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Decolonising Speculative Fiction

Postcolonial Studies Association
Newsletter

June 2018

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Editors' Introduction

Isabelle Hesse and Edward Powell

We are very excited to write the editorial for our first special issue of the PSA newsletter – Decolonising Speculative Fiction. We had a fantastic response to our CFP and received a number of great contributions that explore the topic of decolonising speculative fiction (SF) – what that means, how it is happening, and why it should be of interest to postcolonial critics.

SF, of course, isn't written only by white people: this has been the case ever since the genre's emergence during the height of European imperialism. All too often, though, the history of white SF has overshadowed those of African SF, of South Asian SF, of South American SF, and of the many Indigenous SFs.

Beginning with Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan's groundbreaking anthology *So Long Been Dreaming* (2002) the last twenty-five years have seen increasing attention among academics, cultural gatekeepers, and mainstream metropolitan audiences to SF written from beyond the small space of white Euro-America.[1] 2011 saw a notable milestone, when Nigerian-American author Nnedi

Okorafor won the World Fantasy Award for her 2010 novel *Who Fears Death*: look out for HBO's forthcoming adaptation, to be produced by George R.R. Martin. The success of Marvel's 2018 film adaptation of *The Black Panther* was unexpected but hugely encouraging, as Afrofuturism found mainstream appeal.[2]

And yet, the producers of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) were met with thousands of accusations of promoting 'white genocide', simply for casting John Boyega and Lupita Nyong'o in starring roles.[3] Meanwhile, the Hugo Awards have faced 'concerted campaigns' against nominations that are 'overtly to the Left'.[4] More generally, white SF remains overrepresented in literature, while in film, television, and other visual media, white protagonists continue to dominate.

The reduction of literary history to the contributions of whites; the subsequent overrepresentation of white voices and imaginations, past and present; a group of writers and critics contesting this overrepresentation by

recovering histories of SF beyond its hegemonic Eurowestern branch, while also reinventing the genre itself by drawing upon other cultural resources and historical experiences; and a subsequent reactionary pushback from the dominant group. This will sound all too familiar to scholars of postcolonial literature and culture.

But there are more fundamental reasons why the decolonisation of SF might be of particular interest to postcolonial studies. Consider Graham Huggan's description of the field's 'capacity to undertake a critical exploration of the territorial imperatives of colonialism, and its frequently *speculative* consideration of alternatives to these imperatives'.[5] The term 'postcolonialism' itself – so maligned for misrepresenting the neocolonial present – is speculative, invoking a possibility that remains unrealized. Like SF, then, postcolonialism is concerned not just with how the world currently is, but also what it could be like.

Meanwhile, as Okorafor has noted, SF 'carries the potential

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to change the world. Literally. It *has* changed the world' [6]. Many of the world-changing technologies developed over the last century were inspired by SF. The genre has shaped the future, by shaping what we imagine the future to be, or what we want it to be – and thus, by extension, the Utopian desires that drive technological innovation and social change. Decolonising SF ensures that the futures the genre helps produce aren't marked by a grossly unequal distribution of political, economic, and cultural power that favours whites.

The contributions to this special issue take up the theme of decolonising SF in various ways: some recover the histories of SF beyond its white Eurowestern branch; while others consider what futures and alternative presents Indian, African, Filipino, and Indigenous SF imagine, and how they differ to those imagined by Eurowestern writers.

Mykaela Saunders's article gives an overview of SF in an Australian Indigenous context, and discusses how recent texts have engaged with notions of ecocide, consciousness, and

have engaged with notions of ecocide, consciousness, and agency.

E. Dawson Varughese examines SF in India, with particular focus on the post-millennial novel and its relationship with Indian mythology and fantasy.

Christin Hoene's article explores how the first Bengali SF work – Jagadish Chandra Bose's short story 'Niruddesher Kahini' ('Runaway Cyclone') – brings together science fiction and magical realism.

Sinéad Murphy considers how Iraqi SF images the future through the example of a recent anthology edited by Hassan Blasim – *Iraq+100: Stories from a Century After the Invasion* (2015) – which is also reviewed by Annie Webster in the book review section of this newsletter.

Vida Cruz gives us an overview of the state of Philippine science fiction, with a particular focus on its post-colonial and post-imperial history; while **Mark Bould** discusses how Nigerian-American Deji Bryce

Olukotun's novel *After the Flare* (2017) presents a vision of the future rooted in Nigerian cultural heritage.

Cathy Covell Waegner's contribution turns to Indigenous SF in a Native American context, with a specific focus on irony in *Treaty Shirts*, Gerald Vizenor's speculative novel on the fortunes of the Constitution of the White Earth Nation (CWEN).

Alan Muller considers how the last year has seen SF in South Africa becoming less white; and **Roy Tristan Agustin** examines Dean Francis Alfar's short story 'L' Aquilone Du Estrellas' ('The Kite of Stars') in light of postcolonial theory.

The book review section includes reviews of both general theoretical works as well as creative anthologies. **Sambuddha Jash's** discussion focuses on E. Dawson Varughese's *Genre Fiction of New India: Post-Millennial Receptions of "Weird" Narratives* (Routledge, 2016), followed by three reviews of recent anthologies in the field: **Andrew Stones** shares his thoughts on Nalo Hopkinson

and Uppinder Mehan's *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004); **Annie Webster** discusses Hassan Blasim's *Iraq+100* (Comma Press, 2015); and **Rebecca Macklin** reads Grace Dillon's *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (University of Arizona Press, 2012) for us. Finally, this issue also includes reports from **Sibendu Chakraborty** and **Rodrigo Liceaga Mendoza**, both of whom received PSA funding in 2017.

Happy reading!

References

[1] Over the last twenty-five years, various anthologies have collected SF from beyond Europe, North America, and Australasia: *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2001) and *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* (2005); *Cosmos Latinos: An Anthology of Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain* (2004); *Afro-Future Females* (2008); *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012); *AfroSF* (2013) and *AfroSFv2* (2015); *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and*

Beyond (2013); *We See a Different Frontier: A Postcolonial Speculative Fiction Anthology* (2013); and *Iraq + 100: Stories from a Century After the Invasion* (2015). Jessica Langer's *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (2009) was an early engagement with empire and race in contemporary SF in film, literature, and videogames; around the same time, John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008) traced SF's origins to the colonial adventure stories of late-nineteenth-century writers like H. Rider Haggard. More recently, Eric D. Smith's *Globalization, Utopia and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope* (2012) discusses the Utopian import of contemporary SF from the peripheries of the world-system. Various periodicals have also broadened the SF debate beyond Anglophone metropolitan writers, especially *Science Fiction Studies*, which has featured special issues on 'Global Science Fiction' (March 2000), Slipstream (March 2011), Afrofuturism (July 2007), SF and globalisation (November 2012), Chinese SF (March 2013), and Indian SF (November 2016). Meanwhile, special issues on African SF have featured in *Paradoxa* (2013) and *The*

Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry (2016).

[2] Milena Mikael-Debass, 'How "Black Panther" is Bringing Afrofuturism into the Mainstream', *Vice News*, 7th February 2018

[https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/437d9j/how-black-panther-is-bringing-afrofuturism-into-the-mainstream]

[3] Ira Madison III, 'Some White Guys Are Boycotting Star Wars: Episode VII Because It Promotes "White Genocide"', *Vulture*, 19 October 2015

[<http://www.vulture.com/2015/10/some-white-guys-are-boycotting-stars-wars-vii.html>]

[4] Anon., 'Hugo awards shortlist dominated by rightwing campaign', *The Guardian*, 26 April 2016

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/26/hugo-awards-shortlist-rightwing-campaign-sad-rabid-puppies>]

[5] Graham Huggan, *Interdisciplinary Measures: Literature and the Future of Postcolonial Studies* (Liverpool UP, 2008), p. 15.

[6] Okorafor, 'African Science Fiction is Still Alien', *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*, 15 January 2014

[<http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2014/01/african-science-fiction-is-still-alien.html>]