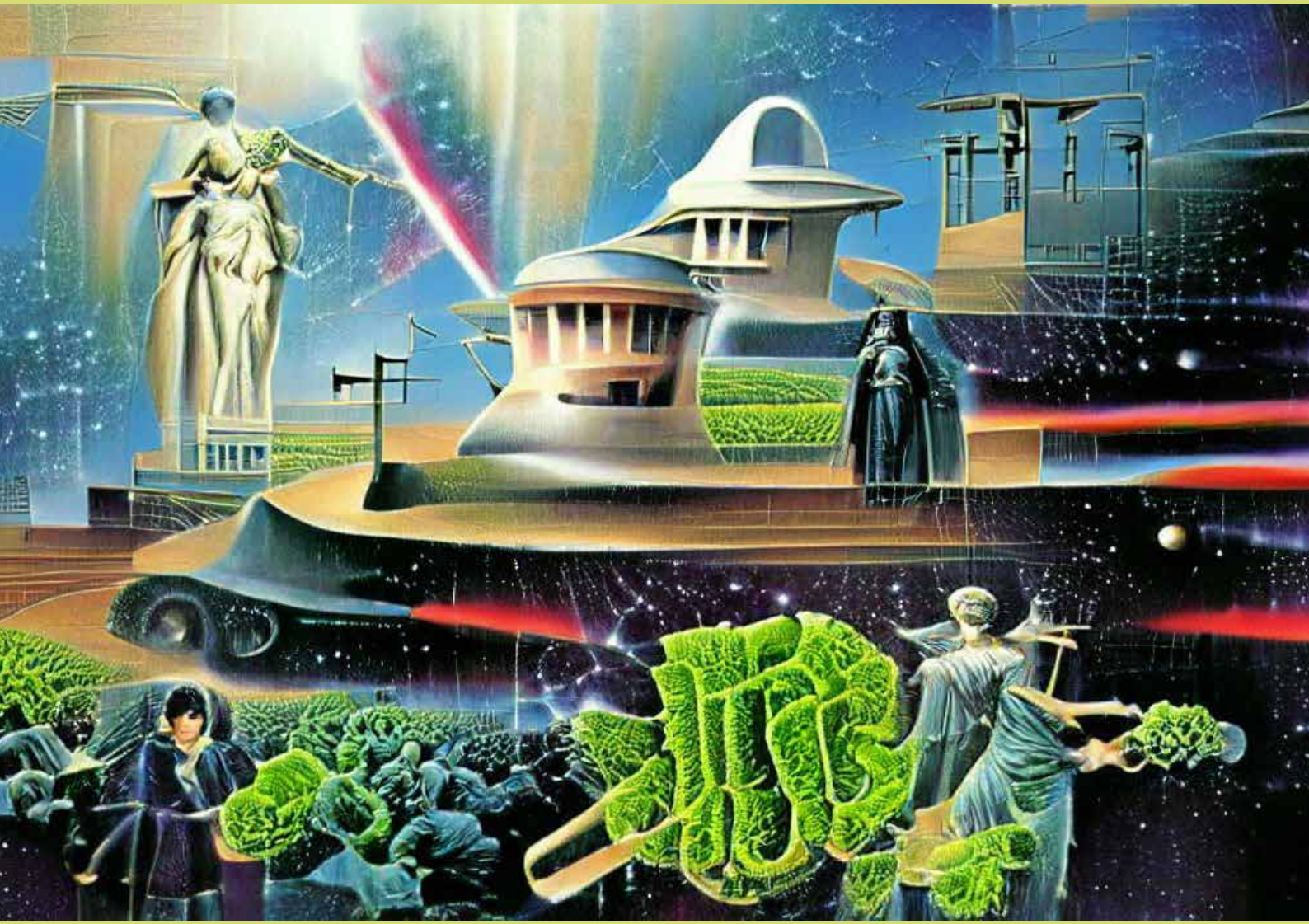
Vector

SFF & Justice



No. 296

Autumn 2022

Cover: NightCafe AI converting text “Science fiction and Justice” to image

BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION

Was founded in 1958 and is a non-profitmaking organisation entirely staffed by unpaid volunteers.
Registered in England. Limited by guarantee. Company No. 921500

Twitter: @BSFA
Instagram: @BSFA_Vector
www.vector-bsfa.com

JOIN OR RENEW YOUR ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP AT
WWW.BSFA.CO.UK

UK	£31
UK CONCESSION	£20
OUTSIDE UK PRINT	£45
DIGITAL	£20
DIGITAL CONCESSION	£14
COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP	*

* A limited number will be available through the BSFA and partnering UK organisations.

Published by the BSFA October 2022, ISSN 05050448.
Printed by Remous Print Ltd. on carbon neutral paper.

VECTOR
296

Torque Control

Jo Lindsay Walton

NightCafe's AI response to the text "Sunflowers, Van Gogh"

Klara and the *Sunflowers*

This issue's cover was created by an AI. Or … *was* it?[1]

Machines have made art for a long time. In the mid 19th century, John Clark's Eureka machine was dropping perfectly okay Latin hexameter bars on the daily. Harold Cohen's AARON began scribbling in the 1970s and sketching plants and people in the 1980s.

But with the likes of MidJourney, Stable Diffusion, and DALL-E, 2022 marks the start of a new era. These AIs accept natural language prompts and produce often startling images. Suddenly the conversation has shifted from what little the AIs *can* do to what little they *can't* do.

The AIs can't paint complex scenes with many parts, for instance. You're better off generating the pieces separately and then jiggling them together in Photoshop or GIMP. They can't paint eyes terribly well, unless your subject happens to be a stoner ghoul. If the moon shines behind your subject's head, it often bulges strangely, bearing ominous tidings for tonight's high tide.

Still, the AIs are getting better all the time. Some online art forums are already inundated with spam. Worse still, the rise of AI art has led to the rise of the AI Art Bro. These combat philosophers, who perhaps recently cut their teeth extolling NFTs, love nothing more than to troll freelance artists nervous about next month's rent.[2] Yet it would be unfair to write off AI art just because it has some disagreeable advocates. Luckily, as science fiction writers and fans, we're well-equipped to make more nuanced assessments.

Or … *are* we? The uncomfortable fact is that science fiction hasn't been *amazingly* good at illuminating the ongoing AI revolution. With notable exceptions, we focus on questions like, 'Can an AI think? Feel? Love? Dream? What does the way we treat machines tell us about how we treat one another?' These are enchanting and perhaps important questions. But they tend to overshadow AI as it exists within data science and critical data studies, and the huge role it is already playing in everyday life. So maybe science fiction writers could do more to infuse our work with an appreciation of AI as it actually exists?[3]

Putting the art in artificial

Most AIs that make the news these days (including those art AIs) are examples of Machine Learning. Machine Learning relies on immense processing power and lots of pre-existing examples to train the computer through various kinds of complex trial-and-error processes. Machine Learning is sometimes described as automating automation itself. We have no idea how to directly program a computer so it can draw any image we ask it for. But we *do* know how to program a computer to program itself to do so, by carefully guzzling up millions of images created by humans.[4]

Could that, in part, explain why the moon grows so bulbous behind a human head? Are the lunar contours haunted by the flowing lines of capes and crowns, helmets and halos and hairdos, that attend so many of the heads in their training data? Must moonrock budge, just a bit, to accommodate the tumbling locks of the windblown studio supermodels?

I'm not sure. One thing is clear. When you consider the training data, the contemporary debates about AI art start to look very skewed. Pundits ponder whether these AIs are mere tools or artificial persons, and who should own the artworks: the user of the AI, the owners of the AI, or perhaps even the AI itself? But what about all the human models who taught the AI models a trick or two?[5] And what about the millions of human artists, illustrators, photographers, and designers who also contributed the training data?

Legally speaking, these creators' rights appear to be limited and vanishing fast. Of course, law is created through particular judgments, as much as it is through legislation. The current wave of AI art hasn't been seriously tested in court, so the answer to ***any*** complicated question about how copyright law applies is, "We're not sure yet."[6] Nonetheless, the EU Digital Single Market Directive has created a copyright exception which means that it's okay to use images, without needing their owners' permissions, for training an AI model.[7] The UK has something similar in place for research purposes, and looks set to extend it for commercial purposes too.

Despite all this, many artists are enthusiastically taking up these enchanted paintbrushes. Pros before bros: those skilled in the arts of Art can wield AIs to far greater effect than ordinary users. Yet at the same time, many are pointing out the double threat the AIs pose. Artists may well have to put up with their artworks being

1 Yes, it definitely was! It was also created by humans though, including Polina Levontin, the human who used the AI, the humans who programmed and trained it the AI, and the humans who created the training data.

2 NFTs, Non-Fungible Tokens, a form of blockchain finance which is entangled in complicated ways with the art world. Currently the most famous example is the Bored Ape collection. NFTs are a whole other conversation.

3 See for example Ruha Benjamin, Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code; Kate Crawford, Atlas of AI; Meredith Broussard, Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World; Safiya Noble, Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism; Simone Browne, Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness; Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, The Costs of Connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism; Shoshana Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. But no doubt these generalisations are unfair. What great science fiction have you encountered (or written!) about Machine Learning and data science?

4 Machine Learning is a very broad term. The leap in image generation we're seeing with MidJourney etc. is to do with a shift from GAN models to diffusion models. The diffusion model trains itself by taking an image and adding more and more random noise to it, remembering all the steps along the way. Once it has an image of 'pure' random noise, it can practise denoising the image, checking its progress against the sequence it has saved. It does this many many times—say about 150 hours and $600,000 of compute cost—and each time adjusts the weights of its neural network. What you end up with is a neural network that is pretty good at 'finding' any given image in a random field of noise, even if the image wasn't really there to begin with. Of course there is plenty more to it than that, but hopefully it's forgivable as an intro. In the same vein, there's an xkcd comic that depicts Machine Learning as a pile of linear algebra with a funnel to pour in data, and a box that spits out answers. 'What if the answers are wrong?' 'Just stir the pile until they start looking right.' xkcd.com/1838/

5 Should people whose likenesses appear in the training data have any rights? Here the question is partly about identifiable individuals, especially celebrities and public figures, whose appearances are becoming available for use and manipulation in new ways. But it's also about the visual representation of groups—it's about race, gender, nationality, class, and other big categories, and how these get inscribed into AI models in ways that may reinforce or (perhaps) subvert stereotypes and biases. Or maybe even give rise to new ones.

6 One area of controversy is whether AI art should be copyrightable. Many jurisdictions say that it definitely is not copyrightable, whereas the UK's Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 leaves things much more open. It's worth emphasising three things. (a) Creating something non-copyrightable doesn't mean you can't sell it (it just means you can't stop others from selling it too). (b) Combining non-copyrightable elements can give rise to new copyrightable works. (c) It may be tricky to prove what has or hasn't been AI-generated. So you might get situations where somebody protects an AI-generated work using copyright, simply by insisting it was actually human-created; conversely, you might get predatory appropriation of human labour under false claims of AI authorship.

7 There is the opportunity to opt out. It is easy to see what this might mean in the case of a training dataset (just remove the images), less easy to see what it would mean in the case of a model that has already been trained on that dataset.

fed into models, so that these can imitate their styles and subject matters.8 Artists may also end up competing with those same AIs for clients and commissions.

In short, for those who have cause to work with artists—for your book covers, for your websites, for your *D&D* or *Lancer* campaigns, for your kitchen wall or your next tattoo—the coming months and years are a great time to show a bit of extra solidarity and support.

'Here is some information I found about "Pod Bay Doors," Dave.'

Compared with visual art, AI text generation has made a smaller splash. But its ripples carry at least as far. What do you think, BSFA? How would you feel about an AI-drian Tchaikovsky or an Una McAutomatic, an Ursula K. Le ImageGen or a Samuel R. DALL-E? Adam Roberts wrote a collection called *Adam Robots;* what if Adam Robots wrote a collection called *Adam Roberts*?

Then again, readers of the future may not *know* when an AI has been involved. One gloomy vision is this: in the future, an 'author' could be whoever is wealthy and pompous enough to employ a small army of AI trainers, AI prompt engineers, market researchers, focus group moderators, beta readers, sensitivity readers, narrative troubleshooters, specialist copyeditors, astroturf fans, and so on, to implement their personal literary genius. They are under no obligation to show how they did it.

If that's a timeline we want to avoid, where should we steer instead? I don't know, but my hunch is it's one where copyright law is radically transformed. Some writers can be pretty conservative when it comes to copyright. But many writers at least recognise that copyright law doesn't really reflect the messy realities of the creative process. A host of legal concepts—originality, ideas and expressions, *scenes a faire*, labour and skill or judgement, fair dealing or fair use, joint authorship, and others—are no more than flexible approximations of such messy realities. The legitimacy of copyright doesn't rest on its accuracy, but on its claim to create an environment which rewards creative experimentation, and one where the fruits of creativity are shared fairly between individual creator and the wider society.

The more that our creative processes are transformed by AI, the more tenuous and unsuitable these legal concepts appear. And at the same time, the less convincing copyright law's claim to legitimacy becomes. The whole rickety, jury-rigged apparatus grows more visible. We see its flaws, and not just in relation to these emerging technologies—we see how copyright law has been flawed all along. Every work of art is nourished by countless others. From the authors of the books you love, to the people that lent those books to you, to that witty quip you transferred from your best friend's lips to charismatic sneer of a space corsair, to that cup of tea your father set down on your desk when you needed it most … these others may not all be the author of your work, but nor are they nothing to it. Those whose contributions have not been registered in any way have disproportionately been women, people of colour, and working class people.

The task, then, is to imagine and to advocate for good alternatives. Science fiction writers and fans may be well placed to do just that. Should we seek the freedom to publish stories about any fictional characters we want, Wanda Maximoff wandering off to Ankh-Morpork, or Jean-Luc Picard beaming down to Annares? Might it be nice to read Francis Spufford's Narnia novel *The Stone Table*? Could there be upsides, under certain circumstances, to other creators playing with the characters *you* invented? What alternative compensation mechanisms to copyright exist, have been proposed, or are newly imaginable? How might the arts be funded more generously and effectively? What might it truly mean to give credit where credit is due? Above all: what gets us closer to a world where anybody who wants to make stories or art can do so, and nobody has to worry about selling those stories or that art, or wowing funding gatekeepers, just to put food on our tables and roofs over our heads? And what pushes us further away from that world?

And I wonder if we could go even further? Stewartificial Intelligence Hotston lays out in his guest editorial this issue's theme of justice, and makes an urgent appeal for new ideas. And as Gautam Bhat-AI suggests in his article, science fiction might play a role in exploring distributional justice. So I wonder, might this be a moment where not just the nature of Intellectual Property, but the nature of *all* property, can be subjected to fascinating and ferocious reimaginings?[9]

BSFA Committee News

BSFA members will have noticed some comings and going announced in the monthly newsletter. We say farewell to Writing Groups Officer Terry Jackman and Councillor Yen Ooi, with huge thanks for all their hard work and general brilliance. We are delighted to welcome Stewart Hotston as BSFA Councillor, (Stewart also guest-edits this issue of *Vector*), as well as Writing Groups Officers Mark Bilsborough and Sam Fleming to fill Terry's shoes (one shoe each, they claim).

As we go to press, we also hope soon to be announcing a new Awards Officer or two. Following a motion at the 2022 AGM, a working group has been set up to explore potential changes to the BSFA Awards—something will be presented at the next AGM, likely including at least one new category. If you have thoughts you'd like to share about the BSFA Awards, now is an especially great time to share them (Farah Mendlesohn at treasurer@bsfa.co.uk is the best person to direct these to).

If you don't already, don't forget to follow the BSFA Twitter account (@bsfa). There's also a Facebook group, a Discord server, the main BSFA website and the Vector website. We'd also love to hear (vector@bsfa.co.uk and/or chair@bsfa.co.uk) your thoughts on the BSFA's digital presence.

JO LINDSAY WALTON IS VECTOR EDITOR-AT-LARGE.

A tribute to Maureen Kincaid Speller

Whenever we corresponded, and the couple times I was lucky enough to hang out in person, Maureen was the epitome of generosity, intelligence and humour. Her loss is going to be deeply felt throughout the community. My thoughts are with all those who knew and loved Maureen, and especially with Paul. (Jo Lindsay Walton)

***Vector* would like to share the following tribute that was put together by a wide collection of friends of Maureen Kincaid Speller, from fandom across the world. It first appeared in a recent BSFA newsletter.**

Maureen's first fannish contact was at the age of 19 in 1979, through OUSFG (the Oxford University Science Fiction Group). Through that she found CUSFS (Cambridge), Jomsborg, and in 1982 *The Women's Periodical* (TWP), becoming the administrator in 1985. In 1986 Maureen began reviewing for *Vector*, one of the British Science Fiction Association's magazines, and soon became a regular.

8 My first real experience of using AI art was creating the Wildlaw Judgement Generator, a small artistic collaboration with legal scholar Bonnie Holligan and artist Elias Youssef, which also included surreal courtroom sketches generated using Dall-E Mini. I feel pretty good about how it all fit together: a big reason it happened in the first place was getting some funding to pay Elias; the AI was used in ways that felt like it set off the human art, rather than displacing it or drowning it out; the glitchiness of the AI didn't feel like an irritation to be eradicated, but more like a source of inspiration and fruitful weirdness. The Wildlaw Judgement Generator also relates to this issue's loose theme of justice, specifically environmental justice. It is inspired by an actual legal case, which explored how much (if any) compensation should be paid to a commercial fishery by the Environmental Agency, after the Environmental Agency placed a heavy restriction on how many fish could be caught, in order to protect the fragile fish stocks. The bigger question is, as climate change and environmental crises make many previously viable activities no longer possible, how should the costs of transition be distributed? It's also part of a bigger project (the UK Earth Law Judgments project), reimagining legal judgments from an ecocentric perspective. sadpress.itch.io/wildlaw-generator

9 For starters, even the existing regime of copyright law unsettles some common convictions about how property works. For instance, it is possible to create something that is both original (so you get copyright) and yet infringes on somebody else's copyright (so you can't use your copyright). Some creations (like the sentence, "How are you?") would be so absurd to privately enclose, they automatically belong to everybody. Then there is the law on fair dealing, which says it is perfectly fine for somebody else to use something that is 'yours' so long as it is for one of a specified list of purposes in the public interest. What if there were a few more fair dealing exemptions in the physical world, on the ownership of land and factories and finance?

In 1986 Maureen also became editor of *Matrix*, another of the BSFA's magazines; she continued for 21 issues (#65 to #86) standing down in 1989. She also edited the sf magazine *The Gate* (1989-90) and served as co-editor of *Vector* (1992).

In 1989 Maureen took on the role of BSFA co-coordinator, with a later stint as co-administrator and another from 1995 as administrator, a post she held until 1999. It is in this role, and her overall work for the BSFA, that many who came into fandom in the 1990s remember her: Penny Hill remembers Chris Hill first going to the BSFA evening when Maureen was the events organiser, and how careful she was to ensure that new people were welcomed, introducing him to people he could talk with. At their first Eastercon, again it was Maureen who ensured the Hills met like-minded friendly fans.

As well as an editor and an organiser, Maureen was a writer. In 1987 Maureen produced her first fanzine, the single issue perzine *Bottled Lightning*. She was part of the newsletter team for the 1987 Worldcon (Conspiracy '87) and was extremely active in other APAs (amateur press associations) as well as TWP; perhaps most notably, she founded the literature APA *Acnestis*, serving as its administrator throughout its existence. She contributed regular articles on sf to early issues of the fanzine *Banana Wings*, and her personal fanzine *Snufkin's Bum* ran from 1995 to 1998. Andy Hooper wrote of it: 'An engaging perzine that covers the pleasures and terrors of searching for new furniture at the Croydon IKEA franchise. Sounds stultifying, I know, but Maureen's style features such a nice combination of amusement and earnest contemplation of the absurd that I read right through to the end before I had time to wonder what the point of it all was.' A description that summarises Maureen's dry humour beautifully (efanzines.com/Apparatchik/76-fmz-countdown.html)

In *Snufkin Goes West*, Maureen detailed her three month trip for the Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund (TAFF), with brief notes from every place she stayed and major places she visited including Yosemite National Park and the San Francisco Bay Area. Geri Sullivan writes, 'My favorite entry is from Snufkin Goes West #3: "Portland: Kate Yule takes me to Powell's Bookshop, and helps me pick my jaw up off the ground. Then she takes me to her gay square-dancing class, where I spend a riotous evening forgetting my left from my right, and learning that yes, this is possibly the most fun I can have with my clothes on."'

From 2000-2001 Maureen was co-editor with Bruce Gillespie and Paul Kincaid on the critical fanzine *Steam Engine Time*. For the past few years Maureen has entertained friends with stories on Facebook with stories about being a Lib-Dem candidate, adventures in gardening and, perhaps funniest, the tales of her cats (including, but not restricted to, Snufkin, Kadala, Zakcat, Pickle, Minnow, Errol, Bandit, Smudge, Nicodemus…) and who for the past few years have been a collective of Maine Coons, including the dignified Rosa and the rather less than dignified Mort. Maureen's online presence is as vivid as her in person life. Traci wrote: 'I would pay good cash moneys for a collection of her writing about the various felines she's shared living quarters with over the years. I owe my overuse of the word "fossicking" entirely to one of her tales of cat kind. Nicodemus I believe that was.'

Maureen's status as a cat person came under challenge just once. Geri Sullivan wrote this anecdote:

'Not forgetting Willow the dog' by Geri Sullivan

> Maureen is a cat person and, well, at least back in 1998, she was absolutely not a dog person. She said dogs usually made her uncomfortable, and she was bewildered to discover that she was comfortable around Willow, the American Water Spaniel who lived at Toad Hall. Willow was 4½ years old when Maureen stayed with Jeff Schalles and me in Minneapolis during her TAFF trip. One or two cats were also in residence at the time; I'm all but certain it wasn't three.
>
> Maureen and I were sitting on the back steps, talking, enjoying the nice summer afternoon. Willow was in the yard, stalking some small creature we couldn't see. I mentioned how Willow was moving to Maureen, explaining that Jeff's cats Huey and Louie had taught Willow how to hunt when Willow was a pup.
>
> 'That explains it!' Maureen exclaimed. ~'Willow moves like a cat! That's why I like her, why I'm comfortable around her even though she's a dog. Her body language is that of a cat!'~
>
> I note that Willow was mentioned and thanked along with various humans in Snufkin Goes West #3. Toad Hall's feline(s) weren't.

Maureen has long been a Big Name and an honoured fan, recognised by sf conventions as well as working on them. In 1984 she was involved in the Unicon, Oxcon; by 1996 *Evolution*, the Eastercon, had invited her and Paul Kincaid to be among their guests of honour, an event immortalised in the souvenir book by their friend Christopher Priest. Maureen was then part of the committee for *Intuition*, the 1998 Eastercon, sharing responsibility for programme, promotions, publications and productions. It was also in that year that she was elected as the TAFF delegate to North America (attending *Bucconeer*, the 1998 World Science Fiction Convention), and won a Nova Award for Best Fan Writing. The following year she was shortlisted for a Hugo Award, and so attended *Aussiecon Three* in 1999 as a Hugo finalist and panellist (along with Paul Kincaid, who was the GUFF delegate).

At *Aussiecon* Maureen was a key figure on panels on reviewing and criticism, a role she has continued to take. Cheryl Morgan recalls, 'The thing I always remember with regard to Maureen was when we were both at WisCon and they put us on a panel about "Celtic fantasy". We were on it because we are British, but we were on with a couple of American women who had clearly read everything by Iolo Morganwg and subsequent imaginative people and assumed that it was all true. It was a very bizarre experience for both of us to be on a panel with people who clearly had deeply held beliefs about something we knew to be entirely false, and having to let them down gently. Naturally we bonded over this.'

Maureen's critical interest and credentials had been clear in much of her earlier fan activity. In 2005 she presented at the Worldcon Academic Track on the writings of Alan Garner and staked her claim to be one of the key experts on his work. In 2006 Maureen joined the staff of *Strange Horizons* (regularly shortlisted for the Best Semi-Prozine Hugo) as a reviewer; she became Senior Reviews Editor in 2015. Meanwhile, in 2008 Maureen completed her BA in English Literature, and in 2010 her MA in post-colonial studies at the University of Kent.

Maureen published widely: her reviews and essays have appeared in *Foundation: the international review of science fiction*, *Interzone*, *Strange Horizons*, *Vector* and elsewhere. Some of her work has been assembled in *And Another Thing…: A Collection of Reviews and Criticism* (coll 2011 chap). John Clute wrote in the SFE: 'The range of topics considered, and the level-headed intensity with which she shapes her conclusions, mark her as a significant voice in UK genre criticism.' (sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/speller_maureen_kincaid)

Maureen's critical acuity was recognised by jury appointments. She served two terms as a judge for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the first in 1989 & 1990, the second in 1993 & 1994; in 2004 Maureen served as Chair of the Tiptree Award and from 2004 to 2006 as a Rotsler award judge (for art in sf fanzines and other community publications). Her contributions to sf awards included more work behind the scenes, and she was also a director of the Serendip Foundation (established to support the Clarke Award) between 2003 and 2006.

Maureen's awards experience continues from the other side of the process. Following her recognition for fan writing, Maureen's critical writing has continued to win praise and acclaim. Her blog post on *Paper Knife* about the 2011 Clarke Award was shortlisted for the BSFA Non-Fiction Award in 2012 (paperknife.wordpress.com/2012/05/01/the-shortlist-project/), and she was part of Anglia Ruskin's Shadow Clarke committee in 2017 whose blog was also shortlisted.

Maureen contributed an essay on Marge Piercy's *Body of Glass* to *The Arthur C. Clarke Award: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Paul Kincaid and Andrew M. Butler in 2006, and in 2015 edited with Paul Kincaid the non-fiction anthology *Best of Vector: Vol 1: The State of the Art* (anth 2015 chap) which efficiently assembles half a century of critical evaluations from *Vector* of the state of sf, with an emphasis on its evolution and fate in the UK. She joined the Editorial Team of *Foundation, the International Review of Science Fiction*, in 2009 as Assistant Editor, and took over copy editing in 2013. She also taught the Science Fiction Foundation Masterclass in 2016, and served as an Anglia Ruskin Science Fiction Fellow from 2018 (csff-anglia.co.uk/?team=12786).

A full list of Maureen's critical works can be found at ISFDB which cites over four hundred distinct written contributions to science fiction criticism and fandom (www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/ea.cgi?94897).On 17th September 2022 Maureen Kincaid Speller was awarded the Karl Wagner Award of the British Fantasy Society for her contribution to the Genre.

Guest Editorial: SF and Justice

Stewart Hotston

This issue has been a long time coming. For me it was given special impetus by the Black Lives Matter movement that sprang into resurgence in 2020 with the death of George Floyd. Around that movement collected a series of weather fronts not only on the nature of identity, culture and racial justice, but also huge and ongoing discussions around active law enforcement, justice systems and their beneficiaries.

Since one can legitimately talk about the beneficiaries of laws and legal frameworks, one can also reasonably talk about those inherently put at disadvantage by those same systems.

Gautam Bhatia, both in his interview but also in his article, highlights how corrective and distributive justice impact upon SF writing, fashions and trends. It is a fascinating series of insights that are driven by a voice that both understands Western approaches while existing partially outside of them. That liminal occupation of operating within two different majority systems serves us well as we think about how justice and science fiction intersect.

Science fiction writers have always used their stories to pose pressing political questions, whether it's H.G. Wells speculating about class and nationhood in *The Time Machine* (1895), or Annalee Newitz exploring Intellectual Property and pharmaceuticals in *Autonomous* (2017).

Within that landscape, 'Mosquitoes, mushrooms, magic: Africanfuturist SF for nature's futures' by' Naomi Terry, Charne Lavery, Laura Pereira, Bwalya Chibwe, Nedine Moonsamy and Chinelo Onwaulu, examines Africanfuturist ideas around justice and nature's futures, providing us with insight and, importantly, majority world voices. They discuss the possibilities open to us both in how we approach writing science fiction but also how we envisage ideas of justice there and beyond.

No framework of justice is perfect—whatever their origin—but we are desperately in need of new ideas, new intersections between ourselves and the kind of debate these pieces raise.

For me the possibility of exploring new ways of thinking, not just about established categories like restorative or distributive justice, but to contemplate novel frameworks, is both exciting and a welcome corrective to the assumptions we can often make in the West that justice only, really, takes one form and that is the one we see assumed by philosophers and theorists like Rawls, Hayek, Dworkin and Sandel.

It remains to be said that forms of justice are inherently political. Where we cannot see that it is too often because we sit inside those systems unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge their axioms.

Science fiction is great at exploring these blind spots, great at helping us talk about issues that might, otherwise, be too fraught to discuss clearly.

Our interview with Ali Baker, who is the Diversity Officer for the BSFA, highlights not just the impact within the pages of SF stories but how we can create space for those stories to be told in the first place.

My own time as a Clarke Award judge revealed the all too common state of affairs where non-white, non-male voices were not simply a minority but statistically significantly under-represented; demonstrating that it wasn't chance that led to lower than expected contributions from diverse voices but the result of structural and conscious bias within the industry.

If science fiction has something to say to us about justice then Ali's work is crucial in helping make the space for that message to be spoken and heard.

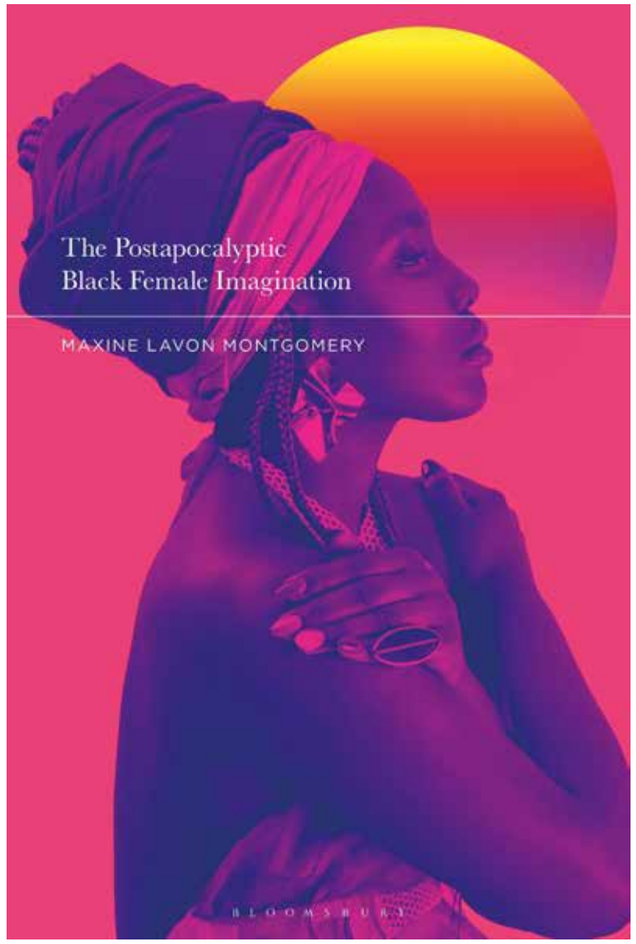
We're more than two years out from George Floyd's death. As a singular point for many to awaken to the idea that justice isn't a dry thing which happens to other people, it has faded from many people's consciousness. For others it wasn't needed as a prick to our consciences in the first place. Regardless, wherever we find ourselves in the world, the idea that science fiction has something to contribute to ideas and discussions around justice feels as important as ever.

I hope this issue contributes to these discussions and helps those of us wrestling with these ideas, making these spaces and exploring these tropes even if just a little bit.

Enjoy.

Vector Recommends

From *The BSFA Review*



***The Postapocalyptic Black Female Imagination by Maxine Lavon Montgomery* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020)**

Reviewed by Arike Oke

This slim volume is the latest in Professor Maxine Montgomery's decades-long and seminal investigation into Black women's apocalyptic writing. Here Montgomery addresses the scope of the imagined post-apocalyptic world, from the Burn that destroys Toronto in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in The Ring*, to the layers of visioning forwards and backwards in Beyoncé's *Lemonade.*

The apocalypse is conceptually ever in front of us, but speculative and near-future apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction operates at a level of understanding that the apocalypse has already happened, multiple times. For people of the African diaspora one of the most significant real history apocalyptic events was the Transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. For many of the adults and children trafficked in this trade, history stopped. Society stopped. Family stopped. Language stopped, and the world was made anew for them in a hellscape of abuse, dislocation and enslavement. Just as in the mainstream, white-cultured, fictional visions of a post-apocalyptic world elements of the culture pre-Fall persist (see *A Canticle for Leibowitz, Planet of the Apes'* denouement, the longing towards the half-forgotten in the *Mad Max* series), so too the Black female post-apocalyptic vision features a yearning towards the pre-apocalypse society from which the post Slave Trade African diaspora were forced onto a new stony future.

The psychosis of the enslaved Africans' apocalypse is one in which the before-times carried on without them—meaning that their descendants can return to their ancestral lands and find them strange. This lived layer of disturbance to the path of history opens up divergences and richnesses of the creative resources to writers of this diaspora who focus on apocalyptic, near-apocalypse and post-apocalypse fiction, as the ones featured and examined in Montgomery's book. Beyond that Montgomery's discourse introduces investigative overlays of gender (female identifying, especially including matrilineal transmission of culture) and sexuality.

Montgomery is writing an academic investigation through this book, not a treatise, and as such she contextualises with other academics' and writers' work—for example giving credit to the term 'cultural haunting' to describe "contemporary ethnic narratives of ghostly intrusions", to Kathleen Brogan. The book therefore becomes a guide, signpost or perhaps an invitation to delve more deeply into the discourse by providing the scholarly context around the ideas in the book.

Introducing the futurist fiction of Black women as essentially rooted through this haunting of culture past or of culture out of reach allows Montgomery to showcase and examine the writings of the Black female SF/ speculative canon as responses to colonialism and racial separatism. Noting the transformations available in these genres, Montgomery is able to identify Octavia E Butler's vampire, and Edwidge Danticant's sea spirit as ways in which the Black female body can be transmuted beyond time and race while still maintaining its umbilical connection to ancestral cultural heritage. Transformations are also routes in fiction to challenge notions of fixed gender and sexuality, but these are again informed by the ghost ship of colonialism and the transatlantic apocalypse. Afro-futurist writing is described as part of the continuum that understands the past existing jowl to cheek with the future. It becomes a recovering exercise not only for the lost threads and, as Montgomery describes it, the "largely unscripted heritage", but also for the Black identities that could come about from our ruptured present. If in the present moment Black female identities are "subsumed within a master narrative of whiteness", these writers can imagine what brave new world contains identities made whole, and visible.

This includes queer identities. Montgomery uses Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* and *No Telephone To Heaven* novels as a way to understand the liminal space of a "creolized identity" in which it is possible to resist both Imperial/ colonial influences alongside a self-constructing queer New World. The Transatlantic apocalypse as the real world apocalypse underneath the layers of diasporic Afro Futurism includes the use of zombie and zombification to symbolise the induced forgetting and severance from the past. Zombies as a cultural phenomenon are from diasporic African culture and are used in the white Western cultural canon as stand ins for modern fears (consumerism, climate change, the AIDS pandemic). In the post-apocalyptic Afro futurist female canon, Montgomery describes how the zombie exists in an induced state of not-life and not-death. This is the colonised, and enslaved, experience. Montgomery uses Erna Brodber's *Myal* and Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* to argue for an "un-zombification" of Blackness. The self-construction available in futurist narratives allows for a self-led reframing of the zombie trope, in which the de-zombifying process could mean successful decolonising of the Black body and mind.

Montgomery brings her analysis full circle by the end of the book by analysing the Black female imagination for post-apocalyptic utopias. She rejects the 'clean sheet and start again' post-apocalyptic utopia by noting that the approach of the post-apocalyptic Black female imagination instead leans towards a salvage and build a new aesthetic. In this she is referencing fictions that draw on deluge apocalypses—in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, for example. In building new worlds Montgomery notes the dangers of rebuilding toxic structures from the world swept away. She cautions that Beyonce's vision in Lemonade suggests a new world order of female violence that only replaces the patriarchal violence rather than creating something more equitable.

The Postapocalyptic Black Female Imagination gives us a deep dive into the textures, the limitations and the bright threads of innovation available to the post-colonial female Black diaspora writers in this space. It is rife with spoilers as Montgomery uses all of her expertise to interrogate texts, so while the book can act as a way to understand and to build out a reading list, be prepared to have all plot points not only given away but dissected. The book is slim physically but weighty in academic terms—not for a casual reader. It does however add to an emerging discussion that finally fleshes out Black women's contribution to our collective imagining of the future, in a way that links us all back to our pasts.

Coffinmaker's Blues: Collected Writings on Terror by Stephen Volk (Electric Dreamhouse, 2019)

Reviewed by Geoff Ryman

I was sent this book to review by the publishers at the author's request.

When I was 12, like Stephen King, I graduated from *Famous Monsters of Filmland* to another newsstand journal, *Castle of Frankenstein*. The photos may not have been as good, and the text looked like it had been typed not typeset, but it was a satisfying read. Contributors like Lin Carter or Richard Lupoff wrote like horror films and fiction had value.

Coffinmaker's Blues by Stephen Volk may feel for some like a collection of good blogposts. For me, the collection re-created the sensation of reading my favourite mag—respectful writing about something people disrespect.

Stephen Volk is a veteran writer of horror TV and screenplays. He's worked with William Friedkin; he was the creative force behind the sensational TV one-off *Ghostwatch***.** This collection of sixty monthly pieces for first *The Third Alternative* then *Black Static* begins with articles first published in 2004 and ends with those from 2016. Two more recent postscripts round things off.

Volk has received a lot of unhelpful notes from producers. His exasperation with critical remarks brings a smile. In 'Do I Know You?' from May 2012, he skewers the writer workshop axiom that a character must want something or have a goal. As Volk reminds us, most of us AREN'T actively seeking our goals. He goes on:

> Another demand is to make characters "likeable" which in my experience is never a useful instruction. In fact, I'd ask the opposite: "What's wrong with this person?"

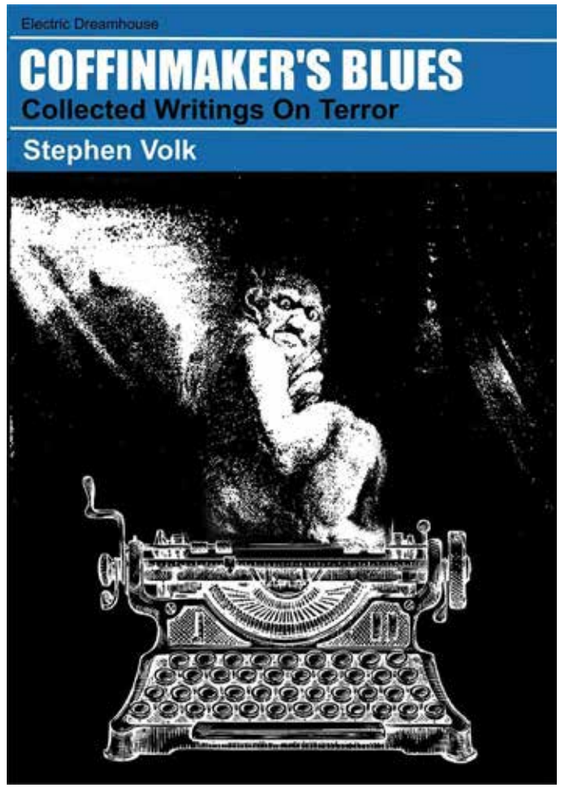
This is a book about writing *per se* as much as it is about horror. Like Stephen King's *On Writing***,** the book is full of practical advice on how to get the best out of yourself and your work. Some of his best passages give fresh, thought-provoking rules of thumb. What he gets out of seeing *Psycho*:

> The reasons we Horror writers should remember Hitchcock and *Psycho* is that their power to shock depends on three things: clarity of geography (where people are: the death of Abrogast); narrative context (where the scenes are: the death of Marion), and style.

The piece 'Bus Moment' from November 2011 reflects on the ubiquity in horror films of the jump cut—the fake scare that jolts, rattles and so often cheats. Volk regrets jump cuts but knows why he uses them.

The artist Grayson Perry says, "play is often a time when children process difficult emotional situations through metaphorical games". … And the "scare moment" is part of that game we play—just not the whole thing.

Artists, photographers, anthropologists, biologists—Volk's range of references go far beyond Lovecraft, Poe, and classic or not-so-classic movies. Harold Pinter gets quoted to devastating effect in 'Mirrors for Eyes', a June 2015 wander around affectless monsters such as robots,



cyborgs, zombies and psychopaths. It's occasioned by Volk's love of *Westworld***,** both the original movie and the TV series. The piece lacks focus until Volk quotes Harold Pinter's enraged Nobel prize speech, slamming American culture. Volk concludes '*Hannibal* is also, to me—like *Westworld*—a chilling picture of America.'

A final postscript piece from 2018 'The State of Us' quotes evolutionary biologist Randolph Nesse on why biologically, we are programmed to jump first and only then find out the threat was not real.

In other words, our imagination played a huge part in creating an anxiety-based way of thinking. Those humans with better imagination and more anxiety survived….

I found this strangely liberating because it shows we are essentially animals created from terror…

At his best, Volk's practical, anecdotal approach draws conclusions that have the authority of wide reading and hands-on industry experience.

Not every essay hangs together. Sometimes Volk free-associates around a topic. We might get an anecdote from the industry, an interesting quote from a philosopher, and a nod at a favourite franchise. It's

***Psycho* (1960)**

entertaining, but I didn't always see a point. These are monthly pieces, written while pitching, re-writing, or tearing your hair out at a producer's behaviour.

But at his best, Volk argues for the importance of Horror (always with a capital letter) in terms that are used to describe literature.

In 'Wrong is Good', from June 2013 he discusses Dennis Potter's *Brimstone and Treacle* and how it got pulled by the BBC. Potter's play was difficult and morally ambiguous—plain wrong in the eyes of the BBC programmers.

Wrong is good, dangerous, tricky, and frightening to deal with—but as a Horror writer you have to go there, unfalteringly. Otherwise, what is the point? The Wrong is where we see the Real in our hearts.

Part of the reason I enjoyed this book so much is generational. I know Volk's references. We probably had similar schooling. Like me, Volk seems to think that Horror is literature or can be. I can't define literature, but I know it when I see it. Literature takes the high road, the steep climb, aiming high and advancing the craft to do so even when it confounds audiences or offends gatekeepers. From again, 'The State of Us'.

The horror of living. The meaningless(ness) of life which fiction tries to ameliorate with shape and pattern. But in reality life has no punchline except for death….

The plain fact is, we are, each of us, walking horror stories.

We are the horror, Poe says.
We always will be.

An Earnest Blackness by Eugen Bacon (Anti-Oedipus Press, 2022)

Reviewed by Phil Nicholls

An Earnest Blackness is the debut collection of 12 non-fiction essays by Eugen Bacon, published by Anti-Oedipus Press, 2022. Her previous work includes three novels, all nominated for BSFA awards. Bacon is a multi-prize-winning author and her creative work has appeared in many magazines.

The opening lines of the first essay set the tone for much of the collection: "Decades after the groundbreaking work of authors such Toni Morrison, Samuel Delaney, and Octavia Butler, black speculative fiction is more visible and thriving than ever." The heart of this collection is an overview of black speculative fiction, Afrofuturism, AfroSF and even slipstream writing, styles where "We can contemplate different, better futures." Bacon offers good explorations of these labels across several essays but concedes that "There are problems with definitions."

An explosion of competing labels around subgenres of black speculative fiction is both a benefit and a curse. The range and variety of terms is a reflection of growing interest in black genre writing and represents heightened exposure. However, such terms risk becoming flat or monolithic. "All terms led to black-people stories in speculative fiction and embodied the prospect of manifesting a new kind of storytelling."

Despite her concern for the extent and limitations of these assorted terms, Bacon remains steadfast on the need for these categories as a vehicle to promote black fiction in all its forms. "Until more readers, publishers, agents, and literary-awards judges start paying attention to stories of inhabitation, multiple embodiments, and inclusivity across cultures, the rise of this calibre of fiction will linger in the margins."

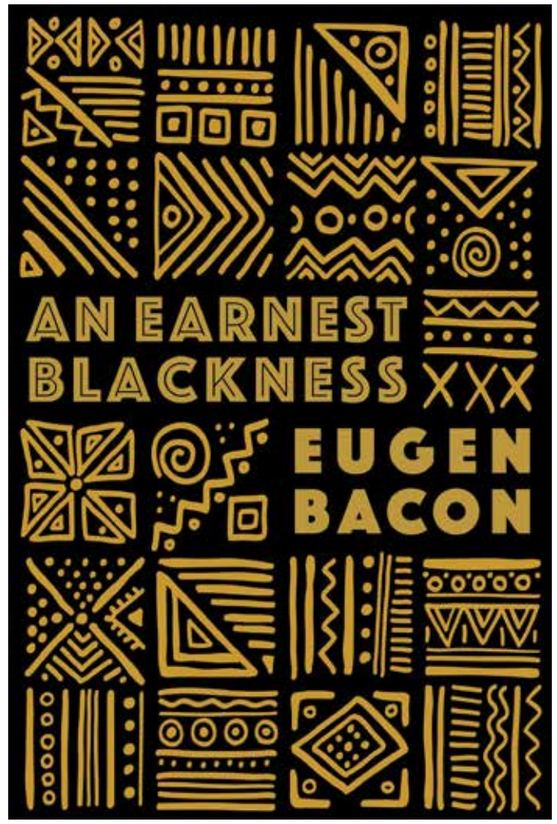
Bacon's essays also explore beyond these subgenres of speculative fiction to broader cultural issues. In 'The Benefit of Our Humanity' she argues for a global future with a multiplicity of cultures where racism has been defeated. "Doing nothing is being complicit. Do better for black people. Do *better* for ethnic minorities. We are your friends, your partners, your colleagues."

The conclusion to the essay captures the truth underpinning an entire movement: "Black lives matter—not *because others don't, but because others won't if black lives don't.*" The simple, vivid capture of a broad philosophy in a single pithy phrase is the essence of a poet's craft and evidence of her skill as a writer.

An Earnest Blackness includes several essays illustrating Bacon's creative side. In 'Worldbuilding in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's The Perfect Nine' Bacon "explores world-building through creation mythology, culture, nature, and the otherworldly while blending folklore, adventure and allegory." The companion piece 'African Creation Myths' offers a more detailed review of myths. Both pieces are brimful of advice and cool imagery for any creative world-builder.

The final and longest essay is 'Making Claiming T-Mo', an extended overview of the novel which was the product of Bacon's PhD in creative writing and published in 2019 by Meerkat Press. Bacon relates the creative journey of the novel, with feedback from her PhD examiners, excerpts from the finished text and onwards to eventual reviews of the published book.

All the essays are academic in style, complete with footnotes, quotations and bibliographies. Yet, Bacon maintains a friendly, chatty style. Reading this fascinating collection is like chatting with your smart best friend



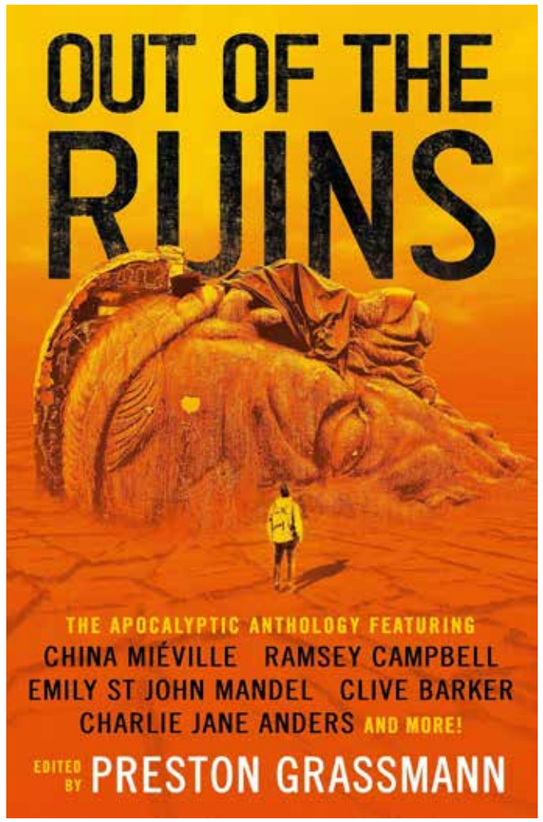
who wants to help you learn. If you enjoy the intelligent SF articles published in Vector, then you will enjoy *An Earnest Blackness*.

Bacon's playful, creative style shines through in the screenplay-like delivery of 'Inhabitation'. This essay struck me as the emotional heart of the collection, being a conversation between Bacon and her friend Genni. The pair discuss life as African Australians with great humour and insight.

Genni says: "Speculative fiction is a safe place to explore my dualities, my multiplicities." This single phrase captures the essence of *An Earnest Blackness*, its duality as biography and theory, along with the multiplicity of the topics explored in such an insightful short collection.

Out of the Ruins, ed. by Preston Grassmann (Titan Books, 2021)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer



Apocalypses and end-times are among the most popular sf subjects, but there's always something slightly odd about the combination of anxiety and pleasure in reading them. "Apocalypse" is more than "disaster" or even "catastrophe". It really is the underlining finality of everything. Hence, a collection of "apocalypse" stories is bound to be uneven and challenging. There is almost certainly going to be an overload in a series of stories which rip up and throw away human history in inventive ways.

That said, editor Grassmann reminds us of the original Biblical word *apokalypsis*, which actually means disclosure or revelation (as in the "Revelation" of St John the Divine) of hidden or secret knowledge. The stories here have been selected in line with the broader, original meaning, together with an underlying sense that this apocalypse/revelation can, or should, "acknowledge that each of us can excavate something of value from the ash of our end-times and make something new". This asks more from the stories than a simple charting of variant versions of The Ending Of It All. They range from the harrowing incursion of the monstrous (Anna Tambour's "The Age of Fish, Post-flowers", in which we never quite learn what the "orms", which seem to have corralled the narrator's community in their block, are) to the mysterious (China Mièville's "Watching God", in which a population watches ships come and go, to the comic (Paul Di Filippo's "The Rise and Fall of Whistle-Pig City"). They include a distinctly odd (though by no means unsuccessful) cybernoir narrative, "Malware Park" by Nikhil Singh, and a redemptive posthuman post-Apocalypse, "How the Monsters Found God" by John Skipp and Autumn Christian. There are poems (by Clive Barker and D. R. G. Sugawara) and parables; original fiction and reprints (including a rare treat, Samuel R. Delany's extract from the never completed "The Splendor and Misery of Bodies, of Cities", originally published in 1996 in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*). All in all, quite a mixture.

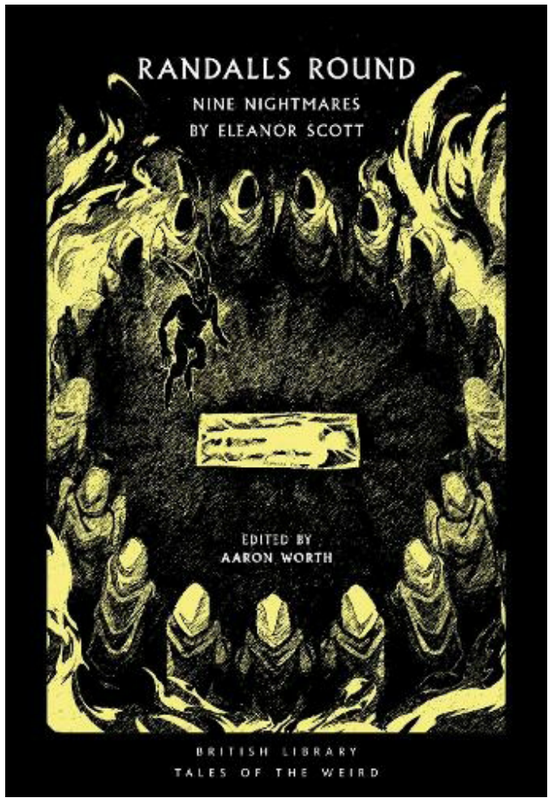
There certainly have been conventional "falls of civilisations" in the past of some of these stories, such as Lavie Tidhar's "The Green Caravanserai", in which scavengers along the Red Sea uncover technology and weaponry from half-forgotten wars, but the endings of these stories avoid the clichés and stereotypes of "catastrophe fiction". The progress of an *Earth Abides/The Stand*-type plague is charted in Carmen Maria Machado's "Inventory" through the memories of a "last survivor" charting their sexual experiences. But in Charlie Jane Anders' "As Good As New" there is a genie in a bottle who has been granting wishes, *reversing* apocalypses (and thus creating the unintended consequences that lead to new ones) on the instructions of a succession of other "last survivors". Ramsey Campbell, in "Reminded" shows people dealing with a world in which memories have been wiped by forces unknown. Emily St John Mandel's "Mr Thursday" revisits and recasts the time-travel story in which someone intervenes in another person's life, to have her agent trying (but failing) to make a change out of simple human sympathy rather than simply following his instructions. Kaaron Warren's "Exurbia" is certainly a personal apocalypse (the protagonist is thrown out of his tower-block early on in this story), but the unusual beginning allows us an insight into this future which, more than many stories in the collection offers a vivid picture of a world which is both familiar and *other*.

In the long-ago days when I was applying for jobs most people would avoid but were good "career-moves", I was advised never to talk about "problems" but "challenges" or "opportunities". Hence I was mildly amused by the rhetorical question in the blurb "can we turn the cataclysm into an opportunity?" But the hope presented at the conclusions of many of these stories is, as in "Inventory" and "Mr Thursday", or Nick Mamatas' "The Man You Flee At Parties", often the result of someone confronting their own personal *apokalypsis* and thus makes sense. It is true that in some stories, even some of the better ones, the grasping for redemption and hope does head towards rather saccharine comfort, although even as I wonder whether there *is* such a thing as "cosy Apocalypse", I find myself admitting that individual tastes are going to differ widely on this issue. Just as so much *Utopian* fiction crashes and burns on the troubling issue of waving away the mountains of human striving and misery that have built a better world, so rebuilding from the Apocalypse can likewise ignore the fact that for every fictional protagonist who finds redemption, millions of others may have been crushed.

The best stories are those which revisit, but do not repeat, the standard themes of Apocalyptic sf, and those in which it is quite clear that the author has understood quite what has caused this "apocalypse" even as the reader has to puzzle it out. And which are less "message" stories than stories about individuals facing individual dilemmas. We see this in the Mièville story and in Tambour's "The Age of Fish, Post-Flowers", in Nina Allan's "A Storm in Kingstown" when the temporal location of the story only gradually comes clear, and perhaps Jeffrey Thomas's "The Endless Fall", which begins with what seems to be a survivor regaining consciousness in what seems to be an escape pod. Given the range of style and theme, reading straight through the anthology is possibly not to be recommended. Nevertheless, there is a wide variety of storytelling approaches in this anthology, and despite my caveats above, it is worth reading, a story or two at a time, and savouring the difference that you will find.

Randalls Round: Nine Nightmares by Eleanor Scott (British Library, 2021)

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller



The 1920s were a rich period for ghost story writing, exemplified by the stories that appeared in Cynthia Asquith's *Ghost Book* series, the first volume of which came out in 1927. That featured work from familiar names, such as Algernon Blackwood, Oliver Onions, Hugh Walpole, and May Sinclair. Other writers producing work at this time included E.F. Benson, H. Russell Wakefield, and William Fryer Harvey. M.R. James himself was still occasionally publishing short stories, and a collected edition of his short stories would appear in 1931.

In the midst of all this, in 1929, without much fanfare, the publisher Ernest Benn issued a collection of nine short stories by Helen Leys, writing as Eleanor Scott. *Randalls Round* was described as a collection of 'weird and uncanny' stories but marketed very poorly so that it sank almost without trace. Needless to say, copies of that edition are not easily come by. Scott's fortunes were revived, to a degree, in the 1970s and 1980s, when Hugh

Lamb and Richard Dalby included some of her stories in their anthologies but it was not until 1996, when Ash-Tree Press produced a new hardback edition of the collection, that it was possible to properly see what the fuss was all about. Now, nearly thirty years later, the British Library has published a reasonably priced paperback edition and a new generation of ghost-story aficionados can see what the fuss is all about.

Eleanor Scott was never a bad writer—she came from a family of people who earned their living by writing so she thoroughly understood the nature of her craft. All of the stories in this collection, including two stories under the pseudonym 'N. Dennett', are well told, solidly plotted, and a pleasure to read. But what we do see in this collection is a writer who was learning her craft as a writer of weird tales, and Scott's influences are not always lightly worn. 'The Twelve Apostles', for example, owes a heavy debt to James's 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas', using a similar mechanism of clues to a treasure hidden in inscriptions on stained glass. But whereas the guardian of the treasure in James's story is repulsively amorphous, Scott's guardian is more clearly tentacular in nature, as though Scott doesn't yet trust her readers' imaginations. Similarly, 'Celui-La', a stronger story in my view, has more than a passing flavour of 'A Warning to the Curious' and 'Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad' about it. I'm inclined to think that Scott was actually slightly more in sympathy with Algernon Blackwood—'The Room', 'The Cure' and, albeit more weakly, 'The Tree'—are all shaped by an awareness of a deeper natural power that is the hallmark of much of Blackwood's work, such as 'The Willows'.

It's clear, though, that Scott was steadily working towards her own particular style. For all it riffs on Walter de la Mare's 'Seaton's Aunt', and the notion of the elderly 'relation' who is drawing their strength from those who come into their orbit, Scott's 'The Old Lady' is notable for the way in which the strong, capable heroine determines to rescue Adela Young, her university acquaintance from the clutches of her vampiric 'aunt', and the way in which marriage, the bane of the young university woman of the 1920s, becomes actualised as a threat.

However, it is 'Randalls Round' itself that is Eleanor Scott's masterpiece. There are hints of its genesis in 'The Cure', with the presence of Murky Glam, the village unfortunate who is also the guardian of an ancient rite, but the idea of a ritual persisting into modern times is more fully explored in this story. Heyling, an overworked student has gone to the village of Randalls for some peace and quiet. His friend Mortlake has suggested that Heyling might look into an old dance or ceremony called Randalls Round, which seems to be associated with a nearby piece of derelict land containing the remains of a long barrow. The land's owner refuses to allow Heyling to prospect for treasure, which should have been his first clue to leave well alone, but Heyling determines to visit the mound under cover of dark.

Which he does, only to find himself caught up in the last act of a ritual which has, over the last day or two, been playing out around him in the village. The story itself is once again well told, with more Jamesian resonances (again 'A Warning to the Curious', and also 'Martin's Close') but it's Heyling's experiences in the field, spying on the men of the village as they enact an ancient ritual, and his subsequent encounter with something very economically sketched, that sets this story apart. There is a sense that Scott has finally found a subject of her own (a feeling echoed in 'The Menhir', by N. Dennett, whom Richard Dalby believed to be Helen Leys under another pseudonym. The style is certainly similar.

The mystery then is why Helen Leys published no more stories in this vein, at least that anyone has been able to find. Would she have continued to turn out stories in a Jamesian vein or might she have moved into more psychological territory as a number of other female writers were to do, Elinor Mordaunt and May Sinclair being prime examples? Or was it simply that she looked at the market and judged that there was money to be made in other genres, such as detective stories, which she also wrote. We'll never know. Instead, we are left with a volume of enjoyable stories and tantalising hints of what might have been.

"Gypsy in Space": A Note on the Representation of the Roma in Contemporary Hungarian SF Short Stories

Áron Domokos

> "Together and apart: that is the definition of fraternity. The one we love is another. But the one we love is as close to us as we are to ourselves. So what is needed is not to see the Roma as only a 'problem'—and especially not as a 'problem' of the white majority—but to act according to the well-known rules of human love, which as a sentiment is not so simple (I have also described it as a contradiction), but in my humble view it is the only right one. "
>
> Tamás Gáspár Miklós, "A lényegről" ("What really matters"), 2017.

Abstract

The representation of marginalized communities is extensively explored in both academic SF studies, and popular discourse around SF, particularly since the second half of the 1960s. Themes such as to what extent and by what means the living conditions, adversities, modes of resistances, worldviews, etc. of such communities are represented in SF narratives, as well as the role that individuals identifying themselves as community members play in the production/consumption/reception of SF, have been investigated by practitioners of quantitative and qualitative research. To date, however, there appear to be no studies that address the representation of the Roma in contemporary Hungarian SF speculative fiction. The present paper aims to do the following: (1) to introduce contemporary Hungarian SF short fiction and its readership; (2) to briefly explore the politics of "integration" and "reverse integration" as a means to contextualize the Roma within contemporary Hungarian society; (3) to give an outline of those "semiotic" means by which Roma characters in the short stories under scrutiny are identified; (4) to characterize the particular Roma representations from "invisibility" through "genocide" to "social mobility" that are present in the narratives in question. The texts used for my investigation are the relevant pieces of those submitted in 2014-2018 as candidates for the Péter Zsoldos Award, a national annual prize awarded for the best (published) Hungarian SF novel and short story.

"Well, white folks ain't planning for us to be here."

I want to begin by mentioning that it is comparatively easy to notice the lack of Black representation in mainstream American SF up to the 1970s. Observing that there was not a single Black character in the now legendary 1976 dystopian film *Logan's Run*, stand-up comedian Richard Pryor commented: "Well, white folks ain't planning for us to be here. That's why we got to make movies" (Pryor 1976). As for the Roma,[1] science fiction literature in English and other languages since the 19th century had very few Romani characters, and even fewer narratives were written by Romani authors. Let us now take a closer look at the Hungarian-language SF scene.

My study considers nearly 300 pieces of short fiction shortlisted for the 2014-2018 *Péter Zsoldos SF Award*, and takes a brief look at works in other media. I am going (1) to place the discourses on the representation of the Roma in a social-philosophical framework; (2) to problematize the issue of Roma representation and its "semiotic" aspect; and, in light of this, (3) to classify different ways in which Romani people are represented in contemporary Hungarian SF.

Survival as a way of life

Just as elsewhere in Europe, the Roma in Hungary cannot be considered a homogeneous community: they are different people in terms of language, socio-cultural status, occupation, history (they migrated and settled in the Carpathian Basin at different times), identity (Romany, Roma, Bey, Oláh, Sinti, Romanian). According to recent statistics, their number has risen "from 400,000 to 876,000, and their share in the total population has risen from 3.7% to 8.8%" (Pénzes et al. 2018: 10, 21). As a consequence of their increasing urbanization, an increasing proportion (62%) live in Budapest or in cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants, and one third live mostly in North-East and South-West Hungary, mainly in peripheral border areas (ibid.). These often segregated and run-down villages and settlements, cut off from the outside world, are officially among the most disadvantaged regions in Hungary, and have some of the highest official levels of unemployment nationally (Domokos-Herczeg 2010: 82). The 'Gypsy'-'Hungarian' distinction, the researchers add, "is linked to class differences, which in turn are primarily related to the nature of employment. It is important to note that the intertwining of ethnicity and class position is not only specific to the Roma and not only in Hungary, but is a feature of the capitalist mode of production, which creates a boundary between those in formal employment and the masses outside or only temporarily active in it" (Czirfusz et al. 2019: 158). Similarly, the latest research highlights that the class differences (public work-wage work, informal and formal labour position, reserve army and wage labour, subproletarian-proletarian) correlate to the Gypsy-Hungarian distinction. (Éber 2021: 220-221.)

The rival social narratives and discourses about the Roma (constructed typically without their participation)—in which the SF works discussed below fit—can be divided into four logically possible broad groups:

1. the integration of the Roma into the state socialist or late capitalist production-based way of life, i.e. assimilation of the (non-white) minority into the (white) majority society;[2]

2. the integration of the non-Roma majority into the local Roma community (Borbély 2019, Isaszegi 2006);

3. the total rejection of integration and cooperation (an openly racist approach); and

4. the fraternal cooperation between the Roma and non-Roma (Tamás 2017).

The latter does not approve of development without "waiting for each other", and even suggests suspending the growth of the party that considers itself "more advanced" and possibly restraining the level of consumption and production. (Isaszegi 2006) Group 1 is the dominant discourse politically, and inspires most heated debates.

The *liberal* narrative (part of Group 1) sees integration-assimilation as a desirable and, what is more, a possible process, but also recognises significant challenges. These include entrenched socio-economic inequalities, inadequate or reprehensible government policies (across housing, education, employment, and other areas), and the microaggressions or open racism of majority society, which together can be called "structural racism".[3] Thus, liberal discourse sees its duty in political and legal representation/protection of the Roma.[4] (For a detailed discussion of this, often condescending, attitude that ignores the context of European colonialism, its basic crimes and racist justification", see József Böröcz's study, 2006).

The faith in integration of the *conservatives* (also Group 1) is much weaker, and accordingly they react to integration dilemmas erratically. Some of the measures they propose have positive effects, but others are inadequate and even mask covert support for segregation. They prioritise maintaining the psychological and material well-being of the majority-white society.

The *racist* discourse (Group 3) completely rejects any possibility of coexistence. It puts the emphasis on racial differences, i.e. claiming the Roma are inferior based on supposedly phenotypic, socio-cultural traits. In this scenario integration is either impossible, or undesirable; instead, creation of segregated areas, districts, ghettos, is being put forward. (It is interesting to note, for example, that the idea of establishing Cigania, i.e. the Roma as a political community/nation, also resonates with some Roma ideas.) It also advocates for institutional control of population growth for the Roma (sterilisation, birth control).[5] In 2008-2009 (under the so-called "social liberal" government) a brutal series of crimes against the Roma were carried out, including attacks by neo-Nazi terrorists which killed six people and gravely injured five more. These murders were directly inspired by the racist discourse.

The proponents of cooperation (Group 2) and reverse integration (Group 2) are not interested in the cultural aspects, but emphasise the mode of production. As András Borbély, Transylvanian social philosopher and literary scholar, writes:

> Deep down, a conflict of interests that is not easily resolved emerges between the principles of social equality and cultural differentiation. This implies that the Roma mode of production is not simply primitive, socially backward, discriminated against, or merely different from ours, etc., but is so different from the gadjos'[6] mode of production as to make integration according to the principles of equality impossible. That is to say, cultural logic tends to override the social, legal, pedagogical, etc. systems of norms that the gadjos would like to be universal (2020).

The "Roma mode of production" (that can be interpreted as a kind of criticism of the Gadjos' mode of production) refers to 1. a systematic rejection of accumulation (often interpreted as "laziness"); 2. rejection of paid employment, education, and exploitative attitude towards the environment. For Borbély, the Roma way of life would be beneficial for everyone; as production has peaked, we need to recycle and redistribute the goods already produced. The emphasis is on a forced scarcity rather than degrowth, as in Jean Ortica's 1977 dystopian SF short story 'Les survivants de l'Apocalypse' (Ortica 1977). Similarly, for Borbély, this waste management, the 'survival attitude' is "a way of life … a culture … a mode of production—that is how we will increasingly resemble them" (Borbély 2020).

"Because the colourful scarves and shawls look so cool on her"

On the presence of the Roma in fiction and its sub-genres, researchers broadly agree that "the speaking, creating, text-creating agent is monopositional, the exclusive property of the non-Roma majority" (Beck 2020). Ethnic Roma scholar Ian Hancock argues, "[i]n children's literature… Roma appear relatively often—but never as characters who happen to be Gypsies, but only because they are Gypsies, because they represent a particular intention. This intention manifests itself, broadly speaking, in three ways: the Gypsy as a lying thief who typically takes the property of a non-Gypsy child; the Gypsy as a magician and fortune-teller; and the Gypsy as a romantic figure" (Hancock 1987). Hines makes a similar point: "The SFF genre is truly mesmerized by the figure of the 'Gypsy'. Sometimes it pictures him as a romantic, free wanderer of the roads, an independent man who rejects the soul-shrinking laws of civilization and lives as he pleases. Sometimes it dresses him in mysticism and paints him

1 The words "Roma", "Romani" and "Gypsy" are used interchangeably in the paper in an unbiased way, without any negative connotations intended. I note, however, that although the usage of the term "Roma," introduced by international organizations in the 1970s, is now widespread in Hungarian Roma communities, many Roma prefer to use "cigány" (Hungarian for "Gypsy"), which often feels not only more neutral but also more comfortable to them. (Dupcsik 2009)

2 Social researchers are also concerned with the racism of state socialism. László Hadházy's film about the dismantling of a Gypsy settlement in the late seventies, entitled Cigányfilm [Gypsy Film] presents an interesting case study: www.youtube.com/watch?v=knie26dy0HE.

3 In Péter Kardos and Gábor Nyári's book (2004), an 18-year-old Gypsy boy with no social capital and minimal life experience, who grew up in a rural institution, is cast in the shoes of a role-playing character who, when plunged into the jungle of the capital, finds himself in a desperate situation no matter what choice he takes. ciganylabirintus.blog.hu/.

4 See for example a Roma-produced "Hungarian-international civil Roma online community TV channel": baxtale.tv/ The Roma Image Workshop also does valuable work: romakepmuhely.hu.

5 See Szombati, K. *The Revolt of the Provinces: Anti-Gypsyism and Right-Wing Politics in Hungary. (Dislocations Book 23)* (Berghahn Books, 2018). Kindle Edition.

6 People of non-Roma origin in Romani language.

as an old Gypsy woman with poignant curses. At other times, it represents the vigorous, sexually heated figure of the young Gypsy girl or man. Sometimes it just does it for fashion's sake, because the colourful scarves and shawls look so cool on her" (Hines 2013).

These representations first emerged in the Romantic period, and are particularly popular in supernatural or fantasy contexts. In Csicsery-Ronay Jr.'s view, "[i]n Romantic literature, supernatural abilities are often associated with archaic peoples (such as Gypsies, American Indians, Scottish Highlanders, Irish aborigines, Siberian shamans)" (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 2008: 35). Trumpener (1996) seconds it: in the staged confrontation between enlightened and superstitious worldviews, the Roma represent magic and curses, barbarism, primitive democracy, the obstruction of the progress of civilisation, raw sexuality, savage energy and counterculture.

How do we identify a Roma protagonist?

The current corpus of compulsory reading in Hungarian elementary and high-school education is a subject of frequent debate.[7] The literary canon established during the period of state socialism includes works that represent inequalities that arise from class. As a matter of fact, most of the protagonists of the novels and epic poems in the curriculum still come from lower classes. However, groups marginalized by gender, ethnicity and disability are underrepresented (Gulya 2018, 2020), while Roma characters are strikingly absent. They do however explore important questions around identity, even if limited by this omission.

How are the figures of the marginalized formed, first from the point of view of the creator, and then from recipients' points of view? Where Roma characters do appear, what defines them? Is it their description, their 'looks,' or the way they are seen by other characters? Or is it the way they speak, their name or the setting of the story? Is it perceived through the way other characters interact with them? Or is it the narrator who defines them? The proponents of corporeal narratology believe that all of these aspects play a role, but the process of encoding-decoding can only work through historically constructed, conditioned topoi (Punday, 2003: 6-12). Punday argues that the less explicitly a body is marked, the easier it is to identify with it. It becomes more difficult the more pre-existing knowledge we have about the character. "This insight is also in line with the experience confirmed by many critical theories: the discourse of hegemony describes excluded groups very strongly in bodily terms, emphasizing their 'alien', 'not-one-of/among-us' character even in their corporeality" (Rákai, 2015: 36).

Following Ian Hancock and Punday, here we should distinguish between the "marked Roma" and the "unmarked Roma". With the former, the narrative draws attention to their Roma-ness, e.g. presenting their identity through the use of ready-made topoi. The character's ethnic identity (Gypsy) becomes the driving force of their story and determines their function. With the latter, the ethnic identity of the character is left out of the narrative, and has little or no relevance to their function in the story.

The Roma in Hungarian SF short stories

To my knowledge, there are no Roma present in Hungarian SF publishing, either as owners, publishers or authors. This means that all the Romani characters in Hungarian SF within the framework of this study are written by non-Romani authors.

In my understanding of SF, I follow ideas explored by Margit Sárdi (Sárdi 2013: 32), and Paul Kincaid, Darko Suvin, Stanisław Lem and Alfred Jarry, MASFITT.[8] As Kincaid puts it, science fiction is not one, but "... many things—a future environment, a marvellous machine, an ideal society, an alien being, a twist in time, interstellar travel, a satirical perspective, a particular approach to the story" (Kincaid 2003: 416-417). For me, "science fiction as thematic literature offers, on the ground of a worldview that moves in notions of rationality-irrationality, rationally posited solutions (existing or not) to problems that are: a) not necessarily relevant to the present or not perceived in the present or b) perceived as relevant to the present" (Domokos, 2019: 65).[9]

The SF narratives that are part of this study (281 pieces of short fiction altogether) were selected from the candidates for the 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017 *Péter Zsoldos Award*, announced by the *Avana Association*. There are 75 male and 27 female authors in the list. These stories defy categorisation: there are space detectives and spy stories, adventure stories about AI and post-apocalyptical narratives, there's a historical fantasy and a space opera, a psychedelic romance and pornographic texts, classic mystery stories and "novel within a novel", as well as rewritten fairy tales, thrillers, military science fiction, works of alternative history, dystopia and even visionary prose poems.

Many of the issues raised by those stories are relevant to our present days: split consciousness, demographic changes, abortion rights, news manipulation, power struggles, animal rights, the food crisis, loneliness, exploitation and oppression, intergenerational conflict, the malleability of virtual reality, the dangers of the web, the dangers of Facebook, automatic cars, 3D printing, etc.

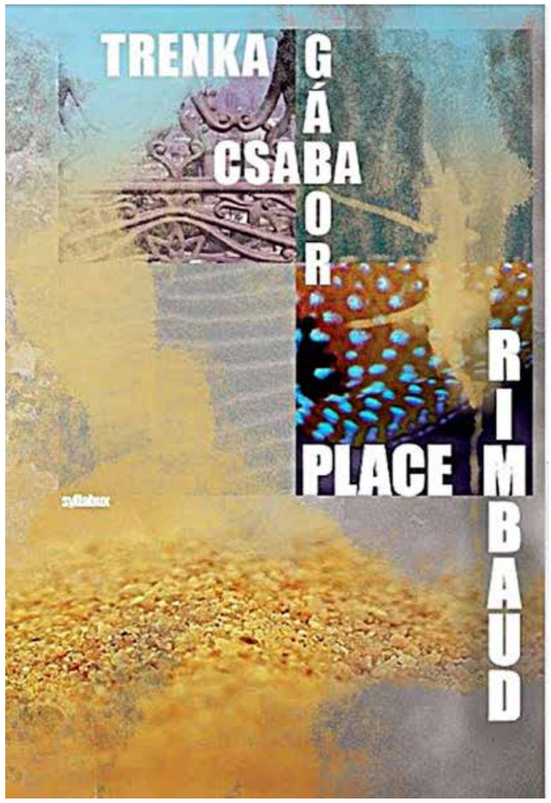
Astonishingly enough, identifiably Romani characters are depicted in only two stories out of 281 texts, despite all this variety of subjects. and even then they have minor roles in the story.

Short story 1. The Roma in an alternate history—Csaba Gábor Trenka: 'The Sheik of Kisvárda' (2015)

Csaba Gábor Trenka (1959) is an author of excellent speculative novels and YA fiction, all of which reflect present-day social reality.[10] His short story 'The Sheik of Kisvárda' is set in an alternate history (Domokos 2022), although the human relationships depicted bear many similarities to our present. The narrator is a wanderer, and the story unfolds before us through his thousand tales. In this parallel universe, the laws of "poetic storytelling" are at work: the events take place in 1421 in Islamic calendar (in our world that is 2000), in the essentially peaceful secularised world of Islamic dominance, but we also learn about earlier significant events (e.g. two Algerian-Turkish wars).

We can infer that the protagonist is recalling past events from some time in the 1460s. The story takes place in Kisvárda (a little-known small town in the poorer north-eastern part of Hungary) in an Islamic-Christian-Roma community. We are not given much background, apart from the telling names. Life is peaceful there, Christianity is declining, but there are still some who practise it. The narrator does not care much about religious life, and does not judge anyone. The Roma are portrayed as the poorest class.

In this alternative history world, the level of technology is less advanced: the town has a few battle wagons and a few non-functioning fire engines, the streets are lit by kerosene lamps, the camel market is bustling, there are no computers or Internet, but science fiction anthologies and magazines are in their heyday. In this Orientalist setting it is easy to sympathise with the adolescent heroes, especially the young narrator, his love for fantastic stories (more of these pulp fiction adventures, with their captivating language, are built into the story!) and his first timid attempt at conquering a woman's heart that ends in disaster.



The representations of the Roma as minor characters follow Trumpener's well-known and in some cases offensive stereotypes. From the very beginning of the story poverty is aligned with ethnicity: "Misery was synonymous with Gypsyism, a world of shabby, dilapidated houses and tin shacks that made up a third of Kisvárda, deep in the sand hills and temperate rainforests. Our parents kept us away from it with well-placed horror stories." This reflects the view of the bourgeois majority society. According to them, the narrator explains, "Gypsies come to steal in droves on Palmyra Avenue (so they are forced to cheat on taxes because the Gypsies take the profits)". Their residence is the camp, the temporary settlement: "[They] have camped for centuries at the end of the Assyrian district, among the sand dunes, and the only reminder of their nomadic existence was that they roasted camel meat on charcoal fires." They are depicted as having a passionate nature, but not

7 Apart from literary merit, tradition and educational value, research results concerning what and how Hungarian children actually read cannot be overlooked (Gombos 2020).

8 The Hungarian Sci-Fi Historical Society. See their website at sites.google.com/site/scifitort/.

9 This definition was shaped in my discussions with fellow scholar Béla Isaszegi. His unpublished manuscript Isaszegi 2004 has also shaped the way I think about SF.

10 One such novel of his is entitled Rimbaud Square (Place Rimbaud, 2013). Trenka's website is accessible at trenkacsaba.wixsite.com/tcg-site/en.

easy to frighten, especially when harmed: they would defend themselves with gerryrigged mines and rocket launchers.

The protagonist's good friend, Omar Lakatos, is from a well-off Gypsy family. A somewhat slow, yet highly imaginative young boy, he is keen on learning a new profession every week. A leading member of his adolescent circle of friends, he has great physical strength and a strong desire for women: "Omar loved not girls, but naked girls... But the Gypsies, according to popular belief, do not consider it (sex) a crime and it is not regulated, they always have sex with everyone, as soon as the hormones that kill childhood are sufficiently increased in girls." Trying to save his friends' reputation, he admits to a theft of a missing object that neither he, nor his friends have touched—he knows he will be a suspect anyway, and his father can help him out by paying "the bill". Traces of everyday racism present in the community of Kisvárda are similar to those of present-day Hungarian towns of the same size.

In this alternate historical world, just as in our time, social mobility or "ascension" can be achieved through assimilation and joining the bourgeois class. As we learn from some perfunctory remarks, the former police captain of Debrecen and the imam of Nyíregyháza both had originally come from the Gypsy camp.

I agree with Baka's (2014) acknowledgment of the short story's aesthetic merits, as the linguistic-stylistic elaboration as well as the rich and inventive network of narration raise it to a level that stands with the highest literature.

Short story 2. The Roma in a dystopia—Judit Lőrinczy: 'The Taste of Arabica' (2013)

Judit Lőrinczy (1982),[11] author of the urban fantasy *Lost Gondwana* and the World War II magical realist novel *The Pendulum Stones*, paints a powerful and oppressive vision in her 'The Taste of Arabica'. The story is set in the realistic (dystopian?) near future (around 2040), in the time of the United States of Europe. There is a Wall between the 'Western' world (that keeps the semblance of prosperity of old, even if oil lamps are used to save money on electricity, food is available through a quota-based money substitute, and the countries are ruled by semi-dictatorships), and the chaotic, starving, helpless 'Eastern' world. Millions of desperate people are trying to cross, illegally or legally, from the Eastern to the Western side.

The Wall cuts Hungary in two, and passes through Szeged in South-East Hungary. We learn the story of Alma, a Hungarian diplomat on a scholarship to the EU, her colleagues and her lover, Miklós, who attempts to immigrate illegally. There are indications of a past cataclysm and its consequences: a gigantic solar flare brought chaos into the world, fanatics blew up key servers, a drug war broke out, China's economy based on false data collapsed, the Gulf Stream ceased to flow, India dropped a nuclear bomb on Pakistan, New York's dams burst, the Tisza dried up, etc. The omniscient narrator gives us a detailed account of the lives on both sides, bringing the two protagonists' lives closer together, questioning the sustainability of the Wall. Occasionally, his narrative is interrupted by official immigration requests or refusals.

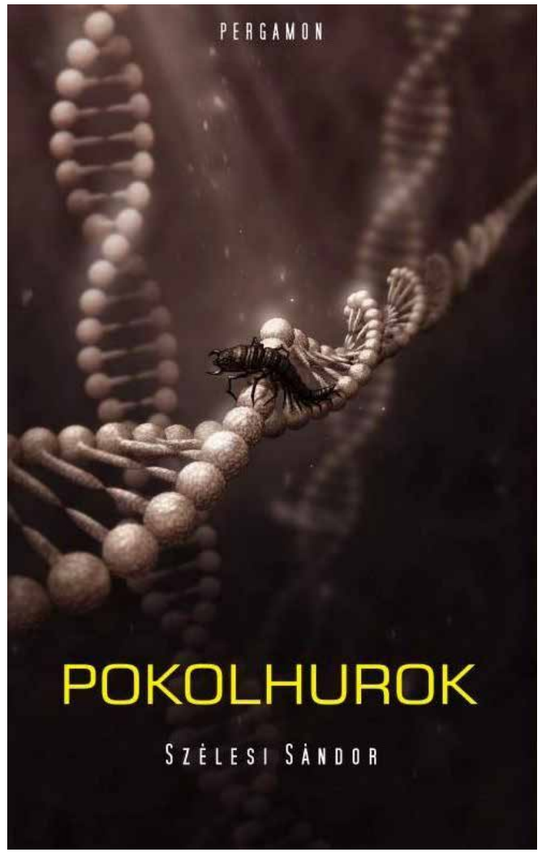
In this believable and detailed world the Roma characters play a minor role, but give us an idea of the Roma as a community that largely avoids romanticizing tropes. Roma refer to non-Roma, white people, for example, as 'peasants'. Thus we learn that in the cataclysm, the majority society once again resorted to radical segregation, and the Roma were deported "within a few years, to isolated villages in northern Hungary, Békés and southern Baranya, or to the Budapest Black Enclave" (Lőrinczy 2013: 32). The Roma were divided into two groups: those living in and outside the enclave. "[Teresa] shared a fifty-three square metre flat with ten other people. The five children and the woman slept in one small room. They had been pushed out of the slightly larger living room, and as Miklós later learned, Teresa feared that sooner or later she would have to move up to the ninth or tenth floor, or worse, find a new place in Teszkófalu [a dilapidated shopping centre; Á.D]. Until they are put on a collection train". The three independent Roma characters (Teresa, Lakat, Csali) all excel at survival and share the male protagonist's adventures for a short while.

11 Read more about Judit Lőrinczy on her blog: judlorin.blogspot.com/2012/01/about-me.html.

Addendum #1: The Roma in a SF bio-thriller—Sándor Szélesi: *Hellgrammite* (2016)

"... [T]his book is a cry for help. I wanted to make people aware, among other things—explained the author (1969[12]) in an interview about the short novel—that even the seemingly innocent Roma jokes are racist" (Csermely 2017). As described by both the author and the publisher, *Hellgrammite*[13] can be considered SF (it is focused around genetics), and contains few references to the present social problems of Hungary. "In *Hellgrammite*, we are exposed to the inner monologue, anxieties and self-aggrandisement of a mass murderer, and through these, to a picture of a hopelessly repulsive society" (Odaértett 2021). The narrator, Gábor, is grieving over the death of his parents, murdered by Roma killers. In a desperate attempt to overcome his pain, he throws himself into his studies, and eventually becomes a researcher in biology at the University of California. Despite all his efforts, his repressed anger gradually resurfaces and urges him to create a race-specific virus that can eradicate the Romani people. The idea of using a virus as an ethnic bioweapon is not new. It appeared in Wells' *War of the Worlds* and was most notoriously used in Jack London's deeply racist short story *The Unparalleled Invasion* (1907), in which a billion Chinese were murdered. More recently, a UK TV series *Utopia* (2013-2014)[14] toys with the same idea, only in this case the scientist is Romani and the virus he designs is meant to leave all ethnic groups except the Roma infertile.

The references and influences in *Hellgrammite* stretch far: the futile search for psychological motivations may remind us of Camus' *The Stranger*, the genocide explained from the point of view of the perpetrator may evoke Merle's *Death Is My Trade*. Certain pages of *Hellgrammite* are reminiscent of sociological case studies, in the way they expose individual, subcultural and social levels of racism towards the Roma (Trehan-Koczé 2009). Disconcertingly, even though the novel deals with relationships between ethnic minorities and the majority of society, there are hardly any specific Romani characters in the novel.



12 Sándor Szélesi's website is accessible at szelesisandor.hu/rolam.

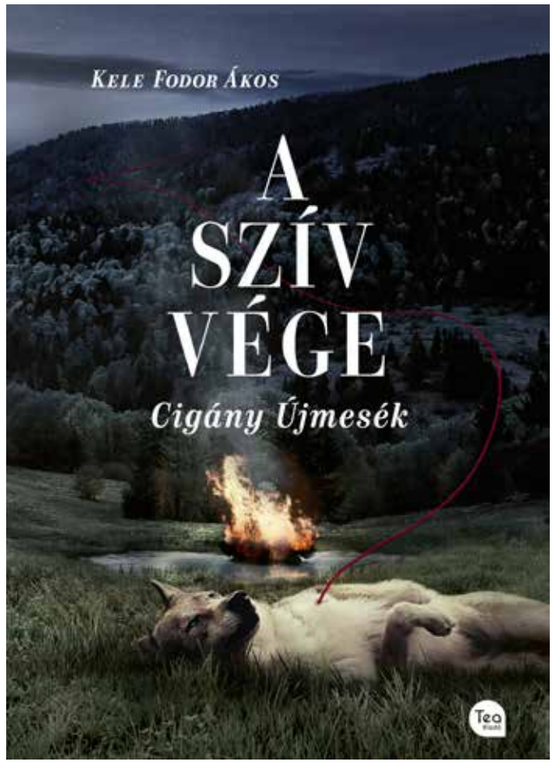
13 The title is the name of the larvae of a specific group of insects, namely eastern donsonflies.

14 Film details: www. imdb.com/title/tt2384811.

Addendum #2: The Roma in a SF black comedy—Balázs Lengyel: *Lajkó—Gypsy in Space* (2018)

The 2018 film *Gypsy in Space*[15] calls itself a black comedy. Among other things, it aims to ridicule socialism and indirectly discredit and diminish Russian space exploration in line with the expectations of the Western viewer. A melancholic satire, it works with stereotypes and creates an alternative/apocryphal world, in which the dictatorship of the 1950s and 1960s with its caricature, non-indi-

15 More information on the film is available at www.imdb.com/title/tt4795022.



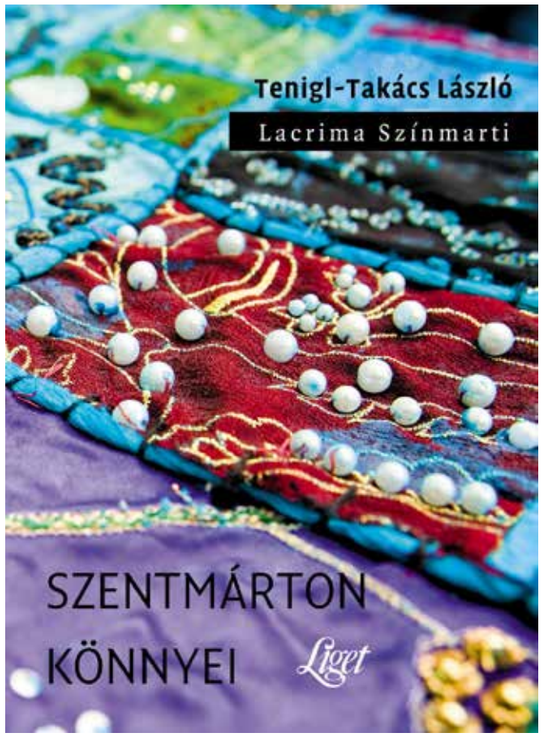
vidual or merely user-oriented functioning, bureaucratic and corrupt stupidity, and paranoia, collides with the desires and opportunities of the "little man". The film follows the life of Lajkó, née Lajos Serbán, who has longed for space and flight since childhood, from the early loss of his mother (victim of a childhood rocket experiment), to his semi-successful space visit to the Soviet space pilot training camp (Baikonur). Lajkó's ethnicity is grotesquely stereotypical and director Lengyel follows the romanticised topoi: Lajkó has many brothers and sisters, a Gypsy fortune-teller predicts his future, they all live in a shabby house, they tell each other stories in the evenings by the fire, his father is a large, sexually overheated male. The attitude of the majority of society towards him bears traces of racism, but the film gravitates towards "acceptance, understanding and humanity, which, according to the film, must be more important than the hatred, nationalism and political ideologies that are instilled in us from above" (Kovács, 2018).

Conclusion

Although there are a number of nationally acknowledged Hungarian Roma authors—Károly Bari, József Choli Daróczi, Tamás Jónás, Menyhért Lakatos, Béla Osztojkán and Magda Szécsi[16]—I could not find a single Hungarian Roma SFF writer. If we look through the very short—just four stories—list of Roma-related Hungarian pieces of SF short fiction out of the 281 short stories described above and in the addendums, it seems that the representation of the Roma in contemporary Hungarian SF seems to be limited to certain genres: alternate history, dystopia, post-apocalypse, bio-thriller, and satire. In other words, the Roma are only legitimately represented in genres that are associated with a radical subversion of our times. Unfortunately, the authors do not use Roma characters when discussing any of the important social issues. The Roma in literature are best described by the concept of "invisibility" (Ellison 1952), that is, class blindness as characteristic of the more conservative strategy.[17] I do not blame the authors: understandably, the majority of SF writers, firmly middle-class, are not aware of the problems of the Roma living next to them.

Nevertheless, some Roma characters are indeed visible in the short stories discussed here, about which the following concluding remarks can be made. Whenever the Roma appear, the author includes them in the plot in a reflexive way. That is to say, the figures do not *happen to be* of Roma origin. If they are Roma Hungarians, their Roma-ness will be addressed in the literary pieces in one way or another.[18] This is not a negative quality of the stories, however, as all of them seem to advocate the liberal-assimilationist approach. It is from this perspective that *Hellgrammite* presents a destructively racist scenario, and 'The Taste of Arabica' shows the nightmare of radical segregation. 'The Sheik of Kisvárda' and *Lajkó –Gypsy in Space*, by contrast, depict a peaceful context, in which the Roma still make up a lower stratum of society. The latter reaches out to the traditional stereotypes of romance (positive and negative, beautifying and criminalizing) and thus unconsciously uses offensive, racist topoi. Tenigl-Takács[19] who lived with Roma communities for decades, wrote a study on the representation of Roma in film. He considers such topoi of romanticization distinctly dangerous, avoidable but difficult to eliminate: "The romanticization of Roma is thus a common interest and will probably be a dominant element in film-making for decades to come" (2017).

There is now a wealth of material written by or about the Roma. However, there are still few recent publications in the realm of fantasy-genres. I would like to draw attention to two of them, both of which, by their very nature, move towards the above mentioned romanticisation. One is a volume by Ákos Kele Fodor, a non-Roma writer who collects and rewrites Gypsy tales and myths. His excellent work *The End of the Heart—Gypsy New Tales* (2018) contains scenes of violence and transgression. The second one is *Bestiarium Ciganorum* (2020), published by the National Association of Roma Women of the 21st Century[20], an album with 200 glossaries and 144 illustrations, which brings together legendary Roma creatures, following the example of J. K. Rowling.



16 If translated to English, this woman writer may be added to Reidy's excellent list of "Twenty 'Gipsy' women you should be reading" (Reidy 2014).

17 This is true even in the otherwise excellent collections of alternate histories, published in recent years, which deal with twentieth century Hungarian history.

18 "Do we need a Hungarian artist of Gypsy origin only if we need a Gypsy artist, or we need them too when a Hungarian artist without any specific ethnic background is needed? Are they called upon even if they have to reflect on a non-Gypsy issue?", asks, for example, painter Norbert Oláh: balkon.art/home/online-2021/olah-norbert-a-cigany-muveszszorongasa-off-biennale-budapest/

19 He is also the author of one of the best sociographic essays on a group of Roma: Tenigl-Takács, L. *Tears of St. Martin / Lacrima Színmarti*. (Liget: Budapest, 2007).

20 See magyarmuzeumok.hu/cikk/bestiarium-ciganorum-legendas-roma-lenyek-enciklopediaja on this volume.

References

Baka, Patrik. "Mi lett volna, ha: Magyar földön Afrikában." [What Would Have Been, If: On Hungarian Land in Africa]. *Partitúra*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2014, pp. 101-127.

Beck, Z. (2020). *A megszólalás üres helye. Romológiáról és más dolgokról* [The Empty Position of Speech. On Romology and Related Matters]. Budapest: Napvilág.

Borbély, A. (2018). *A kígyó és a sündisznó* [The Snake and the Hedgehog]. In: Facebook www.facebook.com/profile/786659699/search/?q=s%C3%BCndiszn%C3%B3.

Böröcz, J. (2006). Goodness Is Elsewhere: The Rule of European Difference. *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 48(01) 110-138.

Csermely G. (2017). Olyan regényt akart, amitől véresre vakarjuk magunkat. Interjú Szélesi Sándorral a Pokolhurok című regényéről. [His ambition was to write a novel which makes us scratch ourselves until we bleed. Interview with Szélesi Sándor on his novel Pokolhurok]. *origo.hu* www.origo.hu/kultura/20170314-interju-szelesi-sandorral-a-pokolhurok-cimu-regenyerol.html.

Csicsery-Ronay, I. Jr. (2008). *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction.* Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Czirfusz, M.; Ivanics, Zs.; Kovai, C., Meszmann, T. T. (2019). A magyarországi munkásság a hosszú lejtmenetben [The long lasting decline of the Hungarian working class]. *Fordulat*, issue No. 26. 142-172.

Domokos, Á. (2019). Világgyár: SF-világépítés és—rekonstruálás irodalomórán [World-Factory: SF-Worlds Building and Reconstructing in the Classroom]. *Anyanyelvi Kultúraközvetítés* 2 (2), 58–96.

Domokos, Á. (2022). The Formability of History: Uchronia in Contemporary Hungarian Short Fiction. *SFRA Review*, vol. 52, No. 2 (*On the Edge:The Fantastic Hungarian Literature and Culture*).

Domokos, V.—Herczeg B. (2010). Terra Incognita: magyarországi szegény és cigánytelepek felmérése—első eredmények [Terra Incognita: The Survey of Settlements for the Poor and the Roma—First Results]. *Szociológiai Szemle*, vol. 20, issue No. 3. 82-89.

Dupcsik, C. (2009). *A magyarországi cigányság története. Történelem a cigánykutatások tükrében, 1890-2008* [A History of the Roma in Hungary as Reflected in the Body of the Reseach on the Roma, 1890-2008]. Osiris.

Éber, M. Á. (2021). *A csepp. A félperiférias magyar társadalom osztályszerkezete* [The Drop: The class structure of the semi-peripheral Hungarian society]. Napvilág.

Ellison, R. (1952). *Invisible Man.* Random House.

Gombos, P. (2020). What and how do Hungarian children read? *Escuela Abierta, 23*, pp. 3-17. DOI:10.29257/EA23.2020.01

Gulya, N. (2018). Másságsztereotípiák megjelenése a tankönyvekben [Textbook Appearances of Stereotypes of the Other]. *Sokszínű neveléstudomány.* Eger, Eszterházy Károly Egyetem, Líceum Kiadó. pp. 75-89.

Gulya, N. M.; Fehérvári, A. (2020). A fogyatékosság reprezentációja az általános iskolák magyar irodalom tananyagához kapc-

solódó művekben [The Representation of Disabilities in the Corpus of Compulsory Literature in Hungarian Elementary Schools]. *Educatio*, 29. (3) pp. 379-393. DOI: 10.1556/2063.29.2020.3.4

Hancock, I. (1987). The Origin and Function of the Gypsy Image in Children's Literature. *The Lion and the Unicorn*. Volume 11, issue No. 1, June. 47-59.

Hines, J. C. (2013). „Gypsies" and Other Fantasy Beings. *jimchines.com*. www.jimchines.com/2013/10/gypsies-and-other-fantasy-beings/.

Isaszegi B. (2004). Mi a filozófia? [What is Philosophy?—unpublished manuscript].

Isaszegi B. (2006). Az úgynevezett „felzárkóztatásról". [On So-Called "Emancipation".—unpublished manuscript].

Kincaid, P. (2003). On the Origins of Genre. *Extrapolation*, 4(4), 13–21.

Kovács, B. (2018). Nem a humoráért, de szerettük a magyar cigányt az űrben [Not exactly for their humor, but we love Hungarian Gypsies]. *Index.hu*; index.hu/kultur/cinematrix/2018/04/01/lajko_cigany_az_urben_kritika_lengyel_balazs_keresztes_tamas_magyar_film/

Lengyel, B. (2018). *Lajkó—cigány az űrben* [Lajko—Gypsy in the Space]. KMH Film.

Lőrinczy, J. (2013). Az arabica íze [The Taste of Arabica]. *Galaktika*, 34 (284), 26–44.

Nama, A (2008). *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*. Austin, University of Texas Press

Odaértett, O. (2021). A tömeggyilkosok anatómiája II. (Pokolhurok) [The anatomy of mass murderers]. odaertettolvaso.hu/2021/05/15/a-tomeggyilkosok-anatomiaja-ii-pokolhurok/

Pénzes, J., Tátrai, P., Pásztor, I. Z. (2018). A roma népesség területi megoszlásának változása Magyarországon az elmúlt évtizedekben [Changes in the Spatial Distribution of the Roma Population in Hungary During the Last Decades]. *Területi Statisztika*, 58(1): 3–26.

Pryor, R. (1976). *Bicentennial Nigger*. Warner Bros.

Punday, D. (2003). *Narrative Bodies. Toward a corporeal narratology*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rákai O. (2015). Korporális narratológia és idegenség: egy kontextuális narratológia továbbgondolása [Corporeal Narratology and the Alien quality: thinking through a contextual narratology]. *Helikon*. 1. sz. 30-39.

Reidy, J. (2014). Twenty "Gypsy" women you should be reading. *Woman in Literary Arts*. www.vidaweb.org/twenty-Gypsy-women-you-should-be-reading/.

Sárdi, M. S. (2013). Műfaj-e a sci-fi? [Is Scifi a genre?]. *Szépirodalmi Figyelő*, 12 (1), 28–36.

Sierra, Alonso, M. (2019). Supervivientes del Apocalipsis: un relato de ciencia ficción "gitano". *Sociología Histórica*, 10 (1), 210-227.

Szélesi, S. (2016). *Pokolhurok* [Hellgrammite]. Budapest: Pergamon.

Tamás, G. M. (2017). A lényegről [What really matters]. merce.hu/2017/01/14/tgm_a_lenyegrol/

Tenigl-Takács. L. (2017). Romák az „elátkozott házban". Romantizáció és dokumentarizmus az elmúlt két évtized filmművészetében [The Roma in the "cursed house". Romanticization and documentarism in films of the last two decades]. *Liget on-line* ligetmuhely.com/liget/tenigl-takacs-laszlo-romak-az-elatkozott-hazban/.

Trehan, N., Kóczé, A. (2009). Postcolonial racism and social justice: the struggle for the soul of the Romani civil rights movement in the 'New Europe'. In: G. Huggan (szerk.): *Racism, Post-colonialism, Europe*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 50–77.

Trenka, Cs. G. (2015). Kisvárda sejkje [The Sheikh of Kisvárda]. In: Szélesi, Sándor (ed.): *2045: Harminc év múlva* [Thirty years later]. Budapest: Ad astra. 131–165.

Trumpener, K. (1996). A cigányok ideje: egy „történelem nélküli nép" a Nyugat narratíváiban [The Time of the Gypsies: A "People Without History in the Western Narratives"]. *Replika*, No. 22-23, 219-241.

This article is published as part of *Vector*'s peer-reviewed track.

ÁRON DOMOKOS IS A SENIOR LECTURER AT MATE, KAPOSVÁR. A GRADUATE OF ELTE, BUDAPEST (MAS IN HUNGARIAN & LIBRARY SCIENCE; LIBRARY SCIENCE, PHD IN LIBRARY SCIENCE), HE WAS EDITOR OF THE CULTURAL MAGAZINES KÖNYVJELZŐ [BOOKMARK] (2005-2010) AND HUNGARICUM [HUNGARIAN VALUES WORTHY OF DISTINCTION] (2009-2010). A MEMBER OF THE SELECTION PANEL OF THE PÉTER ZSOLDOS AWARD (2014-2018), DOMOKOS'S SCHOLARLY OUTPUT INCLUDES 4 PUBLISHED HUNGARIAN-LANGUAGE PAPERS RELATED TO RECENT HUNGARIAN SF SHORT FICTION. HIS INVESTIGATIONS ARE INFORMED BY THE HISTORY OF IDEAS, SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY AND CRITICISM, THE HISTORY OF BOOKS AS WELL AS STUDIES ON LITERARY READERSHIP AND THE PRODUCTION/CONSUMPTION OF POPULAR LITERATURE.

Mosquitoes, mushrooms, magic: Africanfuturist scifi for nature's futures

Charne Lavery, Laura Pereira, Bwalya Chibwe, Nedine Moonsamy, Chinelo Onwaulu, Naomi Terry

Introduction

The future is African: by 2100 one in three people are projected to be from the African continent (Council on Foreign Relations 2020). And yet the stories that the world tells itself about this future are decidedly not African—or at least not of a prosperous, plausible future Africa (Pereira et al. 2021). In a post-colonial world, Africa continues to be colonised by dominant perspectives that dictate what to aspire to and which values are important (Oelofsen 2015). This is to the detriment not only of the continent but the world. It misses the diverse possibilities that local cultures and traditions could offer in terms of preferable futures, drawing on pasts that are deeply connected to the land and ancestors. Addressing this marginalisation of knowledge systems and the people who practice them is of critical importance in the shift towards a more equal development agenda that values diversity (Tengo et al. 2014). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of objectives set up by the United Nations to improve quality of life around the world, protect the environment, and promote peace and prosperity. There are seventeen SDGs, including the eradication of poverty and hunger, the spread of health and wellbeing, quality education, gender equality, and climate action. Governments, businesses and non-profits use the SDGs as a framework for understanding their broader purpose and impact. Are the SDGs fit-for-purpose? It's a controversial question, but one thing is for sure: as the world struggles to meet these goals, fresh ideas, and bold pathways away from current trajectories, need to be explored.

Speculative fiction has a role to play in this. How we think about and imagine the future is an important aspect of decision-making in the present (Vervoort and Gupta 2018). As Lao Tzu says, "if you don't change direction, you may end up where you are headed." When we are continually confronted by stories of doom and gloom, these can often be self-fulfilling (Evans 2016). We end up where we are headed. We are currently experiencing overlapping global environmental crises. The most recent is the Covid-19 pandemic (zoonotic diseases are fundamentally linked to human-environment interactions). The most existentially threatening is climate change. The most ethically compromising is, arguably, the human-induced sixth mass extinction. A business-as-usual trajectory is suicide for humanity. However, what are the futures towards which we *do* want to navigate? And how might we begin to imagine them?

Part of the answer lies with how we value nature. Calls are growing to reimagine transformative futures for nature using more than just positivist science (Wyborn et al. 2020). Traditional environmental policy has often treated nature as a realm whose laws we can know and master, to maximise its economic benefits to humans. In recent years, there has been more recognition that economic benefits are interconnected with social, cultural, and even spiritual benefits. The beauty and abundance of nature give inspiration and solace to humans in ways that are hard to quantify, let alone control, ways that are grounded in the diverse values that people find in nature. Yet perhaps this still doesn't go far enough. There is now growing interest in futures that *value nature in its own right*, independent of the many benefits that nature provides to humans.

The Nature Futures Framework (NFF) offers to fill the gap of diverse, desirable nature-centred scenarios across multiple levels and scales. Developed by a UN body, the IPBES Taskforce on scenarios and models, the NFF aims to capture a wide range of positive values for nature that can co-exist in an infinite set of configurations, capturing a plurality of possible futures.

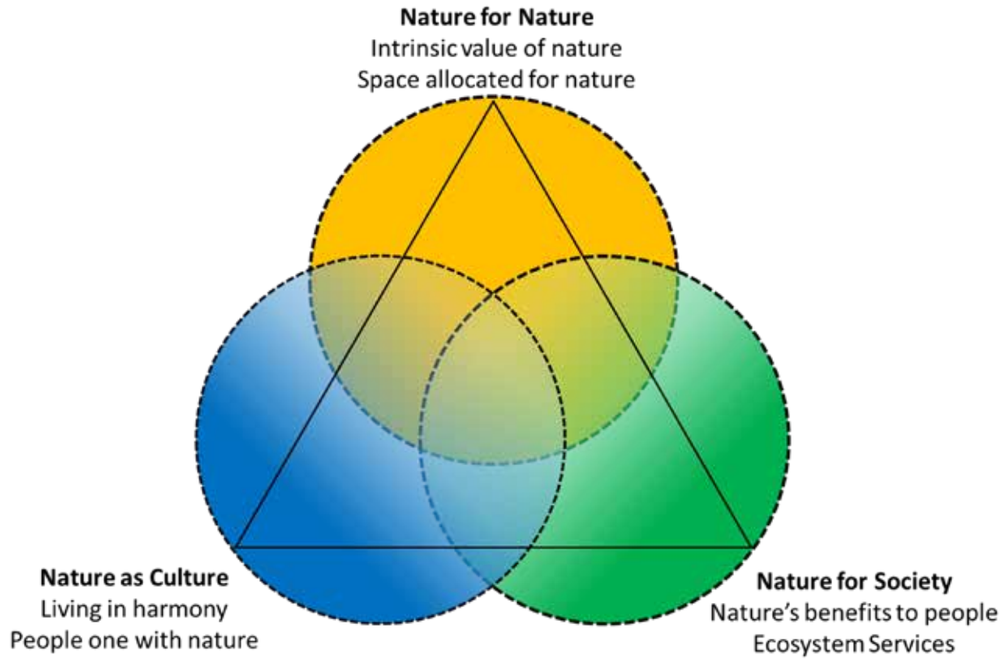


Figure 1: Nature Futures framework (Source: Pereira et al. 2020)

The NFF is simply a triangle in which each corner represents one of the following value perspectives on nature (Pereira et al. 2020):

- Nature for Nature: in which nature has value in and of itself (emphasising the intrinsic values of nature);
- Nature for Society: in which nature is primarily valued for the benefits or uses people derive from it (focussing on instrumental values for nature);
- Nature as Culture: in which humans are perceived as an integral part of nature (recognising relational values for nature).

What soon emerges in the application of the NFF to the science and policy community is that for those who are not directly involved in understanding plural values, it can be difficult to conceptualise futures that draw on these different perspectives. Further, there is a dearth of substantive information on indicators or even descriptions that capture the 'Nature for Nature' and, in particular, the 'Nature as Culture' value perspectives (see Kim et al. 2021). Potential new indicators under discussion include percentage of culturally significant species, representivity and inclusivity indices, human-animal empathy measurements and nature-based rituals (see for instance Chibwe, et al. 2022). We argue that the most important signals of what potential futures are possible are foregrounded in the realm of art and stories. This is where we need to look to address some of these gaps in science as practised. Here, we unpack what storytelling—and more specifically, African speculative fiction—can offer the world in terms of new narratives, narratives that might be informed by diverse traditional practices and knowledge as well as contemporary lived experience, to inspire new futures.

We lay out a three-part argument: firstly, going into detail as to why Africanfuturism is an under-researched and overlooked tool in the quest to derive radical pathways towards a thriving future for people and nature on the continent and across the world. Then, using the Nature Futures Framework (NFF) as scaffolding, we detail some key examples of Africanfuturist writing that aptly capture key human-nature dynamics and diverse values for nature. We conclude with a call for mobilising diverse knowledges through the deployment of Africanfuturist narrative for improved science and decision-making in this time of planetary vulnerability.

The Agency of Africanfuturism

As we search for creative solutions to urgent environmental crises and alternative global futures that include a thriving Africa, we turn first to African writers for science-informed yet hopeful visions. As Stephen Cave, Kanta Dihal, and Sarah Dillon (2020) remind us, science fiction narratives are rarely scientifically accurate, yet are important both as repositories of our hopes and fears, and because they can become fundamental animators of sociotechnical imaginaries that go on to shape our futures. Science fiction performs an imaginative extrapolation of the present into the future, which has both inspired and restrained technology, urban design and politics in the real world, by influencing our thinking and perception around these future propositions.

Yet, according to Michelle Reid, science fiction "is usually narrated by the inheritors of advancement, often assumed to be white, Western, and on an adventure" (Reid, 2009). This sets an onerous task for the postcolonial writer who must engage more carefully with the tenuous politics of power, technology and representation when transposing science fiction utopias that have previously housed colonial and imperialist fantasies. The practice of science fiction in Africa successfully undermines the very notion of Western science as a neutral and universal mode for navigating the world that we must inevitably access if we ever want to form part of a more progressive human experience. Moreover, alternative imagined futures can mitigate the pervasive feelings of pessimism on a continent where people have consistently felt robbed of the right to a future. Science fiction and other forms of future-imagining extend the social imagination forward in ways that can feel self-determined, progressive and affirming. As Ivor Hartmann, editor of the AfroSF anthology argues:

> If you can't see and relay an understandable vision of the future, your future will be co-opted by someone else's vision, one that will not necessarily have your best interests at heart. Thus, Science Fiction by African writers is of paramount importance in the development and future of our continent. (Hartmann, 2012)

Hartmann implies that there is much at stake for Africa in how science fiction writers tell its stories. African speculative fiction draws on a tradition which embodies many neocolonial ideals, yet paradoxically also has the ability to construct new utopian visions beyond colonialism.

Colonial denigration meant that Africans were never perceived as thinking subjects by colonial cultures—let alone technological beings—and African worldviews, which includes a wealth of ideas about indigenous perceptions of time, space, the cosmos and material technology, were dismissed as something akin to fantastic mumbo-jumbo. Yet now, writers and artists are rediscovering these indigenous frameworks through their work by illustrating how their science fiction futures form part of a very long legacy of technological curiosity and scientific practice on the continent.

African science fiction is a fast-growing strand of African literature, and constitutes an already rich archive of futurist creative thought that is locally-grounded in everyday African realities.[1] It forms part of a wider movement that has been called Africanfuturism—including film, visual art, telenovellas, urban design, fashion and so on—and which is in turn linked to the global Diasporic movement known as Afrofuturism.

However, Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism are also importantly distinct from one another. There is a widespread "continental critique of the Americano-centricity of Afrofuturism as a concept" (Eshun 2019, p.367). The critique is based, for many practitioners, on the awareness of an already historically robust African lexicon for science fiction and futures thinking. Because Afrofuturism originates from metropoles in the Global North, practitioners sometimes feel that the central themes of Afrofuturism, largely informed by the horrors of the Atlantic Slave Trade, can but do not necessarily resonate with African speculative concerns. Additionally, aspects of Afrofuturism risk obscuring historical relationships forged by Pan-Africanism and Black Internationalism, separating African thought from that of its diaspora. As Jemima Pierre (2013) eloquently illustrates, this scepticism results from the fact that 'Africa' forms part of an origins story in diasporic thought (2013), leading to nostalgic essentialisms that can limit serious engagements with contemporary—let alone future—Africa. This is not to dismiss the contributions of the diasporic Afrofuturism, but to suggest that it cannot always be considered the central or leading voice.

Nigerian-American writer, Nnedi Okorafor's mounting frustration at being classified as an Afrofuturist, for instance, led to a manifesto about her artistic practice as "an Africanfuturist and an Africanjujuist" (2019).

1 See for instance, Wole Talabi's roundup of his favourite African science fiction and fantasy shorts, vector-bsfa.com/2022/01/26/best-of-2021-wole-talabi-on-african-sf/), and previous issues of this journal.

Compared to Afrofuturism, she argues that Africanfuturism "does not privilege or centre the West", nor does it have "to extend beyond the continent of Africa" (Okorafor 2019, n.p). The emphasis on geographic locatedness is significant, suggesting a need to cordon Africa off from overwhelming Western discourses that define Africa as other to itself. Her imaginative project, Okorafor argues, is rather "rooted first and foremost in Africa" (Okorafor 2019, n.p), and thus takes seriously the sustained exploration of African futures and alternate realities that we are interested in here.

What are some of the signs of a uniquely African futurism? In "Organic Fantasy" (2009) Okorafor unpacks her own style as "organic fantasy," in the same mode as African authors like Ben Okri and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Far from being a Western import, she argues, speculative storytelling has always been a part of African literature and perception. Okorafor reflects on her own writing process by meditating on moments from her past in Nigeria where "fantasy is the most accurate way of describing reality" (Okorafor 2009). Furthermore, in relation to her American life, a series of "cultural mixes and clashes between being American and being Nigerian" create a state of creative displacement that produces her style of SF (Okorafor 2009). However, despite this emphasis on hybridity, she also maintains that this style of SF is not a personal invention springing from her own experience as a "shape-shifter,", but rather an inherited and organic mode of experience and storytelling in Africa.

Okorafor goes further than saying that magic can reveal truths about the non-magical world. She emphasises that to her, the world itself "is a magical place" (Okorafor 2009). True to this ethos, Okorafor's oeuvre "destabilises the hierarchy of science over magic and the secularist narrative of modernity by reabsorbing historical time into the matrices of myth and magic" (Garuba 2003, p. 270). Reassessment of magical thought as technology undermines colonialist discourse that infantilised magic, and suppressed traditional beliefs, by showing how Africanjujuism is capable of refashioning African modernity and projecting African realities backwards and forwards in time.

According to the late Harry Garuba, it is on account of this African animist "ability to prepossess the future that continual re-enchantment becomes possible" (Garuba 2003, p. 271). We are prone to reading modernity as a unidirectional force that squeezes out and eventually annihilates local cultures. However, he argues that it is just as possible to discern the influence of animism—which he reads as central to the African imaginary—on modernity. He thus claims that:

> '... magical elements of thought' are not displaced but, on the contrary, continually assimilate new developments in science, technology, and the organisation of the world within a basically 'magical' worldview. Rather than 'disenchantment,' a persistent re-enchantment thus occurs, and the rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical. (Garuba 2003, p. 267)

Embedded in the collective subconscious, animism imbues matter and objects with spiritual and psychological properties; it colours the world with a non-empirical sense of time, place, and being. For many, this "enchanted" mode of thinking has ebbed since the arrival of modernity because the rational discourses of science and technology are seen in direct conflict with animistic belief systems. Yet in a refreshing turn, Garuba insists that tradition does not survive despite technology, but rather enfolds non-local technologies into local cultures. The exerting force for ideological and sociopolitical mutation is thus animistic enchantment, alongside empiricism. It is animism that imbues technology and science with the otherworldly and makes allowance for its incorporation into African societies (Garuba 2003). Hence African science fiction involves more than an act of superficial indigenisation, but is a fundamental reclamation of the African popular imaginary that uses the environment to organically define the superhero and the fantastic on its own terms.

These arguments and ideas are not limited to Okorafor and Garuba. Like Okorafor's description of "Africanfuturism", there is also Wanuri Kahiu's notion of becoming "conscious creators" (2013) and Ian MacDonald's definition of "jujutech" (2014). In his theoretical expansion of this term, MacDonald identifies a prevalent style in various African novels where "dichotomies of orature and literature, of fabulism and empiricism, present and past, and present and future which otherwise approach one another from agonistic extremes", meet in complex representations of African spaces and realities (MacDonald 2014, p. 196). These all point toward instances where Western technology fuses with African myth, fable and fantasy to produce a syncretic mode of storytelling; he argues that this technique of creative speculation is indebted to indigenous African epistemologies.

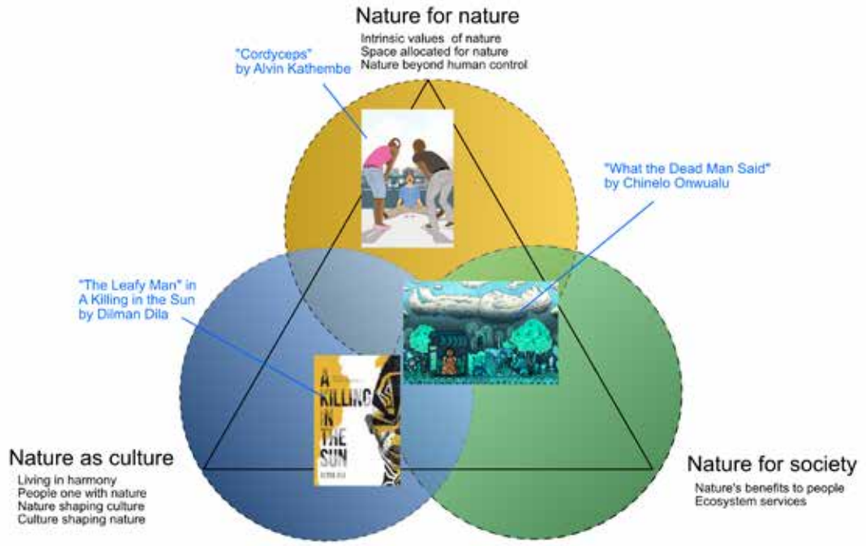


Figure 2: Africanfuturism science fiction narratives mapped to where they most closely align to the NFF (Source: Adapted from Pereira et al 2020)

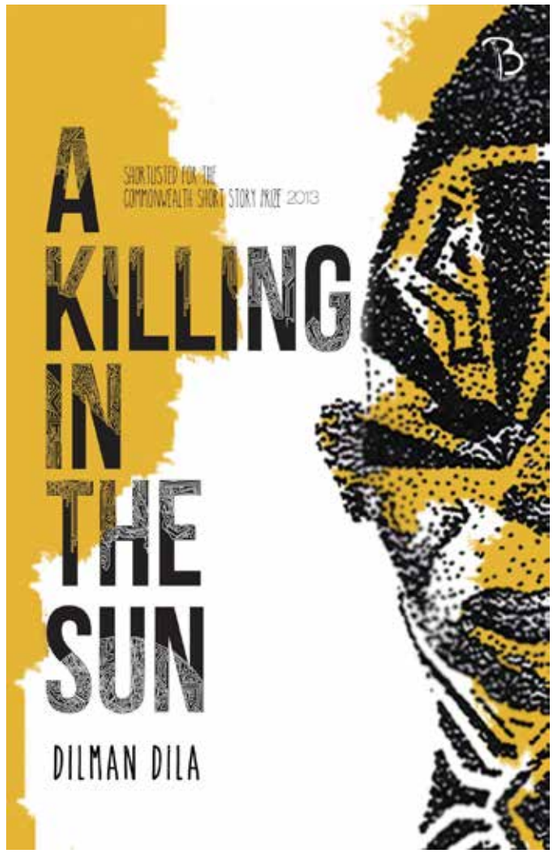
In all of these and other ways, Africanfuturist sci-fi short stories experiment with technological and political developments in local cultural contexts. In so doing they provide ways of exploring different loci of the Nature Futures Framework—in other words, the much wider variety of ways in which nature can be valued, in addition to being valued simply for its benefits to human populations. In the next section, we fill in the pyramid of NFF with some examples of short fiction, that both provide a flavour of this rich, fast-growing, and under-researched archive, and demonstrate its capacity to embody, flesh out, and complicate purely science-based ecology.

Making the Nature Futures Framework tangible through fiction

Nature-for-society narratives are everywhere. Nature is figured as a sink for human waste, a provider of fresh water, a source of natural resources, and so on. So, what are the rarer views of nature in the future—as valuable for its reflexive interrelationship with culture, and for its intrinsic values?

We find that in many Africanfuturist texts, values along the Nature as Culture-Nature for Nature axis are most prevalent. This also happens to be where the biggest gaps in IPBES indicators and metrics are, with values less conducive to the complex quantifications involved in ecosystem services and natural capital accounting practices. While speculative storytelling can neither be reduced to a policy-friendly metric nor necessarily be blended seamlessly into the framework, this section aims to open up a discussion about the ways in which stories may give life and narrative weight to often overlooked values of nature. For instance, stories can offer a mechanism through which to engage quantitative disciplines to see the world from a different perspective and to think more broadly about the metrics that they use in their analyses. Further, it also brings to light the importance of qualitative practices that ensure we do not continuously reduce the world to numbers, but recognise the world in its complex messiness so as to reflect on social-ecological practice.

For example, in "A Shoal of Lovers Leads Me Home" by Ama Josephine Budge, humanity has almost entirely destroyed Our Land. In response, the African Association of Environmental Rehabilitation launches the "Envolution Project", which is to create a humankind that is better



adapted to coexistence with nature by eliminating its dangerous aspects and replacing them with attributes that level the field:

> But changed as we were, we had been given scentsation to survive the hostile world that humanity had left behind. To scentse as one with all other living things—not greater or lesser, but as an equal, essential part. Until we return to the beginning and the Earth can be made anew.

Beginning with dystopian destruction, the story imagines the possibility of a renewed Earth that begins in Africa. In a somewhat similar beginning, "Afrinewsia" by Yazee-Dazele (2015) imagines a dystopian future where elderly humans are only valued as "organic waste"—a trope that harks back to Kurt Vonnegut's "2BR02B". In this story, where children effectively sell their elders, the United African Republic is in the grip of a kind of ecofascism. Its core values are technological progress ("primitive" is the slur of choice), patriotism, consumerism, and environmentalism—reviled "planet killers" are imprisoned in labour camps, where they are worked to death planting trees. But it is environmentalism of a very narrow kind, in which brutal Tree Crime Laws protect forests "artificially bred in greenhouses and out of bounds to the public." Nature is treated as an inert resource, to be extracted and optimised. This is contrasted with the way the elder Ma Braimoh knows nature, as an enchanted universe, animated with energy and intelligence:

> "Trees dey talk o," she would say. "Dem dey talk about bad-bad things wey go happen for future." Then she would point at the skies where Daye would gape at the black-tailed hawks gliding through the evening skies. "See, those birds dey bring good-good message wey go come quench the bad things for ground."

When government officials drag Ma Braimoh away as an Organic Waste Element, this represents their contempt for–yet also highlights for the reader–the kind of traditional knowledge about the value of nature that she embodies and represents.

In the rest of this article we choose three stories to illustrate in greater detail the ways in which they may illuminate and complicate the different sections of the NFF triangle. Figure 2 shows where these three short stories most closely align to the NFF value perspectives for nature. Firstly, the Ugandan author Dilman Dila's 'The Leafy Man,' demonstrating Nature as Culture; secondly Kenyan Alvin Kathembe's 'Cordyceps,' for Nature for Nature; and finally, Nigerian author Chinelo Onwualu's 'What the Dead Man Said,' exemplifying Nature for Society, whilst drawing from all three perspectives.

In Dilman Dila's 'The Leafy Man', genetically modified mosquitoes are introduced to a town, Abedo, in an attempt to "Roll Back Malaria" (Dila 2014, p. 4). The mosquitoes were genetically modified by a foreign company eerily called the Pest and Germ Control Corporation (PGCC) not to carry the malaria parasite and not to feed on blood. Abedo was selected as a testing site following an intervention by a corrupt local politician. Unexpectedly, these lab mosquitoes, called Miss Doe, mutate so that males also start feeding on blood. They grow in size, develop group intelligence and an ability to evolve at a fantastical rate, mutating in real time whenever chemicals are used against them. Swarms of thumb-sized insects destroy the town, draining all living occupants of blood, human and otherwise.

The protagonist Japia, a traditional healer, survives the first onslaught by using his knowledge of plants—the mutated mosquitoes in the story fear only by the smell of oranges. He wraps himself in orange leaves (earning the title 'leafy man') when he ventures into Abedo to look for food; otherwise he and a small child hide from mosquitoes inside an orange grove. Having served the village for thirty years as simultaneously a "gifted shaman" and a firm believer in "native medical science" (Dila 2014, p. 4), he had earlier involved himself in anti-malaria campaigns. When the government gave him a bicycle to promote insecticide-treated mosquito nets, he used the opportunity also to further his own complementary agenda, promoting additional (fictional) natural remedies like planting orange trees near houses and rubbing orange peel on the skin.

PGCC are aware that, in order to reverse the disaster they have created, "the leafy man is the key. We must know his secret. We have to find him" (Dila 2014, p.15). But they are unable to see that Japia's simple orange leaves are the key (instead the scientists contemplate nuking the town while the mosquitoes are confined to it). Japia, suspicious of the scientists given their previous dismissal of his concerns, runs away from the "wazungu" leaving them to die at the hands of their creation. While earlier in his career, Japia had "disassociated herbal medicine from spirit worship" (Dila 2014, p. 4), his practice is more locally grounded, subtle and watchful than that of the bewildered and destructive outsiders. His training in "the ancient way" speaks of a long history of local people shaping nature, and indigenous nature shaping culture, presenting a near-future vision of African life that is both apocalyptic and yet hopeful.

While "The Leafy Man" fleshes out the Nature as Culture side of the NFF triangle, in "Cordyceps" by Alvin Kathembe (2017) we get a glimpse of Nature for Nature. There is a brief moment in "The Leafy Man" where Japia considers the mosquitoes from their own point of view. Like he and his young charge, Miss Doe is running out of food: "He wondered if she could starve to death. Was blood the only thing Miss Doe fed on? If she killed off every living thing in the area, would she starve?" (Dila 2014, p. 7). It is a moment of cross-species thinking or projection, if not quite empathy, which marks the beginning of understanding how to combat the scourge. In "Cordyceps", a similar parasitic plague is unleashed—this time in the centre of the city of Nairobi—as nature mutates in response to human meddling.

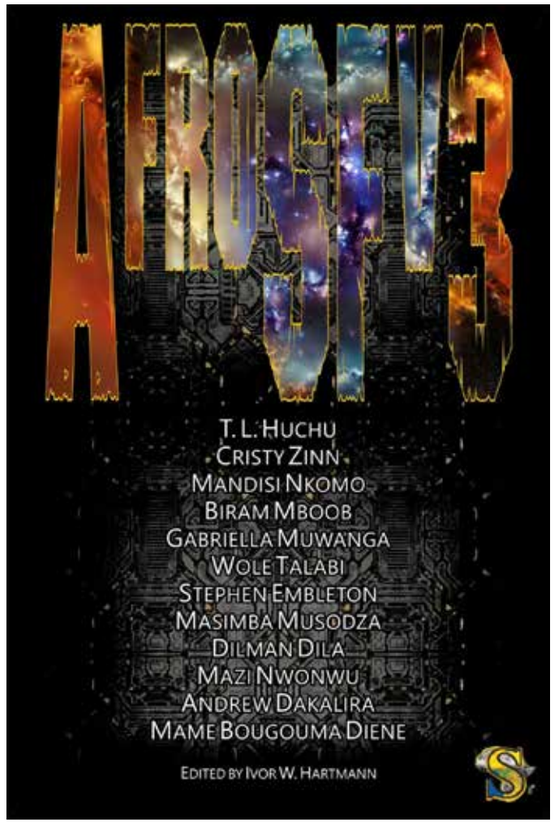
At the beginning of the story, a hotel manager and a police inspector are mystified to find "some kind of plant, some sort of greenish-yellow stem" growing out of a man's eyes. The dead man, a Korean mycologist, had climbed to the top of the hotel building, onto the roof where he died. The plant turns out to be a gigantic form of fungus, related to the Cordyceps fungus which can invade an ant's body and grow inside it, eventually taking over its brain. The fungus uses its control over the brain to make the ant climb to the top of a plant, so that it can release its spores over the widest terrain. In the story, these fungi have mutated to add humans to their list of hosts. The fungal epidemic is likened by the husband of one of its victims to ebola –-but it turns out to be far worse for humans.

Still, there is a kind of beauty to the plague from a mushroom's perspective that suggests a broadly ecological as well as nature-for-nature message. Nature, the story shows, is not ultimately controllable, partly because humanity is not exempt from its forces or purview. Samples of the fungus are given to Dr Alice Okallo, from the Kenya Medical Research Institute, who identifies it as the endoparasitoid fungus of the story's title. She goes on to explain to her mystified intern that this fungus is not simply (or only) "creepy", but in fact "nature's way of population control":

> Making sure no species' numbers grow beyond what the ecosystem can support. Different Cordyceps species target different different organisms—grasshoppers, locusts, caterpillars … it's a system of check and balance; once a species becomes too dominant, Cordyceps happens and limits its growth.

This may come uncomfortably close to myths that blame the climate crisis on overpopulation. The story does not mention that "what the ecosystem can support" is not just about total population size, but also about how resources are distributed. However, this is not only a matter of refiguring a human tragedy in terms of a wider population ecology, but also, albeit briefly, considering the role and experience of the fungus for its own sake.

Narratively, the story shifts perspective continually, from the hotel receptionist, to the police inspector, to Dr Okallo, to the first of the newly infected victims, a



woman named Brenda. The story ends as Brenda quietly escapes her concerned husband, driven by a need for fresh air and a desire to see the sky. Finally, she reaches the roof of her building, where the reader realises that her consciousness has become part human, part mushroom:

> Beautiful night. Look at that full moon! And the breeze! Lovely fresh breeze. Just the thing I want. I just need something to lean against, as I take in this view, this fresh air.

Hers is a final, hybrid, nature-human form of life, mingling briefly with strange fungal drives for height and wind. Through this horrifying yet balancing, destructive yet beautiful fungus "from Congo-Brazza", we have a rare glimpse of nature's perspective and value to itself. Such a story adds a reality to the concept of 'more-than-human' ecologies and geographies that attempt to break down the post-Enlightenment dichotomisation of humans on the one side and nature on the other (see Whatmore 2002).

In 'What the Dead Man Said' by Chinelo Onwualu, both of these more unusual sides of the NFF triangle are represented, along with the more familiar Nature for Society angle. Set further in the future in Onitsha, a city in "New Biafra," a daughter, Azuka, returns home for her father's funeral. She has been living in "Tkaronto, in the Northern Indigenous Zone of Turtle Island—what settler-colonialists still insisted on calling North America." In the story, after the Catastrophe that scorched and drowned the world from the 2020s to the 2060s, nature has finally been protected for society. New Biafra cleared out derelict cities and towns and reseeded forests, which in the present of the story cover almost eighty percent of the country.

However, Azuka's ancestors had, "neglected one thing: While they were busy creating our new homeland, they forgot to also raise the massive families that would be needed to keep it solvent and thriving." The irony is that society has failed to protect itself, facing fertility problems and steep population decline. The rebalancing of nature and humanity is reflected by the disrupted balance between nature and culture. At his funeral, Azuka's father is placed in a biodegradable pod, a technologically advanced rewriting of tradition that fits with the bioengineered forest species. Yet other parts of the ceremony are more continuous with ancient practice, as Azuka's Auntie Chio

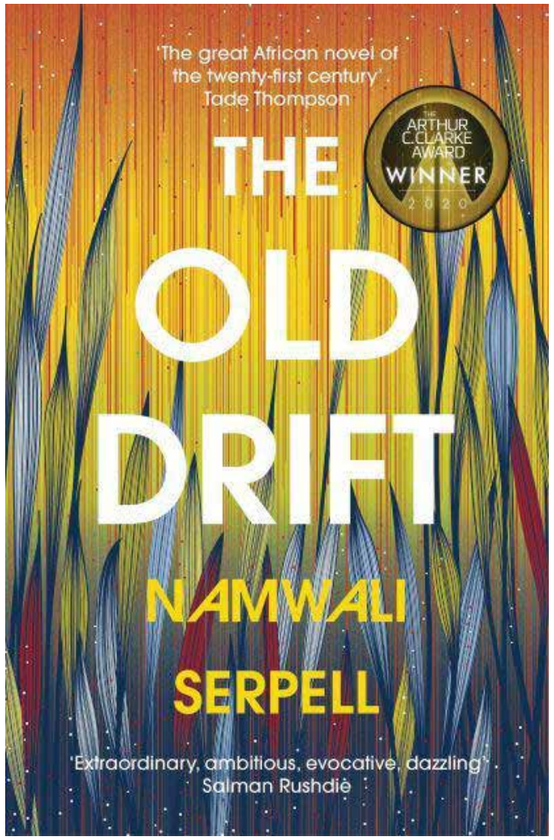
> welcomed the community into the home as tradition dictated, presenting kola nuts and palm wine as an offering to the household gods. Another of my elder aunts—I forget how we're related—led the prayers, pouring libation to beckon the ancestral spirits into our home and escort my father's spirit to the land of the dead.

Rather than static and unchanging, nature-culture relations shift and evolve, in ways both good and bad. The protagonist is haunted by an assault that occurred when she was a child, prompting her move away from home. She was repeatedly raped by her uncle, and her father and family responded with heavy silence when the truth came out. After he dies, however, her father returns as a kind of ancestral presence to try to show her that things have changed, that now those traumatised by gender-based violence are cared for rather than ostracised. He is not completely convincing, however, and the story looks even further ahead to a renewed future. As Azuka wonders on her way back to Tkaoronto, "Maybe what we needed was to learn to live with the world, and ourselves, as it was now. Perhaps our salvation lay in the broken spaces inside us all."

Conclusion

Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* is a vast multigenerational saga that draws together and expands on several of the themes discussed above. In the last section of the novel, set in the near future, mosquito-like drones are invented by Zambian scientists, echoing the swarms of mosquitoes that have acted as a kind of chorus throughout the earlier sections. In both mosquito tales, and the mushroom and forest stories discussed above, global technologies are enfolded and evolved within local cultures. The stories show futures in which, as Garuba suggests, biological science intertwines with local knowledge and anthropocentrism with multispecies imaginaries. These examples of African speculative fiction demonstrate the ways in which the genre can be a means of animating blueprints, of thinking through the human implications of our future choices, and consciously designing a more habitable future for us all.

How can African SF better realise these potentials, and exert transformative influence on key values, decisions and policies? This is a vital question, but not one that can be easily addressed. Rather it speaks to a need for a plurality of exploratory projects: fostering the creation and public reception of African SF, integrating African SF into co-production processes, and connecting African SF with key publics and changemakers. Just one example is a new project on African Futures (see futureecosystem-safrica.org/). The project intends to start this bridging process by exploring an African case study for the Nature Futures Framework from a place of continental diversity, multiple histories and a wealth of traditional ecological knowledge. The underlying ethos of the project is to employ a decolonial approach to creating futures that fully acknowledges structural and historical injustices on the continent. It seeks to build an African network of changemakers and to create a space that facilitates frank and difficult conversations about identity, aspirations and diverse ways of being and knowing and how these will shape the future. The project builds on the foundation of Africa's rich bio-cultural heritage and storytelling to help create more desirable African-centred visions of the future through methods such as speculative fiction. It has a strong emphasis on acknowledging and foregrounding Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK) and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). At the same time, it will



interrogate what it means to categorize knowledge as ILK and TEK in the African context. Through collaboration and knowledge co-production with (rather than extraction from) participants in this research, the project aims to produce a variety of transformative future scenarios that promote positive human-nature relationships, such as that recently undertaken in northern Malawi (Carpenter-Urquhart et al 2022). Futures capacities provide a valuable tool to communities and organizations to have more say in the futures they want to build, and so this project will also act to increase those capacities and knowledge exchanges. By undertaking new collaborations, such as between members of Royal Households and SF authors, and making use of different media such as art and podcasts for retelling oral histories in new ways, the project hopes to open up new possibilities for alternative futures for African human-nature relationships that are home-grown and authentic.

In conclusion, this brief analysis has shown that Afrifuturist SF has the potential to address gaps identified within the NFF, especially at the Nature as Culture and

Nature for Nature nodes. Crucially, it is a space where visions of the future can embody the priorities and the lived experience of their African authors. The results will be diverse, as even this small sample shows, and we do not propose a singular account of how such fiction works nor what it can accomplish. Nonetheless, some common themes emerge. Across most of these stories, the fantastic is not opposed to everyday experience, but emerges from it; the past is richly active within the present; science and technology do not contradict animistic enchantment, but rather can be enfolded within local and traditional knowledges; the power of science invites imaginative satire rather than deference; and the intrinsic value of nature may often manifest in ways that are not tidy and reassuring, but messy and terrifying. This is very much a project in progress, and many questions remain about the capacity for literature to inform metric-based frameworks and vice versa. Still, there is clearly a need for a more concerted effort to bridge the important work of the humanities around narratives, cultures, histories and identities with the equally important scientific analysis of ecologies, planetary limits and technologies.

References

Abiola, Saratu (2014) "A Winter in Lagos" in *Omenana* omenana.com/2014/11/30/winter-in-lagos/

Budge, Ama Josephine (2018) "A Shoal of Lovers Leads me Home" in *Anathema Magazine* www.anathemamag.com/a-shoal-of-lovers-leads-me-home

Carpenter-Urquhart, L., Nyasulu, M., Chibwe, B., and Pereira, L (2022). Mzimba Futures: Operationalising the Nature Futures Framework in Malawi. African Futures Project report 1. Stockholm: Stockholm Resilience Centre.

Cave, Stephen, Dihal, Kanta and Sarah Dillon (eds) (2020). AI Narratives: A History of Imaginative Thinking about Intelligent Machines. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chibwe, Bwalya, et al. (2022) "Nature Future Framework High Seas Report. Workshop 2: H3 Where do we want to go". Stockholm, Sweden.

Council on Foreign Relations (2020). Podcast: The future is Africa. New York: USA. Accessed 30 January URL: www.cfr.org/podcasts/future-african#:~:text=Projections%20show%20that%20by%202050,young%20people%20in%20the%20world

Dazele, Yazeed (2015). "Afrinewsia" in *Omenana*. omenana.com/2015/03/05/afrinewsia/

Dila, Dilman (2014) "The Leafy Man"' in *A Killing in the Sun*. Johannesburg: Black Letter Media.

Eshun, Kodwo (2019) "To Win the War, You Fought it Sideways: Kojo Laing's Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars" in Gunkel, Henriette and Lynch, Kara (eds) We Travel The Space Ways: Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions. Wetzlar: Transcript, pp. 83-106.

Garuba, Harry (2003) "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture and Society." *Public Culture*, 15, 2, pp. 261-85.

Hartmann, Ivor (ed) (2012), Afro SF: Science Fiction by African Writers. Johannesburg: StoryTime Publication

Kathembe, Alvin. (2017) "Cordyceps" In Omenana. Accessed on 30 January from URL: omenana.com/2017/04/06/cordyceps/

MacDonald Ian P. (2014) "Alter-Africas: Science Fiction and the Post-Colonial Black African Novel." Dissertation, Columbia University.

Kim, H., Peterson, G., Cheung, W., Ferrier, S., Alkemade, R., Arneth, A., … Pereira, H. (2021, July 22). Towards a better future for biodiversity and people: modelling Nature Futures. Preprint available at doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/93sqp

Oelofsen, R. (2015). "Decolonisation of the African mind and intellectual landscape". Phronimon, 16(2), 130-146.

Okorafor, Nnedi (2009) "Organic fantasy." *African Identities*, 7, 2, pp. 275-86.

Okorafor Nnedi (2019) "Africanfuturism Defined". Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog. Accessed: 12 March 2020 URL: nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html?view=classic

Onwualu, Chinelo (2019). "What the Dead Man Said" in Slate, August 24 2019. Accessed 30 January 2022 URL: slate.com/technology/2019/08/chinelo-onwualu-what-the-dead-man-said.html

Pereira, L., Davies, K., Belder, E. den, Ferrier, S., Karlsson-Vinkhuysen, S., Kim, H., Kuiper, J., Okayasu, S., Palomo, M. G., Pereira, H., Peterson, G., Sathyapalan, J., Schoolenberg, M., Alkemade, R., Ribeiro, S. C., Greenaway, A., Hauck, J., King, N., Lazarova, T., … Lundquist, C. (2020). Developing multi-scale and integrative nature-people scenarios using the Nature Futures Framework. *People and Nature*, 1–24. doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/ka69n

Pereira, LM., Moyo, B., Lavery, C., Sitas, N., Selomane, O., & Trisos, C. (2021). Wakanda Phambili: African science fiction for reimagining the Anthropocene. In J. Andersson & S. Kemp (Eds.), Oxford Twenty-first Century Approaches to Literature Futures. Oxford University Press. www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198806820.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780198806820-e-16

Pierre, Jemima (2013) The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Reid, Michelle (2009). "Postcolonialism" in The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction. Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sheryl Vint (Eds). London and New York: Routledge, pgs 263.

Tengö, M., Brondizio, E. S., Elmqvist, T., Malmer, P., & Spierenburg, M. (2014). Connecting diverse knowledge systems for enhanced ecosystem governance: the multiple evidence base approach. *AMBIO*, 43(5), 579–591.

Vervoort, J., & Gupta, A. (2018). Anticipating climate futures in a 1.5 °C era: the link between foresight and governance. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 31(February), 104–111. doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2018.01.004

Whatmore, Sarah (2002). Hybrid Geographies: Natures Cultures Spaces, SAGE Publications, London, UK.

Wyborn, C., Davila, F., Pereira, L., Lim, M., Alvarez, I., Henderson, G., Luers, A., Maze, K., Martinez-harms, M. J., Montana, J., Ryan, M., Sandbrook, C., & Shaw, R. (2020). Imagining transformative biodiversity futures. *Nature Sustainability*. doi.org/10.1038/s41893-020-0587-

CHARNE LAVERY IS A SENIOR LECTURER IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA AND CO-DIRECTOR OF THE OCEANIC HUMANITIES FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH PROJECT (WWW.OCEANICHUMANITIES.COM) BASED AT WISER, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, SOUTH AFRICA. SHE EXPLORES LITERATURE AND CULTURE OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH IN A TIME OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE. SHE IS A CO-EDITOR OF THE PALGRAVE SERIES MARITIME LITERATURE AND CULTURE, A BOARD MEMBER OF THE JOURNAL GLOBAL NINETEENTH-CENTURY STUDIES, AND A SOUTH AFRICAN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES DELEGATE TO THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE ON ANTARCTIC RESEARCH (SCAR). HER MONOGRAPH WRITING OCEAN WORLDS: INDIAN OCEAN FICTION IN ENGLISH APPEARED IN 2021

LAURA PEREIRA IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND EXXARO RESEARCH CHAIR AT THE GLOBAL CHANGE INSTITUTE, WITS UNIVERSITY IN JOHANNESBURG, AS WELL AS A RESEARCHER AT THE STOCKHOLM RESILIENCE CENTRE. HAVING COMPLETED HER DPHIL IN GEOGRAPHY AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY, LAURA HAS LIVED AND WORKED ON THREE CONTINENTS. SHE IS INTERESTED IN THE INTERFACE BETWEEN TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND INNOVATION, THE ROLE OF FUTURES TECHNIQUES IN TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE AND DEVELOPING INNOVATIVE METHODS FOR KNOWLEDGE CO-PRODUCTION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRY CONTEXTS. HER MISSION IS TO MAINSTREAM AFRICANFUTURISM INTO THE SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE AROUND SUSTAINABILITY TRANSFORMATIONS.

BWALYA CHIBWE IS A CONSERVATIONIST, WILDLIFE CRIME CONSULTANT AND CO-FOUNDER OF THE WOMEN FOR CONSERVATION NETWORK IN ZAMBIA. SHE IS TRAINED IN ECOLOGY, WILDLIFE FORENSIC GENETICS AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT. HER WORK CENTRES AROUND THE INCLUSION OF INDIGENOUS AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE IN THE CREATION OF LOCALLY LED CONSERVATION INITIATIVES.

CHINELO ONWAULU IS A NIGERIAN SPECULATIVE FICTION WRITER AND EDITOR, INTERESTED IN ALL THE WAYS IDENTITY AND CULTURE INTERSECT TO TELL US WHO WE ARE - AND WHO WE MAY BE, IF WE CHOOSE. SHE'S ALSO AN EDITORIAL CONSULTANT WITH OVER 10 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN CRAFTING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS FOR MULTI-NATIONAL NON-PROFITS. HER SHORT STORIES HAVE BEEN FEATURED IN SLATE.COM, UNCANNY, APEX AND STRANGE HORIZONS AS WELL AS IN SEVERAL ANTHOLOGIES INCLUDING THE AWARD-WINNING NEW SUNS: ORIGINAL SPECULATIVE FICTION FROM PEOPLE OF COLOUR, THE SAGA ANTHOLOGY OF SCIENCE FICTION 2020 AND 2021'S BEST OF WORLD SF VOL.1.

NEDINE MOONSAMY RESEARCHES SCIFI IN AFRICA AND TEACHES POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA, SA. SHE WROTE 'THE UNFAMOUS FIVE' (MODJAJI BOOKS, 2019).

NAOMI TERRY IS A RESEARCH CONSULTANT AND NATURE GARDENER. THE DYNAMISM OF CULTURE IS THE CENTRAL MOTIF OF HER WORK, WHETHER THAT BE THROUGH FARMING AND RACIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT IN THE UK, OR RESEARCHING TRANSFORMATIVE IMAGINARIES, FOOD CULTURAL PRACTICES AND MIGRATION AT THE STOCKHOLM RESILIENCE CENTRE. NAOMI HAS ALSO WORKED AS A WILDLIFE ECOLOGIST IN THE UK, CALIFORNIA AND BOTSWANA, AND IN DECOLONIAL PEDAGOGY AT THE CENTRE FOR ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES, SWEDEN.

An Interview with Yudhanjaya Wijeratne

Interviewed by Gareth Jelley

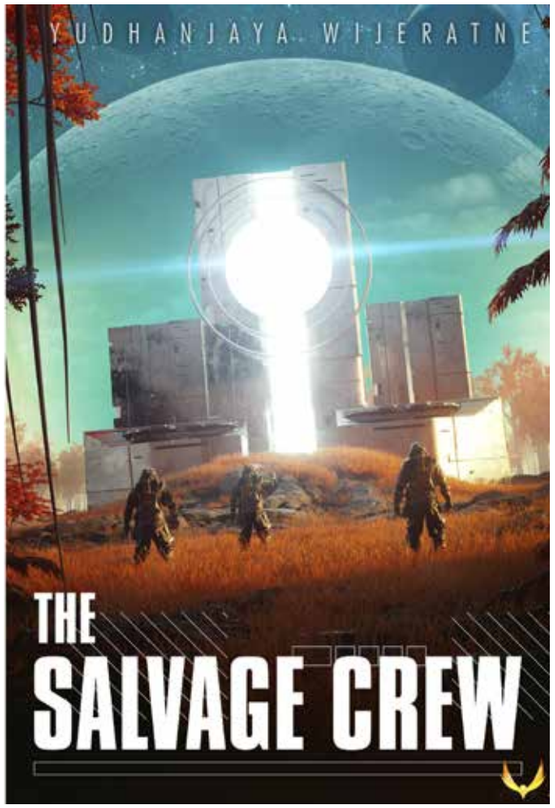
This is an excerpt from an interview which first appeared here intermultiversal.net/an-interview-with-yudhanjaya-wijeratne. Copyright Gareth Jelley and Yudhanjaya Wijeratne.

Before we spoke today you told me that you grew up reading, or being read, stories from a really wide range of cultures. There were stories from Myanmar and India and China and Europe. And you've also written about how Arthur C. Clark was a presence in Sri Lanka and that your first science fiction novel was *Rendezvous with Rama*. And you also mentioned Le Guin, Guy Gavriel Kay, Robert Holdstock, and Diane Wynne Jones. And Tennyson's 'Ulysses', which you read in *A Golden Treasury*, comes to play a powerful role in *The Salvage Crew*. What led you to such a diverse range of books and influences? And what do you still find yourself going back to when you're writing today?

Oh, lovely. That's a good question, because I don't think that I had a lot of choice, initially. When I answered your question—What did you grow up reading?—those weren't stories I had any role in selecting. Those happened to be the stories that were around in the culture. I guess pretty much anyone in Sri Lanka will tell you the story of Rama and Sita, that's *Ramayana*, and these things are part and parcel of the culture, and the stories that are passed on through it. And then on the other hand, if you want to read, and if you're a child and your parents understand that you're drawn to the fantastical, then really the selection that you can get is quite limited. And a lot of it then defaults to what I would consider classics. Things like the *Mahābhārata* classics, *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, and also *The 1001 Arabian Nights*. These are all international classics that have persevered for a long time.

So if you're a parent who doesn't really know much about science fiction or fantasy, those stories are fantastical and there's also this cultural link to many of these stories. For example, my mother used to read me *Journey to the West*. And I remember even as a kid, we were drawing the obvious parallels between Hanuman, of mixed South Asian mythology, and the Monkey King, both incredibly mischievous, both could leap long distances, both have this sort of cudgel, they had similar moves sets. And even back then we were like, —Ah, all right, so this must've been one of our guys who went to China and made trouble there. And so there's this thousand-year conversation that was happening in those stories.

And so that was the literature that I was exposed to growing up. And then as I grew older and I was able to make choices by looking at libraries and so on, a large part of it was down to what bookshops and bookshelves offered here in Sri Lanka, where we may not necessarily have access to everything because shipping is so expensive. And it's still a problem now. And we would often have access to books that had survived on the bestseller lists for 5 to 10 years, because when you're a bookseller, you can't necessarily risk bringing down this season's best sellers or the latest *New York Times* Top 40 or whatever it is, because you're now risking an extraordinary amount of money in the process of shipment and payment and so on. So you wait a little bit and you look for books that seem to be perpetually popular. So that's what really entered my reading canon, because those are the books that I naturally ended up picking up: books that tended to have a longer shelf life. Which naturally means that I missed out on quite a lot. But I also was fortunate enough to read a loose collection of books that seemed to be of extremely high quality in the sense that they seemed to have a lot of endearing qualities about them. And they seemed to be a little bit more timeless than some of the books that I read today, for example.



Pivoting, you mentioned how Nuance Dragon isn't particularly good with your voice, and that touches on the subject of biases in machine learning algorithms, and on the nature of the data set an algorithm is trained on, which is related to your project detecting fake news. Could you talk about that other work?

Ah, so essentially the way I explain it is I have three day jobs. So obviously science fiction writer, that's a thing. I work as a data scientist for a think tank that specialises in public policy in the Global South. The think tank is called *Lirneasia* and we've, we've basically been all over the place. So a lot of the work that I do there falls roughly into what I would say is computational linguistics and using textual data to find answers for things like infrastructure, sometimes it's things like networks and relationships, and sometimes it's things like hate speech and misinformation. And the third thing is I co-founded a fact-checker called Watchdog after the bombs went off in April 2019. So the fact checker has grown to about 200,000 users. I took a lot of what I would say I learned from Watchdog into *Lirneasia*, some things I learned from *Lirneasia* the other way. Sitting back and being able to do the research into misinformation from an academic perspective, with that level of data access, and with that level of six months to a year of thinking, of properly being able to think through and analyse frameworks, and so on, and I took that thinking back to the fact checker, which is more about responding to X rumour right now. We monitor 11,000-odd Facebook groups, WhatsApp groups, Telegram groups, and all that massive flood of data, that fire hose, and where do we fight it? What's the most effective? It's a very day-to-day existence there. So, because of this I have a reigning interest in misinformation, and I have an interest in seeing if some of this stuff can be automated.

And there's some work that I'm doing that is basically building models to detect misinformation, to work again in a human-plus-AI fashion to see if we can build some of these models and bake them into the backend so that they work in tandem with the human to take that constant slush pile of stuff that keeps coming in, potentially flag if something is true or not, and say this is something we're having trouble with, so pass it to the human. And thus the human fact-checkers' time is better spent because it takes orders of magnitude more effort to refute bullshit than it does to produce it. So by default, even if you assume that the number of creators of misinformation—and let's say intentional creators of misinformation, because intent is a whole other conversation in this game—if you make the number of intentional creators of misinformation equal to the number of fact-checkers in the world, the fact-checkers would still lose, because one task is inherently orders of magnitude easier than the other, and one task is more difficult. So that's why I'm trying to see if some of this stuff can be brought in.

So it's a multi-dimensional project. There's the technical aspect of recreating some of the stuff that's in cutting edge literature, just implementing some of these models, collecting the data for different languages, like Sinhala and Bengali, some which have not really been explored this way before, building models for those, and then actually going out and talking to fact checkers and trying to identify, —Hey, can you even use this stuff? Sure, I'm a data scientist and I can create these models on the fly, but for many of our contemporaries, is this stuff useful? Do you have the tech, do you have the software to even integrate this into? Are you still working off a notepad and post-it notes? What would you need? What kind of capacity would you need? Because a lot of the hype around the AI community is very odd to see as someone

from the Global South, because you see all of these wonderful things being created, and all this inventiveness and invention, and in some cases, pedantic, 1% accuracy pushers, all of that going on there. And the real world impact is completely different. Sometimes there's no real world impact at all, other than a few people getting assistant professorships out of it. So a lot of our job at *Lirneasia* is to try and bridge that and to be the real-world engineering folks that go, —Right, let's take the cutting edge and bring it down to where we can actually use it.

Trying to redistribute the future.

Yes. Which is always a challenge. The future is already here, it's just not evenly distributed. And nowhere is that more apparent than if you take a country like Sri Lanka and you take a country like the US or the UK, and you look at the progress in machine learning and statistics applications there. Because the future is there, it's in GitHub repositories, you can download it. Any of these programmers can easily access these things. It's just not evenly distributed.

Do you see the tools you're designing as things that could be in the hands of individual users, with user control of the sensitivity or granularity of the fact-checking, or do you think these tools need to be centrally controlled?

I am very much vehemently opposed to central control. I come from a country where central control by idiots has resulted in a civil war that ended in 2009, where thousands of innocents died. I see the impact of centrally controlled economies and infrastructures, and in almost every case here, particularly in South Asia, particularly in India and Sri Lanka now, this central control of the narrative as a whole, and I despise it. Yes I do, at a level, I do want to see people having these tools and technologies in hand. And I think that's inevitable now. For example, deepfakes, which was a matter of concern early on when they were being used for porn, then an even greater matter of concern when they were used to spoof politics, like what Jordan Peele did with Obama's face. But it was still just a curious kind of thing. And now we are seeing EU lawmakers getting deepfaked video calls from Navalny's phone. And interestingly, I can download a deep fake app onto my Android phone and I can take a photo of anyone I know and just map them onto a Hitler's face, if I wanted to, and this is just garden variety Android technology. So this will happen. This distribution is going to happen.

Whether my tools will be the ones, I don't think so. I'm painfully aware that what we are doing is a stop gap. I'm going to be actually moving to a more full-time role on Watchdog, running that as a startup, as a CEO, so I don't want to be doing that forever. I am here very much to be a tiny stop gap in that, to be as effective as I can be, to give people some tools, make this stuff open source so that everyone can build on it, and then I want to go away and I want to write my books and keep my feet up and just have arguments with my cat. I don't necessarily think that my stuff will be at the forefront of the revolution. It's a lot like building tires for cars. Somebody else can come and build the cars. What I'm doing is not so glamorous as it is just useful. It's not glamorous work. I enjoy its usefulness. That's about it. But the fiction is where I want to be. But I'm making very small, incremental change, and I'm okay with that.

Moving on to ricepunk. Can you say a little bit about what ricepunk means to you and how it came about? I think it's excellent and more people need to know about it.

[LAUGHS] Sure. So, *The Ricepunk Manifesto*, as with all literary manifestos, needs to be taken with a grain of salt. What it is about is a set of aesthetics that I espouse, that I have particularly started espousing more and more as I become more politically involved. Again, I work in public policy, and you know a lot of these things—bombs going off, fact-checkers, the machinery of government and society—are things that I sadly am possibly too familiar with at this stage. So ricepunk is a set of aesthetics that looks at the impact large systems, particularly systems of governance, particularly systems of economics, have on the individual, number one. Because I find that in a lot of the fiction that I read, we rarely interact so much with these. Western fiction particularly is about the individual hero who rises above and becomes a law unto themselves. But in reality, most of us play within these large systems and constraints that are set out around us, whether it's the systems of morals, whether it's almost Coasian bargaining systems that we have mutually agreed to, whether it's social contracts, or whether it's constitutions or laws or fear of retaliation. There is this idea of the system that we play. And I want to interrogate these systems. I want to write fiction that explores these systems. In fact, in *The Salvage Crew*, for example, Amber Rose spends a lot of time talking about the systems that he lived through, and he still lives under. Like everything in the universe is a function of budget, for example, for planetary crusade services. So this systems thinking is one part of the ricepunk aesthetics.

The second is this idea of hybridity and a certain nihilism inherent to, I would say my own circumstances, and those of people in South Asia. We are comedians: we eat rice and burgers, we drink arak and whiskey, we are the East and the West. And the idea there is, so much of our cultural zeitgeist is a hybrid of cultures. On both sides of the extreme, you have this cultural purity crap and these gatekeepers who are trying to define some phantom, mythical state of pure culture. And what happens is we end up getting shoehorned by them both. We are neither. We are neither native enough for the true natives, nor foreign enough for the true foreigners. We're somewhere in between.

But the reality is that most of us in this world inhabit this kind of middle ground, this hybridity. And yes, we have very chaotic lives, and we often find ourselves taking on different identities as the social constructs around us change. And we find it necessary to keep these different identities in play all the time. And because we are hybrids we live through this extraordinary mental dichotomy where on one side, you'll find free speech absolutists—and we hear the phrase free speech absolutists and we see whistleblowers and journalists doing their stuff against governments, and they're protected, and they don't get shot, while here, where we live, someone speaks out against the government, they get shot. And we constantly live—particularly because of the internet, because of this cross connection—we live in this odd mix of disbelief, I would say, combined with a certain sense of practical reality, because we constantly have to adjust to these vastly different ideals that we always find ourselves amidst. And our default framing to a certain extent is nihilism, because our governments have proved incompetent. There is no concept of meritocracy. It's a concept of, —Who were you born to and who are you related to? And quite often the shallowest of achievements drown out the deepest of voices. So this is a reality that we have to square with. So that's an aesthetic that I want to bring out and explore again.

And in *The Salvage Crew*, there is a very depressed guy who's on the bottom of a very, very shitty system to whom this very shitty system is still better than being a farmer on the ass-end of nowhere. So, often these are the realities that we find ourselves in, and I find it interesting to think about the stories that can be told there, because quite often, when we think about the poor and the downtrodden, we either romanticise them or we paint them on a canvas of pity and loathing. Now I've been very poor, as I said, been to a level where you're incredibly hungry for weeks on end and just collapsing, even as we struggled to sit up. And the reality is that life goes on. The reality is that you find ways of living. You find little places where you get joy from. Anger, love, drama. Whether you fight the system, whether you pay the system, whether you figure out a little optimizations that let you get around the system—these are stories. And I want to tell these stories. So that's the other aesthetic of ricepunk.

And the third is to—what joins these things together—is really a call to imagine these multicultural, multipolar worlds that are built not on one truth, not along one ideal, there is no one framework of good or bad, but there are several, and they're always competing. And to tell the stories of the people who are caught in the middle, as most of us are, and to write their lives. So, that's ricepunk, that's a set of aesthetics. Now I should probably have explained this in a paragraph, or so, but manifestos are meant to convey aesthetics. So yes, it's a personal manifesto, it's something that I try to do.

That hybridity speaks to me and I think it is centrally important to me, because I was born in the UK, and then I lived for a decade in China, and now I'm outside both places, and so I'm both somewhere between those two poles and also somewhere else that has its own history and its own stories.

Exactly, exactly. And I find that the people who I've always been most interested in talking to are people who are hybrids, because by dint of being strangers, everywhere they go, they have a little bit more perspective on everything they've come across.

What is really important for me, and probably the key reason I'm doing these interviews, is that I think it's important that everyone, everywhere can have access to fiction by everyone, everywhere. And I think this is something you touched on earlier. And talking to writers like Lavanya Lakshminarayan, I get a sense that there are still too many gatekeepers. What would you like to see change in the global publishing industry to make it easier for readers and writers everywhere to experience and share stories more easily?

In a general sense, I have, for example, a trilogy called *The Inhuman Race*, which I sent you the epub of, which you can't buy on Amazon US, you can only buy in India. And on a broader scale, the problem with science fiction and fantasy is that so much of the zeitgeist is centred around the US, and it's not even around the UK, which I would have expected, but it's around the US, and the US has its own particular ways of acquiring, its own informa-

tion filters, and it sees only a fraction of what's actually out there. So the best thing I can think of is for American publishing houses to potentially work with Indian agents, and to work with Indian publishing houses, and reach out in the form of competitions, or unsolicited manuscript submissions for X area, for Y area. That type of stuff is easy to set up. And that's basically fixing the input—it's garbage in, garbage out. I'm not saying that the current crop of writers in any way are garbage, I'm just using computer terminology and slang to explain what I'm trying to clarify: if you fix the input, you get a better output, if you trust the process.

So that's one thing, but that again pushes more power into this very mericentric publishing ecosystem. So what I would really like to do is I would like to see regional publishers actually get their shit together and start publishing, and start acquiring, and, more importantly, start paying the writers. Because currently, for example, if you are writing in India, advances are nothing. I've got one of the higher end things out there, it's a five book deal, and let me tell you, I was looking through the Publishing Paid Me Data, and that four- or five-book deal is not even comparable to some of the worst offenders on the Publishing Paid Me list. And I'm considered highly paid in these regions, I'm considered well paid in this publishing ecosystem in terms of advances.

So what I'd like to see is for local publishers to step their game up, because it's not like there's a lack of money in these systems. The money is there. The centre of gravity of the world's GDP is actually shifting towards India and China by 2035. Right now it's a little bit between New York and Western Europe. By 2035 it'll be at a point between India and China. So more and more money is swinging this way. The cultural pendulum, if you look at it, is also swinging this way, as you see more ideas being brought out, as you see more conversation rise to the fore. So I would like to see local publishers. I would like to see local conferences. I'd like to see these things come up because the problem of bending the knee and saying, —O, American publishers, buy our stuff, is it's nice, but that's literally not gonna solve the problem. That just is a different way of saying, —Oh, hey, here's the white man's burden. It's kind of like a reverse Kipling, which I'm not totally happy with. I'd rather see our cultures and our communities be able to stand up in their own right.

So, how could this be done? Okay, one potential thing to do is if we know the systems and the publishers that already exist are either flawed, or not paying their the writers enough, or not profitable enough, then what you potentially could do is create a couple of companies and treat it like an injection of capital, and this is something better established publishing systems and industries can easily do, where they are set up publishing operations in these regions that are then regional, but you create competition and you create this culture of paying for good art and you pay well for good art, and you create this culture that then has ripple effects on the artists who create, and in terms of competition on the on the publisher that acquire So that's something that's perfectly possible.

The other is of course, tried and tested, where local regional communities recognize excellence in the way of awards and things like that. That's cool. I think but at the end of the day you can't eat awards. The great tragedy of this region is that there are people who will put their heart and soul into one book, one book or two books, put it out there, that's it. And they're done being a writer after that, because you can't have a multi-book career, you can't sit down and call yourself a full-time writer, you can't sit down and call yourself a full-time artist. You are an artist, plus this. You are a writer on the weekends, but in reality, you're doing some other set of jobs. I'd like to see full-time creatives actually being subsidised for good work. And this is possible. The economics of this are possible. You know, how Silicon Valley, for example, was kickstarted was with a lot of government subsidies, and a lot of government funding going into industries and kick-starting this very careful competition plus interdependency among themselves, where they were supplying each other with tech and ideas, but at the same time competing against each other. That kind of investment, I would love to see that in publishing.

I know China is doing that right now because ever since Liu Cixin rose to prominence with the Hugo's, there's been a significant amount of interest, particularly among academia and the government, with the sources of funding available to have conferences, conventions, to fund all sorts of science fictional projects. And that is now kick-starting a wave of really excellent Chinese science fiction writing that's coming out and being translated and now filtering into the zeitgeist. Our governments are, well, obviously way behind the curve.

More money in the right places.

Well, not just money in the right places, but to create sustainable businesses that can continue investing in art. And the word businesses there is important, because it's not enough to have charities just handing out funds.

It's not enough to have scholarships. You need systems that can sustain themselves because otherwise they're always going to be propped up by a few, and whoever's doing the propping up will eventually be controlling that segment, that market, that domain, or whatever that organization has attached to it. So I'm not saying philanthropy, I'm saying kickstart some competition and whoever's investing in it makes some money. Fantastic. That's good. So whoever's doing it gets something as well. But create an actual industry of creativity.

What should people be looking out for from you next?

So, next will be *The Inhuman Peace* and a non-fiction book called *The State of Data*. *The Inhuman Peace* is the continuation of *The Inhuman Race*, which was very much my homage to *Lord of the Flies* meets *Bioshock* meets *Battle Royale*, and there's possibly some interesting explanation of what it means to be human inside of it. *The Inhuman Peace* is the continuation of that. It's an alternate history, alternate future, Ceylon where the British Empire never left, and now you have Thin Lizzy and the second Song Emperor all beating up on poor little Ceylon in the middle, reflecting some of the political zeitgeist of today, but set in a very weird 2035 where we have more biologically modified people than computers around. So that's *The Inhuman Race* and *The Inhuman Peace*.

The State of Data is a three-part exploration of the uses and abuses of big data and artificial intelligence by governments. It's set out in the thesis, antithesis, synthesis fashion. The thesis is that states need data, and the more data a state has, the better it can provide goods and services to the population that it controls. So Kauṭilya's ARTHASHASTRA is one of the oldest books on statecraft, and this guy advised the largest single political entity to ever exist on the Indian subcontinent, which is the Maurya Empire. This would have been back when the Silk Road was literally being created. These were people who laid the foundations there.

So, basically, I read this text, and actually most of it is about surveys—it's a primer on really good economics and data collection, and the structure of a state that even back in 375 BC could hold that much territory and still have an extraordinary amount of information going back and forth. Their censuses were detailed to the level of, —How many old people are there in a village? And, —How many pregnant women are there? And the king should be able to say, —Okay, that's why we need to allocate resources from, we need to give them pensions. We need to give them the funds. So I was reading that and then meditating on why states need data. So it starts with this and it goes all the way up to modern day surveillance states, and to smart cities and things of that nature.. And in the antithesis, it goes very anarchistic points on why large centralized state infrastructure, this kind of central planning mentality doesn't work.

And it draws from the work of James Scott and Jane Jacobs to point out the way, this whole idea of the single central planner sitting there in his infinite wisdom is not a good nor useful improvement of the human condition. And the synthesis of course, brings all of this stuff together and says, yes, sure, fantastic. The theory is wonderful and all, both the central planners and the anarchists, however, here is reality, and here's the reality that we need to adjust to, which is that we live in a world where corporations have, I would say, more information than nation States do. And you have little empires like Facebook of 2.3 billion people that know far more about their subjects than any number Cold War-era spies, or any number of former kingdoms could ever have. And how do you live? What do you do about a world like that? So that's *The State of Data*, that's a non-fiction book. Both this and *The Inhuman Peace* are coming out this year.

Then after that, next year, I'm going to have to focus on a number of—ha, 'focus on a number of books' is a very weird sentence. I'm currently writing a book called *Origami Meteorite*. That may be out, that not be yet. And I'm hesitant to tell more about it until I've finished it. But *The Salvage Crew* two and three, I will be writing that next year. So, most likely the pace will be, *The Inhuman Peace*, *The State of Data*, then *The Salvage Crew* two and three, then possibly *Origami Meteorite*. *Origami Meteorite* might come first, but I think that's highly unlikely. It's a much larger book and it's a completely different subject.

And after that I have to write a book about genocide. And it's something I've been putting off for a while. And it is going to be fiction, but constructed out of a lot of non-fiction. So, I've already stood on enough mass graves, and I've done my research and my flying around the world, and let's just say, I've seen a lot of bones and wounds and torture scenes. It's something I've been putting off until I'm in a better frame of mind to write it, so it's something like what I said earlier where I collect ideas and I put them in that box in my head. The cross-domain connections have been made, I know the story, I know how it turns out, I just don't want to touch it yet. So let's see, after *The Salvage Crew* two and three comes out, how I feel about it, whether I do that or whether I do something that I'm slightly happy about.

I am definitely interested in reading that, and *The State of Data*, and everything else. You have your tendrils, or tentacles, coming out in so many directions. It's wonderful.

I am an octopus. Or a supremely bored octopus.

They're very smart creatures.

Very smart, yes, but still end up on plates.

GARETH JELLEY IS THE EDITOR AND PUBLISHER OF INTERZONE AND IZ DIGITAL (INTERZONE.DIGITAL). HIS INTERVIEWS HAVE APPEARED IN SHORELINE OF INFINITY, BLACK STATIC, INTERZONE, AND AT HIS OWN SITE INTERMULTIVERSAL (INTERMULTIVERSAL.NET). HE LIVES IN EUROPE WITH HIS WIFE, THEIR THREE RAMBUNCTIOUS CHILDREN, AND AN EVER-CHANGING NUMBER OF TEETERING TBR PILES.

YUDHANJAYA WIJERATNE IS A SCIENCE FICTION WRITER, A RESEARCHER, AND AN ACTIVIST. YUDHANJAYA'S WORK HAS FEATURED IN NUMEROUS PUBLICATIONS AND HIS LATEST WORK, THE SALVAGE CREW, IS A MASTERPIECE CONTAINING A VAST AND GLIMMERING CONSTELLATION OF INTERCONNECTED PHILOSOPHICAL AND AESTHETIC IDEAS. YUDHANJAYA CREATED THE RICEPUNK MANIFESTO, WHICH CAN BE FOUND ON YUDHANJAYA.COM, AND AS PART OF THE EDGERYDERS COLLECTIVE HE EXPLORES INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO THE CONSTRUCTION AND ORGANISATION OF A BETTER WORLD.

An Interview with Ali Baker, the BSFA's Diversity Officer

Interviewed by *Vector* editors

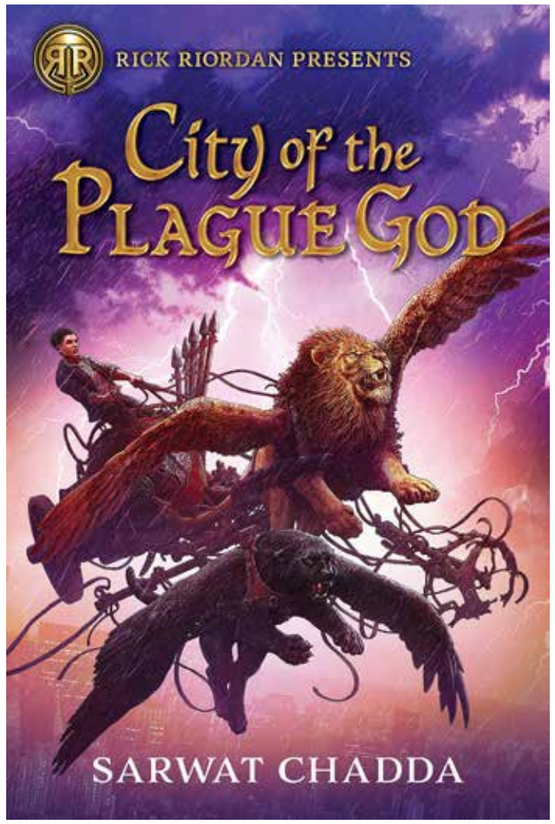
Thanks for chatting to *Vector* about the Diversity Officer role. Of course, being Diversity Officer doesn't mean you're alone in thinking about diversity—it is part of every BSFA role. But we'd love to hear your perspectives. This is a fairly new role for the BSFA—in fact, you're the first. Can you tell us a little bit about what the role means to you?

Hello, and thanks for inviting me! To give a little bit of background to why I threw my virtual hat in the virtual ring, I come to SFF from two directions: one as an academic researching children's fantasy fiction, and secondly as a fan. There is a lot of overlap between these two approaches, inevitably. When I first moved to London in the late 90s I went along to some fandom events, and I encountered dismissal (because I went to the Wrong Kind of University and because my preferred reading at the time was fantasy rather than hard SF), sexual harassment and an awful lot of gatekeeping. I'm really glad that British fandom has, largely, recognised that impact overrides intent—I'm sure these people I met at events didn't mean to be unpleasant and hostile to me due to my social class and gender, but the impact was that I stopped attending events. I don't want that to happen to other people, so I see it as my role to interrogate our practices. Our events in London are in pubs: who does that exclude? People uncomfortable around alcohol, and particularly the barriers that can be blurred with people drinking alcohol. The event venue has stairs. Inevitably that creates barriers. And finally, what is the difference between telling people about an event and explicitly inviting them to be there, and letting them know that we seek to make spaces safer, both virtual and in-person events?

If you look at the science fiction that is being published in the UK, there have been some promising signs in recent years, especially in terms of gender. But it is still very disproportionately white and middle class. What can the BSFA do to help level the playing field for writers of colour and working-class writers?

As I said above there is a difference between a blanket call for papers and explicitly inviting people to take part. I'm very keen to hold virtual events to support new reviewers and critical writers as well as short story writers, and my hope is that we can hold at least one event before our next AGM. Being both a bit naive and also quite stubborn I wrote reviews for *Vector* and other places with no idea what a review was supposed to involve and I've been enormously grateful for the comments that editors have made to help me get better at writing—but it is a scary process and can seem as though there's knowledge that reviewers or article-writers are supposed to have. The edition of *Vector* focusing on class was wonderful, as are the other editions on Chinese and African and Afrodiasporic SF and I hope that we can encourage the authors published in those editions to submit more writing to us, however, as I said before, sometimes we need to actively invite marginalised people to get involved.

The Science Fiction Research Association recently held their annual conference, which included a special panel on concrete suggestions "for making it more safe and encouraging to join for diverse thinkers and creatives in SF studies". Some of the things which were mentioned were free or subsidised memberships, sponsoring events that involve international members of the community, supporting minoritised researchers in their careers and making diversity and inclusion part of the decision-making in all aspects



lative work by authors from underrepresented groups is promoted through our channels; this is particularly important given Stewart Hotson's important work on the lack of diversity in submissions to the Clarke Awards.

Other than what we've mentioned so far, where do you think change is happening, and/or needs to happen, within the BSFA and related organisations? What kind of support would you most like to have in your role?

I'm hugely excited by the growth of membership that we have experienced recently. I think that the big challenge will be to retain those memberships, particularly in the Orbiter writing groups, and to reinforce our Code of Conduct across all spaces. As we tentatively put our toes back into the water of in-person events, how can we make sure that they are welcoming and positive places for everyone? At the same time, virtual events can be much more accessible for people with caring responsibilities, mobility issues and other challenges that make travel and visiting physical spaces hard. I think that I've had very good support in my role and I'm hugely grateful to the team. I have had absolutely no pushback from members either, so I hope that this means members agree with our direction of travel. I would like more time in the day and maybe a *Star Trek*-style transporter but I'm sure I'm not alone there!

What is the most challenging aspect of the role so far and how do you think that will change as it continues on?

Hmm. This is a hard one to answer without breaking any confidentiality, but there was an issue in an online space. This was not the fault of anyone except the person who continued to exhibit hostile behaviour despite being asked to stop. That person chose to leave the space, and we later discovered that they were not a BSFA member and therefore should not have been accessing the space anyway. As our systems evolve and use of technology is embedded, I hope that issues like this will be less likely. We have a duty of care to our members, and harassment cannot be tolerated.

How do you see the need for this kind of role developing over time? It is a transitional role, or one that we'll need long term? If it's the latter, what do you think needs to happen for the issues to remain at the front of people's minds?

of the organisation (not just a remit for the Diversity Officer). Do you feel like this speaks to the BSFA's current situation?

I completely agree that we can't assume that just because we have the post of Diversity Officer that diversity is done now. I'm really proud of what we have achieved this year-sponsoring memberships of WorldCon for Nommos finalists, and memberships of FiyahCon for fans of colour and increasing our community membership scheme. However there is more that we can do to make our spaces accessible and welcoming, and to think about all the intersections of minoritised identities. If we're carrying out actions of support in one area, are we reducing accessibility for a different minoritised group?
More does need to be done—now I am finally finished with my PhD thesis, which took 8 years while parenting a wonderful autistic child and fighting for an appropriate education for him, moving three times, getting married and two changes of jobs, my next project is to consult with BSFA members of colour and others who face structural barriers to inclusion to ensure that we continue to make progress in widening participation and accessibility. In addition, I am committed to ensure that speculative work by authors from underrepresented groups is promoted through our channels; this is particularly important given Stewart Hotson's important work on the lack of diversity in submissions to the Clarke Awards.

Other than what we've mentioned so far, where do you think change is happening, and/or needs to happen, within the BSFA and related organisations? What kind of support would you most like to have in your role?

I'm hugely excited by the growth of membership that we have experienced recently. I think that the big challenge will be to retain those memberships, particularly in the Orbiter writing groups, and to reinforce our Code of Conduct across all spaces. As we tentatively put our toes back into the water of in-person events, how can we make sure that they are welcoming and positive places for everyone? At the same time, virtual events can be much more accessible for people with caring responsibilities, mobility issues and other challenges that make travel and visiting physical spaces hard. I think that I've had very good support in my role and I'm hugely grateful to the team. I have had absolutely no pushback from members either, so I hope that this means members agree with our direction of travel. I would like more time in the day and maybe a *Star Trek*-style transporter but I'm sure I'm not alone there!

What is the most challenging aspect of the role so far and how do you think that will change as it continues on?

Hmm. This is a hard one to answer without breaking any confidentiality, but there was an issue in an online space. This was not the fault of anyone except the person who continued to exhibit hostile behaviour despite being asked to stop. That person chose to leave the space, and we later discovered that they were not a BSFA member and therefore should not have been accessing the space anyway. As our systems evolve and use of technology is embedded, I hope that issues like this will be less likely. We have a duty of care to our members, and harassment cannot be tolerated.

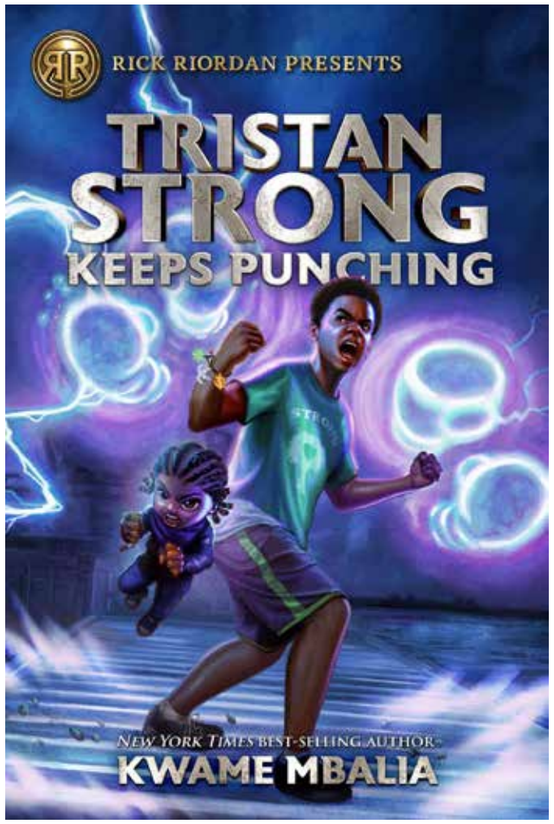
How do you see the need for this kind of role developing over time? It is a transitional role, or one that we'll need long term? If it's the latter, what do you think needs to happen for the issues to remain at the front of people's minds?

I think that there will always need to be a person who asks questions about accessibility, intersectionality and widening participation. We live in a sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic and ableist society and inevitably we are all impacted in different ways. This doesn't make those of us who are more privileged bad people, but as fans of a genre that asks big questions about worlds and universes and how societies operate in them, we should use our imaginations to be a bit more empathetic, to think about the lives of people not like us and how we can create systems so minoritised people are not constantly playing on the highest difficulty setting.

Do you think there's a difference in what majority writers from other cultures need, compared to what minority voices need? For instance, an Indian writer who lives in India and is published in Europe, vs. an immigrant writer living in Europe?

This is a really hard question for me to answer! I'm not a fiction writer and I am a white cis woman living in Britain. I think that there are two really huge issues here: firstly that Britain publishes shamefully few books in translation, so an Indian author writing in India in an Indian language is already at a disadvantage. Secondly I think that big publishers have a very small-c conservative view of what readers want. Look at authors who have won the big SF awards in recent years; the perceived diversity of novels, authors and characters even led to racist right-wing protests by the Sad (and Rabid) Puppies at the Hugo Awards in the middle of the last decade. Of course smaller publishers are far more adventurous and willing to take risks and we love them for it! So there are obvious structural disadvantages in place for writers publishing in other countries getting books published here.

Having said that, there are similar but different challenges for authors of colour and working-class authors publishing here. My area of knowledge is children's literature, and I have been told many stories by authors about insensitive editors. A British Asian children's author I know was told that his British Asian protagonist wasn't Asian enough. I mean, what does that mean? Should all British Asian protagonists only eat curry, or wear shalwaar kameez, or worry about forced marriages? Why can't they eat chips, wear jeans and fight demons? Another author was told that their dialogue wasn't accessible because it was using the speech patterns of the North-East of England. Imprints in the US like Rick Riordan Presents is a wonderful step forward, and I'm delighted to see British author Sarwat Chadda being published there, and I have been boring people to sleep with my praise of the wonderful L.D. Lapinski who writes working-class families and LGBTQ+ characters with respect, as part of the two protagonists of her Strangeways Travel Agency books's identities, but not the purpose of the story. I'd love an imprint like Rick Riordan Presents here, with speculative fiction about British children of colour having adventures in places other than London. I want to read about a Black British girl fighting duppies in Watford, please!



Ali was interviewed by Stewart, Jo and Polina.

SFRA Conference Report: Futures from the Margins (Oslo, 2022, co-hosted by CoFutures)

Guangzhao Lyu

"Futures from the Margins"—the theme of this year's annual conference of Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA)—reminds me immediately of Paul Kincaid's review of *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction* (2019) co-edited by Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link, published in *Extrapolation* 61.1. Kincaid claims that this anthology challenges the American-centric history of sf and re-writes it with a hope of amplifying the previously repressed voices from the "unseen" worlds—voices from China, South and South-Eastern Asia, Eastern Europe, Middle East, Latin America, and Africa. "Such cultural differences give this sf a different feel from the Campbellian hard sf we are used to, but it is sf nonetheless" (217), and they all respond in various ways to the socio-political condition in the related countries, regions, and nations at a specific moment.

No matter how global or how planetary sf appears, it is always anchored in the soil of particular places. Although the diversity of sf has been disguised under the ostensible universality formed pretty much in accord with the American tradition, localised interpretations are waiting to be discovered. "Once the will was there," writes Kincaid, "it didn't really take long to start unearthing them" (216). In line with Kincaid's comments, I believe the conference "Futures from the Margins" also indicates such a will of unearthing, of amplifying the previously muffled voices, and—as demonstrated in the programme—of foregrounding the issues of those whose "stakes in the global order of envisioning futures are generally constrained due to the mechanics of our contemporary world" (CoFUTURES).

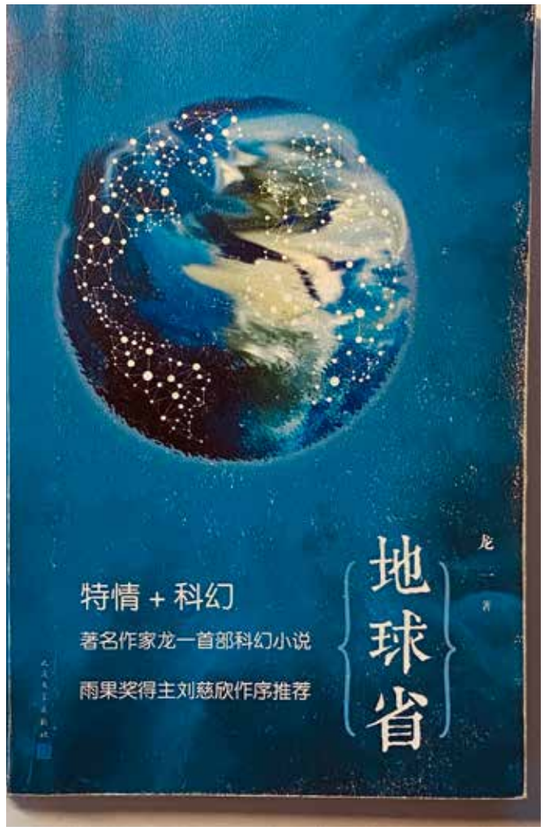
Organised by the CoFUTURES project initiated by Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay and held in the University of Oslo, "Futures from the Margins" attracted more than 200 presenters from thirty-four countries, featured six keynote addresses, forty panels and round-table discussions, three workshops and three arts events. As someone who can only participate remotely, I felt jealous of those privileged in-person attendees who were lucky enough to develop a fuller sense of the conference—I wished I could be there as well. Nonetheless, the conference was clearly a great success, and in-person attendees have praised the host committee's generous hard work, and the friendly and exciting atmosphere they created. We were invited to explore a wide range of topics such as "what future would look like from the margins" and "how these futures from the margins speak truth over power in presents." It even turned out that we were, in fact, not only talking about "margins" *per se*, because it is the margins that define the whole picture. According to Egyptian graphic novelist Ganzeer, one of the six keynote speakers: "Margins aren't at the fringes of a page; they are most of the page." This, perhaps, is the most eloquent manifesto during the five-day conference. I really hoped I could attend every single panel, but apparently, I was incapable (yet) of being at different places simultaneously like in the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), so I will try to outline the panels I did attend and send apologies to those whose presentations I missed.

I still couldn't believe it was me who had the honour to be the first speaker in one of the first group of parallel panels of the conference—"Spatial Futurisms in Sinophone Science Fiction". I introduced Long Yi's 2018 novel *Earth Province* and discussed how the politics of the "prosumer"—the "synergic implosion" of consumer and producer—remakes social subjects in the context of late capitalism in certain urban spaces. I argued that when the human body becomes a commodity in itself, consuming to survive becomes part of the "cost of production." Therefore, they would turn into "prosumers," as conceptualised by George Ritzer, highlighting a new dimension of capitalist exploitation most evident in the Internet industries and platform economies. Following my paper, Yen Ooi shared her research on two novellas written by Regina Kanyu Wang—"The Story of Dǎo" (2019) and "A Cyber-Cuscuta Manifesto" (2020). Based on the differentiation of "Tabula Rasa" and "Tabula Plena" theories (the "blank page" and the "full page"), Ooi pointed out that, especially in the domain of architecture and design, "Tabula Rasa" is now increasingly replaced by "Tabula Plena," recognising the authenticity of space and environment and emphasising that human action should be "interactive" rather than "creative." She believed such a conceptual transition may speak to the critique of anthropocentrism in Wang's stories.

In the same panel, I also enjoyed Mia Chen Ma's reading of He Xi's *Six Realms of Existence* (2002) based on Ulrich Beck's "reflexive modernity" and Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity." She claimed that this novel features a spatial division reflecting the power dynamic in different urban spaces and among various social classes, which indicates the institutional risks, and the uneven distribution of these risks, in the context of late capitalism. At the end of this panel, Frederike Schneider-Vielsäcker focused on Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing" (2014) and Chen Qiufan's "The Fish of Lijiang" (2006) and examined the impact of China's post-socialist, market-oriented transition on social subjects. She considered these stories Bakhtinian chronotopes—where time and space converge into one—which provides us with a textual reference to the developmental unevenness and stratification in contemporary China.

The next panel I attended was themed "African SF: Alternate Futures," where Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra discussed *After the Flare* (2017) by Deji Bryce Olukotun. Through her interrogation of colonialism and forced labour depicted in this novel, Armillas-Tiseyra revealed the transgressive power inherent in Afrofuturism as a potential way out of the historical exhaustion projected by capitalist realism, pointing out the possibility of a new order that may lead us to the "not-yet". Ugandan writer Dilman Dila introduced a local political system based on his personal attachment to Ugandan villages, where the notions such as "leader" and "political centre" are largely absent, formulating a localised, decentralised mechanism different from the bureaucratic hierarchy evident in modern nation-states. He believed that it was in this decentred anarchy, rooted in the sense of place and post-colonial nationality, that we could build a post-capitalist social order.

Michelle Louise Clarke directed our attention to the narrative of disease in Afrofuturism. With Ilze Hugo's *The Down Days* (2020), Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* (2011)



Long Yi (2018) *Earth Province*

and Véronique Tadjo's *In the Company of Men* (2017), Clarke argued that the power dynamic embedded in the temporality and spatiality of "future" is not natural, but constructed by people's collective memory of the present. Following this, Joanna Woods also focused her presentation on temporality and spatiality, which she claimed to be the two most essential concepts of speculative fiction in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. Drawing on her PhD thesis, Woods introduced the Nommo Award presented by The African Speculative Fiction Society since 2017 and elaborated on the Nommo's influence on sf writing in related countries.

Leaving Africa, we entered the world of games. In the panel "Gamified Futures," Felix Kawitzky as the first speaker discussed "world-building" in speculative board games, especially the utopian imagination of political and cultural alternatives, which can be divided into those set "in a universe almost the same as our own" and those "in a nearby parallel universe." Paweł Frelik began with climate change, introducing the sense of colonialism in electronic games, in which the transformation of alien planets completed by the players reflects on the relation-

ship between human beings and the Earth environment. Meanwhile, Frelik also reminded us that we need to be aware of the boundaries of interactivity in these games, since some contents are designed to be "touchable," while others are not. And it is in such a duality between interactivity and non-interactivity that we could feel the sense of the Anthropocene unconscious.

Brian Willems introduced the current AI star—GPT-3 (Generative Pre-trained Transformer 3), an autoregressive language model to produce humanised text using deep learning. Using Eugene Lim's 2021 novel *Search History* as an example, Willems focused on the interactivity between readers and the AI and argued that nowadays we are still evaluating and interpreting AI writing from a "human" perspective, which is essentially an anthropocentric paradigm of thinking. He claimed that only by abandoning such a mindset and writing *with* AI can we truly achieve human-AI intimacy. This leads nicely to another kind of interactivity brought forward by Tristan Sheridan, who examined reader subjectivity in interactive fictions. She argued that most interactive narratives, especially those told from a second-person perspective, do not leave enough space for reader subjectivity as they have claimed. The process of reading is more like following various instructions, which are all pre-determined by the author in a fixed narrative framework.

In the first keynote speech, Norwegian poet and novelist Sigbjørn Skåden talked about his Sami identity. He introduced the cultural and ethnic history of the Sami and the impact of three major colonial powers—Russia, the Dano-Norwegian Realm, and the Swedish Empire. As a result, the traditional hunting culture was gradually marginalised, the old religious system replaced by new religions. The indigenous Sami language, therefore, has also faded from mainstream society, with only around 10 percent of the Sami population still able to speak this ancient language. Skåden then discussed the impact of climate change on the landscape of the Nordic region, which is a central element of Sami identity and therefore has a profound impact on Sami culture. From here, he turned to his recent novel *The Birds* (*Fugl*, 2019), pointing out its recreation of history and the Sami's interaction with nature, animals and geography. The novel portrays an alien colony, and the people who travel there find that the natural environment seems very different from what they were used to before. In interacting with it, the protagonist is acutely aware of the intricate connections between the environment and human culture. For Skåden, *The Birds* may not be traditional science fiction, but its imagery of ecological futurism helps us to understand the importance of landscape and nature in Sami culture.

As the beginning of Day 2, in a panel themed "Future Studies," Kania Greer shared with us her experiences during the DragonCon in 2019 from the perspective of education, discussing how to enhance students' interests in scientific studies with the depiction of scientists and technological innovation in popular culture, films, novels and comics. Meanwhile, Paul Graham Raven introduced the Climaginarian Projects he has been working on, including The Rough Planet Guide to Notterdam 2045, Rogue Planet Guide to Skåne 2050, Museum of Carbon Ruins, LU@375 (a special edition of Lund University Magazine imagining the university's 375th birthday in 2041), and Memories from the Transition (Malmo Soundwalk). He believed, drawing upon Ruth Levitas's *Utopia as Method* (2013) and Phillip E. Wagner's *Invoking Hope: Theory and Utopia in Dark Times* (2020), that these projects may chime with people's desire for utopia, a hope for a reality that has not been realised *yet*. Raven also offered some cautions, drawing on experience, about the use of science fiction within policy and corporate futures contexts. Although definitely worth doing, these exercises are not *always* transformative. One of his finishing provocations was that it may often be the process of dreaming itself, rather than the specific content of dreams, in which the greatest utopian potential lies.

After Raven's utopian projects, I attended one of the most impressive panels throughout the conference—one that focused on European imaginaries. The first speaker Miriam Elin Jones examined the marginal languages and cultural diversity in sf through Welsh writer Owain Owain's dystopian novel *The Last Day (Y Dydd Olaf*, 1976). She began by introducing the novel's unique narrative framework made of letters and archives, through which readers are gradually able to realise the author's dark, unsettling imagination of the late twentieth century, and to develop a sense of Welsh nationalism and local culture. By emphasising the marginal position of the Welsh language and culture within the constructed totality of "Great Britain," Jones encouraged us to value the literary connection to "place" and to recreate the rich cultural content of linguistic diversity. Joining the discussion of marginality, Lars Schmeink investigated the portrayal of marginalised communities in contemporary German sf works, starting with a brief overview of German sf. He highlighted the "progressive turn" in recent decades through several representative works of "Progressive Fantastic," such as James Sullivan's *The City of Symbionts* (Die Stadt der Symbionten, 2019), Judith C. Vogt and Christian Vogt's *Waste Land* (2019) and *Ace in Space* (2021). Emrah Atasoy discussed utopianism and world-building in contemporary Turkish sf, as well as Turkish writers' interrogation of Anthropocentrism. Based on the concept "critical dystopia," Atasoy argued that, in recent years, Turkish literature has seen the emergence of a number of sf writers who have used "utopia" as a motif, and among them Ayşe Kulin, author of *Captured Sun* (Tutsak Güneş, 2015), appears as one of the most influential. Through his close reading of this novel, Atasoy highlighted the depiction of eco-futurism and the utopian vision that emerges from Turkish utopianism.

The second keynote of the conference featured Argentinian writer Laura Ponce. From her own experience of growing up in Moreno, she revealed the tension between centrality and marginality, highlighting the nationalism and local culture of Argentina as a post-colonial country. She claimed that, just as what Mark Fisher had proposed in *Ghosts of my life* (2014), the "ghosts" of imperialism can still be seen in Buenos Aires, and that these ghosts have always haunted the local political and economic context. She then described the neo-colonialism under the leadership of the United States since the 1970s, pointing out the involvement of world capital in the local environment and culture of Argentina in the context of globalisation. It is in the context of this neo-colonialism that Argentina, as a "periphery" of the world, has never given up the struggle against hegemony and the reconstruction of the world order. She then introduced the indigenous languages of Latin America and the variants of Spanish, which formulate a linguistic diversity where we can see a futurism and utopianism different from the European and North American perspectives, a kind of "lingua franca" that belongs exclusively to the margins of the world. In her view, the term "science fiction" is itself a product of the West, and the sf works available to Latin American readers are mediated through the Western market, resulting in a sf totality that overrides the linguistic diversity of Latin America, and in which the local culture, the local imagination of the future, is forced to lose its voice. While most of the CoFutures conference was conducted in English, Ponce delivered her keynote address in Spanish, with an English translation projected.

Following Laura Ponce's Argentinian insights, I moved onto an equally fascinating panel focusing on Brazilian sf films. Carolina Oliveira discussed the issues concerning race, gender and class through *Unliveable* (Inabitavel, 2020) directed by Enock Carvalho Matheus Farias and *Purple Dictatorship* (Ditadura Roxa, 2020) by Matheus Moura. With Patricia Hill Collins's theory of "outsider within," Oliveira claimed that it is on the basis of their marginalised identities that the black women in the films are able to find a place for themselves in society, and that their black female identities become symbols on which the protagonists rely for their survival. Alfredo Suppia presented a video paper on the environmental degradation caused by the massive deforestation in Brazil in recent decades. He offered a detailed analysis on various Brazilian speculative films, including *Brasil Ano 2000* (1969), *Abrigo Nuclear* (1981), *Oceano Atlantis* (1989), and *Rio 2096* (2013), highlighting the concerns about desertification, nuclear radiation, global warming, and rising sea levels in Brazilian cinema. Also in this panel, Matheus Schlittler discussed the dystopian narrative and social scarcity in a video game *Frostpunk* (2018) produced by 11 bit studios. He argued that video games are an important part of sf culture and that their unique world-building mechanisms are informed by a number of typical paradigms, including cyberpunk, steampunk, utopia, dystopia, etc. The retro-futuristic narrative of *Frostpunk* needs to be understood in a similar way, in that the scarcity in the game's setting can be seen in part as a result of the way capitalism works, and players are required to build the "last of the worlds," which also reflects a utopian imagination.

The next panel features "urban futures," beginning with Aishwarya Subramanian's introduction of urban space in Delhi, India. Based on a discussion on Vandana Singh's novelettes "Delhi" (2004), "Indra's Web" (2011), and her recent anthology *Utopias of the Third Kind* (2022), Subramanian investigated the complex relationships of utopia and colonialism, and the difficulties of women finding a place in the public space of India's big cities. And from India, we were moving to Atlanta, Georgia, along with Doug Davis's presentation on Michael Bishop. In his works such as *Catacomb Years* (1979), a collapsing America isolates itself from the rest of the world and becomes a classic piece of "Dome City" narrative, which draws inspiration from urban renewal projects in Atlanta in mid-twentieth century. From Atlanta, Sara Martin led us to Barcelona, introducing a shared world anthology by nine authors—*Barcelona in 2059* (2021)—featuring a utopian artificial island called Nova Icària, built as the site of a posthuman experiment that has brought about far-reaching technological and social revolutions. Mark Soderstrom offered a wide-ranging account, that went beyond particular cities to discuss cosmopolitanism, urban politics and hybridity in contemporary speculative fiction and films in general. He mentioned N.K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* (2020), Tade Thompson's *Wormwood* trilogy (2017-2019), and a number of films or TV series such as *Sense8* (2015), *Blade Runner* (1982), and *The Shining* (1980), all of them demonstrating Stuart Hall's well-known statement: "the future belongs to the impure."

The last panel on Day 2 began with John Rieder's powerful claim: "Science fiction is about truth, and truth matters." He discussed the portrayal of social movements and social dysfunctions in speculative visual fictions—especially Minsoo Kang's "The Virtue of Unfaithful Translation" (2020) and Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone's *This Is How You Lose the Time War* (2019)—and analysed the involvement of political power in the realm of history, communication, and personal emotion. Following Rieder, Daniel Conway discussed the notion of "Amor fate" in the film *Arrival* (2016). He noticed that although human beings may have evolved in a certain way through an alien language, this "evolutionary" opportunity is apparently not available to all, which becomes a privilege of particular social groups, thus creating a separation between "higher" and ordinary human beings. Those who can see the future, in a way, become alienated, transformed from human to the "Other." Built upon this point, Iuliia Ibragimova adopted a rather different way of perceiving "otherness." Using Aliette De Bodard's *Universe of Xuya* series (2007-present) as an example, she discussed the revolutionary values of life in social resistance movements based on the concept of "Assemblage" proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). In the *Xuya* series, the Vietnamese empire, with Confucianism as its basic ideology, leaps to the centre of the world, and thus the "family" becomes the most basic political unit of the empire in the story. For Ibragimova, however, the top-down political hierarchy of the empire can only be changed through a process of Deleuzian deterritorialisation.

At the start of Day 3, Giuseppe Porcaro and Laura Horn discussed the representation of European futures from a sociological and political perspective. They believed that sf could be seen as a viable methodology, using imaginative narrative as an important platform for constructing new political frameworks. In this way, they introduced the sense of supra-nationality in works such as *The Expanse* (2015-2022), *Star Trek* (since 1966), *Ministry for the Future* (2020), and the inherent heterogeneity of the European Union in the *Fractured Europe* sequence (2014-2018). Next up was Jerry Määttä, who focused on the politics and poetics in contemporary Swedish speculative fiction. Through analysing the elements of class, gender, religion, welfare system, nationalism, globalisation, ecology and sustainability, Määttä shared his detailed close reading of Johannes Anyuru's *De kommer att drunkna i sina mödrars tårar* (*They Will Drown in Their Mothers Tears*, 2017) and Camilla Sten's *En Annan Gryning* (*Another Dawn*, 2015).

Anastasia Klimchynskaya, winner of this year's "Support a New Scholar" grant sponsored by SFRA, took us back into history. Starting with nineteenth-century speculative narratives, especially Jules Verne's *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*, 1870) and H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), she discussed the representation of industrialisation and modernity, as well as the resulting futuristic imaginaries and cultural paradigms, inviting us to pay more attention to the marginal spaces and cultures under the disguise of totality in the name of science and rationality. We then moved to nineteenth-century Russia with Stephen Bruce. With Jan Tadeusz Bulharyn's *Plausible Fantasies* (1824) and Vladimir Odoevsky's *The Year 4338* (1835), Bruce demonstrated the social and political concerns in both novels and interrogated the technologies and futuristic imaginations concerning new means of transportation such as an air balloon. He believed that these imaginations could lead to an alternative map of geopolitics, indicating the two authors' different perceptions of empire, class, and power.

During the third keynote address, Indian writer Indrapramit Das shared his recent novelette "A Necessary Being" collected in *Make Shift: Dispatches from the Post-Pandemic Future* (2021) edited by Gideon Lichfield, discussing the impact of the pandemic on individuals, countries, nations, and regional politics. A detailed summary of the story is provided in Ksenia Shcherbino's book review of *Make Shift*, published on *Vector*'s website in April 2022, which I quote below:

> Family relationships are in the centre of Indrapramit Das's "A Necessary Being," a beautiful and sad story about bonding and parting. Our ruined world is being slowly tended back to life by giant omnipotent robots, doing all the menial tasks to make the planet livable again. They are operated by people who inhabit their mechanical bodies and give up on all human connection. But one day one of the operators rescues a little girl. She has nowhere to go, so he adopts her and lets her live with him inside the machine and pilot it. Together they become "heart" and "soul" of the robot. But is this life too much or not enough for a human child? The fragile ecosystem of father-daughter relationship unfurls against the background of the recovering world, and raises questions about gratitude, loyalty and our future survival.

After Das's keynote, we followed Joan Gordon to indigenous territories in Australia. Reiterating the conference's focus on "margins," she discussed the vibrant cultures of indigenous people in Australia through Tracy Sorensen's 2018 novel *The Lucky Galah*, which is set in a fictional town in West Australia in 1969 and features a galah who can receive signals from satellite dishes. Drawing on her own concept of the "amborg gaze" and the Deleuzian "becoming," Gordon argued that the novel reflects the interplay between Aboriginal and colonial cultures, and between human beings and animals in the era of posthumanism. And then, we travelled north to Okinawa with Kenrick Hajime-Yoshida. With the film *Miracle City Koza* (2022) directed by Kazuhiro Hirai, he introduced the unique maritime culture embedded in Okinawan masculinity under the double colonisation of Japanese and American culture. He noticed the connection between body and island space in the dance "Happy Happy Kachashi," emphasising its significance in the local cultural norms. In the next talk, *Vector* co-editor Jo Lindsay Walton invited us to another island in the Pacific—the island of Yap (Federated States of Micronesia), introducing an indigenous economic system in which stone money played an important role. Rejecting the way Yap has been analysed by Western economists, such as Gregory N. Mankiw, Walton pointed out the importance of non-Western, non-capitalist societies in transcending the end-of-history discourse and formulating a post-capitalist alternative.

During another panel on Afrofuturism (apart from the one I attended on Day 1), Dan Hassler-Forest introduced his recent monograph *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism* (2022), where he examined the black utopia in Monáe's 2018 album *Dirty Computer*. Treating us to clips from the videos, and conducting close readings that highlighted queer and Afrofuturist themes Hassler-Forest explored how unique lyrics, music, dance and visuals combined to challenge perceptions of masculinity and feminity, the real and the unreal, and the possible and the impossible. Julia Gatermann discussed the Afrofuturist portrayal of "trans-corporeality" in N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017). Drawing on Jane Bennett's "vital materialism" and Rosi Braidotti's posthumanism, Gatermann argued that the subjectivity of the characters in the novels is not "fixed" or "territorialised." Instead, it

is a post-humanist, nomadic subjectivity, constructed through the process of merging and becoming. Also focusing on the *Broken Earth* trilogy, Helane Androne emphasised the apocalyptic settings in the novels as a response to the feminist movements in the US. She introduced the five keywords in Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000)—that is "Semiology, Mythology, Meta-ideologizing, Democratics, and Differential Movement"—and connected these concepts to Jemisin's novels to interrogate her depiction of social resistance.

The fourth keynote address, marking the end of Day 3, was delivered by Nigerian writer and editor Chinelo Onwualu. Onwualu gave a powerful and optimistic address, which encompassed both personal and planetary themes. She focused on the current climate debate and argued that while we are studying and perceiving climate change from a pessimistic perspective, we also need to develop a mindset of "climate optimism." In her view, although we are now confronted with a variety of worldwide injustices, and the environment we live in is characterised by violence, oppression and discrimination, we must not let these wounds cause us to lose hope for the future. On the contrary, it is this utopian vision of the future that gives us the impulse to make a difference. She said with great passion: "Enough with these dystopian narratives. Instead, let's not be afraid to contemplate utopias right here on earth. Let's think like children."

Day 4 opens with Egyptian artist Ganzeer's keynote address, where he introduced his comic novel *The Solar Grid* (since 2016) after his provocative claim: "Margins aren't at the fringes of a page - they are (most of) the page"—which I have quoted earlier in this report. Drawing on the classic sf motif "Mars," *The Solar Grid* depicts a Mars-Earth dialectic to explore social issues such as immigration, population, class and energy**.** *The Solar Grid* has a deliberately provocative premise, imagining a dystopia that has a form of clean renewable energy at its centre. Ganzeer then gave us a fascinating tour of the diverse visual styles *The Solar Grid* offers, and explored the reasoning behind their use. He shared a debate with his editor about the storyline and the style of graphic presentation, and highlighted his inspirations from traditional sf works, Japanese manga, and many other sources. A generous man as he is, Ganzeer also showed us some of the pictures and script content that have not yet been released. In these subsequent chapters, Ganzeer will revisit the connection between theology and reality from the perspective of "speculative theology," which, in his view, is the unique narrative potential of sf alone.

In the following roundtable discussion, Avery Delany, Cristina Diamant, and Mia Chen Ma from the London Science Fiction Research Community (LSFRC) shared the call for papers of LSFRC's 2022 conference themed on "Extractionism." With adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017) and *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (2019), Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* (2018), and Rivers Solomon's *The Deep* (2019), they interrogated the sense of marginality with neoliberal capitalism and reiterated J. G. Ballard's claim that "periphery is where the future reveals itself." This, they believed, is the key to an alternative future where we can hear the voices that have never been heard before.

In one of the last panels, Cody Brown introduced Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* (1974) from an Afrofuturist perspective, emphasising the novel's historical and academic significance through his discussion of race, climate, and social movements. He argued that the novel critiques the oppression of marginalised groups by neoliberal capitalism and thus reconstructs the possibilities for them to imagine their future. At the same time, Delany has also explored the power dynamic and interactions between different social groups. For Brown, "choice" is the basis of individual subjectivity, and the different understandings of choice may suggest the formation of new subjects. Isiah Lavender III began by returning to Fredric Jameson's proposal of utopian "desire," pointing out the important role of utopian and sf imaginaries in post-capitalism. Using Derrick Bell's novelette "The Space Traders" (1992) as an example, he discussed the depiction of "whiteness" in Afrofuturist narratives and offered the concept of the "Noirum" based on critical race theory and Darko Suvin's concept of novum, in this way revealing the systematic discrimination in the US both historically and in the present.

The conference concluded with Chinese scholar DAI Jinhua's pre-recorded keynote speech. Drawing on Jack Ma's book *Weilai yilai* (*The Future has Arrived*, 2017), Dai presented China's repositioning within the world's economic and political networks in the context of the "rise of China." But meanwhile, she also pointed out that, to a certain extent, Chinese people still maintain a national identity that has been in place since 1919, namely that China is behind the world and that China is outside the world. Since the end of the twentieth century, China's significant economic development has formed a new identity, but people have not yet constructed a new logic in the "future has arrived" context. On the basis of such a duality, Dai introduced the "Sang culture" (culture of demotivation) that has become popular in recent years. People have bid farewell to the revolutionary discourse, but they are then forced to live in a problematic reality.

From the perspective of the pandemic, Dai saw the rise of right-wing populism and the closure of geographical boundaries. With this in mind, she introduced a special sub-genre of Chinese online literature called "danmei"—that is romantic fictions featuring love affairs between male characters primarily but not exclusively for the entertainment of female readers—particularly Yishisizhou's *Xiao mogu* (*Little Mushroom*, 2020), Tang Jiuqing's *Xianshi shoulie* (*Time-limited Hunting*, 2021), and Wu Zhe's *Rongcheng* (*Melting City*, 2021), summarising the common setting of all three novels: a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Everyone in these novels endeavours to stop the arrival of their doomsday, but they are also aware that such attempts are ultimately useless. Finally, Dai referred to the film *Interstellar* (2014) directed by Christopher Nolan and raised a question for us all to consider: when we look at the future, do we see our civilisation as the coexistence of various social communities, or as the continuation of a species?

GUANGZHAO LYU (HE/HIM) HOLDS A DOCTORATE DEGREE IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE FROM UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON (UCL). HE IS THE CO-FOUNDER OF LONDON CHINESE SF GROUP (LCSFG), AND HAS SERVED AS A CO-DIRECTOR OF LONDON SF RESEARCH COMMUNITY (LSFRC) UNTIL 2021. HE IS THE AWARDEE OF THE "SUPPORT A NEW SCHOLAR" GRANT (2021-2022) SPONSORED BY SCIENCE FICTION RESEARCH ASSOCIATION (SFRA). HIS RECENT ARTICLES HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED IN SFRA REVIEW, VECTOR, SCIENCE FICTION STUDIES, EXTRAPOLATION, UTOPIAN STUDIES, AND COMPARATIVE CRITICAL STUDIES.

A no and two yeses

Stewart Hotston interviews Gautam Bhatia

Not only do you write SFF but you are deeply involved with the Indian justice system. How do these two components intersect for you?

As a constitutional lawyer, I've come to realise, in various ways, how law—and law's articulation of justice—constitute the invisible plumbing that undergirds so much of the world around us. This realisation has played a big part in my SFF world-building: I now always think about what ideas of law and justice are consistent with the world that I'm constructing.

Involvement with the justice system, in all its complexity, also makes you wary of easy or quick answers, and compels you to confront the indeterminacy of some of our most fundamental ideas around what is just and what is right. This certainly bleeds into my SF work: in *The Wall* and *The Horizon*—my finished SF duology—I went some way towards trying to ensure that the antagonists had good arguments, which they made well. The idea was to communicate to the reader, through the story, that sometimes you will be left with a lingering doubt about what, truly, was the just solution in a particular situation, and whether it was ever possible to achieve.

More specifically, I've come to understand the importance of procedure in serving the cause of justice, and this is—presently—playing a big role in my current WIP! A lot of times, in fundamentally unfair and authoritarian contexts, we can ensure a modicum of justice by attacking the procedure through which an unjust decision was made, even though the system prohibits us from challenging the substantive injustice. SF should do a lot more with brilliant procedural innovations thwarting the antagonists.

On the flip side, I believe that SF is, at its heart, an optimistic genre, that always leaves a space for daring to imagine something different, by asking the "what if?" question. This optimism has often sustained me through my engagement with Indian constitutional law and the justice system, especially during challenging times (of which there are a lot, now!).

What are the most interesting questions SF can interrogate about the idea of justice?

One thing that SF does a lot—and does well—is interrogate questions around interpersonal justice and corrective justice. In a lot of SF we find a clear articulation of an unjust state of affairs, how we got there, and the struggle to change it. I think where SF could do more is interrogate questions of *distributive* justice, justice when it comes to the basic political-economy question of who controls the means of production and the production process in any given society: or, in other words, SF that interrogates and challenges economic injustice (a particularly relevant theme today). For example, think of all those SF novels which take Empire for granted. Well, that choice of a political system of governance also carries with it a whole host of unarticulated choices about centralised state coercion, appropriation of surplus value, and so on, all of which go uninterrogated, as the attention is on the actions of characters *within* that overall economic-political system.

A classic interrogation of precisely this, of course, is Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, where an anarchist society and a capitalist society are placed side by side, allowing us to compare how political, economic, and social justice works in each. There are other examples of this, but I think there could be more attention paid to this aspect: more SF novels with conflicts over labour conditions (especially when engaging in extractive activities on asteroids and other planets!), over the production process, over control of production itself, and so on.

How do you think ideas of justice shape culture and, perhaps equally importantly, shape what can be thought within a culture? A sneaky second question here - given your answer above, how do you think that ideas of justice have shaped the kinds of stories SFF has considered telling?

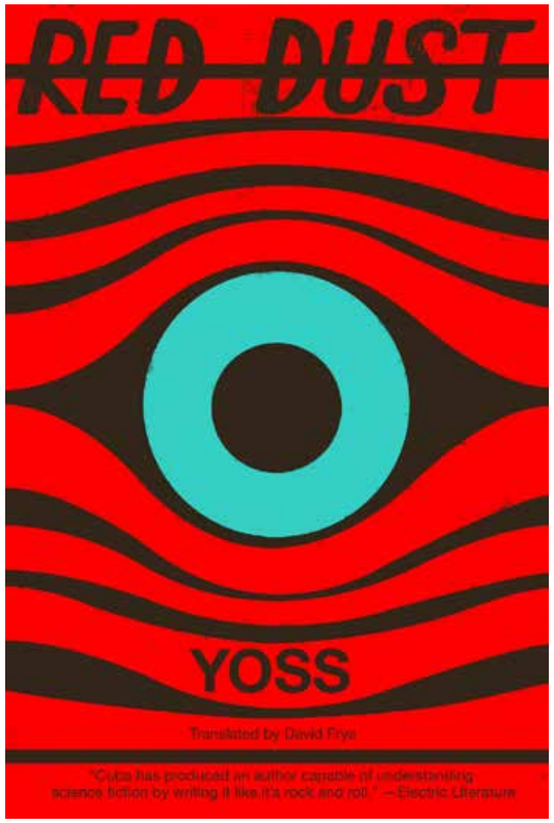
I think the first thing to note is that culture is never a monolith: at any given time and in any given society, there is a dominant culture (and if you were to go full Marxist, that dominant culture is the expression of the dominant class), and there's cultural dissent. Ideas of justice tend to shape—and, in turn, are shaped by—the dominant culture; but the presence of cultural dissent always creates a tension, I think, that makes those ideas of justice themselves contestable and negotiable. The dominant culture might, for example, tolerate discrimination against an "other" (and the laws and the justice system will reflect that), but history tells us that there will always be voices of dissent that will question the legitimacy of any legal system based on discrimination, and that this will have an inevitable impact upon how society conceives of—and implements—ideas of justice.

As far as the history of SFF goes, if we think of contemporary anglophone SFF, then it has arisen out of capitalist societies. And I think that shows, for example, in how a lot of SFF is great at examining issues around corrective justice (crime, punishment, policing), but there's a lot less of it when it comes to distributive justice, i.e., reimagining the entire political-economic foundations of society, control over the productive process and the means of production, and so on. It's also why the works that do it successfully—such as The Dispossessed—really stand out (and it's no surprise there that Le Guin engaged deeply with the work of anarchist political philosophers - as late as 2015, she was reviewing Murray Bookchin!). This is something I discuss in the accompanying article as well.

If someone asked for a short story and a novel that you think epitomise what SF can say about justice, what would you recommend?

This is a tough one! For the novel, I'm going to go with an old classic: Terry Pratchett's *The Night Watch*. It really has everything: legal justice, political justice, economic justice, revolutionary justice, historical justice, all blended together in an inimitable, Pratchett SF-nal setting. And the best thing about *The Night Watch* is that it recognises the complexity of all these dimensions of justice, and elects to leave the question of what constitutes justice open, rather than forcing an answer down readers' throats.

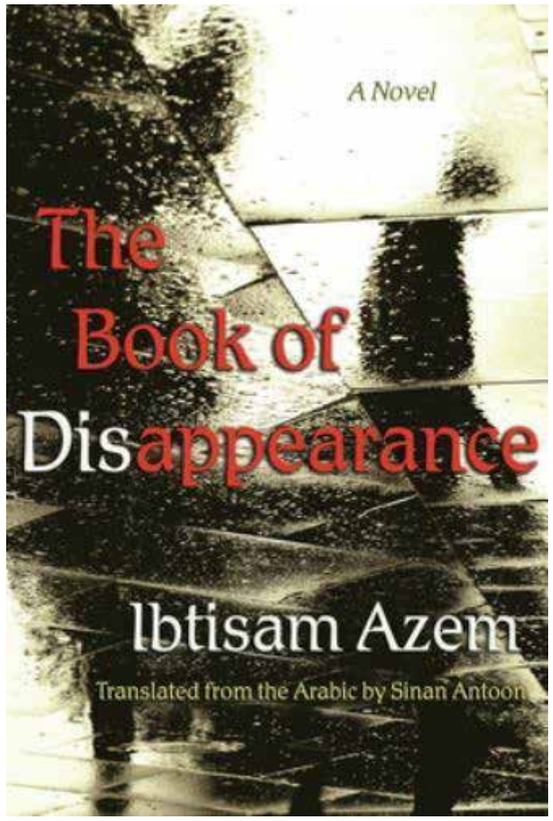
Honourable mentions for Seth Dickinson's *The Traitor Baru Cormorant* (colonialism and justice), Iain M. Banks's *Look To Windward* (justice in tragic circumstances), and of course, Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (structures of justice in an anarchist society).



A short story is even harder. I'd pick Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing", for its treatment of how questions of justice are inseparable from questions of political economy, and the economic structure.

On a similar note, if you were to shout out writers from outside the European/US axis in this area, who would you be pointing people to?

I've already mentioned Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing" (China). Odafe Atogun's *Taduno's Song* (Nigeria), Shadrek Chikoti's *Azotus the Kingdom* (Malawi) and Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (Egypt) are all very sensitive SF treatments of justice in an authoritarian political context. Ibtisam Azem's *The Book of Disappearance* (Palestine)—whose premise involves the overnight physical disappearance of all Palestinians from the State of Israel—thinks through questions of justice in relation to dispossession. Fadi Zaghmout's *Heaven On Earth* (Jordan) grapples with questions of intergenerational justice, in the context of the invention of an anti-ageing drug.



Red Dust (Cuba) by Yoss has a literal positronic detective as its main character, scouring the solar system for a criminal with reality-altering powers: it's a darkly hilarious meditation upon many things, including the role of the police and the nature of crime in a materially unequal context.

What trends have you seen in what SF is talking about over the last few years and what, if anything, has changed in that time?

I think that SF has become a lot more sensitive when it comes to justice along the axes of identity, and especially marginalised identities. I mean, think of Anne Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* (the clue is in the name!) or—more recently—Ryka Aoki's *Light From Uncommon Stars*. This is something I've definitely seen change for the better over the last decade or so: SF is now a lot more ready to acknowledge these axes of injustice, and to imagine worlds in which they become sites of justice.

Do you think writing about justice can have a real-world impact? I guess whether that's a yes or no answer, I'd be really keen to understand why you've reached the conclusion you have.

I think there's a yes and a no there. "No" in the sense of, I don't think that (most) writing makes a tangible, measurable impact, and indeed, writing that sets out to do that is invariably didactic and dull. I'm with Auden there: poetry makes nothing happen.

An SFF writing culture where progressive ideas of justice are the norm, and frequently explored by writers, no doubt contributes towards the building and maintenance of a more democratic and egalitarian public culture, although it is generally impossible to "see" that in action.

But I also think there's a "yes", albeit in a very qualified sense. Writing is part of culture, and all culture has *some* real-world "impact", although it isn't measurable. An SFF writing culture where progressive ideas of justice are the norm, and frequently explored by writers, no doubt contributes towards the building and maintenance of a more democratic and egalitarian public culture, although it is generally impossible to "see" that in action.

There is also "yes" in another, more speculative sense: SF offers us the freedom to explore ideas of justice whose time has not yet come in the "real-world" (Annarres is, yet again, a classic example). SF can be a safe home for speculation about what political, social, economic, and ecological justice might look like in a very different world. And these ideas *can* find their way back into the world, in a receptive political climate. However, if they do, we should hope that they will have a better reception than Plato did, when he tried to implement his ideas in *The Republic* in an actual running State!

GAUTAM BHATIA IS AN INDIAN SFF WRITER AND EDITOR. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF THE WALL (HARPERCOLLINS INDIA 2019) AND THE HORIZON (HARPERCOLLINS INDIA 2021), AN SFF DUOLOGY. BOTH BOOKS WERE ON LOCUS MAGAZINE'S ANNUAL RECOMMENDED READING LIST. BHATIA IS ALSO THE CO-ORDINATING EDITOR OF STRANGE HORIZONS, A BRITISH FANTASY AWARD-WINNING WEEKLY ONLINE MAGAZINE OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY. IN HIS SPARE TIME, HE MOONLIGHTS AS A CONSTITUTIONAL LAWYER.

Two Ideas of Justice

Gautam Bhatia

As a genre committed to exploring "alternatives to how we live", questions of justice have always been at the forefront of contemporary SF writing. One of the most frequently recurring themes has been that of crime and punishment: indeed, SF's focus on technology has allowed writers to explore a range of questions related to criminal justice, from policing (Philip K. Dick's "precogs" come to mind) to prisons. Some of the most interesting thinking has considered entirely alternative forms of criminal justice altogether: for example, Alastair Reynold's *The Prefect* gives us a brief glimpse of a future society where policing takes place through randomly selected civic volunteer militia, which are disbanded as soon as the immediate task is done.

Issues around criminal justice fall within the broad category called "corrective justice": i.e., at their root, they deal with how to rectify a wrongful harm or injury inflicted by one person (or set of persons) upon another. Corrective justice assumes a prior normative consensus about what constitutes wrongful injury, and then asks: how is this injury best rectified? Variants of this question are at the heart of the many volumes of science fiction that deals with policing, crime, and punishment. They are also present in some of the most famous "courtroom" scenes in SF: for example, in *Star Trek*: The Next Generation's *The Measure of a Man*, Commander Data must establish that he is entitled to a right to self-determination, in order to avoid being dismantled by Starfleet. The establishment of his rights takes place through structured courtroom argument, and it turns upon the interpretation of existing Starfleet law.

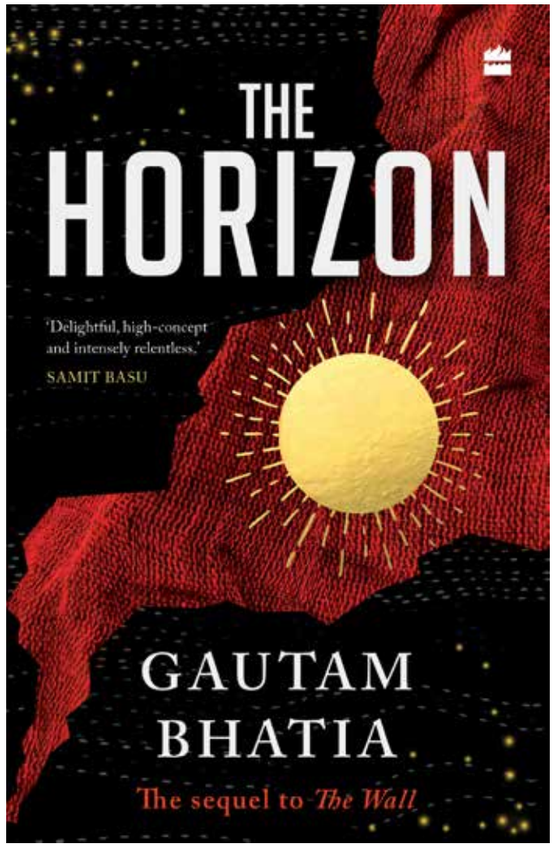
There is, however, another set of anterior questions that corrective justice and courtroom set-pieces do not adequately address. These are questions of "distributive justice": that is, the allocation of resources across society[1]. Questions of distributive justice are embedded within the political economy and the constitutional arrangements that structure a society. It is here that I think that we have not yet seen the variety and diversity of treatment in SF that we have seen when it comes to questions of corrective justice.

Consider, for example, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy* and Arkady Martine's *A Memory Called Empire* and *A Desolation Called Peace*. The two series are separated by seven decades, and—as Martine has noted in interviews—*A Memory Called Empire*, in many ways, is in conversation with, and responds to, *Foundation*. However, while very different in their sensibilities, the two series are united in their starting point: i.e., the choice of Empire as the overarching governing and administrative framework of the galaxy. With this initial choice, a set of other choices inevitably follow: a certain structure of the political economy, centralised administration, the distinction between a core and a periphery, and the flow of resources from the latter to the former. While both series explore a range of questions with great subtlety and thoughtfulness *within* this context, their basic assumptions—that go to questions of distributive justice—are unshakeable[2].

Iain M. Banks' Culture novels and the Strugatsky Brothers' Noon Universe are two SF series where the starting point—in terms of governance and political economy—is very different, and therefore presents us with different questions of justice. Both the Culture and the

1 The terms "corrective justice" and "distributive justice" are, of course, reductive; I use them here as placeholders for a set of family resemblance concepts. Here I focus on these two concepts of justice, although other important distinctions include those between "retributive justice," "restorative justice," and "transformative justice." Broadly speaking, retributive justice focuses on punishment and compensation, restorative justice focuses on repairing relationships between offenders and victims, and transformative justice focuses on changing both these interpersonal relationships and the wider social and economic structures within which harm occurs.

2 Although, arguably, they are challenged to an extent at the end of Foundation and Earth, and with First Contact in A Desolation Called Peace.



Noon Universe and imagine a post-scarcity, anti-capitalist society, where there is no more private ownership over the means of production (the root of a lot of distributive injustice). However, both the Culture and the Noon Universe come to us as fully-formed, mature societies, with the writers focusing almost exclusively on external conflict with other societies (and thus dropping us back into the well-traversed terrain of corrective justice: think of Banks' *Look to Windward* or the Strugatskies' *Hard To Be A God*).

One striking exception is Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. *The Dispossessed* is an SF meditation on distributive justice *par excellence*. Le Guin takes us into the nuts and bolts of how Annares—an anarchist, non-capitalist, post-carceral society—would function in practice. The questions she considers range from social production (indeed, running through *The Dispossessed* there is an open question of whether it is just that the weight of moral consensus effectively compels everyone to spend a certain amount of time engaging in physical labour, regardless of what their other talents might be) to social *reproduction* (i.e., the range of activities that ensure the continuation of social life, including child-rearing). Indeed, in *The Dispossessed*, questions of distributive justice are presented particularly starkly, as Annares is a counterpoint to the planet Urras, where a recognisably capitalist and a recognisably state-socialist nation-state are locked in a conflict with each other.

The Dispossessed is not entirely alone in this. There is a tradition of writing—such as Kim Stanley Robinson's *Blue Mars*[3]—that has built upon it. It is my impression, however, that as a genre, SF still remains overwhelmingly focused on issues around corrective justice. That is not to suggest that these issues are unimportant or uninteresting; however, as we enter a time in which the climate crisis reveals to a greater and greater degree the unsustainable bases of our current society and political economy, it will therefore be interesting to see if science fiction will respond with a greater, sharper focus on questions of distributive justice.

3 See e.g. Will There Be Justice? Science Fiction and The Law (2019), Tor.com. www.tor.com/2019/08/07/will-there-be-justice-science-fiction-and-the-law/

GAUTAM BHATIA IS THE AUTHOR OF THE SF DUOLOGY, THE WALL AND THE HORIZON. HE IS THE CO-ORDINATING EDITOR OF STRANGE HORIZONS. IN HIS SPARE TIME, HE IS A CONSTITUTIONAL LAWYER.

An interview with Roman Krznaric

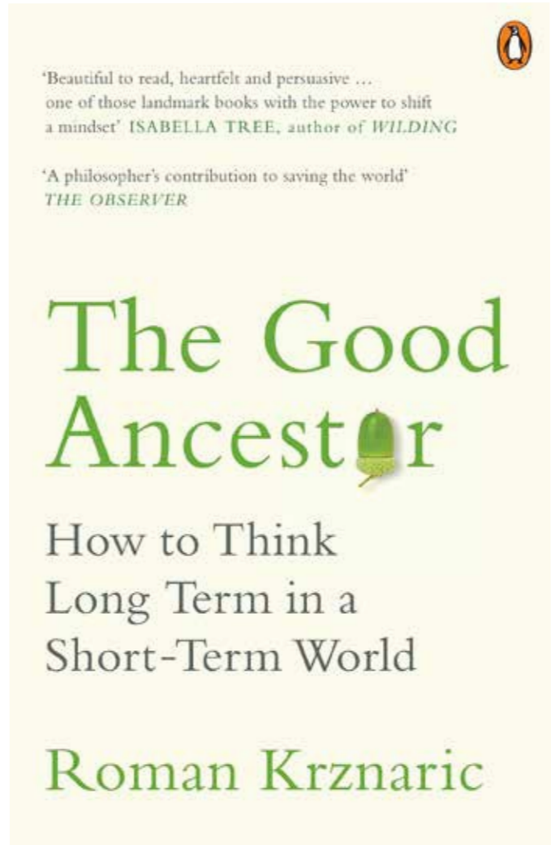
Interviewed by Liz Jensen

This interview first appeared on writersrebel.com/science-fiction-and-the-power-of-storytelling/. Copyright Liz Jensen and Roman Krznaric.

The title of your book is taken from a quotation by the medical researcher Jonas Salk, who asked: 'Are we being good ancestors?' You write that Salk, who developed the first successful polio vaccine, could have patented it and become rich as well as famous, but he resisted, because he wanted to 'be of some help to humankind.' Does the 21st century have its Salks, and if so, how would you characterise their mindset?

Let's start with the mindset. Or rather, the brainset. Each of us possesses what I think of as a 'marshmallow brain' and an 'acorn brain'. The marshmallow brain is the part of our neuroanatomy that focuses on instant gratification and immediate rewards—we love the dopamine rush of clicking the Buy Now button. It's named after the famous Marshmallow Test of the 1960s, when kids had a tasty snack placed in front of them and if they resisted for 15 minutes, they were rewarded with a second one: the majority of kids couldn't resist and snatched it up.

But that's not the whole story of who we are. We are also the proud possessors of an acorn brain. It's new—only about two million years old—and lives in the front of our heads in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. That's the bit that focuses on long-term thinking, planning and strategising. We're actually pretty good at it compared to most mammals. A chimpanzee plans ahead a bit and might take a stick, strip off the leaves and turn it into a tool to poke into a termite hole. But it will never make a dozen of these tools and set them aside for next week. Yet this is precisely what humans do. We might be addicted to our phones, but we are also experts at the temporal pirouette—we have a capacity to think long and save for our retirement or write song lists for our own funerals.



That's the acorn brain in action. It's how we built the cathedrals of medieval Europe and the sewers of 19th century London, which are still in use today.

So, to answer the question! I think Good Ancestors are people who have their acorn brains well and truly switched on. They are thinking beyond the here and now, beyond their own mortality. They project their minds forward to look back and ask, 'How will future generations judge us for what we did or didn't do when we had the chance?'

Salk was one of them, of course. But I'm a little reluctant to pick out individuals, in the same way that I have a bit of an allergy to the idea of leadership—'exemplary individuals' who will come along and save us. I think many of the Good Ancestors today are collectives—the Māori activists who are campaigning for rivers to have the same rights as people, or the XR Grandparents who take to the streets with photos of their grandchildren hanging around their necks.

You argue that the future has been colonised as a result of our short-term thinking, and you write about 'time-rebellion' as a form of resistance. What are time-rebels? How can they decolonise the future, and what simple initiatives could governments, corporations and communities take to think decades and centuries ahead?

Yes, I believe that humankind—especially those of us living in wealthy countries in the Global North—has colonised the future. We treat it as a distant colonial outpost where we can freely dump ecological degradation and technological risk as if there was nobody there. But of course it's occupied by the billions and billions of people who are likely to inhabit the future—who far outweigh everyone alive today. The tragedy is that these future generations are not around to do anything about this pillaging of their inheritance. They can't leap in front of the King's horse like a Suffragette or go on a Salt March to defy their colonial oppressors like Gandhi. So we have to do it for them.

As I wrote my book, I started to discover just how many people, organisations and movements are dedicated to this task of decolonising the future and giving a voice to future generations and the planet they will live on. I think of them as Time Rebels. They can be found in every realm—politics, economics, culture, technology.

I'm particularly inspired by organisations like the US public interest law firm Our Children's Trust, which has launched a series of legal cases on behalf of 21 young people who are campaigning for the legal right to a safe climate and healthy atmosphere for both current and future generations. To be honest, I never used to have much faith in law—I thought it was too slow and too conservative. Yet Our Children's Trust and similar legal movements in the Netherlands, Germany, Pakistan, Colombia and other countries have shown incredible energy and effectiveness in their campaigns for the rights of future citizens. And they're starting to win (like in the Urgenda case in the Netherlands). This is one of the biggest revolutions in rights since the French Revolution.

So I think we should be doing all we can to support these legal movements. I'm also a big fan of citizens' assemblies. One of the most interesting models I've come across is in Japan. It's called Future Design and is directly inspired by the Native American idea of Seventh Generation decision-making. What they do is invite local people to discuss and draw up plans for the towns and cities where they live. But they typically divide them into two groups. One group are told they are residents from the present day. They other half are given beautiful kimono-like gowns to wear and told to imagine themselves as residents from the year 2060. It turns out that the 2060 residents come up with much more radical plans for their communities, from long-term investment in health care to action on the climate emergency. Future Design is now being used in big city governments like Kyoto and is spreading to other countries. It's a brilliant innovation on the citizen's assembly model, adding an explicit imaginative journey into the future. Let's all create bespoke Future Design gowns for our own communities.

You quote the astronomer Carl Sagan who argued that societies should be guided by what he called 'a long-term goal and a sacred project'. How can we discover what our own transcendent mission might be, as individuals? What is yours?

Ha! Big questions! I've always been a fan of Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. What I took from his book is that dwelling in the present moment isn't enough to give most human beings a sense of meaning and purpose. What we need is what he called a 'concrete assignment'—a future goal that transcends ourselves and which can get us out of bed in the morning. It could be anything—to find a cure for cancer if you're a medical researcher or to keep your small family business going.

For me, what's the transcendent goal? Just as there is a biosphere that provides the air we breathe, I believe there is also an 'ethnosphere' that provides the cultural air we breathe—it's the swirls of ideas, assumptions and beliefs that shape our worldviews, our ways of thinking and being. I see my goal as a writer to transform the ethnosphere—to add new ideas into the swirl that will ideally outlast my lifetime. Some of these ideas are metaphors or concepts—like 'colonising the future' or being a 'good ancestor' or 'time rebel'. I am convinced that ideas have the power to change society—that's what I've learned from three decades of grappling with the question of how change happens.

As a society, we need a transcendent goal too. I love Sagan's writing but I don't like his ultimate goal for our species, which is for humanity to spread to other worlds. I think we first need to learn to live within the boundaries of this one and only planet we know that sustains life. Once we've mastered that, then fine, let's jet off to Mars. But I think it's going to be some time yet before we've learned to live within the ecological limits of Spaceship Earth.

What role do stories play in engaging us with the future, and its inhabitants?

Storytellers are time travellers, taking us on journeys into both the past and future. It's interesting, though, that the genre of science fiction and stories about time travel into the future didn't really emerge in Western culture until the 19th century (Jules Verne, H.G. Wells etc). Until then, most utopias and dystopias were set in a distant place, not a distant time. Think, for instance, of Thomas More's *Utopia*.

My favourite storyteller about the future would have to be Kim Stanley Robinson. Many climate activists might know his most recent book, *The Ministry for the Future*. But I also love his novel *Aurora*. At first sight it's a classic generation starship story, but it is actually the best exploration of ecological economics and its importance that I've ever read. You have a giant spacecraft travelling for 200 years with 2000 people on board to colonise a distant planet. The spacecraft has 24 biomes in it—so there's a desert, a savannah, a wet tropical zone and so on—and the people are living and dying for several generations, attempting to survive in a closed system. They're trying not to use more resources than they can produce and regenerate on their farms and spaceship, and not to create more waste than they can deal with. In other words, it's about trying to keep the system in balance. That is the essence of ecological economics as expressed by people like Herman Daly in the 1970s.

Aurora looks like it's a book about space, but it's really a depiction of the dilemmas we face on Earth—about how to survive on our beautiful and fragile life-giving planet. I'm sorry to give a spoiler, but this is exactly what the people on the spaceship realise: upon reaching their destination, they discover that humankind cannot survive in a place it has not evolved to adapt to, and so they decide to come back to Earth. The best plot twist I've ever read. Genius.

Now for a short creative writing exercise. Imagine your children at the end of this century, looking back on the how the world has changed since they were young. Give us the capsule version of the story you'd like them to be able to tell to their grandchildren: the story where it all goes right.

It won't all go right. At it's very best, it will be a mess, a struggle, full of crises and tragedies along the way.

The story they tell will undoubtedly be one of rebellion. It is very rare, historically, for major transformations of rights or justice to occur without disruptive social movements cracking open the social and political order from below. Slavery wasn't abolished in British colonies in the 1830s simply because paternalistic parliamentarians like William Wilberforce were successful lobbyists—it would never have happened without the great Jamaica slave revolt of 1831. The Suffragettes wouldn't have got very far without the militant actions of the Women's Social and Political Union, founded by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903, whose members chained themselves to railings, broke windows of public buildings, set post boxes on fire and went on hunger strikes.

My grandchildren will tell stories of the twenty-first century rebels who were part of this grand historical tradition. There will always be people working within the system, trying to reform it from the inside of traditional institutions—political parties, business and so on. But the story the future will tell will be that their actions would have had limited impact without the radical flank movements who shook up the system, who changed the public conversation, who finally switched on our acorn brains.

And there was a rousing call that became their motto and that was never forgotten: Time Rebels of the World, Unite!

LIZ JENSEN IS THE AUTHOR OF EIGHT NOVELS INCLUDING THE ECO-THRILLERS THE RAPTURE AND THE UNINVITED. IN 2019 SHE CO-FOUNDED THE EXTINCTION REBELLION GROUP WRITERS REBEL, WHICH PUTS LITERATURE IN THE SERVICE OF THE ENVIRONMENT, WRITERSREBEL.COM.

Science Fiction and the Power of Storytelling

Roman Krznaric

An extract from Roman Krznaric's new book *The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World*

While the time rebellion in politics and economics has only developed since the 1970s, novelists and film makers have been extending our imaginations into the future for over a century. One early exponent was Charles Dickens; in *A Christmas Carol*, the 'Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come' shows the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge the death of Tiny Tim and his own neglected grave. Yet the real leap into the future came in the late nineteenth century with the writings of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, founders of science fiction, a genre now often known as 'speculative fiction'. Time machines, men in the moon and being lost in space soon became part of our everyday vocabulary.

Today it can almost feel like we are overdosing on it, with Hollywood pumping out a succession of apocalyptic sci-fi blockbusters like *The Day After Tomorrow*, in which climate change creates a giant superstorm that brings about a new ice age. It is easy to be disparaging of this 'apoco-tainment' industry, which gives us plenty of emotional and high-tech thrills but often fails to forge a deep sense of connection with the fate of future people. Yet there are just as many serious and thoughtful attempts to explore possible futures, from novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and its sequel *The Testaments*, to films like *Children of Men*, based on P.D. James's novel, set in a world where two decades of human infertility has left society on the brink of collapse and our species facing extinction.

In one of the first systematic attempts to study the genre, scholars at the University of Lisbon analysed the dominant themes in 64 of the most influential science fiction films and novels over the last 150 years, ranging from Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* to Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* and James Cameron's *Avatar*. By coding their content into over 200 thematic categories, clear patterns began to appear. In 27 per cent of the sample, technology had become a tool for manipulation and social control. The destruction of the living world appeared in 39 per cent of the books and films, and acute food scarcity was a theme in 28 per cent, while 31 per cent contained resistance movements to fight oppressive political systems and extreme inequality. One of the study's main conclusions was that speculative fiction and film don't simply help us visualise and connect with the abstract notion of 'the future', but also operate as an early warning system that actively engages us with the risks of technology or resource exploitation far more effectively than the dispassionate analyses of scientists or long government reports. It can politicise us, socialise us and alter us. According to the authors, sci-fi has a capacity to 'speak its truth to power' and promotes 'an ethics of precaution and responsibility'.

So it might be fictional, it might be entertainment, but it might also be a message. Kim Stanley Robinson, who has tackled the impacts of global warming and the challenges of colonising other worlds in a series of politically savvy bestselling novels such as *New York 2140* and *Aurora*, says the purpose of his writing is to tell 'the story of the next century'. All his science fiction is intensely grounded in the latest climate and technology research, and although it might explore human foibles as much as any literary novel, its larger purpose is to help us understand the crises that are coming our way and inspire us to act now to prevent or minimise them. They are a wake-up call. Robinson describes his books as 'realism about our time'.

If I were to highlight a single example to illustrate the 'early warning' power of science fiction, it would be Olaf Stapledon's prophetic masterpiece *Star Maker*, published in 1937. The novel describes a distant planet very much like ours known as the Other Earth, which is similarly populated by humans. One day, a geologist among them discovers a ten-million-year-old lithographic plate etched with a diagram of a radio resembling those in their own society.

The inhabitants of this planet cannot believe that there was once a human civilisation as technologically advanced as their own that had collapsed and disappeared, and comfort themselves with the belief that the diagram must have been left by some other intelligent but less hardy species that had experienced a brief flicker of civilisation. According to Stapledon, 'It was agreed that man, once he had reached such a height of culture, would never have fallen from it.'

What was the eventual fate of the people of the Other Earth? Theirs was a curious society, where radio technology became so advanced that most of the inhabitants carried a radio receiver in their pockets that stimulated their brains merely by touching it. Through this 'radio–brain–stimulation', people could experience the sensory pleasures of a banquet without eating, take part in a thrilling motorbike race without any danger, travel to wherever they pleased and even enjoy radio-induced sex. 'Such was the power of this kind of entertainment that both men and women were nearly always seen with one hand in a pocket,' Stapledon tells us. Eventually 'a system was invented by which a man could retire to bed for life and spend all his time receiving radio programmes'.

Governments on the Other Earth soon realised that they could manipulate this virtual world of 'radio bliss', using the receivers to broadcast nationalist propaganda messages that demonised their enemies. The result was the outbreak of devastating wars. Not long after, scientists discovered that the planet's weak gravitational field was causing the gradual loss of the precious oxygen that sustained life. Although they had always possessed a self-confident belief that their civilisation could overcome any challenge 'by means of its unique scientific knowledge', one of the unintended consequences of the radio-induced wars was that scientific advancement had been set back by at least a century, leaving the people of the Other Earth insufficient time to solve the problem of their deteriorating atmosphere. Their fate was settled. They were destined for extinction.

Stapledon may have written all this over 80 years ago, but there could hardly be a better parable for our times. As we fiddle distractedly with our own digital versions of radio bliss in our pockets, might we become yet another lost civilisation to be discovered in the rock strata by the geologists of tomorrow?

ROMAN KRZNARIC IS A PUBLIC PHILOSOPHER WHO WRITES ABOUT THE POWER OF IDEAS TO CHANGE SOCIETY. HIS LATEST BOOK IS THE GOOD ANCESTOR: HOW TO THINK LONG TERM IN A SHORT TERM WORLD. HIS PREVIOUS INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLERS, INCLUDING EMPATHY, THE WONDERBOX AND CARPE DIEM REGAINED, HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED IN MORE THAN 20 LANGUAGES. AFTER GROWING UP IN SYDNEY AND HONG KONG, ROMAN STUDIED AT THE UNIVERSITIES OF OXFORD, LONDON AND ESSEX, WHERE HE GAINED HIS PHD IN POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY. HE IS FOUNDER OF THE WORLD'S FIRST EMPATHY MUSEUM AND IS A RESEARCH FELLOW OF THE LONG NOW FOUNDATION AND A MEMBER OF THE CLUB OF ROME. ROMAN KZNARIC ACKNOWLEDGES THE DARUG AND GURINGAI PEOPLE AS THE TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND WHERE HE GREW UP.

CALL TO ACTION

On his website www.romankrznaric.com, Roman Krznaric presents a list of over 50 time rebel organisations dedicated to intergenerational justice and taking the long view, from Afro Rithms from the Future to Doughnut Economics Action Lab. Look up three of them and asking yourself what you can do in practice to promote their cause.

WRITERS REBEL platforms quality fiction, non-fiction and poetry from writers and activists engaged in the climate and ecological emergency. If you would like to pitch an idea, or offer help on our editorial, social media or website team, contact us.

Website: writersrebel.com

Twitter: @XrRebel

xrwritersrebel@gmail.com

xrwr.volunteers@gmail.com