

VECTOR

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CLASS

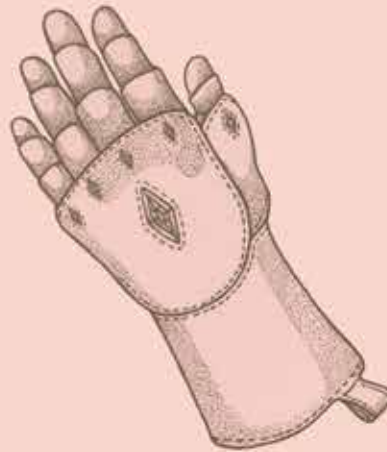
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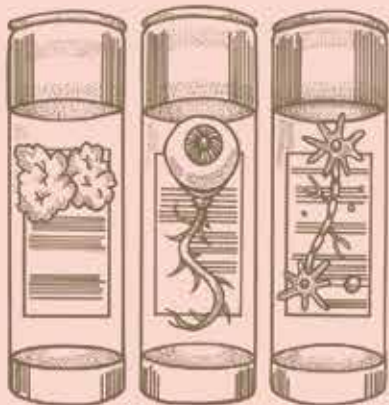
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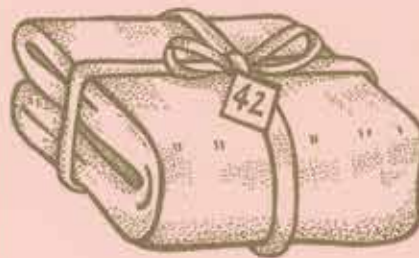
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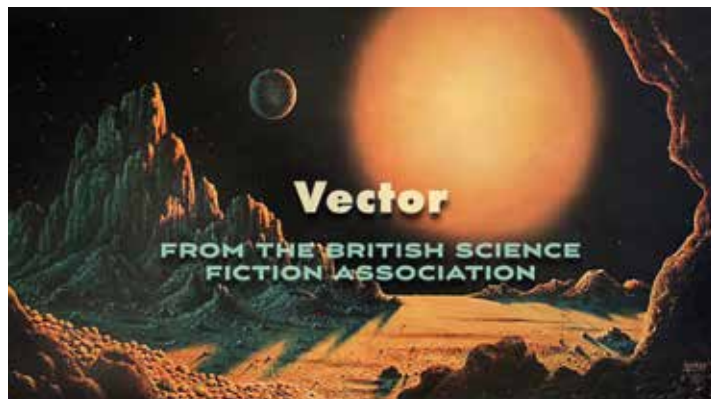
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Fictions of Escape: SFF and Class

Guest Editorial by Nick Hubble

It is customary to commence editorials to special issues with an explanation of why the issue's theme is of topical relevance to the reader. At this point I could in best academic manner write something about how social class, which had perhaps been in retreat as a category of analysis, has made a return to pressing relevance in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007-8. However, I think we have moved beyond the time for such circumspection. I would argue that social class has always been central to SF and fantasy, both of which exist for the purpose of expressing opposition to the existing dominant social order. However, even if this wasn't the case, I think the current relevance of class to SFF would still be blindingly obvious. Phenomena such as the election of Trump, Brexit, and various other global manifestations of populism and disruption bear testimony to a seismic shift in the social structures of capitalism. The unfolding climate crisis and the global Covid-19 pandemic provide these changes with an apocalyptic context. The stakes are now as clear as they have ever been: if the current capitalist ruling class remain in power, the world as we know it will experience such devastation over the course of this century that the possibility of establishing alternative sustainable forms of society will be remote.

The Subsidiary Body for Implementation of the Agreement

This catastrophic context directly or indirectly informs much current SFF from Kameron Hurley's *The Light Brigade* (2019) to N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-7). A prime example of such work, Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), explicitly combines class and environmental analysis in order to map out how capitalism might be challenged and the climate crisis averted over the next few decades. The novel's opening chapter set in 2025 provides a harrowing description of a heat wave in India, in which more people die than in the First World War, illustrating how a "wet-bulb temperature" of 35 °C is lethal for human

beings. Robinson's subsequent account of the failings of the Paris Climate Accords leading to this event is couched squarely in class terms:

Now India was being told not to burn coal, when everyone else had finished burning enough of it to build up the capital to afford to shift to cleaner sources of power. India had been told to get better without any financial help to do so whatsoever. Told to tighten the belt and embrace austerity, and be the working class for the bourgeoisie of the developed world, and suffer in silence until better times came—but the better times could never come, that plan was shot. The deck had been stacked the game was over. And now twenty million people were dead. (Robinson 2020: 23-4).

As a consequence, therefore, India rejects the global capitalist order by electing a new political party, nationalizing the power companies, building wind and solar plants, dismantling the caste system and embracing change. Furthermore, a radical portion of this new Indian polity promises economic war on any countries failing to implement the Paris Agreement: "The world would see what this particular one-sixth of its population, formerly the working class for the world, could do. Time for the long post-colonial subalternity to end" (Robinson 2020: 26). We see how that threat plays out across the following decades as we cut to and fro between many different locations and events around the world, all interwoven with the activities of the titular UN agency that is founded as a permanent "Subsidiary Body for Implementation of the Agreement". The narrative encompasses a wide variety of approaches: at one point the head of the Ministry, Mary Murphy, upbraids the seven-person presidential Swiss Federal Council for the misuse of numbered bank accounts and invites them to invent post-capitalism by way of atonement, appealing to a sense of bourgeois

rectitude perhaps. However, many of the other examples of actions collectively leading to the easing of the climate crisis that Robinson describes are more obvious examples of class struggle, such as the founding of cooperatives and staging of general strikes. The result is that revolution comes. “Not the expected one” (Robinson 2020: 480) but a complicated post-capitalist form of zero-carbon blockchain economics, in a world navigated by sailing ships and hot air balloons, with political decisions made according to the principle of subsidiarity at the most local level possible, even by the people on the streets.

Morlocks vs. Eloi

Of course, there is nothing new about SFF advocating revolution. For example, William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890) is one of a number of late-nineteenth-century socialist utopias that describe the results of radical social change; in this case, a general strike and civil war in 1952 have led to the evolution of an egalitarian arts-and-crafts society with enlightened attitudes on divorce and childcare. It is not surprising that such themes became prominent in this late nineteenth-century period during which capitalism achieved full dominance as a global system. The very processes which enabled this development, such as the completion of rail and under-sea telegraph networks, were realised through exploiting the labour of the international working class. Class conflict is inherent to modernity and therefore also to SF, which is fundamentally a literature of modernity. This is exemplified in the figure of the writer most often taken as the main early practitioner of modern SF, H.G. Wells, who places a particularly brutal representation of the class struggle at the centre of *The Time Machine* (1895).

In this novel, the time-travelling protagonist famously travels 802,701 years into the future to find that the proletarian-bourgeois divide of nineteenth-century England has devolved into two species: the child-like Eloi roaming free in a pastoral idyll and the technologically advanced Morlocks, who live underground but emerge at night to eat the Eloi. Despite Adam Roberts’s recent contention that the Morlocks are the descendants of the upper class and the Eloi are the distant offspring of the workers (Roberts 2019: 44-6), most people *do* read the connotations the other way round and see this as a satire on the class structure of fin-de-siècle England. The fact that the power differential has exchanged so that the ugly workers, forced underground at some point to keep them out of sight, now have the whip hand is the point. Wells has two messages for his late-Victorian readership.

Allowing society to be based on a binary class divide is obscene per se. Besides, there’s always the possibility that such a hierarchy might flip.

In particular, there is an intentional revenge element to the plot of *The Time Machine*. It is doubtful that Wells could have written this novel with such relish, or even at all, if it wasn’t for his intimate knowledge of what life was like “below stairs” in the big country houses that still exercised feudal domination over large tracts of England. His mother was the housekeeper at seventeenth-century Uppark, on the South Downs, where servants moved around – like the Morlocks – through a series of tunnels to keep them out of sight.

It is the transgressive element of *The Time Machine*, by which extreme symbolic violence – literally, eating the rich – underwrites a desire to change the world, that appealed many years later to Joanna Russ. In her “The Second Inquisition” (1969), a teenage girl dealing with the social repressions of 1925 imagines liberation in the form of rescue by a female trans-temporal agent, who, when questioned, admits to being a Morlock, one of the terrible murderous rulers of the worlds of the future. More recently, Creation Theatre’s adaptation of *The Time Machine* placed Wells’s concern with class struggle into the context of climate crisis, geopolitical instability, out-of-control technology, and rolling pandemics: devastating events with unequal impact on the rich and poor. After playing for just a few nights, the show had to move online because, almost as it prophesied, of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the Country of the Blind

This idea of symbolic liberation is central to SF. It is not always violent – it can be as simple as the idea of a rocket overcoming the forces of gravity – but the idea of breaking free from particular ideologies or social orders, allowing the possibility of different ways of living or even simply escape, is a recurrent motif in the generic forms which established SF. Arguably, for example, the general thrust of US golden age SF concerns the desire of a technically educated, new middle class (e.g. clerks, technicians, and engineers etc.) to liberate themselves from residual nineteenth-century values. This desire is never far from Wells’s stories, which is why they were so widely republished in the American magazines of the 1920s. Perhaps the quintessentially British version of this sentiment is best expressed in Wells’s “The Country of the Blind”. Here, the sighted hero, far from becoming King as the famous

proverb suggests, ends up dying an outcast rather than submit to having his eyes surgically removed. As I have written concerning the story:

It is an allegory concerning the inhospitability of an ingrained and hidebound society (i.e. late Victorian and Edwardian England) to new ways of seeing (i.e. as advanced by representatives of the new science and the new politics, such as Wells himself). The development of the “scientific romance” created a brilliant device for presenting Wells’s visionary ideals to a wider public in the face of this stasis and reaction. The “science” guaranteed the progressiveness of the social and cultural themes, while the “romance” provided a fictional space in which to situate this oppositional discourse against that of the restrictive ruling ideology. (Hubble 2005: 94)

There is a paradox to this new “structure of feeling” [1], which is that although it is most likely to be keenly felt by people from marginalised classes – working, lower-middle and new-middle – it is not the oppression of the ruling classes per se that it seeks to be free from, but rather from the class system itself. In this sense, real liberation is not about gaining better representation or more power for one’s own class, so much as it is dissolving one’s own class, along with the systems that produce it. The ingrained and hidebound values that are being rebelled against might be as much the product of working – or lower-middle-class culture as of the elite.

In some SF texts, such as “The Country of the Blind”, this question remains ambiguous because Wells doesn’t make it clear which particular section of society he is most concerned with but obviously just wants a new order, which he spent another forty years trying to write into existence. However, there are at least two major ways in the twentieth century in which SF imagined the end of the class system: by working-class revolution or by the disappearance of upper and lower classes leading to a uniformly new-middle-class society.

Mars Wars

It would require a large book to map out these two science fictional approaches to a classless society in full, but one way to grasp what is at stake quickly is to think of two distinct traditions of representing Mars in SF. On the one hand, there is what we might consider the “American Mars” of Bradbury, Heinlein and Dick, in which Mars is essentially an exotic version of small-town America,



enabling various forms of (by no means insignificant) social critique to be effectively employed while not being revolutionary. On the other hand, there is “Red Mars”, as featured in *Red Star* (1908) by the Bolshevik, Alexander Bogdanov, in which the protagonist, Leonid, a revolutionary involved in the Russian Revolution of 1905, discovers that his comrade Menni is in fact from the advanced socialist society of Mars. The bulk of the text takes the form of a classic utopian tour, as Leonid accompanies Menni back to Mars and gets to experience socialism in action, which includes a liberating reduction of gender difference. In the process of Leonid’s stay, we learn the history of the relatively peaceful revolution on Mars some centuries before, in which the means of production were socialized following a wave of strikes and the workers’ party becoming the government.

One interesting feature of the novel is that Leonid struggles to the point of mental breakdown with acclimatizing to the cultural difference of a fully egalitarian society: “overwhelmed by its loftiness, by the profundity of its social ties and the purity of its interpersonal relationships” (Bogdanov 1984: 135). As a consequence, Leonid comes to the conclusion that it would have been better if Menni had picked a normal worker to take to Mars rather than an intellectual such as himself because someone with less to unlearn but “organically more stable and firm” (Bogdanov 1984: 135) would probably find it easier to adjust. Using the difference between Earth and a fictional socialist society on Mars, Bogdanov illustrates the cultural schism not only between actually-existing capitalist and communist or socialist societies but also the differences within socialist societies. Hao Jingfang’s *Vagabonds*

(2020) presents us with a contemporary version of the “Red Mars” paradigm. Here Mars functions as the locus for the examination of the positions of three generations of Chinese communism in a context in which everyone is to some extent a worker. However, the “Red Mars” scenario works equally as providing a space for those American writers seeking to think through a politics that is difficult to situate within the context of their own country. The obvious example of this phenomenon is Robinson’s *Red Mars* (1992) and its sequels. The idea of a “Red Mars” also exists at a more straightforward level as shorthand for the possibility that society might be organised in a more classless and collective way than contemporary America; see, for example, Hurley’s *The Light Brigade*, in which the protagonist eventually joins the Martian communists. In the case of the popular book series, *The Expanse* (2011-) deployment of the “Red Mars” paradigm serves in part to set up a cold-war style relationship between Earth and Mars, which can sometimes be exploited by the “Belters”, the marginalized working-class miners of the asteroid belt.

A Common Style of Proletarian Life

While class-conscious SF might be driven by a desire to escape from restrictive social orders, many social and cultural factors work to maintain the class structures in society. This isn’t due to “false consciousness” or people not thinking about the circumstances they are in. The sociologist Margaret Archer argues that self-reflexivity is universal: people always reflect on who they are in relation to the world around them. However, this thinking takes different forms, and is not always disruptive. As discussed above, the advent of global capitalism and mechanised modernity in the late nineteenth century was certainly a period of change and discontinuity. So one might expect it to be filled with self-reflexive individuals, taking advantage of situational opportunities to rapidly reconfigure the social order. However, the period wasn’t necessarily experienced as discontinuous by everyone. Wells might have moved through a dizzying array of social contexts in his circuitous but relatively rapid rise to global fame, but he was very much an exception. Curiously enough, most people in Britain experienced more repetitive and stable lives, characterised by only incremental changes. When these people reflected on themselves and their place in the world (so Archer suggests), they tended to do so in ways that stabilised the class system, rather than destabilising it. In Doris Lessing’s *The Four-Gated City* for example, the protagonist Martha Quest migrates to Britain in the postwar era. Even before the novel’s science fictional elements proper are

revealed, Quest’s outsider status gives her a distinctly science fictional awareness of Britain’s stolid social structures. Martha muses of her dinner companion Henry:

The trouble is, you have to choose a slot to fit yourself to, you have to narrow yourself down for this stratum or that. Yet although the essence of Henry’s relation to me is that I should choose the right slot, find the right stratum, he would not understand me if I said that: he’d be embarrassed, irritated, if I said it. (Lessing 1969 : 34)

In this respect, Britain at that time was not comparable with modern-day China. In the guest editorial to *Vector* 293, “Chinese SF”, Yen Ooi notes that “China has over the last four decades achieved the technological and economic advancements that countries in the West achieved in the last century” (Ooi 2021: 4). In comparison, Britain arguably took more like 200 years to undertake a similar transition. This led to what Archer describes as a “paradox of modernity”. The kind of “contextual discontinuity” imagined by various branches of economics in which a population of autonomous, reflexive individuals pursue their own ends according to the dictates of instrumental reason did not accurately describe this modernity. Instead,

slowness allowed “contextual continuity” to be reconstituted in the new urban-industrial complexes. The “migratory elite” accurately characterises the captains of industry and later on, their managerial lieutenants, but the urban location of the majority of the [British] population took place gradually throughout most of the eighteenth, the nineteenth and the twentieth century. After this rural uprooting, there was little to discourage urban rerooting on a new geo-local basis [. . .]. Most shook down to the novel pattern of urban living, but one still characterised by features conducive to “contextual continuity”, such as short-distance travel, minimum education, life-long work for one employer, inter-generational solidarity, and knowing, if not loving, their neighbours. (Archer 2007: 318)

The majority of the population who lived within this known world of “contextual continuity” were by and large not desperate to escape as long as they fitted comfortably within it. According to Eric Hobsbawm,

“a common style of proletarian life” formed in Britain in the 1880s and 1890s – even as Wells started writing SF – and remained dominant until well after the Second World War. This “style” was defined both by political factors, such as membership of trade unions and the co-operative movement, but also non-political factors, such as football, fish and chips, and flat caps (Hobsbawm 1978: 231-2).

In the 1970s, Hobsbawm bemoaned the erosion of this culture in the 1950s because he thought the result of that was to hinder the march forward to a socialist Britain. However, if we look at the attitudes displayed to this working-class culture by English SF writers in the 1950s, it is clear that it was not universally considered progressive. William Morris had imagined a revolution taking place in the 1950s but John Wyndham and John Christopher wrote more in the tradition of Wells. Indeed, Wyndham’s *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) draws explicitly on “The Country of the Blind”, which is even discussed at one point by the novel’s protagonists, archetypal new-middle-class scientist Bill Masen and upper-class Josella Playton, as they seek to survive the decimation of the now mostly blind population of England by giant carnivorous walking plants.

Bill and Josella join a sighted group led by a sociologist, Beadley, who plans to build a new society by dispersing across the country and using blind women as breeding stock. Beadley has identified the moral conditioning of existing British society as the biggest obstacle to the human species’ survival (it’s assumed the rest of the world will simply fall apart). This moral conditioning is linked in the text to Christianity but plot developments invite the reader to also connect it to the contextual continuity and restricted nature of the common proletarian style of life. At the beginning of a chapter entitled ‘Frustration’, Bill unexpectedly wakes up to find himself chained to a bed in a strange room and shouts out. In response, the door opens and a head appears:

It was a small head with a tweed cap on the top of it. It had a stringy-looking choker beneath, and a dark unshavenness across its face. It was not turned straight at me, but in my general direction.

“Ullo, cock,” it said, amiably enough, ‘So you’ve come to, ‘ave yer? ‘Ang on a bit, an’ I’ll get you a cup o’ char.’ (Wyndham 2000: 107)

The speaker is identified visibly and linguistically as a member of the working class, who is blind. It quickly transpires that Bill and Josella and some others have been kidnapped in a raid on Beadley’s group organised by the socialist agitator, Coker, and each assigned to a group of twenty blind people with the instruction to help these people – all of whom who speak are similarly linguistically coded as working class – survive amidst the ruins of London. To his credit, Bill does not take the first opportunity to rid himself of the two men he is handcuffed to during foraging trips, and tries to help the group at least get established. However, he feels no affinity for these people and displays his assessment of their value by inwardly cursing Coker for leaving him “holding the baby” (Wyndham 2000: 114). Eventually Bill is released from his frustration by most of the group dying of an unknown disease; the symbolic logic is that the working class are of no use to the future. In contrast to Bill’s implicit rejection of the working class, the protagonist of Christopher’s *The Death of Grass* (1956) is clinical in his rejection of the idea that a working-class man will be of any help to his group’s chance of survival following the collapse of society: “A manual worker of some kind; the sort of man who would give a lifetime’s faithful inefficient service [...] A few months ago the pipe-dream had probably been a £75,000 win on the football pools” (Christopher 1963: 141).

The New Proletariat

British SF of the 1950s, such as written by Wyndham and Christopher, is more concerned with class struggle than its American equivalent precisely because the organised working class, empowered by the Labour Party’s 1945 election victory and the establishment of the Welfare State, presented an obstacle to establishing the kind of technocratic society desired by the new middle classes in the UK. Over time, the political orientation of British SF has shifted as the Labour Party became increasingly associated with modern progressive ideas from the 1960s onwards but the projected vehicle for further progressive change has tended to remain the new middle classes, who were in any case becoming increasingly indistinguishable from the middle class as whole in a society that was now being predominantly shaped by state comprehensive schools and state universities rather than private education and Oxbridge colleges.

By the 1990s, “working class” and “middle class” were increasingly becoming, if not entirely meaningless designations, at best relational terms that meant different things to different people; especially imprecise as

declarations of personal identity. For example, when J.G. Ballard declared in 2002 in the *Guardian* that “my belief is that the middle class is the new proletariat and that in due course we will have to launch a revolution to free ourselves from the abuse we are now on the receiving end of” it was quite difficult to parse the finer politics of his position beyond getting the distinct impression that he didn’t want to be criticised for listening to Radio Four. Repetition of the mantra that the middle class is the new proletariat, in the novel he published the next year, *Millennium People* (2003), seemed satirical in intent when combined with observations to the effect that “prosperous suburbia was one of the end states of history. Once achieved, only plague, flood or nuclear war could threaten its grip” (Ballard 2008: 91). However, his next and final novel, *Kingdom Come* (2006), was both more disturbing and eerily prescient, in its imagination of the kind of classless society long desired by the new middle classes emerging as a hybrid form of English nationalism and “consumer fascism” (Ballard 2006: 168) centred on “a new ‘republic’ stretching from Heathrow to Brooklands, the whole M3/M4 corridor. A new kind of dictatorship based on the Metro-Centre” (Ballard 2006: 196). In the aftermath of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, and in the light of the class of politicians that has risen to prominence on the back of those social phenomena, it is not difficult to see something like this happening.

Faultlines

Of course, with the social glue of the once stable class system now dissolving, it is almost inevitable that Britain will fragment in the years to come; not just in terms of Scotland (and even possibly Wales) becoming independent (a development which will be driven primarily by a class-based commitment to the social democratic ideals of the welfare state) but also in a series of splits that can be seen in outline – between country and city and between the north and south of England – when looking at the map displaying Remain and Leave voting areas in the June 2016 EU referendum. In this respect, the poignant portrayal of the doomed relationship between middle-class Remain-voting architect Harry and working-class Leave-voting hairdresser Michelle in Chris Beckett’s *Two Tribes* (2020) is good at illuminating some of the issues but too schematic in its representation of class

division, which is portrayed as a straight-forward binary divide leading to a future civil war between “the Liberals” and “the Patriots”.

I am a Remain-voting university professor married to an EU citizen, but I am also a comprehensive-school-educated first-generation graduate, whose father and many former schoolmates voted Leave. While I wouldn’t claim to be representative in myself, I think I am representative of the way in which most people can tell very different stories about themselves by highlighting different facts. Therefore, in my view the social reality of Britain is not that there is an uncrossable class divide across which the two sides rarely meet and do not know how to talk to each other; the reality is rather that social identity has become so heterogeneous and overdetermined that everyone struggles to make sense of it, leaving us prone to reach too readily for generalisations. For me, the post-Brexit novel which comes closest to capturing the feeling of England today is Simon Ings’s *The Smoke* (2018) which superimposes at least four different plots – a 1960s-style kitchen-sink northern-working class drama, an alternate European history, a space race to Mars, and a tale of transhuman development – to create a complex, messy, temporally-layered understanding of our fragile present, in which repressed desires spring up even as the Britain of the postwar decades is revealed to be “a fading dream, or a pocket universe slowly blinking out of existence” (Hubble 2019). It is not so much that the class difference Ings reveals is any less unbridgeable than the one charted by Beckett, but rather than existing as a hard divide between two opposed social blocks, it is located inside individual people so that living becomes a matter of solving one’s own contradictions rather than projecting them onto “others”. Thinking about class in this way reveals the way in which consciousness, as much as the material division of labour, determines social being. Such a complex understanding of class makes it easier to resist the allure of the idea that any one class can be *the* revolutionary class and *the* subject of history. Moreover, such a complex understanding of class should come as no surprise to us because we are familiar with it from various works which have become classics; their popularity deriving precisely from their capacity to transcend (or, in some case, send up) schematic understandings of the class divide.

Proles, Working-Class Heroes, and Mid-Century Classics

“Hope lies in the proles”, Winston Smith tells himself periodically in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Yet the irony of that famous dystopian novel is that Winston never manages to make meaningful contact with any members of the working class. The nearest he comes to a proper conversation is with a very old man in the pub; a British institution that plays a central role in the national life precisely because of its (theoretical) status as a neutral space for cross-class encounters. The resultant exchange is one of the funniest moments in a novel which is often darkly comic. Winston, desperate to hear what society was like before the revolution which ushered in the rule of the Party, is reduced to providing a list of ever more stereotypical prompts about “capitalists” as he fishes for a response he can make sense of: “They could ship you off to Canada like cattle. They could sleep with your daughters if they chose [. . .] Every capitalist went around with a gang of lackeys who –” (Orwell 2013: 103-4). At this word, the old man’s face finally lights up:

“Lackeys!” he said. “Now there’s a word I ain’t ‘eard since ever so long. Lackeys! That reg’lar takes me back, that does. I recollect – oh, donkey’s years ago – I used to sometimes go to ‘Yde Park of a Sunday afternoon to ‘ear the blokes making speeches. Salvation Army, Roman Catholics, Jews, Indians – all sorts there was. And there was one bloke – well, I couldn’t give you ‘is name, but a real powerful speaker, ‘e was. ‘E didn’t ‘alf give it ‘em! ‘Lackeys!’ ‘e says, ‘Lackeys of the bourgeoisie! Flunkies of the ruling class!’ Parasites – that was another of them. And ‘yenas – ‘e def’nitely called ‘em ‘yenas. Of course ‘e was referring to the Labour Party, you understand.” (Orwell 2013: 104)

This somewhat timeless joke nicely illustrates Orwell’s understanding of the ambiguous nature of the standing of the working class in Britain; caught between revolutionary formation and narrowly defined cultural identity. His phonetic transcription of the old man’s speech is similar to Wyndham but he employs it not to signify a middle-class frustration but to support the satire at the expense of the kind of left-wing middle-class intellectuals, such as Winston, who constantly invoke the working class without having any contact with it. The effect of the scene depends on Orwell’s understanding

of the possibilities of slippage between the two different ways of thinking about the working class, as subjects of history or bearers of an entrenched cultural identity. A similar idea underpins the joke he makes at the end of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), playing on *The Communist Manifesto*, when he reassures his fellow middle-class intellectuals that in throwing in their lot with the working classes, “we have nothing to lose but our aitches” (Orwell 1986b: 204).

Nineteen Eighty-Four is often portrayed as a very serious work but it is this leavening of playful irreverence with respect to dogma which underpins its unique flavour and thereby its enduring popularity. However, for a book of equivalent stature which maintains a similar healthy scepticism to received opinion from a working-class perspective, we need to turn to fantasy and J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-5). Fantasy superficially appears more reactionary than SF because it tends to feature various classes – nobles, landed gentry, merchants – that we don’t generally see as the vehicles for progressive values and, at least formerly, is often set in pre-industrial periods without the equivalent of modern class relations. The tendency of epic fantasy to treat ‘race’ as a set of fixed categories, with fixed moral meanings, is also part of this reactionary baggage. This has changed in the twenty-first century both as the boundaries between SF and fantasy have become more porous, and in the way that fantasy, in the wake of Terry Pratchett especially, has become a vehicle for exploring historical social development in the light of contemporary concerns. For example, Joe Abercrombie’s *Age of Madness* trilogy (2019-2021) stages a combination of the industrial and French revolutions in his established fantasy realm of Adua, while at the same time reflecting the populism and political chicanery surrounding Trump and Brexit. His attitude concerning the prospects of overthrowing hierarchical social order is cynical but that doesn’t prevent his most contemporary character, Vick, who has grown up in “the camps”, from dreaming her escape from all such systems. However, such escape is not easy to achieve, as reflected in the most recent of Steph Swainston’s Castle series, *Fair Rebel* (2016), which like Abercrombie’s work reflects the social unrest of contemporary England. Here, Connell is one of the women leading an attempt by the marginalised and dispossessed of the Fourlands to overthrow the ruling immortal Circle. Acutely aware of how the slightest misfortune can send poor people like herself into a spiral of descent from which there is no recovery, she analyses the deadening paradox of the class system, which is that it misdirects those seeking escape by constraining their perspectives within the very limits that it creates:

This country is just people stuck in different echelons, different classes, unable to escape them no matter how hard they struggle, staring at each others' lives in bewilderment and disbelief. When they spread their wings, all they can manage is to fly round and round in a cramped cage. (Swainston 2016: 229)

At the end of *The Wisdom of Crowds*, there is a sense of a fragile stability restored but with a suggestion that it won't endure for long; at the end of *Fair Rebel*, the likelihood seems to be that stability won't be restored and that "the Empire will soon blow itself apart" (Swainston 2016: 321). These novels are the product of an unequal hierarchical society which has become inherently unstable.

In contrast to such twenty-first century fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings* appears to be a uniformly politically conservative work, which culminates in "The Return of the King" and generally privileges traditional hierarchies from imperial Gondor and feudal Rohan to the relationship between High Elves, such as Galadriel, and those other Elves who had never been to the West. Most of the protagonists – including Merry and Pippin, who eventually turn out to be, respectively, scions of the Masters of Buckland and the Took Thains – are from the ruling classes. However, there is nonetheless one key working-class hero: Sam Gamgee, of whom Tolkien once wrote 'Sam is the most closely-drawn character, the successor to Bilbo of the first book, the genuine hobbit' (Carpenter and Tolkien 1981: 105). Significantly, *The Lord of the Rings* closes with Sam's return home and he has the final words, while holding his recently born baby daughter Elanor, "Well, I'm back" (Tolkien 1966c: 311). Furthermore, an unpublished epilogue was drafted in which Sam, who has become Mayor of the Shire, talks to a now-teenage Elanor on her birthday, assuring her that there will be things for her to see and do even though a great age has now passed: "The choice of Lúthien and Arwen comes to may Elanorellë, or something like it; and it isn't wise to choose before the time" (Tolkien 1992: 125). In structural terms, therefore, Sam is not only *the* central hero of *The Lord of the Rings* but he is also the conduit for passing on agency from the great lords and ladies to ordinary people such as young hobbit girls.

Sam's key intervention comes when, with the fate of the ring-bearer's quest and Middle Earth lying in the balance, he fights off the monstrous Shelob in the passes of Cirith Ungol. On the one hand, this passage serves as Tolkien's acknowledgement of the heroism

of the working-class soldiers, especially of officers' batmen, that he experienced during the First World War, including at the Battle of the Somme in which he served. It also demonstrates that Sam is the possessor of a ferocity unavailable to his middle-class master, Frodo. For a moment we are transported from the world of high fantasy to the immediacy of a gangland fight: "Now come, you filth!" Sam screams, "Come on, and taste it again!" (Tolkien 1966b: 338-9). This transformative action leads to one of the most significant scenes in the novel. Thinking Frodo dead, Sam realises that he is faced with the choice of whether he should take the ring from him and carry on the quest alone. He is forced to relinquish his familiar subordinate class position as a servant and become an active agent in the plot. As a result, new possibilities open before him:

... he saw Samwise the Strong, Hero of the Age, striding with a flaming sword across the darkened land and armies flocking to his call as he marched to the overthrow of Barad-dûr. And then all the clouds rolled away, and the white sun shone, and at his command the vale of Gorgoroth became a garden of flowers and trees and brought forth fruit. He had only to put on the Ring and claim it as his own, and all this could be. (Tolkien 1966c: 177)

Of course, Sam doesn't make this choice but this isn't an indication of weakness on his part but rather the opposite. By being shown to refuse the dangerous power of the ring, Sam is elevated to the same level in the text as Gandalf, Galadriel and Aragon, the highborn and powerful figures who pass the test of temptation. The fact that this may be put down to "plain hobbit-sense" in his case does not diminish his achievement so much as highlight the strengths of the hobbits' worldview as "little folk", which can be seen as the product of a class perspective. Relatively unalienated in their labour, and with a close relationship in their everyday lives to use value, hobbits as a whole are less likely to be taken in by delusions of grandeur or lust for power than other classes or groups in the novel. This characteristic is a central component of Tolkien's Middle Earth, underpinning the logic of both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, in which, for all its eventual pomp and prophecy, the essential moral values are established in the opening hobbit-focused chapters, which were originally drafted before the beginning of the Second World War (see for dating, Tolkien 2015a: 309, 461; 2015b: 18, 67). It is also worth noting, in a novel that

is marked by racist representations of others such as the “Southrons”, that it is Sam who takes time to wonder about a dead brown-skinned warrior, “what the man’s name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home” (Tolkien 1966b: 269).

Suburban Modernity

This 1930s origin of *The Lord of the Rings* – Tolkien reached the point when the tomb of Balin is discovered before the end of the decade – is actually quite significant for thinking about the politics of the novel and its enduring popularity in class terms. As noted above, the overall position of the work appears to be conservative in terms of its plotline resulting in the restoration of traditional order. This is hardly unusual in relation to English literature as a whole, given that most canonical works, from Shakespeare via Jane Austen and up until Wells, are concerned with the restoration of order. Even in the 1950s, following several decades of modernist and politically radical fiction, most of *The Lord of the Rings’* readership would view its culmination in the return of the king as reflecting convention rather than as a specific political statement. In any case, the recent restoration of order following the defeat of the threat of fascism was welcome to all. While it has been suggested that the events of the penultimate chapter, “The Scouring of the Shire”, in which we see the Shire defaced by machinery and collectivist policies, is a comment of the policies of the 1945-51 Labour Government, it should be noted that this idea that the Shire would be transformed while Frodo, Sam and the others were away was already planned before the war began.

This survival of 1930s themes into the 1950s suggests a different temporal timescale than the one which for decades dominated British historiography. The success of *The Lord of the Rings* might appear to be at odds with the logic of the post-1945 Welfare State but it is entirely in keeping with the recent assessment of historian David Edgerton that the “actual post-Second World War United Kingdom was in some ways better prefigured in the programme of the Tories and the British Union of fascists (BUF) than that of the Liberals or the Labour Party” (Edgerton 2019: xxxiv). Edgerton’s point is that the infrastructure of the 1950s, from rolling stock to schools, hospitals and employment exchanges, was in fact that of the 1930s; as was the diet, preserved in aspic by rationing and food controls, and the Welfare State, which was a reworked version of the one created by the Conservatives in the 1930s.

Thought about within this historical framework, it makes sense to see the Shire as an expression of the Conservative modernity of the 1930s. Sam’s metamorphosis from literary working-class servant in the tradition of Cervantes’s Sancho Panza or Dickens’s Sam Weller to full participant in the politics of the Shire as Mayor, constitutes a progressive form of politics which is not a million miles away from Orwell’s vision in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941) of a classless society emerging along the arterial roads of the outer suburbs of London in the “naked democracy of the swimming pools” (Orwell 1986a: 69). It is interesting to look back on this mid-century moment in comparison to Ballard’s perspective on this same demographic.

Of course, neither Orwell nor Tolkien are unequivocally celebrating a suburban worldview but they see it as offering some possibility of a transformed future. As Frodo says, “I should like to save the Shire, if I could – though there have been times when I thought the inhabitants too stupid and dull for words, and have felt that an earthquake or an invasion of dragons might be good for them” (Tolkien 1966a: 71). The real-life version of this invasion, the Second World War, did shake things up and made a new social configuration possible. There is a case for arguing that Tolkien captures this possibility better than most other writers of the period because he is able to depict a world in which characters from different classes interact and communicate meaningfully with each other. In this respect, Tolkien is successfully able to write a hero who is both culturally working class and capable of expressing and helping to make a future which offers choices to men and women outside the traditional ruling classes. Therefore, Tolkien achieves exactly the conjunction between both meanings of the working class that Orwell employs to satirise the dogmatic faith of left intellectuals such as Winston Smith in working-class revolution as an inevitable historical process.

The Matter of Britain

My analysis of class has by now – unsurprisingly given that I’ve spent more than half a century immersed within it – become entirely embedded within the “Matter of Britain”, the legends, folklore and popular imaginary which influence and complicate the political and social systems that ostensibly rule the largest of the “Islands of the North Atlantic”. This structure of feeling, like my analysis of *The Lord of the Rings* above might seem very far from the possibilities of SF, from Wells onwards, to imagine social change. However, the two traditions are more easily combined than is readily apparent as

demonstrated by Iain M. Banks's 2008 Culture novel, *Matter*, which as John Clute noted in a review at the time, "includes enough talk about regicide and dynasty and destiny and myth-making great events" to make us realise that the title does not just refer to physical matter (Clute 2008: 4). Here, Djan, the daughter of the King of the Sarl, which is a loving representation of the kind of quasi-medieval society that was once virtually synonymous with all fantasy, is also a Culture agent. Ultimately, Djan and her brother, Prince Ferbin, sacrifice their lives to save the planet but at the close of the novel we learn that the Culture's Special Circumstances division will be supporting Ferbin's irrepressible servant, Holve, in a career in politics. The closing pages of the novel may therefore be read as a satire on the ending of *The Lord of the Rings*, as Holve returns home to his wife and children and explains their sudden reversal in fortune:

So, it's politics for me, my dear. It's an ignominious end for a man of my earlier ambitions, I realise, and not one I'd have wished on myself; however, somebody's got to do it, it might as well be me and I think I can confidently say I shall bring a new, fresh and wider perspective to our pretty political scene which will be good for the Sarl [...] and very good for you and me, my darling. I don't doubt I shall be most affectionately remembered by later generations and will probably have streets named after me, though I shall aspire to a square or two and possibly even a rail terminus. Now, where did you say that pipe was, dearest? (Banks 2008: 592)

For all the knowingness, it is clear that Holve will be a good leader and preside over a shift of class relations away from the existing traditional hierarchical order. In other words, Banks is improving on Tolkien by replaying Sam becoming Mayor of the Shire but without the return of the king. At the same time, if Djan as a royal princess has had to die to make way for history, the fact that she is also a princess of the Culture in which all girls are as princesses, foretells a more distant future of universal free human agency. In this respect, *Matter*, which like the other later Culture novels is often undervalued, should be seen as a landmark twenty-first-century work of SFF, linking the possibilities of down-to-earth working-class wit and outlook with the expansive space-faring idea of escaping from finite social orders completely.

The Wider Context

It is not only British middle-class intellectuals, such as Winston Smith, who feel awkward when trying to talk to members of the working class. In Ursula Le Guin's classic "critical utopia" *The Dispossessed* (1974), the anarchist Shevek finds himself bowed to for the first time in his life by the servant assigned to him in the university rooms he occupies during his trip from his homeworld, Anarres, to its twin planet, Urras. The face, hands and clothing of this man come much closer to Shevek's idea of what a normal human being should look like than the immaculately groomed and attired Urrasti academics he has come to work with, but his initial attempt to break down the barriers between them does not go well:

"You know, in my country nobody gives any orders."

"So I hear, sir."

"Well, I want to know you as my equal, my brother. You are the only one I know here who is not rich – not one of the owners. I want very much to talk with you, I want to know about your life—"

He stooped in despair, seeing the contempt on Efor's lined face. He had made all the mistakes possible. Efor took him for a patronizing, prying fool. (Le Guin 1985: 164)

Only later, after Shevek's drunken misadventures in the city, does Efor really open up when talking about hospitals for the poor, such as the one in which his daughter died: "Dirty. Like a trashman's ass-hole" (Le Guin 1985: 236). Shevek has difficulty following Efor's stories of rats, barracks, insane asylums, executions, thieves, tenements, rent collectors and dead babies in ditches, yet also finds them familiar because "this was the Urras he had learned about in school on Anarres ... the world from which his ancestors had fled" (Le Guin 1985: 236-7). In a way, therefore, Shevek does get the confirmation of the horrors of class society from his working-class interlocutor that Orwell's Winston Smith unsuccessfully seeks from the old man in the pub. It is not an entirely convincing exchange, depending as it does on confirming nineteenth-century stereotypes, although at least Efor is given more to say for himself than the injured worker, who hides out with Shevek from the police in a basement for three days before dying.

The literary function of these working-class figures is to furnish Le Guin's novel with a "reality effect" and thus lend the illusion of depth to the representation of Urras. Nevertheless, the real narrative force of the novel lies in

Shevek's own history, related in the alternating chapters set in the past on Anarres. Here, it is significant that he has no difficulty in talking to people carrying out what would be working-class occupations in a different kind of society, such as the train driver with whom he travels across the Southwest. The main purpose of the scenes set on Urras is to provide a contrast allowing Shevek and the readers space in which to reflect on his life and choices. The resultant novel is an exceptional achievement in several respects; notably its rigorous anthropological account of how an anarchist society might function and its depiction of the sheer level of self-examination and willpower necessary, even for those within that society, to live freely. However, what one won't find in *The Dispossessed* is any indication of how one might build an anarchist society on Urras within the existing structures of Earth-like class societies; it was necessary to "fly to the moon" for that to happen.

Perhaps Le Guin's point is that escape is the only way out. Or, to put that another way, perhaps only by radically changing the frame and scale of reference is it possible to move beyond the class divisions of a finite society. One recent novel that makes this kind of move, with a nod of recognition to Banks's Culture series, is Justina Robson's *The Switch* (2017), set in a society deliberately separated from "offworld" in order to maintain a patriarchal, hierarchical order developed from "old Earth sociology". Robson demonstrates how cis- and heteronormativity function to uphold the class hierarchy within this totally closed system, which is doubly unfortunate for queer protagonists from the wrong side of the tracks, Nico and Twostar. They do in the end manage to escape to the wider galactic space beyond their hermetically sealed society, leading Nico to realize that "everything I had lived in as absolute reality was a lie" (Robson 2017: 317). While the plot could be seen as turning on something of *deus ex machina*, the point is that it is Nico's and Twostar's queerness – the novel plays on various meanings of "switch" – which allows them to free their minds of false binary logic and thereby further allows them to imagine how escape is possible conceptually. In other words, the only way to get beyond the class system is to get beyond the capitalist realism – which many people simply see as the commonsense reality of everyday life – which underpins it. Without this shift in consciousness, it is virtually impossible to conceive of an alternative society that is not based on a hierarchical division of labour and therefore the possibility of escape from class appears to be no more than a pipedream; as likely as flying to the moon. As Le Guin suggests in *The Dispossessed*, however, one way to combat the pernicious effects of capitalist realism would be to remember every time we

catch sight of the moon that another type of society is possible. Furthermore, we need to remember that the idea of escape in SFF is not one of escape from reality into a world of make believe but rather one of escape from the restrictive and artificially maintained limits of class society into a freer and more honest universe.

Monica Byrne's *The Actual Star* (2021) plays with the idea that even an apparently classless utopia might still require this possibility of escape into an even more perfect universe: "a realm of divine forms, of which all things here were merely reflections and shadows?" (Byrne 2021: 24). This complex novel, which entwines action set in 2012, with that of the Mayan civilization of 1012 and a future, nomadic, subsidiarist and anarchist, post-binary-gender society of 3012, is concerned with the question of the gap between what people have and what they want. Although the future society meets many needs, including the need to live in balance with a world in which climate change has long since led to the collapse of western-style capitalist society – so that, for example, people's possessions are limited to what they can carry, but this includes personal 3-D food printers and embedded AI – there is still something awry. In this respect, the future-set part of *The Actual Star* is a critical utopia in the tradition of *The Dispossessed* or Russ's *The Female Man* and also interesting because set in the difficult-to-imagine gap between near-future projections such as *The Ministry for the Future* and far-future projections such as the Culture novels. The society it envisions is neither built by the industrial working classes nor technicians and scientists. Instead, its basis in the movement of people travelling in small groups suggests its origin in the behaviour of those refugees successful in avoiding the climate catastrophe and pandemics which the novel projects as characterising our next 200 years or so. What holds Byrne's society together is belief in the seemingly miraculous possibility of "disappearance", the process by which people leave the corporeal world and cross over into the divine realm of Xibalba. One of many motivating plot questions is what happens when people stop disappearing. Is it time for society to change, perhaps by becoming more settled and implicitly hierarchical as may be happening very slowly, or is it time to expand beyond Earth in pursuit of the possibility of transcendence? A truly classless society might be dependent on there always being the possibility of escape; whether into another dimension or just further and further outwards.

Conclusion

In depictions of utopian societies resulting from the escape from the reactionary social structures of the home planet, such as *The Dispossessed* or the Culture novels, we don't find representations of class difference – whether linguistic markers or subaltern behaviours – except where representatives of these utopias encounter other people from societies modelled on hierarchy and scarcity. Of course, this does happen all the time in such works, not only because this is what generates the plot but also – as I hope to have shown implicitly throughout this piece – because there is something about the uncanny familiarity of these awkward cross-class encounters which makes them simultaneously painful and pleasant, shocking and funny, familiar and transgressive to us. I have concentrated on Britain, where this fascination results from a peculiarly idiosyncratic – one might say ridiculous if it hadn't affected so many lives – structure of feeling due to the particularly long and slow historical processes of industrialisation within the country. But there are many other countries in which the class divides of industrialisation have become embedded cultural identities that act as barriers to finding new ways of living appropriate to the demands of the future. In this third decade of the twenty-first century, in which we are confronted by a climate crisis, we need to transition to these future modes of living now. By achieving this it will eventually become possible to view the class divisions of industrial capitalism as little more than the product of a transitional stage in social evolution since surpassed.

Therefore, aside from abandoning capitalism, it is also time to move beyond the comforting soap-opera routines of the British cultural imaginary – and the equivalent versions across the Global North – and find a way to escape to the classless future lying at the heart of SFF. In practice we have already moved beyond the conventional conceptions of upper, middle and working class which held sway in the twentieth century, but once-dominant forms of social organisation tend to have long residual afterlives; especially within the theoretical field. I think that both the writing and the study of SFF have a key role to play in reconceptualising class and presenting cultural alternatives to it. The articles in this print issue and on the *Vector* website highlight some of the ways in which this is happening and will hopefully encourage further work on SFF and class, which is certainly an area to which I intend to return. I would like to thank all of the contributors and Polina and Jo for their work on this issue.

A future free of class systems, exploitation and alienation is possible.

Endnotes

[1] “Structure of Feeling” is a concept developed by Raymond Williams to describe meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt in distinction to formally held and systematic beliefs. Structures of feeling are analysed in respect to the range of cultural evidence rather than in terms of the behaviours predicted by social theories. (See Williams 1977: 128-135).

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Grass in Its Fist

So Mayer



A still image from *Star Trek: Discovery* season 3, episode 8.

When I think about 2020, this is the image I think about most.

It's from *Star Trek: Discovery* season 3, episode 8, and it foregrounds a young scientist, Adira, recently recovered from a serious medical procedure and thrown into a new, high-intensity work situation, asleep on their arms at their console. They have been trying for days to resolve a galaxy-brain complexity algorithm that could, simultaneously, explain why the Federation is in chaos, be key to rescuing desperately ill people, and undermine the hold of an exploitative, violent, nativist and populist criminal syndicate.

The series was filmed July 2019-February 2020, with post-production taking place remotely. It's not hard to see the post-production editors, graders and data wranglers – perhaps home-schooling as they also work from home with a pandemic on the doorstep – feeling reflected in this scene as they finessed it.

But the scene has a background as well as a foreground, in which Adira's new colleagues/bosses/adoptive parents – *Discovery's* doctor Hugh Culber and his partner, scientist Paul Stamets – talk softly and

supportively. Not only are they honouring the work of a very young and new crew member, but – for the first time – using Adira's chosen pronouns in conversation.

In some ways, it feels perilously close to Silicon Valley's exploitative vocational vision in which young programmers live at their desks for companies that spout liberal-libertarian slogans while maintaining – in terms of both their employment policies and their products – structural and systemic racism, classism, sexism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia. Yet *Star Trek: Discovery's* timely frayed and worn take on the original series' utopianism suggests that this is, instead, the revival of the dream of work that Starfleet has long held out: work with dignity, safety, meaning and import.

Dreaming, Adira *works*, their unconscious shaping the solution that cracks the code. What ensues also (re)shapes the meaning and function of Starfleet in this distressed and fragmented new universe. This scene places sleep – rest, care, dreaming – front and centre of what might be meant by a utopian vision of labour.

Adira's snatched nap at their desk feels particularly pertinent because I feel that all I've done for the last ten months is work (from home, at a screen) and sleep. It's been two books about working and sleeping that have, thus, haunted me the most of my year's reading. I was electrified by *A Memory Called Empire* by Arkady Martine, and especially its neuroscience fictions; her invention of the imago, a device that imports the personae of those who previously held a particular job, could be read as very similar both to *Star Trek's* joined Trill: Adira is notably, a human who is hosting a Trill symbiont, previously hosted by their boyfriend Grey, who glitchily haunts them in a manner reminiscent of Mahit Dzmare's situation in *Memory*. Dzmare's imago is also glitching, and her predecessor Yskander is a spectral and often unexpected presence, an embodied unconscious who guides her into intuitive connections that analogise dreamwork.

But it's two novellas that exemplified for me this idea of oneiric labour as a route out of null exploitative employment: the first, *The Employees: A workplace novel of the 22nd century* by Danish writer Olga Ravn, translated by Martin Aitken and published by translation specialists Lolli Editions, takes its inspiration from a Barbara Kruger art installation, and is absolutely what its title describes insofar as the workplace is a spaceship that's also an art gallery, and the novel's form is that of disordered entries from a report by the parent company's investigators concerned that the human and humanoid employees are becoming indistinguishable. More on this elusive text in a moment.

The second novella, *Finna* by Nino Cipri is perhaps the more conventional inclusion, as it's published by Tor, and its acknowledgements situate it resonantly and clearly within the new queer feminist SFF. Cipri writes that 'Karin Tidbeck was my Swedish consultant and she came up with the name for FINNA... [and] Rivers Solomon provided a stellar and insightful sensitivity read', presumably at least in part for the character of Jules, who is Black and non-binary (Solomon's pronouns are fae/faer and they/them). In homage and solidarity, I should say that I was tipped off to *Finna* via Twitter by The Bookish Type, an independent queer bookshop in Leeds who opened, utopianly, in September 2020, and survived multiple lockdowns by building incredible community on social media, and are continuing (like a Starfleet for books) to keep things flowing to those in need.

Cipri also notes that 'Lara Elena Donnelly gave me the premise for this story', a modelling of creative labour as mutual aid in which mutuality is both pragmatic and in the possibility of a shared unconscious. Rather than

Adrienne Rich's feminist 'dream of a common language', *Finna* attentively marks the sharply distinctive experiences of Black and Muslim characters, of cis and trans characters, of working-class employees and middle-management, in its setting of a big-box Scandi furniture store called LitenVärld. A maze in itself, LitenVärld's fractured no-place geography makes it a hotspot for maskhål, aka wormholes, which open to LitenVärlds in other dimensions.

Ava, the protagonist, is already having a bad day – covering someone else's shift, and thus sharing a roster with her recent ex, Jules – when an elderly woman called Ursula Nouri disappears from a room model called the Nihilist Bachelor Cube. The comedic riff on the excruciating language of late capitalism continues when Ava and Jules have to view a workplace instructional videos about wormholes that nods knowingly to the 'Doublemeat Palace' episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (season 6, episode 12). When Buffy's campaign for what could be called 'wages against slayage' fails, she takes a minimum-wage fast food job that supposedly fits flexibly around her unconventional schedule as well as supplying take-out leftovers for her and her sister, but actually leads to grim disappearances that riff on *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973).

Finna has a similar flex on messy edges where the real world and the otherworld meet and rip, and how it's work that crosses over between them. It smartly and tellingly balances the science-fictional otherworlds where, for example, parallel LutenVärld workers are actually vampire-zombies, with the horror of LitenVärld itself, as exemplar of late capitalist dystopia in which work is exploitative, repetitive and meaningless, yet also – because it's a lived space where others who are also disenfranchised or dislocated find/lose themselves – a site of connection and even love. The dream/nightmare otherworlds analogise, satirise and redistribute the signifiers of work without evacuating them of meaning: Ava has to return to LutenVärld at the end, and it remains as awful as it was, even after confronting vampire-zombie hordes.

But what the otherworlds also offer, or rather highlight, is the possibility of comradeship. Forced to travel through the maskhål with Jules, Ava finds a form of workers' solidarity *in extremis*, as their collective decisions and actions are freed from corporate oversight and commerce, and become (as in Starfleet) life-or-death. Ava learns to trust herself through Jules' trust in her, and realises how the dignity of labour, with its skills and solidarity, is ground down by capitalist employment, but not entirely ground out. The experience of otherworlds raise



Rilakkuma and Kaoru

the possibility that dreaming and imagining are *forms* of work, on the self and on the world. And perhaps it is an inalienable form of labour whose effects and products cannot be appropriated and capitalised. When Ava gets back, she's exhausted. So she sleeps – in Jules' empty apartment, where she feels safe. There's something tender and unrecognised in this moment, unfamiliar from conventional heroic narratives. Sleeping and dreaming (or entering a maskhåll) becomes a kind of redistributive action concerning who deserves security and ease.

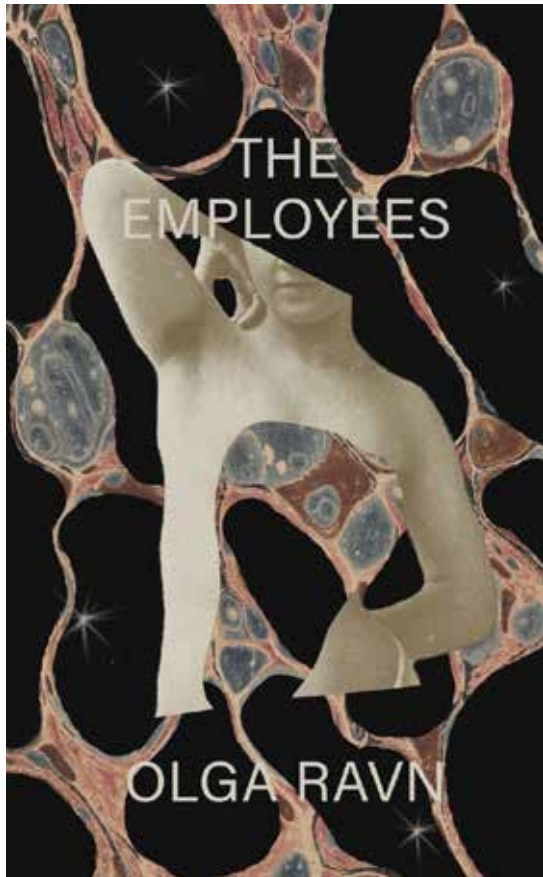
The book ends with possibility, one that is located in refusing absolutely the disciplinary frameworks of retail work, including their signposted no-places: 'To go where she wanted [Ava realised], she had to get lost, and it seemed almost instinctual to do that now... Ava chased that particular sense of disorientation, recognizable now; somewhere between the feeling of falling in love, and falling out of it... of not knowing and still going forward.'

That disorientation is also present, differently, in *Star Trek: Discovery* and *The Employees*, in both the conventional sense, and Sara Ahmed's usage to mark the force exerted on narrative and embodied spaces by queerness. *The Employees'* characters are rarely gendered: some mention experiences such as child-bearing or -rearing, but in the same breath may question whether these are implanted memories.

Both the human/humanoid distinction and binary gender collapse productively and, in fact, revolutionarily, as those employees who are – or think they are, or accept they are – humanoid take over the ship. They are acting in concert in response to a disorientation produced by a number of strange objects taken on board from the planet New Discovery. The objects produce multisensory, and even synaesthetic, apprehensions in some employees and not others, sense-memory triggers that cross the human-humanoid boundary to dispense with the Voight-Kampff test.

The *Blade Runner* reference is not plucked from nowhere. Here's Statement 097 in full, echoing the famous 'tears in rain' monologue as well as the film's rain-soaked climate dystopia:

You want to know what I think about this arrangement? I think you look down on me. The way I see it, you're a family that's built a house. And from the warm rooms of that house you now look out at the pouring rain... I'm standing in the rain that you think can never fall on you. I become one with that rain. I'm the storm you shelter from. This entire house is something you built just to avoid me. So don't come to me and say I play no part in human lives.



Feelings are feelings (as Roy Batty is arguing), and (as queer feminist Yvonne Rainer says) feelings are – like the impossible objects – facts, however much colonial capitalism suppresses and disputes that. It is in *working with* – as guards and cleaners, rather than being viewers, curators or scholars – these disorienting objects that the effects occur. Making visible the often-invisibilised labour attendant on producing a cultural sector with which we can engage critically and for pleasure feels especially pointed and poignant after a year when many wealthy national art institutions such as Tate and Southbank Centre made their lowest-paid staff redundant, especially cleaners, security, retail and hospitality workers who were often already on precarious contracts. *The Employees* considers the work that underlies others' ability to dream, and the ways in which working with numinous objects may inspire a vision of a self-ownership and self-value in that labour, and beyond it.

The Employees ends with the humanoid survivors of the uprising going planet-side, to experience an organic existence and ecosystem about which they only have implanted memories. It's a quietly, deeply subversive idea, a bleaker conclusion than *Finna's*, almost Beckettian. The penultimate, unnumbered speaker says: 'If I pull up some grass from the earth and keep it in my hand from

now on, will there be a chance then? No, we're given new bodies. My dead body will have to lie here with the grass in its fist.'

It's a reminder of the all-too-often inorganic imaginaries of space fiction, a sterile scientism that *Star Trek: Discovery* has disrupted with its mycelial network and, this season, with a greenhouse ship reminiscent of and also redemptive of *Silent Running* (Douglas Trumbull, 1972). The paramount survival of a galactic seed vault lush with vegetation (including medicinal plants) takes place in an episode titled 'Die Trying' (3.5): multispecies co-existence, indigenous and Black leadership, and ecological urgency are keynotes of the third season. It will be fascinating to see whether this eco-consciousness will be maintained in subsequent seasons.

I can't imagine the *informes* that hang impossibly in the Six-Thousand Ship in *The Employees*. When I try to, what I see is my other favourite televisual image of 2020 (although streamed on Netflix since 2019). *Rilakkuma and Kaoru* is a handmade stop-motion animation based on a popular Japanese bear toy. Its logic is indeed oneiric, with Rilakkuma and his friends' adventures offset against the predictable humiliations of office life for Kaoru. In one episode, 'Sleepless Night', the smaller bear Korilakkuma attempts to contact aliens night after night (by leaving food out for them), and eventually appears to succeed. Transported to their ship, Korilakkuma finally gets some sleep, nestled in the arms of a giant space panda. Why a panda? How in space? Is the experience (in the terms of the show's reality) real? Korilakkuma does bring back an object from the spaceship into Kaoru's apartment, defying the other characters' insistence that the ship was a dream. But, as *The Employees* puts it so poignantly, the grass remains in the hand. Under the illogics of global capitalism, what makes sense is the *longing* – experienced across all five of these texts – to sleep in the welcoming arms of a surviving ecology, soundly and safely, ready for tomorrow's soft overthrow.

SO MAYER IS THE AUTHOR OF A NAZI WORD FOR A NAZI THING (PENINSULA PRESS, 2020) AND POLITICAL ANIMALS: THE NEW FEMINIST CINEMA (I.B. TAURIS, 2015), AS WELL AS SEVERAL POETRY COLLECTIONS, MOST RECENTLY JACKED A KADDISH FROM LITMUS. SO WORKS WITH QUEER FEMINIST FILM CURATORS CLUB DES FEMMES AND CAMPAIGNERS RAISING FILMS, AND IS A BOOKSELLER AT BURLEY FISHER BOOKS.

“Harvested by Machine”: Science Fiction and Labor in Outer Space

ksenia fir

“Outer space” is not space as we know it. Capital lusts for it not because of the minerals that can be found or produced on Mars, but for what they can do to us when they get us there.

– Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis, “Mormons in Space Revisited”

Inspired by science fiction, billionaires are racing to lay claim to the Holy Grail of uncontrolled capitalist growth – outer space.¹ The “Amazonification of space,” says *The New York Times*, has now “crossed the point of no return” (Streitfeld and Woo). This is hardly surprising, considering the decades that people like Bezos have spent investing in technologies of space colonization; in Bezos’s particular case, it goes back as far as 1982 when he gave a valedictorian speech on “the importance of creating a life in huge free-floating space colonies for millions of people” (Streitfeld and Woo). Tellingly, such visions of space-colonial future lack any discussion of their inhabitants’ actual living and working conditions. What would living in outer space colonies owned by an interplanetary Amazon actually look like? Who is going to work there?

Between self-driving cars and drone deliveries, the success of the space-racing billionaires like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk depends on the myth of a post-labor utopia brought on by high-tech automatization. Not coincidentally, these prospective Mars, Moon, and asteroid colonizers are also notoriously known for union-busting and abusive labor practices. The post-labor myth is further perpetrated in popular science fiction, which rarely focuses on human working-class characters, instead casting them as robots or simply avoiding the discussion of labor altogether.² In this essay, I focus on rare cinematic and televisual works focused on human, rather than robotic, labor, specifically: *Moon* (dir. Duncan Jones,

2009), *The Expanse* (Syfy/Amazon, 2015-), and *Avenue 5* (HBO, 2020-). I argue that these science-fictional texts draw on current technological and political developments to imagine what it would be like for humanity to not only “explore” but live and work in outer space under global capitalism. The science fiction comedy *Avenue 5* considers the near-future space tourism, as envisioned by Bezos’s Blue Origin and Branson’s Virgin Galactic, while *Moon* and *The Expanse* dramatize futures which realize technocapitalist dreams to “take all heavy industry, all polluting industry, and move it into space.”³ In contrast to labor-free imaginaries, these texts illustrate, to borrow from the *Farm Worker Futurism*’s Curtis Marez, “near and distant futures where technology has not replaced workers but expanded their exploitation” (35) and taken it to the stars. Moreover, I argue that by making working-class labor and exploitation visible within their narratives and by including scenes of worker resistance, these media texts offer glimpses of new potentials for not only interplanetary, but also earthly labor organizing.

Technocapitalism’s vision of an automated, worker-free future is inseparably tethered to degradation of the working-class labor and dehumanization and erasure of those who perform it. In *Surrogate Humanity*, Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora argue that post-labor fantasies depend on positioning gendered and racialized “degraded” labor as “beneath” the human liberal subject (4). As N. Katherine Hayles demonstrated, the human liberal subject (coded as a white male) is defined by *possessing* a body rather than *being* one – a Cartesian body/mind split which allows it to erase any gendered and racial markers of difference (4-5). This split is reinforced by the myth of automation, which promises liberation from the drudgery of manual labor by delegating it to a “machine,” thus freeing the human liberal subject to focus solely on intellectual pursuits. However, the existence and operation of machines depends on human labor, often in ways that are hidden. In particular, these hegemonic imaginaries already allow labor performed

by minoritized and Global South workers to be misattributed to machines, including for instance the human labor of classifying huge amounts of data to train AIs (Atanasoski and Vora 24-25).

Space colonization presents a particularly rich ground to examine the potentialities of outer space labor under technocapitalism, not least because it explicitly puts the laboring bodies in the hands of the boss/landlord who owns the technology keeping them alive. If, as Silvia Federici argues, “one of capitalism’s main projects has been the *transformation of our bodies into work-machines*” (“The Body” 10), then the workers’ dependency on the proprietary technology for basic survival, including water and air, creates a new proletarian cyborg – a work-machine where the biological is subjugated to the technological. Notably, the very word “cyborg” was coined in 1960 to describe technology needed for a man to survive in outer space; ironically, the idea behind it was to *avoid* over-reliance on external technology like artificial atmosphere and limited supply of water – to prevent space travelers from becoming “a slave to the machine” (Clynes and Kline 27). Instead, space capitalism tethers the proletarian space cyborg to their workplace, their private life regulated and monitored, the line between work and leisure erased, and their futures up in the (artificial) air.

The science fiction genre’s crucial power, posits Fredric Jameson, lies not in attempting to imagine “real” futures but in “transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come,” which allows us to contemplate our present as history (288). *Avenue 5*, *Moon*, and *The Expanse* offer vastly different versions of the future which, following Jameson, would nonetheless all claim our here and now as their shared past. Thus, these science fiction works represent contemporary anxieties over capitalism-induced resource scarcity, ecological devastation, and the perpetually impending economic crises. In the remainder of this essay, I focus on the following three aspects of each filmic and televisual example: the forms and conditions of laboring in outer space; the representations of space capitalism’s demands and affect on the workers’ bodies; and, finally, the varying strategies of worker resistance.

I. *Avenue 5*: A Gig in Space

Having tested their spacecraft with their CEOs inside, Blue Origin and Virgin Galactic are no longer the pipe dreams of eccentric billionaires but have become pioneers in the industry of space tourism (Johnson). Following this trajectory forty years into the future, HBO’s

satirical *Avenue 5*, created by Armando Iannucci, introduces a fictional company Judd Galaxy, who “put the spa in space” with luxury cruises – the latest one being *Avenue 5* – available to upper classes and lucky lottery winners. To sell the fantasy of space travel as a safe and appealing enterprise to its customers, Judd Galaxy relies on the tropes from popular science fiction: *Avenue 5*’s bridge looks familiar to anyone who has seen *Star Trek*, down to the beautiful crew and a heroic captain, Ryan Clark (Hugh Laurie).⁴ The fantasy, however, begins to fall apart after a deadly malfunction when the ship finds itself off course. It is soon revealed that Clark is an actor, hired for his looks in order to “reassure” the guests. The real captain has been killed in the accident and, though Clark is now forced to maintain a leadership position in the time of crisis, he has neither the power nor expertise of a captain. To his shock, Clark learns that he is not the only fake on *Avenue 5* – his entire crew, supposedly “the best in the galaxy,” are also actors.

The reason for hiring a fake crew is simple – Herman Judd (Josh Gad) wanted them to look attractive to effectively represent his brand. This may seem like a comedic exaggeration, but actually closely resembles tactics already used by companies that rely heavily on the brand image, such as high-end retail stores.⁵ Arlie Hochschild is among those who theorise emotional labor, which refers to the employer’s requirement that their customer-facing workers regulate their emotions (adopting feminized behavioral patterns such as smiling and speaking in a higher register). Building on Hochschild, Dennis Nickson and Chris Warhurst introduce *aesthetic labor* as a type of immaterial labor which can be summarized as a demand to “look good and sound right” (388). In other words, the companies require their workers to embody a specific class-based aesthetic, which can be seen through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (qtd. in Williams and Connell 352). Unlike simply wearing a uniform or learning specific customer-oriented phrases, habitus cannot be taught in training but is part of one’s upbringing; Williams and Connell note that “in virtually every case, the right aesthetic is middle class, conventionally gendered, and typically white” (350). The fake crew of *Avenue 5*, their hair sleek, “professional,” and highly gendered, their uniforms pristine, and their workplace blindingly white and sterile, embody the “right” aesthetic in the way the “real” crew of the cruise ship – engineers of the ship, in their stretched-out t-shirts, hoodies, baseball caps, relatively androgynous and “natural” hairstyles – does not.

More than looks, aesthetic labor includes speech patterns, particularly the perceived lack of accents (Warhurst 222-4). The expectation to speak in whatever is understood by the customers as “standard American” is a discriminatory practice which disproportionately affects Black, immigrant, and other minoritized communities. Though *Avenue 5* does not engage with the racialized dimension of such job requirements, the show still demonstrates it through Clark, a white British man who is made to speak in an American accent because “passengers find American [accent] more reassuring” (Season 1 Episode 1, “I Was Flying”). Clark, then, represents Judd Galaxy’s aesthetic vision for their ships’ captain, one that their customer base finds the most appealing: a white middle-aged American male.

The problem with representing a brand at a live-in workplace is that both the “on-call” requirement and employer surveillance reaches an apogee – the workers can never be truly “off the clock” and be themselves. Clark and the rest of his “crew” have to play their roles at all times; as one of the fake crew members, Sarah (Daisy May Cooper), aptly notes: “I’ve been in character for four weeks now: it is taking its toll, creatively.” Sarah’s sole role is to control the bridge lights for dramatic effect, turning a touchscreen spinning wheel just so, and, though her comment is played as a joke, it does signal the drudgery and senselessness of her job. Sarah’s position as a fake crew member and desire to leave the ship culminates in a shockingly tragic outcome – believing the conspiracy theory that the entire ship is fake, she walks out of the airlock to her death.

The plot of *Avenue 5* reminds us of the instability of gig culture, taken to the extreme in space – while the workers expect the job to last two months (and then look for another), any accident can easily cause the gig in space to become a lifelong position, essentially turning them into indentured servants. The precariousness of service workers in a capitalist environment of a spaceship is demonstrated by the show when megalomaniacal Judd fires Clark for insubordination. The former captain now suddenly finds himself without “Judd bucks” and thus unable to pay for lunch, without a place to live, and hunted by security (Season 1 Episode 8, “This Is Physically Hurting Me”). Being trapped in space, quitting is not an option – nor is, apparently, accessing your paychecks. Judd’s power as a boss/landlord lets him punish Clark not only with the loss of income but immediate destitution and criminalization. Clark’s sudden dispossession, however, also allows for a public act of self-empowerment: Clark removes his toupée and the captain’s suit, peeling off the “aesthetic” layers to reveal the real person underneath.



Just like *Avenue 5* itself, which sports a beautiful white cruise liner in the front and an industrial cargo ship in the back (“*Avenue 5*”), the ship’s “crew” is divided between the hypervisible actors and the real crew of the ship – engineers whom Judd Galaxy had hidden in a basement away from the fake bridge. The real crew’s “bridge” is a poorly illuminated and cramped compartment where futurist cordless tech and spotless touchscreens of the fake bridge are replaced with familiar computer stations, rusty metal bulkheads, posters on the walls, a mess of paperwork, and other signs of the workers’ presence. The erasure of labor predictably leads to the engineers resenting the fake crew: as Marx argued, needing to separate and pit mental and manual workers – or, in this case, those performing aesthetic vs. manual labor – against each other is an inherent part of capitalism (qtd. in Lebowitz 185). The show further represents the gendered and racialized aspects of labor erasure when the achievements of *Avenue 5*’s second engineer, a Black woman Billie McEvoy (Lenora Crichlow), are continuously misattributed to Clark.

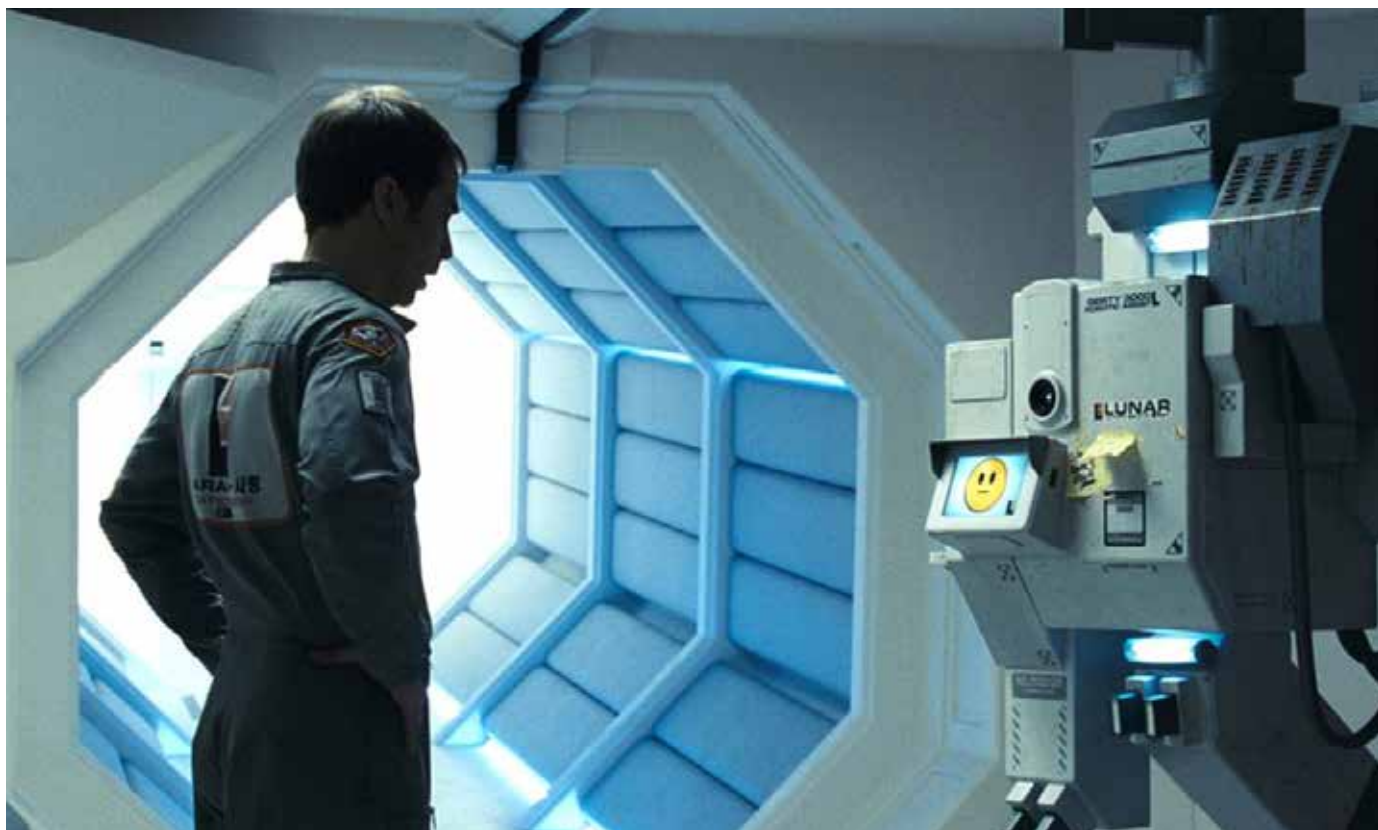
The engineers are not the only ones rendered invisible by the Judd brand – like most luxury hotels, Avenue 5 largely disappears the labor of cleaners, cooks, child caregivers, and waiters. Studies confirm that “chronic invisibility may undermine well-being, especially among marginalized workers in stigmatized occupations,” as customers routinely ignore and take their work for granted, while incidental visibility may lead to classist abuse (Caridad Rabelo and Mahalingam 104, 110). Realizing they are now trapped in space, Avenue 5 workers become more visible – through acts of insubordination. In the third episode (“I’m a Hand Model”), the housekeeping staff protests by folding the towels into inappropriate shapes and leaving gum on pillows, while the waiters and caretakers begin to talk back to the customers. Short of a strike, the workers engage in direct action through familiar labor protests like withdrawal of efficiency and actively break the rules of their employment by refusing to perform emotional labor. While *Avenue 5* fails to offer any actual organizing amongst the staff – lacking any structure, their individual protests fizzle out or are stopped by the management, off-screen – the workers taking advantage of a situation where they cannot be easily fired and replaced to demand better treatment demonstrates the potential for labor organizing in the otherwise precarious job sector of space tourism and hospitality.

II. *Moon*: A Lifelong Career

Duncan Jones’s *Moon* offers a different take on invisibility of outer space-based labor. Here, a technocapitalist utopia conceals a dystopian reality that renders workers disposable, dehumanized, and easily replaceable. *Moon* opens with an advertisement for Lunar Industries, which has harnessed a safe and green form of energy, Helium-3, “The energy of the sun, trapped in rock, harvested by machine, on the other side of the Moon.” These neoliberal greenwashing fantasies use passive tense to cover up the bitter reality: the energy is being harvested not by a machine but by Sam Bell (Sam Rockwell), an increasingly sickly and isolated worker whose only hope is to finish his three-year contract and go home. The contract will never end: unbeknownst to him, each Sam is a clone with a set expiration date, and the hibernation capsule that is supposed to take him back to Earth is, in fact, an incinerator. The clones’ isolation, argues Catherine Constable, “is an extension of traditional analyses of alienation within labour, where each operator on an industrial assembly line is isolated within their individual machinic function” (“Utopia, Dystopia and *Moon*” 80). Constable (“Challeng-

ing Capitalism” 421) further notes that Sam’s alienation is not only physical but temporal: every communication is a recording. The Sam Bell we meet in the beginning of the film is the thirteenth of the Bell clones, each of which has experienced a longer and longer temporal disconnect; for this Sam, it is about twenty years. Only when an accident leads to two Sam Bells coexisting at the same time, disrupting their intended isolation, do they learn the truth about their origins and intended fate.

Before the Younger Sam Bell’s (#14) awakening, the Older Sam Bell (#13) is accompanied only by an artificially intelligent robot Gerty, which ostensibly takes care of the clone while hiding the truth about Sam’s true nature and reporting on him to the corporation in secret, essentially serving as a prison guard. Based on its function and design, down to its screen with emojis which indicate the robot’s emotional reactions, Gerty strongly resonates with the collaborative robots or “cobots”, in development at around the same time as *Moon*. The cobot Baxter was introduced in 2011 by MIT roboticist Rodney Brooks’s Rethink Robotics as a “safe, flexible, affordable alternative to outsourced labor and fixed automation” (Atanasoski and Vora 72-74). Instead of completely replacing human workers, cobots are imagined to serve as a liberatory tool, relieving humans from dull and monotonous tasks. However, this is a very neoliberal vision of liberation, one which reinforces the mind/body split, dividing the ‘higher-order’ labour of the liberal subject from racialized and gendered “devalued work of the body” (Atanasoski and Vora 70). Building on Atanasoski and Vora, I argue that Gerty embodies these neoliberal ideals because of its inherent purpose, which is twofold. First, under the pretense of liberation for humankind, a collaborative robot perpetuates the colonial and patriarchal belief in the subservience of those who perform physical, mundane, caretaking labor to those who perform mental work. Thus, Gerty takes care of all Sam’s needs, for example cleaning and cutting Sam’s hair, while Sam’s primary function is supervising the harvesters – a job that requires human intelligence and could not be automated. Second, as the only source of worker companionship, “worker sociality and sense of collectivity are tethered to the robot, and not to fellow workers” (Atanasoski and Vora 78). Building on a Marxian argument on capitalism’s need for separation and alienation of workers to be self-sustaining, a cobot is employed to exacerbate both conditions, thus successfully preventing any possibility of worker organizing and collective action. Here, however, *Moon* offers a glimpse of another possibility: Gerty inexplicably decides to help the clones rather than rat them out, even to the point of sacrificing its



Moon

memory/identity. Such a decision could be explained by Gerty suddenly developing consciousness and empathy toward the clones (it is, as it continuously repeats, there to keep Sam safe). Another explanation is that Gerty realizes that its mistake of allowing the coexistence of two Sams marks it as a defective, broken machine, and its self-preservation may well depend on erasing the entire incident. Though the reason why is left ambiguous, by overcoming alienation, the clones are also able to form a different relationship to the machine, including it in their collective action.

Visually, *Moon* is a film about embodiment and the physicality of labor. Shot almost entirely in close-ups and claustrophobic medium shots, it centers on the extent of Older Sam's bodily deterioration. The first scene of Sam we see is him working out on a treadmill; the opening close-up focuses on his feet – he is running in place, unable to get away. The camera moves up, revealing his novelty shirt: "Wake me when it's quitting time." The shirt immediately signals to his future class awakening as an exploited worker. It is also a plea to somebody else – somebody not yet there; Older Sam's class consciousness cannot be awakened until Younger Sam is. Older Sam is starved for physical touch; one of the first things he asks is for Younger Sam to shake his hand. He reaches out to the newly awakened clone with his bandaged, bloody

hand, but for Younger Sam seeing his future embodied in the other man causes visceral disgust. As the film progresses, Older Sam's body becomes more and more abject. He loses his teeth, hair and constantly throws up blood. Marx and Engels's famous use of the vampire metaphor for capital is particularly apt here: "the vampire will not lose its hold on [the worker] 'so long as there is a muscle, a nerve, a drop of blood to be exploited'" (Marx 416). Gerty, as a cobot, is Sam's caretaker only insofar as it can make each clone last longer, temporarily alleviating Sam's debilitating psychological distress and a myriad of physical illnesses: wiping his blood, calming his nerves, and motivating him to keep his muscles in shape. Furthermore, *Moon* represents Federici and Caffentzis's argument that "the planned organization of industries in space and the dematerialization of the body go together" (112). Lunar Industries first erases human labor from public knowledge by pretending that this work is being done by machines and then quite literally dematerializes every Lunar worker in an incinerator as the company thanks them for their hard work.

When we meet the Older Sam, he is suffering physically and emotionally, counting days to go back home; his only source of comfort is the memories of his family. To manipulate him into pushing through his deteriorating condition and finishing the job, Sam, like all clones, is

imprinted with the memories of the original (real) Sam Bell and is regularly supplied with recorded messages from his "wife," Tess, and a toddler "daughter." The heteropatriarchal fantasy of a nuclear family, Constable points out, casts Sam in the roles of "husband, father and breadwinner" ("Challenging Capitalism" 425-26), controlling and exploiting his intimate life to increase his labor-power. Not stopping there, Lunar Industries also infuses Sam with feelings of guilt over his incompetence as a husband and father, which he can only fix – as Tess reminds him – through continuing his work on the Moon. Marx (275) has pointed out capital's need for heterosexual family: since the workers are mortal, they must perpetuate themselves through procreation. Through biotechnological development, Lunar Industries finds a way to perpetuate its workers without any loss of efficiency, by immediately unfreezing a new clone to pick up where the old one left off. Ideal workers, the Sam Bell clones are a "living appendage of the machine" who die once their labor-power – their mental and physical capabilities to perform the work – is no longer optimal (Marx 614). Under Lunar Industries' version of reproductive labor, the heteronormative nuclear family is an outdated mechanism, not tossed aside only insofar as it can manipulate the laborer emotionally. The temporal disconnect between Sam and the video recordings thus takes on another meaning: Sam is living in the past, unaware that he is a futurist experiment, a proletarian space cyborg plucked out of time and space. As a man, it is too late for Sam to "return" to Earth – Tess is already dead; as a sophisticated biotechnological work-machine, he signals a vision of a future that companies like Lunar Industries have not yet managed to legalize and normalize. He must, therefore, stay hidden, erased from the timeline as if he never existed.

Worker invisibility and erasure are put to an end when Younger Sam Bell escapes from the moon, reappropriating a Helium-3 transport and thus symbolically reconnecting himself to the product of his labor. Bell successfully arrives on Earth – off-screen – and, through appeal to law and public, harms the Lunar Industries' image and its stock plummets. Constable argues that "within *Moon*, the possibility of utopia lies in communication: between the workers themselves, through globalized media networks and across the solar system" ("Utopia" 81). In *Moon*, the workers' power of resistance comes directly from overcoming competition in favor of cooperation and invisibility by raising public awareness. Being confronted with the horror of exploitation and human rights violations made visible leads to public outrage: as Atanasoski and Vora argue, "technologies that erase human workers are

designed to perform the surrogate effect for consumers, who consume the reassurance of their own humanity along with the service offered" (91). It is not, however, shared by everyone: the final line of the film announces, in a voiceover of a news commentator: "He is a wacko or an illegal immigrant; either way, we need to lock him up," echoing white-supremacist rhetoric in relation to the working-class immigrants and refugees escaping economic and ecological devastation. Sam's status as a clone and enslaved worker racializes him, and so his humanity and rights are put up for debate.

The casting of Sam Rockwell sits in a strenuous relationship with his identity as a white man, perpetuating Hollywood's racist tendencies of casting white actors to portray science-fictional metaphors for slavery, minoritization, and racial discrimination, such as robots and aliens. At the same time, diegetically, the company's decision to hire a white male opens up an opportunity for critical reading in relation to gender, race, and labor within the film's universe. Though the Bell clones have never met another human being, they inherit the original Sam Bell's memories and sense of self, which includes his positionality as a middle-class, highly educated, straight white male. As respected, highly specialized workers, they have no reason to distrust Lunar Industries. Their privileged status thus blinds them to the truth of their existence. It also ensures that making their story known would result in a public outrage. As Atanasoski and Vora argue, "those conceived as fully human are never threatened with *replacement* by a mass of exploitable natural and human resources; "rather, those resources *enable* their lives as fully human" (76). The Bell clones promise to disrupt the complacency of those "conceived as fully human". Therefore, seeing another white male being cloned without his knowledge or consent is a violation of his body and his rights that also marks everyone else "not safe" from such corporate actions.

Moon ends on a brief snippet of the public reaction to Younger Sam's arrival to Earth. Duncan Jones's recent film *Mute* (2018), set in the same universe as *Moon*, features a brief cameo of Sam Bells to continue the clones' story. The film reveals that public protests have led to all 156 clones being freed and brought to Earth (by whom, is not specified). Sam Bells are now involved in a legal battle against Lunar Industries. However, public and media attention span tends to be much shorter than any given court case. Thus, Sam Bell's scene in *Mute* is simply a background television noise for the new protagonist (Alexander Skarsgård); it lasts 20 seconds. It is unclear if anything is being done to expand the clones' lifespans or even if Younger Sam Bell is still alive.

It is also unclear whether Lunar Industries suffered any other consequences beyond financial losses. While the workers' futures – and their very lives – hang in balance, the corporations live on.

III. *The Expanse*: A Workers' Nation

In contrast to *Moon*, *The Expanse* offers no hope from the law to the oppressed proletariat, represented in the show by Belters (those who live and work on the Asteroid Belt): as one of the protagonists, Joe Miller (Thomas Jane), a Belter detective employed by Earth, explains in the pilot episode ("Dulcinea"), there are "no laws on Ceres, just cops." While *Moon* and *Avenue 5* are set in the 21st century (in 2035 and 2060s, respectively), *The Expanse* takes place in the 24th century, after the colonization of the Solar System had already been completed. The Belters' land, however, does not belong to them, and they are at the mercy of the two superpowers, Mars and Earth. Their legal status and rights are continuously in flux. Separated by millions of miles from the two planets, each Belter station is nothing but a speck on their imperial maps. The Belt borders are open to the "Inners" (the citizens of Mars and Earth), but there is no mobility of people from the Belt to the inner planets – only of capital. Belters can no longer survive on Earth as the planet's gravity would crush their lungs – a fact used in the pilot by Deputy Undersecretary of the United Nations, Chrisjen Avasarala (Shohreh Aghdashloo), to torture a Belter for information (gravity torture is outlawed by the UN but still practiced at black sites). Belter labor organizing, therefore, is inseparable from their decolonial struggle for land rights and liberation.

Through the Belt, *The Expanse* offers a vision of the future where technological development and space colonization did not lead to a labor-free utopia but only exacerbated worker exploitation. Living on uninhabitable asteroids continuously puts Belters in danger of bodily harm and death. Asteroid mining and hauling are dangerous physically and psychologically and have significant consequences – in the pilot episode, a crew member of the water hauler Canterbury loses his hand while the Executive Officer attempts suicide. The harsh conditions of outer space compound every crisis: water rationing is continuously in effect; even the air is not free and always on the verge of a deficit, leading to congenital disabilities and deaths by suffocation. With each mining trip, Belters lose the resources necessary for their long-term survival, such as water on the formerly ice-filled asteroids. After a brief teaser, the pilot episode opens with a Belter narrating the history of Earth and Mars's exploitation of

Belters and their land's resources. As he narrates, a long establishing sequence takes us through the guts of the Ceres station; finally, it is revealed that the camera point of view is that of a police drone, on its way to a Belter rally against water rationing. Belters' lack of access to the resources of their land echoes real ecological crises caused by extractive capitalism and settler colonialism, such as the water crisis in Flint, Michigan and the Native American-led resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock. Earth and Mars's employment of police and military surveillance and violence against the Belters solidifies the connection. Under colonial rule of the Inner planets, Belters' lives are completely expendable: by the end of the first season (Season 1 Episode 10, "Leviathan Wakes"), an entire station Eros (population: 100,000), the poorest in the system, is wiped out in a covert biological experiment instigated by a corporation looking to weaponize an alien technology.

Having lived in low-gravity and low-air conditions for centuries, Belters have distinct physiology – tall, thin bodies with fragile bones and other dangerous health conditions – which marks them not only as a classed but racialized community. As Bryan Banker argues, *The Expanse* "makes literal what contemporary theories of identity treat abstractly; namely, that social relations of race and class are inseparable and indivisible" (90). Belters have a distinct culture that has developed as a direct result of their embodied experiences. Their native language, Lang Belta, incorporates a significant reliance on hand gestures, as a result of having to communicate in bulky spacesuits for generations. Many Belters have neck tattoos where the older generations would get scarred by the connecting point between the cheaply made spacesuits and helmets: bodily modifications as acts of reclamation and defiance.

The Belters' most prominent political organization is a radical group called the Outer Planets Alliance (OPA). The OPA, which started as a labor union and evolved into a decentralized network with multiple conflicting factions, advocates for Belters' self-determination and uses various forms of direct action, from strikes and sabotage to more violent acts. Like the Asteroid Belt itself, the OPA factions are intertwined but separated, with vastly different approaches but a common goal – some form of a Belter Nation. Moreover, Belters' national identity does not depend on a particular station or even the Asteroid Belt or Solar System as a whole: when an opportunity to leave the system opens up, many leave to try and build a new life on an alien planet – one with a real atmosphere. Unfortunately, it is not possible to escape from colonialist



Belters in The Expanse

and capitalist expansion in space, and thus the Belter refugees find themselves once again being killed and extorted for resources by the Earthier mercenaries.

In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri offer an apt critique of such “subaltern nationalism” as appearing progressive “against external domination” but easily becoming oppressive internally “in the name of national identity, unity, and security” (106). As the dominant factions attempt lukewarm solutions of negotiation and political bargaining, they leave the OPA and Belt open for a takeover by a dictatorial Marco Inaros (Keon Alexander), who promptly kills all of his political opposition and rides the national pride wave straight into war. The problem of the show, however, lies beyond the rather predictable narrative of a fascistic takeover. Instead, despite introducing multiple OPA factions, *The Expanse* is unable to imagine any other fight for the racialized workers of the Belt but that of national sovereignty. Hardt and Negri extend their analysis to the very narrative of a nation, which, they argue, takes over and subjugates any other idea of a community: “every imagination of a community becomes overcoded as a nation, and hence our conception of community is severely impoverished” (107). In *The Expanse*, the Belt’s decolonial struggle is centered on the desire to transform itself from the Third World to a third nation, equal to the other national superpowers of Mars and Earth. The show’s inability to imagine a different mode of worker liberation on an interplanetary scale manifests Jameson’s claim that science fiction’s “deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to

dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future [...] to succeed in failure, and to serve as unwitting and even unwilling vehicles for a meditation, which, setting forth for the unknown, finds itself mired in the all-too-familiar, and thereby becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits” (288-289). *The Expanse*’s success in failure then is to, perhaps, push us to contemplate a future free of capitalist expansion and nationalistic borders; free of the imaginaries of popular culture and the State and corporate projects; something yet unimagined.

Conclusion

As science fiction texts, *Avenue 5*, *Moon*, and *The Expanse* are drawing on the here-and-now to offer vastly different visions of the working conditions and practices under future interplanetary technocapitalism. *Avenue 5* considers the immediate future where the workers are primarily engaging in customer service and a version of the gig economy, while *Moon* comments on the dark underbelly of capitalist greenwashing and post-labor utopias. *The Expanse*, in turn, offers a vision of a distant future where the proletariat is once again largely engaged in hard manual labor, except this time in remote and desolate outer space. The series and film, however, share striking commonalities, illuminating the contemporary anxieties over the future of space colonization in the popular science fiction imaginaries. In all three texts, workers struggle to come back to Earth: while Avenue



5 finds itself off course and lost in space, *Moon's* Sam Bell is trapped on the Moon, his supposed transport capsule actually a death chamber; to go back to Earth, he has to expropriate a vessel not designed for a human body. Such an option is not available to the Belters of *The Expanse*, which offers a twisted version of Clynes and Kline's cyborg where the workers' bodies have adapted to space at the cost of no longer being able to return to their ancestors' home planet. Furthermore, in each example, the workers experience alienation while being utterly dependent on the boss/landlord or colonial State power for survival, which affects their mental and physical state and limits their ability to resist.

It is, however, possible to identify several proposed strategies for resistance: spontaneous acts of refusals and direct action by the disenfranchised, non-unionized workers; appeals to law and public; and, finally, large-scale organizing for autonomy and self-determination. Moreover, the shared experience of exploitation offers possibilities of solidarity across industries. Hardt and Negri muse that "perhaps the more capital extends its global networks of production and control, the more powerful any singular point of revolt can be" (58). Perhaps, by extending itself into outer space, capitalism would finally stretch itself too thin, allowing for numerous spontaneous and organized acts of resistance. Perhaps it is never too late to reclaim the cosmos – and our home planet – from the capital's grasp. Perhaps it starts with reclaiming our imaginations.

Endnotes

[1] Jeff Bezos is a lifelong Trekkie (Boyle), while Elon Musk cites Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series as inspiration for SpaceX (Locke).

[2] In discussing the working class, I draw on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's definition of the proletariat as "all those who are subordinated to, exploited by, and produce under the rule of capital": to them, "all forms of labor tend to be proletarianized" (256). Furthermore, I utilize Silvia Federici's critique of traditional Marxism, which erased domestic, unpaid, and slave labor by tying the definition of the proletariat to the wage ("Counterplanning from the Kitchen" 9-20). Thus, in my use of *working class*, I refer to all laborers exploited under global (or interplanetary) capitalism.

[3] As Bezos promised upon returning to Earth (Johnson).

[4] To promote Clark, Judd Galaxy claims he'd saved Avenue 3 from a fire – despite his protests that the fire was simply put out by the ship's sprinklers. Thus, as the company's brand relies on nostalgia and tropes of heroism to market itself, some automated labor is, ironically, credited to human workers.

[5] Such sizeist, ageist, racist, and heterosexist discrimination is not illegal – the US labor law recognizes the employers' rights to maintain their brand image through selective hiring.

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KINCAID IN SHORT

PAUL KINCAID



An Inspector Calls

Some years ago, I was on a convention panel with Kim Stanley Robinson and a few others. It is hard to recall the details, but I think I was the only Brit on the panel. At one point, the subject of class came up, and Robinson and I quickly realised we were talking mutually incomprehensible languages. For Robinson, and the other Americans there, class simply came down to a matter of money. If you had wealth, you were automatically in the upper class because you could buy yourself all the other trappings you might need. If you were poor, you were lower class, and that was an end to it.

For myself, and I suspect for any other Brits who witnessed the discussion, this was far too simplistic a definition. Yes, wealth could come into the equation, but it was rarely a major factor and was certainly not an essential part of the definition. In Britain, the poverty-stricken aristocrat, or the nouveau-riche excluded from the upper reaches of society, are clichés precisely because they conform to the much more nuanced and complex notion of class in Britain. Signifiers of class might include education, parentage, accent, whether your family were landed gentry or in trade, and so on, and so forth.

What I took away from this discussion was the notion that class is nothing more than a way of dividing up society based on what those at the top consider to be of value. If the only thing you value is money, then that is what defines class; if money is less important than the eminence of your ancestry or the size of your estate, then

they are what defines class. In Britain we've had centuries of devising ways to exclude others, which is why class signifiers are so complex here.

And there are class divisions in everything. In a 1979 interview, Kingsley Amis said "You can't share real culture equally ... There aren't enough brains to go round." When pressed on whether a more democratic access to literature wasn't an inherently good thing, he replied: "Among the people I talk to about novels, my own and others, it's clear that only a minority of them know what a novel is" (Taylor, 391). Apart from being insufferably elitist, this is another example of class in action, excluding the masses on the basis of the sort of cultural appreciation that those at the top value. As so often when class comes into the discussion, the masses are excluded from the top of the heap not because they haven't been given the opportunity to get there, but because they obviously wouldn't appreciate it if they did get there so there is no point in even trying. Once again we see that what is valued by the elite becomes the essential requirement for those admitted into the elite.

Science fiction, from Wells through Aldiss to Miéville, has proved a powerful medium for questioning and undermining the values upon which such elitism is assumed to rest, whether social, military, cultural or what. You will notice that in this discussion of values the one word notable by its omission is "ethics." The values necessary to define the upper classes, and defend them from the importuning of the lower classes, do not include moral values. To my mind, one of the most effective examples of the way in which the fantastic has been used to demolish assumptions of social and economic superiority by introducing morality into the argument occurs in J.B. Priestley's play, *An Inspector Calls*, first performed in

Moscow in 1945, and not produced in the UK until the following year. *An Inspector Calls* is a morality play about the way morality is lost in a world shaped by class.

Priestley had been wounded during World War One, and from that conflict retained for the rest of his life a disgust at the arrogance of the officer class. One of the powerful undercurrents that runs through *An Inspector Calls*, set in 1912, is a sustained attack on the habits of thought among the upper class that would lead inevitably to that war. But this is only part of the story. Born in Bradford, and affecting a gruff Yorkshire accent all his life, Priestley increasingly came to see himself as the spokesman for the ordinary working class. This was something reflected in his bestselling novels such as *The Good Companions* (1929) and *Angel Pavement* (1930), and in his non-fiction *English Journey* (1934) which recorded the plight of people in small towns and industrial centres at the height of the Great Depression. His broadcasts during the Second World War, consistently arguing for improvements for working people in the post-war world, rivalled those by Churchill for popularity. That sense, that working people deserved better than they got, is at the root of the most explicit attack on the class system in *An Inspector Calls*.

In some ways, Priestley's most interesting works were those he wrote for the theatre, particularly the set of plays, beginning with *Dangerous Corner* (1932), that would become known as the Time Plays. Using ideas drawn from J.W. Dunne's popular *An Experiment with Time* (1927), which suggested that time should be regarded in geographical terms, thus implying that different points in time might be accessible, the Time Plays presented their characters with a glimpse of another time in order to highlight the errors of their ways. These ideas were shown to their best effect in Priestley's most enduring play, *An Inspector Calls*.

The play opens with the family of rich industrialist Arthur Birling celebrating the engagement of daughter Sheila to Gerald Croft. This is as much a social match as a romance, Gerald comes from "an old country family – landed people and so forth" (8), though Birling is also hoping to "find my way into the next Honours List. Just a knighthood, of course" (8). This is the world of the social elite, Birling's wealth being brought into Croft's titled realm, though Birling's elevation is as yet tentative, reliant on no scandal being associated with the name. It is into this gathering, proud and entitled, that Inspector Goole arrives. Though at first Birling suspects no danger: "I'm still on the Bench. It may be something about a warrant" (10).

Birling is privileged but insecure, hiding his nervousness with bluster, boasts and unfunny jokes, and, as Eric says, "not the kind of father a chap could go to when he's in trouble" (54); Goole on the other hand is lower class (he wears "a plain darkish suit" (11)) but purposeful and confident. For Birling and Gerald, class is proof against any problem that might arise, "After all ... we're respectable citizens and not criminals", though as Goole notes, "Sometimes there isn't as much difference as you think" (22). Since their class means that they do not need to take any responsibility for what happens to others, Goole's arrival is seen as nothing more than an inconvenience. As Birling says at one point, "We were having a nice little family celebration tonight. And a nasty mess you've made of it now" (21). The nasty problems of other classes have no business disturbing the placidity of his own existence. When Goole gives a human face (literally, when he produces a photograph) to a recent tragedy, a young woman who killed herself by drinking disinfectant, Birling's response is impatient and lacking in any fellow feeling: "Yes, yes. Horrid business" (12). Goole's job over what follows is to burrow through those class defences with constant references to morality and humanity. He does this by concentrating on each member of the family in turn, but questioning them in the presence of others who therefore unwittingly provide the moral chorus. Thus, when Goole responds to Birling's continual bluster, "Public men have responsibilities as well as privileges," Sheila can add, "we've no excuse now for putting on airs and ... if we've any sense we won't try" (41).

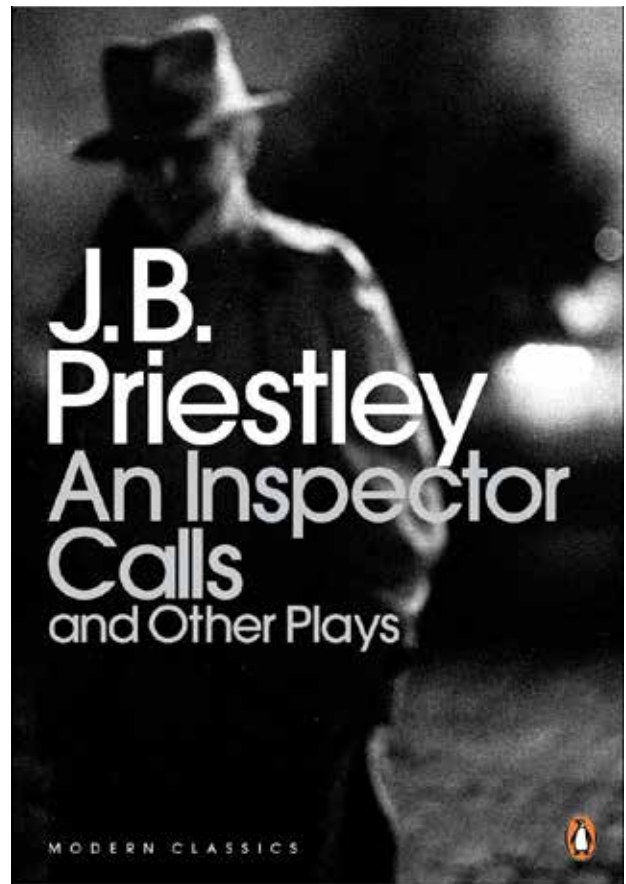
It is worth noting that Goole is careful to show the photograph of the young woman to only one member of the Birling family at a time. The audience might begin to suspect, as Gerald argues late in the play, that it is a different photograph each time, and in a way they are probably correct. When Goole goes on to say that "she'd used more than one name. But her original name – her real name – was Eva Smith" (12), we see her not as an individual case but as an Everywoman, a representative of her class and gender. This is a point emphasized more than once during the play, especially towards the end when Goole points out, "One Eva Smith has gone – but there are millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths still left with us" (56). The wrongs she has suffered at the various hands of the Birling family are wrongs that all women have suffered at the hands of the capitalist upper class.

Goole's systematic questioning of the family members, one at a time, is a recitation of the hardships Eva Smith had endured. As Sheila perceptively notes, as the Birlings use their privilege to build up a wall between

them and the girl, so “the Inspector will just break it down. And it’ll be all the worse when he does” (30). The first thing we learn is that Eva had once been employed at Birling’s factory but had been fired. Thereupon the son asks: “Is that why she committed suicide?” To which Birling snaps: “Just keep quiet, Eric, and don’t get excited” (13). This testiness suggests a nervousness on Birling’s part, but he refuses to accept responsibility. Eva had helped to lead a strike asking for more money, and when the strike was crushed the ringleaders were sacked. “If you don’t come down sharply on some of these people, they’d soon be asking for the earth” (15). “These people” is a classic means of othering, identifying the lesser class as not one of us and therefore not worthy of consideration. It is an approach the Birlings take on more than one occasion, as when Mrs Birling airily declares that she couldn’t possibly “understand why the girl committed suicide. Girls of that class –” (30). When Goole calmly challenges such a stance, Birling tries to intimidate him: “How do you get on with our Chief Constable? ... We play golf together,” to which Goole witheringly replies: “I don’t play golf” (16). Mrs Birling does the same, announcing “my husband was Lord Mayor only two years ago” (31). They are as trapped by class as everyone else, but are unable to see this, and it leads to their doom.

Describing the hardships Eva suffered after losing her job, Goole emphasises her status as Everywoman: “There are a lot of young women living that sort of existence ... If there weren’t, the factories and warehouses wouldn’t know where to look for cheap labour.” To which Sheila retorts, inadvertently making his point for him: “But these girls aren’t cheap labour – they’re *people*” (19). But Sheila herself is guilty of the same arrogance she is here decrying. Eva had been lucky to find work in a fashionable clothes shop, but after a couple of months she was fired. Birling automatically assumes she was “Not doing her work properly” (20), because the poor must bring their downfall on themselves. “I think she had only herself to blame,” (43) as Mrs Birling puts it. But no, it was because Sheila had complained about her, mostly out of spite because a dress she had tried on didn’t suit her: “And you used the power you had ... to punish the girl just because she made you feel like that” (24). Sheila feels wretched about it, though her father “didn’t seem to think it amounted to much” (23).

It is at this late stage, the very end of Act One, that we get the first hint that there is something unnatural, certainly omniscient, about Goole. Sheila realizes that Gerald had an affair with Eva, and he asks her to help him keep it secret from the Inspector. Sheila bursts out: “Why – you fool – *he knows*. Of course he knows. And I hate to



think how much he knows that we don’t know yet” (26). Later, when she begins to question Goole’s nature, she points out, “We hardly ever told him anything he didn’t know” (60). It is Sheila, the one who does understand what is going on and the collective guilt of her family and class, who says to Goole, “I don’t understand about you.” To which he replies, “There’s no reason why you should” (29). After his own interrogation, Gerald briefly comes to share Sheila’s view of Goole’s omniscience (after Gerald reveals that Eva was his mistress, Sheila breaks off their engagement as a matter of form, but in truth the pair seem closer than they ever were before, until he returns to the Birling fold by arguing that because their accuser wasn’t a real police inspector they were of course not guilty of anything); so when Mrs Birling huffily declares “I think we’ve just about come to an end of this wretched business –” Gerald can quietly reply, “I don’t think so” (40).

Gerald met Daisy Renton, as Eva was now calling herself, in the bar at the Palace Variety Theatre, “a favourite haunt of women of the town” (34). Women of the town was a common euphemism in the 19th century for prostitutes. Daisy was being pestered by Alderman Meggarty, “a notorious womanizer as well as being one of the worst sots and rogues in Brumley” (35). Gerald is here revealing a truth about others in the local hierarchy that wouldn’t otherwise be mentioned: social standing

tends to mean that moral failure is swept under the carpet. Gerald's affair with Eva seems to have given her a measure of happiness and security before he breaks it off, but her abandonment again leaves her destitute. She appealed to the Brumley Women's Charity Organization, of which Mrs Birling was a prominent member. For reasons that are not, for the moment, explained, and nobody at the time thought to ask, Eva called herself Mrs Birling. Eva was expecting a child, but even so, Mrs Birling used her influence to persuade the committee to turn her down, partly because she said it was the father's responsibility, but mostly because "I didn't like her manner." For the moment, even though Birling has the first hint of (rather self-serving) doubt – "when this comes out at the inquest, it isn't going to do us much good" (45) – Mrs Birling is impervious within the defences of her privilege: "I did nothing I'm ashamed of or that won't bear investigation," adding the perennial cry of the incompetent general: "I consider I did my duty" (44). Sailing serenely on in her arrogance, and despite Sheila's warning protestations, she insists that the young man who fathered Eva's child and stole money to try to support her, should be "compelled to confess in public his responsibility" (48). It is only then, when it is too late, that she realizes that the young man in question is her own son, Eric.

When Eric learns that Eva died because his mother refused to help, he bursts out: "you killed her – and the child she'd have had too – my child – your own grandchild." She protests: "I didn't know – I didn't understand." Eric's furious response, "You don't understand anything. You never did. You never even tried" (55), tells us everything we need to know about the lack of humanity behind the class walls of the Birling parents. When Goole sums up their individual responsibility in the fate of Eva Smith, Birling tries to buy off his guilt – "I'd give thousands" (56) – but it is too late. The lesson is that we are responsible for each other, and as Goole says in his final homily, which looks forward to the First World War and perhaps, from the author's and audience's perspective, back to the Second World War: "the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish" (56). At this point, Goole leaves; in some filmed versions, his ambiguous status is emphasized by having him simply disappear from the room.

In the post mortem the family then perform, the two children are racked by shame, but the parents still refuse to admit any guilt, "Nothing much has happened," Birling declares, and "it turned out unfortunately, that's all" (57). Their only real concern is that there will be a public scandal, and Birling may not get his knighthood.

When Gerald returns to declare that Goole is not a real policeman, Birling sees it as an escape: he doesn't have to worry about any of their confessions, we weren't really found out so we did no wrong. "I suppose we're all nice people now" (63) Sheila says, sarcastically.

As the parents and Gerald start to congratulate themselves, having satisfied themselves that they had been tricked, that there was no one girl, no suicide, and that all was well and life could continue exactly as it had before, the phone rings. A girl has died on her way to hospital after swallowing disinfectant, and a police inspector is on his way to ask some questions. It is only in these last words of the play that we understand this is indeed a Time Play, that Goole is a glimpse of the immediate future, and his visitation has so shaken them that they will be unable to escape the revelations to come. Their class can offer no real defence against reality.

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Divide in Time and Space: Social Stratification in Wei Ma's "Formerly Slow" and Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing"

Lyu Guangzhao

Frozen in a Bubble of Time

As I finally sat down and started to write my piece for this special issue on "SFF and Class," I had just completed my thirty-five hours long journey from London to Shanghai (including flight transfer) and settled myself in a quarantine hotel. Luckily, my quarantine hotel was not too bad, probably because the pictures of some "fancy" places other people shared online have effectively lowered my expectations. There was something special about my room: it faced a busy elevated road. It was close to it too, close enough for me to roughly recognise the angry, or sleepy, and reluctant faces of the drivers as they travelled to work during the rush hour. The noise was bearable thanks to the double-glazed window shielding this room, less so when someone sounded the horn too loudly, which they did quite often.

The cars, vans, buses, and trucks were driving on this road day and night, without a start, without an end, each with an internal micro-space isolated from others, each with different power dynamics inside them. As they moved, from one end of my window to the other, they became a "continuum" in themselves, a continuum deriving from the mobility, both temporally and spatially, of these moving cubes differentiated into and empowered by their internal spaces. This, I believe, is what Ezra Pound had sensed when he stood still in a metro station more than a century ago: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough." Of course, the apparitions I saw during my quarantine were those of the cars passing by outside my window. They moved. They flowed. Their appearance shifted. They transfigured and merged into one another.

From experiencing this phantasmagorical continuum of road traffic, I have somehow developed an empathetic feeling for the drivers and passengers inside the passing cars. Like them, during my travel quarantine I was also confined in a relatively isolated environment or time-space—a temporarily insulated heterotopia where I, also as an *insider*, was attached to a particular label—"potential carrier of the coronavirus"—and therefore had to comply with a series of rules that would be unnecessary for the *outsiders*. However, the difference between me and the people in the cars, between my quarantine room and the traffic continuum outside the window, is also obvious. They were moving, while I stayed. This contrast of mobility and stillness created a rather bizarre sense of anachronism. It seemed I was left behind the flowing traffic on the elevated road. As the cars ran towards the next place at the next moment, my quarantine routine repeated itself day by day (even the compulsory food menu repeated on a three-day basis, and we were not allowed to order delivery). In this way, my sensations of time and space collapsed into one unity, a unity termed the "chronotope" by Mikhail Bakhtin. "Time," as he wrote in "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope" (Bakhtin 84). Compared to the outside world defined by its mobility, and to the materialisation of the time sequence marked by the road traffic that would never stop, I felt I was frozen in a bubble of time.

Stratified Bubbles in “Formerly Slow”

Also frozen in bubbles of time are the characters in Wei Ma’s short story “Formerly Slow.” Originally circulated on the WeChat official account of Future Affairs Administration in China in July 2019, “Formerly Slow” was translated into English by Andy Dudak and then published in *Future Science Fiction Digest* in December 2020. In this story, the author Wei Ma envisions a fictional city “Shenli” with a subversive yet controversial policy of urban administration, namely the Cyclic Freedom-of-Movement System, dedicated to alleviating a series of urban problems, such as overpopulation, unemployment, eco-degradation, etc. The inhabitants of Shenli are only allowed to travel and work one day a week, and for the rest of the week, they have to stay at home and give their space to other people in the city. Each occupation, therefore, is also divided into seven equal parts. People belonging to different days take the parts entitled to them, while insulated into separate time-spaces, like the cars on the elevated road which keep moving ahead in sequence without seeing each other. For the protagonist Xia Mang and his wife Xiao An, their friends, colleagues, and neighbours are all “Wednesday citizens” like themselves. Those who live on other days, however, literally only exist *outside* the observable world of these Wednesday citizens. There is a solid wall rooted in temporality, separating different social (or temporal) groups of people on different sides. As Xia Mang notices in the story:

The interesting thing was, no matter how dedicated to their work, in Shenli City, Tuesday journalists always had to hurry home before midnight, before Wednesday, while their Wednesday colleagues couldn’t turn up early for their shifts. Around 11:40 PM, Xia Mang would start to see journalists beating a hasty retreat, and starting at ten past midnight, the new batch would begin to turn up.

As if separated by time, like two different worlds, Xia Mang thought to himself. (Wei Ma n.p., original emphasis)

In other words, as expressed more poetically by the rock singer, who, terminally ill, has come to this city in hope of living longer: “Time kept me bound here. And the prison cell that held me was called Wednesday” (Wei Ma n.p.). Even so, from a practical perspective, the Cyclic Freedom-of-Movement System, as a method of biopolitics, works extremely well in Shenli City. Under this system, Shenli can be considered an urban utopia according to all indicators.

The numbers show last year’s per capita GDP at 137,654 U.S. dollars, for a growth rate of 113 percent, surpassing Shanghai for the third year in a row, and holding onto first place in the world for a city’s per capita GDP. At the same time, the report’s questionnaire investigations [of Shenli Economic Development Findings Report], considered highly reliable, indicated a satisfaction rate exceeding 85 percent with regard to a composite index of our city’s economic development, environmental quality, public security, crime rate, and so on. (Wei Ma n.p.)

Attracted by this incredible economic and political success, immigrants from the outside world flock to the utopian city, driving up the number of smugglers. These immigrants, legal or illegal, were not treated equally. They cannot be granted Shenli citizenship naturally. Here, the mechanism which accompanies the Cyclic Freedom-of-Movement System, and that “really makes all the difference” is the “dormancy qualification.” With this qualification, Shenli locals are able to hibernate in a specially designed device at the end of their “working day” (or “Freedom-of-Movement Day”) until one week later, thus ensuring their brain efficiency and concentration, and improving their performance at work.

In contrast to these privileged “chosen ones,” the immigrants are denied the dormancy qualification and prevented from using the hibernation service. Unlike the Shenli citizens, who are able to travel through time into the future in weekly stepping stones, the immigrants are forced to stay awake, and therefore age faster relative to citizens. They are unable to increase their productivity due to lack of rest and relaxation, and therefore only capable of taking on simple jobs with a lower skill threshold. Earning a dormancy qualification in Shenli, for these under-privileged immigrants, has become their lifelong goal, a goal that would require considerable hard work and excessive efforts given the limited number of the available places for each year. As reported in the news, “Last month, Shenli received 7,680 new dormancy applications. Fifty-three qualifications were signed and issued. This issuance rate is a new low, indicative of tightening standards for investigating dormancy applications in our city...” (Wei Ma n.p.)

In a way, these non-native immigrants in Shenli without the dormancy qualification are like the second-class citizens, or “denizens,” a term used by Guy Standing to describe workers without rights and put in supplicant and marginalised positions, forming groups of “resident aliens” (Standing 109). Although they have also

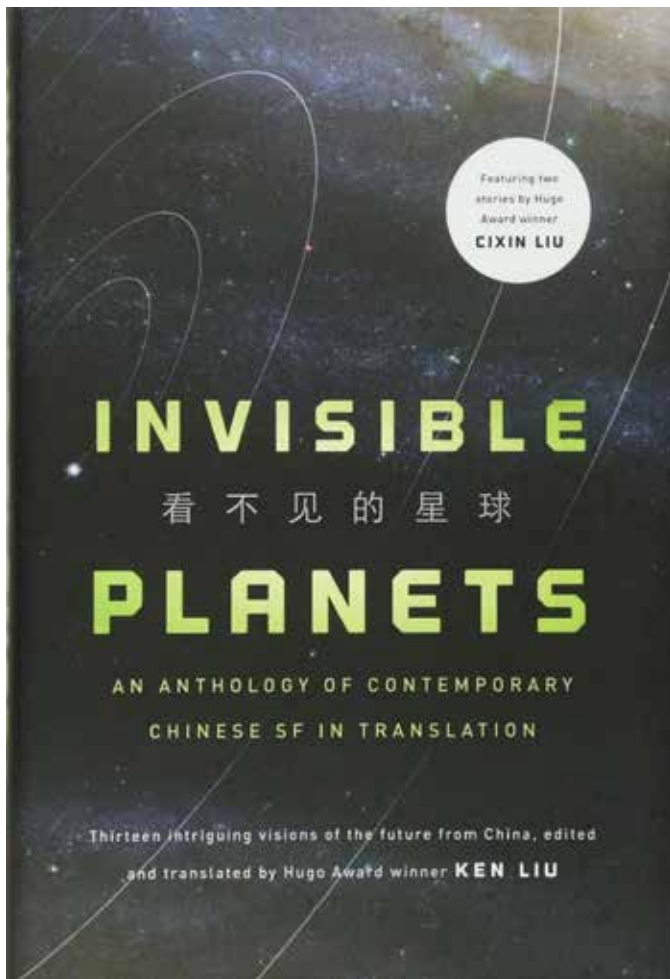
contributed to the Shenli economy, they are basically rendered as the source of cheap labour and forced into the dirtiest and toughest jobs while receiving minimal wages. Therefore, these immigrants without dormancy qualification find themselves as “in-betweeners,” trapped in a utilitarian but toxic duality of “economic acceptance and social rejection” (Ngok 252), which can also be used to describe the dilemma faced by China’s migrant workers flocking to economically developed regions in pursuit of good fortune. In real present-day China, such a sense of being denizens can be triggered by the Household Registration System (also known as *hukou*). Under this system, a citizen must be registered with a specific place (by default it would be your birthplace, or where your parents are registered), where their social welfare resources (including housing, education, medical care, childcare, etc.) are provided. It is possible to transfer your household registration, but in many cases it would be very difficult to do so, especially for cities like Beijing and Shanghai. There are a number of requirements that the internal immigrants can hardly meet, such as the degree of education, income, how much taxes you have paid to the local government, etc. This *hukou* system in China chimes with the dormancy policy in the fictional Shenli, preventing outsiders from accessing the local welfare resources.

For a long time, this system of Cyclic Freedom-of-Movement and dormancy qualifications remain unchallenged, their efficacy and legitimacy well-recognised, until the birth of Weiwei, daughter of Xia Mang and Xiao An. Despite her Shenli citizenship and the dormancy qualification she is entitled to, Weiwei is born with a unique brain structure that resists the dormancy technology. With this potential failure of the dormancy system, the utopian Shenli becomes less utopian. A tiny crack secretly appears in this seemingly flawless structure. All the emotions that had disappeared in this urban utopia – suspicions, discriminations, angers, and concerns – come back again. Weiwei is a note of discord, an underminer of flawlessness, an inauspicious symbol of the fate of utopia. This reminds me of the suffering child in Ursula Le Guin’s famous story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973). The elements of misery and misfortune embodied both by Weiwei and the child in Omelas should be considered the foundation upon which the surrounding utopia is defined. They manage to introduce the premise of what Tom Moylan calls “critical utopia.” Based on his discussion of the “new utopian works” written in the 1960s and the 1970s, he believes:

The authors of the critical utopias assumed the risky task of reviving the emancipatory utopian imagination while simultaneously destroying the traditional utopia and yet preserving it in a transformed and liberated form that was critical both of utopian writing itself and of the prevailing social formation. (Moylan 42)

Because of Weiwei, both the citizens and the denizens of Shenli begin to question the essence of the Cyclic Freedom-of-Movement System. The dormancy technology presses the pause button on people’s lives so that they do not have to waste the rest of the week apart from their “working day,” confined to their homes and waiting. But even so, gradually they have also discovered that this “working day” of theirs requires a much more intense pace of life and work. They have to prove, without reservation, that the dormancy ‘upgrade’, if granted, will effectively make them capable of doing more complex and delicate jobs. In this process, “working” becomes an end in itself rather than a means of self-realisation. “Under these economic conditions,” wrote Marx, “this realisation of [work] appears as *loss of realisation* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object and bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement, as alienation*” (Marx 272). In this way, the *outsider* workers in this story are alienated, or self-alienated, reified as the *object*, rather than the *subject*, of social production. They no longer have weekends and are therefore subordinated to a more general, more exploitive matrix of social discourse, losing their independence and subjectivity to a leviathan built by biopolitics.

While both citizens and denizens belong in theory to the working class – the class of labourers, the class working for employers – the effect of the biopolitical governance in Shenli is to place these two groups in opposition to each other. Between them, a delicately designed, forcibly executed, and politically endorsed boundary has been introduced to deconstruct their class identity. The conflict of capital and labour has been transferred to within the working class, sabotaging any possible collective actions against the employers. In this way, class stratification in Shenli is further enhanced. The citizen-denizen unity that might potentially lead to the “multitude” transcending capitalist manipulation (Hardt and Negri) collapses even before it has a chance to form. Shenli residents tend to see the dormancy qualification as a key to becoming privileged, which allows them to take well-paid and respected jobs. But in fact, those with *real* privilege have placed themselves on a different stage.



They do not pursue this qualification which turns out in reality to be a constraint on those who achieve it. They enjoy a higher privilege – “Total Freedom of Movement.”

Technically speaking, Weiwei is much luckier than the child in Omelas. Her anti-dormancy symptoms do not cause her any suffering, while making her even “freer” than other ordinary people in Shenli. However, her mere appearance still indicates the “critical” side of this urban utopia. In Le Guin’s story, the ones who walk away from Omelas find the ethical conflict hiding beneath the utopian façade of this city unbearable. They cannot abide harmony and happiness conditioned upon a child’s misery. Those who chose to leave must undertake a lonely journey: “Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back” (Le Guin 259). In contrast to this, at the end of “Formerly Slow,” it is Weiwei and her father who leave the city. The note of discord eliminated, Shenli returns to its initial utopian state, *harmonious, flawless, full of joy, hope, and enthusiasm*. Weiwei’s mother Xiao An, who has always resented her daughter’s “uniqueness,” can now *escape* from childcare and return to *compete* as a “qualified” worker. On the contrary, Weiwei and

her father are sent on a nostalgic journey to the *past*, in terms of both temporality and spatiality. They look for a slower pace of life, which existed in the good old days and in other places, where people are still subjects, where they can still enjoy weekends, where the possibility of formulating the “multitude” has not been invalidated by the “dormancy qualification,” a policy which leads to social stratification in this *critical* utopia. “Formerly Slow” is just the prologue to what will be a series of Shenli tales serialised by the Future Affairs Administration on its WeChat account. I believe the author Wei Ma will use her following stories to portray a larger picture that more profoundly interrogates the social malaise she has observed in contemporary China.

Folded Spaces and Human Waste in “Folding Beijing”

Of course, class division, inequality, and stratification are not only represented through temporality. They are also very much evident, more straightforwardly, in space and geography, both in fiction and in reality. In July 2016, one month before “Folding Beijing” won the Hugo Award for Best Novelette in that year, *Beijing Youth Daily* published a news feature on the author Hao Jingfang, and introduced her writing styles and the sources of her inspirations:

When there were major events in Beijing, restrictions were put in place, and instead of bustling streets, they became tidy and beautiful. “There are certain people,” she thought to herself, “*who can be hidden away, hidden in unseen spaces*. With this dark idea, it is certainly possible to hide certain crowds underground forever.” (Yang B1, my emphasis)

Her science fiction writings appear to be mostly inspired by her close observation of her surroundings. “My main motivation for writing,” said Hao Jingfang, “comes from what I have seen and witnessed. These images and emotions are so full in my heart that I need a container to preserve them.” (Yang B1) Deeply rooted in such observations and capturing the weirdness of China’s post-socialist transitions, “Folding Beijing” has gained international recognition as a thought experiment. Utopia and dystopia collide and collapse into each other, not temporally, as in “Formerly Slow,” but spatially. The bright and dark sides of Sargentian “social dreaming” (see Sargent 3-4), the fond dreams and nightmares that can lead to opposite ways of narrating utopianism, merge into a state of ambiguity through the process of “folding.” This process divides Beijing into three strictly stratified

spaces where, in the words of the news feature, “certain people” can be hidden away, only visible to those who live in the same space. As she wrote in the story,

One side of the earth was First Space, population five million. Its allotted time lasted from six o'clock in the morning to six o'clock the next morning. Then the space went to sleep, and the earth flipped.

The other side was shared by Second Space and Third Space. Twenty-five million people lived in Second Space, and their allotted time lasted from six o'clock on that second day to ten o'clock at night. Fifty million people lived in Third Space, allotted the time from ten o'clock at night to six o'clock in the morning, at which point First Space returned. (Hao “Folding” 230)

Through these foldings, Hao Jingfang constructs a utopian/dystopian narrative space, where she is able to investigate different *possibilities*. “I [...] gave a scenario of a possible future that tried to tackle problems brought by automation, technological progress, unemployment, inequality and economic stagnation.” (Hao “Speech” n.p.). As she said at the Hugo Award ceremony one month after the news feature in *Beijing Youths Daily*, the ambition of her “genre-less” writings is to endow science fiction with realistic concerns – the everyday concerns that she has witnessed by looking around herself in contemporary China.

I find David Harvey’s assertion of how China looks very much to the point: “Somebody, somewhere and somehow, is getting very rich” (Harvey 142). From the late-1980s to the mid-1990s, Deng Xiaoping frequently proclaimed that it was necessary to “let some people get rich first in certain regions” in order to lay the foundation of prosperity for all. He moved away from the politically constricting notion of complete egalitarianism and advocated the superiority of socialism “in terms of avoiding polarization, achieving common prosperity and eliminating poverty” (see Naughton 501). However, in the decades following Deng Xiaoping, economic reality moved in the opposite direction. We do not need any well-researched report to tell us about the widening gap between those who “got rich first” and those who the rich have forgotten. The signs of this are everywhere: the developmental unevenness between inland and coastal cities, between rural and urban areas, between different social classes, and probably also between the different passing cars outside my window. Entrepreneurs and labour contractors promise a shining future to youngsters,

fresh from the campuses, and to the migrant workers attracted by the seemingly prosperous silhouette of the developed cities like Beijing. They decorate their promises with various fancy words such as dream, hard work, contribution, prospect, etc., all of which mask a reality which is exploitative and exhaustive in nature. The ordinary labourers in “Folding Beijing” can be categorised with the “precariat,” a term Guy Standing uses to refer to a “class-in-the-making” defined by “short-termism,” who might develop “a mass incapacity to think long term, induced by the low probability of personal progress or building a career” (Standing 8, 21). Beijing’s future does not belong to the precariat:

[They] had built this folding city. District by district, they had transformed the old city. Like termites swarming over a wooden house, they had chewed up the wreckage of the past, overturned the earth, and constructed a brand-new world [...] Finally, when the completed building stood up before them like a living person, they had scattered in terror as though they had given birth to a monster. (Hao 231)

In such a helpless and hopeless tone, “Folding Beijing” portrays the confusion and hardship of all migrant workers and young drifters in this gigantic city. Everyone laughs, cries, prays, gains, and loses here in the folding city, and they all hope to find the sense of belonging and identity in a place becoming increasingly surreal. Beijing welcomes them all, but not in the way they have wished for. Driven by capital, these outsiders are merely considered the source of surplus value to be extracted, working for an illusory goal from which they are forever excluded.

In the story, those who were no longer valuable to the city are sent or expelled to the Third Space. What happens there has nothing to do with the other two spaces. These people are “the masters of the night,” (Hao 232) undertaking the least regarded jobs during the eight evening hours they had every two days. They believe that waste recycling is the backbone of Third Space. They are proud of it, willing to “eke out a living by performing the repetitive drudgery as fast as possible, to toil hour after hour for rewards as thin as the wings of cicadas” (Hao 232). But in fact, they have nothing, none at all. As the protagonist Lao Dao finds out later in the story, their waste recycling industry could easily be run by machines. They do not have any trade with the outside world, cannot afford to apply for loans, cannot contribute a penny to Beijing’s GDP, and therefore have been “kicked out” from the social market as a whole.

Most of the time, they are sealed in soporific cocoon-beds, isolated from the spaces where people are really participating in the dynamic social matrix.

In other worlds, the Third Space is hidden, forgotten, and forsaken, accommodating not social subjects but, in Zygmunt Bauman's term, "human waste." In *Wasted Lives* (2004), Bauman argues that human waste, or wasted humans, are "the 'excessive' and 'redundant', that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay." (Bauman 5) As he continues:

The production of human waste [...] is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity. It is an inescapable side-effect of *order-building* (each order casts some parts of the extant population as 'out of place', 'unfit' or 'undesirable') and of *economic progress* (that cannot proceed without degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of 'making a living' and therefore cannot but deprive their practitioners of their livelihood). (Bauman 5, original emphasis)

However, there is one character in "Folding Beijing", who seems to be different from the other "wasted humans" in the Third Space: this is Lao Dao, the space-traveller. To earn the tuition fees for his adopted daughter Tang Tang, Lao Dao has accepted a commission to sneak into the Second and then the First Space in order to deliver a message. This is not an easy undertaking, but the money is good, and he needs it desperately. Here in his father-daughter relationship, Lao Dao's long-lost subjectivity has been regenerated. Through his hopes for Tang Tang, we can identify Lao Dao's own interest in music, fine art, as well as other elements that transcend the class to which he belongs. At the end of the story, despite many twists and turns (literally), Lao Dao manages to get more than enough money to pay for Tang Tang's tuition. But even so, can we read this story as representing a genuine possibility of class mobility? Can we see any possibility for the subalterns in the Third Space to speak for themselves as they are gradually reduced to mere numbers in the statistical reports presented at the ceremony celebrating "The Folding City at Fifty" (Hao 249)?

I doubt this. What Lao Dao wished was to let Tang Tang grow up as a "real lady" able to "sit elegantly and quietly, cover her knees with her skirt, and smile so that her pretty teeth showed," because this, he believes, is "how you got others to love you." (Hao 262) Interestingly, however, this is also the impression he got from Yi Yan

in the First Space, the beautiful assistant to the bank's president, who has been cheating on her husband and lying to her pursuer; a personae Lao Dao does not like at all. In fact, he is clever enough to understand how far away he is from the First Space. "He gazed at the park at night, realizing this was perhaps the last time he would see a sight such as this. He wasn't sad or nostalgic. This was a beautiful, peaceful place, but it had nothing to do with him" (Hao 257). Lao Dao knows everything. He knows that if one day Tang Tang were to be accepted by the First Space with proper education, she would definitely become estranged, alienated, unfamiliar, and be transformed into someone he would never like. But he accepts that cost anyway, without hesitation, because he understands that this is the only way in which Tang Tang can do something *meaningful* in this folding city, allowing her to escape from her unfortunate identity as "human waste".

Divide in Time and Space

In the "Call for Papers" of this special issue, the editors borrow a sentence from Martha E. Gimenez's article "Marxism, and Class, Gender, and Race: Rethinking the Trilogy": "class is not simply another ideology legitimating oppression; it denotes exploitative relations between people mediated by their relations to the means of production" (Gimenez 24). From this perspective, these "Third Spacers" in "Folding Beijing," theoretically speaking, might not be considered a *class* since they are completely excluded from the general matrix of social production. In the process of urban development and modernisation, these people have made their contributions to building this folding city, but then been abandoned and disposed of within this hidden space. Lao Dao is told later in this story about the contrast between the rising cost of human labour and the cheaper option of machinery. At the same time, increasing productivity leads to an increasing rate of unemployment. To solve this, "[the] best way," as a government officer tells Lao Dao, "is to reduce the time a certain portion of the population spends living, and then find ways to keep them busy. Do you get it? Right, *shove* them into the night" (Hao 255, my emphasis). In this way, the "Third Spacers" are no longer exploitable. They have been used up, having nothing left to be exploited. But nonetheless, their transformation from precarious labourers, or the precariat, to "human waste" does not equate to the end of the market and class exploitation. These mechanisms remain dynamic, just transferred to other relations of production that involve



Image source: tor-online.de/feature/buch/2017/06/ideenliteratur-aus-china-pekings-falten/

machines and the “Second Spacers” – those who still trust and are fighting for the illusions promised by people living at the top of the social pyramid.

Earlier in 2021, there was a much-debated social controversy concerning delivery riders in China. Tired of the biopolitical/algorithmic control of the platform economy and unlimited exploitation by the oligopoly in this industry, they launched an informal strike asking for a higher wage, less commission fees, better protection and insurance, and a longer delivery time for each order (see Wang n.p.). But the companies, not surprisingly, shirked their responsibility. They added a function on their mobile apps allowing the customers to choose whether they were happy to wait for five more minutes or not, igniting a severe conflict between the riders and the customers. The former group argued that the customers were inconsiderate and indifferent to their personal safety, while the rebuttal from the latter was equally convincing: we paid the money, we are hungry and exhausted from our work, and we need our food. According to China Report Network, in the first half of 2019, a prominent food delivery platform in China had 86.3% of its orders placed by customers aged between 20 and 34 years old (see Zhao et al 233). These young people are mostly influenced and coerced by a “996” (9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week) culture that has become dominant in urban life, whether they like it or not. Under such a social system, food delivery is in a way no longer an option, but an indispensable part of their daily life. It seems their anger against the riders’ strike is understandable.

But I am sure you can see what is wrong here. Just like the Shenli citizens and denizens in “Formerly Slow” differentiated by the dormancy qualification, the customers and riders belong to the same class—the working class of labourers, of waged employees, of those who strive to live a better life through dedication and hard work. Their emotions and hostility are misdirected towards each other, as the companies cunningly extract themselves from the mess which they created in the first place. This is what I read from Wei Ma’s “Formerly Slow,” a sharp story revealing the internal division of the working class in this new era and calling for unity between citizens and denizens, between local residents and migrant workers, and between delivery customers and riders. “Class” is always a meaningful topic of science fiction and fantasies, and in “Formerly Slow” and “Folding Beijing,” it is estranged, represented, and interpreted through the forms of temporality and spatiality, generating a special chronotope, where various social concerns and dilemmas can be closely interrogated. In time and space we are divided; but in realising the hypocrisy embodied in the dormancy qualification and the folding city, we will unite, not as human waste, but as human beings.

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Jobs and Class of Main Characters in Science Fiction

Marie Vibbert

I was at a massive mixer for members of the Science Fiction Writers of America, a group I had just joined, wondering how I could even talk with these big, important people. The question everyone asked when you walked up to them was, “What type of science fiction do you write?” After mumbling some self-deprecating responses like “bad” or “oh you know like . . . the kind with robots and spaceships?” I tried to express what made my work different. “I write working-class science fiction,” I told the next gentleman. “Stories with waitresses and janitors in space, you know? I feel like there’s too many stories about rich guys without real problems.”

I picked the wrong man to try this tactic on. He laughed condescendingly and said, “The opposite is true. Everything is about some worker everyman. There aren’t enough stories about rich characters!”

My first thought was, *Ooookay time to start never talking to this dude ever again*, but my second thought was a worried, *Is he right?* I had this gut feeling that a lot of the science fiction I had read didn’t represent my social class, but was I just biased?¹

The only answer was, of course, to collect some statistics! This paper is the culmination of my efforts to answer the question for myself, “Is there a class bias in main characters in science fiction, and if so, are poor or wealthy characters more predominant?”

Methods

Choosing the Books

The first question I had to answer was, “How do I take a sample set of science fiction?”

I limited myself to novels, because novels or their detailed discussions were easy to find, and that way I’d be comparing apples to apples.

¹ It is odd to footnote one’s own class identity, but I feel it is necessary to point out that I am now comfortably middle class, a computer programmer by day, but much of my self-identity comes from growing up below the poverty line, raised by a single father who was a union laborer.

Reading every science fiction novel ever would not be feasible, especially with a staff of just me. I searched for recommended reading lists, but which to choose? Many were simply “The Best of 2019” or such. While it would be interesting to look at a specific period of SF, I wanted a cross-section of what an average reader might have in mind, and that meant including recent books as well as old classics.

I googled “Top Science Fiction Novels” in an incognito browser tab (so as not to bias the results with my search history) and took the first 50 novels the search returned. I liked that list better: it felt eclectic, and included recent novels as well as Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein*. Of course, the Google search results, while incognito, still would be skewed toward my location in the Midwest United States.

The British Science Fiction Association’s magazine, *Vector*, announced a call for papers on class and science fiction. I could hardly contain my excitement (and imposter syndrome) as I typed and re-typed my email asking if this statistical analysis was the sort of thing that maybe they’d want to see? And so, my next data set was BSFA award winners. These would skew British to balance my American bias. How better to kiss up to the editors? I started my spreadsheet!

BSFA award winners include fantasy novels with no science fictional elements, however, maintaining genre purity would open up a can of worms (how to draw the lines? Who gets to say what is or isn’t SF?). I would keep the results of each list separate, to see if there was any bias.

On accepting the paper proposal, editor Polina Levontin suggested adding the titles from the Orion SF Masterworks book series, a somewhat curated list, limited only by what titles Orion had the rights to. So now I had three piles of representative works: award winners, a hodgepodge recommended by Google, and a curated list for a total of 194 separate titles. It seemed as close as I was going to get to a reasonable sampling of notable science fiction novels.

Choosing the Characters

The next question, of course, was, “Which characters?” I didn’t want to look at antagonists or incidental characters. I focused specifically on protagonists, or “the main character.”

However, very soon I came across *River of Gods* by Ian McDonald, which was on both the BSFA list and SF Masterworks. A novel with ten point of view characters. Did I list all ten? Would this weigh the results unfairly toward Ian McDonald’s personal viewpoint?

Hyperion by Dan Simmons had the same problem. I re-read it, and read *River of Gods* for the first time, and I decided, arbitrarily, that I would limit myself to four main characters, maximum, per book. Some books would have one clear main character, but if there was an ensemble cast, I’d list only the top four mentioned in reviews of the book, or read it myself and decide who the four main-est characters were.

Books with high concept plots, like Vernor Vinge’s *Fire Upon the Deep*, rarely mentioned characters at all in their online summaries or reviews. (I learned to dread the words “Great book but not very good characters” as a precursor to having to struggle to find a copy of the book quickly so I could find out who the characters were). I had to dig deeper, reading review after review, asking friends who had read the book, and then reading the book itself as quickly as I could, skimming to see proper names.

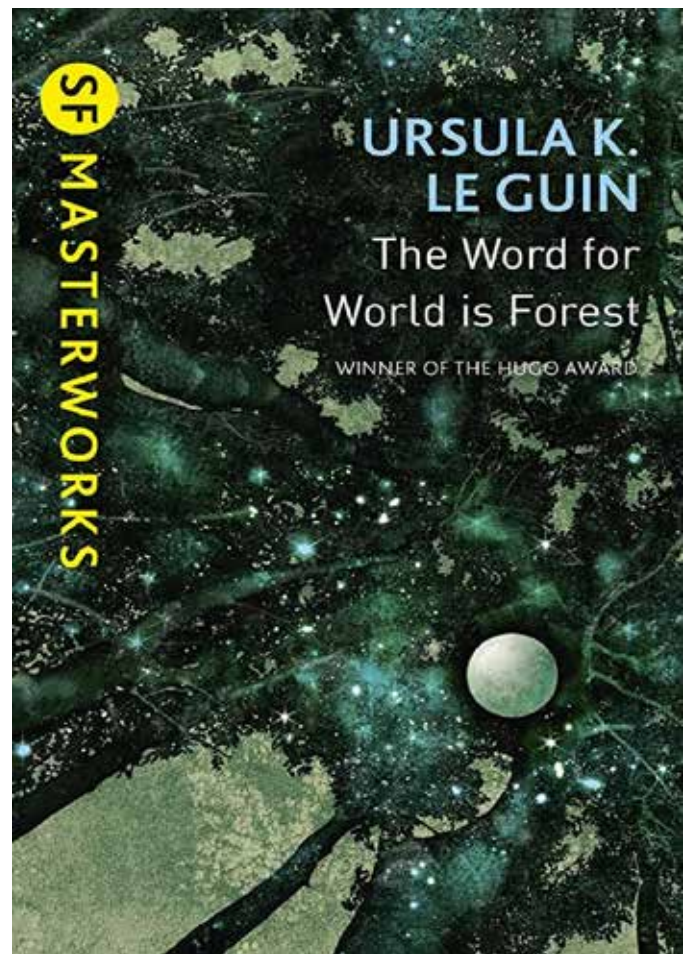
In the end, I was able to find at least one main character for all the books, for a list of 244 separate characters across 194 novels, excepting only the handful of anthologies and short story collections on the SF Masterworks list, which I skipped, rather than have to decide whose story got to be counted and whose didn’t.

Defining Character Class

I looked each novel up on Wikipedia, where very often the Plot Summary section would begin “Joan is a physicist” or “Jane is a coal miner” or what-have-you. Clearly, jobs are important in how we define character, because the vast majority of books could provide a main character and their job through this simple method.

So, now I had a list of books, and the main characters in those books, and their jobs, if they had one. Surely jobs were tied to class, so all I had to do was list the jobs and we’d see who was working class, right?

I had 140 unique job titles across 244 characters. A pie chart with 140 wedges didn’t show me anything interesting. I realized I had to break the jobs into larger groups, and that brought me back to the initial question: What class does each character belong to?



I did a lot of searching for hard definitions of social class and found more than anything that class is complicated. A steelworker in a strong union in the 1960s could be making more than a high school teacher, yet one is seen as a member of the proletariat and the other a member of the intelligentsia. Jobs can start out highly respected, like a computer helpdesk technician in 1970, and become low-wage, low-rated work, like a computer helpdesk technician in 2010. Also, the same job pays differently, and the same wage has different purchasing powers in different countries.

Class is about more than occupation and paycheck. A low-wage worker – maybe they’re a barista at a bohemian cafe, a farm laborer at an artist’s colony, a runner on a movie set – could live rent-free in the family *pied-à-terre*, with a fat allowance. Part of class is in what the work is for: does it provide for the needs or wants of the worker and their dependents? How much of the profit does the worker take home, and how much is siphoned off? Unfortunately, most novels didn’t go into the minutiae. Nonetheless, I wouldn’t rely *just* on characters’ jobs: sometimes I would make judgment calls based on what I could tell about the character and their family background, either from reading the novel or summaries of it.

Based on summaries I found online, I came up with these five categories:²:

1	Poor	Unable to meet basic needs. Unemployed and ‘working poor’ who work at wages below the poverty line.
2	Working class	Able to meet basic needs but not comfortably. May include craft workers, laborers in factories, restaurant workers, nursing home staff, workers in repair shops and garages, delivery services, military troops of low rank.
3	Middle Class	Comfortably able to meet basic needs and some wants. May be clerical-administrative, may provide support for professionals, engage in data collection, record-keeping, paralegals, bank tellers, sales, teachers, military specialists and police officers of middle rank.
4	Upper Middle Class	Comfortably able to meet all their basic needs and many wants. May include professionals, engineers, accountants, lawyers, architects, university faculty, managers and directors, ship captains, military leaders, police chiefs, local politicians.
5	Wealthy	Economic elite whose wealth derives from what they own – real estate, businesses, stocks and bonds, other assets. May include heirs, top-level executives, celebrities.

I went through my list of 140 character jobs and I sorted them into these five classes, making some judgment calls. For example, the main character of *Mythago Wood* by Robert Holdstock is listed in most summaries as “a military vet” – but that’s not an occupation per se. On reading further, I found that he had the wherewithal to bum around France for a year without employment before returning home, to a house with four chimneys and a name, so I put him in the upper middle class and considered that a safe bet.

Jobs could also have a different status given the society or time of the novel. For example, I had “ship captains” listed as an example of an upper-middle-class job, but Tabitha in Colin Greenland’s *Take Back Plenty* reads more like an owner/operator of a long-haul trucking rig in her world where space cargo ships are common, whereas an 18th century ship captain almost certainly would have been wealthy.

Characters could change class over the course of a novel. At first, I listed people as whatever they were introduced as, however this didn’t always feel right. In *River of Gods*, Shiv is introduced in his own luxury vehicle, with a driver, a gangster having just dumped a body. He seems wealthy and I would have marked him as such, however soon he’s lost everything, we meet his impoverished family, and he takes on illicit jobs without much choice, so I marked him as working-class. (Interestingly the only one of the four main characters that I marked below middle class, and the only one who serves partially as an antagonist to the others.) In the same novel Vishram is a stand-up comedian, and listed that way in most summaries. My first instinct is to mark him poor, because who makes any money at that? But reading the novel, he turns out to be from a fabulously wealthy family and quickly becomes a top executive at his father’s energy company, so he was marked wealthy.

My marker would be whatever class the character spends the majority of the novel in, including flashbacks.

Other Statistics Tracked

While looking up their jobs and deciding on their class, I marked if the characters were male, female, or nonbinary, based on pronoun usage.³ I also marked the year the book came out, or, in the case of the BSFA list, the year it was awarded.⁴ I also marked if the authors were male or female. (No authors in this data set were explicitly nonbinary.)

² This is basically similar to how the sociologists W. Thompson and J. Hickey divide it up in their book *Society in Focus* (2005).

³ One exception being the case of the AI main character of *Ancillary Justice*; I felt the ubiquitous she/her pronoun usage in the book rendered the main character neutral, not female.

⁴ This was an oversight caused by copying the BSFA award list directly into my spreadsheet, but novels are awarded the year after they come out, so it’s close enough for this level of general inquiry.

Then, scariest of all, I tried to find out if the author had a non-writing job, and if so, what it was. Based on this I tried to class the authors, knowing it would mean a lot of guesswork, but hoping it might reveal some broad patterns. This was much harder than doing the same for fictional characters. Most authors either did not mention their day job in their bio, or had held a variety of jobs over the course of their lives. I tried to err toward whatever job they held while writing the novel in question, or if that wasn't clear, for the largest part of their lives, but even that wasn't always clear. Authors may enjoy mentioning jobs they have worked in, but they seldom reveal for how long, or whether that job was their main source of income.

While I made sure to provide a job and a class for every fictional character, I allowed myself to not do so for authors, if several searches didn't reveal enough evidence. Finally, I included a notes column in my data, to provide details where difficult decisions were made and could, perhaps, be revised. I manually compared all duplicates and cross-checked the BSFA, SF Masterworks, and Google lists against a Master List. Then, at last, it was time to make some charts, and see what the data told.

Results

The top twenty most common main character jobs I found were:

JOB	COUNT
Scientist	20
Noble	8
Politician	8
Juvenile	8
No visible means of support	6
Anthropologist	5
Detective	5
Priest	5
Soldier	5
Army leader	4
Linguist	4
Psychologist	4
Spy	4
Astronaut	3
Battleship	3
Miner	3
Pilot	3
Ad man	2
Apprentice	2

Undifferentiated scientist was the top job even before I made every "physicist", "geologist", and "biochemist" also a "scientist." (I kept research assistants separate, these were people who might be primary investigators). I felt dirty leaving the social sciences out of it ("psychologist" and "anthropologist" still make the top list) but felt that I couldn't make "scientist" too broad a bucket. As it is, there's no surprise a genre called "science" fiction would have a built-in bias toward scientists.

The top five jobs, other than "juvenile" are all upper-middle or wealthy class. I was not surprised to see a good turnout by "no visible means of support." I actually expected more of that, having often complained about books where the characters drop everything to chase the plot with no concern for how they're going to eat or pay the rent. "No Visible Means of Support" is frequently listed as wealthy, because the character does expensive things (usually

travel) without concern for cost. Only one “No visible means of support” was marked middle class because, well, the character felt middle-class to me, and while he doesn’t think about money, he also doesn’t spend any. This was the protagonist of *The Shrinking Man* by Richard Matheson.

Almost as soon as I started recording data, I was aware of the prominence of professionals, and when I graphed the count of characters in each of the five classes, this proved correct. The largest single class represented is the upper middle class, where professionals sit, with 111 individual characters counted there. Only 13 characters were identified as poor. Double that – 26 – were working class, and over double that – 58 – middle class. Wealthy characters accounted for 36, putting them between working class and middle, in terms of representation.

I wanted to compare this against the actual class breakdown in the United States. To find hard numbers, I went with a Pew report on US income in 2016.⁵ The following chart shows the Pew results next to the character class breakdown in this study sample. Because Pew only used three classes, I’ve combined Poor and Working Class into “lower” and Upper Middle and Wealthy into “upper”. The difference shows that upper class characters are strongly over-represented in the study as compared to the US population, while lower class characters are strongly under-represented, Figure 1.

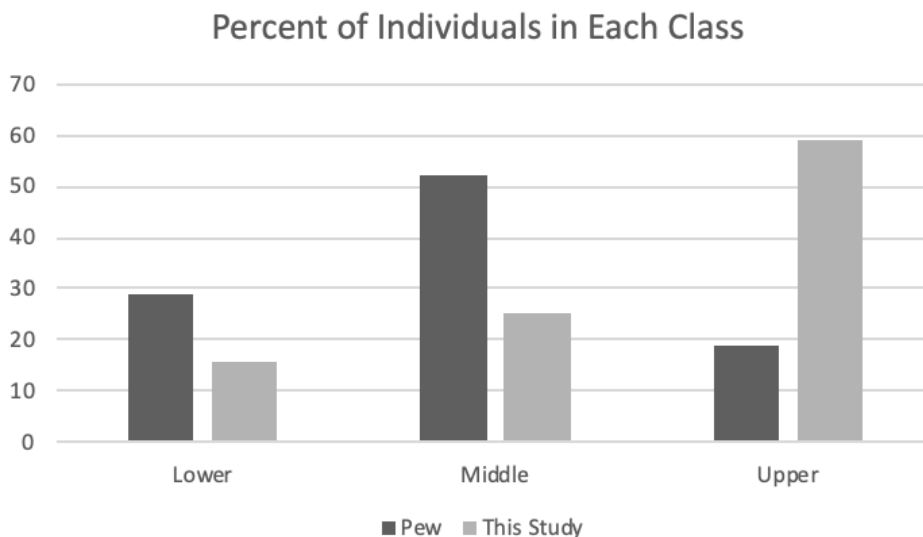


Figure 1 – Comparing the class breakdown for characters in this study vs. Pew report on class of US population based on income weighted for family size. For an individual, to be middle class required an income of \$26,093 a year, to be upper required an income of \$78,281

The next thing I wondered was, does this change over time? I had recently looked at a list of labor unions in science fiction on “Hugo Book Club Blog” (hugoclub.blogspot.com/2018/12/organized-labour-in-science-fiction.html) – for each example of a labor union in science fiction, they listed the date and whether the depiction was positive, negative, or mixed. Scanning the list, it seemed the first half of the list was heavily negative and the second half heavily positive. To check if I was really seeing that, I compared all the entries from before 1990 to the entries from post-1990 and I found that overwhelmingly the pre-1990 depictions of unions were negative, with only 4 positive depictions and 14 negative, and post-1990 depictions were positive – with 34 positive and only 7 negative. Both groups had around the same percentage of “mixed” depictions.⁶

⁵ From Pew Research “The American middle class is stable in size, but losing ground financially to upper-income families” by [RAKESH KOCHHAR](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/06/the-american-middle-class-is-stable-in-size-but-losing-ground-financially-to-upper-income-families/), September 6, 2018

[pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/06/the-american-middle-class-is-stable-in-size-but-losing-ground-financially-to-upper-income-families/](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/06/the-american-middle-class-is-stable-in-size-but-losing-ground-financially-to-upper-income-families/)

⁶ The list was heavily weighted toward titles post-1980, since it focused on television and movies. The only 1930s entry was positive. Obviously, I suspect the virulently anti-union 1980s defined by Ronald Reagan’s policies caused all those negative portrayals in the 80s, rampant corruption in the 1970s lead to mostly mixed and negative portrayals in that decade, and I would hypothesize that the positive portrayals after 1990 shows authors yearning for something that has been destroyed.

That list included movies and TV show episodes, which creates a different genre picture than just novels, and there were more entries post-1990 than pre-1990, but still, if I could find such a shift in opinion in one list of science fiction works, why wouldn't there be change between newer and older books as regards to character social class? I mapped the five social classes over time of publication (or award for BSFA titles.)

This ... was not a very useful line chart. It looked like spaghetti. All the classes went up and down chaotically, though upper-middle class had a strong peak in the early 70s. I put in linear trend lines to clear things up, but all five classes trend slightly up over time – that implies the number of characters is going up over time, not anything about the relative frequency of class.

Could there be a bias toward what time period these books came from? I looked at the count of book titles (omitting duplicates) by year, and sure enough, the early 70s do have more titles, though in general the years after the 70s are better represented than those before. The BSFA list starts in 1969.

Separating out the BSFA list and the Google List, however, it's only the SF Masterworks list that has such a heavy bias toward the early 70s (which raises the hypothesis that this is driven by the height of Orion publishing's title-purchasing power.) The BSFA list by definition has one title per year, and the Google List was surprisingly evenly spread over the timeline. Perhaps if I had listed as many Google results as the SF Masterworks list, the date trend would even out?

Well, there wasn't anything I could do about my sample set at this point, but I could make the data more visual. I converted the chart into percent of characters that year in each class instead of count. When that still looked like a mess of color, I concatenated into three classes and that became easier to read.

The "upper" class visibly dominates throughout time; however, the middle class makes strong inroads after 1995 and though the trend breaks after 2015, it could indicate a general increase in class diversity more recently. Still, it doesn't look like an immediately comprehensible trend over time.

So I thought I'd break up the results by decade and see if there were any shifts visible that way. And there were a few.

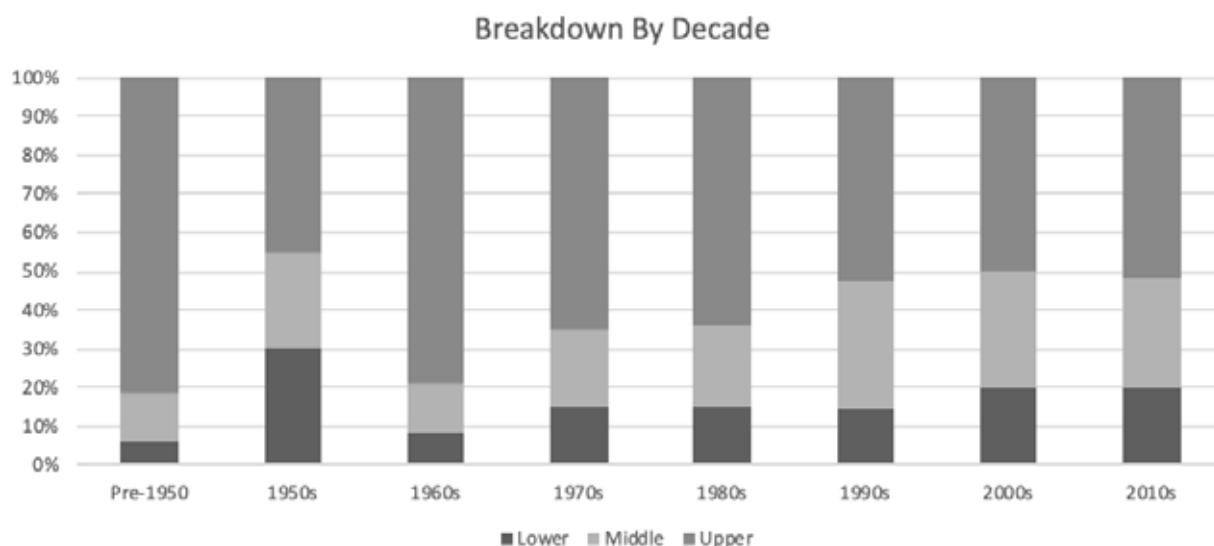


Figure 2 Proportions of Lower, Middle, and Upper class characters by decade of book publication – note all pre-1950s lumped together because of the low numbers.

The 1950s offer more working-class characters than the decades immediately before or after them. The 1960s are particularly abysmal for class representation, Figure 2. The 1970s and 80s are a little better. The 1990s are the most middle-class decade, and the 2000s and 2010s keep those middle-class gains, more or less, and add lower-class gains, though they don't recapture the level of working-class representation in the 1950s.

It's not hard to speculate about historical events impacting the preoccupations of science fiction writers each decade. Post-war progressive policies might drive the 1950s figure and then fall to consumerism in the 1960s. (The late 1930s, with the Great Depression, are a spike of poor and middle-class characters in the wealth-dominated pre-1950 world, though that is lost in Figure 2 because the early, pre-1950s data are aggregated.)

Could the sources of my data be skewing things? I hypothesized that the Google list would be more "casual" and therefore more working-class than the BSFA award-winners, which might skew toward the preoccupations of intellectuals. So, I looked at the class representation in each of my three data sources, I visualised the data as class percentages in each novel list so that the relative size of the sets wouldn't skew the view, Figure 3.

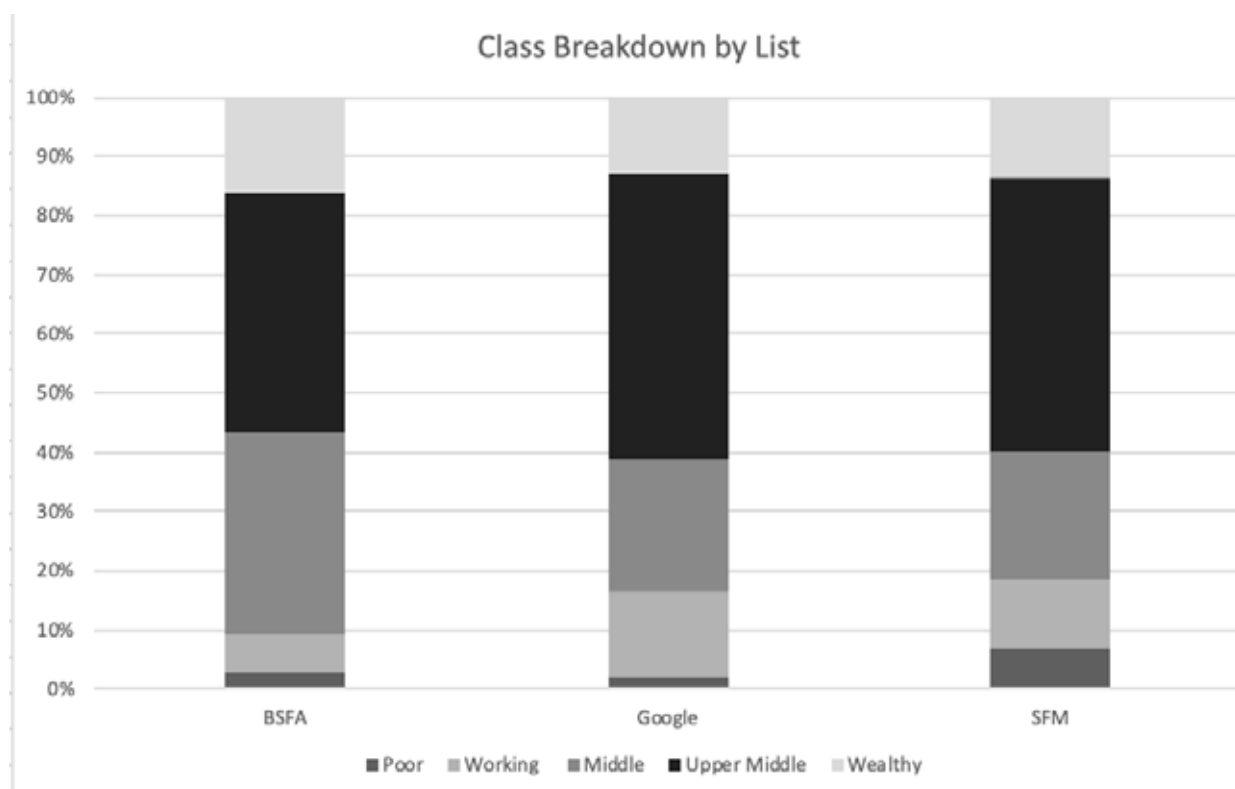


Figure 3: Showing the share of five classes among main characters in the three lists.

What I found was that indeed, the BSFA had the largest percentage of both wealthy and middle-class protagonists. The Google list was the leader in working-class characters, but also the highest in upper-middle class. The Science Fiction Masters list had the highest percentage of poor characters (7%). However, all three lists followed the general trend, most characters in Upper Middle Class, least in Poor, Wealthy more common than Working Class, and less than Middle Class.

Do the results change with character gender? I found there were *no* poor female main characters, at all. Nonbinary/neutral/nongendered characters were exclusively in the middle or upper-middle class, and were the only gender to be mostly middle class instead of upper-middle. Though this is a tiny sample size (only 4 characters), and so this is only fanciful conjecture.

Since there are so many more male characters (out of the total 208 characters 161 were male) the changes in the smaller numbers of female (total of 43 characters) and nonbinary characters (4) are hard to see when looking at raw count, so I did the graph by percentage (so percentage of female characters in each class out of all female characters, etc.)

Other than the nonbinary characters bucking the trend, the male and female characters followed the same class pattern – most in upper-middle, then middle, then wealthy, then working, then poor. Women are slightly more likely to be depicted as wealthy than men (19% of female characters vs. 17% of male characters), and also slightly more

likely to be depicted as working-class (14% to 12%), though men are much more likely to be depicted as poor, as, again, there were no poor female characters (8% of men vs. 0% of women). It seems unlikely that the gender of the character affects class representation, the differences are probably not statistically significant.

Does the class of the characters depend on the gender of the author? Probably not, Figure 4 shows that the distributions by class are very similar for female and male authors.

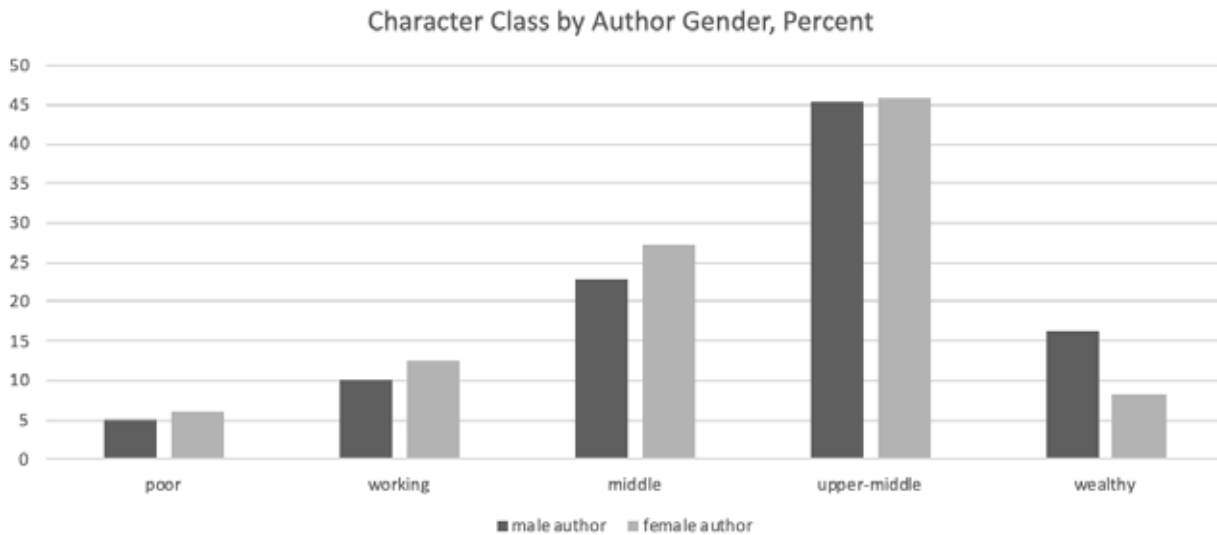


Figure 4 Character class by author gender as a percentage of total characters by that author gender

However, the gender of the author has an undeniable impact on the gender of the character. Female authors appear to only marginally favour female protagonists, splitting themselves pretty evenly between male and female characters and also writing nonbinary characters, while male authors are far more likely to showcase male characters – only a small proportion of the protagonists written by male authors are women (Figure 5).

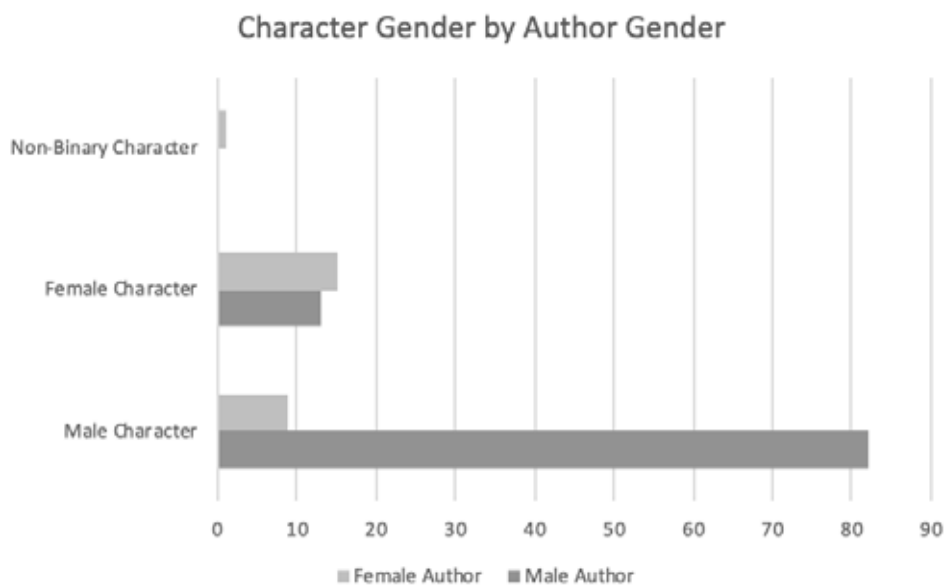


Figure 5 Count of characters of each gender by author gender.

While this isn't a paper about gender itself, since I had the data, I went ahead and charted out author gender over time and character gender over time. As expected, more female authors (and female characters since it is women that tend to write them) appear more recently, though the trendline is higher in characters than in authors. Overall,

gender representation is equally bad among characters as among authors – only about 20% are female. There is a veritable mountain of masculinity in the early 1970s. There are more characters than authors, but years without a female character after 1980 are rare, while years without a female author after 1980 are a more likely occurrence. Also there is a peak of female authorship in the 1990s, and a dearth of female authors in the 2000s, which echoes my findings in my paper tracking female-seeming author credits in top SF magazines.⁷ Interesting that the frequency of female characters somewhat tracks with the same trend, with 2006-2008 being a rare spread without female main characters and only two years in the 1990s without a female main character. It is interesting to note that only one non-binary character appeared before 2009, in 1975. The representation of female authors is a lot better on the SF Masterworks list (about 25%) than on the Google or the BSFA lists (where only 15% of the authors are women). Out of 122 unique authors only 26 (21%) are women.

What about author class? As mentioned before, I couldn't find information on all authors, so there are a number of blanks, more for women than for men. Still, it looks like regardless of gender, authors are more likely to be in the upper-middle class, just like their characters.

That one poor author is a tentative classification: Cormac McCarthy, who lived a relatively impoverished life in Tennessee in the 1960s and 1970s, although he received a major fellowship award in the early 1980s, and started seeing commercial success in the 1990s. His main character was also classed poor – a vagabond.

At first glance, I thought there was evidence for most authors writing their own social class, or at least not far from it. However, comparing individual authors to their own characters there seems to be a regression to the mean, with some poorer authors imagining richer characters and richer authors imagining poorer. More research is needed as there are very few authors in the sample who are either extremely rich or poor! What does it say about how we relate to the class of the characters we write as authors, compared to race or gender?

When I grouped the authors into three classes and compared them against the Pew survey of American households by income, I found that authors were even more skewed wealthy than characters were, so this is likely affecting their view toward characters, Figure 6.

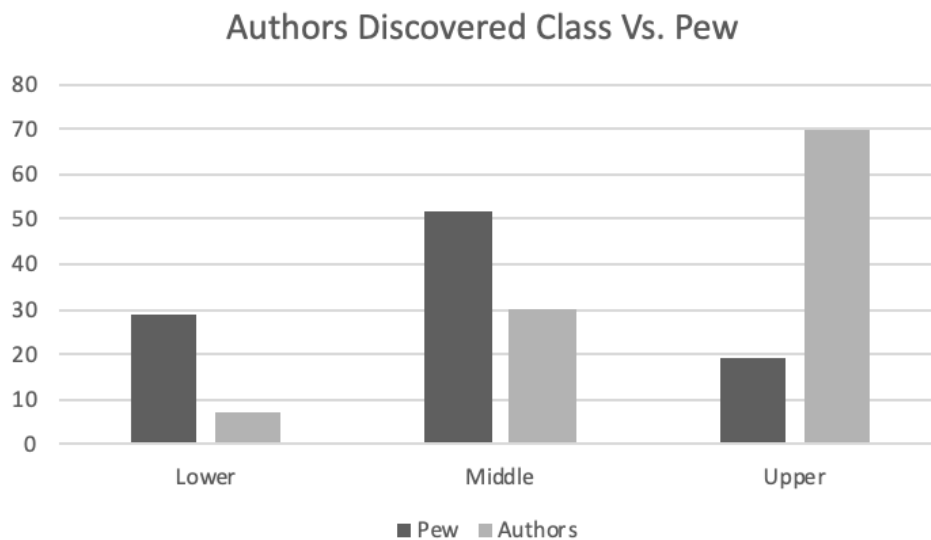


Figure 6 Using the same Pew research in Figure 2, comparing actual population class breakdown in US in 2016 to class breakdown of authors for whom I could make an educated guess at their class breakdown. Authors are much more likely to be upper class than US population, much less likely to be lower class than US population.

⁷ "The Women We Can See in Analog" tracked female-seeming author credits across six magazines from 1926 to 2010 and appeared in Analog Science Fiction and Fact in November 2020. I found the 1990s, particularly the early 90s, to be a time of great female representation in author credits, with a sudden and alarming drop off shorting after 2000, perhaps due to increased competition for more limited page space as online magazines challenged print.

Conclusions and Further questions

Using these methods, there are demonstrably more upper-class and wealthy characters than middle class and below in notable works of science fiction. While the three sources of book titles showed similar trends, the BSFA and SF Masterworks lists were perhaps more elitist than titles produced from a Google search for “Top science fiction novels.” In this sample, male authors were much more likely to write male characters than other genders. While character gender seemed significantly impacted by author gender, character social class does not appear to be that affected by author gender, though female authors were less likely to write the wealthiest characters than male. Male authors are overrepresented in the sample, as are male characters, and upper class characters are overrepresented while working classes are very under-represented. Popularity of class representation seems to change over time. Also, looking at the class of authors, as much as could be determined from online biographies, found that lower class writers are also severely under-represented.

These groups of novels may represent a general sense of science fiction as a genre, because award-winning and popular titles dominate our perceptions over lesser-known titles, but this data set could still be a biased one. Much of what we consider when we say “science fiction in general” isn’t novels. What if I could include movies? TV shows? I would have loved to have done short fiction, but there is so much of it that creating a reasonably representative sample set was too daunting for the scope of this project.

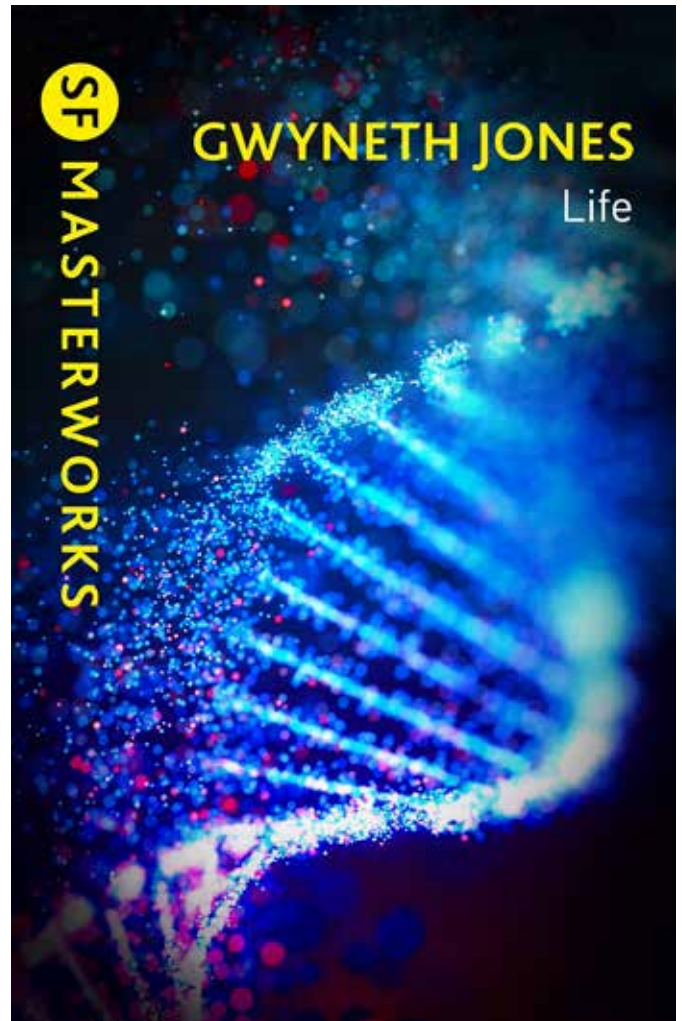
While the three lists showing the same general trends is a hopeful clue that the trends are informative beyond the sample set, these three lists could just be equally biased! What about bestsellers? Hugos? Nebulas?

What could we learn by including an analysis of race?

Given how prominent scientists are in science fiction, how would omitting them change the pattern of class or gender (most scientists in SF are male) representation? Just how much of that upper middle class bias is made up of Principal Investigators?

I would have liked fewer arbitrary choices by me in the data, especially in class attribution. Perhaps a crowd-sourced site could be set up.

Or I could rest on my laurels, having worked up enough numbers to prove some guy in a cocktail party wrong. It isn’t the worker everyman who dominates science fiction, it can safely be said if any archetype does, it is a male scientist at the top of his profession.



If anyone would like to play with the data and come to their own conclusions, the full data set is available on the Open Science Framework: osf.io/ptqys/

MARIE VIBBERT HAS SOLD OVER THREE 70 SHORT STORIES TO PROFESSIONAL MARKETS, OFTEN FOCUSING ON WORKING CLASS CHARACTERS AND SITUATIONS, REFLECTING HER BACKGROUND. HER PAPER ON THE FREQUENCY OF FEMALE NAMES IN TOP SF MAGAZINES OVER THE 90-YEAR HISTORY OF ASTOUNDING/ANALOG WAS WELL-RECEIVED AT THE CONFERENCE COVERING THAT HISTORY IN NEW YORK IN 2019, AND WOULD LATER APPEAR IN ANALOG. BY DAY SHE'S A COMPUTER PROGRAMMER IN CLEVELAND, OHIO.

Vector recommends: *The Gray House*

Farah Al Yaqout

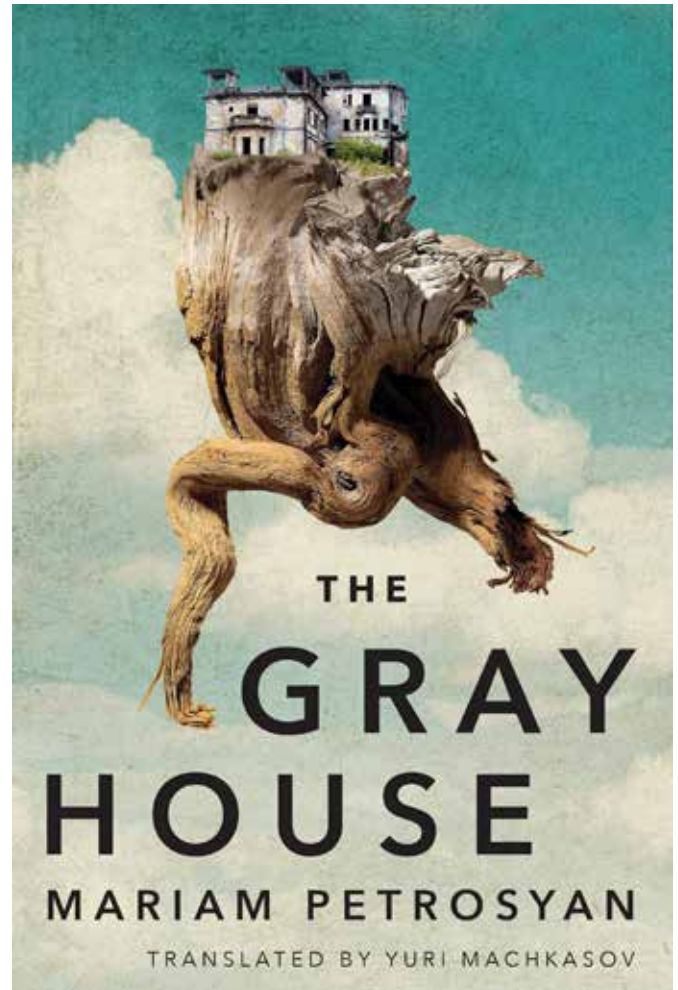
The Gray House (published in Russian in 2009; published in English in 2017)

Written by Armenian author Mariam Petrosyan over the course of eighteen years, and translated to English by Yuri Machkasov, *The Gray House* is a book that defies easy categorization.

The book is an epic: it is a fill-your-own-adventure-via-personal-interpretation. It is about a boarding school for disabled students, which is set in an unidentified time and place, where time loops forward and backwards. It is a fantasy with ancient entities, angels, and a magic forest – if you choose to believe that everything you read is literal rather than metaphoric. Both *The Gray House* and the House itself are “in the no-man’s-land between the two worlds” and it’s up to the reader to decide how they wish to read the text (14). Many of the plot threads that confused me were unraveled thanks to the community efforts of a subreddit, a Wikipedia page, and user-generated writing on social media. It is a book which, due to its universal message of how one must look beyond physical abilities, has created a haven of interpretation and a community which looks beyond ability, background, or language in its quest to understand the House.

In *The Gray House*, the reader is introduced to the titular House, and all of the residents within: nicks are used instead of names, as a way of keeping the Outside, well, outside. Nicks change throughout each person’s stay in the House, depending on the position they hold in the House. Names and identities are shed whenever the students’ actions within the House dictate as such. A student’s position and social standing aren’t set in stone, and all is subject to change depending on the House’s demands.

To anyone from the Outside, the House is a curiously egalitarian society. All of the students are disabled, disadvantaged in some way or the other. To an outsider, their disabilities (wheelchairs, lost limbs, blindness, to name a few) level the playing ground among them.



However, that Outsider would be wrong in their assumptions. Power, coups, and changes in class are not absent from the students’ interactions: there are House Leaders for every floor of the House, and it is partly their responsibility to keep the members of their group in line. Smoker, the first main narrator of the novel begins as a Wheeler on the First/Pheasant floor and is then kicked out of the Pheasants when he decides to wear red shoes, a violation of their Code of Conduct. It is a situation curiously reminiscent of the show trials which happened during the Soviet Union. Petrosyan began writing *The Gray House* in 1991, the same year as the fall of the Soviet Union and there appear to be constant allusions to it throughout the book.

Within the text, there are attempted coups for being House Leader which result in injury and even death. There are fights for being Master of the House, a position held by Blind, not because of the lust of power, but as has been demanded by the House itself. Shark, the principal, knows very little about the true nature of the House he runs. He also seems to believe that he runs the House rather than its true master, Blind. Seeking such power is usually what causes the characters' downfall. The truly powerful characters in the Gray House are usually the quietest.

Each new act begins with a timeline that shows the current students in the House (at least, the ones who are still relevant to the story) as well as their classification as Jumpers or Striders. This classification refers to their ability to visit the House's Other Side, a possibly metaphoric drug-induced visit to a fantasy world... or a truly fantastic land that the students can visit whenever they wish. Some students can never go to the Other Side, some of the more powerful ones can Stride whenever they wish, and some can only Jump once and not return.

There are micro-classes that exist within the Gray House: Jumpers/Striders, wheelers, insensibles, the various Floors. For the most part, they matter very little. Until they matter very greatly, at times such as Graduation and when difficult decisions regarding the Other Side can cost someone their life.

The Gray House is a communist allegory; it is a depiction of a traumatic period of a nation's history; it is an embrace of disability and difference. It is a cult-like society at the edge of two worlds, where preconceived notions of disability and how you are classified within society due to your abilities are questioned.



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Anarchy for the UK: Michael de Larrabeiti's *Borribles*, punk and protest

Ali Baker

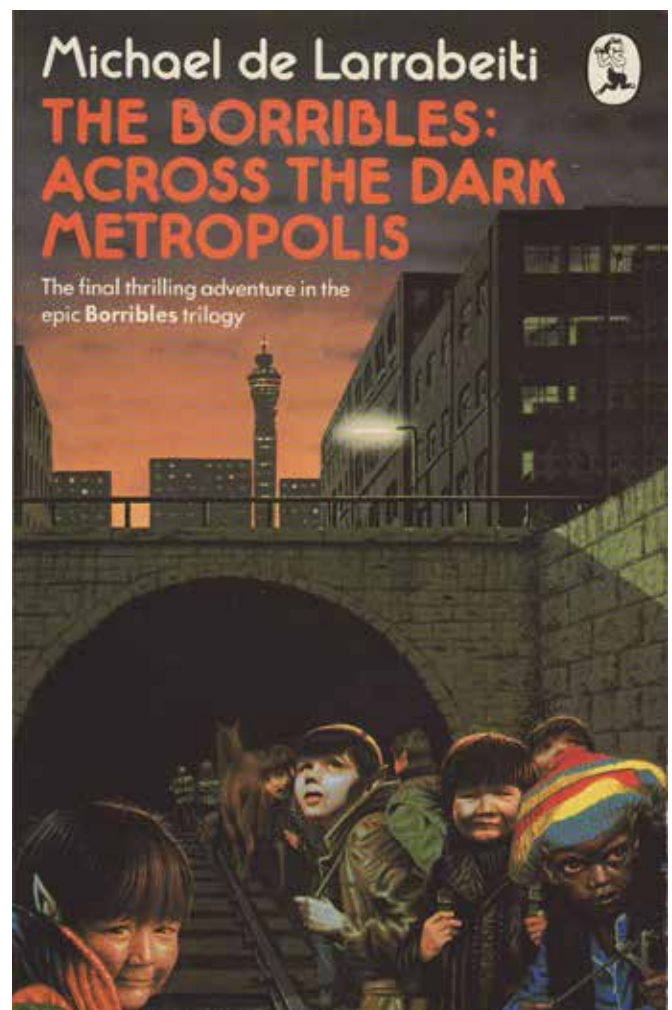
This article will discuss the political, social and cultural background of London in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and how it operated as a background to the *Borribles* trilogy by Michael de Larrabeiti. The trilogy was published in a time of intense political and social upheaval in the UK. The first novel, *The Borribles*, was published in 1976, the year of a heatwave and severe drought, a change in leadership of the governing Labour party, riot at the Notting Hill carnival and the release of what is considered (Mörat, 2021; Guinness World Records, 2003) the first punk single in the UK: "New Rose" by The Damned.

De Larrabeiti was in his 40s when he wrote and published *The Borribles*; a veteran travel and thriller writer, he failed his 11+ exam to grammar school. He had led a varied and interesting career in the nine years it took him to pass his A levels – he kept having to leave technical college to earn money. He grew up in Clapham and Battersea, where *The Borribles* begins.

Borribles could be described as feral Lost Boys and Girls from Peter Pan. They are runaway children, who have all had a Bad Start.

Normal kids turn into *Borribles* very slowly, almost without being aware of it; but one day they wake up and there it is... A child disappears from a school and the word goes round that he was "unmanageable"; the chances are that he's off managing himself. (13, 1989)

They are identified by their pointed ears, which they cover with knitted hats; like Peter Pan they never grow up. They live by squatting in abandoned buildings and by stealing what they need. In this way they have predecessors in Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (1952), Elisabeth Beresford's *Wombles* (1968) and JRR Tolkien's *Hobbits*, of whom more later.



In de Larrabeiti's obituary, the *Daily Telegraph* described the setting of *The Borribles* as "grim and unremittingly violent futureworld" (May 8th, 2008). A contemporary review of the first novel from the *LA Times* described it as a "dystopia". However, in the summer of 1976 during a drought, there was a refuse collection strike. In her memoir, Slits guitarist Viv Albertine describes the West End of London:



The Slits: a still from "Here to be Heard: The Story of the Slits" documentary (2017)

Outside, Oxford Street looks Dickensian. Most of the shops are boarded up, there are mountains of rotting rubbish piled along the edge of the pavements because of the dustman's strike and half the streetlamps are off due to electricity rationing. (136, 2014)

What the *LA Times* of 1976 and the *Telegraph's* obituary writer in 2008 considered dystopian was the reality of London on the verge of political change, with increasing unrest due to unemployment and lack of opportunities for young people. The official unemployment rate was 4.5% in 1975, (ONS, 2021) with young people the worst affected (Eichengreen, 1987). The Office for National Statistics states that the current unemployment rate is also 4.5%, but in 1975 the nation was comparing the current unemployment rate to 20 years of a booming economy and very limited concern about youth unemployment as a distinct category (Eichengreen, 1987, 274). Homelessness was also high (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000), and as a result, squatting was for many people a necessity. In the second book in the trilogy, *The Borribles Go for Broke* (1982), de Larrabeiti writes:

Running away from home, squatting in derelict houses and taking orders from no one is not neat, nor is it tidy. (6)

De Larrabeiti describes the Borribles as delighting in freedom and having no real leaders, although "someone may pop into prominence from time to time, perhaps because he has had a good idea and wants to carry it through" (1989, 14). This is reflected in the anarcho-punk movement that followed, particularly when seen from a feminist perspective. Ruth Elias from Hagar the Womb remembers the genesis of the band in 1980:

At the time, we girls were really pissed off with the guys who had elected themselves the movers and shakers in the Wapping Anarchy Centre... They had an attitude and an almost unshakeable sense of authority and we, the few girls there, were finding it really hard to get ourselves heard or involved in any sense... (2014, 154).

In the first novel of the trilogy, *The Borribles*, de Larrabeiti refers to stories as the oral tradition that the Borribles use for self-expression, reinforcing their identity, protest, exhortation, example and celebration. In the second

novel, *The Borribles Go For Broke* (1981), song is used spontaneously by Borrible Knocker to celebrate the end of an adventure:

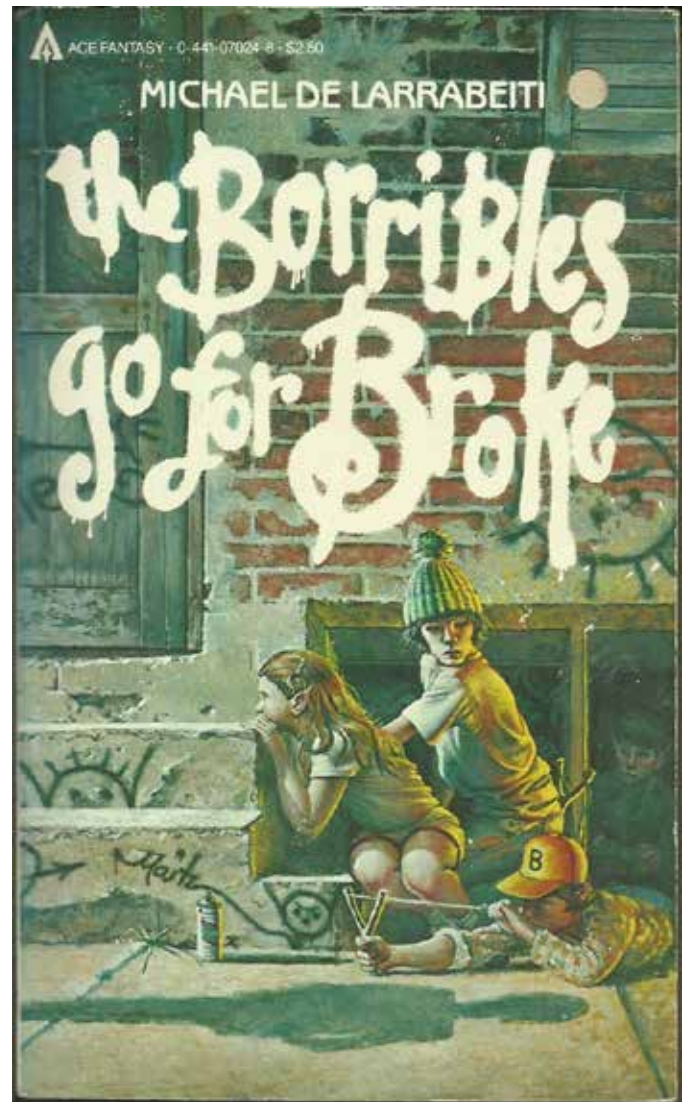
Hip hip hooray – we’ve won the day!
 We ride victorious from the fray!
 Three cheers for Knibbsie! Three cheers for Ben!
 And Donner and Blitzen! Three cheers for them!
 Defying the odds they’ve brought us free
 Of Sussworth, Hanks and the SBG.
 Toast them in beer for all they’ve done –
 Honorary Borribles, every one! (1982, 263)

This song is reminiscent also of the songs from Tolkien’s works; in a 1978 interview paraphrased by his obituary in *The Times*, de Larrabeiti remarked that *The Hobbit* and other children’s adventure novels were “a bloody long way from Battersea”.

Upon the hearth the fire is red,
 Beneath the roof there is a bed;
 But not yet weary are our feet,
 Still round the corner we may meet
 A sudden tree or standing stone.
 That none have seen but we alone.
 Tree and flower and leaf and grass,
 Let them pass! Let them pass!
 Hill and water under sky,
 Pass them by! Pass them by! (Tolkien, 2001,
 76)

The overt political protest in this second novel, and the third, *The Borribles Across the Dark Metropolis*, is striking in a children’s novel. The SBG in 1981’s *The Borribles Go For Broke* (Special Borrible Group, formed to stamp out Borribles by catching them and clipping their ears) is clearly a comment on the Special Patrol Group, a controversial division of the London Metropolitan Police whose role was to counter street protests and civil disorder, who were implicated in the death of New Zealand teacher Blair Peach at a protest against the National Front in culturally diverse Southall, 1979. The final book’s publication was delayed until 1986, as it was felt to be politically inflammatory after the riots in the early 1980s. Inspector Sussworth’s name comes from the ‘sus’ laws: stop and search under suspicion of breach of the 1824 Vagrancy act. The sus laws were used disproportionately against young men of colour (Boateng in Runnymede Trust, 2019).

Songs and oral traditions – rhymes, proverbs and stories – are also used in the second and third novels by other characters, notably Inspector Sussworth and the



repulsive Queen Mum, an alcoholic gang boss living under St Pancras station. When used by these characters, a song has an almost Brechtian effect of alienation, slowing the action down and revealing their motivations:

To make a new society
 We must reform the human race
 If the world were just like me
 The world would be a better place...
 I hate the fools who won't obey
 The rules we set for them to keep
 It's criminal to err and stray –
 Good citizens behave like sheep!

sings Inspector Sussworth (1981, 76).

Viv Albertine of the punk band The Slits states that nursery rhymes and playground songs, such as clapping games and skipping rhymes, are an inherently female form, passed on from older girls and women to younger ones



FIGURE 4. Damned - New Rose Montage - Print Size 22.5" x 22.5" - Scale print on 310gsm Heritage paper

(232). As Alison Lurie states (1990, 19) those rhymes are often much less innocent than adults think; such as the lyrics from this popular skipping rhyme:

Not last night but the night before
 24 robbers came knocking on my door
 As I ran out, they ran in
 And this is what they said to me:
 Little Spanish lady turn around
 Little Spanish lady touch the ground
 Little Spanish lady do the splits
 Little Spanish lady show your knicks (knickers).

Ruth Elias from Hagar the Womb remembers singing a subverted children's song as part of their early sets:

Puff the Magic Dragon lives by the sea
 He doesn't have much to do but he believes
 in Anarchyyyyyy (2014, 159).

This song stood alongside more obviously political songs such as 'Dressed to Kill,' 'Today's Miss World' and 'For the Ferryman.'

To conclude, the political situation in the late 1970s and early 1980s – including the ending of heavy industry, the lessening of the power of unions, the rise of neoliberal politics and privatisation under the successive Conservative governments that led to mass youth unemployment, the Falklands war, and the use of police powers to stop and search young people of colour – is the background to both the *Borribles* books and the contemporary punk scene, particularly the woman-fronted bands. For

those who would like to find out more about them, *The Borribles* and its sequels are back in print, with a foreword by China Miéville, who is a great admirer.

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Wormholes and Workers: Alienation and Agency in Nino Cipri's *Finna*

Andi C. Buchanan

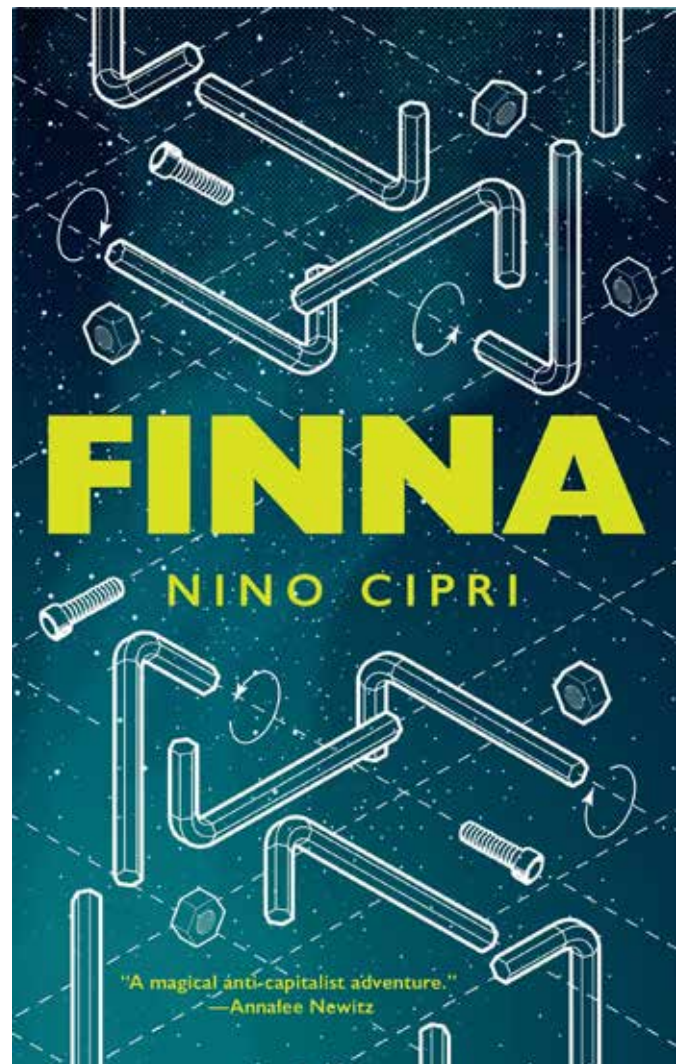
Nino Cipri's 2020 novella *Finna* has been widely praised for capturing the experience of queer millennial retail workers. Told from the perspective of Ava, a worker at the flatpack furniture store LitenVärld, it imagines recurring wormholes that open between versions of the store in alternate universes, leading to a combination of surreal adventure and outright horror when Ava and her co-worker/recent ex Jules are forced to travel through these wormholes in search of a missing customer. Part satire on low-wage labour and corporate policies and thinkspeak, part heartfelt story of queer friendship, *Finna* stands out as a multi-layered exploration of the nature and pervasiveness of alienation, but also the ways it can be resisted and challenged.

Marx characterises alienation as the result of living in a class society, describing it as the loss of fulfilment and agency over one's actions, relationships, and the product one produces. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* he describes four forms of alienation: alienation from the products of one's labour, alienation experienced in the labour process, alienation from one's nature and self¹, and alienation from other workers. *Finna* provides a 21st century view of all of these forms of alienation, using both literal depiction and speculative elements that reinforce its pervasiveness.

Alienation from the products of one's labour or the labour process might occur when a worker is making products one could never afford to buy, or even imagine what to do with, or when the different parts of production are so segregated that one makes or sells a widget but is unaware of the wider product it fits into.

Things are a bit more complicated in *Finna*: no doubt there is disparity between pay and the cost of items on sale, but we're thankfully yet to reach the point where flatpack furniture is truly aspirational. The staff recognise what they are selling as everyday items: sofas, beds,

¹ Sometimes described using the word *Gattungswesen*, clunkily translated as "species-essence" or, less commonly, "human nature".



bookcases – they know what they are and what they will be used for. Jules expresses a dislike of these products (18), and selling them is not a form of self-expression. But it's an open question whether they are really alienated from the products or the process of selling them.

However, LitenVärld is not just selling bookcases and sofas. It's selling an image of a way of life. The store isn't arranged by types of furniture but showrooms or "habitats" as Ava refers to them:

Instead of sections, the store ushered shoppers through an upsetting and uncoordinated procession of themed showrooms, which bounced from baroque to postmodern design. The showrooms sat next to each other uneasily, like habitats in a hyper-condensed zoo. Here was the habitat for the Pan-Asian Appropriating White Yoga Instructor, complete with tatami mats and a statue of Shiva; next to it huddled the Edgelord Rockabilly Dorm Room, with black leather futon and Quentin Tarantino posters. (10)

LitenVärld is selling people images of who they might want to be, selling aspirational false selves. The furniture has been arranged to imply lifestyles that cannot be actualised by the workers, but also probably not even by the customers. It's not so much that capitalism has made the products financially unobtainable as it has evolved to pitching lifestyles to many which are possible only for a few. Ava viscerally feels this alienation, this sense of discord:

That familiar sense of disorientation came over Ava, that slight queasiness at seeing all these clashing rooms squeezed together. It mixed with her dread and made her stomach churn. (17)

LitenVärld sells the home as the nexus of identity, and here the *millennial* aspect of Ava and Jules' identities seems particularly relevant. When generations are stereotypically pitted against each other – most fashionably boomers versus millennials – it tends to perpetuate divide and rule tactics, disregard race and class, compare the whole of one generation to the survivors of another. To claim Ava and Jules are oppressed because of their generation would be unevicenced, and is not a point Cipri makes. But the *nature* of the experience of oppression is marked by generation and this comes through in *Finna*.

Ava and Jules are of a generation that feels betrayed particularly when it comes to housing and the ability to build a particular kind of lifestyle that centres around the family home. The escalating housing market at the very time many of this generation expected to have a foot on the ladder has combined with a succession of "once in a lifetime" financial crashes.

There is a particular irony, marked by dark humour about house plants as substitutes for offspring, that workers of a generation in which many feel they cannot afford children, are forced to sell an aspirational idea of

the family home. They are a generation simultaneously maligned as immature while being denied the trappings of adulthood. Alienation is often described as not feeling at home in one's life – and there's a bitter taste to that here.

If identity cannot be found in the home, it must reside in the internal sense of self, but here too we see alienation at work. Just as customers are sold the possibility of becoming impossible versions of themselves, workers are forced to present false selves. Jules in particular has their identity repeatedly denied. Here, they complain about a customer:

"She managed to misgender me four times in two minutes," Jules said. They bent down to pick up the books they'd knocked off the shelf. "Two different pronouns, completely ignored my nametag, eventually settled on calling me 'the kid.'" (18)

And far from being supported by their manager, Tricia, this is how Tricia refers to them:

Ava winced as she listened to Tricia contort her speech in an effort to avoid using they or them. I just can't do it! Tricia had cheerfully told Ava once, completely unprompted. I guess I'm too much of a grammar nazi! Since then, she went out of her way to avoid using any pronouns at all when talking about Jules, warping her sentences around her refusal. (33)

This is a world in which markers of identity, and of the worker as a *person* – even corporate-assigned markers like Jules' nametag – are subsumed by the system they operate in. Neither Jules nor Ava are completely resigned to it, but there is an extent to which they are forced to accept it.

It's not unusual for precarious workers to take the name badge of those who left most recently – a 21st century version, perhaps of calling all the housemaids Emma and the footmen James and John. It's certainly not unusual for workers to be considered interchangeable. But in these alternate worlds – alternate versions of the chain store – there are literally other Avas and other Juleses. They realise with horror that the company literally does think alternate universe versions of a person are interchangeable. The FINNA manual states that if the person they are looking for is "indisposed" – a polite euphemism for dead – "the light will change to yellow and the FINNA will locate instead ... an appropriate replacement from another universe" (131).

Both Ava and Jules are at first horrified by the idea – Jules looks stricken and Ava drops the FINNA and wants to scream. But at the same time they do retrieve the “appropriate replacement” – albeit with her consent – and unite her with her alternative world granddaughter. Of course Cipri isn’t endorsing the interchangeability of anyone – and it would be a mistake to over-analyse what is primarily a slightly ridiculous adventure, but it’s an interesting contradiction to note.

Alienation from one’s fellow workers is exemplified by Ava’s attitude to “fucking Derek”(9), the co-worker who called in sick necessitating her covering a shift and ultimately venturing through the wormholes. Even though Ava knows her predicament is caused by capitalism and abusive management, her first thought when she is forced to make the journey is that if she survives she is “going to track Derek down and kill him”(35). There’s an ambiguity here: Ava knows, deep down, which side she’s on, but being forced to live with the company’s perspective every single day has absolutely taken its toll. You can see a different form of this ambiguity in her feelings about Jules being at the store:

Ava wasn’t quite willing to hope that they’d gotten fired, but a generalized wish that Jules wouldn’t be at the store? That felt okay. (11)

I don’t think this is just because Ava still has feelings for Jules – though she totally does! There’s some class consciousness simmering just below the surface: she doesn’t have to *like* being around someone to not want them at the mercy of their employer.

Alienation from Ava’s fellow workers also comes across more subtly in her acknowledgement that she doesn’t actually know most of her colleagues:

It always surprised Ava how many people worked at LitenVärld. She only saw most of them crammed in here during the pre-Black Friday war meeting, or for their exquisitely painful “sensitivity training.” (23)

The workplace is supposed to substitute for family as well as home – and admittedly Ava has formed a close relationship there – but on the whole she doesn’t even know her fellow “family members”. It’s no accident that the two main antagonists of the book are firstly an employer that claims to be like a family, and secondly a hive of zombie-like creatures who operate on the command of their “mother” and require blood as payment.

Finna isn’t just a portrayal of alienation under late capitalism, but also depicts with increasing clarity forms of resistance.

Finna posits a celebration of the personal, the hand-made, as a contrast to “big box” impersonal capitalism. In a universe in which LitenVärld is not a big box store but a “wild, chaotic bazaar,” Ava and Jules find a market of appealing food stalls which “weirdly, shared names with the chains and franchises that Ava found herself eating at too often in their shitty suburb” (82). *Pasta and Friends* – the fictional chain whose gift cards Ava and Jules are given as compensation for their perilous journey – is “staffed by a single old man hand-rolling noodles” (82). This is not a worker who is alienated from his product, but one whose work is a chosen craft. The product – which he has control over from flour to hot meal – is “delicious” (83).

For Jules, avoiding mass produced items is a vital expression and reflection of their personal identity:

Jules had refused to buy anything except a set of plates from Liten-Värld, and had furnished it from estate sales and Goodwill trips instead. Everything at work is part of a set with everything else, they’d explained. I don’t fit into any of those sets. (18)

When Ava first bumps into Jules after their breakup she takes note of their scarf, “light green dotted with blue, brown, and gray, crocheted with thick yarn” (12), which she’d made for them for Christmas. At the end of the story, the scarf is a practical part of making the *Finna* work to find them. When Captain Nouresh earlier dismantles the *Finna* she finds various bright and alien components inside the unassuming white, rectangular case, and comments:

It seemed like your world was so scared of strangers and strangeness. It gets covered up, renamed, cut up until it fits into a familiar skin. (84)

There is something important, therefore, about the messy and the unique, about creations that cannot be replicated in large capitalist enterprise. The characters regain their sense of self and purpose via these crafted objects.

There are also parallels with the queerness of the main characters here – while neither are closeted, they are not able to fully express their identities and have them accepted in the work environment; they are, in a sense, the colourful components found within the *FINNA*. Jules not fitting into any of the sets sold at LitenVärld clearly corresponds to their non-binary identity.

Ava and Jules also gain increasing clarity of and anger about their situation. This isn't a simple case of finding new information: they show awareness throughout the book that they are treated terribly and "ugh capitalism" was a "running joke between them" (85). At the same time they have inevitably internalised some of the messages they've been receiving. But they learn to push past them.

"Listen to me!" she shouted. "This is not your fault. It's Tricia's for sending us. And corporate's, they're the ones that cut the FINNA teams in the first place." A moment of quiet. Jules's breathing was beginning to even out. "I guess that's true," they said shakily. "Capitalism," said Ava. Jules huffed a laugh. "Yep." (52)

Most importantly, they exert their own agency and exercise autonomy. Marx wrote that the "alien character" of labour "emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague." While Ava resigns on her return, Jules' sense of freedom is so great that even when they are facing a life threatening situation they look "thrilled that they weren't getting misgendered while answering customers' stupid questions about how much weight a towel rod could really hold." Jules' sense of connection to self is expressed when they say, "doing things my own way is the most ridiculous shit they've ever heard of, even though it's the only way I've ever been happy."

Another form of resistance is coded in Ava's ultimate decision to return to Jules. Notably, although it is an individual choice it is not an individualist choice – reaffirming both queer friendship and class solidarity. While Ava displays autonomy in making this choice, outside of external pressures or corporate rulebooks, it is an expression not only of her personal morals and courage, but of solidarity. It is a journey that is in marked contrast to that ordered by her boss – a journey chosen by herself, but more importantly a journey motivated by her connection with another person.

Some of the most powerful things science fiction can do in a capitalist society are to put things in perspective and show us alternatives. Even undesirable alternatives challenge the idea that we have reached an endpoint in history, that this is our only possibility. Le Guin famously reminded us that while the power of capitalism seems inescapable, "so too did the divine right of kings." This holds true in *Finna* not only for the reader but for the characters, for whom capitalism had once seemed "too big to do anything *but* joke about it":

But now there were options. Doorways into other worlds and other possibilities opened all the time, apparently. (85)

Ava is able to make new decisions as a result of this realisation. She's able to step around the company's interest and favour the interests of herself, and her friend and colleague. She does so decisively but not easily. Throughout the whole book, Ava has been experiencing anxiety and disorientation – maybe not solely due to capitalism or her job, but they almost certainly didn't help. When she returns from these other worlds, she questions if this is her world, and if so why it feels so strange (114). And at the very end, when she re-enters the wormhole system, she *chases* that disorientation. Ava is not free from capitalism, from alienation, from contradictions in her understanding, but in her connection to and sense of responsibility for another person she finds the way to resist; she acts.

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