a decent burial ground.
There is no burial ground anymore.
In their shallow graves the corpses
dance Liberia's cradles empty.

That was then; before the land
turned upon us in anger. Before the earth
refused us burial ground.
Our soil, now soiled, we dig no more.
In digging, we could open up deep sores
in places long closed.

*(*Before the Palm Could Bloom *21)*

Wesley effectively pleads for Liberians to look to the future with hope in this poem. Digging up bones, as she insists, will only exacerbate the pains that may never heal.

Comparably, British poet Warsan Shire's "Conversations about Home" is a historical poem that interrogates the plight of African migrants to Europe. Unlike Wesley, who is concerned about the legacy of war in her homeland, Shire is preoccupied with the futures and dreams wasted at sea, where reports of the drowned after boat accidents keep augmenting the pains of relatives and survivors ("At Least 42"). Her poem satirizes the dilemma associated with African migrants' stories. Shire was born in Kenya to Somali parents but writes compellingly about her parents' country. Many times, economic reasons and ethnic conflicts lead to mass migration to Europe through dangerous routes such as the Arabian Sea, which connects to north Yemen. Shire's poem covers this fact, among other disturbing sociopolitical issues. She brings awareness to the struggles of Africa's migrants who venture into dangerous waters to negotiate their future and the future of their children. In explaining the circumstances captured, she uses the pronoun "they" to refer to people in Europe or elsewhere overseas who seek to know the factors that propel her to tell the tales that act as her muse:

They ask me how did you get here? Can't you see it on my body? The Libyan desert red with immigrant bodies, the Gulf of Aden bloated, the city of Rome with no jacket. I hope the journey meant more than miles because all of my children are in the water. I thought the sea was safer than the land. I want to make love, but my hair smells of war and running and running. I want to lay down, but these countries are like uncles who touch you when you're young and asleep. Look at all these borders, foaming at the mouth with bodies broken and desperate. I'm the colour of hot sun on the face, my mother's remains were never buried.

*(*Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth *25)*

In Shire's poem, issues such as migrant deaths due to boat accidents offer fresh insight into the plight of Africa's migrants who continuously engage in dangerous boat trips to search for a better life in Europe.

For better or worse, Africa's conflicts over the years have spread into different forms of generational crisis for the poor and the underprivileged. Africa's struggles with pandemics such as HIV/AIDS and other diseases represents one area of significant attention. Historically, Africa's poor population has had to deal with the double blow, especially those in West Africa tackling malaria and those in southern Africa dealing with the rising numbers of HIV/AIDS cases. During all this, the question has always revolved around social life and the insistence of locals to trust traditional ways of healing. In the poems by writers from this region, we note how poetry is used to reflect on a serious issue such as AIDS. For example, Malawian poet Jack Mapanje's phenomenal poem "The Note (On Returning Home)" refers to the struggles of a dying husband/father who denies his wife sex because he fears he would expose her to the disease which he had contracted through infidelity. It is only after the man's death that his wife discovers the note that he hid in a Bible and learns the reason for his evasive behavior. In the poem, the poet states thus:

> Darling, you said I tormented
> You when I turned the other side
> Each time you joked about yearning
> For another kid! I am sorry, but I
> Did not know how to tell you: one
> Infidelity gave me the incurable
> Curse I did not wish to pass on; I
> Love you and the children, dearly;
> You'll always be my finest angels;
> Forgive me & pray when I am gone.
>                  *(Greetings from Grandpa 30)*

A dying husband addresses a note to his wife in this simple poem. Throughout the poem, the speaker emphasizes the significance of the ethical decision taken to keep his wife and children alive. The speaker, who is HIV positive, is fully in control of the inescapable tensions and internal struggles that he confronts to ensure his regrets in life are not compounded before his last moments. He denies his wife sex to prolong her life and the life of the unborn child she desires. Mapanje provides a very powerful message in the poem, for the dead man leaves a note in which he confesses his infidelity to his wife and subsequent HIV/AIDS infection. His explanation for his being misunderstood each time his wife unsuccessfully sought his attention in the bedroom is very telling of his deep reverence for the future of his children. In this respect, the persona's message is inspired by self-teaching and the kind of conscious thinking one finds in a poem like "Friday Night", where South African poet Vonani Bila attempts to alert clubbers of the dangers of casual sex. We learn of this as the speaker declares:

> Hey Joe,
> Where is the condom in your pocket?
> Don't make yourself a foolish Thomas.
> The time of trust is long gone.
> It's better to trust a boot,
> It'll protect me from the mud.
> Or we simply can't control the blood?
> AIDS is no Verwoerd carving Apartheid monsters!
> While we keep on waxing our ears,

> Death shall lack mercy, old man.
> Hey Joe, I'm telling you little fellow,
> Geddit?
> The time of fok-fok is long past.
>       *(*Poetry International, *web)*

Bila's poetry analyzes the response of South Africans to HIV/AIDS. He views social pressure and visibility of the disease as reasons that should propel people to act wisely. At the root of his plea is the concern for the future, for he warns, "While we keep on waxing our ears, / Death shall lack mercy, old man". Mphande addresses the same preoccupation with rising death rates of people infected with HIV/AIDS in southern Africa in "Shambling into a Wail". In the poem, the fate of villages exposed to sickness and constant death takes center stage, as Mphande laments:

> Work here is done before the sun's down.
> Occasionally there are groans in the night.
> Children too sick to cry
> Now with the AIDS pandemic
> Sickness is frequent, as are deaths,
> Fires range the ridge like silver spirals
> Healers looking for a cure
> As villagers shamble into another wail.
>       *(*Messages Left Behind *75, lines 6–13)*

The poet advocates action and avoids the temptation to blame outsiders for Africa's growing AIDS infection rate. The kind of urgency exemplified by Mphande's speaker when addressing the seriousness of the epidemic is displayed by the South African poet Dennis Brutus, whose poem "Let's Confront AIDS" declares "Let's talk openly about AIDS, / about the pain and grief / about the anger and fear / about the deep sense of loss" (lines 1–4). He speaks from the vantage point of an optimist, and his utterances are warnings that should alert his people of the dire times and the importance of summoning a collective voice in the search for solutions to the AIDS pandemic in southern Africa. Historically, South African poet and activist Dennis Brutus is associated with the group of first-generation modern African writers. As a young man, he was shot for protesting South Africa's involvement in the 1976 Olympics because he wanted to raise worldwide support against the damaging legacy Apartheid was having on South Africa's future. Because of this historicity to his work, in addition to his past as a prisoner in Robben Island Prison, where famous South Africans such as Nelson Mandela, Robert Mangoliso Sobukwe, Ahmed Kathrada, and other notable freedom fighters were incarcerated, Brutus commands respect globally as a voice singing for the oppressed and underprivileged. Therefore, the urgency and necessity of his call to combat AIDS resembles the conscious messages in the poems of Mapanje, Mphande, and Bila.

## Conclusion

Through a careful discussion of selected poems, this chapter exposes the present, questions the past, and imagines futures. The work of multigenerational African poets reflects the continent's sociopolitical struggles, fears, pains, hopes, and anxiety. To help provide a spiritual basis to deal with the transition from colonial realities that still affect the postcolonial reality, African poets

considered traditionalists and African poets trained in Western poetic modes offer hope through their prescribed ideas and references to social and political issues affecting their homelands. Collectively, the poets have imbibed in their critical scheme the ideology that helps to sieve through the foggy mist of postcolonial tensions in their respective countries.

## Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "The African and the Biafran Curse." *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. Heinemann, 1975, pp. 3–79.

———. *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. Doubleday, 1989.

———. "The University and the Leadership Factor in Nigerian Politics." *The Education of a British Protected Child*. Knopf, 2009, p. 139.

"At Least 42 African Migrants Drown off Yemeni Coast." *The National News.Com*, 10 Mar. 2014, https://www.reuters.com. Accessed 17 Oct. 2020

Awoonor, Kofi. *The Promise of Hope (New & Selected Poems, 1964–2013)*. U of Nebraska P, 7.

Banoobhai, Shabbir. *Inward Moon, Outward Sun*. Gecko Poetry, 2002.

Bila, Vonani. "Friday Night." *Poetry International*. Web.

Brutus, Dennis. "Let's Confront AIDS." *Fingernails Across the Chalkboard: Poetry and Prose On HIV/AIDS from the Black Diaspora*, edited by Randall Horton, M.L. Hunter and Becky Thompson, Third World Press, 2007, p. 168.

Eze, Chielozona. *Survival Kit*. Akashic, 2016.

———. *Prayers to Survive Wars that Last*. Cissus World Press, 2017.

"Futurism." *Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster*, 2011. Web. 2 Apr. 2011.

Kiguli, Susan. "My Mother in Three Photographs." *Kinna Reads*, 10 Apr. 2018, https://kinnareads.com/2018/04/10/my-mother-in-three-photographs-by-susan-kiguli-poetrymonth/. Accessed 13 Mar. 2021.

Mapanje, Jack. *Greetings from Grandpa*. Bloodaxe, 2016.

Mphande, Lupenga. *Messages Left Behind*. Brown Turtle, 2011.

Mthwakazi Queens. "Meet Nandi Ka Bhebhe: Queen Mother of the South." 16 Nov. 2019, https://mthwakaziqueens.org/2019/11/16/meet-nandi-ka-bhebhe-queen-mother-of-the-south/. Accessed 29 Mar. 2021.

Ntuli, Pitika. *Pitikantuli.com*. "Carve Me Words." 10 May 2015, https://pitikantuli.com/carve-me-words/. Accessed 7 Mar. 2021.

Okoro, Dike. "Instilling the Faith in Our Way of Life." (The Future Imagined Differently) *About Place Journal*, vol. 3, no. 5, 2015b. https://aboutplacejournal.org/issues/future-imagined/section-4/dike-okoro/. Accessed 3 Apr. 2021.

———, editor. *Two Zulu Poets: Mazisi Kunene & BW Vilakazi*. Cissus World, 2015a.

———. *Homecoming: New & Selected Poems*. Cyberwit, 2020.

Okri, Ben. "On the Edge of Time Future." *HelloPoetry.Com*. 10 Mar. 2021, https://hellopoetry.com/poets/ben-okri/. Accessed 3 Apr. 2021.

Raji, Remi. "Love Song for My Wasteland, Sequence xvii." *Lyrikline.org*. https://www.lyrikline.org/en/poems/ilovesong-my-wastelandi-sequence-xvii-6466. Accessed 12 Mar. 2021.

Saro-Wiwa, Ken. "The Call." *Poems of Protest from Prison: Nigeria*, Zocalopoets.com, 24 Mar. https://zocalopoets.com/tag/ken-saro-wiwa/. Accessed 12 Oct. 2020.

Shire, Warsan. *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*. Flipped Eye, 2011.

Wesley, Patricia Jabbeh. *Before the Palm Could Bloom: Poems of Africa*. Western Michigan UP, 1998.

World Peace Foundation. "Nigeria: Civil War." *Mass Atrocity Endings*, 7 Aug. 2015. https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocityendings/2015/08/07/nigeria-civil-war/. Accessed 29 Mar. 22.

# 51

# "THEY SAY I'M HOPELESS"

## Jane McKeene Talks Back as Black Girls Do—Interlocking Oppressions and Justina Ireland's *Dread Nation*

*Damaris C. Dunn*

Justina Ireland composes *Dread Nation* (2019) as an alternate history that tells the story of Jane McKeene, a fierce, outspoken Black girl whose life changes when the federal government passes the "Negro and Native Reeducation Act", forcing Negro and native children to attend combat schools. Jane asserts:

> The minority party in Congress was against the combat schools from the start, saying that Negroes shouldn't be the ones to fight the dead—either because we're too stupid or because it's inhumane. But once the act was passed and the schools were established, there wasn't anything they could do, even if they'd wanted to. The federal government is the law of the land, but it doesn't have much say in how things run within the walls—most cities are small nations unto themselves.
>
> *(Ireland 17)*

Pointing out the relationship between federal and state governments, Jane recognizes the politics of race. What she finds out later is that the intersections of race and sex work in tandem to undermine Negro girls. Mayor Carr, Professor Ghering, Miss Anderson, and the sheriff of Summerland invest in upholding structural racism, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy. In defiance, Jane talks back. Sharp and quick-witted in her pursuit to save her male friend's younger sister in Summerland with the help of her light-skinned frenemy Katherine Deveraux, Jane ultimately desires to return home to Rose Hill, her sickles and penny with a hole in it, her only protection.

Running toward futurity, Jane experiences countless obstacles. Though *Dread Nation* is fictional, Justina Ireland's storytelling evokes both historical and present realities for Black people, particularly that of Black girls in schools. Allegorical in nature, Ireland historicizes the mistreatment and experimentation on Black bodies. Supporting the claim that SF texts are allegorical, literacy scholar S.R. Toliver reminds us that SF is more than a fictional account, but a demonstration of the lived and embodied experiences faced by oppressed groups (507). With that said, Ireland characterizes Jane in a way that points to the courageous efforts of powerful historical Black women figures like Harriet Tubman who fought for Black liberation; likewise, Jane is also seen "as unladylike and deviant" (Shange 106).

In this sense, Jane represents real Black girls in that her material reality mirrors the lives of Black girls who experience zero tolerance policies and school pushout. Though Jane can read, has "the highest competency scores in combat modalities" (Ireland 25), and manages to save an entire lecture hall full of people from shamblers (zombies), she incurs constant reprimands. Connecting Jane's experiences in schools with that of Black girls today, the Civil Rights Data Collection shows that Black girls made up 16% of girls in schools in the 2010–2011 school year, yet they are more likely to experience negative outcomes across the discipline continuum (M. Morris 3). These figures directly link to the contempt for Black girls by white hegemonic culture. Education researcher Subini Annamma and team assert that schools have become "sites of racialized and gendered terror" for Black girls (2). From the school curriculum to mistreatment in and out of school, Ireland's positioning of Jane shows that Black girls exist on society's periphery, reminding us all that interlocking oppressions are consistent amongst Black girls. This includes racism, sexism, and colorism. Thus, interlocking oppressions define the relationship between the confluence of race and how class, sex, and gender also function as oppressive systems.

Though anti-Blackness, racism, and white supremacy are barriers to Jane's returning home, she remains fierce, resilient, and presumptuously invested in saving others and herself.

Jane *is* BlackGirlMagic, and BlackGirlMagic provides "a response to such structural violence and the labor … Black girls and women undertake to exist, survive, and thrive" (Jordan-Zachery and Harris 11). Jane's BlackGirlMagic is reliant on her community and does not neatly fit into the meritocratic BlackGirlMagic that focuses on the individual. Jane's Blackness, girlness, and community combined are her superpower. As such, Jane's agency allows her to navigate the spaces she occupies subversively and steadfastly in manner. Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins asserts that no matter the level of oppression, African American women writers maintain that the power to save the self comes from within (119). Thus, Ireland marshals Jane's ability to consistently save herself and others as a testament to her BlackGirlMagic.

Situating Black girls as worthy of being seen, heard, and centered troubles the "dark other" narrative (Thomas 19). As such, in this chapter, I first provide a brief synopsis of critical race and zombie theories. Second, I use critical race theories to interpret Jane's experiences in and out of school while also bringing attention to Black girls' present realities in school. Third, I utilize zombie theory to examine a Black girl attendant turned shambler. I end with a call to move toward a BlackGirlMagic that does not reinforce violence and labor but instead recognizes the beauty and brilliance of Black girls and their communities as important to SF texts.

## Theorizing *Dread Nation*

Critical race theory (CRT) scholars are both existentially and ideologically committed to the struggle against racism. As such, scholars within the fields of education and SF focus on the social and cultural perspectives about how Black, indigenous people of color (BIPOC) experience and respond to racism. Education researchers Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate introduced CRT to the field of education in 1995. Literary scholar Isiah Lavender III credits SF writers Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler for representing race and racism in SF, while also making the critique that race beyond these two central figures is under-theorized. Thus, both fields have employed CRT to begin to make sense of race and racism in their respective disciplines. As such, I employ both critical race and critical race feminist (CRF) theories to make meaning of *Dread Nation*. CRT scholars believe that: (1) racism is endemic to the United States, (2) systems maintain and uphold the interests of white culture, (3) race is socially constructed, (4) storytelling and counternarratives can highlight BIPOC experiences in ways that

white people cannot, and (5) white people have been on the receiving end of civil rights legislation (Delgado and Stefancic 8–11).

Take for instance, the Negro and Native Reeducation Act, which underscores tenets one, two, three, and five. Under this act, negro and native children involuntarily attend combat schools; this example demonstrates the endemic nature of racism and systems interested in holding up whiteness. Here, legislation benefits and ensures the protection of the white elites. Additionally, Jane asserts that "Negro girls" combat schools are in old plantation houses, while the "boys combat schools are abandoned military barracks" (33). This lack of care for negro and native children conforms with the historical underpinnings of schooling in America. Likewise, schools attended by children of color, particularly in the rural South, lack adequate resources compared to Black children's white counterparts.

As such, CRT is invaluable to the assessment of *Dread Nation*. In this respect, tenet four privileges the importance of the storytelling and counter stories of Black and indigenous people of color. S.R. Toliver states that "writers … create metaphorical renderings of real situations and engage readers in a thought experiment that asks them to transfer ideas about stories to events in the real world" (512). As a literacy scholar in the field of education, Toliver works with Black girls to create and make meaning of existing speculative fiction texts that center on Black women and girls.

Ultimately, *Dread Nation* in its entirety is a counternarrative. Because the novel focuses on a Black girl, CRF is the best lens through which to interpret the text. While CRT sufficiently helps to pinpoint the larger systemic BIPOC issues, CRF centers on both the racialized and gendered components of what it means to live in America as a Black girl. In 1989, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, which is the interconnected nature of race, gender, and class, similar to interlocking oppressions. The two concepts help to understand how Black girls experience oppression in and outside of schools. Building off of Crenshaw's work, legal scholar Patricia Williams developed CRF. CRF scholars believe that:

> (1) women of color's experiences differ from men of color and their white counterparts, (2) women of color experience manifold discrimination within a white supremacist society, (3) women of color have many identities and consciousnesses, (4) CRF is interdisciplinary in nature and (5) calls for and employs theory and praxis that commits to dismantling interlocking oppressions experienced by women of color.
>
> *(Evans-Winters and Esposito, 20)*

CRF proves to be beneficial in this context because it attends to the specificity of women of color's experiences, multiple identities, and consciousnesses. Educational researchers have called for the use of CRF when considering school discipline and zero-tolerance policies experienced by Black girls (Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews 1428). Building on the work of other education scholars, I use CRF to examine *Dread Nation* because it provides a broader and more nuanced take on the material conditions of Black girls in and out of school. These scholars critically engage Black girls' identities to provoke a policy and praxis shift in education to the benefit of Black girls. Because they are under-theorized and understudied in SF and education, I find it important to make a place for Black girls in this interdisciplinary conversation.

## Miss Preston's Negro Girls and Real-Life Black Girls

*Dread Nation* represents one pertinent example of how a writer takes up the experiences of Black girls and centers them with intention. Ireland makes use of the science-fictional motif of alternate history in *Dread Nation* to tell her story of a multivalent Black female resistance in the

zombie apocalypse. The centering of Black girls' experience at Miss Preston's school invokes a need to understand Black girls' epistemologies, ontologies, and how interlocking oppressions reinforce racism, sexism, and colorism. These interlocking oppressions inundate and subsume the material realities of fictional and real Black girls. Rejecting the white world, Jane says, "I don't much care for their message of knowing one's place and following along with the natural order" (Ireland 63). Highly aware of how society sees her, Jane resists and talks back. In addition to the special penny that Jane wears around her neck as a sign of home and protection, Jane also carries words from her mother. Collins asserts that "visionary pragmatism of … U.S. Black mothers … grow from the nature of work women have done to ensure Black children's survival" (184). Put another way, Black girls' knowledge comes from their mothers' wherewithal and willingness to survive. Therefore, Black girl sensibilities are passed down.

In the novel, Jane relies on her mother's memory to subvert anti-Blackness and white supremacy. For example, Jane's mother taught her to think critically and question peoples' motives. Referencing the past, she says, "Momma used to say that a politician was a man that perfected the art of lying, so I always read those articles with a certain amount of skepticism before turning to the serials" (Ireland 65). Early on, Jane is aware of Mayor Carr's white racist male privilege and the power of reading. She observes and asserts that "Before he was elected, the squads had been integrated, but now few whites serve anything but command roles" (Ireland 72). Linking her mother's knowledge and her own, Jane assesses how Mayor Carr upholds white patriarchy. As a Black girl, Jane holds a distinct standpoint that tells a very different story from that of traditional SF texts. Jane "gets it from her momma".[1] This combined knowledge from her observations and her mother helps her to make decisions in and out of school.

Thinking critically about the role of schools within society, education scholar David Tyack argues that schools were established to assimilate immigrants and uphold racism and class bias (82). Similarly, in Ireland's alternate history, Miss Preston's school functions as a site to train a workforce for white elites. Attendants in training have two major responsibilities: "keep her charge from being killed by the dead, and her virtue from being compromised by potential suitors" (Ireland 10). Put another way, Miss Preston's girls ought to protect and serve whiteness at all costs and not to engage with boys. This type of education, both mechanical and habitual in nature, does nothing for students, and Jane is critical of this type of schooling. Thinking to herself about the difference between how Indian schools and Negro schools differ, Jane reflects: "I don't know much about how Indian schools work, but I've heard they're less focused on teaching folks how to kill the dead than they are civilizing them" (131). Comparatively, both Indians and Negros are required to do schooling that does not necessarily benefit them; taken from their homes, both groups become responsible for themselves. Quoting Ladson-Billings, scholar Monique W. Morris recognizes how "school-based learning detaches students from their home culture" (111).

While Ireland details various attempts to "civilize" Jane, Jane is unafraid and unreserved in criticizing the shortcomings of school-based learning and raising concerns about her teachers' competence. Upset about a test that she failed, Jane says this about the curriculum: "Seems like a bunch of tomfoolery to me. Who could care what spoon was used for what or the proper address for a European noble?" (Ireland 21). In this passage Jane challenges the primacy of white, Eurocentric ideals. According to Ladson-Billings and Tate, since whiteness is a possession, a student's closeness to whiteness predicts how successful they will be. Although Jane is intentionally sabotaged by her teacher, Jane's behavior is deemed unacceptable. In a two-year ethnographic study, scholar Edward W. Morris found that Black girls were seriously invested in their education; however, their teachers paid more attention to their appropriateness in behavior rather than their academic achievement. Morris states, "this discipline stemmed from

perceptions of them as challenging to authority, loud, and not lady like" (501). This is also true for Jane, and while it appears that faculty hold her to a particular standard, she is consistently reprimanded because she questions authority. Conversing with Miss Preston and Miss Anderson, Jane exclaims, "We ain't even talked about that stuff in our lessons" (Ireland 22). With repugnance, Miss Anderson responds: "A ploy? Treachery? It was important etiquette, you ungrateful brat! I'm preparing you for the noble endeavor of serving as an Attendant to polite society, but it's like trying to teach manners to an animal" (Ireland 22). The exchange in question serves as a poignant reminder that Miss Preston's school is committed to "civilizing" Black girls and preparing them to be attendants to the white elite. Miss Anderson's assessment also reminds that Black girls need to be controlled and, as such, their hypervisibility should be consistent with their actions done in part for the "betterment of humanity" (Ireland 74). Not only does this view uphold white hegemonic ways of maintaining power over Black girls, but it dehumanizes Jane and her classmates. The school upholds systems as described in the second CRT tenet. In Venus Evans-Winters and Jennifer Esposito's assessment of the mistreatment of Black girls in schools, every supporting study claimed that Black girls were "loud". Jane fits the description.

Scholar Monique Morris examines school push-out and how Black girls are criminalized within their schools. In this respect, Miss Anderson and Miss Preston's school represents a larger system whose goal is to dispose of Black girls who do not align with normative ways of being and knowing, her contempt palpable and not uncommon amongst real Black girls who disproportionately experience suspension and expulsion in schools. In *Dread Nation*, Ms. Anderson's goal is to make Black girls whiter, less deviant, and more ladylike. She views Jane and her peers as wild things to be controlled rather than human beings worthy of care and love. Additionally, the headmaster, Miss Preston, serves as an example that racism is endemic and that the U.S. upholds such ideals when declaring: "Jane, I know that etiquette isn't your strongest area. Many of you girls have trouble with it, which is why we wait until your last year here to introduce it" (Ireland 23). At Miss Preston's school, girls' roles and responsibilities are specific, their behaviors prescribed, and the expectation is that they conduct themselves as women, never receiving the opportunity to be children. According to Jamilia J. Blake, Rebecca Epstein, and Thalia González , "Black girls in and out of schools are subject to adultification. "Adultification is a process of socialization, in which children function at a more mature developmental stage because of situational context or necessity" (4). At Miss Preston's and in Summerland, both Jane and Katherine experience adultification.

In addition to experiencing adultification, Black girls in *Dread Nation* are also subject to what Black literary scholar Saidiya Hartman refers to as "the afterlife of slavery" ("Belly" 166). According to Hartman, slavery's afterlife includes "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (*Lose* 6). In Katherine and Jane's case, they are both literally and metaphorically occupying the *afterlife of slavery*, not as former slaves but as new slaves. At Summerland, Jane is treated with disdain, and Katherine passes as a white woman. Upon meeting Jane, the Summerland sheriff asserts, "pastor seems to think the word of the Lord will keep your kind in line, but I ain't so sure" (204). Not responding outwardly but internally, Jane reflects, "though the sheriff took every opportunity to insult … and remind … of the circumstance of" her "dark skin, and I'd like nothing more than to tell him what I think … I know I am more than my skin color" (Ireland 204).

With Jane's identity tied to her penny and upbringing and Katherine's identity linked to her skin color, affording her a certain level of privilege, colorism emerges in the text. Ireland employs colorism in two ways; on the one hand, colorism demonstrates that black girls are not a monolith, and on the other, it shows that darker skin is associated with being bad. Hence, colorism functions as an interlocking oppression in addition to race, class, and gender. Whether

stated internally or out loud, Jane and Katherine are keenly aware of color. In the later stages of the novel, when Jane asks Katherine, "What's wrong?" (Ireland 360), Katherine responds, "I hate pretending to be white, to be like most of the folks in this town. I hate the way they think. And I hate knowing that my face is worth more than all the rest of me" (Ireland 361). The juxtaposition of Jane's Blackness and Katherine's presumed whiteness acknowledges the hierarchal nature of skin color in Summerland and America. Collins states that the effects of color, be it light-skinned or dark-skinned, impact women differently (91). In Katherine's case, she does not like being light-skinned because she has to pretend to be someone she is not. This dislike points to how anti-Blackness functions; Katherine would rather forgo her proximity to whiteness than to be seen as white. Troubling the racial binary, Katherine's counter-story is also unique, and only a story that a Black girl can tell.

While envious of Katherine's beauty, Jane recognizes the burden that Katherine carries and the danger that Katherine would be in if someone in Summerland discovered her passing. Linda Burton and colleagues assert that "race scholars have long pointed to colorism as a source of internal differentiation and equality among people of color" (442). They go on to indicate that the social construction of race purports to "racial realities with real effects" (Burton et al. 444). In thinking about the harmful ways that color has maintained the historical underpinnings of anti-Blackness, racism, and white supremacy, it is painstakingly clear when Jane says: "I fiddle with the curly mass of my bangs and slouch down feeling like the plainest girl ever next to the fashion plate that is Katherine Deveraux" (Ireland 31). Though Jane does not distinctly mention color, it is apparent that she compares herself to Katherine. Secretly, they both want what the other has. In this respect, Ebony McGee, Adam Alvarez, and H. Richard Milner IV call for an assessment of the impact that colorism might have on future students and recognition that awareness of racial identity is pertinent to teaching children. Miss Anderson is the perfect example of how not to be; her comparison of Jane as an animal and her insinuation that Katherine is too pretty are colorism-imbued standpoints. Thinking critically about Jane's fictional experience at Miss Preston's in relation to Black girls in schools, we see the manifold discriminations such as anti-Blackness, racism, sexism, and colorism as interlocking oppressions mark the lives of Black women and girls' experiences fictionally and in real life.

## Black Girl Shambler, We See You

Reflecting on her encounter with the dead, Jane reveals two important lessons. First, "the dead will take everything you love," and second, "the person poking the dead ain't always the one paying for it" (Ireland 46). Readers might think that Jane sees the dead as an empty signifier, but when she comes in contact with the dead, who is also a former Attendant, Massie Carpenter, she sees herself for a moment. Jane's encounter with Massie Carpenter demonstrates how the two girls, alive and dead, are similarly othered. Peering at Massie before having to kill her, Jane recognizes how Massie has also been thrown away by society, placed on the front lines to defend whiteness. In this moment, Jane is Massie, and Massie is Jane. Jane acknowledges the shambler as previously being human before she kills her because she knew Massie, and she recognizes what was and can no longer be. Jane knows that Massie was a good person who was also good at her job as an Attendant; this gives Jane insight into where her life is headed if she is not careful.

Even in her living death, Massie Carpenter works as a laborer for white people. Zombie theorist Sascha Morrell reveals that "it is in the connection with race and labour anxiety that the deepest and most persistent [of] parallels between zombie and robot mythologies are apparent in U.S. culture" (102). Massie is the afterlife of the afterlife. While bell hooks's concept of the oppositional gaze centers the experiences of Black women in film, Ireland employs it as a way

of seeing the Black girl who is not meant to be seen. hooks writes, "even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (116). One example of this usage occurs when Jane recalls a negro girl shambler. She states:

> a Negro girl wearing clothing that looks eerily like mine, and leap, sickle swinging to take the thing down … But as I'm trying to yank the sickles through the shambler's neck I get a good look at the face, and my heart stutters to a stop. The dead girl reaching for my throat is Massie Carpenter. Massie was in her last year when I got to Miss Preston's. The last time I saw her was the night of Professor Ghering's lecture, when she stood along the wall, nodding in agreement as I protested using the poor man in the professor's ill-conceived science experiment. And now, here she is.
>
> *(263–265)*

Not only is the zombie not an empty signifier in this instance, but a girl that Jane once knew. A girl who helps Jane make sense of the reason as to why the dead are encroaching on Summerland so quickly. Jane exercises an oppositional gaze at this moment, seeing Massie as more than dead, but as a human being. Collins insinuates that Black women use their shared, oppositional awareness as a means of resisting their interlocking oppression (Collins). Herein, Jane uses consciousness of the past to inform the present, ultimately saving herself and others.

Ireland moves past simple explorations of whiteness and masculinity. Therefore, Kinitra Brooks asserts, race and gender represent critical intersections that should be better explored in pushing "zombie theory to mine the critically rich ores of the intersections" (461). This alternate history does not leave Black women on the periphery but sees them as agents of change. Without Jane's oppositional gaze, many are doomed, but with her, many can live just a little while longer. At nearly every point in U.S. history, there are Black women and girls on the periphery of the conversation. But, often, it is the Black women and girls who hold this country together; their work ethic and their labor, in the afterlife of slavery, unmatched.

### *Dread Nation* Imitating the Lives of Black Girls Historically and Presently

Like Jane McKeene, Katherine Devaraux, and Massie Carpenter, Black girls in schools simply try to survive. Looking at Black girls in the news today, we find several instances where they are mistreated. In South Carolina in 2015, Ben Fields, a senior deputy officer, forcibly removed a Black girl from her desk by flipping both the desk and her; at a Boston charter school in 2017, Black girls were threatened with suspension for the way their hair grew out of their heads; in February 2020, a six-year-old Black girl was arrested in Orlando for having a temper tantrum, as children often do. These are just some ways interlocking oppressions have continued to persist for the Black girls in schools, giving them no room to simply be girls.

Despite the lack of care and the mistreatment, they persist, but they should not have to under such conditions. hooks states that "asserting agency, even in small ways, is always the first step to self-determination. It is a place of hope" (37). Self-determination and hope remain consistent themes in the lives of Black women and girls. As mentioned earlier, Jane was not supposed to be able to read, but she read to her peers anyway. She talked back. Learning to read was an act of resistance, an act that could end in death. Historian James Anderson wrote that Elizabeth Sparks, an enslaved rebel, held secret literacy sessions in the slave quarters (17). Asserting her agency, Sparks and so many other Black women whose names we will never know saw education and literacy as a practice of freedom.

Jane and Katherine are mere examples of the Black girls that presently walk school halls day in and day out. According to Evans-Winters and Esposito, Black girls' resiliency derives from their strong sense of self—race, class, and gender injustice at school, in the community, and within society—which is distinctly linked to Black girls' ways of knowing and being (13). Dedicated to doing research on behalf and in partnership with Black girls, Black women education researchers commit to telling the stories of Black girls to create space and place for them both inside and outside of schools. Brooks emphasizes that Black women should not be the only ones responsible for taking up the work centering on Black women in zombie films; the same also holds in the field of education. Black girlhood scholar Ruth Nicole Brown, citing Monique Morris, declares that "school processes aimed to reform Black girls" (104). Black girls do not, however, need to be reformed; rather, the institutions that oppress the most defenseless people are what need to be eliminated. In this sense, creating something new is the only way to free Black girls from many oppressions.

Dishearteningly, to say the least, Jane McKeene receives lashes for refusing to fall in line closer to the end of the novel. Jane's lashes are a metaphor for how Black girls are dealt with in schools, punished for being their Black girl selves, and their spirits murdered. Scholar Bettina L. Love explains that regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity, Black children undergo spirit-murdering in schools. Love defines spirit-murdering as "denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable structures of racism" (2). Jane's spirit is murdered over and over again, and she is resilient, her BlackGirlMagic prevailing despite all the things that have tried to kill her. Her small but mighty community near and far helps her to navigate life as a Black girl. Black girls experience a sort of social death at the hands of anti-Blackness, racism, and white supremacy that requires attention in and out school spaces.

## Toward Black Girl Magic in SF and Schools

Scholars Henriette Gunkel and Kara Lynch, cite Samuel Delany:

> We need images of tomorrow; and our people need them more than most. Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics, and politics beyond our control … Only by having clear and vital images of many alternatives, good and bad, of where one can go will we have any control over the way we actually get there in reality.
>
> *(27)*

Delany is absolutely right in his call to action; representation matters and is pertinent to Black girls, who are amongst the most vulnerable. This entire chapter is about the disciplining of Black girls. Ireland's novel provides a powerful statement, and one that I find to be most helpful in my assessment of BlackGirlMagic. Jane's BlackGirlMagic is work. What would it mean for Black girls to have BlackGirlMagic absent of labor and violence? Ireland's text is a good start in that it pervasively challenges and undermines the racial binary that consumes every aspect of what it means to be Black in America. Dionne Farris sings, "they say I am hopeless … as a penny with a hole in it" for a penny with a hole in it has no value. But Jane McKeene reminds us that not only are Black girls valuable, but they are also the backbone of America. They talk back, they walk fervently and steadfastly in their interlocking oppressions. Is this all Black girls are? Are we allowed joy? And celebration? And hope? Are Black girls' material realities just resistance?

CRT combined with SF provides a primer language to help us center the lived experiences of Jane McKeene while recognizing her agency in an alternate history that exists as a backdrop by which she asserts her BlackGirlMagic. Julia Jordan-Zachery and Duchess Harris complicate

the notion of Black girl magic by asserting that, "intracommunication methodology, challenging dehumanizing representations, rendering themselves visible, and practicing restoration" are necessary in perceiving its boundaries (26). Ireland employs intracommunication in *Dread Nation* because it is apparent that her written work is for Black girls; she challenges dehumanizing representations by making them visible and practices restoration through Jane. The same should apply to Black girls in schools today. Black girls have always talked back in and out of school; it's about time we listen.

## Note

1   "She gets it from her momma" is a colloquial expression often used by rap artists to assert that a Black woman/girl has traits, mostly physical, similar to that of their mothers.

## Works Cited

Annamma, Subini Ancy, et al. "Black Girls and School Discipline: The Complexities of Being Overrepresented and Understudied." *Urban Education*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2019, pp. 211–242.

Anderson, James D. *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*. U of North Carolina P, 1988.

Blake, Jamilia J., Rebecca Epstein, and Thalia González. "Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood." *Georgetown Law: Center on Poverty and Inequality*, 18 July 2017, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3000695. Accessed 28 June 2023.

Brooks, Kinitra D. "The Importance of Neglected Intersections: Race and Gender in Contemporary Zombie Texts and Theories." *African American Review*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2014, pp. 461–475.

Brown, Ruth Nicole. *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*. U of Illinois P, 2013.

Burton, Linda M., et al. "Critical Race Theories, Colorism, and the Decade's Research on Families of Color." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2010, pp. 440–459.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2015.

Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. NYU P, 2017.

Evans-Winters, Venus E., and Jennifer Esposito. "Other People's Daughters: Critical Race Feminism and Black Girls' Education." *Educational Foundations*, vol. 24, 2010, pp. 11–24.

Farris, Dionne. "Hopeless." *Love Jones: The Music*. Sony, 1997.

Gunkel, Henriette, and Lynch, Kara. *We Travel the Space Ways: Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions*. Columbia University Press, 2019.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008.

———. "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors." *Souls*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2016, pp. 166–173.

Hines-Datiri, Dorothy, and Dorinda J. Carter Andrews. "The Effects of Zero Tolerance Policies on Black Girls: Using Critical Race Feminism and Figured Worlds to Examine School Discipline." *Urban Education*, vol. 55, no. 10, 2020, pp. 1419–1440.

hooks, bell. *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies*. Routledge, 2015.

Ireland, Justina. *Dread Nation*. Titan Books, 2019.

Jordan-Zachery, Julia S., and Duchess Harris. *Black Girl Magic beyond the Hashtag: Twenty-First Century Acts of Self-Definition*. U of Arizona P, 2019.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria, and William F. Tate. "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education." *Critical Race Theory in Education: All God's Children Got a Song*, edited by Adrienne D. Dixson, Celia K. Rousseau Anderson, and Jamel K. Donner, Routledge, 2016, pp. 11–31.

Lavender, Isiah, III. *Race in American Science Fiction*. Indiana UP, 2011.

Love, Bettina L. "Anti-Black State Violence, Classroom Edition: The Spirit Murdering of Black Children." *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2016, pp. 22–25.

McGee, Ebony O., Adam Alvarez, and H. Richard Milner IV. "Colorism as a Salient Space for Understanding in Teacher Preparation." *Theory into Practice*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2016, pp. 69–79.

Morrell, Sascha. "Zombies, Robots, Race, and Modern Labour." *Affirmations: of the Modern*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2015, pp. 101–134.

Morris, Edward W. "'Ladies' or 'Loudies'?" *Youth & Society*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2007, pp. 490–515.

Morris, Monique W. *Pushout: the Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*. The New Press, 2018.

Shange, Savannah. *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in Sn Francisco*. Duke UP, 2019.

Thomas, Ebony E. *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. NYU P, 2019.

Toliver, S.R. "Can I Get a Witness? Speculative Fiction as Testimony and Counterstory." *Journal of Literacy Research*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2020, pp. 507–529.

Tyack, David. *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*. Harvard UP, 1974.

# 52

# "THE STRENGTH OF NO SEPARATION"

## A Poethics of Inseparability After the End of the World

*Jesse A. Goldberg*

Toni Morrison tells us that "slavery broke the world in half" (178). Chelsea Vowel tells us that "Indigenous peoples the world over are a post-apocalyptic people. We experience The Apocalypse at different times" (Vowel). For millions of people on *the planet*—which is distinct from *the world*—the apocalypse has already happened. "It's after the end of the world", Sun Ra reprises, "*don't [we] know that yet?*" (*Space Is the Place*).

This chapter thinks with Afrofuturist, black feminist, and queer (where those markers are signals of ways of thinking, rather than markers of identity) writers and thinkers, including most prominently Kara Keeling, Denise Ferreira da Silva, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, about life after the end of the world. Gumbs's book of poetry *M Archive: After the End of the World* will be our guiding light, and Keeling, da Silva, Alexander, and some others will help us navigate an alternative futurism of the Human. I write "the Human" with a capital "H" to distinguish it from *human*, lowercase, which designates biological or species identity. There have been and remain those who are human but not Human, those who, in Gumbs's words, "had nonconsensually generated the human across time" (*M Archive* 171). Sylvia Wynter, another navigator, tells us that the Human is a construct made over time, iterated through different genres such as Man.[1] Gumbs, writing in an essay titled "Being Ocean as Practice", thinks with and diverges a bit from Wynter, writing that she wants to "attempt to untheorize the global systems that lead to countless deaths and near-deaths at sea for migrants every day and night. *A divestment in being human*. An experiment in being ocean, as praxis" (336, emphasis added). This chapter takes Gumbs's use of the verb *being* in that last sentence seriously by examining *M Archive* to think about how one version of alternative futurism involves reconceptualizing *being* (noun *and* verb) itself, away from what we think we know as the Human and even the human, towards a way of surviving yet another in a series of apocalypses. The world has ended before, and it is ending again.

The alternative futurism examined in this chapter, then, refuses to defer or fight off or prevent or avoid the end of the world. It is a futurism of present practice. And it is a futurism that is inextricable from its poetic form (so before, and after, you read this chapter, I suggest reading Gumbs's poetry to see all that this chapter cannot say because it is lost in the essay form as my less poetic hand has crafted it). Robin D.G. Kelley emphasizes "poetic knowledge" as "that effort to see the future in the present" (9). Building on Kelley, Keeling writes,

My turn to poetry, therefore, is less about bringing about a utopian future and mapping another world, and more about the access poetry provides to a notion of futurity as both a promise and a wish, at the same time as poetry unsettles the assuredness that there is a future as such.

*(84)*

Poetry as experiment. As a different kind of science that throws into question articles of faith like the idea that there is something called a future that is distinct from this now that we call the present. We can think of *M Archive* as a poetic science project, or scientific poetry, seeking to test an existential question posed by da Silva:

What if, instead of the Ordered World, we imaged each existant (human and more-than-human) not as separate forms relating through the mediation of forces, but rather as singular expressions of each and every other existant as well as of the entangled whole in/ as which they exist?

*("Difference" 63–64)*

This question drills down to the most fundamental articles of faith in Western thought, and that is precisely how deep *M Archive* is willing to dive.

Perhaps the most fundamental article of faith that *M Archive* undoes, which is the primary focus of this chapter, is that there is something called the individuated subject or the individual self which is expressed in the Human. In her introduction to the poetry, Gumbs writes, "*M Archive: After the End of the World* … depicts a species at the edge of its integrity, on the verge or in the practice of transforming into something beyond the luxuries and limitations of what some call 'the human'" (xi). She also tells readers that *M Archive* is a text deeply and inextricably woven with an ancestral text in its imagining of non-individuated being beyond the human after the end of the world—Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (2005). In the beginning of that ancestral co-present book, Alexander writes,

This, then, is the existential message of the Crossing—to apprehend how it might instruct us in the urgent task of configuring new ways of being and knowing and to plot the different metaphysics that are needed to move away from living alterity premised in difference to living intersubjectivity premised in relationality and solidarity.

*(7–8)*

We will see, though, that Gumbs takes Alexander so seriously that when she puts this message of the Crossing into poetic form, a more radical existential possibility comes into view—non-differentiation that is so complete that it even disallows terms like *intersubjectivity*, *relationality*, and *solidarity* insofar as they each presuppose distinct subjects/nodes/existants which do the relating denoted by those words. Gumbs's poetry gives c(h)oral voice to da Silva's theorization of "difference without separability":

Because only the end of the world as we *know* it, I am convinced, can dissolve the cultural differences' production of human collectives as "strangers" … What if, instead of The Ordered World, we could imagine The World as Plenum, an infinite composition in which each existant's singularity is contingent upon **it becoming one possible expression of all the other existants, with which it is entangled beyond space and time**.

*("Difference Without Separability" 58, italics in original; bold added)*

Notice that da Silva's sentence begins with *what if* but doesn't end with a question mark. By refusing the question mark, the sentence refuses the possible answer, *we cannot*. But by opening with the interrogative phrase *what if*, the sentence also forestalls certainty. Da Silva offers a grammar of interrogative assertion that Gumbs is able to give voice to in a form she calls "speculative documentary" poetry (xi). I turn now to a brief section inspired by this grammar of interrogative assertion before exploring what Gumbs does with inseparability in *M Archive*.

## What if Space Is *Not* the Place?

Sun Ra's film *Space Is the Place* appears as element number 86 in Gumbs's "Periodic Kitchen Table of the Elements" at the end of *M Archive*, just one of 118 elements besides *Pedagogies of Crossing* making up the book's bibliographic archive. But as "a founding father of afrofuturism" (Womack 60) whose declaration "it's after the end of the world" extends beyond recognition of his name, it may be useful for readers of this *Handbook*, who may or may not be new to some of the forms of alternative futurisms explored herein, to consider *M Archive* in relation to Sun Ra's *Space Is the Place*.

In his film, Sun Ra, an alien from a distant planet, comes to Earth to try to convince African Americans to leave with him on a spaceship destined for another planet where they can build an independent community beyond the reaches of white supremacy, which is not only restricted to the embodiment of white people, as his primary foil is a Black pimp called Overseer. Much has been written about the film that exceeds this chapter's focus and limited space, but the point of interest for me in thinking about what Gumbs does to exceed even Sun Ra's prophetic vision is the film's attempt to articulate both interdependence or cosmic oneness and separation or self-determination. On the one hand, Sun Ra states in the film, "Yes, you're music too. You're all instruments. Everyone is supposed to be playing their part in this vast arkestry of the cosmos". It's tempting to hear metaphor in lines like those. But as Keeling notes, throughout the film Sun Ra is constantly invoking the reality of "impossible possibility" (62). That is, Keeling thinks we should take him seriously. For Sun Ra, the being of what humans are is music, and in that shared ontology lies the physical possibility of interplanetary travel and the metaphysical reality of deep commonality within the single project of the cosmos' arkestry. But on the other hand, Sun Ra insists that the solution to the violence and debilitating logic of white supremacy is literal trans-universal escape to a new planet for Black people. Utter separation alongside ontological unity. A jazz musician more astutely trained in music theory and practice could explain the non-contradictory tension expressed here than I can, but for my purposes in this chapter, I just want to note the tension. Everyone is supposed to be playing their part, in unity, but when white people and those who enforce whiteness (like the Overseer, who is left behind when the spaceship takes off despite his epidermal Blackness) disrupt the melody by not playing their part, then the solution is found in the separability of the instruments.

The point is not that this is a contradiction, so—aha!—Sun Ra is wrong and Gumbs is right. Rather, I follow Keeling's meditation on the colonizing impulse in *Space in the Place* to suggest that space is not, in fact, the place, because the being that survives after the end of the world does so in excess of space. "Sun Ra's solution in *Space is the Place* to the violence and humiliation of US race relations is to give Black folks a world they can own", Keeling observes (67). She continues,

> Sun Ra seems unconcerned about the specter of African American and Black complicity in a settler colonial project when he advocates for a temporal rupture in Black consciousness … profound enough to transport Black people to another planet. Afrofuturist

narratives that advocate for colonizing another planet raise ... the ethico-political issues that have attended anti-Black settler colonial societies.

*(67)*

In other words, we could ask, whose world will end when Sun Ra and his fellow travelers touch down on their new planet? What kind of apocalypse will they bring with them, and to whom?

Sun Ra says in the opening to his film that he will operate "on the other side of time", and I think that Gumbs's poetry does so as well, but additionally plays on the other side of *space*. To cite Keeling again, "perceiving [the] impossibility [of traveling to another planet to set up a new world] ought to authorize further flights into and imaginations of the impossible that might address the complicity of Sun Ra's vision with settler colonialism" (67). Changing the key of the arkestra's song, *M Archive* seeks livability not away from, but situated right on an unlivable planet after the end of the world comes again. She does this through a Black feminist poethics.

## Poethics, Breathing, Loss

If Sun Ra shows us an escape plan to leave this planet of catastrophes, Gumbs shows us a survival plan that escapes the current *world*, but not the *planet*. For her, the task at hand is to (re) learn how to breathe. Black feminist breathing, in the key of what Christina Sharpe might call "Black aspiration" (109), becomes a form of what da Silva calls "poethics". In her essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World", da Silva writes, "Toward the end of the World produced by the tools of reason, the Black Feminist Poet peers beyond the horizon of thought, where historicity (temporality/interiority), framed by the tools of universal reason, cannot but yield violence" ("Black" 84). In other words, a poet like Gumbs who is engaged in a Black feminist poethics is able to imagine, speculate, and theorize in excess of the limitations of the philosophical schema of Western Knowledge which asserts itself as "universal reason", and in so doing, Gumbs can work language and thought on the other side of time and space. The result is a theorization of ontology, epistemology, and ethics beyond the end of the World of the Human. After all, the World of the Human has been secured through plasticizing and abusing colonized people, to draw on Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's rigorous theorization of plasticity.[2] The World of the Human is such that "the climate is anti-black" (Sharpe 104) and the air, unbreathable. "What makes the world unbreathable for us?", asks Gumbs in "Being Ocean as Praxis". She declares, "State violence; corporate air pollution; the vehicle emissions that are right now being loosed at federal and state levels by politicians who don't believe we have changed the climate; a culture of sexual violence" ("Being" 344). Knowing the problem, Gumbs looks toward the im/possibility of breathing:

> the university taught them through its selective genocide. one body. the unitary body. one body was not a sustainable unit for the project at hand. the project itself being black feminist metaphysics. which is to say, breathing.
>
> *(M Archive 6)*

These lines appear in the opening section of *M Archive*, and they set the metaphysical tone for the poetic narrative theorization to come.

*M Archive* poeticizes an account of how those who we currently call human became a form of being we (readers) cannot currently recognize after the end of the world brought about by climate change, which of course is yet another iteration of the continuing unfolding disasters of

slavery, genocide, and colonial conquest at the heart of this disaster we call modernity. Told in retrospect, readers witness a metaphysical journey wherein the people of earth cease to be separate from each other, from other species, or even from the minerals of the environment. The opening section of the book containing these lines asserts the problem that Black feminist metaphysics sought (is seeking) to solve: "this thing about one body. it was the black feminist metaphysicians/who first said it wouldn't be enough. never had been enough. was/not the actual scale of breathing" (6). Together with the lines about the university, this early page dramatizes the interplay of epistemology, metaphysics, imagination, and power. As a disciplinary institution, "the university" employs the mode of "selective genocide" as a pedagogy of individuation, asserting the primacy of "the unitary body" as the scale at which life itself—that is to say, breathing—happens. But as the atmosphere changes and the planet warms and the oceans rise, breathing becomes a real question. Because the threat to breathing is itself planetary in scale, it must be met at a scale beyond the individual. Precisely because they have been relegated to the basements (or to the underfunded interdisciplinary institutes without long-term scholarly positions) of universities, which is precisely because their full inclusion in a colonial institution such as a university would undo its coherence, Black feminist metaphysicians could see the problem of scale at hand and turn their attention to breathing at the scale of life. Which is to say, they could employ a poethics of breathing that can chart the chances for life after the end of the world.

Da Silva resonates again, this time riffing on Glissant: "Born into the world, Edouard Glissant states, the Subjectum is immediately caught in constitutive relationships, which point to an "absolute elsewhere", another place which is not his—of Man's or of its late twentieth-century ethical rendering, the Human's" ("Black" 89). That is, the very emergence of the singular subject is what undermines its claim to individuation. Poethics breathes here in this emergence. If ethics is a way of understanding relationships of responsibility or obligation to and with others with whom an individual relates or is connected, then poethics provides a way of understanding what responsibility or obligation might mean amongst undifferentiated existence. Poethics requires a leap beyond current conceptions of the Human subject. It requires, as Gumbs's Black feminist metaphysicians tell us, knowledge that is not captured and disciplined by the university. As she puts it in "Being Ocean",

> we are still dealing with this destructive defensive universalized European definition of the human right now. But what if it is time for another leap? Right now, as ocean levels rise around the planet, those of us who are clinging to, resisting, or opposing the dominant definition of the human are under pressure.
>
> *(339)*

That leap is what *M Archive* sketches: a leap toward what Keeling calls, in a riff with James Sneed, "preindividuated being" (156). That is, I believe that *M Archive* thinks towards a way of philosophically conceptualizing and materially living a form of existence that refuses individuation, a way of being in the world that cannot be divvied up into instances of individual subjectivity.

Like Keeling and Wynter, Alexander recognizes that the individual subject is a fiction that required discursive and material violence to craft. "It took five hundred years, at least in this hemisphere, to solidify the division of things that belong together", Alexander writes, "But it need not take us another five hundred years to move ourselves out of this existential impasse" (283). In other words, what we're talking about here is not a move beyond the human to something that comes after. Before and after do not quite work that linearly, anyway. Rather,

there is being *prior to* individuation. Therefore, Gumbs is not leaping forward and leaving the rest of us behind. That would not be a poethical act of the imagination. Rather, she melds together the non-sense of spatial differentiation (the boundaries of my body mark where I as individual subject end) and temporal differentiation (there was a moment called the past and there will be a moment called the future, and they are different). On what might be my favorite page of *M Archive*, Gumbs writes:

> this is what it takes to cool the planet. hold the world together. pro-tect the mysteries.
> *(despite the surface violence. and the pollution you try to bury in your heart)*

> this is what it takes. the strength of no separation. the bravery of flow. the audacity of never saying this is me, this is not you. this is mine, this is not yours. this is now, this was never not before.

> if you listen, each drop is saying always, which is homonym with right now right now. listen to the ocean let go and become one. let go and remain depth. Let go and just be everywhere. Salt particles aligned with the stars in the sky.

> *(107)*

That middle stanza *is* devastating in all that it demands be undone, and inspiring in all the strength of spirit it conjures to posit a map for "hold[ing] the world together" by refusing all that the university has taught concerning the unitary body. For Gumbs and her Black feminist metaphysicians, it is audacious and necessary to refuse the divvying up not only of human beings (via race, gender, sexuality, or otherwise), but of all matter and the relation of life to matter. As da Silva writes, "without *separability*, difference among human groups and nonhuman entities has very limited explanatory purchase and ethical significance" ("Difference" 64–65, emphasis in original). We must, *M Archive* tells us, refuse the distinction between Self and Other. This undoes all notions of ethical or economic debt, since there is no Other who is not the Self to whom one "owes" anything. We must, *M Archive* tells us, refuse the distinction between what is mine and what is yours; that is, we must refuse the very notion of private property. With this notion, all transaction-based models of justice disappear, as any injury to one is an injury to all, and any theft of one is a theft from all by all. And we must, *M Archive* tells us, refuse the distinction between present and the past or future. After all, "always always … is homonym with right now right now". To take this seriously is to understand that it is impossible to plead out of complicity with one's ancestors, and it is impossible *not* to act on behalf of untold generations to come, right now. This metaphysical and (po)ethical leap is not merely beyond the horizon—it refuses the very notion of horizon. The future is not what we glimpse and reach toward; it is now. And we have a poethical obligation to make it breathable.

The leap in *M Archive* is not only from the Human as Western Man to preindividuated being after Man and his World end, but also from notions of what a Black feminist metaphysician might look like. Here again, Gumbs breathes poetry into and through Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing*, where the latter writes, within a longer, gorgeous meditation on Cherrie Moraga and June Jordan's thinking on refugees and "a world on fire":

> In order to wrestle with these questions we would need to adopt, as daily practice, ways of being and of relating, modes of analyzing, and strategies of organizing in which we constantly mobilize identification and solidarity, across all borders, as key elements in the

repertoire of risks we need to take to see ourselves as part of one another, even in the context of difference. We would need to disappear the idiocy of "us" and "them" and its cultural relativist underpinnings, the belief that "it could never be us", so that our very consciousness would be shaped by multiple histories and events, multiple geographies, multiple identifications. …

　　And yet we must remember the character of fire, its paradoxical dimension: it provides sustenance and warmth, but it can destroy, it can kill. … The difference between the welder and those of us who fear fire is the consciousness and attentiveness she brings to the process of entering fire, and it is this consciousness that cultivates the intelligence to discern, embrace, and live that important, yet malleable, relationship between destruction and sustenance. Fire can kill, but without it we *will* die.

*(Alexander 264–266)*

Here Alexander tells us that taking seriously the call from Moraga and Jordan to imagine ourselves as the refugees of a world on fire, not as allies but in deep, perpetual solidarity, would mean exposing ourselves to a radical undoing of our notions of selfhood, subjecthood, ownership, and individuality. This action would mean disabusing anyone who believes it of the notion that they were *not* Black women and thus somehow outside of the project of Black feminist poethics. Gumbs writes in her opening pages of *M Archive*,

some of the people on the planet believed they themselves were actually other than black women. which was a false and impossible belief about origin. they were all … more parts black woman than anything else[.] it was like saying they were no parts water.

*(6–7)*

*The audacity of never saying this is me, this is not you* is audacious, indeed. It demands what Jennifer Nash calls a praxis of "letting go", which is "a vision of black feminist theory that is not invested in making property of knowledge" (3). Such a letting go is indeed indicative of "the strength of no separation". And, in Keeling's words, "Such a politics would demand a society which is bound together through a shared stewardship of all matter" (155). In my reading, such a politics would demand not merely allyship or even solidarity but a fundamental commitment to the principle that liberation is a collective shared interest that necessitates rejecting notions of Self and Other that undergird most politics of allyship or solidarity.

　　I find it important to underline the difficulty of this project, of this politics, of the task of taking breathing up to the planetary scale, which is to say, of doing Black feminist metaphysics. Because what Gumbs, Nash, and Keeling are *not* doing is simply opening up a free-for-all field of play where anyone can claim anything for themselves because we're all just the same anyway. Remember, the notion of property must be dissolved, and as Alexander reminds us, it took 500 years to consolidate the principle of individuation which is the condition of possibility for the very concept of private property. So, this is not a license for cultural appropriation and intellectual theft of Black women's work, lives, and experiences. It is not an invitation for blackface. It is a demand for a strength that not one person can alone possess. This is because the *strength* of no separation is not prior to the refusal of boundaries, but the very constitutive possibility for that refusal. That is, it is not a sequential task, where an individual summons herculean strength to "never [say] this is me, this is not you". Rather, the strength comes precisely from and in and with that very refusal as it is practiced collectively. In "Being Ocean", Gumbs poses the question: "is there such a thing as one person?" (340). She goes on:

Biologist, philosopher, and my dear friend Kriti Sharma offers some key challenges to biology and subjectivity in her book *Interdependence*. "What does life depend on?" Sharma asks. Can we imagine that we—and by we she means all life—are not individual units with the potential to collaborate? Can we imagine that we are not merely interconnected while our inherent difference stays intact? What if instead we co-constitute everything?

*("Ocean" 341)*

In *M Archive*, the answer to that initial question of whether there is such a thing as an individual person may very well be *no*. Or at the very least, *not if we are to breathe after the end of the world*.

While the task of Black feminist metaphysics that the text takes up—that is to say, breathing—often entails significant difficulty around unthinking the most fundamental philosophical concepts underpinning how we think about existence and survival and what it means to have something like a society—which is to say, breathing—in order to poeticize an alternative futurism than the one posited by white supremacist, capitalist settler colonialism, *M Archive* shows glimpses of some concrete plans. Gumbs writes,

each of us had to look it in the eye. the playstation, the hydroge-nated soybean oil, before it was added to the pile of never again. everything that required the small fingers of children for its manu-facture. everything plastic releasing toxins all its half-life. The blood-letting of our consumption was total. and/or one morning she looked in the mirror and saw all she had to give, was all she had to give up, that flesh she thought was hers.

*(50)*

This poem starts at the stuff of property and arrives at the stuff of flesh, tracing a line drawn by the transatlantic slave trade which bound human flesh to the status of property in its creation of the Human Body, a history that Gumbs thinks with in relation to Hortense Spillers in her book of poetry that precedes *M Archive*—*Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*.[3] Here in the concise space of this poem, that line is a cut, a wound, and a thread that leads back through the slave trade to individuation itself, for without that foundational idea, that it is possible to say, "this is me, this is not you", there could not be separation by race, there could not be racial chattel slavery, there could not be colonial conquest to assimilate land through attempting to genocide Indigenous peoples. What this looks like in practice, this poem tells us, is embodying Nash's (po)ethic of letting go.

The first stanza of the poem recalls from the future how painful and necessary it was (will be) for humans to divest from the ideology and practice of consumption. *Never again*, the poem tells us, can we stake our (illusory) comfort on the enjoyment—in both the lay and legal sense—of commodities and resources made possible by exploitation and extraction. In that stanza, "the small fingers of children" remind us of the context of global capital and its dependence upon the violent extraction of labor, while the phrase "plastic releasing toxins" signals how forms of labor extraction are indelibly tied to resource extraction and the warming of the planet. If breathing is to continue in the future, then these forms of consumption must be abandoned. *And/or*, the poem concludes, an individual person must realize that they must give up everything that they are, seeming to cease existing as they know themselves. It is not just a recognizably powerful image to end the poem with a scene of a person looking at herself in a mirror and realizing that she does not even own her own flesh. The scene dramatizes the violent cut, the process of being cut off from one's self, that attends the actual process of de-individuation.

There *is* loss, and there *is* pain in this process. *M Archive* calls for no less than the complete undoing of *you*, reader, specifically. But it is doing so, I believe, with love, at least in the sense explained by Nash:

> To act in love, *with* love, is to recognize this mutual vulnerability as something that must be not eschewed but rather embraced … Put differently, a commitment to mutual vulnerability constitutes a commitment to be intimately bound to the other (or to others), to refuse boundaries between self and other.
>
> *(116, emphasis in original)*

And what else could it be, but love, since Gumbs attempts to chart an alternative future in which we really are all in this together, in which we can breathe, together, on a planet that has been made more and more unbreathable for more and more of us over the past two centuries.

Love doesn't always feel good, though. Sometimes it feels like looking in the mirror and seeing yourself come undone in the face of all that you are co-constitutive with. Here, again, Nash tries to explain,

> to be undone is not synonymous with to be wounded, though it can take that form. The realization of our capacity to be "undone", of the way others can "undo" us, and the decision to embrace rather than retreat from the possibility of our potential undoing, is the logic of black feminist love-politics.
>
> *(117)*

In this explanation of the radical worldmaking potential of the capacity to be undone, we can see that the moment of individual undoing, which is a loss, is at the very same time a moment of collective becoming, a simultaneity that transcends any mathematics of gains and losses predicated on the notion that there is anyone to do the gaining or losing or anything to be gained or lost. What is after the end of the world? The planet, perhaps, and then there is us existing in a state of being-with-the-planet.

Throughout *M Archive*, Gumbs sketches scenes of human beings developing physical mutations to breathe underwater, live underground for years at a time, and communicate telepathically, to name only a few of the most recognizable science fiction images in the text. These examples and the book as a whole both embrace and escape metaphor; however, both resist and insist upon being taken literally. To live after the end of the world, when the oceans rise and the air becomes too hot and too toxic to breathe, human beings in that future must become something unrecognizable to the humans of our present as constituted by all that we think we know by way of the universities' pedagogy of "selective genocide". Which is to say, since "always always" is a homonym with "right now right now", we have to learn to breathe, now.

## Practicing Alternative Futurism, Now

I wrote this chapter during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022 (at least), specifically from the geographical location of what is today called the United States. Writing about a poethics of breath and the imperative of non-individuation while a disease of the respiratory system kills millions of people because of resistance to regulatory measures grounded in rhetorical appeals to individual freedom feels deeply unnerving and painful. As I drafted this chapter, I have reread a dozen times with a rage and sadness grounded in love these words in *Pedagogies of Crossing*: "How many more must die before we internalize the existential message of our

# 53

# AFRICANFUTURISM AS DECOLONIAL DREAMWORK AND DEVELOPMENTAL REBELLION

*Jenna N. Hanchey*

### The Afronauts and Alternative Developmental Trajectories

In 1964, Edward Mukuka Nkoloso trained astronauts for the Zambian space program. Nkoloso described his organization in newly independent Zambia as the National Academy of Science, Space Research and Astronomical Research, providing his own title as the Director of Science, Space Research, and Philosophy. Calling his trainees Afronauts, Nkoloso revealed that Zambia planned to beat the United States and the Soviet Union in the race to the moon. The Afronauts trained rigorously, rolling down hills in oil drums and swinging around trees to simulate the experience of low gravity. Many Western journalists regarded Nkoloso and his Afronauts with derision and disbelief, and even today, clips from the Zambian space program can be found on YouTube under categorizations such as "Well that Sucks" ("The Time When Zambia") and "Not Exactly Normal". In one such interview, the camera cuts from the teenage Afronauts doing calisthenics to Nkoloso calling out commands, before landing on the white British journalist standing with a sardonic lean, who concludes, "To most Zambians, these people are just a bunch of crackpots. And from what I've seen today, I'm inclined to agree" ("Zambia's Forgotten Space Program"). Such ridicule says more about how Western systems understand Africans than it does about the Africans themselves.

As Zambian writer Namwali Serpell elucidates, dismissing Nkoloso as simply ridiculous required overlooking many aspects of his Space Program ("The Zambian 'Afronaut'"). Over his military fatigues, Nkoloso donned dramatic capes of silk and velour. The Afronauts sometimes wore green silk jackets and yellow pants—not for space, they explained, but for their band, "Dynamite Rock Music Group". And Matha Mwamba, the Afronaut scheduled for flight to Mars, was to take with her two (out of 12) trained cats—and a Christian missionary. For, as Nkoloso wrote in an op-ed, "We have been studying the planet through telescopes at our headquarters and are now certain Mars is populated by primitive natives". But, he reassures the reader, "I have warned the missionary that he must not force Christianity on the people in Mars if they do not want it" (Nkoloso).

As Nkoloso's obvious parody of colonization makes clear, the Afronauts were not a paltry imitation of the Western space race, but rather a mocking satire of it (Serpell, "The Zambian 'Afronaut'"). Here, I am particularly interested in how the Afronauts' mimicry undermines the assumption that the Western journey in relation to space and time exemplifies the only path of

development, one based on exploration and conquest. Nkoloso and the Afronauts *were* continually misread as desiring—and failing—to imitate the West. In part, I believe this misunderstanding stems from the inability for white Westerners to imagine futures designed by anyone but themselves. That is, interpretations of the Afronauts have fallen into the Western-centric trap of assuming development can take only one course, has only one possible future—that set by the West.

On the contrary, the Afronauts demonstrate that Africans have long imagined development in ways that do not fit Western normative trajectories. For one, their entry into the space race brings into sharp relief the contradictory logics required to justify the large financial burden to place, as Gil Scott-Heron put it, "Whitey on the Moon" for the supposed global and universal goal of upholding "freedom" (Kennedy). Nkoloso continually returned to monetary inequity, requesting millions and billions of dollars from Israel, the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Arab Republic, and UNESCO, as Serpell relates ("The Zambian 'Afronaut'"). None of these correspondences were met with approval, let alone any indication that the pointed jab leveled at funding the further expansion of white, Western conquest was recognized or understood. The Afronauts created space for alternative epistemologies of development beyond coloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom* 9), but only for those able to dream the possibility.

In this sense, the Afronauts demonstrate two key concepts that I argue throughout this chapter are found within Africanfuturist imagination and creation: decolonial dreamwork and developmental rebellion. I define decolonial dreamwork as the labor of imagining beyond the limits the West has erected around possibility, a labor that unlocks liberatory futures by refusing to capitulate to the suppression of African dreams, instead leaning into the transformative potential of desire. Developmental rebellion then emerges from this imaginative labor as an alternative form of development that resists, rather than acquiesces to, Western modernity and coloniality.[1] Together, decolonial dreamwork and developmental rebellion undermine the ways that coloniality acts to structure African futures and realms of possibility.

Coloniality exists as a global system of Western epistemological and ontological oppression that arose coincidentally with modernity and continues to ideologically undergird global political contexts. African scholars in particular are concerned with the epistemological function of coloniality, and how it obscures African knowledges and undermines subject formation.[2] Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni explains that to delink from coloniality is to divest from the Western logics that make African epistemologies unintelligible, centering instead on epistemic justice: the "liberation of reason itself" (*Epistemic* 3). Delinking from colonial epistemologies of development is required to liberate African-centered futurities, as the West has claimed a "monopoly of the future" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic* 243) that erases them (Eshun 292). Ndlovu-Gatsheni explains the need for an African response:

> Capturing the future for Africans and all other people who experienced colonialism and who are today living under global coloniality entails fighting to create another world and to set afoot a new humanism. It is a search for meaning after centuries of been pushed to meaninglessness. A lot of daring to invent the future is needed.
>
> *(*Epistemic *245)*

The Afronauts demonstrate the decolonial dreamwork required in daring to invent the future, and how it allows for a form of development that functions as rebellion against colonial structures.

For one, the Afronauts depict the labor of imagining futures beyond and against white Western imaginaries. By daring to dream beyond what was normatively considered possible,

that Zambia could have a space program, the Afronauts not only offered a trenchant critique of white Western capitalistic developmental logics, but also put forth a claim that space and the vast imaginaries that come with it are not only the terrain of white, Western, "developed" subjects. They declared that space was also for Africans. In addition, the Afronauts form part of an alternative trajectory of development, one that recognizes what Julius Nyerere (485) argues: that for Africans and other impoverished peoples of the world, "development of peoples means rebellion". It is a mistake, Nyerere says, to equate development with "new factories, increased output, or greater national income statistics" (485). Development as rebellion is not simply economic, but based on social and political organization premised in "equality and human dignity of all those involved" (Nyerere 488). This liberatory vision of development is antithetical to the Western developmental logics of individualism and linear progress from primitiveness to enlightenment through competition. It requires rethinking futures of development delinked from coloniality.

In this chapter, I examine how Africanfuturism performs this same decolonial dreamwork, daring to invent futures for Africans by Africans in ways that reconceptualize development as rebellion. Naijamerican author Nnedi Okorafor coined the term Africanfuturism to refer to creative work that "leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa … Its default is non-western; its default/center is African" ("Africanfuturism Defined").[3] Those in power often narrate future possibilities in ways that constrain imagination and agency, attempting to defuse developmental rebellion before it occurs. In particular, white, Western, corporate technofuturists describe Africa as the "zone of the absolute dystopia", in order to make resistance to Western developmental logics seem futile (Eshun 292). Africanfuturism rebels against Western-centric futures that erase Africa—as well as the undermining of African agency in the present that enables such futures—by imagining beyond and against neoliberal conceptualizations of global development. Drawing from Africanfuturist fiction and film, this chapter examines how Africanfuturism offers an opportunity to delink from the ontologies and epistemologies of Western coloniality encapsulated within logics of development, and imagines radical futures by centering African agency and liberation.

## Centering Africanfuturism in Africa

Although Afrofuturism has been an object of scholarly investigation for decades,[4] critics have now started to investigate how the generalizing use of "Afrofuturism" has often erased African work through its primarily diasporic concerns. As Somali-American author Sofia Samatar argues, "the lack of attention to the diverse streams of Afrofuturism threatens not only to obscure possibilities for rich discussions, but to imply a development narrative that assumes there were no African futurists before 2000" ("Toward" 176). Samatar believes that Africanfuturist work should be included within a redefined Afrofuturism, but other African authors disagree. For instance, Samatar cites Nigerian British writer Tade Thompson as claiming "Afrofuturism is specifically American … and 'geopolitically inappropriate' as a descriptor of speculative fiction from the African continent" (175). At CoNZealand, Nigerian author Oghenechovwe Ekpeki described Afrofuturism as "mostly pertain[ing] to the broader diaspora to the *exclusion of* stories from within the African continent itself", and Suyi Davies Okungbowa, also a Nigerian writer, agreed that African-centered stories diverged from Afrofuturist concerns (Bacon, emphasis in original). Many African authors agree that African science fiction requires its own moniker.

Yet, as Nigerian writer Chinelo Onwualu explicated in "FIYAHCON State of: Black SFF" at the inaugural FIYAHCON for BIPOC+ speculative fiction, there is no singular authentic

African speculative fiction, but rather works that demonstrate differential degrees of relatability to African life. There *is* no clear line demarking what counts as Africanfuturism and what does not. However, Onwualu recognizes that some uses of African contexts do not reflect African interests. For instance, even though Nnedi Okorafor's representation of Lagos in *Lagoon* (2014) as a frequent visitor to the city feels less intimate than that of resident Suyi Davies Okungbowa in *David Mogo, Godhunter* (2019), both of their works occupy a distinctive space in relation to African audiences than that of others such as Nigerian American novelist Tomi Adeyemi, whose novel *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) takes city names from Nigeria and places them in a fantasy land where they hold no correspondence to the geography of Nigeria itself. Reading Adeyemi's work proves disorienting for those who live in the cities she has thrown into a mixed-up landscape, implying that the primary audience for this Nigerian-inspired work is not in fact Nigerians ("FIYAHCON"). Africanfuturism may have degrees of correspondence to African lived experience, but it must start from Africa rather than from the West.

Okorafor defined the term "Africanfuturism" on her blog in October 2019 out of frustration that African continental concerns and material realities were being obscured through labeling African work "Afrofuturist". Africanfuturism requires its own concept, as it has different stakes from the Western-centered Afrofuturism. South African author Mohale Mashigo argues that Afrofuturism often uses the African continent "as a costume or a stage to play out … ideas" rather than dealing with African materialities and situated cosmologies (xi). Afrofuturist work conjures a fantasy of Africa—sometimes literally, as in the case of Adeyemi—that enables diasporic imaginaries, but can stunt the ability of African authors to situate their stories in continental perspectives. Recently, the importance of Africanfuturism has even entered the popular sphere, as Africans simultaneously recognize the (diasporic) racial value of, and yet look askance at, popular Afrofuturist renderings of Africa in films such as *Black Panther* (2018) and Beyoncé's *Black Is King* (2020).[5]

By dis/connecting Africanfuturism and development, I hope to flesh out the material importance of futuristic renderings of the continent. How Africa is imagined to relate to development in the future *is* intimately connected to African lives in the present. As Thompson explains in an interview by Samatar, "it is … not the case that SFF is exclusively about the future. It is about the present, and it is about reclaiming narratives of the past" ("Interview"). Thompson particularly concerns himself with those "foreign actors who believe sci-fi should be a tool for driving development in African nations" (Samatar, "Interview"). Rather, as Mashigo exhorts, Africans need writing that "predicts … Africa's future 'post-colonialism'" (xi). Africanfuturism posits differential trajectories of futures against coloniality by imagining decolonial forms of development and demonstrating the dystopian effects if Western developmental trajectories continue to dominate imaginations.

## Africanfuturism Against and Beyond Developmental Coloniality

I trace four ways that Africanfuturism activates decolonial developmental trajectories. First, Africanfuturism demonstrates how Western corporate capitalist developmental trajectories rely on a suppression of radical desire. Second, Africanfuturism reminds the reader that alternative futures are never lost—even in the environmental ruin left by Western development, the activation of desire can recreate ecological contexts. Third, Africanfuturism posits how alien technology—often the handmaiden of colonial developmental conquest in science-fiction tales—can be used in anti-colonial ways, enabling liberatory futures. Finally, Africanfuturism limns alternative possibilities for life itself that function outside of Western competitive logics that underlie capitalistic understandings of development.

### *Radical Desire Against Neoliberal Capitalism*

Africanfuturist authors use radical imaginings of desire to respond to colonial and neocolonial contexts of dream and feeling suppression. In order for Western corporate capitalism and neo-liberal governmentality to maintain control over futures of technology, development, and resources,[6] African dreams must be hindered from flowering. Tade Thompson's *The Wormwood Trilogy—Rosewater* (2016), *The Rosewater Insurrection* (2019), and *The Rosewater Redemption* (2019)—demonstrate how Western capitalist trajectories of growth and control are based in suppression of feelings, even to the point of finding mass suicide preferable to change. Likewise, Zimbabwean author Tendai Huchu's "The Sale" (2012) points readers to the potential for desire to challenge capitalist trajectories of growth and control. Radical desire can derail colonial plans for occupation and control.

The aliens in Thompson's trilogy, called Homians, do not invade in the typical manner—they are not physically boarding starships bound for Earth. Rather, the invasion is a slow kind. The Homians sent biological probes, called footholders, to a massive number of planets, hoping to find one that was suitable for them. Multiple footholders landed on Earth and slowly and subtly began changing the human physiology through fungus-like xenoforms, until human DNA becomes entirely alien. At that point, the Homians can begin to download their consciousnesses into human bodies, slowly replacing all human life on Earth. The Homians exist only as consciousnesses, data uploaded into a quantum server. Lifetimes ago they destroyed their own planet, and committed a sort of mass suicide, uploading their consciousnesses and destroying their bodies until they could find a new planet to take over.

Through the Homians, Thompson analogizes the future of humanity if we continue to follow trajectories of environmental degradation and collapse. Thompson explains:

> The Homians themselves actually represent the human race. They represent the end of what we've done to ourselves, and what we're doing to ourselves now. They are a reflection of *us*. All right? They are what we will become if we become technologically advanced and we can't keep our planet alive and we can't get our philosophy right.
>
> *(Hopeton Hay Podcasts)*

Thompson notes that the aliens represent humanity—if it continues along the worst of environmental trajectories set by the West. Importantly, he demonstrates the suppression of feeling and desire that is required to maintain such a destructive trajectory. The Homians have so completely exterminated the desire for alternative ecological paths that they gave up even on their own bodies and selves, ultimately resulting in mass suicide. Thompson deftly connects the suppression of radical desire through the acceptance of normativity to slow planetary death, to self-death, and to the colonial conquest of others.

Tendai Huchu takes desire a step further in his short story, "The Sale" (2012), demonstrating how radical desire can overwhelm mechanisms of suppression, and open alternative pathways. In "The Sale", all Zimbabwean "natives" are forced to take a cocktail of drugs to maintain acceptable levels of various hormones and other bodily readings. These levels are maintained by "public health drones" controlled by CorpGov, which has, the Zimbabweans are told, "an *unwavering* commitment to native health" (35, emphasis in original). CorpGov is run by a state named Chimerica; Huchu clearly asks us to think about a future where corporate control over governments extends so far that China and the United States have merged to form one, large corporation-state. Zimbabwe has "*voluntarily*" ceded its national governance to CorpGov (34, emphasis in original)—but only because it was left with no alternative, as the nation was unable

to pay off its debt from aid and neoliberal restructuring loans. Under the oppressive system masquerading as benefiting human health, the drugs—which are administered forcibly by drones in the form of publicly administered enemas if one fails to take the pills at home—keep Zimbabweans in a numbed state of acceptance.[7] However, the rage that the main character feels at the sale of Great Zimbabwe, the ruins of the capital of the ancient Kingdom of Zimbabwe, to Chimerica, where it will be placed in a theme park outside of Beijing, overwhelms the sedatives and hormone suppressants he has been fed. He cannot allow the sale to happen, and he throws himself between the machinery and the ruins.

These works examine both how the suppression of radical desire is required to countenance colonial futures, and how the activation of desire can challenge capitalism's developmental goals. Desire overwhelms and upends colonial futures.

### *Environmental Connection Against Dystopia*

The activation of desire also reimagines environmental futures, responding to contexts of environmental degradation stemming from coloniality. Elsewhere, I explore in detail how this is demonstrated in Okorafor's novel *Lagoon*.[8] *Lagoon* is a first-contact story. Aliens land in Lagos, Nigeria. However, instead of coming to take what they desire, they come to inquire about ours. Throughout the novel, the aliens only ask: "What is it you want?" They activate desire, both human and nonhuman, bringing decolonial futures into being. Notably, the book begins with a swordfish who desires the strength and size of a monster that she might destroy oil pipelines. The aliens clean the air and water, activating futures based in the connections between living things and the environment around them. Here, I describe how *Pumzi* (2009) and *Who Fears Death* (2011) portray how dreams of other possible futures have the possibility to remake our environments—even when the future seems already lost.

In Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi*, we enter a world 35 years after World War III, "The Water War", in a fully contained underground community in East Africa called Maitu. Connected to the radical possibility of desire, everyone in Maitu is made to take dream suppressants. But the museum worker Asha's dreams are too strong; they come through the suppressants anyway. The audience sees her dreaming of a beautiful tree in the middle of the endless desert, stretching for miles around the compound. However, she has always been told that there is no water, and thus no life, outside the compound. Inside the compound, all water is conserved: every drop of sweat wrung out of clothing to clean and reuse, all urine collected and purified for drinking. The energy of the compound comes from residents taking turns on treadmills, stationary bikes, and rowing machines. When Asha is mysteriously gifted a soil sample that holds an impossible level of water, she takes the seed of the mother tree kept in the museum and escapes to the outside, daring to dream that the tree she saw in her dreams is real.

In *Pumzi*, we find that dreams can change the physicality of the world. Asha takes the seed in the soil, and, collapsing finally in the desert, uses the water from her own dying body to make the tree grow. She becomes the tree in her dreams. Her dreams created a tree out of an impossibly dry desert. *Pumzi* paints a vivid portrait of the way dreams can change material conditions.

Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* extends this power of dreams by implying they can change not only materiality, but also time. Similar to Asha, the main character of Okorafor's novel, Onyesonwu, lives in and around a vast desert. However, she has visions of a bountiful, dense jungle beyond the boundaries of her known world. Onyesonwu is a powerful sorceress, able to travel in the spirit realm, known as the wilderness. On one such journey she follows a *Koponyungo*, a magical fire lizard of the desert, across the face of the world, flying farther than she knew existed. She exclaims when they arrive: "Greeeeen! As I've never seen it. As I'd never imagined

it … *Is this even possible?* I wondered. *Does this place really exist?*" The *Koponyungo* confirms that it does, but Onyesonwu realizes it is "too far to ever get to". But after a second, she adds, "Maybe someday it would not be" (310–311, emphasis in original).

*Who Fears Death* concludes in two ways. In the first, Onyesonwu dies the traumatic death that she knew was coming—facing it was the test she had to pass to be trained as a sorceress. Yet, as the novel reminds us, "something must be written before it can be *rewritten*" (415, emphasis in original). The book then begins again as "Chapter 1" in its final pages (416). Onyesonwu rewrote the story of the world, and in doing so, rewrote time itself. She refuses ending, and instead begins again in the green place of her dreams.

Okorafor reminds the reader that linearity of time and developmental trajectories is a Western construct, and one that does not serve African interests. As Eshun and Keeling describe, Western futurists attempt to make capitalistic visions of development seem inevitable. Kahiu and Okorafor instead demonstrate the power of dreaming beyond these limitations, and how imagining impossible worlds can rewrite African stories in ways that revive environmental flourishing and possibilities for life.

### Alien Technology Against Colonialism

Africanfuturist creators also reimagine relations to alien technologies in ways that deny colonial epistemologies. In *Rosewater Redemption* and *Lagoon*, respectively, Thompson and Okorafor present futures where aliens have landed in Nigeria, and alien technology is key to decolonial futures—but do so in very different ways.

On the one hand, in Thompson's *Wormwood Trilogy*, the aliens have landed for that age-old colonial reason: to upend indigenous life, exploit indigenous bodies, and take over the planet. However, Thompson's conceptualization of alien colonization is novel in that the aliens are not physically present on Earth. Rather, their footholders have been sent out to a number of different planets to explore where they might be able to colonize. The aliens themselves are without bodies until the colonial process is complete. Settlement thus requires subtly replacing human DNA with alien DNA through an airborne fungus-like substance called xenoforms until human bodies are 100% alien. Then, the Homians can download into humanity's very bodies.

Thompson ingeniously uses aliens to analogize the process of neocolonialism ("I Don't Like Linearity").[9] In truth, Thompson tackles the problem of decolonization from a perspective that recognizes the inextricable nature of coloniality from contemporary life—it cannot simply be denied or removed—and yet does so in a way that spurs vehement rebellion, rather than complacent acceptance. In *The Rosewater Redemption*, alien technology has already irreparably replaced human DNA with that of aliens, leaving the dilemma of, as one character puts it, "how to save the world from aliens, yet keep their infrastructure". She then comments: "after the British left, we kept the trains" (90). Ultimately, the Nigerian heroes of the books use the alien technology against them, destroying the moon-base servers that hold the alien consciousnesses through the aliens' own quantum system. Thompson analogizes the process of what Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls epistemic freedom, delinking the technologies used by colonists from their epistemological bearings, instead operating them in direct contradiction to the ways they were intended to be used. The colonial technology that was intended to allow for the conquest of Earth instead enables its liberation.

*Lagoon* takes an entirely different approach to aliens landing in Nigeria, but it is no less decolonial. Rather than positing humans who must fight against alien colonization, Okorafor asks the audience to imagine an alien landing that is premised the radical potential of desire. What if aliens came not to colonize, but to create anti-colonial possibilities of relational

coexistence? Okorafor posits aliens as bringing gifts of fantastical self-actualization in exchange for a home. As I have elsewhere described,[10] the aliens activate queer desire in a way that reimagines being and life beyond what the humans had previously considered possible.

Okorafor demonstrates how alien technology becomes the means of developing anti-colonial worlds. Here, the aliens provide tools for activating nonnormative and anti-colonial desires, providing Nigerians (and the nonhuman life within and around Nigeria) with the tools through which to actualize their nonnormative desires and create a world unconstrained by colonial structures, such as the reliance on oil or strongman politics. Together, these two texts posit ways that technologies often associated with colonialism can be used instead for liberation.

### *Alternative Ontologies Against a Foreclosure of Life*

Africanfuturist visions of life respond to coloniality's attempts to circumscribe futures of life, and what existence can be, by rethinking life beyond what global neoliberal capitalism portrays as all that is possible. Both the *Binti* and *Wormwood* trilogies, by Okorafor and Thompson respectively, present the reader with radical visions of life, radical in that these visions queer existence itself, reinscribing life as intimate relations with Otherness. Binti was dead. She should have been dead. Her existence in the normative sense was over. Oyin Da was dead. She should have been dead. Her existence in the normative sense was over. As Keeling argues, against the demands of capital, "queer nonetheless stubbornly works on and through bodies, establishing relations between them and thereby connecting them across space and time" (19). Africanfuturism queers how life itself can be thought in order to establish new relations, outside and in excess of the normative boundaries of developmental logics.

Binti's life ends. And yet. She is reborn through a sting of the alien Meduse that should have ended her existence. Instead, it reforms her life, both in body and consciousness, as now not only Himba but also part of the Meduse. Again, her life ends. And yet. She is reborn in and through connection with the living spaceship called the New Fish. Her existence again extends and changes, she is more and otherwise as her being extends through relations previously thought impossible. Binti's life is vitally and inextricably intertwined with the things previously considered "alien" and "Other" around her.

Oyin Da's life ends. And yet. She exists in and through the xenosphere created by the xenoforms: the alien particulate matter in the atmosphere around Rosewater. She can wander through memories and time, changing, if not the past itself, then people's relations to it, which can have just as profound an effect. She appears to travel through time and space, because she does not exist within it the same way as the traditionally living do. She builds a home with her wife in the ether; they have a daughter made from their spirits. Oyin Da is not alive, but she exists. Her existence is built in and through the xenoforms; her existence is enabled by the aliens.

Although these two series examine life most explicitly, Africanfuturist works consistently call into question the idea of human dominance and the developmental futures it entails. By rethinking existence as dependent upon Otherness, Africanfuturism denies colonial logics of individualism, conquest, and development as the outgrowth of competition, instead encouraging readers to envision worlds created in and through ecological and contextual relationships.

### Dreaming Developmental Rebellion

Eschewing the Western developmental logics of coloniality pries open doors to futures once considered impossible. But doing so first requires dreaming beyond the limits of possibility. The Afronauts were mocked for desiring beyond what the West thought possible—a place in the race

to the stars. Indeed, Serpell describes how Nkoloso was inspired to start training Afronauts by imagining the impossible. During his first ride in an airplane, "[w]hen the pilot refused to stop the plane so that he could get out and walk on the clouds, Nkoloso made up his mind to enter the space race" ("The Zambian 'Afronaut'"). Even though Nkoloso's desire to stop a plane mid-flight to walk amongst the clouds seems ludicrous, it resonates with other challenges to the West's delineation of possibility. Africans and the African diaspora have been "historically dislocated by Western ideas of progress" (Lavender 15), written out of its narrative. When Africans dream futures that Western development claims to be impossible, they create new realms of potentiality. Nkoloso and his Afronauts may not have journeyed to the moon or to Mars, but they highlighted the colonial logic that claimed their goals to be impossible, and demanded its reconsideration.

Africanfuturism provides a means for Africans to imagine their own futures, ones that are not beholden to the colonial logics of development. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni claims, "White races claimed complete *being* for themselves and pushed African people into a perpetual state of *becoming*—a state of incompleteness" (*Epistemic Freedom* 252, emphasis in original), which then "gave birth to the colonial idea of Africans as the condemned people of the earth, the anthropos of the planet and the wretched of the earth" (*Epistemic Freedom* 253). In sum:

> All this indicates that the problem of coloniality of being has a negative and disempowering bearing on the possibilities of African people creating their African futures. They cannot effectively create African futures if they have not regained their denied ontological density, which enables an escape route from imposed inferiority complexes.
>
> *(*Epistemic Freedom *253)*

African epistemologies are thus key to creating futurities that move beyond and against development in the Western sense and enabling their actualization in the present—movement that is necessary not only to liberation for Africans, but for all. The Afronauts may not have left Earth, but we have yet to fully comprehend the future potentialities that have been unlocked by their claim to be racing for the moon. Africanfuturism imagines and builds futures as yet unthinkable: futures that develop in and as rebellion.

## Notes

1 The idea of development as rebellion comes from Nyerere.
2 See Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire* 10 and Tamale for further explanations of coloniality, and Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom* and wa Thiong'o for how coloniality underwrites epistemic injustice.
3 Okorafor's preferred national identification, a collapsing of "Nigerian American".
4 See for instance Nelson; Womack; Anderson and Jones.
5 See Asante and Pindi 222; Akinro and Segun-Lean; Gathara; Irakoze; Zeleza.
6 For more on this, see Eshun; Keeling.
7 Similarly, Namwali Serpell builds on this automated, non-consensual vision of future public health with swarms of microdrone mosquitoes (*The Old Drift*).
8 See Hanchey.
9 This process of neocolonialism is similar to what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls colonization of the mind.
10 See Hanchey.

## Works Cited

Adeyemi, Tomi. *Children of Blood and Bone*. Henry Holt, 2018.
Akinro, Boluwatife, and Joshua Segun-Lean. "Beyoncé and the Heart of Darkness." *Africa is a Country*, 15 Sept. 2019, https://africasacountry.com/2019/09/beyonces-heart-of-darkness. Accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

Anderson, Reynaldo, and Charles E. Jones, editors. *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*. Lexington, 2016.

Asante, Godfried A., and Gloria Nziba Pindi. "(Re)imagining African Futures: Wakanda and the Politics of Transnational Blackness." *Review of Communication* vol. 20, no. 3, 2020, pp. 220–228.

Bacon, Eugen. "Afrofuturism: A WorldCon Recap, and Some Thoughts." *Vector*, 4 Aug. 2020, https://vector-bsfa.com/2020/08/04/afrofuturism-a-worldcon-recap-and-some-thoughts/. Accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

*Black Is King*. Directed by Beyoncé, Walt Disney Pictures, 2020.

*Black Panther*. Directed by Ryan Coogler, Marvel Studios, 2018.

Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." *The New Centennial*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 287–302.

"FIYAHCON State of: Black SFF." *FIYAHCON: For BIPOC+ in Speculative Fiction*. https://theconvention.fiyahlitmag.com/the-archives/. Accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

Gathara, Patrick. "'Black Panther' Offers a Regressive, Neocolonial Vision of Africa." *Washington Post*. 26 February 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/02/26/black-panther-offers-a-regressive-neocolonial-vision-of-africa/. Accessed 2 Jan. 2020.

Hanchey, Jenna N. "Desire and the Politics of Africanfuturism." *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2020, 119–124.

Hopeton Hay Podcasts. "Interview with Tade Thompson about His Afrofuturist Science Fiction Novels." *Podomatic*. 15 Dec. 2019, https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/kazibookreview/episodes/2019-12-15T04_34_42-08_00. Accessed 26 Oct. 2020.

Huchu, Tendai. "The Sale." *AfroSF*, edited by Ivor W. Hartmann, StoryTime, 2012, pp. 32–41.

"'I Don't Like Linearity—I Find it Boring.' Nick Wood Interviews Tade Thompson." *Short Story Day Africa*. 8 Feb. 2017, http://shortstorydayafrica.org/news/idont-like-linearity-i-find-it-boring-an-interview-with-tade-thompson. Accessed 26 Oct. 2020.

Irakoze, Judicaelle. "Why We Must Be Careful with Beyoncé's 'Black is King'." *Essence*, 1 Aug. 2020, https://www.essence.com/entertainment/only-essence/beyonces-black-is-king-criticism/. Accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

Keeling, Kara. *Queer Times, Black Futures*. NYU P, 2019.

Kennedy, John F. "John F. Kennedy Moon Speech—Rice Stadium." *NASA.gov*, https://er.jsc.nasa.gov/seh/ricetalk.htm. Accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

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

Mashigo, Mohale. "Afrofuturism: Ayashi's Amateki." *Intruders*, Picador Africa, 2018, pp. ix–xv.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity*. Berghahn, 2015.

———. *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*. Routledge, 2018.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. East African Educational Publishers, 1986.

Nelson, Alondra. "Introduction: Future Texts." *Social Text*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2002, 1–20.

Nkoloso, Edward Makuka. "We're Going to Mars!" *Vice.com*, https://viceland-assets-cdn.vice.com/viceblog/41033528Nkoloso-Zambia-space-program.JPG?crop=1xw%3A0.4208096590909091xh%3Bcenter%2Ccenter&resize=2000%3A*. Accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

Nyerere, Julius. "Poverty, Christianity and Revolution." *New Blackfriars*, vol. 52, no. 618, 1971, pp. 484–495.

Okorafor, Nnedi. *Who Fears Death*. Daw Books, 2010.

———. *Lagoon*. Saga Press, 2014.

———. *Binti*. Tor.com, 2015.

———. *Binti: Home*. Tor.com, 2017a.

———. *Binti: The Night Masquerade*. Tor.com, 2017b.

———. "Africanfuturism Defined." *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*, 19 Oct. 2019, https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html. Accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

Okungbowa, Suyi Davies. *David Mogo, Godhunter*. Abaddon Books, 2019.

*Pumzi*. Directed by Wanuri Kahiu, Inspired Minority Pictures, 2009.

Samatar, Sofia. "An Interview with Tade Thompson." *Interfictions*, 7 Oct. 2016, http://interfictions.com/an-interview-with-tade-thompson/. Accessed 21 Oct. 2020.

———. "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2018, pp. 175–191.

Scott-Heron, Gil. "Gil Scott-Heron—Whitey on the Moon." *YouTube*, uploaded by Ace Records Ltd, 19 August 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goh2x_G0ct4.

Serpell, Namwali. "The Zambian 'Afronaut' Who Wanted to Join the Space Race." *The New Yorker*, 11 Mar. 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-zambian-afronaut-who-wanted-to-join-the-space-race

———. *The Old Drift*. Hogarth, 2019.

Tamale, Sylvia. *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Daraja, 2020.

"The Time When Zambia Tried to Go To Mars." *YouTube*, uploaded by SideNote, 8 Nov. 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TI9ixb-a5M&feature=emb_title

Thompson, Tade. *Rosewater*. Orbit, 2016.

———. *The Rosewater Insurrection*. Orbit, 2019a.

———. *The Rosewater Redemption*. Orbit, 2019b.

Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Lawrence Hill, 2013.

"Zambia's Forgotten Space Program and the Backyard Space Race." *YouTube*, uploaded by Not Exactly Normal, 21 Oct. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3tJ5Nfxn9I&t=42s

Zeleza, Paul. "Black Panther and the Persistence of the Colonial Gaze." *LinkedIn*, 31 Mar. 31 2018, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/black-panther-persistence-colonial-gaze-paul-tiyambe-zeleza. Accessed 2 Jan. 2020.

# 54

# "BUT I'M RIGHT HERE"

## The Curious Case of Killmonger and the Failures of Utopian Desire in Marvel's *Black Panther*

*Jasmine A. Moore*

Speculative Black thought has long drawn on the dreamscape to mobilize notions of futurity in which far-off horizons offer more positive versions of life than past and present realities. From Marcus Garvey's prophetic proclamations of a crowned prince in Africa, to Martin Luther King Jr.'s famed "I Have a Dream" speech, to Langston Hughes's "Dream Variations" and "A Dream Deferred", the liminal space of not-yet-but-soon-come has been the cornerstone of social justice, Black personhood, and reclamations of social and political sovereignty. Through essay, poetry, novel, film, and visual arts, Black people have worked to continue dreams that resist the residual traumas of slavery, mass incarceration, economic disparity, disease, and death. Visions of a global African ontology have fueled these literary and intellectual sojourns in establishing a Pan-Africanist network in which people of the African diaspora recognize their collective experiences in order to band together to resist Western imperialism. From more conceptual modalities of storytelling that express new ways of being to costuming and design aesthetics, Black culture embraces the legacy of activism and revolution that relevantly speaks to today's issues from the forefront. Afrofuturism operates as such a medium to mine science-fictional tropes in order to construct critical commentary in which the Black dreamscape thrives.

The scope of this project explores the construction of the critical utopia in relation to visions of Afro-speculative being. Using Marvel's *Black Panther* (2018), directed by Ryan Coogler, I argue that the film's investment in creating the cinematic dreamscape of the idealized Wakanda, a fictional African nation that has resisted Western colonization by way of the alien metal Vibranium, places the viewer as an active participant in mystic ritual and tribal culture. From costuming to CGI and visual camera cuts, the movie speaks to Scott Richmond's notion of proprioception in which the viewers are transported by illusions into Wakandan terrain and thus enveloped in sensory perception, making Wakanda rich and fertile ground for fulfilling the desire of witnessing an Africa untouched by the ravages of the transatlantic slave trade and colonization. While we feel the sensation of flying in a Wakandan aircraft, the illusion of looking up and onto native Wakandans in tribal dress at the waterfall, the mystery and awe of the magenta-hued aurora lights of the ancestral plane, we are equally confronted by the Black body's political positioning in reality. Black audiences rejoice in the dream of such a place while feeling genuine pleasure in joining the world of Wakanda; the sensational experience of the fictive world creates another version of how history might have been, imagining lives lived outside of the wake of slavery. In addition, my research operates at the intersection of Black speculative thought and

Afro-pessimism to elucidate the complexities of *Black Panther* in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and white supremacy on the rise. It seeks to answer the importance of representation and the promotion of a shared African aesthetic while problematizing the film's ideological leanings about the meaning of progress in America. In order to participate in *Black Panther*, to watch the story unfold, viewers must engage with their critical bones or grow new ones to account for the movie's inherently critical messages.

The stunning visual effects invite viewers to participate in what Michelle Commander labels African flight. Commander states, "Africa emerges as a signifier that is perpetually in flux, reinforcing the impossibility of literal returns despite the perpetuity of yearning as well as the hybridity of Afro-Atlantic identities" (5). This Africa as signifier enables larger sociopolitical criticisms at work throughout the film. The problematic of a utopia created by white creators Stan Lee and Jack Kirby for Black people during the civil rights movement does not readily account for the crisis of narrative in relation to Black American experience. Coogler's reimaging of the character Killmonger, whose depiction is fundamentally different from his initial comic book configuration, intervenes on behalf of Black American dissent. At the outset of the movie, the dream seemingly belongs to the character Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan) for which Wakanda's simulated history unfolds, indicated in the first words of the movie "Baba. Tell me the story of home".

*Black Panther* therapeutically mitigates mass violence committed against the Black body by white hands by eliminating Ulysses Klaue (Andy Serkis) early in the film, yet reinscribes another form of violence in the role of an extrapolation of dual identity as outlined by W.E.B. DuBois in his theory of double consciousness:

> the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.
>
> *(3)*

In other words, Killmonger symbolizes the consistent reality of Black oppression in this country, while T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) represents the desire for a pristine Black consciousness and Black wholeness that can never be realized. This duality allows audiences to empathize with Killmonger's twisted Negritude, an autonomous Black identity that resists whiteness, while simultaneously rooting for T'Challa's need to end that very same Frankenstein-esque existence.

## T'Challa as the Figurehead for the Dream

Excited moviegoers experience the utopian wish for a space free of colonialism when the real world seemingly falls away in favor of the narrative that comes to fruition on screen. Just before the unchallenged prince T'Challa's flyer makes its way through the invisible barrier that shrouds Wakanda from the rest of the world, he wistfully whispers, "This never gets old", preparing audiences for the jaw-dropping reveal of Wakanda's capital city, Birnin Zana, also called "The Golden City". As the flyer makes its way through the Vibranium-fueled membrane, the camera pans across a bustling and thriving marvel from behind T'Challa's jet; Wakanda's industrious cityscape teems with modern skyscrapers and train systems with aesthetically African edifices. Going through the barrier also transforms our view of what seems to be a rural landscape to the

high-tech marvels of the city, challenging the idea of an underdeveloped Africa. Audiences, in collective shouts or sighs of approval, participate in the consumption of science fiction for what Adrienne Maree Brown deems are critical purposes: "Science fiction is simply a way to practice the future together. I suspect that is what many of you are up to, practicing futures together, practicing justice together, living into new stories" (19). These speculative visions intimate what could be possible, altering the negative stereotyped messages of the past. The flyer moves smoothly around these buildings as victorious orchestral brass and percussive music plays in the background to heighten the majestic sense of a long-overdue homecoming. The camera swiftly cuts to the flyer landing, panning upwards to show the intricate underbelly of the advanced technology amid the colossal structure of a skyscraper reaching up to the sky as T'Challa's sister Shuri (Letitia Wright), his mother Ramonda (Angela Bassett), and the royal warrior guard, the Dora Milaje, await T'Challa's landing. The introduction of this scene plays heavily on the senses; audiences are captivated by the textures of the cityscape and impressed by the wondrous production that fuses science fiction and existing technology together that at once make Wakanda both accessible yet tantalizingly out of reach in its alien projection of African futurity.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the world of Wakanda necessarily draws on stunning visuals of tribal heritage to authenticate a traditionalist legacy. During the waterfall scene, several tribes are represented, resisting the often-touristic fetish of the African tribal body. As Wakandan subjects, individual tribes are able to proudly boast their cultural fashions without the bent of documentary anthropological exploitation. Equally, because of the fictive nature of Wakanda, the simulated tribes mash together unique cultural imaging in a cooperative framework that has been the goal of Pan-Africanism since its inception. The camera moves over the red clay-covered braids of the Himba tribe to the lip-stretching plates of the Mursi tribe and juxtapositions modern Westernized three-piece suits constructed by Nigerian and Ghanaian designers, in conjunction with Nike Foamposites on Wakandan feet slipped sneakily into the shot as it returns to T'Challa ready to defend his kingly mantle (Ford). The textures of the textiles involve viewers in the movies trending fashion, which gives the depth and understanding of a fully independent and functional world while playing against the careless ideological assumptions of our present reality, i.e., that tribalism is not sophisticated and operates as static and outside of historical progress. Coogler's aesthetic choices for Wakanda engage viewers to become aware of their bodies in relation to how clothes move against the limbs, American discomfort with the sight of lip-stretching, and the sweeping panoramic views that invite all into the Wakandan dream, where viewers become guests in awe of the lavishness of the Wakandan hosts instead of the problematic overseeing voyeurs peeking into Indigenous African lives whose voices have been previously erased by Western narration. Therefore, it becomes imperative that Wakandans are visually represented, and their likenesses felt, in order to question this current historical moment in which little is known but much is assumed about African nations by Americans. The tribal and spiritual world of Wakanda must fit the Afro-diasporic longing for a nativistic return while challenging non-Black notions of cultural inferiority in relation to modernization.

Moviegoers who have not experienced the Black Panther via comic books become familiar with T'Challa during Marvel's *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), in which T'Challa follows the whereabouts of Captain America's friend Bucky, who is earlier revealed as a Hydra sleeper agent known as the Winter Soldier in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). T'Challa wishes to enact revenge for the murder of his father King T'Chaka during the Winter Soldier's bombing of an embassy at Baron Helmut Zemo's behest. It is precisely after this moment that T'Challa, stately, reserved, and dangerous, fulfills the demands of Black longing in which a Black person can bring a white person to account for the crimes against kin. Although it is not

until after the tribal challenge in *Black Panther* that T'Challa's title as king is rightfully secured, the audience understands that the ascension to the throne in fact happens not through a course of political sanctioning, but instead through the rootedness of ancestors. Bloodline and lineage are the basis for utopic construction in which T'Challa becomes the symbol of an African continuity made apparent. Black moviegoers are given the chance to inhabit this narrative, to feel pride and awe at the richness of a lineage that has not been hobbled or lost to egregious crimes. The afterlife, ironically, does not offer endings, but instead invites new beginnings. T'Challa is greeted and comforted by his spiritual predecessors; they offer him access to reclamations of the past, affirmations in the present, and foresight into the future. The ancestral plane holds the essence of the dreamscape in which home and origin are never mysterious and opaque, but rather teeming with warm knowledge and easy dissemination. T'Challa and Killmonger's experiences of the ancestral plane invokes the fragmentary identity of postcolonial Africa and Black Atlantic thought posited by Paul Gilroy.[1]

In many ways, T'Challa's existence becomes the pinnacle of the limitations on utopia's ability to sustain itself. Through his character, Afro-diasporans become more in-tune with the inequities that T'Challa's privilege highlights. For African Americans and Afro Caribbeans, the legacy of chattel slavery, segregation, and colorism brings the longing for completeness to bittersweet points; for Africans, the nonexistence of white colonial disruption highlights the manipulated trajectory of citizens within the African continent. While Black viewers admire T'Challa's ease and apparent safety walking the Wakandan bazaar with Nakia or his confidently relaxed gait in Shuri's stylish tech lab outfitted with African artwork, they become aware that he can do so because the oppressive Black/white binary and racial oppression do not exist for him. Through Coogler's powerful directorial gaze, each celebration of the king invokes a self-reflective reminder that T'Challa is mythological for a reason, or, as Gregory Carr writes, "The Black Panther is an imaginary African with no discernible historical African roots, making him much more imaginary than, say, Marvel's Captain America, Daredevil, or Spider-man (or even Luke Cage)" (173). The escapist indulgence of becoming Wakandan or proclaiming "Wakanda Forever!" allows Black people to enjoy the unique cultural acts of collectivism and tradition yet acknowledge the fragile positioning of these acts in anti-Black spaces. Equally, the unique metaphysical powers given to the superhero via the heart-shaped herb allow T'Challa to transcend into a deity state that stands at the gate of life and death; his governance over mind, body, and spirit eliminate the precarity that being Black causes on a daily basis. Thus, the construction of T'Challa as god-like represents a futurist projection insomuch as T'Challa has the power to shelter himself and his people in the metaphysical technology of the soul network. His spiritual power, separate from his technological mastery, envisions the continuous wish to move beyond the pained and suffering Black body to new conceptions of fulfillment, vitality, and joy.

T'Challa's very existence confronts the seeming dichotomous nature of the "primitive" against the technological progressivism of the "civilized". As Todd S. Burroughs writes of the comic,

> In that first issue, no. 52, the Fantastic Four openly question how such a "primitive" society could produce such wonders. The Wakandan emissary driving the air car warns the four that "in this land, things are not always … as they SEEM!".
>
> *(4)*

The conception of the Black Panther is a seemingly peculiar thing. While writers Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's invention of the character seems like a step toward anti-racist inclusivity, it still operates under the shadow of Western imperial assumptions in which technology is the domain

of the West and nations/cultures that fall outside of that hegemonic order exist outside of linear time, doomed to a never-ending primordial limbo. The irony of this particular ideology hinges on the technological innovation and labor of African people. Films like *Hidden Figures* (2016), telling of the Black women "computers" who were responsible for the success of the U.S. space program, demonstrate that history has been devoted to covering up the substantial and essential contributions to science and industry made by Black people. This line of thinking directly questions the construction of modernism via historical materialism, which situates modernity as the product of the West. Would Wakanda, having never experienced colonization, be able to participate in what is now known as the technological age, which stands as the legacy of Western exploitation? Does technology as we know it depend upon the imperial project, or do the combination of African aesthetics and the uses of advancement break open the cycle of techne via the capitalist mode? For a possible answer, I turn to Carr's assertion that "History has happened. It cannot be reversed. The quest for wholeness, to quote Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o must rely on decolonizing modernity, not returning to a past that never quite was" (173). The decolonized construction of T'Challa as scientist and chieftain asserts that African ways of knowing are both valid and invaluable while still upending modern frameworks to depict images of the new.

The importance of the actor who plays this character has never been more essential to the role. Chadwick Boseman, known for his expert ability to inhabit stories of African American icons, stands as an intertextual marker of Black excellence. T'Challa indeed becomes a quiet referent for the praxis of African American ancestor worship; James Brown, Thurgood Marshall, and Jackie Robinson, who are just as much a part of the ancestral plane as T'Chaka and the keepers of the Black Panther mantle are that hail before him. This kinship demonstrates that the film is conscious of not only its viewership, but indeed, the real work that Black people commit themselves to amid the odds that are placed against them. In addition, Boseman stands as a marker of a Black community that attends to the history of Black ingenuity. His presence as an actor demonstrates that Black utopia not just is seen through works of fiction, but also exists in reality, to which Alex Zamalin writes, "if black utopia has been an expression of what the political scientist Richard Iton has called the 'black fantastic', it has, as much as anything else, been a fantastical meditation on untapped possibilities already embedded within society" (10). HBCUs and other sites of Black collectivity are loci for utopian endeavors in which Blackness can *just be*. Following his graduation from Howard University, which some have said is Wakanda realized, Boseman's rise to acting success has been deeply impacted by the Black utopian collective structures that the university inspires. To this end, Carr, a professor of Africana studies at Howard University, writes in the Afterword for Burroughs's work on Black Panther's history, "In the Black Panther film, T'Challa is portrayed by the fine young HBCU-trained actor Chadwick Boseman … He was introduced to Black Panther as an undergraduate at Howard, the same convened Black cultural space that lit [Ta'Nehisi] Coates' imagination" (174). Due to Boseman's tragic and untimely passing in the fall of 2020, the hopes and dreams placed upon the prestige of the character and the grace that Boseman brought to the role has been renewed. Social media discussions place T'Challa on hallowed ground, eliding character and actor as a part of the greater ancestor network. All the same, T'Challa's necessary success as a receptacle for utopian striving still comes under close scrutiny when the character Killmonger comes under review.

## The Dream's Implications: Afro-Atlantic Thought, Modernity, and Utopia

Wakanda's cityscape signifies the peak of technological achievement. Wakandans' ability to manipulate the mysterious properties of Vibranium positions them at the forefront of mankind, counter to Western ideology and oppression of the African continent. The powerful use of the

cinematic screen allows for viewers to become submerged in the world of Wakanda, which offers a therapeutic Afro-Atlantic flight, to which Commander believes that "Disrupting the effects of dispossession and symbolic annihilation indeed remains a possibility for architects of contemporary Afro-Atlantic speculative flights who return to psychic Africas as they organize locally and globally" (233). In this fashion, Wakanda acts as an alien world, parallel to U.S. visions of glamorized tech and industry via the mode of alternative history, doubly operating as a safe haven for Black people to rest from the weariness of political, economic, and social death. On Darko Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement and science fiction's critical utopian nature, Phillip E. Wegner writes, "science fiction represents a significant global modernist practice, its estranging visions of other cognitive worlds providing a way of bringing into focus the dramatic transformations and conflicts that define the experiences of an imperialist capitalist modernity" (14). As a supremely Afrofuturist text, the use of cognitive estrangement proves fertile ground for Coogler and Marvel's thought experiment in which an uncolonized African nation can emerge fully and competitively into technological modernity without the exploitation of labor that has come to characterize capitalist industrialization.

While sensory images center on ritual, dancing, flying, and training via science and martial combat, nowhere in the film is there the backbreaking labor characteristic of colonized subjects the likes of which have been depicted in canonical literary works like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Wakanda is free of the implications of laborious violence that have been seemingly naturalized in Western modernity, where the Black body is subject to peril and strife. Audiences can breathe freely as their senses are not attacked by images of the tortured Black body as either work mule or perpetual victim of poverty, disease, and senseless death. Although separatist and hidden from the rest of the world, Wakanda stands as the great utopian desire of many underdeveloped African and Afrodiasporic people and nations that fall behind in the ability to participate in the global economy. Ironically, present Africa's resources are utilized the world over; yet many of its citizens, as a residual leftover from colonization, do not benefit from the lucrative gains that these materials provide other countries. Interestingly, the critical nature of science fiction productively intervenes within this narrative, to which Wegner writes that "the machinery of science fiction is again retooled in order to make it responsive to the emerging realities of globalization" (xvii). Wakanda's utopian refiguring gives audiences the tools to learn lessons from their cinematic embodied experiences by providing critical contrast to normative experiences of history and everyday life.

In addition, Wakanda's ability to shield itself from colonization and slavery has given inhabitants the power to center their spirituality via the traditionally Egyptian panther goddess Bast, giving the ruler of Wakanda the ability to wear the mantle of Black Panther. This mantle not only takes the form of enhanced strength and cat-like prowess, but also the ability for the Black Panther to commune with the dead. The powers of the mantle represent another ethic of living with nature in the film, not the "inherent primitiveness" of ideas about Africa that informed the original Black Panther comic.[2] After T'Challa wins in ritual combat against Jabari tribe chief M'Baku (Winston Duke), Zuri (Forest Whitaker) takes T'Challa into the Vibranium mountain where he imbibes the non-appropriated, Vibranium-infused, heart-shaped herb that transports him into the Ancestral plane. The scene goes black in an almost suffocating darkness before T'Challa wakes and emerges pristinely from the earth into the aurora lights of a cosmic Serengeti. There, T'Challa speaks to his father, who imparts the wisdom of generations of previous black panthers on how to rule Wakanda. T'Challa's journey to the ancestral plane delves further into utopia as viewers realize that he has dominion over both life and death in which he can talk to his predecessors and tangibly identify his historical lineage. Coupled with Shuri's increasingly innovative tech discoveries that make science and magic nearly

indistinguishable, T'Challa's power to fully possess his past, present, and future as it unfolds onto this spiritual realm echoes the desire for Afro-diasporans to combine spiritualism and technology as a kind of black technics that will relieve them of the ills of trauma. This utopian vision is beautiful, yet lacks the critical depth that unfolds when the problematic character of Erik Killmonger enters Wakanda.

## Killmonger's Afropessimism, Utopian failure

The discussion of Afro-Atlantic thought, futurism, and utopia finally leads to the issue of N'Jadaka, aka Erik "Killmonger" Stevens (Michael B. Jordan) who is readily staged as the most complex and problematic character of the film. As the son of the N'Jobu, N'Jadaka, had he grown up in Wakanda, would have been a direct challenge to T'Challa as leader of the tribes. This revelation makes his displacement all the more heart-wrenching; it is neither ability nor failing of character that causes Killmonger's displacement. Rather, it is purely situational, a microcosm akin to that of the realistic African American's estrangement to that of Africa. Everything from his urban attire in the museum scene to the distinctly Oakland, California, accent codes him as both cool and dangerous—the stereotypically hyper-sexualized thug of the American imagination. Ironically, this depiction is not at odds with the ruthless tactical nature of his persona as the American soldier whose primary objective is to kill at the direction of his country, yet his missions hold an ambivalent antipathy toward patriotism that is classic of the Black soldier experience.

Killmonger's place among Wakandans is troubled from the start; he is a lost Wakandan by way of King T'Chaka's betrayal and murder of his father to uphold the country's strict adherence to secrecy and national security. From there, Killmonger must grow up as a displaced Wakandan in an African American wilderness, to which his story inevitably ends in tragedy while the trajectory of Wakanda's hero, the Black Panther T'Challa, righteously emerges into the global capitalism of the world, masked as charitable educational outreach. Killmonger's inability to access his spiritual lineage is more than a result of the murder of his father N'Jobu; like descendants of slavery, his ancestral timeline has been severed, leaving him constantly alone and adrift in the darkness of unhealed trauma despite and in relation to his success in American institutions, i.e., Annapolis, MIT, black ops. Thus, Killmonger's doomed journey as an African American product of the military-industrial complex, with neither past nor future, leaves him outside of utopia in what Sebastian Weier labels the void that has claimed many Black bodies posited in Afropessimist thought. While proprioception enables embodied experience of visual illusion, it brings the viewer to critically discern the very same illusion of Wakanda's presence within the crisis of utopia. Coogler's depiction of a thriving Wakanda that fails to participate in a Pan-Africanist vision highlights the precarious and melancholic view of African American life, more aptly labeled Afropessimism. In his exploration of the development of Afropessimistic theory, Weier writes, "[Afropessimism's] aim is to deconstruct an epistemological blind spot in large parts of the humanities and social sciences that risks confusing hypervisibility and invisibility, misrecognizing representations as real, thus reiterating the black invisibility constitutive of white civil society" (421). Coogler's depiction of Killmonger as a complicated antihero in nature explores the jealousy, rage, and despair latent in Black existence, his villainy stems from the villainy of white supremacy, oppression, and loss.

However, Killmonger foregrounds this anger into a kind of twisted negritude drawing on his knowledge of Black struggle in which the shared experiences of Black people the world over fuel his desire for personal sovereignty and maniacal destruction, opposite of Aime Césaire's intended goal from which Killmonger's ideology draws:

> For not only is Césaire's idea of blackness non-essentialist insofar as it is suspended among historical, experiential and phenomenological determinants; in accepting the history of oppression that lends value to his Negritude, the "black" speaker seeks ultimately to free himself from it and be recognized only as a man, nothing more and nothing less.
>
> *(Garraway 76)*

Jaded by his experiences of loss and abandonment, Killmonger develops a paradoxically hungry nihilism in which the quest for ideologically white power and domination attempts to fill the void of meaningless despair that has haunted his life, of which Adam Serwer argues is Killmonger's tragic flaw: "Killmonger's plan for 'black liberation', arming insurgencies all over the world, is an American policy that has backfired and led to unforeseen disasters perhaps every single time it has been deployed" (Serwer). While Wakanda acts as a reprieve to the starved and troubled psyche of shared Black experience, Killmonger is the necessary irruption of the real into that very dream that problematizes and complicates Black life as it stands.

During Killmonger's visit to the ancestral plane, he is greeted by a seemingly severe yet tender N'Jobu. The audience witnesses that, unlike T'Challa's experience of the expansive Serengeti-like quality of the ancestral plane, Killmonger's plane is encapsulated in the claustrophobic Oakland apartment of his father's death while the shimmering beauty of the visually enhanced setting lies waiting beyond the window, painfully out of his reach. N'Jobu says, "They will say that you are lost", to which the child N'Jadaka replies, "But I am right here" as his father nods slowly with heavy remorse. The transition in camera cuts, moving from man N'Jadaka to child N'Jadaka and back to man, proprioceptively demonstrates the disorienting nature of time in which Killmonger's development has been stilted; he cannot move forward or back, but remains in a constant loop of reenacting traumatic memory. This visually disorienting technique causes the words "But I am right here" to paradoxically ring both true and untrue; the Killmongers of the world are continuously made invisible, fighting exhaustively to be seen and heard.

Rather than give Killmonger a sense of calm, Killmonger's grim goal for world domination is firmly established since he has neither past nor future to rely upon. While using the once-galvanizing rhetoric of Marcus Garvey's UNIA Pan-Africanist mission against itself to terrorize Wakandans, Killmonger destroys the Wakandan dream (Garvey 5). His dissatisfaction and rage highlight a sobering truth: how can white writers like Stan Lee and Jack Kirby conceive of a utopian, technologically advanced modernist African nation without falling into the trap of leaving the rest of the world and history itself to fumble in the darkness? While the white antagonist Ulysses Klaue is quickly disposed of, the remnant of colonial leanings lives on in the pain and suffering of the displaced N'Jadaka, who is primarily a product of the Western colonial-military-industrial machine. I draw a distinct connection here to Gilroy's discussion of Richard Wright's violent Black male characters: "Violence articulates blackness to a distinct mode of lived masculinity, but it is also a factor in what distinguishes blacks from whites. It mediates racial differences and maintains the boundary between segregated, non-synchronous communities" (Gilroy 174). Like Wright's Bigger Thomas, Coogler's Killmonger speaks to a certain kind of Black male violence and anger that comes as a result of the violent systemic oppressions which foreclose his potential, even as he strives to resist them. Consequently, as it goes with all native sons, the dream for Killmonger is over before it begins.

The end of the movie comes as no surprise; once Killmonger is defeated by T'Challa and chooses death over technological healing, Wakanda can once again reach its utopian equilibrium. Killmonger's death brings about a multitude of unresolvable problems for the film. Is his death an easy nullification of grassroots movements? Does his death inspire audiences toward action, or pacify them in the wake of political upheaval? A possible answer is that Wakanda itself

has greatly changed; it has grown wise and generous as a nation in the wake of Killmonger's startling takeover. His fanatical intervention brings Wakanda to its critical heights, establishing a tension that, as Tom Moylan describes, is essential to the success of the critical utopia in the postmodern era: "aware of the restriction of the utopian impulse to marketing mechanisms, the authors of the critical utopia assumed the risky task of reviving the emancipatory utopian imagination while simultaneously destroying the traditional utopia" (42). This crisis of utopia necessarily shows its capacity to reify certain conservative notions of the status quo that, if left on their own, would continue the cycle of oppression in a way that erases the trauma of history altogether. However, I am not entirely sure that the movie accomplishes the goals of what Zamalin pinpoints as Black utopian work: "black utopian and antiutopian work chastens contemporary American faith in postracialism—that good intentions and better laws could solve the problem of racism as if it can be remedied through better civic education or harsher penalties for bad deeds" (140). The final scene in which T'Challa and Shuri travel to Oakland to start a Wakanda STEM center for urban youth still places the ramifications of systemic racial oppression as the responsibility of marginalized communities. It implies that if Black Americans are smart enough, they may eventually emigrate to Wakandan soil or navigate better opportunities in America. This half-hearted attempt perhaps embodies the weakest point of the film, because it still relies on the idea that racialized dog whistles of urbanization are the problem when Killmonger graduated top of his class from Annapolis and MIT.

Although Killmonger dies, audiences are left with a sobering realization that Wakanda's fictional beauty, while inventively therapeutic, does not erase the ugliness of our real history. This sentiment is equally mirrored in Gilroy's analysis of Wright's modernist writing:

> The striking images of intraracial antagonism in "The Man Who Went to Chicago" present the inescapable conclusion that the conditions of extreme privation and stress which define the limits of the modern world for blacks, racial identity guarantees nothing in terms of solidarity or fraternal association.
>
> *(Gilroy 182)*

Put under strain and a life that garners many Blacks no love, no encouragement, no solace shatters the goals of Pan-Africanism that the Black community must work doggedly to achieve. While the seeds for Killmonger replicas exist in the form of incarcerated Black youths, unfortunately, a decolonized king of Africa is not available. Therefore, the potential for a realizable figure *is not* the fictional T'Challa of Wakanda, but the very realistically displaced African American N'Jadaka.

As stated, the beauty and ambition of *Black Panther* as a filmic adaptation of the Marvel comic inspires cinematic awe in itself. Through proprioceptive aesthetics, the technicity of the cinema permits audiences to see and feel a world that lies adjacent to the reality of the one they inhabit. This experience opens greater avenues for the reception of insightfully complex messages that inform the past, present, and future trajectory of mass culture in general and Black cultures in particular. If we could not anchor our hopes on Wakanda's utopian claims, become enthralled by its tribal textures, its spiritual vibrancy, its technological and historical magnitude, then Erik Killmonger's embittered attempted destruction would not make us simultaneously horrified at his monstrosity and celebratory of his audacity to the call the world wrong, followed by T'Challa's echo later. By participating in the experience of traversing the promising liminal space of the dream realms, we hopefully read this movie more carefully and earnestly in the wake of globalized subjectivity. Instead of operating in a reductive binarism that sides with the isolationist nationalism that T'Challa exudes or the embittered regurgitation of a blackened

imperialism that Killmonger proposes, viewers must demand something more. The demand entails justice that respects and revisits ancestry while luxuriating in the hope and wonder of futurity. The silver lining, the echo of good common sense, reigns in Nakia's (Lupita Nyong'o) proclamation: "We can do both".

## Notes

1   Paul Gilroy, in his description of Martin Delaney's trip to Africa, writes,

> At this point, it is necessary to appreciate that any discomfort at the prospect of fissures and fault lines in the topography of affiliation that made Pan-Africanism such a powerful discourse was not eased by references to some African essence that could magically connect all blacks together.
>
> *(24)*

I draw on this point to illumine the complex relationships developed in *Black Panther*.

2   For more on *BP* comic history, refer to Burroughs's work, where he discusses the various iterations of *Black Panther* and the stereotypical depictions that follow the character.

## Works Cited

Brown, Adrienne Maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change*. Changing Worlds. AK, 2017.

Burroughs, Todd S. *Marvel's Black Panther: A Comic Book Biography from Stan Lee to Ta-Nehisi Coates*. Diasporic Africa, 2018.

Carr, Gregory. "Afterword." *Marvel's Black Panther: A Comic Book Biography from Stan Lee to Ta-Nehisi Coates*, edited by Todd, S. Burroughs, Diasporic Africa, 2018, 169–176.

*Black Panther*. Directed by Ryan Coogler, performances by Chadwick Boseman, Lupita Nyongo, Michael B. Jordan, Angela Bassett, and Forest Whitaker, Walt Disney Studios, 2018.

*Captain America: Civil War*. Directed by Anthony and Joe Russo, performances by Chris Evans, Robert Downey Jr., Scarlett Johansson, Don Cheadle, and Chadwick Boseman, Walt Disney Studios, 2016.

*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Directed by Anthony and Joe Russo, performances by Chris Evans, Sebastian Stan, Scarlett Johansson, Anthony Mackie and Samuel Jackson, Walt Disney Studios, 2014.

Commander, Michelle D. *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic*. Duke UP, 2017.

DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Millennium Publications, 2014.

Ford, Tenisha C. "Why Fashion is Key to Understanding the World of *Black Panther*." *The Atlantic*, 15 Feb. 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/02/why-fashion-is-key-to-understanding-the-world-of-black-panther/553157/. Accessed 1 Jun. 2020.

Garraway, Doris L. "'What Is Mine': Césairean Negritude between the Particular and the Universal." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2010, pp. 71–86.

Garvey, Marcus. "Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey." *Library of African Studies: Africana Modern Library*, edited by Amy Jacques-Garvey, New York City, 1923, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203041468/philosophy-opinions-marcus-garvey-amy-jacques-garvey. Accessed 12 Apr. 2021.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard UP, 1993.

*Hidden Figures*. Directed by Theodore Melfi, performances by Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, Janelle Monae, Kevin Costner, and Kirsten Dunst, 20th Century Fox, 2016.

Moylan, Tom. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. Peter Lang, 2014.

Richmond, Scott C. *Cinema's Bodily Illusions: Flying, Floating, and Hallucinating*. U Minnesota P, 2016.

Serwer, Adam. "The Tragedy of Erik Killmonger." *The Atlantic*, 21 Feb. 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/02/black-panther-erik-killmonger/553805/. Accessed 1 Jun. 2020.

Wegner, Phillip E. *Shockwaves of Possibility: Essays on Science Fiction, Globalization, and Utopia*. Peter Lang, 2014.

Weier, Sebastian. "Consider Afro-Pessimism." *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2014, pp. 419–433.

Zamalin, Alex. *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*. Columbia UP, 2019.

# COMING TOGETHER, "FREE, WHOLE, DECOLONIZED"

## Reading Black Feminisms in Tochi Onyebuchi's *Riot Baby*

*Parker Alexander Miles*

### Writing Black Liberation through Afrofuturism

*Riot Baby* (2019), a speculative novella by the incandescent Tochi Onyebuchi, absolutely destroyed me. It follows Ella and Kev, sibling protagonists, as their Mama raises them in South Central L.A. and Harlem, New York City. In astonishingly few pages, Onyebuchi offers a searing commentary on the carceral state and biopolitics, and shows us that harnessed rage can be liberatory. It is a complex and incisive commentary on the brutal realities of Black life in America.

Like its Afrofuturist kin, *Riot Baby* holds Black life up as a lens. Broadly, Afrofuturism invites readers to "interpret, engage, design, or alter reality for the re-imagination of the past, the contested present, and as a catalyst for the future" (Rico 231). Both the novella and the genre resist the psychic obliteration that Black folks have endured in America through 400 years. The fatalism and despair fomented by these centuries of abuse can be counteracted by Afrofuturist art, "countered by the concept of prophecy, or speaking about hope to create a vision of the future. 'It's about future thinking, sustainability and imagination'" (Rico qtd. in Womack 41). In *Riot Baby*, Onyebuchi seeks to write that prophecy with ink distilled from the pain and rage Black folks endure. In *Riot Baby*, Ella and Kev experiencing the violent, violated histories of Black people is exactly what fuels their power to shape futures. *Riot Baby* asks us to use that truth, like Ella does, to imagine and make a free world for ourselves and our children. The novella "exposes something that colonialism imposes"—physical and psychic violence that America employs via policing to maintain its racialized social hierarchy (Rieder 15). In the text, decolonized Black subjects unmake the world, fugitive to the civil and social death that contemporary state power would wield to control them. *Riot Baby* rejects the imperial gaze by centering powerful Black characters and naming white violence and violation, resisting the elision of both. In so doing, *Riot Baby* gives readers a weapon with which they might continue the struggle to free their minds.

Though folks have long been writing in and theorizing through the genre, there has been a resurgence of public attention to Black speculative and Afrofuturist modes in recent years, namely through *Black Panther* and a revival of Octavia E. Butler's oeuvre. Folks continue to take up Afrofuturist challenges of societal progress and the ostensibly impartial nature of technology.[1] As academics have examined the genre, they have highlighted the agency and prowess

of female Afrofuturist protagonists' pursuit of justice,[2] and the survival tools Afrofuturism offers all Black people (Holmes). Like these authors and others, I seek to use this literature to work toward freedom.

In what follows I endeavor to contribute to scholarship about Afrofuturism and to buoy our collective imagination. This chapter situates Onyebuchi's novella within the theoretical traditions of Afrofuturism and Black feminisms and illuminates how *Riot Baby* picks up the mantles of both. In this chapter, I offer *Riot Baby* as an analytic for imagining new and heretical possibilities for Black freedom as Black men learn to be better, more ethical stewards of the Black feminist tradition. I argue that Black men must participate thoughtfully in the labor required of us; we must engage with the antiracist, antisexist healing projects prophesized in the radical Black feminist canon, and we must do so carefully. Even as *Riot Baby* takes up the liberatory impulse of Afrofuturism, it leverages tropes that require Black women's pain and labor to deliver salvation for Black men and the world. This chapter interrogates the opportunities and limitations of positionality: Black men like the character, Kev, the author, Onyebuchi, and I, the reader, must reckon with what's at stake when we take up Black feminisms and speculative modes for liberation.

As an educator and doctoral student, I am painfully ambivalent about critique. On one hand, I recognize its value, and I am learning that critique can be an act of love, a calling in, an invitation to be in conversation with ideas and texts held in high regard. On the other hand, I still struggle with doubt that I am (or will ever be) educated enough to offer substantial commentary to the discourse, such as it is. This tension redoubles for me as a Black man engaging with Black feminisms, citing and reciting lessons from my intellectual othermothers, giants of theory. I look to the example of other Black men taking up Black feminisms, like Michael Awkward and Wilson Okello.

It is absolutely vital that I name this tension, and that so doing I bring myself into this writing. As Awkward writes, "to speak self-consciously—autobiographically—is to explore, implicitly and/or explicitly, why and how the individual male experience (the 'me' in men) has diverged from, has created possibilities for a rejection of, the androcentric norm" (*Scenes* 148). I name the particular tension that arises as a Black man taking up Black feminisms because a failure to note that and how my birth and socialization as a cisgender male mediates how I take up (space in) Black feminisms is violence by omission. I do not presume to belong here. Rather, I heed Valerie Smith's words and write to "explore the nature of the contradictions that arise when [I] undertake Black feminist projects" (qtd. in Phillips 74). Consequently, this chapter, for me, feels risky. Though, as Wendy Lesser writes, "such risks are necessary if one hopes to encounter provocative artistic representations of women by men" (8). These are the tools with which we might dismantle the master's house. Thus, I begin with what frightens me most: arguing that the themes and tropes espoused by *Riot Baby* make it a Black feminist text.

## Reading *Riot Baby* as a Black Feminist Project

*Riot Baby* is a Black feminist text, as is much of the genre in which it is situated. Afrofuturism attends to the ways "racism and sexism are fundamental to an understanding of both plot and character" in their works (Salvaggio 79). Given its most prolific and influential authors and their specific attendance to Black women's internal lives, I would argue, as others have, that Afrofuturist thinking takes up Black feminisms.[3] Afrofuturism is one of the modes in which Black women have "wielded arts and letters to tell, represent, and create alternatives against the controlling images of existence for minoritized bodies" (Okello 10). Though *Riot Baby* is not written by a Black woman, and therefore cannot qualify as "ideas produced by Black women

that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women" (Collins S16), it commits to its agentic female protagonist's pursuit and enactment of justice for herself and her community. *Riot Baby* leverages specific tropes that invited me to attempt to locate it as a product of both Afrofuturist and Black feminist ideas and standpoints: fugitivity and the emancipatory potential of Black women's anger. Both of these tropes are tools *Riot Baby*'s characters use to both embody and create Black freedom.

Ella is the ultimate Black fugitive, a Black woman with an uncontainable body who seeks to usurp the social order. The theorization of fugitivity comes out of America's history of oppression and enslavement and Black resistance to it. Fugitivity offers a way of reimagining "the multiple and heterogeneous insurgent black movements, not only the visible rebellions but the smaller, sometimes unseen and subversive micro-politics of insurgency … which represent radical and open imaginaries and visions of freedom" (Thompson 246). These are the ways Black folks resist social death in the aftermath of chattel slavery. As a teen in New York, Kev's Black existence alone makes him a fugitive. Cops harass him for no other reason than his Black presence, the laughter and blunts he shares with the homies; these are the "everyday practices of refusal, resistance, and contestation" (Campt 112) that make Kev a fugitive. They are affirmations of joyous life that reject the violent social order that upholds the American empire.

In *Riot Baby*, the protagonists' fugitivity is a legal matter as well. While Kev is imprisoned, he is surveilled 24 hours a day. Despite this surveillance, Kev, like countless other inmates, engages in small acts of resistance by keeping contraband—magazines, snacks, a Roomba. In the face of the violent white supremacist state, this "desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed" is radical indeed (Moten 131). Ella is surveilled as well, like everyone else in Onyebuchi's near future, where the American government's technology is pernicious and its threats of violence overt:

> up and down St. Nicholas, they amble. Stationed on one corner, an officer sits in his mini-tank and say something that the cop walking by laughs at. The guns on the small tank's turret are angled toward the ground. Metal orbs float along the sidewalks above the street lamps, close enough for people to see, not bothering to disguise themselves, but everyone has already gotten used to them. They've quieted the neighborhood.
>
> *(80)*

Despite these obstacles, Ella can move at will. Any freedom of movement for Black women represents a fugitivity in a white supremacist schema, so Ella's ability to fly, to pop herself and Kev into and out of any place and any time, is transgressive (Cooper 39). As she visits Kev on Rikers Island and takes him to her world in his past, she "ruptures captivity and the social death it purports to make natural" (Bey 57). These trips provide opportunities to humanize Kev in spite of the traumas he endures on Rikers, to show him that another way is possible. Ella saves Kev, with Afrofuturist tools— through shared histories of family lineage that ground him.

Ella's own fugitivity resists the pervasive surveillance of American modernity. "Shielded" Ella is her own kind of "outsider within" (Collins S16). Shielded, she is invisible and able to see whiteness without being seen; she eludes human eyes and CCTV technological panopticon alike. In one scene, she watches revelers at a horse race, vulnerable, drunk, and pitiful, oblivious to the ease with which she could destroy them. She wants to show Kev "how little they are" (Onyebuchi 84), that their freedom and their privileged position in society does not make them better than him, than Black people. As the novella progresses, Ella's influences on Kev spark the development of a new consciousness and their attendant powers. When Kev eventually gets out on parole, he lives in a closed community of parolees. Instead of an ankle monitor, he is

outfitted with a thumb-implanted microchip that monitors his position, the contents of his blood, and which dumps drugs in his system when he grows too agitated. Onyebuchi implicates the dystopian surveillance capitalism that already pervades American life; Kev's chip flashes with the insignia of the corporation that owns the community, the chip's tech, the tech Kev builds for his work release (Onyebuchi 151). Kev surprises himself by unleashing his Thing—his powers—to cut the chip out of his thumb; for the first time in a decade, "they can't watch my bloodstream anymore, can't see if I'm sleeping right … can't see me" (Onyebuchi 160). This moment signifies the culmination of Ella's work to awaken him. Physically, he has escaped confinement and surveillance; he has escaped psychically as well, understanding what his abilities require him to undertake. Thus liberated, Kev joins Ella's project as prophesied by Fanon; she has shown Kev that "this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence" (Fanon 37). Together, they pour the kerosene of their Black rage on the oppressive colonial system and set it aflame. Theirs are the power and desire to upset the necropolitical order, to "dictate who may live and who must die" instead of the government (Mbembe 3). Ella and Kev inflict terror and death on the institutions that would have otherwise used the same to maintain "order". The siblings' agency and fugitivity grants them sovereignty, discards the imperial gaze, defying the carceral and militaristic logics of the American settler-colonial project. Their righteous anger fuels this power and desire.

Ella has her own anger, but she also carries her Mama's, Kev's, and Black America's. She gathers them from the world, from the churning shouts of rioters in Los Angeles, from the TV, where "on the screen, police tape flaps in the breeze behind the newscaster bundled up in a November coat. Friends leaving a nightclub. NYPD on scene. Fifty shots fired into a man's car. Sean Bell" (Onyebuchi 40).[4]

She warns Kev that "something bad is gonna happen", then Ella vanishes for years after this (Onyebuchi 40). Mama recognizes that Ella is "just angry and she needs to go be with herself for a little bit", where her anger and marginality let her see clearly and have insight about the world (129). *Riot Baby*'s Black readers will recognize that anger. It is one that we have managed for centuries, have used to see whiteness at work in interpersonal and systemic relations. Ella's unbridled anger is an emotion Black folks have stifled and wrangled for our own safety. For Black women especially, oppressed by the interlocking systems of racism and sexism, rage is fundamentally reasonable (Cooper 6). The atrocities committed against Black folks in America are innumerable and continue daily. *Riot Baby* delivers an opportunity to ask us: what if you could do something about it?

By the novella's conclusion, Ella has absorbed and harnessed Black rage. So equipped, she choreographs the end of the world. In *Sister Outsider* (1984), Audre Lorde wrote of the "symphony of anger" that women of color endure in America (129). Lorde notes that it this anger is "*symphony* rather than *cacophony* because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart" (*Sister* 129, emphasis in original). *Riot Baby*'s arc concerns Ella conducting this symphony. From the dissonance of a mother's wail, the thud of fists on flesh, from the aching despair of solitary confinement and the churning moan of the anxious mob, she arranges Black anger at the violence and hate Black folks endure, producing something that can be handled, something good and safe that can save us.

Ella's rage and its potential gives Kev hope when his own burgeoning powers, flashing uncontrolled in moments of crisis, are not enough to save him. Onyebuchi writes, "Ella saw him imagine her throwing an armored personnel carrier into a battalion of cops tricked out in riot gear. She sees him wondering if this knowledge would be enough to get the COs to stop hassling him" (147). Kev's immediate hope for reprieve from the horrors of Rikers is replaced later by something greater. When Ella steals her brother away from his probation facility, she

shares her vision of the future with him and the music of her rage, the resonance of its truth unlocks his own. Kev reflects,

> All this time, I'd wanted it. Somewhere in the back of my mind. As a kid in those inter-rogation rooms, as an older kid in Rikers. Then it gets beaten out of me, and I'm convinced we're too small for it, Ella's too small for it, for burning it all down.
>
> *(Onyebuchi 147)*

Suffice it to say, Ella's rage and vision are big enough. As it always has in America, Black women's rage builds movements (Cooper 147). In *Riot Baby*, this rage cleaves the world and, from the rubble, hews freedom.

Early in the novella, as the tension that will erupt into the 1992 riots[5] still builds, Mama asks Ella to pray with her. Mama asks God: "whatever you would have us do, make our way clear for us. Lord, bless my Ella. Make her strong. Make her smart. Make her powerful" (Onyebuchi 19). By the end, Ella is all of that. She manifests the intelligence to recognize the structures that oppress Black people, the strength to use her anger, and a

> power to examine and to redefine the terms upon which we will live and work; our power to envision and to reconstruct, anger by painful anger, stone upon heavy stone, a future of pollinating difference and the earth to support our choices.
>
> *(Lorde, Poetry 130)*

Ella acknowledges that with her God-given gifts come responsibility to do the Lord's work. She tells Kev: "God is a loving God, but he's also the architect of our revenge. He delivers us from Egypt. But he also brings the locusts and the frogs and the rivers of blood" (Onyebuchi 160). God may be the architect of Black revenge, but Ella recognizes herself as the sign and instrument of that revenge. She says:

> "I am the locusts". Ella sends the thought out like a concussive wave, so that it hits every surveillance orb in the neighborhood, every wired cop, every crabtank in the nearby precinct. I am the locusts and the frogs and the rivers of blood. I'm here now[6].
>
> *(Onyebuchi 152)*

In her vision of the future, Ella and Kev enact a vengeance:

> Fire and blood and screaming and singing. Shattered chunks of marble littering park grounds. Monuments to the Confederates pulverized into dust. Police stations turned to husks, watch posts unmanned and creaking with rust. Cities, whole cities, rising up into the sky. So much death, but there's joy in it. Apocalypse sweeps the South. Vengeance visits the North.
>
> *(161)*

This apocalyptic vengeance is not selfish. Rather, it is what must be done to "make the land ready for our people" (160). These are the "heretical actions our dreams imply"—the radical liberation that Ella and Kev summon from their traumas and tragedies (Lorde, *Poetry* 373). *Riot Baby* prophesizes a long night of reckoning for the white oppressor, of destruction on a biblical scale, but in the morning will come joy; "only then will we clear those forty acres of poison" (Onyebuchi 162). Only then can Black folks lay claim to the freedom owed to them

since emancipation. I read and reread these last few pages with teary eyes, relieved that at least in this pocket universe, the horrors that Black people have endured *were for something*.

## Saving Superwoman—Representing Black Women in *Riot Baby*

*Riot Baby* also takes up another trope from Black speculative and science fiction: the superwoman. Ella fits into a genealogy of similarly powerful Black women. Mary from Octavia Butler's *Mind of My Mind* (1977) and Amber from Butler's *Patternmaster* (1976) would recognize Ella, would hope she called them "auntie". Lauren, mother of the Earthseed religion in Butler's *Parables* would appreciate the ambition of Ella's vision. Essun and Nassun, protagonists in N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, would salute Ella's bravery, her desire to liberate those who are oppressed, enslaved, murdered by the status quo.

Using her Thing, Ella can fly, turn herself and other people/things invisible, appear and disappear at will. She can control hundreds of discrete objects with precision and toss massive pieces of machinery; Ella can bend metal with her bare hands. Ella reads minds and motives, implants thoughts, and can see into the past and the future. Onyebuchi foreshadows Ella's penchant for creating and destroying worlds early in *Riot Baby*. She augments Kev's toy train set when they were kids, "the first car puffing into a ball of flames and the others blowing up too until there was nothing but a trail of fire winding its way up the mountain, imaginary wind blowing the flames back like a wave of orange-red hair" (48). Like plenty of kids before them who had set something afire to watch it burn, they "[tried] to un-char the mountain and reform the cars. She never did get it back to how it'd been" (48). By the novella's end, though, they have the vision, the imaginative power to rebuild the world.

Ella, like the superwomen who came before her, is supremely agentic. She moves with a "brazenness the world tries to beat out of black girls before they reach adulthood" and dares to be "eccentric, defiant, outrageous, … visionary in a world where black women and girls don't often get to do any of these things without lethal consequences" because she can do anything (Cooper 107). Ella survives these consequences with her power, authoring her transgressive and destabilizing subjectivity. Hers is the power to "[resist] the dehumanization essential to systems of domination" (Collins S18). Through its superwoman and her powers, *Riot Baby* empowers readers to reimagine what justice is possible for the oppressed.

I will always be grateful for what Onyebuchi writes and how well he does it. His other acclaimed works are tremendous, but *Riot Baby* is singularly incendiary for me.[7] I read it and reread it, and I weep in agony, in solidarity, in ecstasy. I am awed by the grace and torque of Onyebuchi's prose. *Riot Baby* exemplifies what speculative fiction is supposed to be and do. Specifically, as a work of Afrofuturism that takes up the impetus of its Black feminist foremothers, *Riot Baby* offers Black men "an invaluable means of rewriting—of revis(ion)ing—our selves, our historical and literary traditions, and our future" (Awkward, "Black" 9). In some ways, though, *Riot Baby* falls short.

Despite these tropes and the liberatory impetus, *Riot Baby* repeats logics of misogynoir[8] by requiring another Black girl to suffer to develop other characters and advance the plot. Ella, Black superwoman, omnipotent fugitive, is a "chosen one", destined for this role, born for trauma and tragedy and world-cleansing rage; I hate it for her. Like Mary, Lauren, Essun, Nassun, and the other liberating superwomen who came before her, others perceive Ella as monstrous. Through much of the novella, Ella scares Kev, and angers him; Ella's own anger is unjustified. She seems the unpredictable, unknowable, unsafe other, who just happens to be his sister.[9] When Lorde advocated for the purposeful uses of anger, she is clear: "Black women are expected to use our anger only in the service of other people's salvation or learning", noting that

"that time is over" (*Sister*, 132). Through Ella's character, *Riot Baby* risks extending that time, risks offering Black women again as the presumptive strength and rage that will save us all. Put simply, we have to reckon with how and why *Riot Baby* asks another Black girl to save the world. We must ask why it requires her and her alone to visit the "weeping families that have to struggle stoically through their Black grief or that can stand behind microphones and declare their Black anger", visit "makeshift memorials to dead Black kids", visit Confederate monuments "to know who was hanged here. Who was beaten here. In whose name they were violated" (Onyebuchi 145). Ella alone must take it all in, then must save and awaken Kev to bring him and his Thing along with her. Given both history and the contemporary moment, I wonder if Ella's seemingly incessant traumatization is worth the risk it carries.

It is risky, generally, for men to represent women in their art. Feminist critic Wendy Lesser suggests that such risks—art through which the male artist risks the charge of misogyny—"are necessary if one hopes to encounter provocative artistic representations of women by men" (5). *Riot Baby* speculates that together, Black men and women will destroy and remake the world. However, Ella spends a majority of *Riot Baby* helping Kev get ready for the role he'll play in upsetting the world order; *Riot Baby* risks the perpetuation of a stock image of Black women as angry, uncontrollable, necessary saviors. Through Ella, and to a lesser extent, Mama, *Riot Baby* risks locating that stock image in the near future of Black liberation such that these roles continue to appear "natural, normal and inevitable parts of [the] everyday life" of freedom fighting (Collins 69). Afrofuturism requires Black folks to look to the archives to fuel our imaginations, but we must be cautious about what images we project onto our futures.

In *Riot Baby*, Ella's relationship with Mama is complicated, as the latter struggles to make ends meet for her family and protect Ella from herself and the world. Throughout the novella, Ella experiences visions of Mama that unlock her powers as well as Kev's. Ella watches as Mama experiences the casual gendered violence that causes so many Black women to have complicated pregnancies and births: a miscarriage caused by a threatening boyfriend, which her second doctor bandied casually about as she prepared to deliver Ella, and a difficult delivery of Kev. The doctors' disregard for a Black woman's pregnancy provide an example of simultaneously racialized, gendered violence emblematic of Kimberlé Crenshaw's theorization of intersectionality (1241).[10] In *Riot Baby*, Mama is the only woman we see closely or completely enough to witness the intersectional manner in which racism and sexism combine to impact Black women's lives; Ella is Superwoman, above such mortal concern for her own safety. She is a key cog in the engine of the novella—a counterpoint to Kev's futility and the deliverer of vengeance for the murder of Black men by the state. in a text so dedicated to bearing witness, there is scant mention of the women the state brutalizes. To me, the elision is glaring.

Sean Bell, Oscar Grant,[11] Freddie Gray,[12] and Rodney King are victims of police brutality mentioned by name in the text. The reader is called to remember their names, remember their lives, remember their deaths. The violence that they suffered at the hands of a white supremacist state fuels Ella, fuels the novella. Ella embodies the humanist Black feminist critique that structures and enables that violence; she's angry, just like "all Black girls who love bigheaded Black boys as friends and brothers and cousins [are] mad" (Cooper 168). Some of this anger she draws from other Black women, from her mother, from angry Black women at a Chicago public safety police board meeting she "visits", women "sweating and hurting and vivid with hypertension and the club and the church [who shout] "we know this board doesn't care about Black women! We know this board doesn't care about Black people!" (Onyebuchi 144). Largely, though, Ella draws the anger that these women feel for those bigheaded friends and cousins, not for themselves. While Black women are not invisible in *Riot Baby*—the text invokes Dajerria Becton and the atrocious abuse she endured at a McKinney, Texas, pool party—but Onyebuchi

never names Black women that the state has murdered. Not Sandra Bland,[13] Michelle Cusseaux,[14] Mya Hall,[15] or the scores of Black women killed by police since 2015 (Iati, Jenkins, and Brugal). This elision risks reproducing silences about the risks that Black women face. It is a pattern of elision on which Black feminists have commented extensively, including the notable #SayHerName campaign of the African American Policy Forum.[16] Like Ella, Audre Lorde saw the utility of anger, but noted that "part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters" (*Uses* 129). *Riot Baby* neglects to pour one out for the sisters, the women, except as mothers, as caretakers of the Black community and spirit.

Black men thinking and writing about Black life must take care in our representations not to reduce Black women to their pain, their anger, their relation to and responsibility for Black men. This impulse is one of "the constructed impulses of hegemonic masculinity", one which ranks Black women lowest on the social hierarchy and constrains what care society can muster for them to gendered arenas (Okello 10). In *Riot Baby*, this care could be another moment with Ella, one in which she is more than her omnipotence and "outlaw emotions" (Meiners 29). As a protagonist, Ella is active, but lacking interiority. I would love for Kev and Ella to acknowledge this difference, would love an opportunity for both to comment directly on what they are up against structurally, for "moments that dramatize the tensions between male self-interest and a recognition of women's systemic oppression" (*Scenes* 117). To me, it's necessary in literature of liberation like *Riot Baby*. Of course, Kev plays a vital role, as his endurance is necessary for the remaking of the world; through the horrific trauma he experiences, readers get searing insight into the carceral state's oppressive reach today and soon for Black men.[17] Ella, Mama, and the Black women represented by them deserve to be more than tools, more than plot devices. They are not reducible to pain and rage for the loss of Black men's freedom and life, nor responsible for our salvation.

## "Freedom Dreaming" Through the End of the World

This chapter rejects the androcentric norm. In these pages, I aspired to do some of the necessary work Black men must do with and for each other to uplift the race. It represents the best way I know to show Tochi Onyebuchi how seriously I take his work, how important I think his creations are and will be for Black readers and our capacities to imagine greater, freer futures, and what we must break to actualize them. Of course, there is no one way to read *Riot Baby*, and I may be projecting the work's Black feminist ambitions. Decidedly an antiracist text, *Riot Baby* serves as a beacon in both the form and the genre. Other work in this vein would do well to attempt being intersectionally antiracist, or, as Amandine Faucheux offers in their theorization of queer Afrofuturism, create texts "in which race is inextricably tied to gender and sexuality so that it is impossible to talk about one without always already signifying the other" (Faucheux 563). Such writing challenges the coloniality omnipresent in gender roles and invites subaltern compositions of bodies and the relations between them.

In our own ways, Onyebuchi and I are "freedom dreaming" (Kelley 3). We theorize better worlds, futures without violence, without prisons. We owe it to ourselves, to other Black men who might look to worlds we have scribed to do that dreaming; we owe it to Black women to dream of their freedom without assuming the inevitability of their suffering, or how we might harness their powers to save us. It is worth the risk and the work we have yet to do. Our futures can be ones without monsters. But as Ebony Thomas writes, "would-be storytellers must somehow liberate the Dark Other from her imprisonment and impending doom, not only in the text itself, but also in the imaginations of their readers" (8). In the closing chapter of *Freedom Dreams*, Kelley poses the same question that *Riot Baby* leaves us with: "what shall we build on

the ashes of a nightmare"? (196). I am better prepared to answer now that my imagination has brushed against *Riot Baby*; the prescient brilliance of Black feminisms and Afrofuturism whet readers' vision. If we can be incisive enough, our answer might be the thesis for Black men and women coming together "free, whole, decolonized" (hooks 127). Such is the vision of the genre and the potency of Black thought. Maybe Black folks will not use their telekinetic prowess to destroy white supremacy, but speculative fiction like *Riot Baby* helps us imagine that it is possible to do so, and it reminds us—in the face of reformist liberalism and incrementalist progressivism—that such absolute destruction may be necessary. What will we build on the ashes of a nightmare? Anything we want.

## Notes

1 Faucheux and Lavender (32) and Holmes (12) take this up.

2 Thomas; Toliver.

3 See Womack; Rico.

4 Sean Bell was an unarmed Black man killed by police on November 25, 2006, in Queens, New York.

5 The novella is named after Kev, who was born in a Los Angeles hospital while the city burned around them in the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict. Toddling Ella, already in the throes of Her Thing, barely withstood it.

6 Onyebuchi's near-future is already happening in Brooklyn City, Minnesota, where military vehicles menace folks protesting yet another extrajudicial execution; George Floyd's 2020 death under Derek Chauvin's knee sparked a summer of protest in the United States.

7 *War Girls* and its sequel, *Rebel Sisters*; *Beasts Made of Night* and its sequel, *Crown of Thunder*.

8 Moya Bailey's term, coined in 2008, refers to the particular gendered and racialized hated Black women experience.

9 Ebony Thomas describes how the "dark other" is a prominent feature of SFF in her text, *The Dark Fantastic*.

10 Intersectionality is an analytical framework that explains how systems of power create interlocking conditions of oppression. According to Crenshaw, structural, political, and representational intersectionality can be at play. Onyebuchi's inclusion of Black women's disproportionately dangerous pregnancies activates all three forms.

11 Oscar Grant was shot in the back while unarmed, laying facedown at the Fruitvale BART station in Oakland, California, 1 January 2009.

12 Freddie Gray was killed after a "rough ride" at the hands of Baltimore police, 12 April 2015.

13 On 23 July 2015, Sandra Bland was found hanged in a jail cell after being arrested and assaulted over a traffic stop.

14 Michelle Cusseaux was killed in her home on 14 August 2014 during a court-ordered mental health check.

15 Mya Hall, a Black trans woman, was shot and killed on 30 March 2015 after making a wrong turn onto a Maryland NSA base.

16 Begun in 2014, the campaign highlights the gendered ways anti-Black racism is enacted by police (Crenshaw et al.).

17 Alexander challenges the notion that systemic racial discrimination is over, and locates it in the criminal justice system and the "War on Drugs".

## Works Cited

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2010.

Awkward, Michael. "Black Men's Place(s) in Black Feminist Criticism." *Representing Black Men*, edited by Marcellus Blount and George Cunningham, Routledge, 1996, pp. 3–26.

———. *Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir*. Duke UP, 1999.

Bey, Marquis. "Black Fugitivity Un/Gendered." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2019, pp. 55–62.

Campt, Tina M. *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*. Duke UP, 2012.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems*, vol. 33, no. 6, 1986, pp. S14–S32.

Cooper, Brittney C. *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*. Picador, 2019.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé W., Andrea J. Ritchie, Rachel Anspach, Rachel Gilmer, and Luke Harris, *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women*. Columbia University Law School Scholarship Archive, 2015, https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/3226. Accessed 29 June 2023.

Faucheux, Amandine H. "Race and Sexuality in Nalo Hopkinson's Oeuvre; or, Queer Afrofuturism." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2017, pp. 563–580.

Faucheux, Amandine, and Isiah Lavender III. "Tricknology: Theorizing the Trickster in Afrofuturism." *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2018, pp. 31–46.

Holmes, Caren. "Afrofuturist Responses to State Violence." *Brief Encounters*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2020, https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.169. Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

hooks, bell. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. Routledge, 1993.

Iati, Marisa, Jennifer Jenkins, and Somer Brugal. "Nearly 250 Women Have Been Fatally Shot by Police since 2015." *The Washington Post*, 4 Sept. 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/investigations/police-shootings-women/. Accessed 11 Mar. 2021.

Kelley, Robin D.G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Beacon Press, 2002

Lesser, Wendy. *His Other Half: Men Looking at Women Through Art*. Harvard UP, 1992.

Lorde, Audre. *Poetry Is Not a Luxury*. Druck & Verlags Cooperative, 1993.

———. *Sister Outsider*. Penguin Classics, 2019.

Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*, translated by Steve Corcoran, Duke UP, 2019.

Meiners, Erica R. *Right to Be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and the Making of Public Enemies*. Routledge, 2007.

Moten, Fred. *Stolen Life*. Duke UP, 2018.

Okello, Wilson. "Toward an Ethical Black Men's Feminism." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2020, pp. 343–356.

Onyebuchi, Tochi. *Riot Baby*. Tor, 2019.

Phillips, Layli. *The Womanist Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Rico, Amanda Renee. *Imagining Global Female Futures in Black Speculative and Science Fiction*. 2018. Texas A & M University. PhD dissertation.

Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*: Wesleyan UP, 2008.

Salvaggio, Ruth. "Octavia Butler and the Black Science-Fiction Heroine." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1984, pp. 78–81.

Thomas, Ebony E. *Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*. NYU P, 2020.

Thompson, Vanessa E. "Repairing Worlds: On Radical Openness Beyond Fugitivity and the Politics of Care: Comments on David Goldberg's Conversation with Achille Mbembe." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 35, no. 7–8, 2018, pp. 243–250.

Toliver, S.R. "Of Monsters and Saviors, or Black Women in The United States." *Medium*, 19 Aug. 2020, medium.com/@stephanie.toliver/of-monsters-and-saviors-or-black-women-in-the-united-states-50bb732dc659. Accessed 8 Nov. 2020.

Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2013.

# 56

# ENGAGING SECOND-PERSON PRESENT

## Metafiction and Stereotypes in Violet Allen's "The Venus Effect"

*Päivi Väätänen*

Violet Allen's "The Venus Effect" (2016) challenges its audience by presenting its readers with stereotypes abundant in society and popular culture and forcing readers to consider them. Allen embeds this strategy in the very structure of the narrative and the literary devices it employs, namely metafiction and metalepsis. Composed of nine vignettes or brief chapters, each of which are slightly different in genre, style, and setting, "The Venus Effect" presumes to tell an action-packed story with a Black man named Apollo as the main character, and an alien girl from Venus passing as human as his potential love interest. However, the story keeps getting cut short when a man in a police uniform appears and kills the main character, and the story needs to be restarted. After each failed attempt to tell the story, the otherwise-unobtrusive narrator intervenes, expressing frustration at the way the protagonist keeps getting killed and the narrative thwarted. In the metafictional passages between the chapters, the narrator tries to locate reasons for the abrupt endings, and to find ways of preventing it from happening again by changing the narrative accordingly.

Many of the changes have to do with the stereotypical image of a Black man as threatening, as the narrator initially puts the blame on something the main character did—but it becomes more and more obvious with each chapter that the worst crimes the main character commits is running while Black and being in the same car with a white girl. Allen also points out stereotypes and racist conventions in science fiction and popular culture by exploring the roles Black characters play, or tend not to play, in them. By exploring Allen's use of metafiction and stereotypes, I demonstrate that despite metafiction being traditionally seen as playful exploration of the artificiality of fiction and stereotypes as something to be avoided rather than paraded in front of readers, Allen uses both in "The Venus Effect" to convey a powerful message.

In its bold employment of stereotypes, "The Venus Effect" differs significantly from the work of Black SF pioneers like Samuel R. Delany and Octavia E. Butler, who defied stereotypical presentations by embracing hybridity and difference. Allen, however, has a different approach. I argue that Allen's use of metafiction and stereotypes mark her as a representative of a new generation of Black authors, who use stereotypes and metafiction in their work as part of a new cultural strategy. Shawan Worsley points out that the context of black cultural producers in the late twentieth century was shaped by a "dialectic of racism and racelessness" in a society that "can embrace multiculturalism at the same time it finds rationale for racist practices, such as racial profiling, in the name of patriotism and national security" (4). This cultural moment

produced a generation of artists who recognize that the previous generations' strategy of countering racist stereotypes by replacing them with positive images has not worked, as the stereotypes still abound. Instead, the new generation of Black artists choose to use and to expose the stereotypes, making it impossible for their audiences to ignore them (Worsley 1). Allen's "The Venus Effect" discusses stereotypes through parodic humor, but always engages readers in the process by the narrator's metafictional interventions between the brief chapters.

Like her handling of stereotypes, Allen's use of metafiction further marks her as belonging to a new generation of writers. Irmtraud Huber describes a new "post-postmodernist" or "neo-realist" generation whose playfulness is closely tied to an ethical principle about the role of fiction in society. Huber notes that when writers of this generation use metafiction, it is not so much to reveal the artificiality of fiction but to explore its communicative function, as they

> shift their focus from ontological and epistemological questions to pragmatic ones in an attempt to reclaim fiction as a form of communication that actually manages to convey meaning, however unstable and compromised it may be. In face of the postmodernist tenets of the inaccessibility of the real, the indeterminacy of meaning and the impossibility of truth, they explore the ways in which we nonetheless understand reality, construct meanings and communicate with each other. In face of the omnipresence of fiction, they ask for our agency in its production and to assume responsibility for the fictions we tell.
>
> *(15)*

Responsibility for the fictions we tell—and read—is a central aspect of "The Venus Effect" and Allen's treatment of stereotypes and metafiction. This way of understanding metafiction goes against the previous general understanding of metafiction as playful exploration of the artificiality of fiction, which is often claimed to be the main motivation behind the use of metafiction by postmodern authors (sometimes erroneously, as Bo Pettersson,[1] among others, points out). Such a description of metafiction tends to ignore its political and ethical potential when employed by later writers like Allen, whose metafiction creates a special kind of relationship between fiction and reality: instead of exposing the artificiality of fiction, metafiction in "The Venus Effect" brings the real world and its ugliness into the narrative world in a more grounded manner and emphasizes fiction's role in not only reflecting but also shaping that reality. Therefore, "The Venus Effect" represents an excellent example of how metafiction can be used to make a point. The urge to communicate and explore the role of fiction is also evident in Allen's comments in an interview where she discusses "The Venus Effect" and the metafiction in it:

> I was driven by an interest in using metafiction to explore how we conceptualize race. I've always loved metafiction and postmodernism, particularly stuff from the '70s. A lot of it's just sort of fun, but I think that good metafiction is a way of examining the ways that stories influence our lives.
>
> *("Author Spotlight")*

"The Venus Effect" not only examines the way we are affected by narratives but is itself a part of that change.

As a concept, metafiction has been thoroughly theorized and analyzed in narrative theory, and definitions vary. I use the term in a broad sense as an umbrella term to refer to fiction about fiction—passages and aspects that self-reflectively refer to the fiction as an artifact constructed by the author.[2] Under this broad definition, metalepsis, as one type of metafiction, functions as a trope that breaks the so-called fourth wall between the narrative world and the real world. In

"The Venus Effect" this metaleptical moment happens when the narrator tells the reader to go into the narrative and take the role of the main character.

Mainstream literature, African American literature, and science fiction often use metafiction differently, and partly for different purposes. With its propensity for realist descriptions due to the mimetic tradition of genre science fiction, the very definition of science fiction *is* hostile to literary playfulness. In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, John Clute argues that genre science fiction "is essentially a continuation of the mimetic novel". Thus, science fiction that breaks the mimetic illusion does not fit the core definition of genre science fiction. Instead, *The Encyclopedia* includes this kind of "non-'realistic' non-genre sf" under the umbrella term "fabulation" (Clute). Nor have metafictional elements in fiction been unproblematically accepted in African American literary circles. Madelyn Jablon notes that social realism has long been the preferred mode of expression for African American authors, and for some, aesthetics and politics have been "mutually exclusive, antagonistic categories" (15). Jablon quotes an African American scholar, Donald B. Gibson, who in 1981 claimed that "attention to form" in an African American author's oeuvre means disregarding literature's "social commitment" (qtd. in Jablon 15). However, as my analysis of Allen's short story will demonstrate, this argument does not hold: the social commitment of "The Venus Effect" is obvious, not despite but because of the metafiction. The same expectation of social realism shadows the fact that Eurocentric theories have largely ignored African American literature in the context of metafiction. Instead, African American literature has often been "dismissed as social realism and classified as propaganda tract rather than fiction" (Jablon 168). Add to the mix the definition of genre science fiction excluding "fabulation", and metafiction-employing science fiction written by an African American writer becomes a kind of an epitome of nonconformist literature.

Furthermore, as Jablon points out, often metafiction in black fiction is a "byproduct" of intertextuality (4). That is, African American writers have traditionally used metafiction not so in order to circumvent literature's "usedupedness" or "exhaustion", as Linda Hutcheon and John Barth have famously characterized metafiction, but rather to bring it back to life, to modify, and to pay homage to their literary predecessors (Jablon 30). Jablon's point applies to references that African American authors make to other African American writers' texts, so the relationship becomes complicated when discussing a genre like science fiction that has not until recently been a part of the African American canon nor included African American writers. This claim becomes evident in "The Venus Effect", when Allen's narrator makes references to stereotypical depictions and the lack of diversity in science fiction and fantasy, and in popular culture in general.

Even though earlier conceptions of metafiction emphasized the playfulness of metafiction and its self-reflectivity as autonomy, a separation from society and societal issues, scholarship has also noted another kind of potential inherent in metafiction. As Richard Walsh contends, "Innovative fiction does not abandon the conventions of realist representation out of adolescent posturing, glib nihilism or sheer frivolity, but the better to pursue something else: an argument" (42). This pursuit of an argument becomes obvious in Allen's narrative and is achieved through metafiction and metalepsis when the readers of "The Venus Effect" are denied the role of passive bystanders. Rather, Allen encourages her audience to take a stance as regards the racist stereotypes underlined in these short stories by the authors' strategic use of metafiction, which causes fiction and reality to bleed into each other in a novel way.

The narrator's direct address becomes key to the metafiction and its effectiveness. "The Venus Effect" first presents a reader with (a beginning of) a story, followed by its abrupt ending. In the following metafictional passage, the narrator discusses the stereotypes present or implied in the narrative, but often the narrator's annoyance with the events is disguised as frustration at

the workings of the narrative, as the narrator keeps finding fault in the main character or the story's setting. After the first of the many deaths of the main character Apollo, the narrator stipulates that he may not have been likable enough. Therefore, in the next chapter, he is depicted as a model citizen with a heart of gold. For instance, he wins the basketball game for his team—a victory which, it is implied, will save the local youth center, and he has apparently helped a disabled orphan boy to get adopted. Leaving the stadium, Allen still describes Apollo as the ultimate good guy, but in an increasingly ironic way; features that would not match Apollo's hyper-positive hero image are presented with strikethrough typographical marking in the text, which creates a comical yet powerful effect. For instance, Apollo "blasts a positive, socially conscious rap song about working hard and pulling up one's pants on his stereo" (345) and when he sees a spaceship crash land and explode, he reacts with: "Golly" (346). The strikethroughs make visible the ironic modifying or sanitizing of the stereotype. By first mentioning and then crossing out the controversial rap artist Rick Ross as Apollo's choice of music, for example, Allen both makes the audience notice the underlying stereotype and demonstrates that modifying it does not help Apollo: he is nevertheless again killed by the man in the police uniform. Still attempting to find fault in the main character and the narrative world, the narrator concludes that in this chapter "Apollo was a big phony, totally unbelievable. Guys like that went out of style with Flash Gordon and bell-bottoms" (347). The parading and evaluating of stereotypes continue throughout the narrative. After making the main character more "likable" fails, Allen's narrator tries to make the main character more "relatable" (as a child), or less threatening (as a "lady"). In one of the chapters, Allen provides a superhero setting, and in another, the story is "blaxploited",[3] but nothing seems to work. Time and again, the restarted narrative ends in the man in the police uniform killing the main character.

As the main character keeps on getting killed in various, violent ways, it becomes evident that the narrator's desperate efforts to save the main character by finding fault in the story do not work. The narrator comes across almost as fallible, as readers become more and more aware of the fact that the fault does not lie with the main character or the narrative's setting. When the narrator stipulates that Apollo got killed the first time because he was not likable as a character, readers may yet agree. However, beginning with the ending of the second chapter, it is clear that attempting to find fault in the main character, and replacing one stereotypical character with another, will not work. More and more emphatically, Allen's narrator forces readers to notice and evaluate the racist stereotypes. For example, after the superhero-styled chapter "Go Go Justice Gang! ft. Apollo Young", where Apollo gets killed by a police officer who pulled Apollo's car over because there was a white girl in it with him, the narrator first wonders what was wrong this time because "That one was really good. The white guy was in charge and everything", but speculates that perhaps

> Apollo shouldn't have been in a car with a white lady? That's scary, I guess. … The man in the police uniform probably had good intentions. Like, he wanted to make sure the girl wasn't being kidnapped or anything. Why else would they be together?
>
> *(355)*

The rhetorical question in the vignette also addresses a different question to the audience: Do you really think so? Readers soon realize that—unlike what the narrator assumes—the problem is not a narratological one. The entertaining switching of genres and the humoristic display of stereotypes inherent in the genres have a deadly serious sociopolitical background in police brutality and the killing of unarmed African Americans. Hence, by exposing stereotypes prevalent in popular culture and society, Allen also focuses attention on a painfully topical issue.

Throughout "The Venus Effect", Allen also parodies the genres on which she models her chapters, especially the lack of diversity, or the very narrow and selective understanding of diversity in the genres. In the superhero chapter, for example, the leader of the Justice Gang, Red Justice, explains to Apollo—naturally featured as "Black Justice"—why the gang needs all of its members, even the "stereotypical valley girl" Pink Justice, to stop a danger threatening the city: "Just as white light is composed of all colors of light, so White Justice [their greatest superpower] will be formed from our multicultural, gender-inclusive commitment to Good and Right" (353). However, a few lines further on, Allen duly clarifies that "the Justice Gang accepts all types of people, as long as they love justice, are between fifteen and seventeen, and present as heterosexual" (353). This explanation implies, of course, that the alleged "diversity" in popular culture is often reliant on so-called token characters and is not actually inclusive at all. Furthermore, when Allen's narrator tries to save Apollo by situating the story in the far future, the chapter does not come to an end with the main character's death, since, surprisingly, he is not present in this version. This time, the intervening narrator knows exactly what went wrong: "So I checked, and it turns out there are no black people in the far future. ... I don't know where we end up going. Maybe we all just cram into the Parliament-Funkadelic discography at some point between *Star Trek* and *Foundation*?" (361). Because of the exclusively white distant future in most of the classic science fiction story worlds, the text needs to be taken back to the present in order for Apollo to even exist.[4]

The intertextual dimension in Allen's narrative clearly expresses a heavily parodic tone and at the same time also revitalizes the creative technique, as it paves the way for other kinds of representations and other identities in the genre. As the butt of irony and satire in Allen's work, the often stereotypical representations of black characters in popular culture, as well as the lack of diversity in fantasy and science fiction, come under scrutiny. Intertextuality in Allen's narrative does not easily fall under either of the two categories: it neither reacts to literature's "exhaustion" as such nor pays respectful homage to literary predecessors, as Jablon characterized black authors' usage of intertextuality. Instead, Allen's metafiction exists in a particular context that combines aspects of both, as earlier science fiction and other white writers are included among her predecessors.

Significantly, in the penultimate chapter, Apollo (initially) survives being shot by the man in the police uniform, where the stylistic tone develops into that of a blaxploitation movie. Moving the narrative to a context where intertextual references relate to Black culture saves Apollo from the bullets of the man in the police uniform. Apollo and his white partner Patrick reveal that the man in the police uniform is in fact the evil Venutian Lord Tklox, who is present in many previous chapters in various villainous roles. Although it is not specifically stated in this vignette, I interpret Patrick, at least in this chapter, as a white character, because Apollo and Patrick's "manly" handshake is described by comparing it to a handshake by "[Arnold] Schwarzenegger and Carl Weathers in *Predator*" (363). Apollo's partner Patrick certainly seems happy that the police officer was an alien "bad guy", as now

> it is in no way necessary for me to consider the ideological mechanisms by which my community and society determine who benefits from and participates in civil society, thus freeing me from cognitive dissonance stemming from the ethical compromises that maintain my lifestyle.
>
> *(362–363)*

Because the murderous entity turns out to be an alien character, Patrick can think of himself as one of the good guys fighting an outsourced evil, not having to acknowledge being part of the

problem himself. The sudden academic jargon attributed to Patrick strikes hard. Up to this point in the chapter, Patrick has been presented as a man of monosyllables, only echoing Apollo's verbal bravado. Patrick's relief at not having to think of complex real-life issues and his white male privileges ties in with the questions of whether fiction has any real-life effect, and what the responsibilities of an author are. If, indeed, the "bad guys" just happen to be bad, self-reflection regarding society's racist structures and the audience's role in maintaining them and profiting from them becomes unnecessary. A stereotypical story with good and bad guys may be entertaining and escapist, but lack any subversive potential.

However, Allen's narrative thwarts Patrick's avoidance of responsibility with having yet another police officer turn up and, seeing Apollo next to the dead man in the police uniform, shoot him dead. Thus, the palpable relief of not having to think of complicated ethical issues and police violence is truly short-lived. This plot twist refutes Apollo and Patrick's revelation of Lord Tklox being the man in the police uniform, who has kept appearing with murderous intent in the other vignettes.

Thus, not even blaxploitation could save Apollo from the man in the police uniform. For that, the narrator finally decides to recruit the reader, who, not being "pure pretend" like the narrator, can thus be a match for the man in a police uniform, who is "real" (363), implying that it is actually the audience who should "consider the ideological mechanisms by which my community and society determine who benefits from and participates in civil society".

At the end of "The Venus Effect", Allen makes evident and personal to her readers the pointing out of archetypes, stereotypes, and prejudices in a last attempt to save Apollo by "engag[ing] second-person present" and ushering readers into the narrative in the role of the police officer. The narrator tells his readers that "[y]ou've got to go in [to the narrative]" to face the "civilization-destroying" Omega question, which has been hinted at throughout the story. In the final chapter, readers are responsible for deciding whether to pull the trigger and whether Apollo survives this chapter. As the short story nears its end, "you" have just stopped a black man, presumably Apollo, who "fits the description of a mugger who has been plaguing the area for weeks" (365). The encounter reaches a climax:

Suddenly, his hand moves towards a bulge in his pocket. It's a gun. You know it's a gun. You draw your weapon. You just want to scare him, show him that you're serious, stop him from drawing on you. But is he even scared? Is that fear on his face or rage? How can you even tell? He's bigger than you, and he is angry, and he probably has a gun. You do not know this person. You cannot imagine what is going through his mind. You have seen this scenario a million times before in movies and TV shows.

You might die.
You might die.
You might die.
The Omega Question is activated:
Who matters?

<div align="center">(365)</div>

The ending *is* powerful because it ends *in medias res*, leaving "you" standing there, with a gun in "your" hand, and the only help to be obtained is from popular culture: "you've seen this scenario a million times before in movies and TV shows" (365). By giving readers only references to popular culture as a clue as to how to act in this situation, the short story demonstrates that even though the decision to shoot or not to shoot is made by the individual holding the

gun, people act based on the cultural prejudices, many of which are acquired through the media and popular culture.

In this sense, the metalepsis in "The Venus Effect" functions as an almost textbook example of aspects of metalepsis in popular culture, where, Jeff Thoss notes, metalepsis has three central purposes: "the investigation of escapism, the creators' self-inspection and parody" but "entertainment … always dominates" (44–45). However, while it is clear that Allen's metalepsis is entertaining in just the way Thoss describes, it also fulfills other functions, such as pointed anti-racist morals, that go beyond entertainment and parody. Therefore, the parallels Thoss draws between popular culture metalepsis and the authors' self-inspection may be too straightforward in relation to Allen's narrative. I suggest that rather than providing a metaphor for the authors' self-inspection or inspection of the escapist aspects of popular fiction, what is evoked in "The Venus Effect" is the audience's self-inspection. Readers consider, as Patrick in the blaxploitation chapter puts it, "the ideological mechanisms by which my community and society determine who benefits from and participates in civil society" (362). "The Venus Effect" interrogates the role of popular fiction in creating and maintaining those ideological mechanisms, and the ideological question is an integral part of the metafictional passages.

What is particular in Allen's use of metafiction is that rather than turning inwards in self-reflection or self-consciousness, metafiction in "The Venus Effect" turns readers' attention to the forms and conventions of popular culture (of which it is admittedly a part), and in so doing it establishes strong links between fiction and reality. One of the most evident links to the readers' reality is the police officer, who is, as the narrator reasons in the end, "real" and thus cannot be controlled by the narrator, who is, in contrast, "an authorial construct, just words on a page". This fictive construct ironically turns the situation on its head: the narrator/author is not real, but a character in the narrative is, which makes the policeman's appearance at the end of each chapter a kind of a retrospective metaleptic move. The "real" policeman in the narrative represents the narrative's connection to the real world; the fact remains that police brutality ending the life of many black Americans *is* the main theme of the story, but it is nothing new.

Thus, while the metalepsis in Allen's short story fulfills the functions Thoss described as typical of metalepsis in popular culture—entertainment and discussion of the effects of popular culture—it does not do so exactly in the sense Thoss shows in his examples from works of popular fiction. Thoss describes the parallel between immersion in popular culture and metalepsis in his examples as a literal metaphor:[5] the author's or character's journey to a fictional world is a metaphor of immersion, which implies that if the journey into the fictional world has negative consequences for the person transgressing the border, it can be interpreted as corroborating the criticism of uncritically consuming too much popular culture. In Allen's use of metalepsis, however, while the criticism is definitely there, the relation is more complicated. As Allen "engage[s] second person present", the author encourages readers to cocreate the story and its meaning with an active consideration of racism, both in society and in the traditions of the genre.

Thus, "The Venus Effect" inextricably links discussions of stereotypes and the metafictional qualities in the narrative. Metafiction and metalepsis enhance the narrator's discussions of stereotypes and the author's use of stereotypical representations, which make it all become personal in the end. Even though it has been easy to be entertained by the cleverness of Allen's narrative, in the end readers must face their own prejudices, when the narrator ushers the readers to perform a metaleptic move and go "into" the narrative to take the role of the man in the police uniform.

As I noted in the beginning, by her fictional treatises on racism in society and popular culture, Allen seems to be part of a "post-postmodernist" generation, which, as Huber

demonstrates, is concerned with the responsibility and communicative function of fiction. Clearly present in "The Venus Effect", this aspect becomes more pronounced as the narrative progresses. As Allen also notes in the "Author Spotlight", published with the short story in *Lightspeed* magazine, while "the story came from a place of fear and powerlessness, fear that something like this might happen to me or a loved one and powerlessness in the face of this huge problem", she did not even wish to represent the police officer as the sole bad guy of the story: "To put it real simple, the bad guy is not the cop, the bad guy is racism, racism that goes far beyond the actions of individuals or particular institutions". Therefore, Allen's use of metafiction not only reveals the artificiality of fiction but highlights the ethical and social dimensions of fiction. The metafictional passages in her work amplify the emotional, ethical, and political effects of her story. This combination of facing the narrative's artificiality and at the same time being aware of taking part in its creation can result in what Neumann and Nünning call a "hermeneutic paradox".

But how, exactly, do metafiction and, especially, the metaleptic move enhance readers' involvement in "The Venus Effect" while at the same time emphasizing its artificiality? What makes Allen's strategy in "The Venus Effect" so exceptional is the way it reveals only its true object of joint attention at the end of the story. The story's name contains the key. On a surface level, the title can be read as a reference to the Venutian characters and the Venutian Lord Tklox's "civilization-destroying" Omega question. However, the Venus effect is also a psychological and optical illusion, or a case of erroneous cognition, where the spectator cannot rightly judge what the person in a painting (for example, Venus in Peter Paul Rubens's *Venus before a Mirror*) is seeing in the mirror she is looking into. Rather than seeing the same image the audience sees in the mirror—her face—she actually looks at the audience through the looking glass. The *mise en abyme* perfectly captures the effect of the short story. Beginning with metanarrative as self-inspection, the narrator's commentary may first be read as the narrative and narrator referring back to themselves and the workings of each genre. The narrator finds fault in the main character and the setting, is frustrated by the fact that the narrative is not behaving as it should (e.g. "Apollo Allen and The Girl from Venus"), and refers to the men in the police uniform as "certain uniformed narrative devices" (352). Chapter by chapter, however, Allen guides readers to realize that despite the narrator residing in the narrative world and talking about how stories should and should not work, the metafictional features are not really about the narrative's self-reflection, nor is it contained within the narrative world. Allen's direct address invites readers more specifically to examine the reasons behind the grisly fate of the main character.

The Venus effect turns the narrative's self-reflectivity into readers' self-exploration: it is not the narrator and the workings of fiction that the narrator sees in the metaphorical mirror, but us readers. At last, the final, metaleptic move reveals the object in the mirror to be "you" when the narrator acknowledges the reader as "real" and asks them to go into the narrative to save Apollo, reasoning that "we [the narrator and "you"] have to save Apollo. We are both responsible for him. We created him together" (363). In that moment, the narrator and reader lock eyes through Venus's mirror, and the resulting joint effort to save Apollo is where the communicative and cocreative aspects of metafiction can be brought more into the picture, as readers become very conscious of joining narrators or characters in creating the story and its meaning.

Thus, the disruption of the mimetic illusion creates a more personal, more authentic reading experience than a realistic, non-metafictional narrative could provide. It becomes even more personal when Allen's narrator trusts the reader with the responsibility of deciding how the final chapter ends for Apollo. In this narrator's and readers' joint attention to the narrative, readers' knowledge of an author's or character's background can play a more significant role; knowing

that the writer is African American, for example, may make readers more aware of questions related to race and identity politics. With the metaphorical Venus effect, Allen's narrator invites readers to pay more attention to racist conventions of popular culture or actual brutal police violence—both of which boil down to institutional racism that the reader is also a part of, one way or another.

Allen's direct address invites readers more specifically to examine the reasons behind the grisly fate of the main character. This request becomes even more personal when Allen's narrator trusts the reader with the responsibility of deciding how the final chapter ends for Apollo. By disrupting the passive bystander effect, Allen's narrator encourages readers to pay more attention to racist conventions of popular culture or actual brutal police violence—both of which boil down to institutional racism that the reader is also a part of, one way or another. The effect of breaking the fourth wall strengthens the bond between the author and the reader, and authenticates the authorial voice. While the narratorial interventions in "The Venus Effect" break the immersive illusion, they may also enhance readers' involvement by removing the barrier between fiction and reality, as character, narrator, and audience meet eye to eye. Jointly acknowledging the need for change, Allen, her narrator, and the audience become part of that change.

## Notes

1 Pettersson argues that "postmodern experimentation impedes the act of reading by blending fantastic and realist features as well as genres, symbols and allusions, metafiction and allegory—thus producing a powerful sensation of life" (38).
2 Neumann and Nünning distinguish between metafiction and metanarration: "metanarration refers to the narrator's reflections on the act or process of narration; metafiction concerns comments on the fictionality and/or constructedness of the narrative". Especially in "The Venus Effect", however, it is not feasible to make a distinction between the two, as the narrator engages in both at the same time. Therefore, I employ the term metafiction throughout this chapter, despite the fact that some of the examples discussed could also be labeled metanarration.
3 The narrator refers to the blaxploitation film genre here, the "action-oriented" films with mostly African American cast that during the 1970s were targeted to young, urban Black audiences (Howards 7).
4 Ironically, the very white future world of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy has been diversified in the latest Apple TV production, where some of the main characters are Black.
5 Metaphors made literal are of course a staple of science-fictional language. Samuel Delany's often-quoted example, "Her world exploded" (27), is an illustrative example: in a science fiction narrative, it can indicate a literal catastrophe on a planetary scale as well as metaphorical one on a personal level.

## Works Cited

Allen, Violet. "Author Spotlight: Violet Allen." *Lightspeed* 79, Dec. 2016, www.lightspeedmagazine.com/nonfiction/author-spotlight-violet-allen-2/.
———. "The Venus Effect." *Resist: Tales from a Future Worth Fighting Against*, edited by Gary Whitta et al., Broad Reach Publishing, 2018, pp. 341–365.
Clute, John. "Fabulation." *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, edited by John Clute and David Langford, SFE Ltd/Ansible Editions, 23 Jan. 2018, sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/fabulation. Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.
Delany, Samuel. "The Semiology of Silence." *Silent Interviews: On Language, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics*, Wesleyan UP, 1994, pp. 21–58.
Howards, Josiah. *Blaxploitation Cinema: The Essential Reference Guide*. FAB Press, 2008.
Huber, Irmtraud. *Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies*. Palgrave, 2014.
Jablon, Madelyn. *Black Metafiction: Self-Consciousness in African American Literature*. U of Iowa P, 1997.

Neumann, Birgit, and Nünning, Ansgar. "Metanarration and Metafiction." *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn et al., Hamburg University, 24. Jan. 2014, www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/50.html. Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

Pettersson, Bo. "The Real in the Unreal: Mimesis and Postmodern American Fiction." *The European English Messenger*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2007, pp. 33–39.

Thoss, Jeff. *When Storyworlds Collide: Metalepsis in Popular Fiction, Film and Comics*. Rodopi, 2015.

Walsh, Richard. *Novel Arguments: Reading Innovative American Fiction*. Cambridge UP, 2009.

Worsley, Shawan M. *Audience, Agency and Identity in Black Popular Culture*. Routledge, 2010.

# 57

# "CAN YOU FEEL IT"

## Michael Jackson, Afrofuturism, and Building the Jacksonverse

*Natasha Bailey-Walker*

Afrofuturism, as an artistic movement, explores a myriad of possible realities—joining past, present, and future—through the lens of black people with agency, voice, and power. Celebrated Black writer Walter Mosley ruminates on the importance of Black science fiction as igniting the black imagination that will eventually become black reality. Mosley states that "In science fiction we have a literary genre made to rail against the status quo. All we need now are the black science fiction writers to realize these ends. But where are they?" (406). In the conversation of Black speculative fiction and the Black imagination, several Black artists come to mind. Octavia Butler, Parliament-Funkadelic, Janelle Monáe, and André 3000 have all been discussed because of their contribution to Afrofuturism. Disappointingly, Michael Jackson has been an overlooked but crucial contributor to this movement and challenges Mosley in that the production of Black speculative fiction can exist in many mediums—not just literary texts. Jackson's way of envisioning a global future *is* nothing short of genius. While his ballads, dance songs, and signature moves reflect his visionary status, Jackson's music videos demonstrate his Afrofuturistic genius from "Can You Feel It", a video he personally wrote for The Jacksons' *Triumph* album, to "Scream", his duet with his sister Janet Jackson. Michael Jackson has much to say about a bright Black future.

Jackson sets the foundation for the Black speculative artists that are now at the forefront. With the advent of festivals and conferences focused on the influence of Black speculative fiction and film, such as the BBC's series on Afrofuturism and the annual NYE parties, *Afrotopia: from Africa to the Future*, discussing the impact of the originators on the resurgence of Black speculative fiction is not only timely, but crucial. By analyzing his music videos and their lessons on social justice, the creation of mythology, and the promise of the future, Michael Jackson videos not only showcase the ideas espoused in *Dark Matter: A Century of Black Speculative Fiction* (2000), but reveals something that also may have been taken for granted about the greatest pop star of all time—that Michael Jackson understood Afrofuturism long before we did.

While Jackson is often analyzed and interpreted through his impact on pop culture, his contributions to Afrofuturism require further study. In Ytasha Womack's book, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, discussions of Afrofuturism move non-linearly from Sun Ra to W.E.B. DuBois to Janelle Monáe and Erykah Badu. Her circular analysis meets perfectly with the energy of Afrofuturism because according to Womack one important element of Afrofuturism is the bending of time and fixed constructs. "These artists are bound by a

conviction to reshape black images past and present. Meshing the limits of time and space, today's Afrofuturistic artists provide another lens to view the world" (135).

By looking at four Jackson videos chronologically, the audience can experience how Jackson touches on every element of speculative art—horror, fantasy, and science fiction—with a distinctly Black retelling. It is important to note that while the lyrics may not speak to Afrofuturism directly, Jackson's videos focus on the limitlessness of the imagination, which is intrinsically tied to Afrofuturism. "Afrofuturism's visual aesthetic is a playground for the imagination" (Womack 127). While to most casual Michael Jackson fans, seeing any of his work as early Afrofuturism may seem incongruous with the media portrayal of an artist seeking to become "white", a deeper study of the elements employed in his videos showcase his intentional commitment to BIPOCs, and Black people specifically. One need look no further than Jackson's 1993 television interview with Oprah Winfrey, when she asked him about having a white child play a younger version of himself in a Pepsi commercial:

*Oprah:* There was a story about you, um, wanting to have a little white boy play you in a Pepsi commercial.

*MJ:* (sighs exasperated): That's stupid. That's the most ridiculous, horrifying story I've ever heard. It's crazy. I mean why? Number one, it's my face as a child in the commercial. Me! When I was little. Why would I want a white child to play me? I'm a black American. I'm proud to be a black American. I am proud of my race. I am proud of who I am.

*(0:15)*

Many people, my younger teenage self included, read his response as a convenient answer. After all, had he not also had plastic surgery on his nose, eyes, and lips? In retrospect, our limited notions of Blackness would not allow us to accept his own experience and his own personal love and connection to his Black identity. However, if anything can be said about the many transformations of Michael Jackson, I would say that he is not limited, that he is larger than what many of us could imagine in his time.

Michael Jackson exists outside of time as one of the unsung contributors to Afrofuturism. Erik Steinskog analyzes Jackson through his music and videos compiled on the *HIStory: Past, Present, and Future, Book I* album. Steinskog suggests that Jackson never deviated from his purpose of presenting and representing Blackness: "Almost as if he were a work of Afrofuturist fiction himself, Michael Jackson constructed popular works and a public image that combined past, present, and future in ways that adapted and interrogated racial politics and African American identity" (139). Jackson uses Afrofuturism coupled with his distinct cosmology to inscribe blackness as a promise for the salvation of all.

### The Beginning and the End of the Jacksonverse

Salvation to a beleaguered Earth, ravaged by war, famine, and poverty, arrives in the 1980 music video "Can You Feel It", performed by The Jacksons. While this was not a solo song, Michael Jackson wrote and conceived the music video for the reunited group's album, *Triumph*. The video begins with a godlike voice telling the origins of the world in language that is almost biblical. In the King James Version of the Bible, the first line is "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth". The unknown narrator of the video begins with a similar invocation. "In the beginning, the land was pure" (Jackson, "Can"). The narrator goes on to explain the creation of the earth and the multitude of humans that would soon inhabit it.

While invoking a spiritual history, Michael Jackson rewrites it to exclude an all-knowing god and instead a divine earth. As Marlo David reveals, "Afrofuturism casts its gaze forward into the post-human/post-black future and back into the black humanist past simultaneously" (698). Looking backwards and forwards, the omniscient narrator in Michael Jackson's video gives the history of the world and, more importantly, how humans lost their ability to cherish their world. "Can You Feel It" follows one of the most important elements of Afrofuturism as described by Ytasha Womack. "Afrofuturists value universal love, reinterpret sound and technology, and echo beauties of a lost past as the essence of a harmonious future" (Womack 55). By ascribing divinity to the land, Jackson invokes one of the first elements of Afrofuturism—re-envisioning the past in order to create a new future.

A streak of light appears. A comet? A meteor? Suddenly, the video presents the four elements of life—earth, air, water, and fire. The Jacksons materialize, not yet fully formed, high above the earth like celestial beings. Michael Jackson reaches down into the cosmic water, and he and his brothers become fully formed as he transforms the water into fire and then into a giant beam of shooting light. They are the stuff of legend, of myth. Keith Oatley and Raymond Mar suggest that myth-making began shortly after the birth of language in order to assign meaning to our world and that "Creation myths, the bases of religion … were created to produce meaning and order in an unpredictable environment" (186). Since "Can You Feel It" is both a creation myth and a future promise, the Jacksons become the original celestial beings of their own universe. The costume styling of the Jacksons is reminiscent of Sun Ra and George Clinton, the icons of Afrofuturism. The "high-flying African inspired space costumes, wordplay that challenged logic, and the use of traditional and electronic instruments to redefine sounds and push for universal love were established by Sun Ra and George Clinton" (Womack 57). We can imagine, then, that the Jacksons are both celestial beings and aliens—their clothing is shiny and futuristic, while the humans all wear the styles of the 1980s. In other words, the Jacksons are both the beginning and the end in the cyclical manner of Afrofuturism, which includes the past to imagine the future. The brothers scatter glowing particles on all of the humans and watch them with joy as they accept the love brought from the divine universe.

The Jacksons have arrived full of good and love to influence a lost mankind. As the narrator states, "They would never lose sight of the dream of a better world that they could unite and build, in triumph" (Jackson, "Can"). They represent both our origin stories—our myths—and our futures. "Can You Feel It" echoes the vision of its predecessors, like Sun Ra's concerts and cult classic film, *Space Is the Place*.

> Sun Ra believed that he came to the world to heal. This quest to fill the knowledge gaps, to find the erased contributions of people of color, and to ultimately shatter the color/class divides resulted in an information trek that would last most of his life.
>
> *(Womack 59)*

In the Jackson universe, perhaps a Jacksonverse, they have the power to save humans from themselves.

In the closing of the video, the first human to recognize the blessing bestowed by the Jacksons is an Indigenous American man. Michael Jackson actively centers these people as the first people, as the man in the video is the first to truly understand the universal love brought to them by the Jacksons. He pushes to the front of the crowd and smiles as his body is warmed with their blessing. The fact that the second person to feel their blessing is a young Black boy, wide-eyed and innocent, who reaches for the hand of the first man and receives the energy

flowing from the Jacksons to the man and then to him, reflects Michael Jackson's intent to center BIPOC as the first to acknowledge the gift of universal love.

> Although Jackson is not regarded as Afrofuturistic in the vein of Sun Ra or Parliament, largely because he didn't sing about space or use his lyrics to invert reality, he did sing of universal love, humanity, earth consciousness, and innocence. His videos are science-and-magic hybrids with fantastical optical illusions.
>
> *(Womack 149)*

Soon everyone is filled with the magic of the Jacksons and is saved from destruction. They were birthed by the Jacksons and subsequently saved by the Jacksons. It is a circle that speaks to the Sankofa element of Afrofuturism. In order to imagine a future, artists must also engage with the beginning, which in this case is a young, innocent child.

However, in Michael Jackson's future videos, he explores how, where, and when things go wrong in the world, starting with race and gender norms. "Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it's a total reenvisioning of the past" (Womack 9). If anything, Michael Jackson uses Afrofuturism to hold a mirror to the past in order to reimagine it.

## Race-Swapping in the Jacksonverse

In the realm of horror films historically, most Black characters serve as secondary characters—sidekicks, first to get killed, or comedic relief—usually as a paltry attempt at diversity. Rarely written as the protagonist (or the monster), Black characters in horror have become something of a punchline. *Everyone knows the Black guy dies first.* With the exception of a few (*Candyman*, for example), Black characters appear in the background. Michael Jackson revises past horror films by centering Black characters even while using expected narrative devices.

When Michael Jackson released "Thriller", the third single from the same titled album, many of the expected narrative devices appeared. "Just as the right words and actions can speak the future into existence, the same can recast the past, too" (Womack 153). Michael Jackson distinctly rewrites horror conventions for a Black audience in the same way that Afrofuturists attempt to deal with nonlinear nature of time. Set in a 1950s suburb, the opening scenes of the video have no music. Driving on a back road one evening, Michael Jackson's car runs out of gas and he and his girl are stranded and forced to walk alone into town. According to Kobena Mercer, Jackson's video is simply a self-conscious parody of gender roles, where "Their clothes—a pastiche fifties retro style—connote youthful innocence, the couple as archetypical teen lovers" (40). However, they are *not* the archetype. They are a young black couple in the 1950s, driving a luxury convertible car, wearing the classic middle-class garb, and even their language reads as the All-American teen couple: in blackface. While Mercer reads "Thriller" through the lens of gender, it is just as important to read it through Afrofuturism, especially as the video plays with ideas of race.

Jackson uses his videos to challenge social binaries. As Elena Oliete states, Jackson "foregrounds the artificiality of filmic representations, demonstrating that they are nothing but cultural constructions that continue to establish the dichotomy of white/norm and black/deviation" (63). While Oliete does not reference "Thriller" directly, her claims map beautifully on many of Jackson's videos, especially "Thriller", as he latches firmly to the iconic image of teenage lovers in classic horror films.

Moments after they begin their walk, Michael asks his date to be his girl and she is elated. Mercer opines, "This innocent representation is unsettled by Michael's statement: 'I'm not like other guys'. The statement implies a question posed on the terrain of gender, and masculinity in particular: why is he different from 'other guys'"? (41). Unsettling music creeps in, and sweet Michael Jackson transforms into a violent werewolf. Jackson isn't the sweet boy-next-door; he is the monster under the bed. How can you not read this as the impossibility of attributing innocence to young Black boys? The choice of a werewolf seems simple enough—a classic 1950s horror monster—but there is more at play in relation to Blackness. "Artist/professors John Jennings and Stanford Carpenter call this presence of ghost stories and hauntings in black literature and art the 'ethno-gothic' and believe it's a way of dealing with cultural trauma" (Womack 103). The use of horror in Black storytelling is part of Black speculative fiction, but when the story is rewritten, as Michael Jackson does, it becomes Afrofuturism. As Mercer claims, "Werewolf mythology, lycanthropy, concerns the representation of male sexuality as 'naturally' predatory, bestial, aggressive, violent—in a word, 'monstrous'" (46). In a racial context, these terms and ideas have long been attached to, and still not fully detached from, the "natural" state of Black men.

The natural, bestial state of Black men is born from the Black brute or Black buck trope as seen in early films. Donald Bogle discusses this in detail in his powerful text, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, in which he outlines the construction of Black tropes and stereotypes in American film. "The Black brute was a barbaric brute out to raise havoc. Audiences could assume that his physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed" (13). The creation of this stereotype begins with *Birth of a Nation* (1915) but continues on to the present. One need only look to Hillary Clinton's infamous dog-whistle sound bite when she termed young Black men as "superpredators" who must be brought to "heel".

While scholars like Mercer dissect "Thriller" as though it is merely a campy parody of classic horror, I assert that it is not a whimsical parody, but instead consciously subversive. Mercer remarks, "The almost camp quality of refined exaggeration in [Vincent] Price's voice and his 'British' accent is at striking odds with the discourse of black American soul music" (40). A mild undercurrent of derision from Mercer exists here, in which he seems to belittle the heart of Black soul by calling Price's voice "refined", somehow suggesting that Jackson's music is not. Mercer also suggests that it was impossible to make "Thriller" without parody because at the heart of cinematic horror is the inherent desire to mimic its predecessors (Mercer 40). Even if "Thriller" is read as a quirky retelling of male sexuality, one cannot ignore the theme of the Black sexual predator through a horror lens that usually excludes Black characters altogether. Afrofuturists focus on the importance of Black voices telling their own stories, and, in "Thriller", Michael Jackson is rewriting the horror trope with Black characters at its center.

Much of the horror trope builds on societal fears of marginalized and oppressed groups, the fear they may rise up—like the zombies in "Thriller"—and paint Black bodies with fur and fangs. In Jackson's video, we see him first as an unassuming young man and see him change into the great fear of the masses. Beneath him lurks the savage of story tales. If the ending of the short film is any indicator, Michael Jackson suggests that he is both beast and man, adding a supernatural element that is a major part of Afrofuturism. As Mercer states, "Jackson not only questions dominant stereotypes of black masculinity, but also gracefully steps outside of the existing range of 'types' of black men" (50). Jackson has rewritten the horror trope in which the monster is not defeated, but instead is more savvy than past horror tropes lead us to believe.

If Jackson's "Thriller" reaches back in time to the 1950s to rewrite a black horror story, then his next time leap is even more impressive. While "Thriller" time travels only 30 years into the past, "Remember the Time" rewinds history nearly 700 years and retells the past through an Afrofuturistic lens.

## Repairing the Past in the Jacksonverse

"Remember the Time" is the foundational power of the Jacksons in "Can You Feel It". Much like Octavia E. Butler wrote all the books of her Patternist series without following a clear timeline—not at all in chronological order—so does Michael Jackson. While not solely the only method of time travel, Afrofuturists often bend and break the rules of linearity because the "notion of bending time erases the race-based limitations that all too often lace the present and define the recent past" (Womack 154). Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980) details the origin story of the beings evolved from two African gods but was written four years after her first novel, *Patternmaster* (1976), which represents the fallout of the culmination of the powers acquired by the generations of beings spawned by Anyanwu and Doro.

Two decades after "Can You Feel It", Michael Jackson's Egyptian-inspired video explains the magic and abilities of Black people that will eventually evolve into the celestial beings (we have already met) centuries in the future. As Steinskog states, "Imaging a different future, counter-history of the future, therefore depends crucially on how the past is employed" (128). Both Jackson and Butler begin their foray into Afrofuturism—obviously, in the future—but inevitably must go back and correct the narrative of the past to create a cohesive alternate universe. In "Remember the Time", Jackson chooses to retell the most prevailing and misrepresented history of Africa: Ancient Egypt. "Afrofuturists love to anchor their work in the golden era from times long gone, and there's no ancient culture that merges the heights of science and the esoteric like the Egyptians and Nubians" (Womack 81). Jackson anchors his music video in Ancient Egypt, and the story is built on part myth, part fantasy.

Jackson chooses Eddie Murphy and Iman to play Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II and Queen Nefertiti,[1] respectively, which introduces the first difference in this story. In cinematic history, the rare presence of Black actors in Ancient Egypt is generally relegated to slaves or peasants. Given that nearly every Hollywood rendering of Ancient Egypt is whitewashed—even Jackson's best friend, Elizabeth Taylor, played Cleopatra in 1963—seeing two dark-skinned, well-known figures playing the noble roles thrills and jars simultaneously. The audience finds itself already in the middle of an important historical correction, using the element of Afrofuturism which focuses on recasting the past from our present moment.

Jackson's video eschews white actors entirely. Every single person, down to the extras, are Black and Brown people. Even notable people in the Black community—Magic Johnson, Leslie "Big Lez" Segar, and Tommy "Tiny" Lister Jr.[2]—play the minor characters who perfect Jackson's vision of a new Ancient Egypt. While in "Thriller", white bodies were rewritten as Black, "Remember the Time" doesn't rewrite, it returns, white bodies to the Black bodies they historically were. In Afrofuturism, "the mythmaking and time-travel themes and celebration of ancient wisdom are steam-powered by this idea that there simply must be more to the mythological canon than the stories we inherit" (Womack 95). Classic art representing Egypt, Greece, even Rome seems to suggest that these civilizations were predominantly lily white, despite our understanding of the diverse mix of nations, ethnicities, and religions that existed simultaneously in these spaces.

Much of the misguided whitewashing of Egypt can be blamed directly on the preservation of these artifacts. Many of the marble and ceramic sculptures of these eras have been cleaned and restored in ways that removed the intentional color of the pieces. Sarah Bond not only explains that many of these iconic pieces initially were in color and represented the diversity of these nations but that the combination of early cleaning and restoration techniques and a dearth of nonwhite historians and classicists helped to create a white narrative of ancient civilizations (Bond). She adds that by reducing them to monochromatic pieces, we—with our implicit

biases—read them as white. Allowing our implicit biases to imagine them as white is the antithesis to Afrofuturism, which is based on embracing African history and culture while projecting it into the future.

Destroying implicit biases, Jackson's video operates as Afrofuturistic by rectifying the whitewashed narrative of Egypt. It does so by operating in the present and the past—contemporary Black celebrities projected back in time to Ancient Egypt—and giving us Jackson's distinct vision of a Black Egypt. It's worth noting that even with his creative vision, Jackson employs *Boyz in the Hood* (1991) and *Higher Learning* (1995) director John Singleton to bring his video to life. According to Steinskog, the purposeful nature of many of Jackson's music videos reveals "a Michael Jackson … that is deeply embedded in discourses of 'blackness', the politics of race, and dimensions of black nationalism" (135). Even beyond the casting of the video, the elements of the video from the dances to the hairstyles are distinctly Black. "From naming themselves after Egyptian deities to donning the wardrobe, no stone is left unturned in the quest to reinterpret the greatness of ancient Egypt and Nubia in modern and futuristic black cultures" (Womack 81). By connecting the contemporary aesthetics of modern Black culture to ancient Egypt, the video restores a Black legacy.

Ramses and Nefertiti lounge in the great room, visibly bored, when Nefertiti asks to be entertained. Two performers attempt to charm her with their skills, only to be subsequently executed. The third entertainer, silent and shrouded in a black cloak, casts some magic sand on the great room floor and melts into it. The room gasps and falls silent. Moments later, the pool of sand and cloak morph into a liquid gold—much like the liquid metal from *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) released one year prior—and reemerges as Michael Jackson clad in gold and a teal sarong. Michael Jackson has now incorporated a futuristic element in an ancient world, the seed necessary for the Black futuristic world he has already created.

By leaning on the blockbuster that changed sci-fi special effects for a generation and projecting it back into the past, a Black past, the video rewrites innovation and places it directly in Black authorship. Not only does it suggest that the power of metamorphosis existed in Ancient Egypt, but the powerful and pliable metal is not a crude metal, but gold, which was the most sought-after resource of African civilizations of the time. In 1992, Jon Pareles of the *New York Times* harshly critiqued "Remember the Time" for everything from being derivative to campy to being a poor knockoff of the special effects used in *Terminator 2*. Pareles calls the liquid gold scene simply a "computerized metamorphoses (so startling in 'Terminator 2' but already banal)" (Pareles). Already banal only a year later? It seems that his take on the video is steeped in derision of not only Michael Jackson, but of the real truth of Black contributions to Nile civilization. "Perhaps as a nod to Afrocentric contentions that Egyptian culture was created by blacks, the video clip takes place in ancient Egypt, which looks a lot like a Sheba cat-food commercial" snarks Pareles. By reducing the video to an expensive hollow commercial, Pareles willfully rejects the intertextuality of the video and the conscious play at Afrofuturism that anchors his music videos of the past that reinvent the future.

The video is both a nod to Ancient Egypt and to Eddie Murphy's *Coming to America* (1988), which was not only a hit at the time but remains a classic in Black cinema. *Coming to America* holds a place in Afrofuturism in its own right as an iconic comedy about a fictitious wealthy African country which seems to have avoided the decimation and destruction brought by European colonization and the transatlantic slave trade. In essence, the film represents an earlier comedic version of the Marvel film *Black Panther* (2018), with Zamunda standing in as Wakanda. Insofar as *Coming to America* plays out in the music video, Michael Jackson's dance sequence is both new and old. In Murphy's *Coming to America*, there is a lengthy, heavily choreographed dance scene at Prince Akeem's engagement party. The dance scene featured in

"Remember the Time" follows a similar script: the dancers blend traditional dances with what contemporary viewers would read as "urban booty-shaking".[3] The difference is that Jackson's video is serious in tone and incorporates the hairstyles of the 1990s, which happen to be a resurgence of historically African braid styles like "goddess braids" and the famous dancers of the moment like Big Lez, and the use of present trends in Black culture works well in operating in the vision of Afrofuturism through which the old becomes new again.

Jackson simply seizes on that moment to define the origin story of his past videos by using Black culture to view its ancestry. His video attempts to fix the whitewashing of Egypt in the one way he can: through his power as an international icon. Just as Sarah Bond charges all creators of popular culture,

> We have known for a long time that we have a diversity problem, and one way to address this might be to emphasize what an integral part people of color played within ancient … history. But the onus is also on the media and fashioners of popular culture.
>
> *(Bond)*

"Remember the Time" takes the power of Afrofuturism to write important narratives that centralize Blackness in the chronology of our world and worlds to come.

### Exile and the Epic Journey in the Jacksonverse

If "Remember the Time" sets us up for the long Jackson timeline leading us to "Can You Feel It", then his video "Scream" represents the decisive one of the series. "Scream" includes his pop-star sister Janet Jackson, and it is important to note that for the anniversary of his death, Janet released a short clip recreating the opening scene from "Remember the Time". Just like her brother, she pulls on the contemporary moment and places her queendom in a more West African aesthetic, an aesthetic that has informed popular culture of the moment thanks to *Black Panther* and the surge of Afrofuturism festivals that honor the many distinct ancient African civilizations. As David observes, "What connects these cultural productions are futuristic counternarratives that speak to the intersections of history and progress, tradition and innovation, technology and memory, the authentic and engineered, analog and digital within spaces of African diasporic culture" (698). Janet Jackson reaches back in time while staying in the present, just like her brother.

For many, the time jumps between Michael Jackson's videos may seem disconnected, even disparate, but just as Octavia Butler found a way to connect all of her stories, so does he. Steinskog remarks, "Michael Jackson's adaptation of a wide range of racialized identities and temporalities makes some of his work highly relevant to discussions of Afrofuturism" (126). In this video, Michael and Janet Jackson are the lone occupants on a spaceship flying away from Earth. "[According to George Clinton,] the mothership became a bridge between a missing African past and a glorious space-age future" (Womack 63). Their spaceship is operating as the mothership of past Afrofuturist imaginings of Clinton and Sun Ra, leading Janet and Michael to a space-age future. The black and white aesthetic of the video, which is actually more of a chrome than a bleak black-and-white contrast, immediately pushes the audience far past our present.

"Scream" exposes all of the injustices and corruption of the current world and suggests that the duo have decided to take their chance on escaping to avoid being poisoned by the world we now inhabit. In this video, as closure to the first video discussed, "Can You Feel It", the message of the song matches the video. However, "Scream" makes the injustices more clear: there is no

"soon men and women of every color and shape would be here too, and it was too easy sometimes to not to see the colors, and ignore the beauty in each other" ("Can"); instead, the video opens with Michael and Janet Jackson attacking a whitewashed narrative:

> (Michael) Tired of tellin' the story your way
> You're causin' confusion
> You think it's okay
> (Janet) You keep changin' the rules
> While you keep playin' the game
> I can't take it much longer
> I think I might go insane.
>
> *("Scream")*

Michael and Janet Jackson insist in these lyrics that the system is rigged, but in context of the video (and Michael Jackson's past videos) they refer to being voiceless. Afrofuturism gives Black artists (and Black cultures) a voice, so their exodus makes sense because, in order to speak their truths, they must go to space. Wanuri Kahiu's TEDTalk, "Afrofuturism in Popular Culture", discusses the impact of Afrofuturism on pop culture as a tool for empowerment. "As Africans, or as descendants of Africa, we've never had a space or a voice within our own history. We've never had a chance to talk about our own history; it's always written by other people" (Kahiu 7:36). In both Wanuri Kahiu and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDTalk, they outline how being inundated with a white narrative affects how people see themselves in the past, present, and future. Adichie also addresses this in her TEDTalk, "The Danger of a Single Story":

> What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books, by their very nature, had to have foreigners in them … But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature.
>
> *(2:31)*

Her call echoes the importance of Afrofuturism—the necessity of writing Black bodies into the timeline as active and vital elements. A large swath of Black speculative fiction starts with a new beginning from a corrupt world that disenfranchised Black people, and Michael Jackson owns this theme by putting the physical Earth in the background in several scenes in the short film.

In his meditation room, Jackson poses like Buddha, but the more he ruminates on injustice, he explodes and screams which shatter the skylight above, and he is moved to action in his dance scene with Janet. As David notes, "Racism and white supremacy continue to over-determine the hopes of black futurity, thereby necessitating nothing less than empowered individuality" (697). They must make change. They cannot exist in their bubble—the spaceship—they must push towards something greater. As Mercer alludes, "These videos—executed from storyboards by Jackson himself … breach the boundaries of race on which the music industry is based" (36). Michael Jackson has truly broken the boundaries Mercer asserts and, even more so, creates a whole universe in which these boundaries do not exist, and he and his sister take us there into the Afrofuture.

So many elements of the video fly by the audience's senses, but with closer inspection, they all lead to one conclusion: the Jacksons leave Earth to reconnect with their brothers. The ship, marked with a giant "J" on the helm, flies away from Earth (which is always shown in portholes behind Janet and Michael) with an unknown destination. They seem to be just burning time until their undetermined destination. If this is the bookend to Michael Jackson's interest in Afrofuturism, then he and his sister can travel through the timeline to be with their brothers and be the change the world sorely needs. In this respect, Michael Jackson's alternative universe shatters revisionist history and makes a prophecy for the future.

Jackson's Afrofuturistic vision runs clear through all of his videos, even the ones that critics found to be incomprehensible. Even if we dismiss Michael Jackson for the lyrics of his songs, his videos are clearly within the realm of Afrofuturism. "Music videos are the main visuals for today's music … When it comes to the synergy between the imagination, technology, and liberation, the video is the ideal storytelling format" (Womack 145). Each video is played with either rewriting the past or imagining the future. In the Jacksonverse, "one can at least visualize Jackson's alternative: a utopian world without borders or hierarchies" (Vogel 102). However, in the Jacksonverse, not only is the world redefined, but the entire universe equalizes Blackness. A connection can be made to Sun Ra's 1974 short film *Space Is the Place*, as the Jacksons are taking their audience to a new universe that will save the Black race. Bond concludes her essay on the whitewashing of ancient culture by leaving her readers with one thought: "perhaps, in this truer representation, we can come to better understand ourselves" (Bond). For Michael Jackson, his Jacksonverse is Afrofuturism.

## Notes

1   Note that historically, Nefertiti was married to Akhenaten; however, Eddie Murphy's costume matches that of Akhenaten, not Ramses.
2   Big Lez was known for her hip-hop dances in everything from *Living Single* to *Rap City*, while Tommy Lister is best known as Deebo in *Friday*.
3   Note that "urban booty-shaking" or "twerking" has long had its origins in traditional African dances, so it is both old and new.

## Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story." *TEDGlobal 2009*, Jul. 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en. Accessed 7 Dec. 2022.

*Birth of a Nation*. Directed by D.W. Griffith. United Artists, 1915.

*Black Panther*. Directed by Ryan Coogler. Walt Disney, 2018.

Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films.* Continuum, 2003.

Bond, Sarah. "Whitewashing Ancient Statues: Whiteness, Racism And Color in the Ancient World." *Forbes.com*, 27 Apr. 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/drsarahbond/2017/04/27/whitewashing-ancient-statues-whiteness-racism-and-color-in-the-ancient-world/#7cbf7dad75ad. Accessed 17 Nov. 2018.

*Boyz in the Hood*. Directed by John Singleton. Columbia, 1991.

Butler, Octavia. *Patternmaster*. Warner, 1976.

———. *Wild Seed*. Doubleday, 1980.

*Candyman*. Directed by Bernard Rose. Tristar, 1992.

*Cleopatra*. Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz. 20th Century Fox, 1963.

*Coming to America*. Directed by John Landis. Paramount, 1988.

David, Marlo. "Afrofuturism and Post Soul Possibility in Black Popular Music." *African American Review*, vol. 41 no. 4, 2007, pp. 695–707.

*Higher Learning*. Directed by John Singleton. Columbia, 1995.

*Holy Bible*, The Authorized King James Version, Nelson, 2006.

Jackson, Michael. "Michael Jackson—Remember the Time (Official Video)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Michael Jackson, n.d.-a https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeiFF0gvqcc.

———. "Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson—Scream (Official Video)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Michael Jackson, n.d.-b https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0P4A1K4lXDo.

———. "Michael Jackson—Thriller (Official Video)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Michael Jackson, 3 Oct. 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOnqjkJTMaA.

———. "The Jacksons—Can You Feel It?" *YouTube*, uploaded by The Jacksons, 15 May 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrKZNqIR2U0&list=PL-XWzp9D9WebD0sFl6dDgqmpEhYGjeXUw.

Jackson, Michael, and Oprah Winfrey. "Michael Jackson Said It Would Be "Horrifying" if a White Actor Played Him | Where Are They Now | OWN." *YouTube*, uploaded by OWN, 26 Jan. 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w20H0L555cE.

Kahiu, Wanuri. "Afrofuturism in Popular Culture: Wanuri Kahiu at TEDxNairobi." *YouTube*, uploaded by Tedx Talks, 14 Sept. 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvxOLVaV2YY.

Mercer, Kobena. "Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's 'Thriller.'" *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions on Black Cultural Studies* by Mercer, Routledge, 1994, pp. 33–50.

Mosley, Walter. "Black to the Future." *Dark Matter: A Century of Blacks Speculative Fiction*, edited by Sheree R. Thomas, Warner, 2000, pp. 405–407.

Oatley, Keith, and Raymond A. Mar. "Evolutionary Pre-Adaptation and the Idea of Character in Fiction." *Journal of Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2005, pp. 179–194.

Oliete, Elena. "Michael, Are You OK? You've Been Hit by a Smooth Criminal: Racism, Controversy, and Parody in the Videos 'Smooth Criminal' and 'You Rock My World'." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2006, pp. 57–76.

Pareles, Jon. "Review/Video: Michael Jackson's Costly New Promotional Clip." *NYTimes.com*, 4 Feb. 1992, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/02/04/arts/review-video-michael-jackson-s-costly-new-promotional-clip.html. Accessed 17 Nov. 2018.

Ra, Sun. "Sun Ra—Space Is the Place (Movie—1974)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Thelonesometraveller, 4 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCalqwsicls&t=4083s.

Steinskog, Erik. "Michael Jackson and Afrofuturism: HIStory's Adaptation of Past, Present, and Future." *The Politics of Adaptation: Media Convergence and Ideology*, edited by Dan Hassler-Forest and Pascal Niklaus, Macmillan, 2015, pp. 126–139.

*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Directed by James Cameron. TriStar, 1991.

Vogel, Joseph. "'I Ain't Scared of No Sheets': Re-Screening Black Masculinity in Michael Jackson's Black or White." *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2015, pp. 90–123.

Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Cultures*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2013.

# 58

# AFROFUTURISTIC STORYTELLING IN *BARRACOON* AND *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

*Piper Kendrix Williams*

To dream, plan, and survive, Black people must claim an ontological existence. "To be" or "not to be" as a Black person demands existing in the present, reaching back to see the past and leaning forward to grasp the future. To be my "ancestor's wildest dreams", to "stand on the shoulders" of those before us, as the popular Black sayings go, is to enter into the time loop of Afrofuturism. For Black people in the West generally and in the United States in particular, it is difficult to "be", to exist, to be free from oppression and white supremacy in the past or in the here and now. Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and her posthumously published work of nonfiction, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* (2018), can be read as Afrofuturistic prose and, more broadly, Hurston as an Afrofuturistic writer/artist. For Hurston, no other space exists for Black people to thrive other than in their imaginations, other than in the Afrofuture, where she captures the freedom necessary for us to narrate our own stories. Her stories and her characters are not past or present; they are Afrofuturism at work. Selfhood is claimed, and their humanity transcends and disrupts the time and materiality of the present. The Black speculative Afrofuture exists in the intimate storytelling between first *Barracoon*'s Kossola and Zora Neale Hurston and then between *Their Eyes Were Watching God*'s characters Nanny, Janie, and finally Pheoby, for time and reality are suspended between them.

For this chapter I am "re-reading" *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a much-read and analyzed novel alongside its predecessor and simultaneously its descendant, *Barracoon*. When read together one sees the loop of Afrofuturism reaching back to the summers of 1927 and 1937 and glide into the future of 2018. Ytasha L. Womack, in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), also considers Hurston's place in Afrofuturism (and what she calls Afro-surrealism), citing both to "explain the southern folklore and magic of Zora Neale Hurston" (165). Hurston has been gone for more than 60 years, lost to time before Alice Walker "recovered" her; now her work is continuing to be published, and the past is living into the future in her writings. Magic indeed. And as Kodwo Eshun indicates, "Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afro Diasporic projection" (301). These two books show how Hurston captures "counter-futures" in Kossola's narrative, in her inclusion of Nanny's ex-slave narrative, and in Janie's storytelling to her friend Pheoby, where Janie "recovers" her own history in service of living into the horizon and the future.[1]

## Afrofuturism and Hurston

The term Afrofuturism was first coined by Mark Dery in his 1993 essay "Black to the Future" (reprinted 1994), where he queried, "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have been subsequently consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (180). For Dery, the answer is yes, and he finds it in art, comics, science fiction, and the history of Black people. Many theorists of Afrofuturism focus heavily on science fiction, technology, and Black speculative traditions as key sites. While the idea of the Afrofuturism that most writers imagine manifests itself in science fiction, I am interested in the ways Afrofuturism is revealed in Black literature more broadly, where the awakening of personal Black ontology can be found. As Reynaldo Anderson argues, "Whether it's through the analytical framework of Black feminism, Black Nationalist, Afro-pessimism, Afropolitan discourse, and so on, I would argue that people are generally trying to reposition themselves to be in the debate on Black futurity" ("On Black Panther" 2018). Afrofuturism also has potential to link with Black feminism, as "symbiotic modes of thought", which "provide a method for understanding Black women's futurist cultural productions" (Morris, "More than Human" 33). This repositioning of Afrofuturism as an analytic and feminist framework is essential in my reading of *Barracoon* and *Their Eyes*. In both books, Hurston enters into the Black future by enacting *The Power of the Porch*, to borrow from the title of Trudier Harris's slim 1996 volume. For Harris, the porch becomes "the primary stage for interactive storytelling", allowing for the "interdependence of talkers and listeners", and where Hurston and her characters time travel, reverberating through alternative realities of past, present, and the Afrofuture (Harris xii).

Hurston extends our epistemological understanding of Afrofuturism by considering (1) how we know who we are, and (2) how we articulate what we know. Hurston does this by placing Janie on her porch, Nanny with Janie in her lap, dreaming of a house with a porch, and Kossola on his porch in Africatown. Thus, these locations become sites of alternative realities separated from a world of oppression and white supremacy. Hurston's characters, especially Nanny and Janie, "*are* the future" because "Afrodiasporic cultural practices" allow for "imagining the continuance of human society", which both Nanny and Janie are intent on seizing (Morris, "Black Girls" 153). Hurston creates "counter-pasts and counter-futures and alternative and parallel universes that center Blackness, without constantly referencing whiteness" (Morris, "More than Human" 36). Just as Harris conceived, every porch in Hurston's creative imagination exists as Black spaces outside of whiteness.

Afrofuturism disrupts linear notions of time, capturing the idea that for Black people in the United States, past is present and present is future. As James Baldwin once proclaimed, "History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history. If we pretend otherwise, we are literally criminals" (Peck). This statement rings especially true for Black people who have experienced the myriad oppressions of white supremacist violence, from slave traders and masters of the colonial and antebellum eras to the police brutality and violence and white supremacist domestic terror of the twenty-first century. Black Americans still carry this weight of history, as white Americans pretend otherwise. Black Americans still have to fight to be seen as fully human, to exist, to be something other than a problem. Exemplary of this is how the Black Lives Matter movement is not just a twenty-first-century phenomenon of explaining our humanity to white people, but one that Black people have been proclaiming and fighting for, for over 400 years. Afrofuturism allows for a new temporality to be imagined. It can be used to examine and analyze Black American literature and posits that the freer expression of Black subjectivity occurs in the imaginations of the future.

Two African cultural artifacts symbolize my thoughts about Afrofuturism. First, the Griot: West African traveling poets, musicians, and storytellers who maintain a tradition of oral history in parts of West Africa. And second, the image of the Sankofa Bird. "Sankofa is an African word from the Akan tribe in Ghana. The literal translation of the word and the symbol is "it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind" ("The Power of Sankofa" 2017). These artifacts symbolize the temporal and time-bending nature of the Black experience. Storytelling allows for metaphoric time travel, the memories shared allow for what Isiah Lavender III calls a "trans-historical feedback loop" (191). The Griot and the Sankofa were born in Hurston's heart and work. According to Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was "damned up" and she had to write the novel under "internal pressure" (Boyd 293). It is well-known that Hurston wrote *Their Eyes* in a seven-week flash of inspired thought. In this novel, Janie sits on her porch telling Pheoby the story of her life, and in doing so she represents the Sankofa bird, looking back on her life story, while simultaneously walking forward into the horizon, giving the gift of self-revelation to both her and her friend, for time is suspended between them. In *Barracoon*, Kossola also embodied this inspiration for Hurston, and she looped into his Afrofuture when he too became both Sankofa and Griot, telling her the stories of his and his people's past, present, and future; and in her retelling, she is the Griot telling Kossola's story for all those in the future. She creates the space for Kossola to find his being, to become his own Griot, joining Hurston.[2]

The idea that the novel lay within Hurston's creative imagination essentially guides this project. Womack argues,

> Call it the power of the subconscious or the predominance of the soul culture gone cyber-cop, but this dance through time travel that Afrofuturists live for is as much about soul retrieval as it is about jettisoning into the far-off future, the uncharted Milky Way, or the depths of the subconscious or imagination.
>
> *(2)*

Hurston first finds Kossola, tapping into his "subconscious", and then creates *Their Eyes* drawing on her creative "imagination" and time travels through the stories of Janie and Kossola weaving together past, present, and the "yet to be". In all of these endeavors, Black ontology manifests: in the stories of self, of our ancestors, and those not yet born: we are, we were, and we will be.

Hurston's oeuvre engages the far reaches of the "Milky-Way" both inside her heart and mind and outside in her words and actions. Valerie Boyd describes Hurston's experience writing *Their Eyes* as "Commanded by a '*force somewhere in Space*'" ("A Protofeminist"). While Boyd argues that Hurston engages in hyperbole, I contend that a profound connection exists between Black subconsciousness and imaginations of the great beyond: for where does the future exist if not in space, in Kossola's memories and stories, in Janie's story and memories of Nanny's dream of giving a great Black sermon? Hurston does not overstate and is not dramatic; she is Afrofuturism in action. She embodies the belief in the Black futurity which sits at the center of Afrofuturism. This story from "space", dammed up inside, bursting forth, has been written already in Hurston's interior.

My reading of *Their Eyes* and *Barracoon* focuses on how the imagination of the future and the manipulation of how time works in both books. Afrofuturism is a "narrative practice", specifically a "transhistorical method that re-reads texts … highlighting the way Black experience in America … has *always* been an experience of spatial and temporal dislocation and disorientation" (Lavender 2). Kossola and Hurston and her characters Nanny, Pheoby, and Janie exist

across time and place, experiencing this "spatial and temporal dislocation". In addition, the "resistance to slavery provokes a uniquely afrofuturistic vibe when their separate experiences are framed as self-engineered pocket universes" (Lavender 88). The porch in both books, as well as Nanny's lap in *Their Eyes*, can be read as pocket universes, which "exist within the boundaries of another universe—a space within a space, governed by its own rules" (Lavender 88). In the remainder of this chapter, I offer a close reading and literary analysis of these locations, focusing on the revelations of Afrofuturism's broad implications, centering Black women's intimacy, storytelling, and self-revelation that take place in these "spaces within spaces", allowing Black ontology to exist.

## Africa in Our Dreams: Kossola

Time travel allows one to experience alternative realities and dimensions. Storytelling in *Barracoon* and *Their Eyes* allows Hurston, Kossola, Janie, Pheoby, and Nanny to travel back in time to slavery and forward to the future in their dreams, ideas, and aspirations. While many do not believe in time travel, time is not a stable concept. Philosophers, scientists, writers, and thinkers have long understood time as socially created; bound to human definition. Hurston, engaging in her own time travel, often changed her birthdate, staying "college age" for more than a decade.

Approaching Kossola in 1927, Hurston repeatedly visits him, asking for his story, while time is suspended in the quest to have him tell his story, one Sankofa/Griot to another. In the introduction to *Barracoon*, she looks back to the past to consider the African kings and white slave traders, knowing they haunt and yet shape Kossola's memories:

> *All these words* from the seller, but not one from *the sold*. The Kings and Captains whose *words moved ships*. But not *one word* from the cargo. The thoughts of the "Black ivory", the "coin of Africa", had no market value. Africa's ambassadors to the New World have come and worked and died, and left their spoor, but no recorded thought.
>
> *(6, emphasis added)*

Hurston purposefully transcends time as she gives *words* to Kossola and raises *the sold*, the cargo from the brutal tribal wars in Africa, from the depths of the Atlantic, from the coffin of slavery. In asking Kossola, "who are you?", Hurston gains entrance to his pocket universe when he answers, "'Oh Lor', I know it *you* call my name. Nobody don't callee me my name from cross de water but you. You always callee me Kossola, jus' lak I in de Affrica soil!'" (17) For Kossola, the idea that his name and his words could be valued corrected the view of those Kings and Captains who assigned only monetary value to Black bodies. The ontological question, "who are you?", delights him. Kossola continues his ontological statement, using his native tongue and English to claim a blended and "*singular*" self, "who says … '*Edem etie ukum dem etie upar*': The tree of two woods, literally, two trees that have grown together. One-part *ukum* (mahogany) and one-part *upar* (ebony)" (15). Mahogany and Ebony: two kinds of Black, African and African American, merge together into Kossola's imagined Black future.

Kossola's memories of his African roots and home and his decades in Africatown outside of New Orleans enact Afrofuturistic time, past, present, and future. He is the Sankofa bird, dancing on one foot, looking into his past and transforming slowly into a Griot to tell who he is and who his people are. "'Thankee Jesus! Somebody come ast about Cudjo! I want tellee somebody *who I is*, so maybe dey go in de Afficky soil some day and callee my name and somebody dere

say, 'Yeah, I know Kossola'" (19, emphasis added).[3] Kossola dreams of connecting his time back in Africa to an imagined future time in the United States: could it be possible that someone in Africa knows him—knows his name still?

Although Kossola imagines returning to Africa, the stories he shares with Hurston show how much his experiences in America link him to the oppressive systems Black people experience in the twenty-first century, which capture the police shootings of unarmed Black people—a seeming endless loop of violence on film and audio beginning with Trayvon Martin's murder. Kossola, called Cudjo, has five children and gives them all two names: "One name because we not furgit our home; den another name for the Americky soil so it won't be too crooked to call" (73). "De las boy we callee him my name, Cudjo, but his Afficky name, it Fish-ee-ton" (73). After their only daughter dies of an illness at age 15, their youngest son is murdered: "Nine year we hurtee inside 'bout our baby. Den we git hurtee again. Somebody call hisself a deputy sheriff kill de baby boy now … He say he the law, but he doan come 'rest him lak a man" (75). Kossola's experiences of losing a child to the brutality of unchecked police violence reverberates backward to all our ancestors losing children to the brutality of slavery and forward to the twenty-first century when Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, and tragically so many more suffer a similar fate.

Recalling all the years behind him, terror and hope tethered together, Kossola suffers loneliness, and there are times when he doesn't want to talk to Hurston. But she persists, bringing him food, sharing meals with him, and eventually coaxes him to tell his story: "I can't talkee plain, you unnerstand me, but I calls it *word by word* for you so it won't be too crooked for you" (19, emphasis added). His "crooked" words mirror the crooked nature of time a Black person experiences, thought of as Black "coin", but having "words by words" and "thought" allows Black people ontology. But even more, storytelling gives us the ability to time travel. Hurston witnesses this time travel after a long afternoon of Kossola telling her the story of his people, the Dahomey:

> Kossola was no longer on the porch with me. He was squatting about that fire in Dahomey. His face was twitching in abysmal pain. It was a horror mask. He had forgotten that I was there. He was thinking aloud and gazing into dead faces in the smoke. His agony was so acute that he became inarticulate. He never noticed my preparation to leave him … and his smoke pictures.
>
> *(49)*

Kossola drops deep into memory, reflecting on all that he's lost. He travels back through time, back to his now ancestral home and back through the years of loss, despair, ocean crossing, cruelty, and exile; past and present collapse, while the future awaits.

## Nanny's Sermon

This crooked story, which reverberates through time framing the ways Black people's stories are told, shapes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as well. Finding an answer to "who are you?" is central to Janie's story and is first revealed in Nanny's narrative after she finds Janie kissing a boy at the garden gate. In writing Nanny's history as a slave, Hurston weaves Nanny's story around the ways past, present, and future repeat the time loop. Symbolically Janie represents Nanny's future, as does Hurston, in whose imagination both women exist. Nanny then, in Hurston's vast imagination, offers another slave narrative and, in its aesthetics and symbols, Afrofuturism is revealed. Afrofuturism

posit[s] that Blacks will exist in the future, as opposed to being harbingers of social chaos and collapse,[Instead,] Afrofuturism insists that Blacks fundamentally *are* the future and that Afrodiasporic cultural practices are vital to imagining the continuance of human society.

<div align="right">

*(Morris, "Black Girls" 153)*

</div>

Nanny, horrified to witness Janie kissing a young man, imagines "social collapse" and "chaos" for her granddaughter, knowing that Black women are often the most victimized when society falls into its worst tendencies:

Honey, de white man the ruler of everything as far as Ah been able to find out … So the white man throw down de load and tell the nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger women is de mule uh duh world as far as Ah can see.

<div align="right">

*(14)*

</div>

Nanny seems trapped in the hierarchies at the intersections of race and gender. She has to share her story with Janie, her independent and risk-taking granddaughter, seeing in her the future.

Nanny realizes through her fear or in spite of it that in Janie and in her own words, there is a future and a Black speculative future at that: "Black women … are often ignored, dismissed or diminished, but nevertheless remain fundamental to any complete understanding of futurity" (Morris, "More than Human" 33). Nanny refuses to be ignored and especially does not want to be diminished. Closing the distance between Janie and herself, Nanny calls Janie to sit on her lap "lak you use tuh", and "sat rocking with the girl held tightly to her sunken breast … Nanny half sung, half sobbed a running chant prayer" over Janie (14). Nanny begins to weave a story out of the darkness, imaging a past and future for herself and Janie simultaneously. Thinking back to slavery, Nanny, tells Janie: "us colored folks is branches with roots … Ah was born back in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of what a woman oughta be and to do" (16). The "multiplicative oppressions" are many in Nanny's story of slavery: she is raped by her slave master and then threatened by the Mistress, who demands, "what's yo' baby doin' wid gray eyes and yaller hair" and threatening that in the morning, she will be tied up and struck with a hundred lashes (18). But Nanny has never been "stop(ped) from wishin'" and knows that no matter what "You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will" (16). Between "wishin" and "will", Nanny creates a future for herself and her daughter, running away when Mistress promises to sell her baby as soon as possible.

Futurity is the gift Nanny extends to Janie, even as all readers of *Their Eyes* know Janie resents Nanny and her gift for much of the novel. Despite this, Hurston knows, the enslaved person and the former enslaved person can hold a "counter-past" and a "counter-future". Kossola exists in the loop of time and space, and his reappearance in the imagination of Black people in the twenty-first century furthers the understanding of Hurston's use of the themes in Afrofuturism. In addition, through Nanny, Hurston focuses on Afrofuturistic feminism. Nanny wanted "to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me" (16). Nanny's ability to create, survive, and imagine, propel her narrative into space, where her stories wait for Janie. Janie's mother's rape, and escape from the place of it, render Nanny and Janie alone to find a way together. But with Janie on her lap, telling her granddaughter her story, Nanny's sermon is still alive in her heart and mind, and in her soul:

So whilst Ah was tending you of nights Ah said Ah'd save the text for you. Ah been wait-
ing a long time, Janie, but nothin' Ah been through ain't too much if you take a stand on
high ground lak Ah dreamed.

*(16)*

Nanny needs no pulpit, for on her lap, she can transmit this dream to Janie, pass the dream of a
future where Black women take their rightful place at the center and "on high". Nanny's "ser-
mon" is Afrofuturistic feminist prose, for at its heart it holds Janie's past, present, and future.

## Porch Magic: Janie

As *Their Eyes* begins, readers quickly realize that they are at the end of Janie's story, not the
beginning. Hurston, the magical Griot, not unlike other Black women writers, subverts linear
time to foreground the deep tissue connection between past, present, and future, representing
the Sankofa bird once again. We, the readers, time travel with Janie, looking back while moving
forward. In fact, the first lines of the novel invoke an argument about time:

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide.
For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the
Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is
the life of men.

*(1)*

Here Time is given authority and subjectivity in Hurston's anthropomorphism. Time "mocks"
men in their dreams, as men focus out into the horizon. However, Time seems to "act" differ-
ently for women in the author's estimation: "Now, women forget all those things they don't
want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth.
Then they act and do things accordingly" (1). Here Time is buried in women's control; they are
not mocked by Time. Instead, in the power of memory, remembrance and forgetting, women
exist in the past, present, and future, simultaneously.

While so much of the time in *Their Eyes* focuses on Janie and her life story from a young girl
to a woman in her 40s, the actual "time" of the novel is only one night, one night on Janie's
porch, where she tells Pheoby her story. Janie has, this night, just returned to her home in
Eatonville, and as she walks, the people on their porches watch in judgment.

The people saw her come because it was sundown … It was the time to hear things and
talk. These sitters had been tongues, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long … But now
the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human … They became lords of
sounds and lesser things … They sat in judgment.

*(1)*

The men "noticed her firm buttocks … the great rope of Black hair … then her pugnacious
breasts"; while the women "took in the faded shirt and muddy overalls" (2). No one exists in
Janie's time: the porch sitters, in their judgment, can only focus on and objectify her body and
the past. No one but Pheoby can truly see her friend and a glimpse of the future. For it is the
intimate friendship between these two Black women that a Black, Afro future can exist, mirror-
ing in many ways the intimacy between Hurston and Kossola. Like women in centuries before
her, like her ancestors in Africa, Pheoby brings food to Janie, knowing that she must be hungry

and tired. Traveling around a corner and entering through the "intimate gate" to find her friend, Pheoby brings a "heaping" plate of food (4). While the porch sitters hope Pheoby will gather information about Janie that is "cruel and strange", Pheoby offers Janie respite from judgment by enacting their friendship (4).

And this Hurston knows: Janie exists on her porch, in her words to Pheoby, in the story of her life and in Hurston and in us as readers. So, she "begins" Janie's story at the end and with close inspection, readers see where time is wrapped around Janie's story. Janie is in fact a woman, "forgetting" all she doesn't want to "remember" and "remembering" all that she doesn't want to "forget". Here the future is present and past: she has survived her journey into, in Ytasha Womack's words, "the far-off future, the uncharted Milky Way" through relationships with her grandmother, husbands, lovers, and finally her "self". This journey to self brings us to "depths of the subconscious or imagination", where, as Black people, the future is a place we can see, actualize, and live. After the tragic death of Teacake, her self-named soulmate, Janie returns to Eatonville, walking into the future, to her porch, and to her friend, Pheoby.

On Janie's porch, in the closeness they share, the future exists, for time is suspended between them. They are Black women bonding outside of other people's judgment. Morris, building on bell hooks's notion of "talking back" in the "liberated voice", argues:

> It is not about simply replacing the dominant voice with the voice of the marginalized; rather, liberation is cast in terms of coalition and power sharing, … I want to consider the synthesis of Afrofuturism and Black feminist thought as Afrofuturist feminism. Afrofuturist feminism is a reflection of the shared central tenets of Afrofuturism and Black feminist thought and reflects a literary tradition in which people of African descent and transgressive, feminist practices born of or from across the Afrodiaspora are key to a progressive future.
>
> *("Black Girls" 154)*

Pheoby keenly awaits to hear Janie's story: "They sat there in the fresh darkness close together. Pheoby eager to feel and do through Janie, but hating to show her zest for fear it might be thought *mere* curiosity" (7, emphasis added). I emphasize "mere" for, on a micro level, the storytelling from one to the other reflects Morris's understanding of the "transgressive" "progressive future" these two Black women occupy. Janie's is not a marginalized voice attempting to seize power; her gift of story exists outside hegemonic structures. Through the "intimate" gate, Janie and Pheoby enact Afrofuturist feminism together.

Janie, herself, already exists in a different time, far beyond her neighbors. She returns from burying the dead and performs the practice of self-care that is both ancient and insistently present, and forebodes a future time and space. The whole time she tells Pheoby her story, Janie's washing and soaking her feet; in a way, this foot washing occupies the whole time of the novel as well. On the fifth page of the novel, after eating Pheoby's gift of food, she goes to "scrub mah feet" (5). And then, almost 200 pages later, her storytelling to Pheoby almost complete, she "stirred her strong feet in a pan of water. The tiredness was gone so she dried them off on her towel" (191). While not necessarily biblical, Janie's foot washing is metaphysical, for her exhaustion is both physical and spiritual. She has journeyed through life, and now on this night, in the darkness with her friend Pheoby, Janie can regenerate once again.

As is true in many circumstances, time can be marked in many ways. While Janie's story is long and could be counted through the relationships with her grandmother and her three husbands, Hurston also distills Janie's story down to this night. And it is the friendship between these two Black women and the story passed by Janie to Pheoby which invokes the close intimacy they share as "kissin'-friends for twenty years" (7). For Hurston, the necessary intimacy

between them actualizes the future: "Time makes everything old so the kissing, young darkness became a monstropolous old thing while Janie talked" (7). Here, Hurston as author, who is both a Griot and Sankofa bird, takes flight, inventing a language, engaging in hyperbole, in order to capture the weight of her story and the time traveling she's experienced; could it be anything other than monstropolous?

Janie can tell her story, now that her feet are washed and soaked and her stomach is full, with her "kissin' friend" close. Hurston writes,

> Pheoby's hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story. So she went on thinking back to her young years and explaining them to her friend in soft, easy phrases while all around the house, the night time put on flesh and Blackness.

> *(10)*

Here Hurston personifies time as both human (flesh) and Black(ness). Time may be passing in the darkness outside Janie's house, embodied in humanness and Blackness, but her thinking back and telling forward becomes a kind of Afrofuturistic loop. Janie falls deep into past remembrance: "Ah know exactly what Ah got to tell yuh, but it's hard to know where to start" (8). Janie does the metaphysical work of "soul retrieving", to borrow a term from Womack's work on Afrofuturism. This self-work *is* always future-focused: Janie's story begins, and we fall into the story as if it were the present, easily losing sight that Janie's past lives exist within her storytelling. In that way, like all stories ancient and modern, they exist in their iteration and reiteration: looking back, moving forward, and they exist in the ontological claim: I AM, the revelation of self. Hurston describes the moment: "They sat there in the fresh young darkness close together … Janie full of that oldest human longing—self-revelation. Pheoby held her tongue for a long time, but she couldn't help moving her feet. So Janie spoke" (7). Self-revelation exists in the time loop that Afrofuturism makes possible.

Hurston allows Kossola to tell his story, giving him the chance to reflect on himself, to claim and answer the question: who are you? Hurston gives Nanny her own slave narrative and finally gifts Janie with a story of ontology as well, answering Pheoby's questioning and need for the gift of another Black woman's story. In the intimacy between all, in the stories of self, which allows for time travel, their stories live forever into the future, the Afrofuture.

Hurston's oeuvre highlights that to dream, plan, and survive, Black people must claim an ontological existence. Much of western philosophy and writing concerns ontology: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* asks "To be or not to be, that is the question". The philosopher Rene Descartes claims, "I think, therefore I am". After being defined as objects that can be bought and sold, as Kossola and Nanny's experiences exemplify, it is doubly important for Black people to claim subjectivity, to claim personhood, thus making the ontological claim, I am! Most importantly, "To be" or "not to be" as a Black person demands that we exist in the present, reach back to see the past, and lean forward to live into the future, the Afrofuture.

## Notes

1 Hurston was an anthropologist who was trained to study and understand how the past relates to the present and how both can give guidance to, or an understanding of, the future. In 1927 she was given the task of finding and interviewing Oluale Kossola, called by his slave name Cudjo Lewis, who was kidnapped from West Africa's shores in an illegal slave trading mission in the 1860s. Hurston's account of these interview sessions never saw print until the 2018 printing of *Barracoon*. Ten years after meeting Kossola, Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when doing more anthropological study in Haiti, and she was once again inspired, perhaps looking back on the gift of story from Kossola.

2   Of course, "space" has multiple meanings; capitalized, we look up to the stars, but in other forms we can be called to look inside. Elizabeth Alexander's captures one idea of space that I find useful in my analysis of *Barracoon*, *Their Eyes*, and Hurston herself—the "Black interior". Alexander writes, "What I am calling *dream space* is to my mind *the great hopeful space* of African American creativity. Imagining *a racial future in the Black interior* … I see it as an *inner space* in which Black authors have found themselves to go far, *far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what Black is, isn't or should be*" (5, emphasis added). Alexander underscores how space, within ourselves and within the universe creates the terms on which Blackness and Black people find ontological existence and Afrofuturism.

3   Kossola's claim "Who I is" resonates with a moment in the 2016 film *Moonlight*, at the end of the film, when the protagonist Chiron (Trevante Rhodes) gets in touch with a man, Kevin (Andre Holland), he knew when he was a boy and a teenager and with whom he shared his first sexual encounter (a moment of beauty and intimacy). Chiron has transformed himself from a vulnerable and fearful youth into a hard and strong man. Kevin, shocked at Chiron's transformation, asks "Who is you?" echoing Kossola's claim "who I is", and reverberating through the centuries.

## Works Cited

Alexander, Elizabeth. *The Black Interior*. Graywolf, 2004.

"On Black Panther, Afrofuturism, and AstroBlackness: A Conversation with Reynaldo Anderson." *The Black Scholar*, 13 Mar. 2018, www.theBlackscholar.org/on-Black-panther-Afrofuturism-and-astroBlackness-a-conversation-with-reynaldo-anderson/. Accessed 12 Apr. 2019.

Boyd, Valerie. *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. Scribner, 2003.

———. "A Protofeminist Postcard from Haiti." *Zora Neale Hurston, the Official Website of Zora Neale Hurston*, 15 Oct. 2014, https://www.zoranealehurston.com/resource/a-protofeminist-postcard-from-haiti/. Accessed 9 Dec. 2022.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery, Duke UP, 1994, pp. 179–222.

Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 287–302.

Harris, Trudier. *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan*. U of Georgia P, 1996.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. Harper Collins, 1998.

———. *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"*. Amistad, 2018.

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

Morris, Susana M. "Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler's *Fledgling*." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 3–4, 2013, pp. 146–166.

———. "More than Human." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 46, no. 2, Feb. 2016, pp. 33–45.

Peck, Raoul, director. *I Am Not Your Negro*. Magnolia Pictures, 2016.

"The Power of Sankofa: Know History." *Carter G. Woodson Center*, 20 Nov. 2017, www.berea.edu/cgwc/the-power-of-sankofa. Accessed 27 Feb. 2021.

Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2013.

# 59

# THE MIDDLE PASSAGE TO THE ANTHROPOCENE

## Eco-Humanist Futures in Black Women's Poetry

*Marta Werbanowska*

In many ways, the very existence of African American poetry—what the poet June Jordan terms the "difficult miracle" of its persistence (261)—is a testament to the success of the cultural practices and cosmologies that enabled Black survival of and after the Middle Passage. Following that traumatic encounter between Africa and Europe and their respective ideologies of "being human", Black authors have often proposed African-derived cosmologies and ways of knowing as the humane—and ecological—antidotes to the fragmented, mechanistic, and exploitative *modus operandi* of Euro-America. Today, in the face of exacerbating crises of global anti-Blackness and imperialistic ecocide, they continue to revisit the histories of Afro-diasporic survival in search of models for imagining human and larger-than-human life at—or even after—the end of the world. In this Anthropocene era of climate change, the need for ecological ways of thinking and being is undeniable; at the same time, understanding the ideological entanglements between the violences of racial slavery, colonialism, and imperialism and those of environmental destruction becomes crucial for envisioning a just and sustainable way forward. This chapter considers poems by Nikki Giovanni, Tracy K. Smith, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs—three generations of African American women writers—that revisit histories of the Middle Passage to imagine Black futures guided by eco-humanist thinking.

The fluid idea of *Black eco-humanism* in this chapter builds on Michael Onyebuchi Eze's definition of *African eco-humanism* and Lorraine Code's idea of *ecological thinking*. The former, as Eze explains, "draws upon an African cosmology to articulate a historicized view of an eco-community that is more inclusive and adaptive" than the anthropocentric humanism of European Enlightenment (622). Inclusive of but not limited to the African continent, Black eco-humanism also covers the adaptations and evolutions of such philosophies by the Black diaspora, scattered across the Atlantic in the wake of the Middle Passage. Comprising "ways of knowing that depart from" what Code terms the "epistemological monoculture" of the West, such eco-humanism is also a diasporically situated type of ecological thinking—an epistemological practice that is "sensitive to human and historical-geographical diversity and well equipped to interrogate and unsettle the instrumental rationality, abstract individualism, reductionism, and exploitation of people and places that the epistemologies of mastery have helped to legitimate" (Code 8–9, 21). Thus, rather than from any explicit focus on environmental concerns, the ecological dimension of Black humanism stems from its preference for relationality and collectivity over individualism, material spirituality over materialism, and sustainable

harmony over domination, in human and larger-than-human interactions alike. The poems discussed here embrace Black eco-humanist principles in their visions of futures and spaces that can exist beyond the Anthropocene.

### Looking Back to Look Forward: Afrofuturism in "We're Going to Mars"

Defined by Reynaldo Anderson as a project whose mission is to lay "the groundwork for a humanity that is not bound up with the ideals of white Enlightenment universalism", contemporary Afrofuturism can be thought of as one type of Black eco-humanism (230–231). While this rejection of Western epistemological dominance is one of the central tenets of Black studies in general, Afrofuturism's specific focus on the apocalyptic character of the Middle Passage encourages a rethinking of Black diasporic life as "always already" futuristic. Since, as Mark Dery argues, "African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees", their experience of modernity has been one of "a sci-fi nightmare"—and, consequently, also of postapocalyptic survival (180). African American and other Black diasporic writers often revisit the memory of that foundational abduction and write against its forgetting within the official civilization-defining narratives of the modern West. Afrofuturist creators in particular, as Kodwo Eshun asserts, "extend that tradition [of cultural countermemory] by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective" (289). Remembering the unofficial, discredited, and often unrecorded histories that position "slavery at the heart of modernity", Afrofuturism spins interweaving future visions of the past and the present in light of these histories (Eshun 297). In this manner, Nikki Giovanni's "Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea (We're Going to Mars)" reframes the memory of the Middle Passage as an analogy of a futuristic interplanetary journey that, this time taken voluntarily, navigates towards a space and time where (and when) Black life can thrive.

The 2002 poem offers a rumination on humankind's fascination with interplanetary travel that turns the popular Euro-American assumptions about Blackness and futurity on their head. Published the same year as Paul J. Crutzen's *Nature* article that introduced the term *Anthropocene* to popular scientific discourses, "Quilting" reconfigures the idea of linear history to underscore "the necessary connection between black history and our collective human future" (Bashir 35). To this end, the poem opens with a sweeping catalog of historical and literary events that, in various ways, have paved the way for the human journey to Mars. Having asserted that "Marco Polo rocketed / to China" and "Columbus trimmed / his sails on a dream of spices" in search of "adventure" (lines 1–4), the poem's speaker proposes that

> We're going to Mars because Peary couldn't go to the North Pole without Matthew Henson because Chicago wouldn't be a city without Jean Baptiste Du Sable
>
> *(lines 9–12)*

This recollection of the oft-ignored centrality of people of African descent to the achievements of Western civilization is followed by a swift reminder that the latter's geographical and technological progress has not necessarily been accompanied by moral or ethical advancement. To the contrary, in the poem's scathing assessment,

> we journey forth
> carrying the same baggage
> but every now and then leaving
> one little bitty thing behind:

maybe drop torturing Hunchbacks here;
maybe drop lynching Billy Budd there;
maybe not whipping Uncle Tom to death
*(lines 18–24)*

The speaker's disenchantment with the moral progress of humanity—at least as it presents itself in the Euro-American literary imagination and the violent histories it reflects—continues with scenarios for an interplanetary contact if it were to take place on Earth: "If Mars came here", Giovanni speculates, "it would be ugly": "nations would ban together to hunt down / and kill Martians" (lines 35–37) as well as

**Martian Sympathizers**
As if the *Fugitive Slave Law* wasn't
    bad enough then
As if the so-called *War on Terrorism*
    isn't pitiful now
        *(lines 42–46, bold and italics in
                original)*

Tying together the violence of the past, the present, and the prospective future, the poem shows that while the victims of the state's racializing ideologies are subject to change, the fundamental mechanisms of otherization, subjugation, and elimination remain the same. Thus, the history of Western civilization roughly sketched in the first two pages of the poem reveals itself to be circular rather than linear, at least in one aspect: that of constant return to creating, as Toni Morrison puts it, "the illusion of power through the process of inventing an Other" (24). And to both Morrison and Giovanni, it is the "narratives of slaves"—and their descendants— that are "critical to understanding [this] process of Othering" (25–26).

Consequently, the people who have experienced radical dehumanization are instrumental to imagining future ways of retaining humanity under the most challenging of circumstances. Describing the prospective journey to Mars as three years spent by astronauts "in a tight space going to / an unknown place" with "no known landmarks to keep them human" (lines 67–70), she states in "Quilting" that

there is no historical precedent for that/except this:

The trip to Mars can only be understood through Black Americans
I say, the trip to Mars can only be understood through Black Americans
*(lines 72–75)*

With the Middle Passage as the only "historical precedent" for interplanetary travel, the poem positions its descendants as an "alien nation", best equipped not only to survive another journey but also to establish relations with Other aliens. Echoing Morrison and Paul Gilroy's assertion that the "concentrated intensity of the slave experience is something that marked out blacks as the first truly modern people" (221), the poem ponders the fundamentally modern humanist questions that the kidnapped Africans had to consider to survive, physically and spiritually, as still relevant for (post)modern humans traveling into the unknown: "How did you calm your fears … How were you able to decide you were human even when everything said you were not … How did you find the comfort in the face of the improbable to make the world you came to your world" (lines 108–111).

The key to survival for both the enslaved and the cosmic travelers lies, Giovanni suggests, in their rootedness in Black cultural practices developed in the aftermath of the Middle Passage. In the poem's last stanza, the collective speaker that is "Black America" offers a list of instructions that will enable "NASA" to "successfully go to Mars and back":

> you will need a song … take some Billie Holiday for the sad days and some Charlie Parker for the happy ones but always keep at least one good Spiritual for comfort … You will need a slice or two of meatloaf and if you can manage it some fried chicken in a shoebox with a nice moist lemon pound cake …
>
> *(lines 113–119)*

This tongue-in-cheek index of space travel essentials draws from African American history of overcoming adversity through the generative power of nourishment, be it spiritual—as the song which was first raised "in the belly of the ship" to offer comfort, hope, and remembrance (line 99)—or physical, like the Southern Black culinary customs that evolved out of the scarcity of food under slavery and inaccessibility of dining facilities under Jim Crow. By positioning survival practices from seemingly bygone times as applicable to near-future endeavors, Giovanni blurs the lines between Black past, present, and future, suggesting their coexistence rather than succession. Combined with the poem's emphasis on the ongoing relevance of Black knowledges, this circular understanding of history aligns Giovanni's message with the tradition and practice of *Sankofa*—the Akan-derived Africana epistemological principle that advocates for "a return to the source, to one's history and culture for grounding and models in one's unique cultural way of being human in the world" as a mode of envisioning sustainable futures (Karenga 413).

Significantly, the poem's Black America not only shares the knowledge it has historically developed here on Earth but is also suggested to precede NASA's grasp of outer space. The poem ends on a note advising the astronauts that, upon their landing on the surface of Mars, they will see "a smiling community quilting a black-eyed pea … watching you descend" (lines 124–125). While the race (or even species) of this community is never explicitly stated, the closing metaphor marks it as culturally Black through the use of the *mascons*, defined by Stephen Henderson as images that carry "*a massive concentration of Black experiential energy*", of quilting and black-eyed peas, both associated with Black folk practices of the American South (44, emphasis in original). The resulting image highlights the endurance of Black life and culture in spite, and outside of, the cycles of Euro-American violence described in the earlier parts of the poem (the "smiling community" seems to be welcoming its visitors with an attitude radically opposed to the hostile, "Othering" greeting that the speaker speculates would await Martians on Earth). Echoing the story of how the Dogon people's ancient astrological knowledge confounded twentieth-century European scientists, Giovanni's vision of Black people as the pioneers of interstellar travel also testifies to the essentially eco-humanist nature of African American survival practices that foster the life-giving principles of cooperation, community, and exchange. Defying the limitations of space and time as imagined by the "epistemological monocultures" of the West, the poem—like a quilt that interweaves the past with the present, folk knowledges with scientific discoveries, and the Middle Passage with space travel—suggests that Black history is, in fact, (inter) planetary future.

### A Black Feminist Passage to *After the End of the World*

One epistemological tradition that can be seen as essentially eco-humanist in its relentless rejection—as well as transcendence—of the limitations of Western thought and in its search for being "otherwise" has been Black feminism. Experimental artist and thinker Denise Ferreira da

Silva, for instance, sees the figure of "the Black Feminist Poet" as one that "peers beyond the horizon of thought" and thus sees a future after "the end of the World produced by the tools of reason" (84). Alexis Pauline Gumbs's 2018 *M Archive: After the End of the World* offers a poetic vision of such "existence toward the beyond of Space-time" and into "relationality, contingency, immediacy" (da Silva 91). The book imagines a postapocalyptic world where the boundaries between past, present, and future, as well as those between self and other and human-nonhuman, are blurred and obsolete; rather than on discrete entities, events, and locations, the collection's focus is on relations, continuities, and processes. Building on another apocalyptic event, *M Archive* is written in conversation with M. Jacqui Alexander's essay collection *Pedagogies of Crossing* that frames the Middle Passage as

> not only a geographic transfer of millions of people but also a movement of energies and elements into a relationship that persists, a material and conceptual relationship we navigate with the potential and compelled crossings we make in each moment.
>
> *(Gumbs x)*

In Gumbs's book, the crossing becomes the organizing metaphor, a methodology, and epistemology all at once. Like the Middle Passage, the "end of the world" in *M Archive* is an end and a beginning at the same time, and Black feminist modes of knowledge become constitutive in the process of this world becoming anew.

The Middle Passage, in many ways, can be understood as a process-event during which time and space underwent radical transformation, both inside the hulls of the ships and across the planet connected by their routes. First, the transatlantic slave trade was a key stage of the geo-climatic shift that initiated the Anthropocene or, perhaps more accurately, the Plantationocene—a descriptor that underscores "the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor" (Haraway 206). In biochemical and ecosystemic terms, as Christina Sharpe reminds us, "the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today", since about "90 to 95 percent of the tissues of things that are eaten in the water column get recycled" (40–41). The "crossing" may thus be said to have fundamentally affected the spaces and times, or locations (from Africa and Europe to the Americas, from land to sea) and durations (from single lifetime to eternity), in terms of which we think of (Black) human life. Finally, the Middle Passage was a paradoxical realm of simultaneous undoing and becoming of psyches, peoples, and cultures. Édouard Glissant and Wilson Harris describe the space-time of the hull of the ship as "a matrix … pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death" (6) and a "limbo which is a metamorphosis or new spatial character born of the Middle Passage" (17), respectively. *M Archive* recreates this larger-than-human, at once lethal and generative, space-time of the Middle Passage to imagine a world after a catastrophe that has forced humankind to radically remake itself in order to survive.

In *M Archive*, the world "ends" in an anthropogenic ecological catastrophe. Humankind has committed a "suicidal form of genocide" that "could only make the planet unbreathable" (6), and the accounts in the book constitute "the archive of our failure" (139). This failure, both moral and physical, is presented as an inevitable consequence of what Code terms the "the self-certainties of western capitalism and the epistemologies of mastery it underwrites" (4): a civilization built on the principles of domination, extraction, and exploitation of all Others, human and nonhuman alike. Recollections of how "they used to scoop up everything we loved and put it in a machine" (149), or how the invention of teleportation did not seem worth "all the blood it took to teleport … even if it was somebody else's" (152), illustrate that before the humans

"made themselves obsolete" (153), they had lived in a mechanized civilization that placed for-profit efficiency and short-term gains over sustainable growth and ethical responsibility. One witness-survivor of the Armageddon makes the indictment clear:

> i mean maybe it was all a response to the mining and blasting and digging and polluting and paving and disrespecting. maybe if we had known we would have been gentle enough keep the planet together. you know?

> but anyway this is what happened. (and you can take it literally or not) one day, all at the same time, the continents got up, just stood right up after letting us live on their backs all that time …
>     and the planet was gone.

> *(161–162)*

Despite their hesitant tone and mitigating vocabulary, the speaker seems to be fully aware of the catastrophic impact that large-scale capitalist exploitation has had on the planet, as well as their complicity in the literal end of the world (through their use of plural first-person pronouns). With a combination of resigned distraction ("but anyway") and regret, they also admit that other ways of being and operating in the world were available yet ignored, as "the people who wanted to tear up the forests and frack down for oil and build highways on the sacred mounds couldn't listen [to the indigenous people] and steal at the same time" (161).

Other accounts in the book reveal that, although discredited by the then dominant—now fallen—civilization, such alternative knowledges have survived, and are still available after, the Apocalypse. In one poem-vignette, children living after the end of the world learn about the past from their teacher-elder: "*there was something called rain. and it mixed with the sun. and they grew out of the ground, when the earth was brown. when the earth was brown like us and green. meaning ready and alive*" (142, emphasis in original). From this fragment's use of the first-person plural, as well as from several other moments in the book—explaining, for example, that "melanin started to matter more" for survival right before the catastrophe (15)—we can assume that the survivors, "brown" like the earth, are the Indigenous, Black, and other people of color. This "end of whiteness" (76) is attributed to the Euro-American civilization's dismissal of the "subordinated knowledges that are produced in the context of the practices of marginalization" by subjugated peoples (Alexander 22): "anything they wanted to know about the earth and what would happen if they ignored it, they could have learned by watching the old, curved brown women everywhere" (Gumbs 35). Thus, Gumbs reveals the roots of the Armageddon as both ecological and epistemological, and those who have survived it have been able to do so not only through adaptation to their new environments but also by embracing and utilizing their hitherto-dismissed knowledges and ways of being.

The most salient of these knowledges, *M Archive* suggests, have been produced by Black women, and the roots of their wisdom can be traced back to the "crossing" of the Middle Passage. One of the downfalls of Western civilization, according to a speaker early in the book, was the Enlightenment notion of the human subject as an individual separate from its human and nonhuman Others: "this thing about one body", she reveals, turned out to be "not a sustainable unit for the project at hand … which is to say, breathing" (6). Armed with hindsight, the speaker—a researcher in archives that document the now-fallen civilization—knows that, in the universe, "there is no either or. there is no this or that. there is only all", and asserts that the "black feminist metaphysicians" (6) had been the first to preach this fundamentally ecological principle. Here, the awareness that a human organism can neither physically nor spiritually

survive in isolation stems from the experience of the Middle Passage, during which the shackled captives "learned each other by shape, by the melding of their body fluids, by scent" so that, by the time they reached the shore, they were "none other than each other" (115). The becoming of a new people that had first taken place on the slave ship, described by Harris as a "re-assembly which issued from a state of cramp to articulate a new growth" (13), had also laid out a blueprint for future adaptive transformations required in the face of rapid environmental change. Those who heeded the call of the Black feminist metaphysics of crossing were better equipped to cultivate the memory of that first end of the world and, consequently, to survive (after) the second one.

While Giovanni's poem draws primarily from African American traditions to imagine a survival guide for an "unprecedented" future, Gumbs reaches even further across the times and spaces connected by the Middle Passage, attributing world-generating powers to the African past and Black diasporic practices outside North America as well. *M Archive*'s penultimate section, titled "Baskets (Possible Futures Yet to Be Woven)", remembers

> the people who had been dancing in circles. charting the way back.
> opening their bodies to be inhabited by the elements. you can say
> they had an advantage. or that their africanness foreshadowed
> everything, just as it had overshadowed everything before the end.
>
> their yellow and green meant they could predict a world. their
> yoruba and akan meant they could feel a world coming.
>
> *(181)*

Just as Harris interprets the Caribbean limbo dance as a spiritual reenactment of the slave ship, where "the slaves contorted themselves into human spiders", and thus a "kind of gateway" (11) between the African past and American present, Gumbs sees Afro-Brazilian dances as conduits for African cosmologies enacted in the body. It is through the "opening [of] their bodies to be inhabited by the elements" that the dancers are able to "predict a world" after the disaster, one that requires an understanding of the self as permeable and relational, open to what elsewhere is termed "the radical black porousness of love" (7). Like all poem-vignettes in the book, this one, too, ends with a footnote that directs the reader to a passage in *Pedagogies of Crossing*. Here, it takes us to the closing paragraph of a chapter in which Alexander calls for solidarity of women of color across differences because the boundaries that separate them "are never discrete" (297). In *M Archive*, such Black feminist solidarity, rooted in the epistemologies of crossing—across the Atlantic Ocean, across individual bodies, and across the human and nonhuman—becomes the foundation for a new humanity after the end of the world.

### From "Voyage through Death" to *Life on Mars*

A kind of Black feminist thinking rooted in African cosmologies that transcend the boundaries between the Western ontological categories of human and nonhuman, being and nonexistence, or self and Other, can also be traced in Tracy K. Smith's 2011 collection *Life on Mars*. In his review of this Pulitzer Prize-winning book, James Edward Ford III proposes that the poems collected there "can be read as questions, explorations, and hypotheses on dark matter"—a substance that "composes most of the universe" but also defies the traditional divide "between something and nothing" (164–165). Indeed, Smith's work tends to straddle modern scientific discourses and premodern African cosmologies, posthumanism and Black humanism, and

syncretize them into a vision of an ecological subject—one that is "made by and making its relations in reciprocity with other subjects and with its (multiple, diverse) locations" (Code 91). In *Life on Mars*, the subject often speaks from a space of transformation, of death and rebirth, of the pain but also hope that comes with experiencing the simultaneous loss of one world and emergence of another. While the collection does not mention the Middle Passage as such, it imagines subject-making processes that echo Glissant's visions of dissolution and reconfiguration of individual and collective subjectivity inside the "womb abyss" of the slave ship (6)—or the poet Robert Hayden's famous account of the "voyage through death/to life upon these shores" (lines 6–7). Just as Glissant maintains that "the abyss is also a projection of and a perspective into the unknown" (8), Smith approaches the transformative realm of the abyss, both oceanic and cosmic in its imagery, as an epistemic standpoint from which a (post)human subject of the future can be imagined.

One poem in *Life on Mars* that describes such an abysmal realm of becoming—perhaps the Middle Passage, perhaps the Armageddon—is "At Some Point, They'll Want to Know What It Was Like". The speaker-survivor exists in a time-space that cannot be pinned down: she may be an ancestor recalling the crossing from Africa to the Americas, or a future survivor of a planetary catastrophe. Prioritizing visceral, affective recollection of the experience of transformation over any "objective", factual account that would allow the reader to identify the event, she describes her death and rebirth within a Glissantian "womb abyss":

There was something about how it felt. Not just the during—
That rough churn of bulk and breath, limb and tooth, the mass of us,
The quickness we made and rode—but mostly the before.

The waiting, knowing what would become. Pang. Pleasure then pain.
Then the underwater ride of after. Thrown-off like a coat over a bridge.
Somehow you'd just give away what you'd die without. You just gave.

The best was having nothing. No hope. No name in the throat.
And finding the breath in you, the body, to ask.

*(lines 1–8)*

Forcing previously separate bodies into a proximity that at once melts them together ("churning" them into a "mass") and violently fragments them (into "limb" and "tooth"), the event echoes the limbo "dance" of contorted bodies. The "underwater ride" further heightens the association with the horrors of the Middle Passage but also brings to mind a submerged world after a catastrophic increase in sea levels caused by global warming. Yet, the speaker does not perceive that process as purely terrifying; rather, she recalls the dissolution into "having nothing" as the "best" aspect of the event. Stripped of the symbolic ("name") and imaginary ("hope") realms of human activity, the speaker is reduced to her physicality ("you, the body"). This moment of absolute dispossession and dehumanization is also one of rebirth: it is only after the certainties of the old self are stripped away that the generative power of breath can be experienced most viscerally, and the unknown can be faced with utter openness. "Confronting the unknown with neither preparation nor challenge" (Glissant 5), one can only "ask", rather than assume or assert.

With the rallying cry of "I Can't Breathe" at the countless demonstrations for Black Lives since Eric Garner's murder in 2014, breath and breathing have become mascons in Black culture in recent years. Back in 1970, Harris proposed that "breath is all the black man [*sic*] may

have possessed at a certain stage in the Americas … [H]e possessed nothing but the calamitous air of broken ties in the New World" (33). Recalling Frantz Fanon's dictum that the colonized revolt when they can no longer breathe, Christina Sharpe explains how what she terms the *weather* of systemic racism—"the totality of the environments in which we struggle; the machines in which we live" (111)—ceaselessly works to take even this fundamental "possession" away from Black people, and calls for the necessary work of *aspiration*, or "imagining and … keeping and putting breath back in the Black body in hostile weather" (113). In "At Some Point", Smith performs aspiration by focusing on the power of breath to sustain life and generate future possibilities: to (re)construct broken ties between the self and the body, the past and the present, one needs to "ask"—absorb the unknown and transform it into knowledge, just as oxygen and glucose are transformed into energy during respiration at the cellular level.

Structurally and thematically, the poems in *Life on Mars* oscillate around such moments of generative transformation, of re-membering the self through its relations with human and larger-than-human others, all connected by a universal life force. Smith explains that she "wrote the bulk of the book in the wake of [her] father's death, and while [she] was pregnant with [her] daughter. So those unknowns felt very present and very urgent" to her (Klein). Importantly, these "unknowns" of death and birth are not oppositional, but entangled. The ontology behind Smith's work echoes what Will Coleman describes as West African ideas of "personal [and collective] perpetuity", or "the Afrocentric belief in a cyclical process of regeneration through birth, death, and rebirth" (35). In this cosmology, death and birth are liminal moments when the human self is most "porous" and open to interactions with the world of spirits and energies, animated by an "ever-present life force" (Coleman 4). In Smith's poems, this force appears under the guises of God, It, or "The Largeness We Can't See"—an omnipresent power that "we live blind to" while it constantly "[l]eans its deathless heft to our ears / and sings", safeguarding the continuity of the cycle of life (lines 15–17). This idea of universal and cyclical connectivity of all beings is also reflected in poems such as "Everything That Ever Was" (which asserts that the eponymous "everything … still is, somewhere, /floating near the surface" [lines 3–4]) or the playfully titled "It & Co.", in which the speaker wonders: "Is It us, or what contains us?" (line 2). From an African-derived ontological standpoint, the answer is always both: divine forces do not exist in separation from their material manifestations in humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects.

This essentially African and eco-humanist vision of (always larger-than-) human life also informs the two most obviously Afrofuturist works in Smith's book: "Sci-Fi" and "The Museum of Obsolescence". Both poems imagine a future civilization that syncretizes Euro-American and African sciences, philosophies, and cosmologies. With life now transferred to another planet, located "[e]ons from even our own moon" ("Sci-Fi", line 19), this future world is posthuman in a technological and cybernetic sense: sex and gender distinctions have become obsolete ("Women will still be women, but / The distinction will be empty. Sex // … will gratify / Only the mind, which is where it will exist" [lines 7–10]), and the life-giving qualities of Earth have, by necessity, been replaced with scientific inventions ("But the word *sun* will have been re-assigned // To a Standard Uranium-Neutralizing device" [lines 14–15]). But it is also posthuman in the sense of its departure from the liberal Western humanist understanding of progress, domination, and consumption as markers of a good life and a successful civilization: the Museum of Obsolescence houses relics from the past such as "green money", "oil in drums", and books "[r]ecounting the wars"—things we "once coveted" but that are now "returning / To uselessness" (lines 10–12, 1, 3–4).

Yet, this new civilization offers neither an idyllic Afrocentric return to pre-capitalist, pre-modern values nor a futuristic techno-utopia: while people "live to be much older, thanks / To popular consensus", this now "scrutable and safe" ("Sci-Fi", lines 17–18, 21) cosmos is also

suspiciously sterile, with not only "Illness" but also "Love" constituting "Concepts difficult to grasp" for the posthumans ("Museum", lines 19–21). Like the Middle Passage centuries earlier, the interplanetary journey to this new planet was a rupture following which a complete return to what once had been becomes impossible. When read together with the three final poems in the book that meditate upon birth, conception, and the briefness of human life, Smith's futuristic lyrics seem to suggest that a sustainable, Afrocentric humanism—what Maulana Karenga describes as the "unique cultural way of being human in the world" (413)—is perhaps best remembered and recreated by the way we live here and now, rather than hoped for in a distant future.

## Conclusion: Recalibrating the Human

The poems by Giovanni, Gumbs, and Smith discussed in this chapter offer a small sample of contemporary poetry that draws from the long and diverse traditions of Black eco-humanism to imagine sustainable future worlds and subjects, either here on Earth or beyond its confines. From Phyllis Wheatley in the seventeenth century all the way to contemporary poets such as Danez Smith, African American and other Black diasporic authors have been guided by African cosmologies in their visions of (social) ecosystems where Black life can thrive in spite of the devastating, world-altering rupture of the Middle Passage and the history of racial capitalism and exploitation that followed. Healing from that original trauma, frustrated by subsequent forms of racialized violence, including the ongoing anthropogenic environmental catastrophe that disproportionately affects communities of color, requires that the coordinates of what makes us *human* are recalibrated to generate an ecological, ecumenical subjectivity, both individual and collective. The poets discussed in this chapter undertake this task through the prism of what M. Jacqui Alexander dubs the "existential message of the Crossing": the knowledge that a Black eco-humanist "intersubjectivity premised in relationality and solidarity" (22) can be, and "always already" has been, re-membered, re-generated, and re-created—even after the end of the world.

## Works Cited

Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Duke UP, 2005.

Anderson, Reynaldo. "Afrofuturism 2.0 & The Black Speculative Arts Movement: Notes on a Manifesto." *Obsidian: Literature in the African Diaspora*, vol. 42, no. 1–2, pp. 230–238.

Bashir, Samiya. "Giovanni's World: After a Three-Year Hiatus, Poet-Activist Nikki Giovanni Returns with 'Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea'." *Black Issues Book Review*, vol. 4, no. 6, 2002, pp. 32–36.

Code, Lorraine. *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location*. Oxford UP, 2006.

Coleman, Will. *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of Telling the Story*. Pennsylvania UP, 2000.

da Silva, Denise Ferreira. "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2014, pp. 81–97.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery, Duke UP, 1994, pp. 179–222.

Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 287–302.

Eze, Michael Onyebuchi. "Humanitatis-Eco (Eco-Humanism): An African Environmental Theory." *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, edited by Adeshina Afolayan and Toyin Falola, Palgrave, 2017, pp. 621–632.

Ford, James Edward, III. "'Space Is the Place': Afrofuturist Elegy in Tracy K Smith's *Life on Mars*." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2014, pp. 161–166.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard UP, 1995.

Giovanni, Nikki. "Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea (We're Going to Mars)." *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea: Poems and Not Quite Poems* by Giovanni. Harper, 2002, pp. 1–4.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. 1990, translated by Betty Wing, U of Michigan P, 2010.

Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. *M Archive: After the End of the World*. Duke UP, 2018.

Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2015.

Harris, Wilson. "History, Fable and Myth in The Caribbean and Guianas." *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 1/2, 2008, pp. 5–38.

Hayden, Robert. "Middle Passage." *Collected Poems*, edited by Frederick Glaysher, Liveright, 2013, pp. 48–54.

Henderson, Stephen. *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*. Morrow, 1973.

Jordan, June. "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1986, pp. 252–262.

Karenga, Maulana. "The Field, Function, and Future of Africana Studies: Critical Reflections on Its Mission, Meaning, and Methodology." *Handbook of Black Studies*, edited by Molefi Kete Asante and Maulana Karenga, Sage, 2006, pp. 402–420.

Klein, Michael. "Interview with Tracy K. Smith – 'Poets are Lucky'." *Ploughshares Blog*, 30 May 2012, http://blog.pshares.org/index.php/the-word-i-couldnt-leave-a-few-questions-for-tracy-k-smith/. Accessed 10 Nov. 2020.

Morrison, Toni. *The Origin of Others*. Harvard UP, 2017.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke UP, 2016.

Smith, Tracy K. *Life on Mars*. Graywolf, 2011.

# INDEX

Pages in *italics* refer to figures and pages followed by "n" refer to notes.