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The Two Speculations: The Poetics of Contemporary Speculative Fiction

A dissertation presented

by

Cecilia Mancuso

to

The Department of English

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

English

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

April 2021

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The Two Speculations: The Poetics of Contemporary Speculative Fiction

Abstract

The 21st century has seen the increasing breakdown of boundaries between traditional literary genres, which has led to the establishment of umbrella terms like “speculative fiction” to encompass a large variety of genre traditions and admixtures. However, much uncertainty persists about how to describe what speculative fiction is and does, as the variety it encompasses makes a single comprehensive definition difficult and potentially flattening. This project works to establish “multiplicative speculation” and “predictive speculation” as poetic concepts which can be used to describe what speculative fiction can do, to analyze how the genre has evolved in the last two decades and how it interacts with contemporary politics and culture, and to build a model for how to organize texts using post-genre formations.

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To all who gave me hope

Acknowledgements

Like any work of multiplicative speculation, this project would not exist without the tireless collaborative efforts of a number of people and communities.

First and foremost, thanks to my family – to my parents for being the rock that kept me anchored in all kinds of weather, and to my brother, who blazed the trail and helped me at every step to follow after.

Many thanks to my committee - to my chair, Professor Stephanie Burt, whose expertise in the realm of speculative fiction has been invaluable, and who never hesitated to leap to my aid when the chips were down; to Professor Kelly Rich, who has patiently, generously, and tirelessly offered me feedback from the perspective of a curious outsider to the genre and peerless support in my graduate school journey; and to Professor Amanda Claybaugh, who it's no exaggeration to say taught me how to write academically, and who so vitally introduced me to the kinds of public writing that most energized my scholarship.

Deepest gratitude to all the peers, colleagues, and students who took time to discuss my ideas or inspire them – most particularly Sophia Mao and Josephine Reece, without whose insights this project would not exist, but also the members of the Harvard English department, the Women, Gender, and Sexuality program, staff at the Center for Talented Youth (particularly Boyd White), the Learning Lab at the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, the Harvard Bureau of Study Counsel, the NYU Game Center, and the students I was lucky enough to instruct both at Harvard and the Center for Talented Youth.

This project would also not have been possible without the support of members of the Writing Oasis – much gratitude both for keeping me writing and sharing experiences and commiserations that kept this project grounded – as well as the many workshops and groups offered by the Harvard Bureau of Study Counsel, particularly “What Are You Doing With Your Life?” which kept me asking the important questions about my values, my priorities, and my personal and emotional health throughout this process.

Thanks to the professional publications, organizations and conferences who gave me a proving ground in which to test and refine my ideas – to *Public Books, The Guardian,* and *Ancillary Review of Books*; to Harvard’s 20th Century and Contemporary Colloquium, the Science Fiction Research Association, the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present, and the Popular Culture Association.

Finally, many thanks to the tireless work of fans and fan scholars everywhere for offering an invaluable foothold into culture in the twenty-first century.

Don't just fight the darkness. Bring the light.

− Kameron Hurley, *The Light Brigade*

Introduction

Beyond Buckets

I like to tell people I'm a "buckets person" – I like sorting things into clearly labelled buckets. This is a big reason why I got into studying what we call "genre theory" – thinking through what makes a text belong to a particular genre or not. Historically, doing genre theory has been one big bucket-sorting exercise – debating which rules a text has to follow or which characteristics it needs to have in order to sort it into a particular genre bucket, whether that's science fiction or horror or Nordic Noir.

But recently, accelerating in the last 20 years or so, texts have been combining, remixing, and playing with genre in a way that has made it difficult for this bucket-sorting to accurately describe many texts. A simplistic example: if a text has dragons but it's set in space, is it science fiction or fantasy? Do we need to get a new bucket and call it "science fantasy" and put this space dragons text in it? If we do, what happens if we then find a text that is 90% dragons and magic, but then we find out at the end of the book that a lot of the "magic" was really just science all along? Do we call that science fantasy? Do we pull out *another* bucket and call it "science fantasy that's mostly science?" One can imagine we would end up with a nearly infinite supply of buckets describing every possible combination and ratio of one "genre" to another. Insofar as genre labels are about giving us a useful way to find and talk about the relationships between texts, this ever-multiplying number of categories would probably get pretty confusing pretty quickly and not be very useful.

Recognizing this problem, genre theorists have been looking for a new model – a new way of thinking and talking about genre. One result of this has been increased usage of umbrella terms which cover a number of "genres" as well as texts which combine them or fall between them. One of these umbrella terms is "speculative fiction," which is often used to shorthand a lot of different genres – particularly science fiction and fantasy – and texts that play around with them and combine them in funky ways. That helps with things like shelving books at a bookstore – just have one big speculative fiction section and have done with it! – but it does still leave scholars of literature like me with a problem.

Part of what's useful about the buckets model is that it tells literary scholars what kinds of language to use when talking about a text, and what kinds of things to look for. If we know that something is detective fiction, we can use certain language to describe it – "whodunit," "locked room puzzle" – and we know certain things to expect that text might include, like a "twist" at the end where "the butler did it." This language and these expectations we have of a particular genre are called its "poetics" – the building blocks that make a text a certain genre, and help it do what that genre does best. We tend to write about genre texts that use or break with that genre's poetics in an interesting way; for example, we might write about a piece of detective fiction where there is no detective – the reader is the detective – because it's interesting that the text plays with the poetics of detective fiction while still being recognizable as detective fiction.

But when we start to use big umbrella terms like "speculative fiction" to describe lots of genres and genre mixtures at once, we don't have a "poetics" to use – because it's a new-ish and intentionally vague concept, we lack a specific set of language to use to talk about what's important in a speculative fiction text, or expectations about what speculative texts do or do not do. This has led to a lot of people asking, "what makes speculative fiction, *speculative fiction*,

really?" Our first instinct is to grab a bucket and start writing down rules for what speculative fiction must contain or what rules it must follow in order to go in the speculative fiction bucket. But we resist this urge, because we don't need more buckets! In an effort to avoid the buckets model, we might instead ask ourselves, "what can speculative fiction *do*?" The big difference in this question is that it asks about speculation as a process – something a text *do* – rather than speculative fiction as a label – something a text *is*. It's also a more inclusive way of thinking about genre – by asking the question this way, we're not trying to define what makes something speculative fiction *and nothing else* in the way that we might say something is science fiction, not fantasy. By asking what a speculative text does, in addition to whatever else it might do or be, we're instituting something a lot more like a "tags" system, where we can sort texts by a particular tag, but being tagged as one thing doesn't stop them from also being tagged as other things as well.

The major goal of my dissertation is to help create a "poetics" of speculative fiction – a set of language for talking about what texts under the umbrella of speculative fiction can do. I didn't set out to singlehandedly create this language – that's a huge, ever-changing project! – but to suggest just one set of language we might use to talk about how speculation works in art these days. In my research, I decided one important thing that "speculation" does – whether it's an investment broker trying to predict what a stock price will be tomorrow, or an author writing about long long ago, in a galaxy far far away - is help us to imagine the future. But those two examples I gave – the investment broker and the speculative author - affect how we imagine the future in different ways. The investment broker is "speculating" about tomorrow in the hope that they can narrow down many possibilities and predict the most likely future, in this case so they can profit off of that prediction. Reading a book about a world in which things are totally

different from your present reality, on the other hand, has a more abstract value – it sparks your imagination, adding a whole bunch of ideas and questions and possibilities to your mental database, and expands the horizons of what kinds of futures you can imagine. This can be really literal and concrete – you read about a world with a very different system for talking about gender, and you begin to imagine what a future in which we talk about gender differently would be like. Or it can be more abstract – you read about a different world and start to realize you've taken certain things about our world for granted, as if they have always been that way or could never change, when really this isn't true.

I think the difference between these two kinds of "speculation" is important, so I came up with some terms that we can use to describe them – "predictive speculation" and "multiplicative speculation." "Predictive speculation" is speculation where the goal is to narrow down a number of future possibilities to the one which maximizes a particular thing. The investment broker is participating in predictive speculation when they try to use all of the available data and complex algorithms to narrow down all of the possible stock prices tomorrow to the most likely stock price – they are trying to speculate about the future in a way that maximizes profit, or maybe likelihood. "Multiplicative speculation" has a different goal – it tries to multiply the number of possible futures we can imagine by showing us lots of different possibilities and reminding us things could always be different. Any text which, by presenting its story and world, inspires its reader to imagine things could be different or question something about their world that they took for granted could be said to be participating in multiplicative speculation, regardless of whether these possibilities seem better or the questions are profound.

If it's not already obvious from these descriptions, one of these kinds of speculative fiction is already in very wide use in our society – predictive speculation powers a lot of our

financial and governmental decision-making, particularly under capitalism (that's right, we're talking about the c word). The goal of capitalism is to maximize profit while minimizing other things like time, cost, and liability. Because predictive speculation is, as a mental exercise, built to find the single future in which something is maximized, it's a very valuable tool for systems like capitalism to create efficiency.

But it also has a more sinister effect – if, for example, we're used to using predictive speculation to find the most likely or plausible future, and somebody comes back and tells you that they ran the numbers and the most likely or plausible future is one in which, for example, nothing can be done about climate change and devastating effects on the environment are inevitable, that's probably going to have an effect on the way you conduct your life. You might start taking longer showers and leaving the lights on, stop bothering to shop local, buy sustainable, or find carbon-neutral options because, well, if it's too late already, why bother? You might start buying land in the Midwest because it's the only place that will definitely not be underwater a hundred years from now. You might just buy yourself a pint of ice cream and eat the whole thing in one sitting while watching Netflix to deal with the emotional burden of knowing the planet as we know it is likely on an unchangeable course towards disintegrating in your lifetime. But you might notice that a lot of these reactions involve consuming things – consuming more resources, buying more things, continuing convenient but destructive habits. You might also notice that all of these reactions would benefit – often directly generate profit for – institutions with a financial stake in you consuming these things.

Predictive speculation can be a valuable tool, but it can also very, *very* easily be abused by capitalist institutions and people in power. It can create a profound sense of hopelessness – something I like to call a "garbage time mentality," the sense that we're in the final moments of a

game we feel we have already lost, so there's no use trying. And this "garbage time mentality" can be incredibly profitable – both convincing us to consume in profitable ways, but also convincing us that it's not worth, for example, organizing politically to hold large corporations responsible for their carbon emissions, because it's too late anyway. The different chapters of my dissertation talk about different problems that can arise when predictive speculation is abused in this way to create hopelessness, to devalue the act of imagination itself, to convince us that inaction and resigning ourselves to bad futures is somehow more realistic or pragmatic than acting to make the future better, and to pretend that a future that is the best for only a specific group of people (usually people in power) is the best future we can hope for. I saw the three major problems of predictive speculation as follows: one, it maximizes for imminence and plausibility (something we might call realism); two, it minimizes estrangement; and three, it's insecure and ashamed of its associations with speculative fiction, and spends a lot of energy creating exclusive definitions for itself.

After diagnosing these problems, the rest of my dissertation focuses on highlighting examples of multiplicative speculation in fiction that counteract or avoid these problems. "Multiplicative speculation" works as a kind of antidote to predictive speculation, because predictive speculation is about narrowing possibilities and multiplicative speculation is about multiplying and expanding them. So for one, I went out and found an example of fiction that instead maximizes possibility and variety – in this case, a 2010s subgenre called "hopepunk." For two, I found an example of what it looks like to maximize estrangement in a text – in this case, a space opera series called *Machineries of Empire*. And for three, I went out and found an example of a contemporary speculative genre which is not insecure or ashamed, and which focuses on creating inclusive definitions that allow a lot of texts to participate in it – in this case,

the genre of Afrofuturism. The goal of all of this searching and analysis was to define multiplicative speculation more clearly and show what it could do that predictive speculation can't. In so doing, it fleshes out the definitions of multiplicative and predictive speculation and makes the argument that we need these terms in order to make sense of some of the developments that occurred in speculative fiction in the last 20 years or so.

Chapter 1

Hopepunk and the Two Speculations

I. Introduction

"The opposite of grimdark is hopepunk / pass it on."[1] In August 2017, this two-line Tumblr post by blogger and author Alexandra Rowland launched a viral campaign for the establishment of "hopepunk" as a new subgenre of speculative fiction. Though the original post was little more than a joke, a play on words, Rowland found themselves bombarded with calls to seriously expand on the term and its definition, which they did 2019's "One Atom of Justice, One Molecule of Mercy, and the Empire of Unsheathed Knives." Offering itself as a radical but happy medium between the paralyzing resignation and cynicism of nihilist "grimdark" fantasy and the passivity, false sense of security, and "chosen one" underpinning of "noblebright" fantasy, hopepunk became a rallying cry for a wide range of speculative fiction judged to be weaponizing hope against an overwhelming wave of hopelessness in contemporary media and life.[2] The coining of hopepunk was met with an initial groundswell of support that only grew in the following year after journalistic explainers revived the term, earning praise for its self-organization around affects like hope and its proposed mechanisms for surviving and resisting the logics of capitalism. However, hopepunk also garnered several recurring critiques as it grew in popularity, including its incoherency as genre or movement in the traditional sense; the

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[1] Alexandra Rowland, "The opposite of grimdark is hopepunk. Pass it on," *Tumblr*, August 1, 2017, https://ariaste.tumblr.com/post/163697878524/ariaste-ariaste-the-opposite-of-grimdark-is.

[2] Alexandra Rowland, "One Atom of Justice, One Molecule of Mercy, and the Empire of Unsheathed Knives," *Festive Ninja,* 2019, https://festive.ninja/one-atom-of-justice-one-molecule-of-mercy-and-the-empire-of-unsheathed-knives-alexandra-rowland/..

confusion of tones, moods, and affects it purported to encompass; and its failure to acknowledge the indebtedness of its survival mechanisms to the experiences and work of marginalized people thinking and living alternative futurisms.

I argue that hopepunk, while imperfectly executed as a phenomenon, nonetheless unearthed important truths about contemporary affect, genre, and the nature of speculation that deserve to outlive it. First, by defining itself in opposition to a current trend of hopeless speculative fiction, hopepunk uses colloquial language to astutely diagnose something warped in the fabric of contemporary dystopia - a trend only made legible in the scholarly sphere by triangulating the concerns of three scholarly discourses (utopian studies, affect theory, and alternative futurisms). Second, by proposing itself as a relatively loose collection of texts united by a fluid set of affects and ideologies, hopepunk strives to model one possibility of what categorical intertextual relationships might look like in a post-genre world which is moving away from traditional spatial and mutually exclusive models of genre and towards defining textual identity and relationships in terms of what texts do or enable for their readers. However, as previously stated, hopepunk's vital contributions are mired almost inextricably in its blindspots and weaknesses as a phenomenon.

In this chapter, through a systematic postmortem of hopepunk's successes and failures, I develop "multiplicative speculation" as a contemporary mode of speculation which preserves hopepunk's strengths while addressing and improving on its shortcomings. First, through a synthesis of popular, journalistic, and scholarly engagements with hopepunk from its inauguration through its heyday, I identify the factors that made hopepunk virally resonant. Next, through an equal and opposite analysis, I identify the shortcomings which ultimately hamstrung the fledgling movement. I then turn to defining "multiplicative speculation," speculation which

expands one's future imaginaries, in opposition to "predictive speculation," which seeks to narrow down multiple future possibilities to a single optimized one. I read multiplicative speculation as a triangulation of a set of concerns drawn from utopian studies, affect theory, and alternative futurisms, particularly intersectional queer futurity. I propose multiplicative speculation as the realization of a new, fundamentally inclusive, post-genre model of marking categorical relationships between texts - one answer to the question of what speculation as a method or process *does*, rather than what speculation as a genre *is*. Above all, I argue that the interplay between multiplicative and predictive tendencies in contemporary speculative fiction is a vital lens through which to interpret its evolution. Finally, I turn to Kameron Hurley as an exemplar of multiplicative speculation, and interpret her 2019 novel *The Light Brigade* as an example, synthesizing the tenets of hopepunk it practices with their origins in theories of alternative futurity - in this case, Aimee Bahng's "migrant futurity."

II. What Hopepunk Gets Right

Hopepunk's virality suggests it has its finger on the pulse of something vital in contemporary culture, and it certainly succeeds as a cultural phenomenon on several fronts. First, hopepunk's manifestos successfully outline functional strategies or philosophies with which to combat the uncertainty and the logics of capitalism which dominate contemporary life, particularly the condition of cruel optimism. Second, hopepunk identifies a number of specific texts which are working to preserve hope in the contemporary, assembling through a crowdsourced effort vibrant and varied hopepunk "canons" which are markedly (and not coincidentally) diverse, featuring a large proportion of works by and about marginalized people. Third, hopepunk diagnoses a significant struggle in the realm of dystopia, stumbling by popular

analysis into a much larger and longer scholarly conversation in the arena of utopian studies; in short, it brings to the fore a battle for the soul of contemporary dystopia between utopians and anti-utopians. Hopepunk owes its brief but intense virality to the resonances it found with contemporary readers via these contributions.

Hopepunk's first major strength is that it outlines some functional strategies or philosophies with which to contend with the uncertainty and precarity that typifies contemporary life for many, and to combat the logics of capitalism these conditions fuel. As a philosophical movement, the constituent criteria that make up hopepunk mark it as a set of survival mechanisms for the uncertainty and unpredictability of life in the contemporary. Two of the criteria of hopepunk - belief "that the fight to build positive social systems is a fight worth fighting," and that "the fight to achieve human progress [is] something permanent, with no fixed 'happy' end" - reflect hopepunk's investment in protecting us from complacency, from settling for what Rowland has called "false utopia."[3,4] The other two criteria of hopepunk - an "emphasis on community-building through cooperation rather than conflict," and acts of "radical empathy," or "choosing to do the good, kind thing, even when the system doesn't encourage that, as an act of courage" - reflect hopepunk's investment in modelling ways for us to persist through the perpetual uncertainty of the future.[5,6] It is, as Rowland put it once in an interview, "the man standing at Julius Caesar's shoulder as he rides through the cheering crowds, whispering to the

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[3] Aja Romano, "Hopepunk, the latest storytelling trend, is all about weaponized optimism," *Vox*, December 27, 2018, https://www.vox.com/2018/12/27/18137571/what-is-hopepunk-noblebright-grimdark.

[4] Alexandra Rowland, "Episode 1: False Utopias and...Robot Sex??", *Be the Serpent*, January 31, 2018, https://betheserpent.podbean.com/e/podbean_best_podcast_hosting_audio_video_blog_hosting/.

[5] Kayti Burt, "Are You Afraid of the Darkness?: A Hopepunk Explainer," *Den of Geek*, November 7, 2019, https://www.denofgeek.com/culture/are-you-afraid-of-the-darkness-a-hopepunk-explainer/.

[6] Romano, "Hopepunk, the latest storytelling trend."

emperor: 'This too shall pass.' In some contexts, it is a warning (grimdark). In others, a comfort (hopepunk)."[7]

By emphasizing in its tenets the embrace of and derivation of hope from future uncertainty, hopepunk is poised to offer readers an escape route from the core logics of contemporary capitalism - in particular, seemingly inescapable cycles of aspirational subjectivity. Since the 2011 debut of Lauren Berlant's affect theory lodestone *Cruel Optimism,* identifying and analyzing conditions of aspirational subjectivity - broadly speaking, entrapment within cycles of self-transformation without clear motive or reasonable expectation of success - has defined discussions of hope within the academy. For many, Berlant's "cruel optimism" - the oft-quoted condition "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your own flourishing"[8] - seemed to neatly capture both the precarity of life under neoliberal capitalism and our widespread denial of that precarity. Because hopepunk treats the uncertainty of the future as a boon, a space of possibility, it offers itself as a potential escape route from conditions like cruel optimism, which cease to function in the absence of firm expectations of the future. In conditions of cruel optimism, power and entrapment in the cycle is maintained by the fiction of arrival - of holding out for an acute experience of having achieved a specific thing. By investing more value in the concept of the fight eternal than a particular moment of arrival, and generating hope from the future's uncertainty rather than attempting to in some way eradicate or "fix" it, hopepunk leverages the benefits of multiple possible futures rather than foreclosing on them for the sake of certainty - particularly the illusory certainty of cruel optimism.

The second piece of important cultural work hopepunk performs is to identify a group of

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[7] Kayti Burt, "A Hopepunk Guide: Interview with Alexandra Rowland," *Den of Geek,* November 6, 2019, https://www.denofgeek.com/culture/a-hopepunk-guide-interview-with-alexandra-rowland/.

[8] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011), 1.

specific texts which might help to preserve hope in the contemporary, creating a number of diverse and varied crowdsourced hopepunk "canons" for readers to work through. Importantly, these canons were not established by Rowland in their initial manifesto, but rather by the journalistic explainers that brought hopepunk to the mainstream in the year after its coining.[9] With few exceptions, the vast majority of texts most frequently identified as hopepunk are post-2000 works of contemporary speculative fiction, particularly works by or about marginalized people. Animated gem *Steven Universe* is celebrated for its found-family community building and the radical empathy of its motley cast both in their efforts to save the world and more mundane moments of friendship and camaraderie. *Avatar: the Last Airbender* and its follow-on *The Legend of Korra* combine their own take on radical empathy with a perpetually reaffirmed sense that positive social systems are worth fighting for, even when one's opponent seems as intractable as the militant nationalism of the Fire Nation. The *Saga* comics series by Brain K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples is recognized for celebrating brief, fleeting moments of fulfillment and equilibrium in darkness, but denying again and again the expectation that the refugee protagonists' fight for a better life will ever truly be "over." Afrofuturist and Africanfuturist texts in particular also frequently make hopepunk lists, with Janelle Monae's iconic music (particularly full-length album *Dirty Computer*) calling for holding onto memories and relationships as a key form of resistance against corrupt systems which seek to eradicate them and violently render uniform individuals who do not fit strict, dehumanizing parameters.

The third and final strength of hopepunk is that it astutely diagnoses a current and significant struggle for the soul of dystopia based on the symptoms of a set of common contemporary affects. The two to three years leading up to hopepunk's debut saw a smattering of

[9] Burt, "Are You Afraid of the Darkness?"; Romano, "Hopepunk, the latest storytelling trend."

popular think pieces on an apparent shift both in the affects of everyday life and in the dystopian fiction which seemed to replicate and amplify them. In 2015's "What's the Matter with Dystopia?" Ursula Heise proposed that the wave of dystopia that seemed to peak in the late 2000s "aspire[d] to unsettle the status quo, but by failing to outline a persuasive alternative, they end[ed] up reconfirming it," producing an accompanying wave of "pervasive social pessimism."[10] Writing for *The New Yorker* in 2017, Jill Lepore marked a similar change in this contemporary dystopian literature - while "dystopia used to be a fiction of resistance," contemporary dystopia had become a "fiction of submission...of helplessness and hopelessness" and a vector for "radical pessimism" whose "only admonition is: Despair more."[11] Catalyzed by this ever-growing cocktail of negative affects both within and beyond speculative fiction - pessimism, despair, resignation - hopepunk's manifestos define it quite literally as an affective counterattack, not just producing hope but "weaponizing" it.[12] Eschewing both the inescapable pessimism of contemporary dystopia and the blind optimism of toxic positivity it might be tempting to reach for instead, hopepunk seeks out something more along the lines of Bloch's "educated hope."

In highlighting these contemporary affects and trying to trace their source in popular media, hopepunk successfully identifies in popular terms the latest volleys in a battle between

[10] Ursula Heise, "What's the Matter with Dystopia?" *Public Books,* February 1, 2015, https://www.publicbooks.org/whats-the-matter-with-dystopia/.

[11] Jill Lepore, "A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction," *The New Yorker,* June 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/05/a-golden-age-for-dystopian-fiction.

[12] Romano, "Hopepunk, the latest storytelling trend."

utopians and anti-utopians which has been raging in cyclical fashion since at least the 1970s.[13,14] In 2020's *Becoming Utopian,* Tom Moylan identifies the ways in which capitalism has both condemned and co-opted the utopian project in the contemporary, one result of which has been an "upsurge" of dystopia in recent decades - a particular trend of dystopia which "feeds a fatalist, anti-utopian pessimism rather than provoking the prophetic awakening of which the dystopian imagination is capable."[15] This cycle of anti-utopian backlash to utopian imagination is itself nothing new, merely a perpetuation of a decades-long pattern that in its last iteration saw the radically utopian texts of the 1970s give way to the paralytically pessimistic cyberpunk dystopias of 1980s, regaining only partial ground in the 1990s.[16] Furthermore, dystopia as a genre has always hybridized what we might colloquially consider utopian and dystopian traditions, with sub-variants of every combination - the "critical dystopia," which "includes at least one utopian enclave or holds out hope that dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia;" the "flawed utopia," which introduces dystopian complications into an initially straightforwardly utopian text; and so forth.[17] But this specific strain of anti-utopian dystopia - though it has

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[13] It's important here to distinguish between dystopia and anti-utopia, which are not synonymous. Per Kim Stanley Robinson: "utopia is the idea that the political order could be run better. Dystopia is the *not,* being the idea that the political order could get worse. Anti-utopias are the *anti*, saying that the idea of utopia itself is wrong and bad, and that any attempt to try to make things better is sure to wind up making things worse, creating an intended or unintended totalitarian state, or some other such political disaster." Kim Stanley Robinson, "Dystopias Now," *Commune Magazine,* November 2, 2018, https://communemag.com/dystopias-now/.

[14] See also the mapping of the "Dystopian Continuum" in Tom Moylan, "The Critical Dystopia," in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 195 fig. 6.1.

[15] Tom Moylan, "Introduction: Becoming Utopian," in *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 2.

[16] For a decade-by-decade account of the ebb and flow of utopianism in 20th century literature, see Raffaela Baccolini, "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction," *PMLA* 119, no. 3 (2004), 518.

[17] Lyman Tower Sargent, "Definitions," in *Utopian Literature in English: An Annotated Bibliography from 1516 to the Present* (University Park, PA: Penn State Libraries Open Publishing, 2016 and continuing), https://openpublishing.psu.edu/utopia/content/definitions.

"linger[ed] like a dormant virus in every dystopian account" - is a uniquely contemporary mutation which has seen anti-utopian ideologies attempt to overwhelm other dystopian varieties, covertly colonize the entire dystopian genre with strict anti-utopianism even as these texts continue to claim to be "false 'dystopian' allies of Utopia."[18,19]

Hopepunk reacts against this trend of anti-utopianism in dystopia with an equal and opposite call for "anti-anti-utopia." The concept, a direct critique of anti-utopianism popularized by Fredric Jameson, defends acts of radical imagination as the inherently valuable and necessary work of the utopian project even as it recognizes - but refuses to be paralyzed or dissuaded by - the negative potential of utopia.[20] Overwhelmingly (though not exclusively, as we will later discuss in greater detail), texts identified as hopepunk fall into the category of "critical dystopia" - dystopia with some core, glimpse, or possibility of utopia - because, as Levitas has theorized, the "critical potential" of dystopia "depends on the presence or absence of a route out."[21] However, seeing dystopia overrun by anti-utopianism, hopepunk considers the genre a lost cause and instead strikes out to form an entirely new category to collect the hope and utopian possibility emptied and banished from dystopia. This duality of hopepunk's identity - both dystopian and not dystopian - led to understandable skepticism about the need for a new term, such as Warren Ellis' argument that "well-written dystopia" is "*already* always about hope," and N.K. Jemisin's rebuttal to a defense of hopepunk on Twitter that "Grimdark is actually the

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[18] Moylan, "The Critical Dystopia," *Scraps of the Untainted Sky,* 195.

[19] Raffaela Baccolini and Tom Moylan, "Introduction: Dystopia and Histories," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge: 2003), 6.

[20] Fredric Jameson, "Introduction: Utopia Now," in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), xvi.

[21] Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times: Optimism/Pessimism and Utopia/Dystopia," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge: 2003), 14.

exception. Hopepunk is… everything else."[22,23] Whether hopepunk was the right response to the takeover of dystopia by anti-utopianism is a matter of debate (one we will address shortly), but hopepunk's efforts to identify what was rotten in dystopia and to identify and bolster a counter-trend were unquestionably both correct and necessary.

III. What Hopepunk Gets Wrong

Despite hopepunk's initial rise to cultural prominence and genuine insight, it faltered as a cultural phenomenon in several regards, leading to several recurring critiques and an ultimately brief life in the pop culture spotlight. First, hopepunk failed to make a compelling argument for itself as a new genre, offering philosophical beliefs and affects in place of the shared formal qualities that traditionally unite genres and tying itself too closely to the overdetermined "-punk" family of subgenres. Second, hopepunk further compromised its coherency by neglecting to fully explain the wide range of affects, tones, and moods present in its impressively but confusingly varied canons. Third, hopepunk struggled to prove itself a "movement" in the traditional sense, lacking a critical mass of self-identified hopepunk creators and instead filling its ranks with texts created before the term's coining, making it impossible for these texts to have participated in the phenomenon self-consciously. Fourth, hopepunk fails to fully address the indebtedness of its philosophies to the experiences and thoughts of marginalized people, its survival mechanisms drawn largely but creditlessly from the work of scholars and cultural commentators of alternate futurisms. That so many texts in hopepunk canons are by or about marginalized people and their experiences, yet few marginalized authors identify with the term, suggests that hopepunk's

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[22] Warren Ellis, "The Hope in Dystopia," *Warren Ellis Ltd*, September 13, 2019, https://warrenellis.ltd/jot/the-hope-in-dystopia/.

[23] N.K. Jemisin, tweet, January 16, 2019. Since deleted.

survival mechanisms unawarely retread (and in some sense colonize) ground already mapped by marginalized thinkers and scholars.

Hopepunk's first misstep lies in declaring itself a new "genre" and yet failing to define itself via clear, consistent, shared formal qualities, as a "genre" in the traditional sense might be expected to. One of the most persistent critiques of hopepunk was that it was a redundant term which failed to carve out truly new ground for itself as a "genre." The sense that hopepunk overlapped with other genres is traceable to two main sources. The first was its tendency to substitute affect in place of formal qualities in its self-definitions. In an editorial for *Foundation*, Paul March-Russell argues that "as expressed, hopepunk is no more coherent than the Occupy placard that read 'Capitalism should be replaced by something nicer,'" doing "little to substantiate hopepunk as an actual movement, rather than a sentiment."[24] The second source of hopepunk's apparent lack of distinct genre-ness originated in its insistence on invoking the "-punk" family of subgenres inaugurated by the cyberpunk of the 1980s. Above and beyond this trend being overused, Lee Konstantinou writing for Slate lamented that hopepunk does perhaps the most un-"punk" thing of all - merely retread already-covered ground: "even when they reject it, these new subgenres often repeat the same gestures as cyberpunk."[25,26] In light of these critiques, it's difficult to rebut the persistent claim that hopepunk defines itself in such a broad and familiar fashion that almost "everything… could be classed as hopepunk," and though I will

[24] Paul March-Russell, "Editorial," *Foundation* 48, no. 132 (2019), 3.

[25] Lee Konstantinou, "Something is Broken in Our Science Fiction," *Slate*, January 15, 2019, https://slate.com/technology/2019/01/hopepunk-cyberpunk-solarpunk-science-fiction-broken.html.

[26] I wholeheartedly agree not only with this critique, but also with Konstantinou's further evaluation that we're still drawn to cyberpunk because "2019 is far more like 1982 than we'd like to admit," and that "cyberpunk is arguably a kind of fiction unable to imagine a future very different from its present." *However,* I disagree with Konstantinou's ultimate thesis that hopepunk's failures in this regard prove that it intentionally "substituted the hunt for a cool new market niche for the work of telling compelling stories that help us think rigorously about how we might make a better world."

argue there is nothing strictly wrong with identifying a contemporary media trend via affect, it marshalls the wrong kind of evidence to prove the invention of a distinct new genre.[27]

Relatedly, hopepunk's second failure is in reconciling or accounting for the wide and seemingly contradictory range of affects, tones, and moods at play in the many works assigned to its canons. Given the dual nature of hopepunk - the unlikely combination of positive and negative affects in its "bloodthirsty, vengeful joy" and "weaponized optimism" - readers and commentators were quick to resolve that duality by flattening it into a simple case of one dominating the other.[28,29] Accounts abounded of hopepunk as texts in which brief glimpses of light help readers withstand gritty violence and perpetual suffering, *or* in which softness, cuteness, and kindness hide serious reckonings and cushion the blows of sudden gut punches… but rarely both.[30] This partly explains how the same proposed hopepunk canon can play host to both the undimmed kind-cuteness of *Steven Universe* and the gritty dystopianism and nightmarish oppression of *Orphan Black,* a tonal whiplash which commentators such as March-Russell found baffling.[31] Though I will argue later that a two-pronged explanation for this range exists - resulting partly from a confusion over what hopepunk is but largely from an unexplained

[27] Abigail Nussbaum, "The Future of Another Timeline by Annalee Newitz," *Strange Horizons,* January 13, 2020, http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/the-future-of-another-timeline-by-annalee-newitz/.

[28] Rowland, One Atom of Justice."

[29] Romano, "Hopepunk, the latest storytelling trend."

[30] Rowland actually anticipated the tendency towards reducing hopepunk to "niceness" in "One Atom of Justice:" "Hopepunk isn't pristine and spotless. Hopepunk is grubby, because that's what happens when you fight. It's hard. It's filthy, sweaty, backbreaking work that never ends. It isn't pretty, and it isn't noble, and it isn't nice, though I expect the natural inclination (and even my own instinctive inclination) is to make it so—to forget the word "radical" in the phrase "radical kindness," to forget the "punk" part of "hopepunk," which is really the operative half of the word. To forget the anger of it and let it soften, because softness is what we're aching for."

[31] Romano, "Hopepunk, the latest storytelling trend."

attempt to champion the full range of contemporary utopian expression - hopepunk does not offer it as part of its manifestos, leaving itself open to critiques of incoherency.

Hopepunk's third issue is how its attempts at canonization undermine the argument that is a coherent "movement" in the traditional sense. Colloquially, a movement is typically understood to indicate a set of authors self-consciously identifying with a group term and creating media that follows a set of stated tenets (tenets which, in contrast to a "genre," may or may not be formal in nature). Hopepunk's attempts to establish itself as a movement, separate from its claims to genrehood, were sabotaged by two factors. The first was the general lack of creators openly self-identifying with the label. Though a wide range show up in the tentative canons assembled by journalists and fans, it's notable that a significant proportion of the most frequently included - such as Becky Chambers for *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* - have never publicly or officially associated themselves with the term, rendering it unclear whether any of these works were produced with the explicit intention of carrying out a hopepunk agenda. The second compromising factor was the frequent inclusion of texts which predated the term's coining. With the earliest nominations going out to texts from as early as the 1950s (the Sam and Frodo subplot from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*) and the 1990s (Kushner's *Angels in America*), it's clear that many of the texts identified as hopepunk could not possibly have participated self-consciously in hopepunk as a movement without the benefit of a time machine. Though the proposal of conceptual backformations is common practice in the case of genre criticism, it is a nigh-insurmountable accusation for a fledgling movement.

Fourthly, and most importantly, hopepunk falters by treating the frequent inclusion of texts by and about marginalized people in its canons largely as coincidence, failing to acknowledge the many important links between its proposed survival methods and those long

established by those who live and think alternative futurisms. This problem starts at the level of canon creation, in the marked disconnect between those who self-identify as hopepunk creators and those most frequently identified in hopepunk canons as participating in hopepunk. Notably, while many of the most consistently identified works of hopepunk are by and about people of color, it's difficult to find even a single example of an author of color self-identifying with the hopepunk label, let alone the high-profile figures most frequently cited like Janelle Monae. One could consider this a rejection of hopepunk's ideals by these creators, but I would instead argue that it is more likely that these works are instead legible as part of existing movements exploring alternative futurisms *without* omitting intersectional consideration of race, such as Afrofuturism. This is further confirmed by the fact that the most arguably high-profile examples of authors actively embracing the hopepunk label - Kameron Hurley circa 2019's *The Light Brigade* and Annalee Newitz circa 2019's *The Future of Another Timeline* - identify as feminist, nonbinary, and/or queer, but also white.[32] I'd argue that, in attempting to create a 'universal' banner around which to rally a counterculture to anti-utopia, hopepunk has only succeeded in creating a queer- and feminist-informed philosophy that blurs or ignores other markers of difference, such as race.

Though this erasure is suggested by the disconnect between those canonized and those self-identifying as hopepunk creators, it's made most clear by a comparison of hopepunk ideology to the work of intersectional queer theorists on alternative futurisms.[33] Hopepunk's

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[32] Kayti Burt, "A Hopepunk Guide: Interview with Annalee Newitz," *Den of Geek,* November 6, 2019, https://www.denofgeek.com/culture/a-hopepunk-guide-interview-with-annalee-newitz/; Kameron Hurley, "The Future is Intrinsically Hopeful," *Locus,* April 1, 2019, https://locusmag.com/2019/04/kameron-hurley-the-future-is-intrinsically-hopeful/.

[33] Importantly, this is not to critique hopepunk as a cultural phenomenon for failing to cite scholarly ideas - cultural phenomena have no inherent obligation to participate in scholarly discussions, or conduct their own discussions in scholarly terms. Rather, it is to critique the ways in which hopepunk seems to borrow and blend ideas on alternative futurisms generated by intersectional experience, but omit non-queer markers of difference like race, class, and disability when presenting its methodologies even as it implicitly acknowledges the role these experiences and

embrace of the fight eternal and literalization of metaphors about fragmented and nonlinear time is perhaps its most blatant debt, resonating strongly with Jack Halberstam's work on queer time as an alternative to straight time, Elizabeth Freeman's "chrononormativity," Alison Kafer's "crip time," and the perpetually anticipatory, ever-utopian "not-yet" nature of José Esteban Muñoz's vision of queer futurity.[34] In rejecting the idea of a particular future or future moment in which resolution of structural issues will be resolved in totality, hopepunk is also in dialogue with the function of the "waiting room of history" and the rejection of fictions of arrival in Aimee Bahng's model of migrant futurity, the afropessimist haunting of the present and future by signs of the past in Christina Sharpe's "wake work," and Kara Keeling's characterization of the radical imagination of black futurity as projecting itself "after the future," beyond the horizon of the fully predictable or imaginable.[35] These resonances also hold true for the conceptions of relationality and subjectivity within hopepunk's "community building through cooperation" tenet.[36] What hopepunk presents as a fresh set of philosophical commitments and activist methodologies unique to the contemporary in fact reflects longstanding realities of multiple

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perspectives play in constructing those methodologies via the inclusion of a more diverse array of authors and narratives in its canons.

[34] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction: Feeling Utopia," in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

[35] Aimee Bahng, "On Speculation: Fiction, Finance, and Futurity," in *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (Durham, NC; Duke UP, 2017), 5; Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Kara Keeling, "Introduction: Black Futures and the Queer Times of Life: Finance, Flesh, and the Imagination," in *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 34.

[36] For a reading of a hopepunk favorite which explicitly makes connections between these discourses and hopepunk, see Beatriz Hermida Ramos, "Hope is the New Punk: Politics of Storytelling, Queerness and Marginalized Communities in Becky Chambers' *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet," Gaudeamus: Journal of the Association of Young Researchers of Anglophone Studies* 0 (Winter 2020): 27-46. For a feminist critique of Newtiz's *The Future of Another Timeline,* see Nussbaum's review in *Strange Horizons.*

kinds of marginalized experience and knowledge it does not explicitly acknowledge. At its worst, hopepunk becomes a white-centered "universalization" of importantly intersectional ideas about how to survive the present and imagine a better future.

IV. Proposing Multiplicative Speculation

In an attempt to preserve the important cultural work hopepunk was poised to do while amending its shortfalls, and to address key open questions about speculation in the realm of genre theory, I propose a different, much broader paradigm through which to understand the work of contemporary speculative media: that of predictive speculation and multiplicative speculation. Predictive speculation seeks to identify and offer a concrete roadmap to the single "best" future, where "best" means optimized for a particular outcome or set of factors (often minimizing time, maximizing profit, and/or ensuring likelihood/feasibility). By contrast, multiplicative speculation instead seeks to imagine as wide and numerous a range of futures as possible, and more generally expand the horizons of what it is possible to imagine (one's "future imaginaries"). In this model, hopepunk fits beneath the umbrella of multiplicative speculation as a particular expression or example, while the wave of hopeless dystopia against which hopepunk reacts likewise fits beneath the umbrella of predictive speculation. These concepts capture what was productive about the hopepunk phenomenon while expanding and improving on it - addressing the confusion of affects, moods and tones that rendered hopepunk illegible as a genre and movement; instrumentalizing what incoherency remains and providing a model for what post-genre "speculation as a method" might look like; and marshalling and crediting the work of alternative futurisms as its praxis, combining them in practice while acknowledging and preserving important differences between them.

The first major improvement multiplicative speculation makes on hopepunk is in accounting for the tonal whiplash so frequently critiqued in its tentative canons. The confusing, seemingly contradictory cacophony of affects, tones, and moods hopepunk tries to encompass is clarified and justified when reframed in terms of the aforementioned utopian debate. In short, in its different formulations, manifestos, and canon choices, hopepunk wavers between encompassing only critical dystopia - the dystopia with a core of utopian hope or possibility that rings true to Rowland's original definition - and 'everything but anti-dystopia,' which would include utopia, anti-anti-utopia, critical dystopia, and critical utopia all at once. In a certain sense, this openness to the full range of utopian and pro-utopian expression is perhaps a necessary tool in the fight against anti-utopia's dominance. Per Moylan:

> Against this toxic resignation and complicity, what is needed is not a one-dimensional black mirror that turns in on itself but rather a prismatic utopian optic that can break through this provincial temporality and open people to a range of possibilities out of which critical and transformative visions and practices can emerge.[37]

Yet what is "prismatic" can also read as incoherent, and this is certainly the case with hopepunk, which seems to contradict its commitment to the eternal fight as gritty and difficult with its embrace of aesthetics of softness and cuteness. What unites the tonal and generic range of texts identified as hopepunk all is a fundamental commitment to utopianism, broadly conceived and in a variety of forms, which works to combat its own erasure by the logics of anti-utopianism. As presented in its manifestos, hopepunk seems best suited and most committed to spotlighting specifically critical dystopias, which strike direct counterblows against the encroachment of anti-utopian dystopia. Another term is needed to capture the full range of utopian expression

[37] Moylan, "Introduction: Becoming Utopian," 3.

identified in its canons - an organizational gap which multiplicative speculation works to fill, freeing up hopepunk to signify more specifically.

And lest we think multiplicative speculation a redundant term for utopianism in its myriad forms, I would also argue that multiplicative speculation offers a key advantage over this as a generalized term - namely, that it eschews a particular commitment to better visions of the future and leaves space for forms and modes like critical dystopia which present worse modes, but with the end goal of promoting imagination of better futures. With its ultimate commitment of expanding imaginative horizons and multiplying future possibilities above all else, it answers a call once made by Darko Suvin for a utopian- or utopian-adjacent concept which takes as its goal not the depiction of "radically greater perfection" but rather "radical otherness" in the sense of a world "organized according to a radically different principle than the author's community."[38] By focusing on the end goal of multiplying the futures it is possible to imagine, multiplicative speculation is capable of describing and identifying texts in a range of traditional genres - utopia, dystopia, and otherwise - with this common goal.

Relatedly, multiplicative speculation also improves on hopepunk by addressing and instrumentalizing the phenomenon's incoherence as a genre and/or movement in a traditional sense. Hopepunk appears to fail to corroborate its claims to being a genre or a movement, largely by organizing itself around affects and philosophical principles rather than formal qualities or a self-consciously shared identity. I argue that this organizational mode - one more committed to inclusivity and expansiveness than exclusivity and mutually exclusive, enforceable distinctions - can be actively embraced and provide a key model for a new form of post-genre categorical

[38] Darko Suvin, "Theses on Dystopia 2001," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge: 2003), 188.

identity. Discourse in contemporary genre theory is moving away from an outdated model of genres as identifiably disparate traditions and collections of particular shared genre signifiers. As more and more contemporary texts seamlessly combine or land in the interstitial spaces between traditional genre territories, this old model reflects less and less the real state of genre in the contemporary. Instead, it has been replaced by an umbrella model of speculative fiction which includes both a wide range of genre traditions (such as science fiction and fantasy) and interstitial texts that combine or fall between those traditions. However, because of the diversity of what this umbrella model encompasses, and without recourse to the identifying theories of particular traditions, the new question has become how to characterize speculation itself as a method or process - epistemologically (that is, by what it *does*) rather than ontologically (by what it *is*).[39] While the answers to the question of what speculation does are clearly numerous, I argue that a distinction made between multiplicative and predictive forms of speculation cuts to the heart of core divides in speculative fiction today (such as that between utopian and anti-utopian expression in dystopia) while remaining in the spirit of speculation as an epistemological, post-genre formation.

There is, perhaps, a natural skepticism to be had here about multiplicative speculation applying so widely as a category as to include just about everything. First, I see this expansiveness as an asset. Scholars and thinkers of the speculative are contending with the increasing sense that what is vital and energizing about the speculative today is not taking place only in the realm of this umbrella mash-up of traditionally defined non-mimetic genre fictions. While this is naturally the source of some anxiety, it's ultimately futile and dishonest to pretend that the vital work of speculation is only taking place within those boundaries, and definitions of

[39] I borrow the sense of this distinction from Keeling, "Introduction," in *Queer Times, Black Futures,* 17.

speculation which try to capture only those functions which exist within science fiction, fantasy, horror, etc. end up just re-inscribing and reinforcing the same genre boundaries while claiming and trying to do the opposite. If we are committed to the idea of defining the speculative by what it does and not what it is, we have to be open to the idea that speculation can take place in unexpected places and craft non-exclusionary formations accordingly. Second, I would also contend that multiplicative speculation does *not* encompass everything because it pointedly does *not* encompass predictive speculation, to which it is antithetical. Not only is this exclusion vital - because as we saw, where prediction and multiplication meet, prediction subsumes - but I also believe it does not compromise multiplicative speculation's project to be a fundamentally inclusive formation by way of the tolerance paradox - in this case, multiplicative speculation must be open to all forms of imagination except those which by their mere existence threaten the ability of multiplicative forms of imagination to function.

Finally, multiplicative speculation improves upon hopepunk by acknowledging the indebtedness of its survival mechanisms (mechanisms for preserving imagination and utopia) to the alternative futurisms of marginalized people, and in particular intersectional futurisms. Above and beyond merely giving credit where it is due, multiplicative speculation recognizes the differences in experience which produced those survival mechanisms, and the different problems they were developed to solve and affects with which they were developed to cope. By declaring a broad goal (the multiplication of future possibility) which is fundamentally relative in nature - each individual's future imaginaries extend differently, and are pockmarked by blind spots differently - and then marshalling the methods of particular alternative futurisms to address different conditions and challenges, multiplicative speculation also resists blurring or universalizing those mechanisms. Like its compatibility with existing forms of genre identity, the

umbrella of multiplicative speculation brings together affects, survival mechanisms, philosophies, and even formal qualities, combining them into a coherent praxis without scrubbing them of their specificity and origin - acknowledging overlap and congruency while preserving difference.

V. Multiplicative Speculation in *The Light Brigade*

The early 2010s saw both the height of the takeover of contemporary speculative fiction by predictive speculation, while the 2010s are playing host to a responding groundswell of multiplicative speculation. Over the course of this decade, speculative fiction author Kameron Hurley made a similar and related heel face turn from grimdark paragon to prominent advocate for hopepunk. Starting in the early 2010s, Hurley began writing and publishing *The Worldbreaker Saga,* first in an epic sf trilogy about a war between parallel universes that Hurley has said is “about genocide and the terrible things we will all do to save ourselves.”[40] Of her philosophy when beginning the series, Hurley writes: “My argument ten years ago was that nothing could stem the tide of our awful choices, that we would always find ourselves in situations where we only had terrible options. And if we only ever had terrible options, then we were all the bad guys.”[41] It’s this kind of thinking - and the fiction that resulted from it - that by 2015 had earned Hurley the title of “ascending star” of “nihilistic, salt-in-your-wounds fantasy.”[42] From Hurley’s perspective, her commitment in the grimdark was so assured that,

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[40] Kameron Hurley, “The Future is Intrinsically Hopeful,” *Locus,* April 1, 2019, https://locusmag.com/2019/04/kameron-hurley-the-future-is-intrinsically-hopeful/.

[41] Ibid.

[42] “Blogtable II: After Grimdark,” *Nerds of a Feather,* February 2, 2015, http://www.nerds-feather.com/2015/02/blogtable-ii-after-grimdark.html.

when asked in a 2014 Reddit AMA whether she would ever consider writing fiction with a "lighter mood," Hurley's answer was a resounding no.[43]

Yet by 2019, still drafting the final installment of *Worldbreaker* and upon publishing her military sf novel *The Light Brigade*, Hurley's views had shifted significantly in the direction of hopepunk. As Hurley wrote in a 2019 post: "As I've grown as a writer and a human being, existing in an uncertain time… my outlook on the world and the genre has shifted from one of distaste for all things sweet and syrupy to embracing the moral compass and real heroics of the people around me."[44] For Hurley, embracing hopepunk was less about embracing the "sweet and syrupy" and more about rejecting the fiction of inevitability upon which predictive speculation is founded. "I'm no longer convinced it's a radical idea to believe that there are no heroes and that humanity can be reduced to its very worst impulses, It's not particularly exciting or edgy to insist that we're all going to blow ourselves to bits, or war against our neighbors in some libertarian apocalypse scenario…"[45] Instead, Hurley's fiction focuses on "exploring how people can still make good decision in bad situations," namely by remembering that "there are never just two bad choices. There are multiplicities of choices… Real life is muddier than that, and so are the choices that bring us forward, up and away from a nihilistic future."[46] Hurley even goes so far as to mock the glut of predictive speculation, echoing postmodern concerns about what it says about the contemporary psyche: "What a time to be a creator when believing humanity has a

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[43] Kameron Hurley, "I'm novelist Kameron Hurley - AMA," *Reddit,* September 4, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Fantasy/comments/2fg1gg/im_novelist_kameron_hurley_ama/.

[44] Hurley, "The Future is Intrinsically Hopeful."

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

future that is not just a series of dystopian post-apocalypse nightmares is the most radical position one can have."[47]

Hurley's transformation from grimdark icon to hopepunk proponent serves as a microcosmic case study of contemporary back-and-forth between predictive and multiplicative speculation, and positions *The Light Brigade* as an ideal textual case study for not just hopepunk, but also multiplicative speculation as a contemporary response to predictive speculations like the dystopia wave and an escape from late capitalist logics like cruel optimism. As a text, *The Light Brigade* practices a form of multiplicative speculation which resonates deeply with the alternative futurity of Aimee Bahng's "migrant futurity." Its time-bending, parallel-universe-hopping structure is nonlinear queer time in action, and combines with both the relentless presentness and disorientation of Dietz's narration and the novel's running commentary on how capitalism intrumentalizes linear time to exploit the subject, positioning an overthrow of chrononormativity and the embrace of the "waiting room" as a method of escape.[48] Furthermore, the novel's deliberately ambiguous treatment of main character Dietz combines with the novel's persistent critiques of citizenship as an arbitrary, undesirable form of privilege to express a rejection of the fixed subject and the datafication it enables. Finally, *The Light Brigade*'s undermining of predictable military sf narrative expectations combines with a plot-level acknowledgement of multiple universes and an ambiguous ending to maintain the novel's future as a "multiply occupied space" of possibilities rather than fixed outcomes.[49]

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Bahng, "Introduction," 5.

[49] Ibid., 13.

Set a few hundred years in the future, *The Light Brigade* tells the story of Dietz, a young soldier who joins the military seeking vengeance when her home city - Sao Paolo, Brazil - is "Blinked" out of existence via inexplicable means, leaving nothing and no one behind. The atrocity is blamed on the Martians, who were labelled traitors and terrorists some time ago when they declared independence from and cut communications with the corporations running Earth. War with Mars is primarily conducted using "jump" technology, which allows soldiers to cross vast distances by breaking them into light, shooting those photons to the destination, and reassembling them on the other side. Though Dietz is initially eager for revenge against Mars, she quickly begins to experience problems during her "jumps," showing up in the wrong place, with totally different squad members than she left with, and with no memory of how she arrived or what the mission is. Eventually, Dietz comes to the key realization that when she "jumps" she has the unique problem of in fact jumping back and forth in time as well as in space.

What follows is a series of paradigm-shifting revelations - that, though this problem is rare, other soldiers have experienced it too (forming the self-appointed "Light Brigade"); that the war with Mars is not against Mars at all, but between the corporations of Earth; that each of the corporations knows about the time-jumping activities of the Light Brigade and are monitoring them; that each member of the Light Brigade has jumped into many possible futures rather than a single inevitable one, and in none of these futures do any of the corporations assert dominance over the others, or indeed even survive (a stark literalization of the ability to see beyond the end of capitalism). Finally, having gained some semblance of control over her time-jumping, Dietz time-jumps to Sao Paolo before the war begins and uses her powers to perform the "Blink" which ostensibly began the war - not killing or destroying, but merely transporting Sao Paolo and its inhabitants somewhere...else, hopefully better.

The Light Brigade is perhaps most notable for the way its plot consistently, disorientingly displaces its protagonist in both time and space, above and beyond what's expected even of a time-travel narrative. Hurley reportedly consulted a professional mathematician to assemble the diagram with which she tracked Dietz's navigation through the novel's fabula.[50] Dietz's ability to jump through time - at first ruled out for its absurdity, then a kind of violent manipulation, and finally a power over which Dietz has agency - creates a plot that is as disorienting to the reader as it is to Dietz herself. Consequently, the reader's gradual experience of understanding and command over the novel's plot mirrors Dietz's own journey towards freedom from corporate ordering of her experience of time and space.

As a grunt soldier fighting in a war between corporations, the times and spaces that Dietz occupies are heavily regulated, and transitions between different times and spaces are often violent. While at the barracks, soldiers have no real way, natural or artificial, to tell time - all aspects of their lives are dictated by sudden orders delivered with the expectation of instantaneous compliance. It's only when Dietz attempts to keep time independently (by scratching hash marks into the side of her bunk for each day she is at base) that she begins to realize the many ways in which her experience of time is different from others in her company. Given the play with time the novel engages in, it can be no surprise that a broken pocketwatch becomes a major tool for (and symbol of) resistance against the corps. The watch, originally a family heirloom of one of Dietz's fellow soldiers, is transformed into a miniature signal jammer that allows Dietz to have several key conversations without being monitored by the corp. Without the watch - or rather, with the watch functioning as the corp might intend - Dietz would

[50] Kameron Hurley, "The Logic of Time Travel (With Graphs!)", *Kameron Hurley: Welcome to the Hurleyverse,* April 21, 2019, https://www.kameronhurley.com/the-logic-of-time-travel-with-graphs/.

have almost no opportunity to coordinate with fellow revolutionaries. Even armed with this tool, the switch from marking the passage of time in other in company-defined terms is not automatic for Dietz; when Dietz originally sees the huge number of hash marks carved into the side of her bunk, she immediately assumes that they are "kills," a unit of measure primarily meaningful to the corp as a measure of her service as a soldier. It's only later, when Dietz begins to awaken to the realities of her nonlinear experience and the possibilities it opens up, that Dietz considers the marks may instead count "days," a unit of measure almost never used by the military-industrial complex the corps have set up. It's only when Dietz seizes control of her "jumps" and, in doing so, control over her experience of time that she is able to escape the predictive linearity of corporate time.

Looking beyond linear time and into the axis of space, the experience of using the "jump" technology offers a blunt critique of labor relations - being sent via this tech is referred to as "bursting apart," a phrase also used to describe moments when soldiers are killed (often vaporized into "a fine red mist") in combat.[51] Essentially, the corporations enact and re-enact a violence like death on their soldiers in the name of efficiency and profitability. But it is in the spaces of being broken apart that soldiers like Dietz find their opportunity for rebellion. By practicing on the torture modules - a series of simulations developed by the corps to train soldiers to resist torture-based interrogation techniques - Dietz finds a way to take some control over the repeated violence of the jumps, essentially by practicing taking control of the repeated violence of the torture modules. By remaining at least partially aware during the jump process, Dietz quickly realizes that the corps are not sending their soldiers to Mars, but rather to other parts of Earth to wage war against soldiers of opposing corps.

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[51] Kameron Hurley, *The Light Brigade* (New York: Saga Press, 2019), 77.

The transport technology also becomes a metaphor for the resignation and inevitability on which the corps, their control, and their profitability are founded. The technology essentially allows soldiers to skip over the inevitabilities of travel to their combat locations, fast-forwarding through to the point of contact. The inevitability and certainty of this journey allow the corps to justify the use of the transportation tech, and yet it also masks a vital disconnect between where the soldiers are *told* they're being sent, and where they're *actually* being sent. In essence, the corps use inevitability and the lure of "getting it over with" to obscure the uncertainty inherent in the drops, and the major lie of the war.

Rarely does the novel shows its multiplicative colors more clearly than in its turn towards rejecting the ordering of time and space by corporate actors. Even in the face of Dietz's nonlinear experience threatening the order of corporate time, the corps still attempt to re-subsume Dietz's experiences into their system of profiteering. One of the novel's great reveals is that the corps have known all along about the capabilities of the Light Brigade, and in fact know even more than Dietz about what fellow Brigade members have witnessed. Ultimately, it becomes clear that the corps have allowed the Light Brigade to continue in an attempt to instrumentalize their power - the corps have been keeping close tabs on the different futures seen by different Brigade members in an attempt to find a future in which their corporation has won the war, once and for all, and then to find a way to extrapolate from the present to that future in order to ensure it comes to pass. Essentially, what the corps seek is the certainty of an assured future, and the definitive end to the fight through arrival at a fixed moment of victory - in other words, they practice a purely financial, predictive speculation. This logic runs entirely counter to the spirit of multiplicative speculation and the hopepunk tenets of the fight eternal and the embrace of uncertainty, both of which Dietz eventually champions.

As a protagonist, Dietz also allows the novel several ways to reject the fixed subject and the datafication critiqued in Bahng's multiplicative concept of migrant futurity. On a formal level, Dietz's gender remains ambiguous throughout almost the entire novel, only being revealed during the final climactic scene in which she returns to "Blink" her hometown of Sao Paolo. By maintaining the ambiguity of her gender for so long, the novel sets Dietz up as unquantifiable above and beyond her membership in the Light Brigade. On the level of content, *The Light Brigade* offers constant, explicit critique of citizenship as arbitrary, false, and undesirable because it makes the subject vulnerable to datafication. Many characters serving in the corporate armies are "ghouls" - a huge, invisible underclass of people with not granted citizenship by any of the corps who control Earth. The only path to citizenship for ghouls is through hard labor and years of sacrifice to the corps - often terms are so long that citizenship is instead earned by one generation for the next, rather than for oneself. Ghouls are also treated as second-class citizens, unable to work jobs like journalism that require "education" (read: blind loyalty to the corps in question thanks to a life of privilege). Via this commentary, the novel aligns itself in no uncertain terms with the multiplicative speculation of Bahng's migrant futurity, embracing the "waiting room of history" and a lack of recognition by corporate actors as the freedom to strive for and imagine futures free of corporate interference.

Finally, *The Light Brigade* undermines predictability on both formal and thematic levels through its play with genre expectations and its offer of a truly ambiguous ending rather than a crushing defeat or a triumphant, singular moment of victory. Essentially every review of Kameron Hurley's *The Light Brigade* compares it to its clear predecessors in the long-running subgenre of military sf - namely, Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* and Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War.* The novel's story clearly begs the comparison, as it follows a young soldier

through a journey of disillusionment that begins with the angry bravado of boot camp; continues through the trials, tribulations, and traumas of the front lines; and only eventually transitions into Dietz orchestrating a revolution against the forces in charge of the war. What most sets it apart from Heinlein, above and beyond Dietz's eventual defiance and even the utter reversal of the narrative's politics, is the novel's ending. While the original novels end with moments of triumph and victory despite the promise of further conflict to come, *The Light Brigade* embraces an ambiguous ending which delivers neither salvation nor damnation, but rather the promise that the characters' strivings will produce a future that is different from the present, and that they refuse to consider their work over. In the end, Dietz reunites with her family and Blinks her community and her fellow soldiers - those with whom she knows she can weather whatever the future brings - to an ambiguous, undefined "somewhere else" in time and space.

This ending is quintessentially both hopepunk and multiplicative in that it both undermines the seemingly irrevocable badness of the Blink - presented consistently throughout the novel as a war atrocity - and gives us no neat answers regarding how the Blink turned out, no hints whether it was a positive or negative action. Dietz herself exists in a mode of totally accepting the uncertainty of her actions - she Blinks Sao Paolo in the hope that whatever happens next, wherever it ends up, will be better, or at the very least a fresh start. Dietz does not end the war - in fact, the corps subsume the mysteriousness and uncertainty of the event as both provocation and excuse to stir up fear of the other and begin the war, though Dietz seems correct in concluding that in the absence of the Blink, the corps would have found or arranged some other catalyst. But Dietz does strike a blow against the corps, doing so almost coincidentally in pursuit of saving an entire community from destruction and taking the gamble of ending up in a better place and/or time. While the traditional military sf on which the novel is based sees the

continuation of the fight into the future as an opportunity for further moments of victory and glory - further arrivals - *The Light Brigade* celebrates a brief moment of utopia before reintroducing the fight eternal as one for positive social systems and a better future.

VI. Coda: The Horizon

Equipped with multiplicative speculation as an inclusive post-genre formation, and understanding the ways in which it is antithetical to the mode of predictive speculation, we can recontextualize and reinterpret many of the most impactful developments in speculative fiction of the past two decades as maneuvers by predictive speculation to dominate contemporary speculative expression and countermaneuvers by multiplicative speculation to resist that domination. The 2000s trend of authors of literary realism writing what they claim to be critical dystopia while in truth spreading anti-utopian sentiment and reinforcing capitalist realism becomes a core example of predictive speculation. The exponential explosion around the same time of interest in Afrofuturism and its fellow movers despite a significant backlash of white supremacy and institutionalized racism both within and beyond speculative fiction is legible as the triumph of multiplicative forms of imaginative resistance informed by marginalized experience over attempts to quash, flatten or corrupt them by predictive ideologies.

Beyond this initial foray, multiplicative speculation's myriad powers and structures beg to be expanded upon. One might expand upon the close ties between predictive speculation and capitalist realism, and why texts which aim first and foremost at "realism" in a strictly mimetic sense so often engage in the predictive mode of speculation rather than the multiplicative. One might also seek out some of the structures and formal features that promote possibility and hope in multiplicative speculation, though without assuming a prescriptive stance that these *must* be

present for the multiplicative mode to occur. And of course one might expand further on the larger question of how inclusive, post-genre formations like multiplicative speculation function, and what they allow us to see. However, I think the most vital extending work to be done - but like hopepunk's eternal fight, never to be finished - is the work of accounting for the coalitions of alternative futurisms which provide for multiplicative speculation's lofty ideals one or more sets of concrete praxis. With as many futurisms as there are identities, and many more besides in the case of intersectional futurisms, the work of enumerating the types of combinations which produce multiplicative speculation is a ceaseless but vital task.

Chapter 2

Predictive Speculation and Literary Realism

I. Introduction

Having offered an initial definition of multiplicative speculation, we turn now to its antithesis: predictive speculation. Rather than merely define or demonstrate predictive speculation, this chapter reads predictive speculation as an intervention into the much larger conversation regarding a conceptual successor to Fredric Jameson's "postmodernism" in the 21st century. Postmodernism itself is mired in a sometimes productive, but often stymying ambiguity, and the original contexts the term responded to have arguably "become so aggravated and chronic that they have gone through a change in kind."[52] Many have responded to the need for a term to capture the entanglements of contemporary artistic output and the logics of late capitalism with their own coinages or adaptations - Jeffrey Nealon's "post-postmodernism," Mark Fisher's "capitalist realism," and even "neoliberalism" writ large, to name a few.[53] But each of these, as Shonkweiler and La Berge identify in *Reading Capitalist Realism,* comes with their own limitations, lacking in at least one of the three constituent aspects a successful successor must capture: in brief, the violences of capitalism's accumulation mindset, the "lived

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[52] Mark Fisher, "1. It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism," *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Washington, DC: O Books, 2009), 14.

[53] For a more exhaustive gloss of postmodernism's conceptual successor's thus far, see Alison Schonkweiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, "A Theory of Capitalist Realism," in *Reading Capitalist Realism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013): 1-25.

economic, social, and affective instabilities" it creates, and the methods by which these are naturalized and made to seem inevitable.[54]

I contend that the paired concepts of multiplicative speculation and predictive speculation meet these needs, creating umbrella concepts under which current coinages can live while also addressing additional concerns not foregrounded in current critiques of existing alternatives. First, the two speculations resist the tendency to define a conceptual successor explicitly around capitalism as their sole adversary; while I agree that capitalism and its logics are among the direst threats in predictive speculation's stable, I argue that it is not the only one, and that a truly useful conceptual successor to postmodernism will be capable of outliving capitalism, or at the very least capitalism in its current form. Predictive and multiplicative speculation do this by defining themselves as a set of mental processes, affective states, and rhetorical tools that can be used for the purpose of expanding or collapsing imaginative horizons - highly prized and often deployed in the struggle of late capitalism, but capable of finding use and application outside it. Second, where postmodernism and many of its successors seek to primarily define the monolith of late capitalist problems, logics, and violences, they rarely (if ever) function to define a program of resistance. By defining the current struggle through a *pair* of concepts - predictive and multiplicative speculation - my proposed terms assist rhetorically in the attempt to imagine an alternative to capitalism by daring to mark explicitly cultural production which (even briefly or temporarily) serves the purpose of resistance and attempts to resist capitalist subsumption.

In this chapter, I further develop the concept of "predictive speculation" as a post-genre formation by tracing a particular example of it - a wave of near-future dystopia written by authors traditionally associated with literary realism who are hostile to non-mimetic genre labels.

[54] Ibid., 6.

First, I define the scope of this trend and analyze the rhetoric of their rejections of traditional labels like “science fiction,” tracing their motives to a fear that literary realism is being ‘killed’ by speculative fiction. Next, I propose some poetics for speculative fiction - modified versions of science fiction scholar Darko Suvin’s poetics of science fiction - and use these terms to explain how this wave of literary dystopia twists the basic structure of speculative fiction to avoid associations with non-mimetic genre fiction. I then develop a spotter’s guide for two archetypal plots seen in this and other predictive speculation - the “fear plot” and the “containment plot” - which both react to the fear that difference of many kinds, if allowed to flourish, will create change in the world. Finally, I explain how the structural shifts these texts undertake to avoid association with genres like science fiction ultimately produce, on a structural level, predictive speculation - specifically, capitalist realism - which serves to violently reproduce the status quo.

II. Literary Realism, in Memoriam

Just after the turn of the millennium, literary realists started writing about the future. A sudden slew of dystopian and apocalyptic novels emerged, all written by established authors previously best known for writing literary realism. Arguably inaugurated in 2003 with the publication of Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, the trend was cemented by installments like Kazuo Ishiguro’s dystopian alternate history *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and Cormac McCarthy’s minimalist apocalypse *The Road* (2006), both of which garnered attention not just for their content and aesthetics but for the novelty of their established authors trying their hand at futuristic writing for the first time. Around the time Atwood was concluding her “Flood” trilogy with *Maddaddam* in 2013, a second wave of examples were hitting the market, this time penned by both established authors (like Chang-Rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea* (2014)) and lesser-known

writers in the process of making their name (such as Emily St. John-Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014)). Thinkpieces and reviews focused primarily on odd mismatches of writer and genre quickly gave way to proclamations of a new golden age for dystopia; with a slew of literary realist authors at the helm, writing about the future was cool again.

It would be easy to handwave this phenomenon as a textbook instance of art imitating life. In the case of literary realism, a genre definitionally committed to a project of mimeticism, holding a mirror up to an increasingly dystopian and apocalyptic world necessitates writing realistic depictions of dystopia and apocalypse. In the wake of increasingly powerful disruptions to the cultural equilibrium of the world - violences both fast and slow, from the acute trauma of 9/11 to the looming threat of climate change and its inconvenient truths - it would, in fact, seem irresponsible or disingenuous to argue anything else. Yet a further, more complex explanation exists for why this new corpus of texts arose - one obscured by the seeming completeness of the above historicist account, and one capable of answering the questions it leaves unresolved: why these authors? Why then? And why only dystopia and apocalypse? The whole truth is that, around the turn of the millennium, literary realism (particularly the novel) began to fear its obsoletion and death at the hands of speculative fiction - in particular, science fiction.

Setting aside for a moment the melodrama of this statement, the fear is not hard to understand. As literary commentators of many stripes were quick to point out upon the advent of this trend, dystopia and apocalypse had thus far been largely the purview of science fiction. With the exception of a few midcentury political dystopias since scrubbed of their genre associations through canonization, texts about the future writ large had long been shelved and read as science fiction. In an age where elements of dystopia and apocalypse are manifesting in everyday experience, two happily separated arenas of literary production - literary realism and science

fiction - gradually found themselves tackling the same subject matter. Facing an inevitable turf war over this creative territory, literary fiction scrambled to find distinct ways to “do” these genres. An example of this generic handwringing is immortalized in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Estrangement* (2016), in which Ghosh bemoans the work cut out for literary realism now that globally catastrophic phenomena such as climate change - phenomena previously associated almost exclusively with non-mimetic genres - had now entered the realm of reality and possibility. How, wonders Ghosh, can we do the important work of making climate change as much a real and present danger in our realistic fiction as it is in reality when the phenomenon has so long been steeped in ‘unreal’ genres that it brings that unreality with it whenever it is referenced or depicted? Given this convergence of subject matter and the difficulty of establishing a meaningful distinction in approach, for literary realism to fear some sort of contest it was ill-equipped to ‘win’ was perhaps a natural response.

In the context of this convergence and the promise of competition over the same subjects, it is also perhaps unsurprising that literary fiction invested its attempts at differentiation with life-or-death stakes for itself as a genre. In the event of an unsuccessful attempt by literary fiction to carve out its unique contribution to writing about dystopian and apocalyptic conditions, its attempts to capture the increasingly ‘unreal’ present might well be overwhelmed and absorbed into science fiction and its longstanding history of dystopian and apocalyptic depiction. Critics and reviewers were certainly quick to do so - Consider the initial press response to *Oryx and Crake* - namely, the fantastically genre-bigoted *New York Times* review of the novel penned by Sven Birkerts, which begins with the following unsolicited, self-reassuring decree:

> I am going to stick my neck out and just say it: science fiction will never be Literature with a capital “L,” and this is because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character. It sacrifices moral and psychological nuance in favor of more conceptual matters, and elevates scenario over sensibility. Some will ask, of course, whether there

> still is such a thing as "Literature with a capital "L." I proceed on the faith that there is. Are there exceptions to my categorical pronouncement? Probably, but I don't think enough of them to overturn it. Is Margaret Atwood's new novel, "Oryx and Crake," science fiction? Insofar as the term has any practical meaning, yes.[55]

Note the intimate, implied tie between the impulse to denounce science fiction and the need to pronounce "Literature with a capital 'L'" still alive - clearly, in Birkerts' view, there can only be one. Note also the way in which Birkerts characterizes his consignment of *Oryx and Crake* to the category of science fiction as itself an act of critique. Authors and novels operating within a critical sphere in which attitudes such as Birkerts' are the norm might be forgiven for equating categorization as science fiction with the death of literary realism.

What seemed uncalled-for, however, was authors of literary realism joining critics such as Birkerts in resurrecting and reinforcing outdated high culture/low culture binaries and their associated stereotypes in order to bolster literary realism's differentiation project - or, at the very least, distract from its failures. In the absence of a real, defensible distinction in approach, literary realism and its commentators fell back on slinging holdover prejudices in order to draw lines in the sand between its depictions of dystopia/apocalypse and those hailing from the tradition of science fiction. While one might debate Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* as the starting point of 21st century literary realism about the future, Atwood undeniably catalyzed this paired trend of outdated, genre-bigoted critique. The 'shot heard round the genre' came in 2003 during the *Oryx and Crake* press tour with a now-infamous talk show soundbite; when asked what had prompted her to write science fiction, Atwood responded by claiming that her newly minted dystopian novel was *not* "science fiction" - a genre Atwood dismissed as being "about talking squids in outer space" - but, rather, was "speculative fiction" - a serious genre about "things that

[55] Sven Birkerts, "Present at the Re-Creation," *The New York Times,* May 18, 2003, https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/18/books/present-at-the-re-creation.html.

could actually happen."[56] Atwood's comments sparked a near-decade-long war between Atwood and the science fiction community in which Ursula Le Guin, acting as science fiction's champion in the conflict, dismantled Atwood's "arbitrarily restrictive" and self-contradictory definitions and accused the author of reifying science fiction's so-called 'ghettoization' with her coinage rather than working to break those walls down.[57]

Despite backlash within the science fiction community, Atwood's rhetorical move gained considerable steam (and a bit more definition) in the 2000s and early 2010s. Some authors explicitly rallied under Atwood's "speculative fiction" banner, giving press tours emphasizing the imminent plausibility of their particular catastrophic nightmare.[58] Others simply expressed discomfort with explicit genre fiction labels, but offered no alternatives. "Are they going to say this is fantasy?" Ishiguro famously fretted after the release of *The Buried Giant* (2015), his squeamishness earning him the derision of genre commentators such as Le Guin, who described her experience of the novel's clumsy Arthurianism as "like watching a man falling from a high wire while he shouts to the audience, "Are they going say I'm a tight-rope walker?""[59] Literary realism had staked the uniqueness of its depictions of dystopia and apocalypse on their imminent plausibility and verisimilitude. These claims, which we'll return to later in this chapter, created real problems for literary realism, first and foremost because neither plausibility nor

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[56] Margaret Atwood, quoted in Cecilia Mancuso, "Speculative Pulp Fiction," *Public Books,* July 1, 2016, https://www.publicbooks.org/speculative-pulp-fiction/.

[57] Ursula Le Guin, "The Year of the Flood by Margaret Atwood," *The Guardian,* August 28, 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood.

[58] Emily St. John-Mandel, quoted in Ron Charles, "Sorry, Emily St. John-Mandel: Resistance is futile," *The Washington Post,* https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2014/10/15/sorry-emily-st-john-mandel-resistance-is-futile/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.da3b62be7714.

[59] Ursula Le Guin, "Are they going to say this is fantasy?" *Bookview Cafe*, March 2, 2015, https://bookviewcafe.com/blog/2015/03/02/are-they-going-to-say-this-is-fantasy/.

verisimilitude are beyond the reach of science fiction or speculative fiction and, in fact, both form key structural components of most science-fictional and speculative depictions of the future.

For now, it's more important to note that, to scholars and fans of science fiction, the problem literary realism found itself facing and the moves the genre made in response form a very familiar story - one which echoes decades and decades of equal and opposite struggle within the genre of science fiction. Specifically, it echoes the many, many times during science fiction's modern generic history that it has feared its own potential death at the hands of (and absorption into) literary realism. In order to recognize literary realism's behavior as fear of its own death, we must first understand the parallel history of science fiction grappling with that fear.

Science fiction's generic history of self-eulogy is definitively laid out by Roger Luckhurst in his landmark 1994 article "The Many Deaths of Science Fiction: A Polemic." Presenting a somewhat 'parodic' history of the countless times science fiction has declared itself 'dead' or 'dying' as a genre - at least once a decade for the past century, usually around times of market upheaval or upon the launch of a new avant-garde - Luckhurst questions why this rhetoric surfaces so often within science fiction discourse, and why in particular it continues to be used in spite of the fact that every prior prediction of science fiction's death has proven unfounded.[60] Luckhurst performs a psychoanalytic reading of science fiction discourse, concluding that the source of the genre's 'death drive' is its neverending quest for legitimacy and acceptance into the literary mainstream. Outlining the three major strategies by which science fiction has attempted

[60] For a thorough and humorous gloss of many of the death-births science fiction has experienced, see Roger Luckhurst, "The Many Deaths of Science Fiction: A Polemic," *Science Fiction Studies* 21, No. 1 (March 1994): 35-50.

to gain this mainstream acceptance, Luckhurst shows in turn how each of them leads to a metaphorical death for the genre, even as it leads to a victory of acceptance and potential rebirth.

The first strategy, “implementation of internal borders,” marks some subset of science fiction exceptional, claims that this subset represents the ‘real’ character of the genre, and argues that this subset should be accepted into the mainstream while the amputated remainder - impostors and pale imitations that only serve to encourage misconceptions about the genre - be left behind to die out.[61] Luckhurst argues that common rhetorical moves when narrating science fiction’s history, such as the blanket dismissal of works from the pulp era, are examples of this legitimization strategy.[62,63] Both outputs of this strategy involve the ‘death’ of science fiction; the ‘exceptional’ science fiction, experiencing “apotheosis,” transforms into something else (“SF-which-is-not-SF”), while the ‘unexceptional’ work left behind is stripped of its generic identity, deemed unworthy to represent science fiction.[64]

The second death-oriented legitimization strategy Luckhurst outlines is that of science fiction narrating its history in such a way as to claim “non-origin” - that science fiction is and always has been “indistinguishable, identical to the mainstream.”[65] As examples, Luckhurst points to myriad genealogies tracing science fiction’s roots to texts already accepted by the mainstream - such as Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and More’s *Utopia* - and perennial attempts to

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[61] Ibid., 38.

[62] The so-called “pulp” era of science fiction is commonly assumed to last from the founding of Hugo Gernsback’s Amazing Stories in 1926 through to the mid-1930s, and was followed by the genre’s so-called “Golden Age” (mid 1930s to 1950s). See also the “Pulp” entry of the *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction,* http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/pulp.

[63] For a defense of pulp science fiction against attacks like these, see Gary Westfahl, “Three Decades that Shook the World, Observed Through Two Distorting Lenses Under One Microscope,” *Science Fiction Studies* 30, No. 1 (March 2003): 109-122.

[64] Luckhurst, “Many Deaths,” 38.

[65] Ibid., 42.

claim science fiction as the beneficiary of literary and artistic traditions stretching back into prehistory - such as claiming science fiction to be the contemporary site of displacement for the ancient cultural functions of myth. The goal of these arguments is to reveal the barriers between science fiction and the literary mainstream as ultimately superficial and arbitrary, and to advocate the rewinding of our cultural sensibilities to a better, more enlightened time before such barriers existed. In this strategy, science fiction as a distinct genre 'dies' in the sense that it is revealed to have never really existed as a distinct entity in the first place.

The third and final legitimization strategy Luckhurst defines is that of "insistence on the rigor of the scientific" - science fiction's habit of arguing it is valuable for its adherence to the possible, plausible, and educational realities of empirical science rather than for its aesthetic worth or quality as fiction.[66] Even as pulp fiction from science fiction's early days is dismissed as part of the 'internal boundaries' stratagem, it is often rehabilitated by this strategy, which argues that the technical accuracy of much of pulp science fiction's scientific elements lent it paraliterary value as a catalyst for public awareness of and education about the hard sciences of its day. Luckhurst cites early-20th-century science fiction writer Robert Heinlein as the father of this strain of thought, citing Heinlein's early and influential definitions of science fiction as "realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method."[67] According to Luckhurst, this rhetorical move represents a 'death' of a different kind for science fiction - a "retreat"[68] that hinges on giving up on gaining entry to the

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[66] Ibid., 45.

[67] Ibid., 44.

[68] Ibid., 45.

mainstream by way of Literature and instead aiming to enter via Science. Because this shift in emphasis - from "science *fiction* to *science* fiction" - requires science fiction giving up on claims to being focused on the aesthetic quality of its fiction, this stratagem requires science fiction's 'death' as fiction rather than its death as a coherent category.[69]

If we compare Luckhurst's legitimization strategies for science fiction to the discourse surrounding literary realist dystopian and apocalyptic novels in the 21st century, many telling parallels emerge. Atwood herself has cycled through all three at various points. Atwood first established internal borders by asserting that the work she and other literary realist authors were doing was a separate, privileged genre - an exclusionary sense of "speculative fiction" - and that anything not welcomed under this umbrella was ridiculous and unserious ("talking squids in outer space"). Atwood then set about applying the second strategy - claiming "non-origin" - to this nascent genre, spending a considerable portion of her 2012 essay collection *In Other Worlds* distinguishing its generic pedigree from that of "science fiction." Elements of that genealogy, such as identifying its roots with Jules Verne rather than H.G. Wells and claiming kinship with only the most fashionable WWII era political dystopias (Huxley, Orwell, and Vonnegut), have become powerful dogwhistles of literary prejudice obscured by the white noise of supposed historicism.[70] By claiming that Atwoodian speculative fiction descends from a separate, exceptional, and less popular tradition than science fiction, Atwood creates the opportunity to claim that her particular brand of speculative fiction is essentially indistinguishable from literary realism by the transitive property.

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[69] Ibid.

[70] See Margaret Atwood, Introduction to *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (Toronto: Signal, 2011), 1-14. See also Sven Bikerts' aforementioned *Oryx and Crake* review, which almost immediately sets about tracing the novel's "mytho-literary source matter" to "Huxley's *Brave New World,* along with Genesis (our first utopian narrative) and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*."

The third and final legitimization strategy - appeals to the "rigor of the scientific" - formed the basis of Atwood's original remark that her speculative fiction "could really happen," and has been the most expanded upon since. While Atwood has always done her research when it comes to the speculative - for better or worse, *The Handmaid's Tale* was chilling due to its congruencies to existing histories of gendered oppression and state-sanctioned rape - works like *Oryx and Crake* include bibliographies of sources attesting the plausibility and imminency of their every technology and social dynamic, defensively brandishing their sources as a shield against the critiques of genre commentators.[71]

Given these parallels between literary realism's recent moves and science fiction's history of self-eulogy and three possible deaths-by-legitimacy, it seems clear that literary realism is reacting to a fear of its imminent death and absorption into science fiction because of the convergence of their subjects. The major difference between the two narratives is one of motivation. In the case of science fiction, Luckhurst's ultimate conclusion is that, insofar as science fiction's development up to now has been motivated by achieving mainstream-ness, science fiction's "regularly issued panic narratives"[72] about its own imminent death announce not science fiction's failure as a genre, but its impending (and necessarily bittersweet) success in achieving one or more of its strategies of legitimization. Essentially, Luckhurst argues that science fiction doth protest too much - what it claims to fear (literary legitimacy) it actually secretly craves. The same is not necessarily true of literary realism. While science fiction may view its absorption into mainstream realism as a moment of transcendence and apotheosis,

[71] Though the site itself is now apparently defunct, Atwood makes explicit reference to it in the acknowledgements to *Oryx and Crake*: "Deep background was inadvertently supplied by many magazines and newspapers and non-fiction science writers encountered over the years. A full list of these is available at oryxandcrake.com" (376).

[72] Luckhurst, "Many Deaths," 36.

literary realism views any ground given to science fiction as a ghettoization and a demotion in the hierarchies of generic prestige. This is not to say that literary realism doesn't in some sense crave a merger with science fiction - if it didn't, literary realist authors would not be attempting to write it. But literary realism does not secretly desire a merger with science fiction in order to gain access to its prestige because in the eyes of literary realism, science fiction is still fundamentally a low-culture product with delusions of grandeur. To "do" science fiction, then, is to become low-culture oneself.

To counterbalance this loss in status, literary realism about the future instinctively tinkers with the underlying structures of science fiction in a very particular way in order to minimize its low-culture associations. More than anything - more than its preponderance of literary realist authors, or its paraliterary denouncements of science fiction - it's this tinkering that makes this corpus of texts unique and coherent as a phenomenon. It's also worth noting that science fiction has a long history of promoting precisely this type of tinkering, with hotly debated results. In order to explain this tinkering and the effects it can have on narratives and texts, and to establish a working poetics for multiplicative speculation, we need to take a step back to explain how science fiction works structurally.

III. Denouncing Estrangement

Science fiction is famously the "literature of estrangement and cognition" - literature which reminds us our future can differ from our present by demonstrating alternative worlds.[73] The experience of reading science fiction is something like the following: You are staring at your

[73] Darko Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition," in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Oxford, UK: Peter Lang, 2016), 15.

reflection in a basin of water. Reaching over your shoulder, the science fiction author drops an object into the basin. Despite the distortion caused by the dropped object, eventually you manage to relocate at least some part of your reflection in the water. We call the dropped object a novum, or “new thing.” When dropped, it defamiliarizes your view of yourself and your world by producing anything from tiny ripples to sloshing waves of difference. We call this experience of defamiliarization “estrangement.” While experiencing estrangement, the reader leaves behind their assumptions about their own world and enters a world made unfamiliar by the introduction of a novum. If you manage to recognize your reflection in the roiled water - whether in whole or in part - we call this experience “cognition.” While experiencing cognition, the reader recognizes significant parallels and connections between the science fiction world and their own. What the reader at first regarded with objectivity (because it seemed too strange and distant) is suddenly applicable to a set of problems and circumstances about which they are more tempted to be subjective. Perhaps their perspective is changed by this experience; at the very least, it is challenged. Though they can appear in different ratios and come from many sources in a text, both estrangement and cognition are required to produce the interaction that makes science fiction, science fiction.

In large part, this model was established by Darko Suvin, a scholar, poet, and critic widely credited as the father of academic discourse about science fiction. The impact of Suvin and his model cannot be overstated. Many scholars continue to directly reference and deploy his ideas today in the original form they took in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction,* Suvin’s discipline-launching 1979 monograph on science fiction poetics. It’s my own hope here to reconfigure Suvin’s concepts for use as a poetics of speculative fiction more broadly without losing the fundamental concepts and useful simplicity of Suvin’s formulation.

I am far from the first to attempt a critique or reconceptualization of Suvin and his cognitive estrangement model. Some, like Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. in his comprehensive overview of "Fictive Novums" in *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (2008), grapple with the ambiguities which persist in what can seem to be a slick, infallibly rational model.[74] Concerns such as whether a novum can be meaningfully distinguished from its effects and whether texts might contain more than one novum and remain functional as science fiction - a possibility Suvin explicitly disavowed - tend to be the focus of revisitations such as Csicsery-Ronay's. Other critiques focus more on the motivations behind Suvin's model - namely, that of achieving scholarly legitimacy for science fiction as a field of study - and how those motivations create limitations in his model. In fact, in "The Many Deaths of Science Fiction: A Polemic," Luckhurst cites Suvin and his cognitive estrangement model as an "exemplar" of the "implementation of internal borders" stratagem for legitimizing science fiction.[75] Luckhurst argues that Suvin's "final and deathly judgments are proscriptions which result from the desperate desire to decontaminate and inoculate SF," and that this desperation and fear serve as justification for both "a wholesale deportation of categories which surround, indeed interpenetrate inextricably, SF" and a "truly astonishing… dismissal of virtually all, if not *all*, SF."[76] In essence, Luckhurst argues that the exclusions and limitations of Suvin's cognitive estrangement model are ultimately just as arbitrary as models like Atwoodian speculative fiction because they are similarly motivated by fear and desire for legitimacy.

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[74] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., "Fictive Novums," in *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 47-76.

[75] Luckhurst, "Many Deaths," 38.

[76] Luckhurst, "Many Deaths," 39.

My own approach draws more on critiques like Luckhurst's, but rather than claim that these limitations pervade Suvin's model to a degree that renders it useless, I believe that it's possible (and preferable) to rehabilitate some of Suvin's terms and concepts. I argue that concepts like estrangement and cognition are separable from ethically inflected connotations of prestige and legitimacy (or lack thereof) that render them less useful in the context of the open-concept landscape of contemporary speculative fiction. In making this intervention explicitly, I also hope to avoid the temptation to attribute Suvin's unfair critiques of science fiction to bad-faith outside actors, or narrate Suvin's ideas in ways that erase the problematics of the original model in an attempt to preserve Suvin's evergreen position in the field. My goal here is to explicitly mark the limitations of Suvin's model in order to explain the utility of an adjusted model with a wider application. In short, I will advocate for a shift in the purpose's model which will precipitate a shift in its form - a move away from using Suvin's tools to artificially differentiate intimately interrelated genres now comfortably accommodated under the inclusive "speculative fiction" umbrella term, and a move towards using Suvin's tools to speak across them and articulate their shared project.

The greatest limitation of Suvin's cognitive estrangement model is the pseudo-ethical associations with which Suvin imbues estrangement and cognition and their interaction in science fiction. In Suvin's estimation, estrangement is a primarily ludic textual effect, one linked to hedonism, escapism, and disengagement from reality. When we colloquially characterize reading speculative fiction as a 'guilty pleasure,' we are instinctively responding to this pseudo-ethical discourse, expressing guilt for willingly accepting the ethical risks and performing the unethical behaviors associated with estrangement. Cognition, on the other hand, is overwhelmingly considered a disciplined textual effect, linked to narrative sophistication, critical

thinking, and engagement with reality. Cognition takes on positive ethical connotations when characterized as a behavior the reader performs in order to resist or counterbalance the idle temptations of estrangement. Essentially, estrangement is characterized as the source of everything which is low-culture, adolescent, and objectionable about science fiction, while cognition has the power to control and shape estrangement in ways that can make science fiction high-culture, mature, and sophisticated. These characterizations allow Suvin to, in what is essentially an infinite spectrum of admixtures of estrangement and cognition, draw a line in the sand and reconstitute a binary of "real science fiction" which meets a certain standard of self discipline and "science fiction-which-is-not-science fiction" which doesn't. Suvin's hope in creating this division is to establish science fiction as a kind of model minority genre and to disentangle judgments of its legitimacy from that of genres such as fantasy.

According to Suvin, estrangement at its best (i.e. when properly contained by cognition) is "a creative approach" for exploring certain questions and problems.[77] However, because of estrangement's tendencies towards "mystifying escapism," "ludic pleasure," and "anti-cognitive impulses," Suvin considers estrangement more often than not an "opium for the people," encouraging the "surface sensationalism" which marks "second-rate SF."[78] In an attempt to define what makes science fiction distinct from adjacent estranged genres such as folktale, fantasy, and pastoral, Suvin constructs a hierarchy which establishes science fiction as superior on the grounds that it disciplines its "wish-fulfilling element" (estrangement) through cognition.[79] Suvin further uses the effective counterbalancing of estrangement with cognition as

[77] Darko Suvin, "Preface to the First Edition," in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Oxford, UK: Peter Lang, 2016), 3.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition," 20.

a criterion for a hierarchy of texts *within* science fiction. For example, Suvin critiques space opera (science fiction organized around the adventures and intrigues made possible by a vast colonized cosmos), claiming that the huge amount of estrangement baked into its premise would be impossible to contain or counterbalance with cognition. On these grounds, Suvin dismissing the entire subgenre of space opera as "SF retrogressing into fairytale" and, in so doing, "committing creative suicide." [80] By developing these hierarchies, Suvin codifies and reinforces the pseudo-ethical associations of estrangement and cognition.

From Suvin's perspective, large quantities of estrangement pose enough of a threat to science fiction's rhetorical function that one of Suvin's other iconic concepts - the concept of the "novum" - is primarily developed as a method for disciplining and containing the threat constituted by estrangement. Suvin posits that a certain subset of science fiction (his chief interest in *Metamorphoses*) is systematic in its approach to creating differences between the between worlds, structuring themselves so that all estranging differences between the world of the science fiction text and the world of the implied reader can be logically traced back through cause and effect to a single catalyzing difference - Suvin's "novum."[81] Suvin posits that "a cognitive - in most cases strictly scientific - element becomes a measure of aesthetic quality," and that all "significant" science fiction is primarily recognizable by its usage of "more complex and wider cognitions."[82] In other words, science fiction texts which thriftily extrapolate complex webs of difference and significance from a single, plausible novum are aesthetically superior because they maximize cognition and minimize estrangement. As a result of Suvin's influence

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[80] Ibid.

[81] Darko Suvin, "SF and the Novum," in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Oxford, UK: Peter Lang, 2016), 80.

[82] Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition," 27.

on the field, these pseudo-ethical associations of estrangement and cognition, and the generic and sub-generic hierarchies they enable, have been widely embraced both within science fiction discourse and beyond it. Studies as recent and foundational as Frederic Jameson's *The Desire Called Utopia*, the newly minted monograph paired with older essays in his 2005 collection *Archaeologies of the Future*, are organized around Suvin's derogatory concept of estrangement as little more than 'wish-fulfillment' and take pains to reinforce the petty, desperate separations Suvin insists exist between science fiction and 'lesser' genres such as fantasy.[83]

Yet the ethical associations and hierarchies built up around estrangement and cognition are ultimately arbitrary, motivated by fear, desperation, and desire for legitimacy. At best, they represent a once-but-no-longer useful concession, a strategic distinction designed to help the genre gain ground in its fight for scholarly legitimacy. At worst, however, the ethical associations of estrangement and cognition that persist today represent exactly what Suvin feared the so-called science fiction "ghetto" had become by the 1970s - something once "protective" and productive for the development of the genre which has now become "constrictive, cutting off new developments."[84] Though the demonization of estrangement and the canonization of cognition once served a discursive function for the genre, we must recognize the ways in which these received ideas might be artificially limiting the conversations we can have about science fiction and speculative fiction today. In a generic field now typified by an increasing lack of meaningful distinction between various genres - especially those which in some way embrace estrangement as a tool - estrangement and cognition are only valuable as concepts if they are

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[83] For the former, see especially "How to Fulfill a Wish" (72-84); for the latter, see especially "The Great Schism" (57-71). Both in Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005).

[84] Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition," 27.

divorced from their history of use as instruments of judgment, dismissal, and exclusion. In what follows, I hope to model and normalize the usage of value-neutral conceptions of estrangement and cognition, using them to explain the peculiar structural self-sabotage practiced by literary realism about the future.

IV. The Two Plots

Having recognized that literary realism fears its death at the hands of science fiction, and knowing that estrangement and cognition carry longstanding ethical connotations, we are finally equipped to understand two of the most puzzling shared norms of contemporary literary realism about the future: its obsession with narratives of generational conflict and its hostility towards estrangement on a structural level.

First, contemporary literary realism about the future constantly stages narratives of intergenerational conflict. More specifically, they play out the perceived crises of an older generation that fears replacement by a new generation - specifically, by a new generation so totally different from the old that it is unrecognizable as the elder's successor. The biggest concern driving these narratives is one of legacy - the fear of an older generation who feel they have no recognizable successor to carry forward their legacy. As such, the "replacement" the older generation fears can take the form of actual death (extinction or genocide) but can also take forms which interfere with the older generation's ability to reproduce themselves, such as being rendered sterile en masse. This obsession with narratives of generational conflict can seem arbitrary - and even deeply problematic, as we'll explore later - until put in the context of literary realism's fear of generic death at the hands of science fiction. Consciously or unconsciously, the basic function of these plots - in which a newer generation threatens to replace an older one - is

to model the changing relationship literary realism considers itself to have to science fiction. At some point in literary history, literary realism was happy to play an almost parental role to science fiction, patronizing it and dismissing its oddity as the ultimately harmless result of a misguided deviation from its own norms. Now, however, at a time when literary realism is beginning to see science fiction and speculative fiction more broadly as its imminent successors, the genre has begun to fret that its essence and legacy cannot be preserved by a genre perceived to be so fundamentally different in its structure and function.

Second, contemporary realism about the future treats estrangement within its narratives with a hostility that both severely limits the kinds of stories it can tell and warps their interpretation. Its hostility towards estrangement is the result of received ideas about the pseudo-ethical connotations of estrangement and cognition. Literary realism recognizes cognition as an old friend and a source of legitimacy - when literary realism strives to create verisimilitude and reality effects, it is striving to create certain kinds of cognition. By contrast, literary realism has sensed that the kinds of illegitimacy it wants to avoid - the connotations of escapism, hedonism, and disengagement from reality which the convergence of genre threatens to foist upon it - are most closely associated with estrangement. In response, literary realism about the future has developed elaborate narrative strategies for minimizing and containing estrangement so as to likewise minimize the negative connotations and associations such estrangement can bring with it.

One result of this hostility to estrangement is content-based: in its narratives of generational conflict, literary realism about the future invariably associates the older generation with cognition and associates the usurping younger generation with estrangement and its effects. Older generations are familiar everymen, frequently normative by white heteropatriarchal

standards, whose way of life is endangered by changes taking place in the world; younger generations are strange "others" - often explicitly speculative beings such as clones, cyborgs, or magic users - who are seen as the source of, beneficiaries of, or strong advocates for the changes taking place. These stories about intergenerational struggle serve as allegories for the struggle between genres - literary realism's attempts to preserve its modes and traditions in the face of an invasion (of both fiction and real life) by a growing wave of estrangement. In its narratives of intergenerational conflict, estrangement is cast explicitly as the antagonist, a force which has warped the younger generation past the point of recognizability and which by its very existence threatens the survival of the older generation. Though the history of science fiction includes tie-ins to a longer history of anti-technology writing which demonizes estrangement in the form of technological innovation, literary realism about the future pathologically expands this critique to include the widest possible range of differences (including differences of socioeconomic status, politics, race, gender, disability, and sexuality) that the younger generation can manifest.

Literary realism about the future has developed two archetypal plots which respond in some way to the "threat" of science fiction and estrangement using allegories of intergenerational conflict. The first, the "fear" plot, plays out the fears of the older generation - that some seemingly innocuous element of estrangement will multiply and escalate to a point where it wipes them out, sterilizes them, or otherwise renders them 'obsolete,' allowing them to be replaced by a younger generation of speculative beings. The second plot, the "containment" plot, plays out efforts by the older generation to wipe out, sterilize, and/or otherwise render 'obsolete' the younger generation, ostensibly to prevent the reverse from happening. In the first plot, estrangement and its 'takeover' is sensationalized, emphasizing the imminence and severity of the threat it poses. In the second, elements of cognition are successfully marshalled to contain

the elements of estrangement; in some cases, systems are established which destroy the estrangement outright, and instrumentalize this destruction in order to sustain the older generation.

Consider a textbook example of the fear plot: Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. The novel tells the tale of a socially maladjusted Millennial mad scientist whose lack of emotional connection to others (because of too much time spent playing violent video games and not enough non-internet-mediated social interaction) leads him to execute a cold-blooded genocide of the entire human race and to replace them with a new generation of speculative not-quite-humans made in his own image. It's clear how this narrative draws on fears of the replacement of an older generation with an unrecognizable generation. Crake's bizarre speculative creations, the Crakers, are eerie, largely emotionless eternal children who have biologically more in common with the many animals which inspired their design than the humans who created them. What the novel emphasizes above all is the suddenness of Crake's genocide, and the inability of any of those around him - even those like co-protagonist Jimmy, with whom he works closely - to anticipate it or piece together Crake's intentions until far too late. The extinction mechanism Crake uses - BlyssPluss, an STI-preventing, libido-boosting, youth-prolonging contraceptive drug which promises nothing short of immortality - is revealed to be a Trojan horse, a dispersal vector for a swift-killing hemorrhagic fever. This structure - the sudden, exponential growth and spread of an estranged element in the text, which conceals the threat it poses until it's far too late to counteract or contain - is a reflection of the anxieties inherent in the fear plot.

Meanwhile, the "containment" plot is played out in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go.* A majority of conventionally born humans (largely invisible in the novel) sustain their health and longevity by constructing a system in which clones are harvested for replacement organs. This

system is *Never Let Me Go*'s interpretation of motifs of cannibalism and predation common in containment plots - tropes of the older generation literally or figuratively feeding on the younger for sustenance, survival, or sport. While Ishiguro characterizes the novel as "a metaphor for how we face mortality," this vast majority of elder-generation beneficiaries seems exempt from this lesson, exploiting the systematic execution of clones in order to improve and extend their lives and leaving only the speculative younger generation of "Donors" to learn to accept death with noble resignation. The novel's greatest turn comes when it's revealed that the Donors' situation is largely the result of political scapegoating. When a rogue researcher unrelatedly discovers the secret of human genetic engineering, the Donors take the fall, hidden and further dehumanized as a coping mechanism for the populace's fear - as Miss Emily puts it: "It reminded people, reminded them of a fear they'd always had. It's one thing to create students, such as yourselves, for the donation programme. But a generation of created children who'd take their place in the world? Children demonstrably *superior* to the rest of us? Oh no. That frightened people."[85] The Donor program is not just a coldly executed cost-benefit survival decision; it is a hegemonic system designed to defensively suppress the speculative, generational threat the Donors pose, and reinforce the dominance of the older generation.

Both of these plots work on a concrete level as stagings of intergenerational conflict, but they also work at a second order of significance as stagings of generic conflict between literary realism and science fiction. This is not just because they stage disruptions (or preempted disruptions) of hegemonic power, from the defensive perspective of that hegemonic power - they certainly do, and the availability of this broad level of interpretation, when combined with certain structural choices, makes possible other readings we'll return to shortly. But armed with the

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[85] Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (New York: Vintage International, 2005), 264.

context of literary realism's fear of generic death and hostility to science fiction as its successor (both of which so clearly drive the paraliterary discourse around the novels), interpreting the novels as primarily grappling with these anxieties and replicating these hostilities makes sense.

Beyond the context of paraliterary discourse, the primary evidence supporting a reading of these novels as allegories of genre conflict is the fact that both integrally involve the corruption or upsetting hybridization of some form of art as a necessary condition enabling their dystopia or apocalypse. *Oryx and Crake* sees protagonist Jimmy, a humanities student who bemoans having no hirable skills in a future society which only values STEM, gradually corrupted by STEM paragon Crake and convinced to use his powers of artistic production for evil. In the end, Crake's plan only succeeds because Jimmy creates a creative and effective viral ad campaign to sell BlyssPluss. Crake is incapable of doing so because, as the ungenerous personification of stereotypes about STEM, he is incapable of understanding or expressing human emotion; humanities personification Jimmy, on the other hand, can marshall the wildly aspirational and speculative rhetoric to manipulate others' desire, and their desire to be desired. In *Oryx and Crake*'s bleak future, the cooptation of Jimmy's writing skills tolls the final bell for literary realism; non-speculative artistic practices die in darkness along with the rest of the humanities, while Crake's irresponsible science (the novel's primary estranged element) reigns supreme.[86]

In *Never Let Me Go,* the threat science fiction poses to literary realism is acted out in the art the Donors produce in order to prove their humanity. All of Tommy's sketches, meant to

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[86] It should be noted that Atwood overturns some of these features in later installments of the Flood trilogy - for example, sequel *The Year of the Flood* reveals that Crake's genocide was far from total. However, I argue that the fact that almost a decade passed before the publication of a sequel, combined with the fact that Atwood originally intended no sequel and only produced one in response to popular demand, leads me to conclude that *Oryx and Crake* is designed to function as a fear plot, and catalyzed further production in the subgenre as such.

serve as windows into his human interior self, consists of sketches of speculative creatures - some "made of metal," some fleshy and "rubbery" in outward appearance, but always fundamentally constructed and clockwork at their core, like "tak[ing] the back off a radio set… miniature screws and wheels all drawn with obsessive precision."[87] If we see the creatures as representations of Tommy and the Donors, they suggest that the Donors are always speculative at their core, regardless of any outward appearance of humanity. On a more concrete level, these sketches prove the Donors incapable of creating non-speculative art, and therefore a threat to the artistic order of realism - an executable offense in the world of Ishiguro's novel. In both novels, the macro-level failure of society (or the justification for violence preventing it) involves a breakdown or failure of realism as an artistic mode.

Reading these novels as stagings of contemporary conflict between genres would be fine, or at the very least understandable in the larger context we've established, if it were clear that this was the narrative intent of the novels. But as previously mentioned, it isn't actually clear that this is their narrative intent. This lack of clarity, among other things, allows us to read these novels as stagings of other conflicts - stagings of apocalyptic fear-mongering by privileged orders or apologia for systematic violence in pursuit of consolidating and keeping hegemonic power. If these readings sound extreme, they are. But they are not just available to us as readers of these novels - they are actively encouraged by the texts in ways that I assume to be unintentional consequences of narrative choices made for other reasons - reasons having more do with generic fear and hostility than by any latent crypto-fascism on their part. Namely, what makes these novels' narrative intent unclear, and what promotes these extreme interpretations, is

[87] Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go,* 241, 287.

the other result of literary realism's hostility to estrangement: the structural breakdown of the interaction between cognition and estrangement which make speculative metaphors function.

V. Broken Metaphors

The omnipresent symptoms and monstrous rhetorics present in this wave of literary realism about the future should sound familiar to any acquainted with contemporary discourse surrounding capitalist realism - "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even *imagine* a coherent alternative to it."[88] The term, coined by Mark Fisher in 2009's *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?,* seeks to capture not just the artistic concept of realism and the ways in which contemporary artistic expressions of realism feed the logic of capitalism, but also the ways in which realism has grown from a mode of artistic expression to an organizing principle within our perception of lived experience. Most importantly for our purposes, the main symptoms and methods of capitalist realism Fisher identifies that *are* applicable to artistic output align perfectly with the commonalities tying together this wave of literary realism about the future.

First among these is the persistent "theme of sterility," an anxiety which Fisher argues "cries out to be read in cultural terms" in the form of a set of questions: "how long can a culture persist without the new? What happens if the young are no longer capable of producing surprises?"[89] This anxiety arises in response to the second symptom - an artificial stasis that capitalism promotes in an attempt to maintain the conditions conducive to the fiction of perpetual growth. In literature particularly, this expresses itself as a failure of the "reciprocal relationship

[88] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism,* 8.

[89] Ibid., 9.

between the canonical and the new," in which "the new defines itself in response to what is already established," but the established fails or refuses to "configure itself in response to the new."[90] Instead, capitalism permits only "reiteration and re-permutation" of ground already tread, simultaneously producing the appearance of novelty while promoting "the morose conviction that nothing new can ever happen."[91] In light of these revelations, the shared qualities of this wave of literary fiction about the future - its staging of generational conflict and its hostility to difference and change on a structural level in the form of estrangement - are unmistakable as logics of capitalist realism. By artificially limiting estrangement and/or staging it as a virulent threat, these texts break the speculative potential of the estrangement-cognition interaction and instead work to naturalize and reify existing inequalities and violences in the name of maintaining the capitalist status quo.

Let's revisit the concepts of cognition and estrangement through the language we use to talk about metaphor. We can think about the tenor and the vehicle as they relate to the two worlds or realities being compared in speculative fiction - the world of the implied reader, and the world of the text. The world of the implied reader is the tenor of a speculative metaphor; it is the thing which is clarified or described by the comparison. The world of the text is the vehicle of a speculative metaphor - the external, alternative thing whose attributes clarify or highlight something about the tenor. The difference of a speculative metaphor is that we construct the seemingly unlike thing which serves as the vehicle, and do so explicitly to serve this purpose. The process by which the vehicle, the world of the text, is constructed is fundamentally one of estrangement. Comparing between two obviously alike things holds little power and serves little

[90] Ibid., 10.

[91] Ibid., 9-10.

purpose; the greater the seeming difference of the objects, the more impactful the realization of their similarities can be. In order to create a vehicle which truly surprises and enlightens, we must use sufficient amounts of estrangement to emphasize its apparent difference. Cognition - moments in which the reader recognizes a metaphorical comparison is being made - is only possible when the reader does not already fully understand the similarities that exist between the tenor and the vehicle, their own world and the world of the text. Both estrangement and cognition are needed in order to make a speculative metaphor work. If either estrangement or cognition isn't functioning properly in a work of speculative, these metaphors break down.

Literary realism's hostility to estrangement manifests at a structural level, making estrangement not function properly in these novels and, as a result, breaking the metaphors they are theoretically attempting to build. The nature of this breakdown is unique to each novel, but tends to follow certain patterns in each of the two plots - the fear plot and the containment plot. In what follows, I will briefly touch on some of the problems (and pro-capitalist rhetorics) which arise when literary realism about the future tampers with estrangement and its functioning at a structural level.

In containment plots, the text tends to have a single novum which is not permitted to emit any estrangement - returning briefly to our basin metaphor, these are basins in which a dropped pebble produces no ripples. In this sense, one might argue that these texts use the novum in precisely the way Darko Suvin advocated it be used - to discipline and minimize estrangement in the text such that all the differences between the world of the text and the world of the reader can be traced back through branching causes and effects to that single novum. The difference is that, in the world of containment plot novels, the need to control and discipline estrangement is so strong as to not permit any estrangement in the first place. This leads to texts in which no real

differences exist between our world and the world within the text; significant narrative attention is paid to how closely the text resembles our world despite the introduction of a novum. Without sufficient significant differences between the world of the reader and the world of the text, speculative metaphors cannot function properly.

In *Never Let Me Go*, this takes many forms. Carers are not *like* real-life caretakers - they *are* real-life caretakers. Hailsham is not *like* an English boarding school - it *is* an English boarding school. The Donors are not *like* real-life organ donors - they *are* real-life organ donors. What neologisms exist - “Donors,” for example - exist as euphemisms which neatly avoid the speculative connotations of words like “clone.” The pointed 90s nostalgia of the novel’s setting - mostly communicated through props like the Walkman CD player, also works to emphasize that this is a world we all recognize, and perhaps even miss. The Donors’ existence does not seem to affect daily life at all, and what little infrastructure has sprung up to keep Donors from spreading the estrangement inherent in their existence is minimal, and seems to operate within existing systems - Hailsham exists as part of the network of traditional country boarding schools, and the care centers the Donors stay at while Donating seem all but integrated into the NHS. Paired with this familiarity is the fact that many overtly speculative elements of the novel are left undiscussed for large sections of the novel - in addition to the deferred reveal that the protagonists are clones until a third of the way through the novel, we only hear about the advent of genetic engineering in Tommy and Ruth’s confrontation with Miss Emily. The revelation of these elements is always paired with horror - that the Donors are clones is less important to the scene of its revelation, for example, than the fact that they are born and raised with the sole purpose of being gradually, strategically butchered to maximize their use value. Combined, the novel’s emphasis on the familiarity of its world and its pairing of speculative elements with

horror asks us to consider the systematic exploitation and execution of the speculative not only a convenient way to preserve a way of life worth preserving, but a necessary and justified step in preserving that life.

It's almost certain that the novel's emphasis on its world as familiar or nostalgic, and its characterization of speculative elements as horrifying disruptions of that familiarity, are rooted in the "generic revulsion" with which literary realism regards science fiction. And yet, in a system in which literary realism identifies with the largely unseen, hegemonically empowered general populace of the novel, and sees dispossessed, speculative beings like Donors as a threat to its project, what the novel becomes, on some level, is an argument for the hegemonically empowered to resort to violence to remain in power. Because the novel so tightly controls its estrangement, the speculative metaphors it is trying to create break down. What's left is a narrative which, at the highest level of abstraction, humanizes those who uphold and benefit from this cannibalistic system, and asks those it seeks to destroy to sympathize with their plight and submit to their wishes, marking any efforts to rebel or speak back futile. A novel that, for better or worse, sought to defend a particular status quo becomes a generalized parable of submission to biopower and extermination by the state. That this is capitalist realism and its logics at work is undeniable.

Novels which follow the fear plot tend involve a lot of estrangement as a function of their thesis - namely, that estrangement is a threat not unlike a virus which will spread out of control before its threat is recognized. In response to this, fear plot narratives tend to attempt to keep estrangement to a minimum in other areas. A common choice made to minimize other forms of estrangement is to set the novel in the very near future - a decade, a year, twenty minutes. This in and of itself is not problematic, but as a structural decision, it does shift a reader's reception of

the narrative from engagement with a thought experiment to engagement with a warning of imminent doom or danger. Sometimes this shift in reception makes no difference; in other cases, it transforms valuable thought experiments into predictions that validate all the most extreme fear-mongering arguments in favor of preemptive violence available to supremacist movements today.

Consider Naomi Alderman's smash hit *The Power,* in which women gain the power to deliver electric shocks through touch. At first, the titular "power" seems a harmless novelty - there are some accidents before its affordances and limitations are fully understood, but otherwise, it seems slated to have little impact. Then it's discovered that young women (note the intergenerational tensions here) have the ability to awaken this power in older women. The novel's estrangement multiplies exponentially; suddenly, the entire system of patriarchal oppression is reversed into an equal and opposite system of matriarchal oppression in which the non-speculative - in this case, men - are subjugated and replaced. The unlikely heroes of the novel are men's rights activists, their cries of "we knew it all along!" validated by the horrific and sudden reversal. Ultimately, not even the attempted extinction of the entire human race through nuclear holocaust can undo the damage done - in an unmistakable homage to *The Handmaid's Tale,* the novel ends with a returning frame narrative involving a meek male writer the patronizing, harassment-prone female editor of his current work - revealed to be the novel itself, a history of sorts of how women came to be in charge. What I suspect to be the novel's point - the one it has been lauded for - is a classic case of role reversal. The novel's intended audience is men who fail to see the way patriarchy functions in everyday life. With this book, Alderman hopes to disabuse them of its invisibility through a classic game of "how would you like it," with the newly installed oppressive matriarchy quickly escalating into countless graphic

descriptions of abuses of the power by women, from the overnight toppling and replacement of male-dominated governments to multiple graphic rapes of men.

However, while this reading is at least nominally supported by the text, the choice to set the novel in the very near future - ultimately compromises this project and instead sets the novel up to be read (perhaps ungenerously, but not without foundation) by proponents of toxic masculinity as a prophecy of the sinister agenda of feminism. While the rapidity with which patriarchy is replaced with matriarchy is no doubt meant to underscore patriarchy's arbitrariness, ultimately what it underscores is the plausibility of (and the imminent threat to male dominance posed by) a female takeover of society by subtler means. As Jane Donawerth writes of earlier gender-swap 'dystopia:' "This is not a dystopia, however, because the goal is not critique of society or its ills, but rather enforcement of threatened ideology on individuals. There is no potential Utopia opposite to the world where women dominate, as there is in a dystopia, but only the "normal" world that needs to reassert its natural order."[92] Again, we see a structural choice, made on the basis of minimizing estrangement for outdated ethical and fearful reasons, creating consequences for the text which warp our interpretation of the speculative metaphor at work in favor of the existing logics of capitalism and its systems. By creating, through this temporal setting, a world that is "more like an extrapolation or exacerbation of ours than an alternative to it," *The Power* naturalizes the idea that the oppressions of ideological systems like patriarchy are inescapable and inevitable, and that no level of change - up to and including a sudden and totalizing reversal of roles - will disrupt that oppression.[93]

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[92] Jane Donawerth, "Genre Blending and the Critical Dystopia," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge: 2003), 31.

[93] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism,* 9.

If the logics of capitalist realism inherent in these texts are not apparent enough, compare them to *The Girl with All the Gifts*, the 2016 film based on M.R. Carey's 2014 zombie apocalypse drama which begins as a containment plot but quickly moves beyond the bounds of that structure to become something much more. It tells the story of Melanie, one of the first in a new generation of children to be born with a zombie pathogen that has swept the near-future UK. The congenital nature of their infection gives these children limited control over their hunger, and the ability function more or less as humans do when not hungry, or when not in range of something appetizing to them. At first, the film's world resembles that of *Never Let Me Go*, with all of Hailsham's microaggressions operating at the level of macroaggressions. At the military base and research facility where the children are initially kept, three schools of thought regarding the children emerge, epitomized by the three key adult figures in Melanie's life. Sargeant Parks and the men under his command treat the children as subhuman - Parks himself perpetually refers to them as "friggin abortions."[94] As the film proceeds and Melanie proves her humanity several times through empathy, ingenuity, and loyalty, Parks begins to appreciate her usefulness, but never fully acknowledges her personhood. Constantly mediating between Parks and the children is Miss Justineau, the children's kind-hearted teacher, who begins the film convinced of the children's humanity and never wavers in this belief. Dr. Caldwell, a researcher at the base trying to finish her life's work (a cure) before she dies of a mortal wound, is the film's cold-blooded pragmatist. Though she comes to recognize Melanie and children like her as human children rather than mindless agents of their disease, this does not stop Dr. Caldwell from demanding Melanie sacrifice herself, donating her brain and spine to further (and potentially complete) Dr. Caldwell's cure research. In what is widely considered a "twist" ending, Melanie

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[94] *The Girl with All the Gifts*, directed by Colm McCarthy (2016; Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2017), DVD.

refuses to submit to this, and instead causes the release of a huge quantity of the pathogen's airborne form, effectively guaranteeing the zombification of any remaining humans on the planet. The only guaranteed human survivor is Miss Justineau, who continues to teach Melanie and children like her from the safety of an airlock.

Ultimately, *The Girl With All the Gifts* functions as a deconstruction of both containment plots and fear plots. Though the world of the film is initially confined to the Hailsham-like quarantine zone of military base, where life proceeds predictably via strict repetitive protocols, the base is quickly overrun and the small team of survivors forced to traverse vast, unprotected wilderness and cosmopolitan areas packed with so-called "Hungries." The strict control the base's staff seemed to have over children like Melanie is quickly revealed to be little more than a temporary illusion, at which point the film might seem to fall instead into the lockstep of a fear plot, seemingly corroborated by Melanie's closing decision to suddenly and irrevocably unleash a kind of monstrous difference on what little remains of the world as we knew it. Yet the film also complicates this reading by developing our radical empathy for Melanie. The ultimate test of this empathy is Dr. Caldwell, whose seemingly admirable pragmatism makes Melanie's humanity immaterial in her eyes. Though Caldwell explicitly comes to see Melanie as human, she continues to demand Melanie sacrifice herself to save humanity; rather than justify the sacrifice by Melanie's inhumanity, Caldwell explicitly subscribes to the idea that even in the absence of a distinction between herself and Melanie, Melanie is still obligated to submit to her own extermination for the greater good of a very particular set of beings - beings Dr. Caldwell considers like herself in more important ways. In Fisher's terms, Caldwell demands that the new erase itself so that the established need not "reconfigure" itself in response to it.

Melanie's ultimate decision, and her rationale for it - that if she and the other children are "alive" in the same way Dr. Caldwell is, "Then why should it be us who dies for you?" - is a firm rebuttal of the arbitrary endorsement of existing power structures offered to justify the two plots.[95] Even in the face of the actual cannibalization the children are sometimes driven to - Dr. Caldwell recounts with disgusted relish how the children "ate their way out" of the womb, and Melanie comes close at several points to biting humans against her will - this still does not justify, in the film's eyes, the sacrifice of the children in the name of upholding the hegemonic order as it has stood up to this point.[96] In addition to rejecting the logic of containment in its ending, the film also demonstrates structural willingness to introduce estrangement and explore its varied effects on the world allow the film to explore similar themes to *Never Let Me Go* without at any point endorsing a demand for the dispossessed to submit to abuse and extermination at the hands of the hegemonically empowered. This, in a nutshell, marks the difference between predictive and multiplicative modes, and demonstrates a robust, resistant response to capitalist realism as a predictive mode.

VI. Coda: Why Can't We Be Friends?

I'll close here by returning one final time to the seemingly logical objection to this characterization of literary realism about the future, and Atwood and Ishiguro's novels in particular, as capitalism realism: that depiction does not indicate endorsement. Depicting a future in which certain othered beings take over the world is not necessarily a prediction or a warning that real-world others will enact these kinds of violence. Such a text can just as easily frame itself

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

as a critique of mindsets which are prone to believe such predictions. Likewise, depicting a future in which certain othered beings are oppressed and subjected to institutionalized, state-sanctioned violence in the name of stability, security, and the greater good does not equal advocacy for such acts and systems. Such a text can just as easily frame itself as a critique of these systems and the justifications and insidious methods by which they are put into place. But whether or not these novels mean to endorse or permit these extreme, fascistic readings (and I'm inclined to the generosity of assuming they are not), they nonetheless enable (and in certain cases, promote) such readings through the unintended consequences of choices made to manage or minimize estrangement on a structural level - choices fueled by outdated senses of ethics and a misguided assumption that literary realism is in danger of being killed off.

Indeed, this anxiety is all that is preventing literary realism about the future from finding just as natural and fruitful a place among the ranks of multiplicative speculation as traditionally speculative genres. That realism and the speculative are compatible and complimentary modes - for example, that "what most people call 'realism'... is actually a 'weak' or low-intensity variety of science fiction" - is nothing new or controversial, after all.[97] But it is perhaps counterintuitive that a mimetic project can do the work of speculation, as suggested by searches like Sean Austin Grattan's for utopian affects like hope in 20th-century literary realism.[98] Therein lies yet another advantage offered by the terminology of multiplicative speculation: an acknowledgement that processes of speculation need not only take place in the realm of the traditionally defined genre fictions and the interstitial experiments harbored under speculative fiction's umbrella. When we

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[97] Seo-Young Chu, "Introduction: Lyric Mimesis," in *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 7.

[98] See Sean Austin Grattan, *Hope Isn't Stupid: Utopian Affects in Contemporary American Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017).

direct our critical energies towards asking what speculation *does* rather than what it *is,* we open ourselves to the possibility of finding the potential of speculation - both its positive, transformative potential and its negative, stymying potential - where we might least expect it.[99]

[99] It should be noted that this openness also requires a new attitude to genre - the willingness to define textual relationships in this contemporary post-genre landscape in kaleidoscopic and slippery terms, incorporating process, praxis, and affect as much or more than formal features. For a more expansive consideration of what these formations consist of, consult this project's fourth chapter.

Chapter 3

Multiplicative Speculation and Critical Estrangement

I. Introduction

The method of multiplicative speculation - broadening imaginative horizons by multiplying the number and variety of imaginable alternatives - requires not only an acceptance of difference, but an active embrace and valuation of the act of imagining otherwise, regardless of what precisely is imagined. In opposition to this, a foundational argument of anti-utopianism is the "active denial of the merits of imagining alternative ways of life" - the strategic rejection of imagining otherwise as useless, when in fact the simple act poses arguably the greatest threat to predictive speculative formations like capitalist realism.[100] In terms of the poetics of estrangement and cognition, multiplicative speculation not only requires estrangement, it actively and highly values it. Predictive speculation, on the other hand, dismisses estrangement as a tool, claiming it leads to any number of dangers or temptations (from escapism to fascism) rather than critical political engagement.

To argue that estrangement is necessary to produce a critical experience in speculative fiction is old hat - even Suvin, the skew of whose poetics we have already discussed at length, accepts estrangement as a kind of necessary evil in pursuit of the critical process of cognitive estrangement. To argue that estrangement is necessary for utopia is not new either - Levitas theorizes in no uncertain terms that estrangement is a necessary condition for utopian imagination. But to argue that estrangement itself can be critical, can produce a critical readerly

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[100] Ruth Levitas, "For Utopia: The (Limits of the) Utopian Function in Late Capitalist Society," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 3, No. 2, 30.

experience, regardless of the presence, absence, or amount of cognition experienced in a text, takes the discursive back-and-forth of both speculative structuralism and utopia/anti-utopia one step beyond the pale. I further argue that there are critical experiences that can only be made possible by overwhelming experiences of estrangement without counterbalancing cognition, and that these critical experiences are key to the project of multiplicative speculation. Finally, I argue that estrangement and cognition can only fully serve the purposes of multiplicative speculation when acknowledged to be relative - experiences that are phenomenologically different, and cued or inspired by different stimuli and provocations, for different readers. Accepting the relativity of estrangement and cognition not only reinforces the project of multiplicative speculation - how can predictive speculation begin to narrow down our imaginative possibilities without dismissing the perspectives of entire groups of non-implied readers? - but does the work of multiplying exponentially the narratives and possibilities it contains, accounting for the different experiences of cognition and estrangement in response to the same text.

In this chapter, I mount a defense of the poetic of estrangement, one of the core tools of both the utopian project and multiplicative speculation as we have defined it. First, I trace the roots of the claim that estrangement cannot itself be critical, define what “critical” means, and argue for estrangement as a producer of unique critical experiences. Next, I turn to Yoon Ha Lee’s *Machineries of Empire* trilogy (particularly its first installment, *Ninefox Gambit*) as an example of a text which produces a unique critical experience - in this case, a reflection on the perspective and complicity of readers in worldbuilding, and a meta-reflection on utopia’s troubled historical association with fascism. I then return to the discourse of genre theory to develop the claim that estrangement and cognition are relative. Finally, I return to my reading of

Ninefox Gambit in order to demonstrate how the novel debunks the myth of a universal perspective from which estrangement and cognition can or should be judged.

II. Estrangement Can Be Critical

Darko Suvin's entire model of cognitive estrangement (which we reviewed in Chapter 2) is founded on the assumption that estrangement itself cannot be critical. Suvin sees estrangement as an indulgent, potentially corrupting element desperately in need of discipline - a role cognition fills. Only texts which properly counterbalance their estrangement with adequate cognition, and in so doing create a "critical" (read "politically engaged") text, can be counted as true science fiction according to Suvin. Many have written about Suvin's ulterior motives in creating this pronouncement - Suvin essentially prioritizing genre legitimization over accounting for the complex culture and tradition of science fiction as it developed historically.[101] What interests me more here is Suvin's original claim that, in the absence of adequate levels of cognition, estrangement is incapable of being "critical" in any significant sense. If we take "critical" here to mean something like a text's ability to create an experience for the reader that asks the reader to reflect in a self-aware way on their own relationship to the text, I argue it's entirely possible for estrangement itself to generate a critical experience. Furthermore, those who dismiss the critical potential of estrangement neuter the utopian potential of speculative fiction and play into the hands of anti-utopians dead set on "active denial of the merits of imagining alternative ways of living."[102]

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[101] See my discussion of Roger Luckhurst's "The Many Deaths of Science Fiction: A Polemic" in my chapter on literary realism, or for an external source, see Andrew Milner, "Utopia and Science Fiction Revisited" in *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009): 213-230.

[102] Levitas, "For Utopia," 30.

What's especially frustrating about Suvin's dismissal of estrangement is that it disagrees with the concept of estrangement as deployed by Brecht, from whom Suvin draws the term.

There's a curious footnote in Darko Suvin's field-founding "Estrangement and Cognition" - a citation of Bertolt Brecht that admits an interesting alteration. In defining the term "estrangement" for use in science fiction discourse, Suvin uses several quotes from Brecht which define similar phenomena in the realm of theater criticism, then footnotes them as follows:

> Bertolt Brecht, 'Kleines Organon fur das Theater'... My quotations are from pp. 192 and 196 of this translation, but I have changed Mr. Willett's translation of *Verfremdung* as "alienation" into my "estrangement," since "alienation" invokes incorrect, indeed opposite, connotations: estrangement was for Brecht an approach militating directly against social and cognitive alienation…[103]

Given estrangement is such an important term for Suvin and its provenance as a Brechtian concept so vital to its legitimacy, one wonders why would Suvin bury such an important re-translation in a footnote? Comparison of Suvin's interpretation with the original translation of Brecht Suvin cites sheds light on the extent to which Brecht intended estrangement to be used in this way - especially in light of Suvin's admission at the end of his estrangement precis that estrangement is "used by Brecht in a different way, within a still predominantly "realistic" context."[104]

In short, Suvin's intervention is to take what Brecht considered a single concept ("alienation") and split it into two concepts ("estrangement" and "cognition") that then exist in a dialectic relationship with one another, forming the blurry mixed experience of "cognitive estrangement" which purportedly defines science fiction. It's in this section that Suvin begins to establish a hierarchy between the two which characterizes estrangement as a necessary evil and

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[103] Darko Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition," in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Oxford, UK: Peter Lang, 2016), 19n2.

[104] Ibid., 19.

cognition as its antidote, and that begins first and foremost in his citations of Brecht. Perhaps the key quote Suvin marshals is from Brecht's "Short Organon for the Theater," as follows: "A representation which estranges is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar."[105] This is important because it establishes the power of estrangement to make the familiar seem somehow unfamiliar, a process vital to speculative fiction's ability to have political impact; estrangement denaturalizes systems and behaviors which have been naturalized. Only by realizing our own conventions are just as arbitrary and strange as alternatives can we begin to imagine changing how we live.

But Suvin here takes a hard left in his deployment of Brecht, emphasizing above all else the anxieties about totalitarianism that underpinned and necessitated "alienation" in theater. For Suvin, Brecht's "alienation" is important because it seems to be fueled by anxieties about becoming passively lost in or escaping into the fictional. For Brecht, the worry is that the audience is too susceptible to the kinds of petty emotional manipulations employed by bourgeois theater that they are emotionally and intellectually defenseless when confronted by similar tactics by totalitarian rhetoric. Disrupting those manipulations with the methods of epic theater prevents this. To Suvin, this feels like a familiar danger - the danger of the reader of science fiction escaping into another world, passively receiving the norms and conventions of that world, perhaps even forgetting that the fictive world isn't real. But, faced with the same problem, Brecht and Suvin seem to come to nearly opposite conclusions. For Suvin, the solution is to constantly disrupt estrangement with cognition. For Brecht, the solution is estrangement itself.

In line with Brecht, Ruth Levitas has declared that "the utopian function is estrangement," and theorized the three functions utopia can serve to be "compensation, critique,

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[105] Ibid., 18.

and change" - all of which require estrangement to function.[106] In the case of compensation - Levitas' term for transporting and wish-fulfilling utopian texts which others might critique as escapist - estrangement enables the sense of transportation to another world and potential forgetfulness of the real. In the particular utopian sense, 'critique' consists in realizing the limitations and flaws of one's own world, something enabled by the objective distance that estrangement creates. Change, Levitas' shorthand for meaningful difference in the structures of society produced by direct action (something others might shorthand as activism or structural change), is inspired by the imagination of concrete alternatives to the present real and the planning and execution of real-life action to bring them about. Whether critique (in Levitas' sense) or change is the measuring stick for "critical" in the sense we developed above is the subject of some debate; though Levitas has insisted at times on change as the mark of effective utopia, she once wrote that "what is most important about utopia is less what is imagined than the act of imagination itself, a process which disrupts the closure of the present."[107] Lucy Sargisson launches a similar defense of the act of imagination itself as utopian praxis - per Sargisson, "For me, the exploration of alternatives is a transformative process in itself… is a necessary part of the process of transformation."[108] Both agree, however, that the act of imagining otherwise - something definitionally dependent on the experience of estrangement - is fundamental to the utopian project.

Likewise, as a matter of definition, multiplicative speculation takes as one of its core premises the embrace of estrangement as in and of itself a "critical" tool and a keystone of its

[106] Levitas, "For Utopia," 26, 39.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times: Optimism/Pessimism and Utopia/Dystopia," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge: 2003), 16, 17.

utopian, critical dystopian, and anti-anti-utopian work. Not only does estrangement enable this work, it enables critical experiences which simply cannot be achieved with a Suvin- or anti-utopian-approved balance of estrangement and cognition. One such experience is Yoon Ha Lee's *Machineries of Empire,* a speculative trilogy published between 2016 and 2018. Beginning with *Ninefox Gambit*, the series presents a fictive space operatic universe with physical laws so baffling and entangled with political ideology as to be nigh impenetrable by the reader, and uses this experience of uncertainty, unfamiliarity, and confusion - in short, an experience of almost overwhelming estrangement - to perform a critique of readerly perspective and complicity in the narrative, and a meta-critique of utopia's long and troubled relationship to fascism.

III. Estranged Worldbuilding in *Ninefox Gambit*

Almost every review of Yoon Ha Lee's *Ninefox Gambit* includes some attempt to capture the uniquely challenging reading experience the novel presents. Most, thanks to the purpose and structural constraints of book reviews, attempt to explain the novel's plot and setting in a straightforward way before flagging how painstakingly the experience is of attempting to assemble even such basic information in a simple, declarative, definitive format. Others purposefully daze and amaze, presenting fully in-universe, jargonistic explanations of the novel before declaring the reader's confusion to be definitive of the reading experience and backtracking to make some clarifications. I myself am going to do the latter, because being baffled by *Ninefox* is fundamental to the unique experience it offers - an experience of overwhelming estrangement that does more to define what "estrangement" means in this argument than any of my attempts to define it in words.

Take the opening pages of *Ninefox Gambit*, first in the trilogy. The scene opens with a horror story about the power of "threshold winnowers," a nuclear-bomb-like weapon capable of defying the laws of physics - when deployed, "every door in [a] besieged city exhaled radiation that baked the inhabitants dead."[109] We then witness the efforts of protagonist Kel Cheris to keep her company of soldiers alive when, in the midst of a battle with some "heretics," they are faced unexpectedly with a similarly inexplicable and powerful weapon - a "directional storm generator" which can both "scramble vectors" and "disintegrate your component atoms entirely."[110] At first, Cheris attempts to defend her company by ordering them to assume a particular wedge formation that, if executed correctly, will allow the company to produce a certain "exotic effect," a physical-law-defying happening on the battlefield (in this case, protection from the weather).[111] However, Cheris doubts that this formation will actually produce the desired exotic effect because, "like all exotics, this ability depended on the local society's adherence to the Hexarchate's high calendar."[112] In the world of *Ninefox Gambit,* a calendar is not "just a system of timekeeping," but a complex system of "feasts, the remembrances with their ritual torture of heretics, the entire precarious social order."[113] Realizing quickly that the local heretics do *not* observe this high calendar, and that therefore the efficacy of exotic effects generated by the high calendar have been compromised here, Cheris uses her singularly impressive math skills to calculate on the fly a new, "heretical" formation that draws its power from the local calendar and accounts for the spatiotemporal distortions created by the

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[109] Yoon Ha Lee, *Ninefox Gambit* (Oxford, UK: Solaris, 2016), 5.

[110] Ibid., 5, 7, 5.

[111] Ibid., 7.

[112] Ibid., 8.

[113] Ibid.

aforementioned directional storm generators. While Cheris' soldiers are initially hesitant to assume this heretical formation for fear of punishment by the Hexarchate, those soldiers are imbued with "formation instinct," an irresistible compulsion to obey their military superiors, so they assume the formation.[114] While the battle is won by Cheris' quick thinking and the heretical formation (which dissipates the storm), the scene ends with Cheris and what remains of her company being reprimanded and shipped out to be dishonorably discharged or executed for committing heresy.

If this sounds confusing, it is, and I argue it is meant to be, in an almost modernist sense of difficulty. The series intentionally creates, not just in its opening pages but throughout the trilogy, a readerly experience of confusion, unfamiliarity, and a profound sense of outsiderness - in short, estrangement. Estrangement's role here has largely to do with worldbuilding, the process of acquainting an uninitiated reader with the workings of an invented world. Like any space opera series, Yoon Ha Lee's *Machineries of Empire* trilogy introduces a swathe of neologisms and details to achieve its worldbuilding, fleshing out a vast interconnected universe very different from our own. Unlike many space operas, however, *Machineries of Empire* is more than happy to introduce these concepts to the reader without full explanations or contextualizations of what they are, and to let the reader sit with the discomfort of that lack of understanding for pages, chapters, sometimes even entire installments. This has a couple of consequences for the texts.

First, they immerse the reader in a near-constant experience of estrangement, providing an excellent test case for Suvin's assertion that estrangement itself cannot be critical. Rather than ask what precise balance of cognition and estrangement is constitutive of an ideal speculative

[114] Ibid., 38.

fiction, the series asks instead how little cognition is necessary to make speculative fiction function. As NPR's Jason Sheehan asked in his review: "how much can you screw with a world before you take it completely to pieces? How much fundamental similarity to our own must an author's imaginary place possess in order to hang together for a reader?...[And] how, in a place so alien, can you root the experience in something that gives it the roundness of an internal humanity?"[115] Given the long history of the Suvinian admixture of estrangement and cognition (balanced or cognition-weighted) and the recent trend towards utter cognition with little to no estrangement at all, for *Ninefox Gambit* and its subsequent texts to strategically and polemically unbalance its elements just as strongly in favor of estrangement is both unprecedented and uniquely contemporary as a phenomenon.[116]

Second, the novels' experience of near-constant estrangement asks the reader to become aware of and question the extent to which worldbuilding in texts they've previously experienced has been oriented, overtly or covertly, towards an implied reader like them. This may in turn lead one to question the extent to which the real world is oriented overtly or covertly towards oneself - a key starting point of self-awareness in any analysis of privilege and inequality. While this final step - the leap from a principle governing their experience of the fiction to a principle applicable to real life - is undoubtedly a step of cognition, it seems to me that this rhetorical move would be impossible to perform in a text whose estrangement was properly counterbalanced along Suvinian guidelines by cognition. A text with a Suvin-approved balance of cognition and estrangement would never muster the experience of estrangement necessary to prompt these kinds of reflections in the first place.

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[115] Jason Sheehan, "Beautifully Alien 'Ninefox Gambit' Mixes Math and Magic," *NPR,* June 25, 2016, https://www.npr.org/2016/06/25/482023715/beautifully-alien-ninefox-gambit-mixes-math-and-magic.

[116] See Chapter 2 for my take on literary realism doing speculation which permits itself little estrangement.

Finally, *Ninefox Gambit* asks us to consider our complicity in a fictional world when we interact with worldbuilding in particular ways. In some sense, the only possible way of persisting through the experience of a novel like *Ninefox Gambit* is to at some point accept the text's frustrations - stop expecting information to be given to you at the times you feel you "need" it and simply experience the world as it is presented. For Barnes & Noble, Ceridwen Chistensen writes of *Ninefox*'s worldbuilding: "Whatever the opposite of an infodump is, Lee deploys it, with prejudice. The calendars of the Hexarchate are almost willfully difficult to understand, something you can grok maybe three letters of before you shrug and skip on to the next legible scene."[117] But this potentially puts readers in a dangerous position of complicity with the Hexarchate - if they merely sit back and accept a fragmented, Hexarchate-approved account of the empire and how the universe works, they are potentially in the position of supporting the Hexarchate by imaginatively reifying its rhetorics, just as surely as the characters' belief in the Calendar empowers the empire.

One important test case for all of these consequences of the novel's estrangement is the "remembrances" - the ritual torture which supposedly powers the empire. The remembrances are a prime example of an element of worldbuilding in the novels which is introduced/cited very early on, but is not understood fully for hundreds of pages (if they can be said to be understood at all by the end of the series). The remembrances are introduced on the fourth page of *Ninefox Gambit,* the first novel in the series, as part of an explanation of the unique denotation of "calendar" in Lee's universe: "the high calendar wasn't just a system of timekeeping. It encompassed the feasts, the remembrances with their ritual torture of heretics, the entire

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[117] Ceridwen Christensen, "Blogging the Nebulas: *Ninefox Gambit* Is a 500-Level Class in Military Space Opera," *B&N Sci-Fi & Fantasy Blog*, April 14, 2017,

https://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/sci-fi-fantasy/blogging-nebulas-ninefox-gambit-yoon-ha-lee/.

precarious social order."[118] This line in particular uses an alienating, estranging rhetorical move found throughout the *Machineries of Empire* - the definition of in-universe jargon using yet more in-universe jargon. This moment, and others like it, are moments of challenge to the reader - moments which tell the reader that, not only are they not privy to the knowledge of a particular world element, they are also not privy to any significant number of other world elements necessary for them to understand the first. In so doing, the *Machineries of Empire* trilogy builds up the impression for the reader that this fictional universe is not just not their own - it is a universe for which they lack even the basic foundational principles of understanding. Tor.com's Aidan Moher wrote of *Ninefox Gambit*: "you're thrust into a volatile, complex world governed by physical laws and systems for which we have no real world corollary, but are expected to keep up anyway. No hand holding. No baby steps."[119] The level and consistency with which *Machineries of Empire* repeatedly rejects the reader's understanding and refuses them any conceptual purchase on its worldbuilding forces readers to reckon with why they continue to expect some moment of clarification or revelation from the novels on these matters, even many hundreds of pages into a series clearly dead-set on a concerted project of non-translation.

The denotation of "remembrances" is loosely but overtly defined here - we know before we ever see or hear about an actual remembrance taking place that remembrances involve (perhaps contitutively) the practice of ritualistic torture. Yet the more specific denotation of remembrances - precisely what they consist of, if torture is all they are, who the "heretics" are - as well as the connotations of the remembrances - how they're regarded in-universe by any number of people with any number of different perspectives - will almost never be made clear to

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[118] Lee, *Ninefox Gambit*, 8.

[119] Aiden Moher, "Stealing the Future: *Ninefox Gambit* by Yoon Ha Lee," *Tor.com,* June 15, 2016, https://www.tor.com/2016/06/15/stealing-the-future-ninefox-gambit-by-yoon-ha-lee/.

the reader, only through sideways reference, implication, and uncertain inference. Throughout *Ninefox Gambit,* we witness only very indirect participation in remembrances by protagonist Cheris; this typically takes the form of a kind of private meditation and perhaps the burning of incense. This might lead one to question whether this is all the remembrances are for the vast majority of the empire - an Omelas-like awareness and acknowledgement of the realities of the torture taking place somewhere, but a lack of active participation or witnessing. Only slowly over the course of the series do we gain glimpses suggesting otherwise. In book two, *Raven Stratagem,* we finally witness the torture itself, being brought narratively into an interrogation chamber as Cheris' parents and loved ones are ritualistically wiped out.

It's also in *Raven Stratagem* that we gain more information about what constitutes a "heretic" - namely, how little cause is necessary to declare someone a heretic, and how eager the Hexarchate is to do so, as the Hexarchate decides more or less on a whim to imprison and torture, with the eventual goal of genocide, protagonist Cheris' entire ethnic group, for no reason other than to attempt to provoke a rash reaction out of Cheris. A further example in *Raven Stratagem* of the flimsy nature of hereticalness is paired with a glimpse of the unique mystical powers of the Vidona, the faction within the Hexarchate responsible for carrying out remembrances. When one character's father admits to an admirable and small act of rebellion against the strict rules of the Hexarchate and its calendar, the character's Vidona mother instantaneously reduces her spouse to "corpse paper" and calmly folds them into a piece of origami. Moving far beyond whatever imagined tortures the reader might bring in from their own context, this scene transforms the remembrance tortures into something fantastically and outlandishly cruel. Finally, in *Revenant Gun,* the third novel in the series, we eventually see a public remembrance taking place on the main deck of a Hexarchate warship in an attempt to

bolster the power of the empire against its enemies in a coming combat. We also see in this moment our first known example of someone objecting to the remembrances - when the ship's commander attempts to intervene and stop the remembrance, he is relieved of duty and thrown in the brig. All of our initial assumptions about the remembrances are overturned, and overturned incompletely/non-definitively, over the course of the many hundreds of pages of the series.

The most important question mark when it comes to the remembrances is their connection to the Calendar and the proper functioning of the empire. Even in their very first introduction in the series, the remembrances are touted as absolutely necessary to the functioning of the Hexarchate and its high calendar. In the absence of any clear or firm knowledge of the high calendar and how precisely it functions, the remembrances' importance remains in question for the vast majority of the series. Though the reader is told outright that the remembrances are necessary to power the High Calendar, which in turn is necessary to run the empire (largely because the Hexarchate's military is dependent on technology which only works in space colonized by the high calendar), it is never fully explained precisely how the two are connected - how power, abstract or concrete, flows from the remembrances to the calendar to the warships of the Hexarchate. Only the seeming convenience of the remembrances being necessary to perpetuate the empire's neverending reign of violence and colonial ambition, combined with the eventual revelation that who is declared a "heretic" and who isn't is an entirely arbitrary and politically motivated decision, clues the reader into the potential that there *isn't* a necessary connection. True to form, the series neither confirms or denies the necessity of the remembrances until *Revenant Gun,* wherein rebels against the Hexarchate successfully spec out a new "calendar" which does not require remembrances. Those advocating this calendar still meet with heavy resistance, however, primarily from a powerful political figure within the Hexarchate -

Nirai Kujen, one of the six “Hexarchs” (faction leaders) of the empire. Kujen’s motive for this is proven to be largely self-serving: the remembrances don’t power the empire so much as they power his functional immortality (Kujen is almost a thousand years old at the series’ start, essentially founded the Hexarchate and invented math which powers the high calendar, and has lived within the system he created ever since as a body-hopping consciousness).

The consequences from this revelation (towards the end of *Raven Stratagem*) are twofold. First, this revelation transforms the trilogy into what is eventually a thwarted containment plot.[120] Kujen’s parental role in creating the empire, as well as his incredibly fraught patriarchal authority over Shuos Jedao - at once his colleague, equal, son, and victim - puts him in prime position as the controlling hegemonic faction in a classic containment plot. Kujen quite literally manufactures difference - dividing the universe into those living under his calendar and those who are not - in order to then harvest and use that difference to power his immortality. Fearing any other calendar as a threat to his own and, by extension, to the mathematics and exotic effects which power his immortality, Kujen builds an entire empire around a perpetual cycle of declaring outside threats and containing and strategically culling those threats to bolster the “Hexarchate.” A number of characters take on the role of the opressed underclass of the empire, but none so much as Cheris, whose entire army is executed by the Hexarchate to ensure no heretical thinking potentially transmitted by Shuos Jedao “infects” the rest of the empire’s army, and whose entire ethnic group is delcared heretical and wiped out in a brutal genocide. Also taking on the role of rebellious younger generation is Jedao who, despite being hundreds of years old, still has the mind and spirit of a young cadet whose suffering under the Hexarchate system (abuse and assault at the hands of his superiors, as well as the suicide of a lover during his school

[120] For a definition of “containment plot,” see Chapter 2.

years when a game meant to satirize the abritrariness of hereticalness went wrong) leads him to plot a centuries-long campaign to sacrifice everything he knows and loves to dismantle the empire so completely that it can never return. The eventual (though arguably mixed) success of this plan in *Revenant Gun* marks *Machineries of Empire* as one of a number of contemporary speculative texts working to undermine the trope of the containment plot as established in the early 2000s with the rise of depressive dystopia.

Second, it forces the reader to question their almost inevitable decision to take the worldbuilding of the series for granted - worldbuilding that deceived them into accepting that the system of this unfamiliar empire was necessary and integral to that empire's survival, rather than the survival of a single individual well past his appointed time. Given how sketchily remembrances and their consequences are defined throughout the series, and just how long it takes the reader to get anything like enough conclusive information to begin to question them, you'd be forgiven for expecting some sort of Omelas moment during which the Hexarchate citizens suddenly realize for the first time the horrifying extent of the biopower which fuels their lives. But the sad truth is that everyone in the Hexarchate is essentially equally aware of these horrors, and simply chooses not to think about them, and to passively participate in them. No one walks away from this particular Omelas.

In taking the worldbuilding the series for granted, the reader is forced to consider their own complicity in this system - being willing to accept bad first principles upon which an entire imperial system is built, purely to escape the feeling of uncertainty and the emotional and intellectual labor of needing to constantly question, to constantly exist in a state of skepticism and uncertainty about how all the pieces of the system fit together. What once might have been used as a yardstick to measure the success of the author in communicating their vision for

another world, in the absence of any such ambition on Lee's part, instead becomes a yardstick of the reader's success. One approaches a novel like *Ninefox* with the almost immediate aspiration to reach a moment of what feels like complete understanding of and command over the world. But this moment is impossible to reach without a concession to the underlying assumptions of the Hexarchate - assumptions which fuel and justify fascism, imperialism, and genocide. By making the series' worldbuilding so difficult to parse, Lee both challenges and does a favor for his reader - the series runs that reader through the wringer of non-understanding, but also highlights the dire consequences of giving in to an overtly received worldview.

Ultimately, *Machineries of Empire* is as a series deeply polemical in favor of estrangement. We are only susceptible to the allure of a cognition experience when it comes to the Hexarchate's remembrances because we've been conditioned to crave one, as opposed to staying with the uncertainty. In the face of the exotic effects, we crave some sort of logical explanation. We are so motivated as readers to seek a cognition experience that we are primed to accept almost without question the first compelling explanation of how they function, because such an explanation gives us that experience of cognition. The revelation that no necessary connection exists between the exotic effects of the empire and the remembrances thrusts the reader back into an experience of productive estrangement - what few base principles the reader had assembled as governing this universe crumble, leaving the reader with only more uncertainty.

The last important move that *Ninefox Gambit* makes with regard to estrangement has to do with complicating and putting to work the associations established between estrangement and fascism. In his original model, Suvin critiqued fantasy as a fundamentally fascist genre because it, in a totally non-robust way, starts from illogical, bad first principles and proceeds to

extrapolate out from those bad first principles (often through a method that is itself deeply illogical) in order to create its world. Suvin saw this - a bad system extrapolated from a few patently false bad first principles - as indicative of fascism, and feared that readers trained by or susceptible to this kind of worldbuilding would also be susceptible to the self-aggrandizing heroic myth-making that undergirds fascist regimes. The stigma of being a gateway to fascist sympathy is one of the most serious ever levelled at estrangement as a concept, and at utopian cultural production writ large. But Levitas herself rebuts this - and indeed countless attempts by purveyors of anti-utopia to argue in bad faith that utopia is a slippery slope to fascism - when she argues that "*the problem about totalitarianism is not its utopianism, but its totalitarianism.*"[121]

In the spirit of Levitas, as part of its rehabilitation of estrangement, *Ninefox* takes the inherently hegemonic nature of Suvin's novum and turns it on its head, revealing and emphasizing its own inherent tendencies towards control, hierarchy, and limitation of difference. Again, Suvin's original purpose in proposing the novum as a mark of "good" science fiction was to encourage the thriftiest possible use of estrangement, so as to minimize the effect of its negative moral and cultural connotations on the work in question. By having all elements of estrangement in a work trace back to a single novum, limiting and containing the work's estrangement as much as possible, Suvin believes a work creates the maximum possible rhetorical impact for a work which requires both estrangement and cognition. Suvin himself describes the influence of a novum on a work as "the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional novum."[122] *Ninefox* takes the hegemony baked into the idea of the novum and uses it to

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[121] Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, "Utopia in Dark Times: Optimism/Pessimism and Utopia/Dystopia," in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge: 2003), 26.

[122] Darko Suvin, "Preface to the First Edition," in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Oxford, UK: Peter Lang, 2016), 7-8.

create a depiction of a fascist state quite literally putting the novum's hegemonic power to work for them.

In the case of *Ninefox,* this is calendrical math, the unreal branch of mathematics invented by Hexarch Nirai Kujen which forms the basis for the empire. Nearly every other element of the Hexarchate - its systems, exotic effects, its remembrances, and of course Kujen's own immortality - all derive from Kujen's calendrical math in some way. As a novum, calendrical math is hegemonic - it controls and limits all other elements of estrangement in the universe by maintaining direct ties to them. As N.K. Jemisin wrote in her review for *The New York Times,* "Mathematics is often lauded as a universal language, but this is blatantly untrue; for universality to work, adherents must believe in the same basic truths, or principles, to the same degree."[123] Calendrical math serves as the bad first principle upon which the rest of the Hexarchate is seemingly logically built, a fragile but self-perpetuating consensus about how the universe works. Fascinatingly, however, the counter to the hegemonic power of this estrangement is not cognition - the Hexarchate is not destroyed by a sudden moment of understanding of how everything functions, or a moment of real-world realization by the reader. The Hexarchate and its out-of-control, hegemonic novum instead is destroyed by yet more estrangement: the introduction of entirely new calendars. These "heretical" calendars, having no tie to the Hexarchate's calendrical math, replace the High Calendar by starting from entirely new first principles (omitting, for example, the first principle that the empire can only sustain itself through the suffering of othered beings). In other words, on a structural level, *Ninefox* is about

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[123] N.K. Jemisin, "The Latest in Science Fiction and Fantasy," *The New York Times,* August 11, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/14/books/review/science-fiction-ninefox-gambit-yoon-ha-lee.html?campaignId=7JFJX.

the replacing of the novum (an inherently violent control placed on a text's estrangement) to a self-regulating but not artificially limited source and system of estrangement in the text.

IV. Relative Estrangement

The other important revelation that *Machineries of Empire* primes us to recognize is the relativity of estrangement and cognition as concepts. In *Metamorphoses*, Suvin acknowledges a potential problem with his as-written definitions of estrangement and cognition. By Suvin's definition, estrangement and cognition are in large part a measure of the plausibility of a given element of the text, with estranged elements being marked implausible and cognitive elements being marked plausible. However, plausibility is largely a matter of context - what is "plausible" by the laws of Western Enlightenment empirical science is different from what might be plausible by another culturally determined set of standards. Furthermore, each author and each reader approaches a text with a different set of contexts that affect their judgment of what is "plausible." This seems to suggest that, because estrangement and cognition seem to be measures of plausibility, and plausibility is relative depending on context, estrangement and cognition must necessarily be relative terms. But acknowledging estrangement and cognition as relative terms would undermine Suvin's project of classification and legitimization, which required clarity and precision in its criteria.

For example, one complication introduced by the relativity of estrangement and cognition is a historical objection. In Suvin's original formulation, what constitutes estrangement and cognition seems to be largely determined by what is "plausible" - not strictly *possible,* but *plausible* - by the laws of some kind of empirical science. In the event that a scientific concept was plausibly accurate at the time the author wrote the work, but has been disproved by the time

that the reader reads the work, is it still science fiction when the reader reads it, or has it (in Suvin's words) "retrogress[ed]" into fantasy?[124] Intuitively, the work would remain science fiction, and yet the original definitions of cognition and estrangement seem to imply - if ambiguously - that it might no longer be science fiction. Because the text would lack a sense of plausibility when measured by the reader's context, the text would lack a key source of cognition - one of the two constituent elements of the genre. To sidestep problems like these, Suvin makes repeated references to "the empirical environment of the author" as the standard by which estrangement and cognition should be judged.[125] This solves the historical objection - in the event of a disjunction between the plausibility of a work according to the author versus the reader, Suvin endorses siding with the author's perception of science over the reader's in matters of classification. In other words, out of a four-actor system of people engaging with a text - the real author, implied author, implied reader, and actual reader - Suvin chooses the real author's perspective on plausibility as the most important.

That Suvin pins the relativity of estrangement and cognition to the real author's perspective (or, put another way, their *intention* for the work) has of course inspired objection in a post-Barthes era. One of the most persuasive defenses was launched by Carl Freedman, who insisted in the spirit of classic close reading that we should interpret Suvin's move not as a move to center the author, but to center the text. According to Freedman, cognition is not an abstract quality a text either had or did not, but an effect created by the text, and that estrangement and cognition alike should be judged by "the attitude of the text itself to the kind of estrangements

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[124] Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition," 20.

[125] Ibid., 16n1.

being performed."[126] In essence, it was not necessary that the text be plausible when measured by the yardstick of empirical science at the historical time of writing. Rather, it was more important that the text itself project an aura of plausibility and sensibly suspended disbelief when presenting readers with its science-fictional elements. In the original historical objection, the text would remain science fiction, not because its "science" was plausible at the time of writing, but because its author invested the text with an attitude of plausibility towards that science.

When combined with defenses like Freedman's, Suvin's original formulation makes a strong case for flattening the inherent relativity of estrangement and cognition. But it makes this argument primarily in pursuit of establishing a clear sorting algorithm between science fiction and fantasy. In an increasingly interstitial contemporary genre landscape, Suvin's model works hard to make a distinction that seems increasingly pedantic at best and mercenarily prejudicial at worst. If we approach estrangement and cognition without the ulterior motive of distinguishing and elevating science fiction, we can reclaim the relativity of these terms as a site of productive ambiguity.

China Miéville's 2009 essay "Cognition as Ideology," a thorough dismantling of both Suvin's original argument and defenses like Freedman's, gestures towards the importance and utility of estrangement and cognition as relative terms. Rebutting Freedman's definition of cognition as a textual effect, Miéville asks, "*Whose* cognition effect? More pertinently, whose cognition? And whose effect?"[127] Arguing science fiction is "something done with language by someone to someone," Miéville rejects the idea of cognition and estrangement as arising

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[126] Carl Freedman, "Definitions," in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 18.

[127] China Miéville, "Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory," in *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 235.

spontaneously and independently from a text itself.[128] After all, Mieville points out, neither Suvin's ideas nor Freedman's defense account for a yet more insidious objection than the historical objection: the frequent case of a text whose "science" is known to be bunk both at the time of writing and at the time of reading. With no recourse to real-world science as a metric for plausibility, surely the creation of a "cognition effect" (as defined by Suvin/Freedman) would be impossible. Rather, Mieville defines cognition as a highly social act of "persuasion" between the real author and an implied reader. Importantly, for Miéville, this act is not about the author persuading the reader of the plausibility of their text's "science," but rather about the author persuading the reader of their own suspension of disbelief in that "science." On a concrete level this manifests most frequently as a command over the jargonistic language of invented sciences. This may do little to persuade readers of the plausibility of a piece of "science" - it may, in fact, leave them yet more confused about how it functions and whether its functioning follows any of the rules of empirical science as the reader understands it. However, natural usage of such "technobabble" does contribute to a reader's sense of the author's belief in and understanding of these elements in the text, creating a "cognition effect." By reintroducing the role of both the author and the reader into his model of estrangement and cognition, Mieville moves us back in the direction of fruitful discourse about the two as relative terms.

Why is it important to acknowledge the relativity of estrangement and cognition? Especially in light of the increasing visibility of a diverse array of authors and readers within the field, it's only by acknowledging that both authors and readers approach texts with different knowledge and contexts that we can begin to acknowledge the extent to which texts have long assumed a certain subject in the role of reader. A shift in thinking is necessary - instead of

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[128] Ibid.

thinking of estrangement and cognition as implausible/plausible, an impossible generality which places an occluded Western Enlightenment subject in the supposedly "universal" position of judging what constitutes the plausible, we might instead consider them as unfamiliar/familiar, a set of terms that necessarily encourages relativistic thinking. A major constituent thread of contemporary sf is the production of texts interested in pushing back against the false universalism inherent in assuming certain stories and worlds are equally familiar or unfamiliar to everyone who engages with them. One such text is *Ninefox Gambit,* which plays with perspective in ways that frustrate the idea of a coherent universal point of view. By extension, Lee's series challenges the idea that there is a singular perspective from which cognition and estrangement can or should be judged.

V. Debunking the Universal Perspective in *Ninefox Gambit*

In the tradition of much epic speculative fiction, the story of *Ninefox Gambit* rotates through many points of view. Prime among them is that of Kel Cheris, the lowly infantry captain raised suddenly to brevetted general who serves as the novel's protagonist. Cheris' sequences of third-person limited narration are frequently interrupted by several others. Cheris is sometimes subjected to the memories of Shuos Jedao - flashbacks presented in a Jedao-centric third-person limited - which "bleed through" periodically to whoever is serving as Jedao's host. Vahenz afrir dai Noum, one of the two rebel leaders, pens letters to her counterpart which are reprinted in full, adding an epistolary dimension to the novel. Most iconically, however, the novel frequently interrupts Cheris and Jedao's tactical scheming with short vignettes narrated from the third-person limited perspectives of named soldiers on the front lines of the conflict, often seen only for that brief scene as they deal with the consequences of whatever gambit Cheris and Jedao have

just decided on, or whatever unexpected countermeasure the pair will have to strategize their way around next. From the highest political and military authorities to the lowliest infantry soldier, *Ninefox Gambit* samples liberally from a range of perspectives throughout.

Including such a quantity and variety of perspectival characters is a convention of epic speculative fiction that tends to serve the purpose of giving the reader access to greater perspective and knowledge on the world of the text than any individual character would be able to achieve. Especially in the face of sprawling worlds, multiple complex civilizations and cultures, and a wide-spun web of gradually more interconnected events, accessing multiple perspectives might be the only way of giving the reader enough context to understand the causality and import of the narrative. The reader's superior knowledge can be used to create moments of dramatic irony in which they understand in a way the characters cannot what the effects of one character's actions might be on distant characters and disparate plot threads. The reader's knowledge may also grant them the ability to tell truth from lies when it comes to unreliable narrators or matters of perspectival disagreement. However, while *Ninefox Gambit* features what appears to be a classic multi-perspectival epic structure, the novel subverts the conventions of this structure by repeatedly refusing to grant the reader access to even as much knowledge as the characters they observe, let alone more.

One way this is achieved is through the persistent undercutting of moments of dramatic irony. *Ninefox* is a novel of countless interconnected schemes by a bevy of very intelligent and motivated strategists, leading to instance after instance of plots colliding in ways that are unexpected to the characters. Considering *Ninefox*'s multi-perspectival structure, one might assume that the reader is frequently privy to information that renders these moments surprising only to the characters, with the reader being able to foresee such collisions of schemes. And yet

whenever it seems to be developing an asymmetrical distribution of information between characters and the reader, *Ninefox* pointedly disrupts any sense of predictability and superior knowledge. The most common instance is in the letters of Vahenz afrir dai Noum, who serves at times as a kind of proxy for the audience, attempting to disentangle the intentions of Jedao and the higher-ups of the Hexarchate government. While Vahenz obviously writes from a unique perspective - behind the lines of the rebel force in the Fortress of Scattered Needles, a context almost no other perspectival character has any solid information about - Vahenz reveals little to none of her own plans. Instead, her most frequent intervention is to state she already deduced or gathered intelligence confirming something about Jedao's intentions that the reader had only begun to guess. While the reader might regard their intuitive leap about Jedao a major triumph, Vahenz undercuts it with casual guessing that almost always turns out to be accurate and to confirm the reader's suspicions, undercutting the importance of the discovery. Perhaps the most important such case is when Vahenz confirms the reader's suspicions, based on a certain amount of foreshadowing, that Shuos Jedao intends to betray the Hexarchate, and is merely biding his time and appearing subservient to their orders to lull them into a false sense of security and to serve his own agenda. This major revelation - with Jedao's potential for schemes and disloyalty a constant looming question mark throughout the novel - undercuts the reader's attempts to carefully piece together their suspicions from many scattered implications and ambiguities.

Another important class of moments in the text which refuse to grant the reader superior knowledge are the flashes to the perspectives of characters on the front lines of the conflict. Every aspect of these scenes undercuts our expectations - while we might expect ourselves to understand more about what's about to happen in the scene than the lowly infantryman about to be blindsided by Jedao and Cheris' latest sacrificial gambit, more often the soldiers whose

perspectives we inhabit know more about what battlefield conditions they're experiencing than the reader does, and even sometimes more than Cheris or Jedao, acting as they are from the birds-eye position of military leadership. While we expect certain outcomes of these vignettes based on what plans Cheris and Jedao have just agreed on, they are frequently interrupted by enemy countermeasures, often grotesque deployments of hitherto unseen exotic effects which end with the perspectival character's grisly death. (It's worth noting, however, that once the death of these vignette characters occurs often enough to become a convention within the text, that convention also begins to be subverted, with soldiers suddenly beginning to survive their two-to-four page appearances.) In many ways, the greatest transformation Cheris undergoes in the novel is a transformation from one of these vignette soldiers - not only someone with the limited perspective of a lowly infantry captain, but someone whose story originally seems destined to be limited to her five-page, in-medias-res introduction - to someone with the infinitely more complicated and patchwork perspective of someone straddling high and low, loyal and disloyal perspectives on the Hexarchate, someone whose perspective(s) serve(s) as counterpoint chapters to the front-lines perspectives she once epitomized.

In essence, Cheris' collection of many perspectives through a number of unique means and experiences mirrors the reader's own collection of such perspectives by reading different vignettes and letters and flashback memories throughout the novel which grant some kind of access to those many different perspectives. And yet, just like the reader, whose ability to collect all of these perspectives nonetheless does not in fact help them come to grips with or understand the world of the Hexarchate any better, Cheris' collection and collation of so many perspectives does little to give her any sort of strategic or emotional advantage as the Hexarchate and its

systems begin to turn against her and those she loves. All Cheris' multi-perspectival nature brings her is suffering, confusion, and inner conflict.

The first and most important perspective which Cheris adds to her own is that of Shuos Jedao, an undefeated maverick of an imperial general who was executed by the Hexarchate for suddenly turning on and executing everyone under his command, reportedly as a result of having gone suddenly insane. With a major threat to the Hexarchate having arisen, the Hexarchate retrieves Jedao's essence and coerces Cheris (whose choices are to accept Jedao, or accept death for treason) into allowing herself to become possessed by Jedao in a limited capacity. Besides offering Jedao a body to walk around in, Cheris also offers Jedao the advantage of an unparalleled mathematical mind (Jedao's one weakness as a general is that he has dyscalculia, which makes the complicated calculations necessary to wage calendrical warfare nearly impossible to carry out accurately). Though Cheris is in control of her body and has limited mechanisms by which she can control and banish Jedao should he attempt to compel or betray her (a distinct possibility, considering his past), Jedao operates as a kind of Mephistopheles figure, one whose truthfulness, motives, and capabilities Cheris can only guess at despite the fact that they share a body. This relationship is the first farce disproving the possibility of a universal perspective - even in the event of a total bodily merge, Cheris does not have true access to Jedao's perspective any more than we the reader do. Even in the many moments when Cheris experiences "bleedthrough" and is able to directly experience flashback memories of Jedao's, Cheris only finds contradiction and disingenuousness. Every element of Jedao remains uncertain throughout the entire novel, not least of which his nature - whether he is a ghost, a series of brain patterns saved on the cloud, or something else entirely is never addressed or resolved.

Other perspectives Cheris adds to her own throughout the novel are many and disparate, but more often than not involve those of the lower ranks she has suddenly left and been separated from by her sudden promotion to brevetted general. Most notable among them are the perspectives of the servitors - robotic servants whose sentience is underestimated by the vast majority of the Hexarchate - and the perspectives of Jedao's victims at the so-called "Hellspin Fortress massacre." Cheris sets herself apart as unique by interacting as an equal with the servitors, going so far as getting to know some personally, learning their "machine language" to converse with them on their terms, and spending her free time with them watching "dramas." While this subplot seems poised to turn into an android-liberation subplot, in many ways the reverse happens - Cheris experiences an epiphany that the servitors are sentient, and therefore "people" enough to… be sent to the front lines of the conflict and die alongside human troops in order to make special exotic effects happen in ways the enemy might not expect. As far as the Hellspin Fortress massacre is concerned, upon getting some of the details of the massacre from Jedao, Cheris accesses military records about the battle's aftermath and begins trying to read the biographies and experiences of each and every one of the million victims killed. She does this assuming that knowing their stories and perspectives will keep her human, and force her to keep the human cost of war in mind, even as her new status as a general requires her to make decisions sacrificing the few to save the many, and encourages her to make decisions sacrificing even the many to secure victory at any cost. Cheris' plan to retain her humanity in command, however, is immediately undercut by Jedao who, in the four hundred years since his death, has memorized every single one of the victims' stories - as much information as is possibly available about them - and remains a cold, calculating, near psychopathic military commander. In this scene, *Ninefox* seems to suggest that without *being* the victims, no amount of partial access to the

perspectives of those victims will inoculate Cheris against ignoring their interests, and the interests of those like them, in future.

Structurally, we might expect Cheris to become a character with access to a kind of uber-perspective - even just in her combination with Shuos Jedao, she seems to promise to become a kind of “third way” perspective between the average soldier and the higher-ups in the Hexarchate, one which in almost any other story would prove inherently valuable and give Cheris a kind of unique insight that justifies and drives her serving the protagonist role. Cheris literally begins as a vignette soldier, structurally speaking. In almost every regard, her introductory scene is presented as a vignette - in medias res, with named characters imbued quickly and by implication with enough unique characteristics to be memorable and to have a unique stake in the situation she faces. Cheris’ transformation from four-page vignette soldier to brevetted general making high-level decisions does not grant her the type of hybrid perspective one might expect it would. Right up until the end of the novel, Cheris struggles with the realities of decisions she must make as part of command, and never fully realizes the manipulations of Jedao and the Hexarchate until it’s too late, blindsided by almost every scheme and twist right alongside the reader. Cheris, a kind of stand-in for the reader who has access to many perspectives, ultimately gets no real advantages from this arrangement, because no artificial collection of half-perspectives will provide any sense of benefit, only a greater sense of misunderstanding and misdirection.

One moment that must be addressed in any discussion or perspective in *Ninefox* is the novel’s conclusion, in which Cheris takes on Jedao’s identity to an entirely new level. Throughout the novel, Cheris’ merger with Jedao involves strict limitations which ironically allow for certain ambiguities. For example, even though they share the same body, Cheris cannot

hear all of Jedao's thoughts, allowing for moments of uncertainty about whether Jedao is being truthful or complete in his dealings with Cheris. Late in the novel, however, Cheris and Jedao are betrayed by the Hexarchate. Having broken the siege they were sent to break, Cheris and Jedao are attacked by another Hexarchate military force which deploys a carrion bomb - essentially a nuclear device designed to obliterate Cheris/Jedao's troops (who the Hexarchate feared might be loyal to Jedao after serving with him for some time) as well as Jedao himself. Jedao's essence takes the brunt of the attack, sparing Cheris' life but also expelling Jedao from Cheris' body and manifesting what remains of Jedao as "carrion glass" - shards of literal glass formed of what little remains of Jedao's essence. Deciding after this betrayal by the Hexarchate to carry on Jedao's four-hundred-year-and-counting plan to rebel against and dismantle the Hexarchate, Cheris decides to willingly reabsorb Jedao's essence by eating the carrion glass. With each shard eaten, Cheris has a lucid flashback to one of Jedao's key memories from his younger days, memories which eventually clue her in to both the details of Jedao's plan of rebellion and his motivations for pursuing it. It's a scene of incredible, grotesque self-violence, perhaps the only time in the novel when it feels as though Cheris is truly seeing through the eyes of another, gaining access to the experiences that will allow her to act as Jedao would act in a given situation. As if to flag this, the pain of the final two carrion glass shards is pointedly described as "taking [Cheris] through the eyes," as though taking on Jedao's perspective is in some way destroying or doing violence to her own perspective. By depicting the actual assumption of another's perspective as a kind of self-violence only justified and motivated by extraordinary commitment to specific values, *Ninefox* undermines not only the possibility of assembling any kind of single, universal perspective, but also works against the idea that a multi-perspectival

viewpoint is easy to achieve, and without a kind of sacrificial violence done to one's own perspective.

It may seem as though, by putting Cheris through the wringer for her multi-perspectivalness, *Ninefox* argues that we should never attempt to understand the perspective of any other. Instead, I think we must interpret *Ninefox* as warning us against the dangers of peripherally experiencing or hearing about the perspectives of others and assuming that we now have ownership of and command over that perspective. As a clearinghouse of scattered perspectives, Cheris nonetheless cannot weave these perspectives into a single universal perspective, because many elements of the perspectives she has access to are contradictory, incompatible. Even within a single perspective, Jedao's beliefs, motivations, and memories are contradictory and impossible to parse, impossible to reconcile. The universal perspective, in every possible form and configuration, is proved an unattainable (and undesirable) myth.

VI. Coda: On White Supremacy and Totalitarianism

Recognizing the critical power of speculative poetics like estrangement has never been more important - not just to explain the power and methods of multiplicative speculation, but also as a direct acknowledgement that there are authors and readers approaching speculative fiction today with a greater variety of perspectives, contexts, and knowledge bases than ever. At the very least, decentering a white Western perspective on speculative history, the interconnectivity and dialogue between different global, cultural, and subcultural traditions of speculation has never been so apparent to so wide an audience.

This interconnectivity has not arisen without tireless struggle against forces of delimiting prediction. When I began work on this chapter in 2017, speculative fiction was fresh off an

undeniable and blatant backlash of white supremacy within the genre community - repeated attempts to commandeer the Hugo Awards by the "Sad Puppies" and the "Rabid Puppies," who voted in strategic blocks to ensure the victory of white cisgender male authors in order to strike a blow against the "identity politics" supposedly "skewing" the judging.[129] Some commentators were quick to declare the specter of white supremacy in the genre slain because authors of color garnered awards despite this interference (the most famous example being N.K. Jemisin's threepeat Hugo sweep for the *Broken Earth* trilogy, which straddled this hate campaign). Yet as many marginalized people already knew - and as the 2016 US presidential election made clear for those privileged few who did not - white supremacy was not merely haunting speculative fiction and culture, distant echoes of some long-dead phenomenon, but an omnipresent force only growing in power and influence.

Totalitarianism and white supremacy are not distant or theoretical foes - they are realities of the contemporary that must be challenged at every opportunity, and one of those opportunities - a vital one, I argue - is the constant reminder through acts of radical imagination that there is nothing natural, inevitable, or insurmountable about them, though they marshal the rhetoric of prediction in spades to pretend so. The fight against these forces is the eternal fight of multiplicative speculation, and while it must take place in the public space of protest and real-world activism, not just in the pages of novels, the critical power and relativity of estrangement - the radical act of imagining otherwise, for whatever definition of "otherwise" describes your perceived reality - are also key tools in this fight. We cannot underestimate them - those who wield prediction for their own purposes are counting on us to.

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[129] For a review of these movements contemporary to their emergence, see Amy Wallace, "Sci-Fi's Hugo Awards and the Battle for Pop Culture's Soul," *WIRED*, October 30, 2015, https://www.wired.com/2015/10/hugo-awards-controversy/.

Chapter 4

Multiplicative Identity and Post-Genre Formations

I. Introduction

Alongside realisms and temporalities, identities are one of the primary narrative elements multiplied in multiplicative speculation. Embracing and navigating multiple, hybrid, or complex identities is a method of resistance far from exclusive to the contemporary, and has deep roots in a number of movements for alternative futurisms. It is the binary-collapsing praxis of Haraway's cyborg and its successors, mingling human and machine and all of their attendant incompatibilities in an effort to be unparseable and unjudgeable by the Western Enlightenment subject. It is migrant futurity's call to find power in the "waiting room of history," because the wait is not for state recognition of one's personhood but rather for the flattening of one's subjectivity such that one can be datafied, assimilated, exploited with maximum efficiency. It is hopepunk's philosophy of coalition building through collaboration and inclusion rather than violence and exclusion. Containing and juggling many identities makes one difficult to count, to classify, and to exploit.

A similar embrace of multiple and contradictory identity is necessary at a higher level of abstraction, however - the level of genre, and the modes by which we describe categorical intertextual relationships in a contemporary cultural landscape which decreasingly recognizes or reifies traditional boundaries between genres. Multiplicative speculation seeks to model what a post-genre formation can do, what criteria or qualities define one differently or distinctly from traditional genre models, and the political and utopian possibilities these formations multiply by

in prioritizing inclusivity and coalition-building over staking out and defending a unique territory against all comers.

This chapter analyzes the role of multiplicative identity in the project of multiplicative speculation. It celebrates the power of approaches to self-definition and personhood within speculative fiction which assemble often incompatible and contradictory identities to create a powerfully incoherent whole which resists flattening, singularity, and instrumentalization. It tracks this project as it is carried out on several levels - the individual level of character identity, the collective level of group identity, and the meta level of generic identity. Focalized through a reading of N.K. Jemisin's era-defining novel *The Fifth Season,* I analyze the novel's play with character, perspective, and genre as operating on each of these levels - depicting characters denied recognition of their subjectivity embracing irreducible, contradictory individual and group identities as a source of power and resistance, and engaging with the example of Afrofuturism and its fellow movers in the realm of black speculation as a contemporary model of post-genre textual identity which itself refuses to be simplified, codified, or buried.

II. Individual and Group Identity in the Fifth Season

N.K. Jemisin's 2015 novel *The Fifth Season* has garnered the lion's share of its critical and paraliterary attention for the dramatic, late reveal of its play with the convention of multiple narrators in epic speculative fiction. While a reader's initial experience of *The Fifth Season* relies on the misconception that Damaya, Syenite, and Essun are three different viewpoint characters narrating the same set of events from different perspectives, the third act of the novel eventually makes two revelations - first, that these characters exist at different points in time, and second, that these three "characters" are actually three "ages" (in the Shakespearian sense) of the same

individual, with Damaya as the singular protagonist's youth, Syenite her early adulthood, and Essun her middle age. In interviews, Jemisin herself has characterized the move as an effort to push readers to contend with Essun and Syenite's potential categorical unlikeability within the traditions and tropes of Western literature.[130] If readers found they could sympathize with and root for Damaya in her struggle, upon discovering Damaya and the other characters were one and the same, Jemisin hoped readers would reflect critically on the cause and effect of their differing levels of sympathy.

As scholars of the novel have highlighted, however, the knock-on structural effects of this unity extend far beyond this purpose. When paired with the structure of the novel, the unity of *The Fifth Season*'s narrators produces an empathetic readerly experience of its protagonist's struggles with trauma and identity. Kim Wickham has deftly analyzed the raft of repercussions stemming from the novel's use of second-person narration in its Essun-focused segments, concluding it simultaneously creates intimacy and identification with Essun while also alienating us from her and destabilizing our understanding of the relationship between the focal character(s), involving the reader deeply and personally in Essun's process of "forging a unified identity."[131] Trauma studies approaches to the novel, such as those by María Ferrández San Miguel and Kirsten Dillender, emphasize "fractured" identities like Essun's are a survival mechanism, "split personalities [that] allow them to negotiate their subjugation to different forms of oppression at great psychological cost," and that the novel engages readers in the repair of tha

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[130] Jessica Hurley, "An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing: An Interview with N.K. Jemisin," *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 3 (2018), 471.

[131] Kim Wickham, "Identity, Memory, Slavery: Second-Person Narration in N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* Trilogy," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 30, no. 3 (2019), 392.

fracture.[132] In describing Essun's narrative as fundamentally one of repairing and reforming her identity, these readings pinpoint how *The Fifth Season* demonstrates the power of embracing a contradictory identity rather than waiting for validation of a particular version of subjectivity.

Instead of the structure and reveal of this tripartite narrator, I want to focus my analysis on a less-discussed facet of Essun's identity - her dueling identities as "orogene" and "rogga," as expressed by the ways in which she marshalls her supernatural powers. Though in the world of a novel both terms denote a person with the mysterious power to manipulate and command earthly forces like seismic activity, the term "orogene" is used to describe specifically those practitioners who have been trained in the use of their powers by overseer organization the Fulcrum, while "rogga" is initially introduced as a slur deployed against untrained practitioners that is later reclaimed by characters who use it to self-identify.

Difference between the two groups is reinforced not just through the use of these separate terms, but also through the distinct sets of language members of these groups use to describe the use of their orogenic powers. Focalized and explained initially through the Fulcrum-trained eyes of Damaya and Syenite, orogenic acts are described almost exclusively in empirical-scientific terms, drawing heavily on the jargon of geometry, physics, and thermodynamics. Thanks to this choice of language, orogeny at first operates as a "hard magic" system - a relatively clearly defined set of possibilities, requirements, and rules that makes acts of orogeny and their consequences logical and predictable.[133] Yet as both Essun and the reader encounter "rogga"

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[132] María Ferrández San Miguel, "Ethics in the Anthropocene: Traumatic Exhaustion and Posthuman Regeneration in N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* Trilogy," *English Studies* 101, no. 4 (2020), 477. See also Kirsten Dillender, "Land and Pessimistic Futures in Contemporary African American Speculative Fiction," *Extrapolation* 61, no.1-2 (2020): 131-150.

[133] For a definition of "hard magic systems" and how they function narratively in a Western non-mimetic context, see Brandon Sanderson, "Sanderson's Laws of Magic" (https://coppermind.net/wiki/Sanderson%27s_Laws_of_Magic), which can be largely summarized by the First Law - i.e. "An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is directly proportional to how well the reader understands

characters and Fulcrum-trained orogenes experimenting outside the limitations and strictures of Fulcrum orogeny, we see the same set of powers described using the subjective-feeling language of affect, metaphor, and hyperbole - an approach that instead encourages us to think of orogenic powers as a “softer” magic system of indeterminate or unpredictable cause and effect, capability and incapability.

The language “orogenes” use to describe their powers is distinctly empirical-scientific, borrowing heavily from the jargon of scientific disciplines to explain orogeny’s causes and effects as logically and precisely as possible. For example, Fulcrum orogenes describe the vector of their power’s influence as their “torus,” a geometric form which can be thrown like a voice and resized or reshaped to suit the orogene’s current needs. This approach to describing orogenic powers serves several purposes both within and beyond the novel’s fiction. On the meta level of exposition, the precise, objective language of orogenes is initially helpful for acquainting the uninitiated reader with the workings of orogeny. Yet it quickly becomes clear that this language is a product of the Fulcrum, and also functions as a key mechanism of the Fulcrum’s oppression of orogenes.

As an institution, the Fulcrum purports to function primarily as a school to train young orogenes and secondarily as a state department of infrastructure which directs orogene deployments to maintenance jobs and disaster relief sites. However, the Fulcrum’s true purpose - as Damaya’s plotline makes clear - is the hegemonic domination and subjugation of orogenes, dehumanizing them and optimizing the use of their powers to benefit the state. Within the world of the text, the empirical-scientific system of language used to describe orogeny makes it easy to

said magic” - which maintains the classic associations of magic being an estranged narrative element in need of containment and control by cognitive elements like clear, logical, self-consistent rules.

teach en masse in a linear and predictable way; it also helps the Fulcrum to know which orogenes to send which problems - which orogenes know which techniques and can therefore be sent to deal with which problems/tasks, etc. But linguistic conventions like the numerical ranking of orogenes on a scale from one to ten "rings" serves the dual purpose of indicating the relative power and status of orogenes… and creating a system with clear boundaries that limit the possibilities of orogeny as much as it explicates them.

Roughly concurrently with the novel's protagonist, readers come to the realization that the language and systems which make Fulcrum-trained orogeny understandable and predictable are intentionally limited (and limiting) in their ability to describe the full range of uses for orogenic powers. Fulcrum-trained orogenes' empirical-scientific language is in fact a tool by which the Fulcrum maintains dominance over orogenes. For example, it's revealed that Alabaster is not just a "Ten-ringer," the highest ranking possible for a Fulcrum orogene, but a practitioner so far off the Fulcrum's measurement charts in terms of power, control, and creativity of manipulation that the Fulcrum has not even tried to adjust the ranking system accordingly - while adding ranks to the system might more accurately describe Alabaster's capabilities, the rhetorical effect of the Fulcrum expanding the range of orogene power might compromise the system of control the Fulcrum has built up around managing the powers of the original ten ranks; it might also encourage orogenes to, like Alabaster, experiment with unsanctioned and unaccounted-for uses of orogeny which the Fulcrum may not be able to control. Systems as fundamental as language and power rankings, while purportedly established by the Fulcrum to reflect reality, are actually powerful tools the Fulcrum maintains to control and shape what seems plausible - or even possible - in the first place.

By contrast, "rogga" language for orogeny - used both by practitioners who were never taught by the Fulcrum, and those Fulcrum-trained practitioners who risk experimenting with powers not defined by the Fulcrum - is insistently subjective-feeling in nature, replacing geometrical jargon with emotion, sensation, and heavy use of metaphor. For example, the self-described rogga Ykka has the mysterious orogenic ability to draw to her other organically sensitive beings (including orogenes/roggas and stone eaters), a power so instinctive Ykka herself seems unable to verbally explain and instead demonstrates to Essun: "And all at once, you stumble while you're walking. There's no obstruction in the floor. It's just suddenly difficult to walk in a straight line, as if the floor has developed an invisible downward slope. Toward Ykka... "How are you doing that?" you demand. "I don't know.""[134] While roggas are widely feared ostensibly due to the unpredictable nature of their powers - supposedly one emotional outburst all that is necessary to release a deadly burst of uncontrolled orogeny - that same unpredictability allows rogga to find creative orogenic solutions to problems which stump Fulcrum orogenes like Syenite and making it difficult for their powers to be harnessed and instrumentalized by larger systems or institutions.

The contrast between the intentionally limited nature of orogene language and the flexibility and creativity of rogga language comes to a head during Alabaster and Syenite's mission to Allia, where it arguably first becomes clear that the empirical-scientific language through which Fulcrum orogenes are taught to think of their powers actually limits the ways in which it occurs to them to use those powers. When Alabaster is poisoned by a bitter official in Allia, he seizes control of Syenite and ventriloquizes her orogenic powers in order to consolidate enough strength and finesse to essentially will the poison out of his bloodstream. During the

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[134] N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (New York: Orbit, 2015), 336-337.

experience itself, Syenite struggles to find the language to describe what's happening to her and the ways in which Alabaster is vicariously using her powers. In the absence of scientific, mathematical Fulcrum language to describe the event, Syenite instinctively reaches for the utterly subjective language of feeling and sensation instead:

> Something clenches in her mind… She can almost feel his elation. And then his power folds around her… She's falling up, and this somehow makes sense… Something engages. Something else shunts open. It's beyond her, too complex to perceive in full. Something pours through somewhere, warms with friction...And then it's all gone. She snaps back into herself, into the real world of sight and sound...and sess - real sess, sess the way it's *supposed* to work, not whatever-the-rust Alabaster just did…[135]

Only after the fact, when she has time to reflect, does Syenite eventually struggle her way through an explanation of the orogenic theory behind what Alabaster did, trying to explain the phenomena logically while at each and every turn the language available to her as a Fulcrum orogene works against her understanding:

> "Parallel scaling. Pull a carriage with one animal and it only goes so far...Yoke [two] side by side, *synchronize* them, reduce the friction lost between their movements, and you get more than you would from both animals individually… That's the theory, anyway."
>
> ...She rejects the word "how," which assumed possibility where none should exist. "Orogenes can't work together. One torus subsumes another. The greater degree of control takes precedence." It's a lesson they both learned in the grit crucibles.
>
> "Well then… Guess it didn't happen."[136]

Alabaster is quick to encourage Syenite to think beyond the possibilities of orogeny the Fulcrum has laid out for them, and insists that the first step in this process is to discard the Fulcrum's empirical-scientific language in favor of the language of instinct, feeling, and sensation. The extent to which orogeny is explicable by the empirical-scientific language of Fulcrum orogenes

[135] Ibid., 164-165.

[136] Ibid., 168.

is limited, and limited by design rather than accident, to maintain the dominance of the state and to facilitate the instrumentalization of orogenic power for the perpetuation of the state.[137]

While the differences between orogene and rogga language for orogeny remain stark throughout the series, characterizing two schools of thought about the nature and scope of orogenic powers, the two lexicons are eventually combined in the character of Essun, largely through the text's structural gesture of reassembling Essun's fractured identity. Over the course of *The Fifth Season*, Essun develops the ability to think of her orogeny flexibly, simultaneously, and contradictorily in terms of both the empirical-scientific language of Fulcrum orogenes and the subjective-feeling language of rogga orogeny. Holding both these languages in mind at once, accepting the tension and contradiction between them, is the primary capability which sets the novel's tripartite protagonist apart from her fellow orogenes, and positions her uniquely to investigate and engage with the novel's mysterious artifacts and the long history of Fifth Seasons. Embracing and using the two seemingly contradictory group identities without attempting to reconcile them gives Essun access to creative and powerful orogenic maneuvers that make her one of the most powerful and innovative orogeny users in the world.[138]

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[137] This dynamic explicitly parallels a call to action in Martine Syms' "Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto" with regards to using certain kinds of language: "Since "fact" and "science" have been used throughout history to serve white supremacy, we will focus on an emotionally true, vernacular reality." Martine Syms, "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto," *Rhizome,* December 17, 2013, https://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/17/mundane-afrofuturist-manifesto/.

[138] A word should be said here about Alabaster, who is also capable of great acts of non-Fulcrum-trained orogeny. Alabaster's embrace of rogga identity is different from Essun's in two important ways. First, Alabaster himself has made the switch to rogga orogeny so thoroughly that he often finds himself incapable of explaining to Syenite in objective terms what it is he's doing during any particular orogenic act. Second, despite his experimentations with yoking orogenes together, Alabaster is largely uninterested in collaboration or teaching this orogeny to others - even Essun, who is the closest he gets to "student," is largely left to figure out rogga orogeny for herself. By contrast, Essun's ability to translate what she is doing between the two languages, and think with the logic of both orogene identities equally and simultaneously, distinguishes her and her powers in future novels.

Above all, Essun's embrace of her identity as a rogga and an orogene is emblematic of her rejection of the Fulcrum's insistence on flattening her identity. As a rogga-orogene, Essun is not easily assimilable into any of the Fulcrum's carefully tooled systems for ranking, controlling, and exploiting orogenes - one which relies on singular, objective language like numerical ranks. But neither does Essun retreat fully into the singular identity of a rogga, which is also assimilable into the Fulcrum's system (i.e. by the violence of execution of subjugation as a node controller). Instead, Essun's marshalling of both identities at once with no attempt to reconcile their contradictions keeps Essun out of the Fulcrum's systems, both physically and emotionally. As an orogene-rogga, Essun is unsubsumable by the Fulcrum machine.

III. Afrofuturism and the Afterlives of Many Deaths

In an editorial introduction to the 2020 Extrapolation special issue on Afrofuturism, Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek make the bold move of declaring Afrofuturism dead… for the first time. In so doing, they call back to the critique offered by Roger Luckhurst's "The Many Deaths of Science Fiction: A Polemic," a parodic critique of science fiction's near-definitive propensity as a genre for "self-eulogizing"whenever it feels its relationship to mainstream realism either shift or stagnate. In Luckhurst's estimation, these declarations of death are fundamentally an expression of genre anxiety, mingling hopes for imminent acceptance or recognition by some more mainstream or prestigious category (in this case, literary realism) with fears that such acceptance will destroy the very concept of science fiction, whose genre identity seems constituted in large part by its outsider-ness.[139] In Lavender and Yaszek's estimation, Afrofuturism has of late reached the milestone of its first "death." Having spawned a number of

[139] For a deeper account of Luckhurst's "many deaths" theory, see Chapter 2.

sub- and co-phenomena regarding speculative production by, about, and for people of color, the original term and concept of "Afrofuturism" as coined by Mark Dery, Samuel Delany, and others in 1993 is, according to Lavender and Yaszek, on its deathbed. The editorial's return to Luckhurst's rhetoric is intriguing, offering a coy parallel between the genre trajectories of science fiction and Afrofuturism that captures the sense that successive waves of genre phenomena are overtaking the original Afrofuturism, each new wave pushing beyond its boundaries or limitations. And yet the comparison does beg the question: is Afrofuturism really "dying" in the same way that science fiction "dies"? I don't think it is, and I think the differences between these deaths tell us something important not just about Afrofuturism and its successors, but also about what defines speculation as a whole in the 21st century.

Put simply, the "first death" of Afrofuturism as declared by Lavender and Yaszek indicates nearly the opposite of a genre death in Luckhurst's sense. The many deaths of science fiction are defined by a profound ambivalence - a yearning for acceptance by the mainstream paired inextricably with a fear of absorption and thus destruction by that same mainstream. In both cases, the prediction of death is an expression of anxieties about the genre's relationship to some outside authority or category of greater prestige (in science fiction's case, that of "literary realism" or the even vaguer "literary mainstream"). As defined by Lavender and Yaszek, the first death of Afrofuturism notably lacks any profound sense of anxiety over the genre's acceptance by any particular audience or inclusion in any larger category of greater prestige, most notably not even that of science fiction. "Afrofuturism" as a concept is not dying because it is being simultaneously accepted and destroyed by some outside force - rather it is "dying" because the original term is giving way to a wide variety of movements that consider themselves either fellow travellers or successors to Afrofuturism. As Lavender and Yaszek write, "While its

popularity has helped to legitimize racial concerns in SF, Afrofuturism has died and transformed into afrotopia (1998), afro-alienation (2006), steamfunk (2012), Imhotep-hop (2013), black quantum futurism (2015), Afrofuturism 2.0 (2016), speculative blackness (2016), Africanfuturism (2018), black utopia (2019) - and the list goes on."[140] Rather than being a faddish wave or subgenre now losing its separateness and being absorbed back into the mainstream of something like science fiction - as were the fates of avant gardes like the New Wave or cyberpunk - we are instead witnessing Afrofuturism inspiring sub-phenomena and then absorbing those phenomena into the larger, seemingly persistent narrative of Afrofuturism as a genre tradition all its own.

Our question then becomes: what factors decide which genres or movements "die" and which become themselves palimpsests or repositories of waves come and gone? Part of the answer comes from contextualizing current phenomena within Afrofuturism's history - a history far longer and more varied than the newfound attention it has experienced in the 2000s, making a strong argument for contemporary movements as variations on the long-running genre throughline of Afrofuturism.[141] But I think the truly operative quality that makes Afrofuturism function as a stable genre throughline which avant-gardes deviate from and improvise on is that, despite the unusually pinpointable moment of the debut of "Black to the Future" in 1993, Afrofuturism has never been defined through a single, hegemonic, exclusionary definition. Even Mark Dery's definition - "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses

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[140] Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, "The First Death of Afrofuturism," *Extrapolation* 61, no. 1-2 (2020), 4.

[141] For a specific account of Afrofuturism as a convergently evolved tradition to science fiction, see Nnedi Okorafor, "Sci-fi stories that imagine a future Africa," *TED,* August 2017, https://www.ted.com/talks/nnedi_okorafor_sci_fi_stories_that_imagine_a_future_africa?language=en. For a more general survey of Afrofuturism's long history, see Isiah Lavender III, *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement* (Chicago: Ohio State Press, 2019).

African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture - and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" - goes to great lengths to be as nonspecific and non-foreclosing as possible, a gesture of casting a wide net rather than declaring borders.[142] A definition as broad and inclusionary as this - which makes no attempt to create a definition of Afrofuturism that distinguishes it from particular traditions, to exclude works colloquially recognized as Afrofuturist on the vague prejudicial basis of "quality" or "taste," or to measure Afrofuturism by an external yardstick of quality or meaning - is a definition around which a persistent and meaningful genre tradition can be built, even and especially in a contemporary era marked by the dissolution of solid boundaries between genres.

In short, Afrofuturism persists as a generic ocean out of which smaller waves can rise and to which they can eventually return because it rejects the impulse to organize itself (as genres like science fiction have done time and time again) around a single, flattened, hegemonic version of its genre identity - one based on exclusion rather than inclusion. In doing so, Afrofuturism functions as a model for the project of multiplicative speculation, resolving itself to contain multitudes in a move that, while it may initially appear to come at the expense of a coherent genre identity, instead enables a genre *coalition* - a range of genre identities which do not have to be fully compatible to be productive/generative and co-supportive.

Consider, for example, the critique of Afrofuturism inherent in the proposal of Africanfuturism and Africanjujuism, primarily by author Nnedi Okorafor. Hope Wabuke writes of this tension, where Afrofuturism by some estimations "lacks room to conceive of Blackness

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[142] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

outside of the Black American diaspora *or* a Blackness independent from any relationship to whiteness."[143] Compare this with Africanfuturism - "a sub-category of science fiction...rooted in African culture, history, mythology, and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West," and Africanjujuism - "a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative."[144] Though Afrofuturism may be deemed insufficient as a comprehensive term for black speculative production, it and its expansiveness can still coexist with counter-formations like Africanfuturism and Africanjujuism as a recognizable site of certain kinds of production.

Consider also Samuel Delany's recent assertion that "unless we set up our critical mirrors very carefully, arguably there is no such thing as Afrofuturism."[145] Writing at length about disagreement over whether Afrofuturism must be written by black authors, Delany embraces the contradictions inherent in his simultaneous argument that "to the extent Afrofuturism concerns science fiction… it requires writers writing about black characters in the future," as "historically, 'Afrofuturism' is a white concept that does not hinge on the race of the writer," and that "my own feeling is that, as a black writer, whatever I choose to write about in the science fiction form is Afrofuturism."[146] Delany's ultimate conclusion - that "Afrofuturism is pretty much anything you want it to be and not a rigorous category at all" - would be an indictment of a traditionally defined genre, but instead serves as a reinforcement of Afrofuturism's multiplicitous, post-genre

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[143] Hope Wabuke, "Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and the Language of Black Speculative Literature," *LARB*, August 27, 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/afrofuturism-africanfuturism-and-the-language-of-black-speculative-literature/.

[144] Nnedi Okorafor, quoted in Wabuke.

[145] Samuel Delany, "The Mirror of Afrofuturism," *Extrapolation* 61, no. 1-2 (2020), 173.

[146] Ibid., 174, 179, 180.

nature.[147] These critiques do not "kill" Afrofuturism - they merely multiply and expand its imaginative horizons.

As contemporary genre formations, multiplicative speculation and Afrofuturism alike embrace the power of a contradictory identity and forego the endless wait for one's subjectivity to be recognized or validated by some outside authority or judge. Afrofuturism provides a working model of multiplicative speculation's ideas on identity and subjectivity, not just at the level of the form or content of particular texts, but on the meta-level of its approach to genre identity. Above and beyond its engagement with identity at the level of individual characters (Essun's tripartite identity) and groups (Essun as an orogene vs a rogga), Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* participates in Afrofuturism's generic heterogeneity, repeatedly and pointedly subverting genre expectations and emphasizing the text's lack of interest in quibbling over the particulars of its genre tradition.

IV. Post-Genre Identity in *The Fifth Season*

For all the attention *The Fifth Season* and its sequels have garnered for their innovative structure, play with perspective, and work on identity and trauma, almost no explicit scholarly attention has been focused on discussing or debating the novels' genre. In most studies, the fact that *The Fifth Season* in particular draws on the markers or conventions of a wide range of different genre traditions garners no more than a parenthetical reference about how it "straddles several speculative genres." One could almost excuse this omission on the grounds that the novels themselves seem largely uninterested in clarifying or splitting hairs over its generic commitments; this apparently laissez-faire attitude to genre manifests most in moments like *The*

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[147] Ibid., 184.

Obelisk Gate's casual revelation of the nature of orogeny as "magic," a firm denial of any emergent theories readers might be formulating about orogeny as a somehow science-fictional practice.[148] I argue, however, that far from ignoring or neglecting its relationship to particular genres and tropes, *The Fifth Season* is in fact built on the premise - a thoroughly Afrofuturist and multiplicative speculative premise - that power arises from maintaining contradictory identities that cannot be simplified, pigeonholed, or reconciled into a single hegemonic one. From the novel's play with expectations surrounding microgenres and tropes to the entire series' coin-flip push-pull between dystopia and utopia, science fiction and fantasy, *The Fifth Season* is emblematic of the project of multiplicative speculation on the meta-level of genre - inclusive, contradictory, and unpredictable as a matter of praxis.

The initial separateness of *The Fifth Season*'s three viewpoints gives the novel the opportunity to engage in play with a range of conventional frames and subgenres for the narrative of each "character." From the very beginning, the novel promises to buck narrative convention, often explicitly announcing its intention to do so, as when it famously "start[s] with the end of the world."[149] Yet the reader, whether trained by prior experiences with speculative fiction or informed by cultural osmosis of the beats of the bildungsroman, is nonetheless primed by narrative tradition to grasp immediately at the straws of each subgenre and trope system as these viewpoint characters are introduced. As such, *The Fifth Season*'s explicitly signalled departure from each of its expected main plot structures is the first step the novel takes towards building its powerfully contradictory generic identity.

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[148] N.K. Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate* (New York: Orbit, 2016), 106.

[149] Jemisin, *Fifth Season*, 1.

For example, within the space of sf, Damaya's plot initially appears to follow the fantastical, mythical conventions of a hero plucked from obscurity and formally educated to harness their magical potential for the advancement of good. Within the tradition of mimetic fiction, Damaya's storyline seems poised to follow the bildungsroman structure and draw on the conventions of the boarding school novel, perhaps even the particular example of *Harry Potter*, which looms large in contemporary cultural memory. Yet Schaffa's "rescue" of Damaya and his role as her benevolent mentor figure are quickly undermined on multiple levels, through violence fast and slow - in both the microaggressive stories he tells her of Misalem and Shemshena to begin depreciating her sense of self-worth, and in the explicit violence of breaking Damaya's hand in a ritual meant to cement the hegemonic dominance of Guardians over their orogene charges. By little more than halfway through the novel, Damaya's disillusionment with this story has become a mantra: "The Fulcrum is not a school. Grits are not children. Orogenes are not people…"[150] Jemisin herself has framed Damaya's experience explicitly in terms of a rejection of the magical boarding school trope system, declaring the Fulcrum "the anti-Hogwarts."[151]

We see similar moves at work in the other two plotlines. Syenite's story is *not* that of a "hate becomes love" romcom in which she and Alabaster come to realize their "true" feelings for each other, something made clear after less than a chapter of exposition when Syenite reveals the Fulcrum's unspoken expectation that they produce offspring together. Essun's story is *not* the comfortable one of a mother's pacifistic love overcoming violence to save her child from ignorance and bigotry, obvious from the early-stage framing of her quest as primarily one of revenge, and her massacre of an entire settlement of people in pursuit of it. Each set of structural

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[150] Ibid., 297.

[151] Jemisin quoted in Hurley, "An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing," 471.

expectations resonates with conventions and traditions within and beyond speculative fiction. One effect of these underminings is to make the reader's work more difficult, to deny them the "easy out" shortcuts of obvious resonances and clear analogues to existing formations. This pointedly foregrounded, constantly shifting, contradictory sense of generic convention and structure in each plotline puts *The Fifth Season* in the position of being both and neither - both a magical boarding school novel and not, both a hate-to-love romance and not, and so on. This position is the uniquely powerful position of a novel of multiplicative speculation, not tied to a particular generic identity even as it maintains ties to many.

Having laid the groundwork of this micro-genre play in each individual plotline up through the midpoint of the novel, *The Fifth Season* takes that play to the next level of subversion with the revelation of its three-in-one narrator. In addition to advancing and resolving Essun's plot-level individual struggles with identity, this move also transforms the novel's genre identity, elevating and uniting the novel's work beyond that of a picaresque or patchwork of dark micro-satires. In this analysis of the narrator revelation, I aim to separate out and focus my analysis on the realization of temporal disjunction also created by this revelation (which tends to be discussed monolithically with the character implications as a single narrative "twist"), which transforms the relationship between the novel's fabula and syuzhet, which has profound consequences for the novel's genre identity. The revelation of the novel's temporal disjointedness - in other words, that its three narrative viewpoints in fact describe events taking place at vastly different points in the history of the Stillness - results in a sudden mental folding-out of the storyline. This allows the novel to dance deftly around the generic identities of utopia and dystopia, co-mingling the two inextricably and unpredictably. It also denies readers the simplicity of reducing each "character's" narrative to a particular genre or convention - an effort

thoroughly disrupted both by a massive shift in perspective regarding where the narrative "begins" and "ends" and the sudden revelation that all these narratives in fact comprise a cacophonous uber-narrative that can lay claim to all the many genre identities with which each constituent plot has played.

If charted by its moments of hope and despair, each of *The Fifth Season*'s three plotlines follow a similar overall structure - an initial setback to be overcome, followed by an unpredictable middle act constituted by smaller turns, and finally, a seemingly definitive discovery of a utopian space or relation which is quickly and devastatingly undermined near the novel's ending. Damaya's narrative begins with her non-rescue by Schaffa (instigating setback); continues through her oppression and abuse at the Fulcrum until her eventual discovery of a friend and ally in Binof (triumph, utopian relation); and ends with Damaya's sudden separation from Binof and reabsorption into the Fulcrum system (undercut). Syenite's mandated "mission" with Alabaster (instigating setback) eventually leads her to Meov, haven for orogeny, queerness, and polyamory (triumph, utopian space, arguably the most blatant in the novel); but her timeline ends with the brutal destruction of Meov and all it represents, including an estranged re-staging of the climax of *Beloved* (undercut). Key points in Essun's narrative are Uche's death (instigating setback), the non-discovery of Nassun (despair), the discovery of Castrima (triumph, utopian space) and - though *The Fifth Season* notably cuts off before narrating - the seemingly inevitable violent destruction of Castrima, which opens the next installment (undercut). Offset just slightly from each other, these overlapping plot structures allow *The Fifth Season* to balance small moments of hope and despair throughout, despite the disproportionate distribution of these throughout each individual story, and ultimately build to something like a triumphant ending for each (before the final undercutting).

However, when fully unfolded by the reveal into the chronologically arranged fabula, the narrative of *The Fifth Season* becomes a more complex seismograph of hope and despair. What once seemed to be three temporally overlapping moments of intense utopian discovery and dystopian loss are revealed to be distanced by indeterminate, irregular stretches of unmapped intervening time. What once seemed to be three conclusive endings to three bounded, finite narratives are instead revealed to be part of a single, continuous, collective story told over decades that continues still. The structural effect of this twofold. First, the novel's strategic wavering emphasizes the unpredictable pseudo-cyclical nature of utopia and dystopia - that they are elements of long-running processes operating at both the micro level of repetitive, mundane, everyday occurrence and the macro level of sudden acute, extraordinary triumph and disaster. As Jemisin herself said she hoped to capture with the bizarre predictability and unpredictability of the Seasons, "apocalypse is relative thing."[152] Second, the sudden combination into a single narrative of every genre, subgenre, and convention the novel has participated in or critiqued asks us to see individual lives, too, as not just predictable beginning-middle-end narratives reducible to their "ending," but as unpredictable, long-running processes which weave together seemingly contradictory narratives as a matter of course. We cannot, as in the typical case of multiple narrators in epic speculative fiction, compartmentalize each individual narrator as adding only a single perspective and a single set of narrative conventions to our understanding of the novel's world.

It further encourages us to consider individual narratives - both textual and actual - as processes, far greater than the neatly-wrapped sum of their arbitrary conclusion points. If analyzed as separate, bounded narratives, each plotline's natural narrative "climax" (whether an

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[152] Ibid., 476.

apex of triumph or a nadir of despair) seems to exist disingenuously at odds with the rest of that narrative. Having quickly discarded the heartening, heroic structure of the bildungsroman and the magical boarding school school novel, Damaya's plot seems to be building towards a different heroic conclusion - one might expect her to attempt a daring escape from the Fulcrum, or a revolt against its rules, especially given her and Binof's discovery of a seemingly key secret of its functioning (the obelisk socket). Yet Damaya's narrative concludes with her being reabsorbed into the twisted hegemony of the Fulcrum, cut off suddenly from her long-awaited but short-lived friendship, and finding no place else to seek comfort but from the very Guardians who subjugate and abuse her. Though Syenite does temporarily find happiness and parenthood together with Alabaster as part of a heavily mediated polyamorous relationship, those utopian states - along with the conditions that made them possible - are destroyed along with Meov, and Syen and Alabaster end the novel on opposite sides of an estranged "No Future" debate. Essun, failing by the end of the novel to achieve her quest of either revenge for Uche or recovery of Nassun, seems poised to abandon hope entirely - until discovery of experimental comm Castrima, with its upended assumptions and rules surrounding orogenes, provides a temporarily utopian refuge. After hundreds of pages of oscillation and uncertainty, it would be tempting to cling to the "endings" of these individual narratives as effective shorthands or final words on their conclusions or intentions. With the sudden revelation that these seemingly bounded narratives comprise one continuous and continuing story, however, we are discouraged from allowing these now-arbitrarily-timed occurrences to tip our engagement with *The Fifth Season* in the direction of a definitive and singular genre identity.

V. Coda: The Future Possible

As this project began by highlighting, “speculative fiction” as a genre has undergone a massive tug-of-war over its own identity throughout the 20th and 21st century. The new model of speculative fiction which has resulted from these struggles (an umbrella formation comprising many traditional genres and the interstitial spaces between them) demands not only a new definition, but an entirely new kind of identity - epistemological rather than ontological, with multiplicative and predictive speculation as the praxis of contemporary speculative fiction and estrangement and cognition as their core poetics. My primary endeavor in this project has been to create language with which to track a shift in kind - a key divergence I see between the motives and processes of speculative modes, as well as the logics and affects that fuel them.

But as I close this reflection on what these forms of speculation can do for us as post-genre formations, I hope that by merely introducing the terms “predictive speculation” and “multiplicative speculation,” I have foreclosed too much on what speculative fiction is or can be. Multiplicative speculation has, as the core of its spirit, a commitment to increasing the number of imaginable possibilities available to us, and it would seem to undermine this core to dictate that speculation can or should only proceed in one particular way. As a scholar deeply committed to the structural study of genre, it goes against every intellectual instinct I have to resist the urge to reduce multiplicative speculation to just one more generic bucket in a sea of such buckets, complete with its own fairground sign of conditions for inclusion - “you must be *this* speculative to enter…” There is a special power, I think, in feeling, in simply pointing to what we know speculation to be. As we face a brave new world, I invite looking to formations like Afrofuturism, its co-phenomena, and its successors as microcosmic testaments to the power of speculative fiction when precisely what it can or cannot do is not limited, flattened, or policed,

and it does not strive to achieve a singularity of vision or purpose, particularly not as judged by an outside authority.

In every text this project has spotlighted, there is a subcurrent of deep reverence for storytelling. Specifically, we find moments and threads in each which explicitly cast it as an act of survival - in the genre media which Dietz consumes while imprisoned in Hurley's *The Light Brigade*, in the addictive and ridiculous "dramas" with which Cheris unwinds in the *Ninefox Gambit,* and in the Lorists of Jemisin's *The Fifth Season.* In every case, but perhaps most explicitly in *The Light Brigade,* these threads serve to remind us of the power a story can hold - and how often stories and this potential of theirs recedes to the background of our consciousness, how easily we can underestimate them:

> After a few months of media access, I understood why the corps restricted so much of it. It shows you different ways people have lived. It offers options. Gets you thinking… well, is this really the only way that a society can organize itself?... They enjoyed giving me genre shows. They considered those least powerful, least political. But those taught me other things… They were all fantasies, the same way our media is fantastic; full of hopes and wishes and stories about the world we strive for, not the world we live in.[153]

While this reverence for storytelling is ever-present, what truly unites these moments is the lack of specificity regarding what kind of story, generically speaking, is being told. Never in these moments of reflection do these texts focus their energies on excluding even the easiest targets or culprits of prediction. Instead, they emphasize what these stories *do* for the protagonists - what any story has the potential to do. They open minds. They expand imaginations. They provoke questioning and reconsideration of received norms. They comfort. They inspire. They recharge. They provide an opportunity to imagine and strive for a different way of being. These qualities are not unique to one genre, or a mere handful - they are the potential of all storytelling. I hope

[153] Kameron Hurley, *The Light Brigade* (New York: Saga Press, 2019), 262-264.

that multiplicative speculation does some of the work to unite these powers under a term and a community, to encourage others to seek them, to make them, to share them, to reproduce them, to signal-boost them, in hopes that someday soon, we can all find the stories we need within reach.

Conclusion

Bring the Light

One of the biggest takeaways I hoped to instill in defining and demonstrating what multiplicative speculation can do is how capacious it is – how many different types of art can do the things that multiplicative speculation tries to do. Though this project has focused in the interests of time on novels, I see these things happening in mediums like television, comics, and games, and I'd love to explore the extent of this phenomenon in a future project. But this capaciousness naturally leads to skepticism – something along the lines of, "okay, well then what *isn't* multiplicative speculation?" And in response to this, I just have to repeat that multiplicative speculation does not aim to be exclusive. Believe me, I sympathize with the skeptics - I can't emphasize enough how totally counter this is to how I thought when I first began this project, and how I still instinctively think if I don't catch myself. Like I said at the top, I am a buckets person, and there's nothing my brain wants to do more than take this mushy, vague model and squish it into a nicely labelled bucket. But that would defy the purpose of multiplicative speculation, and it would make impossible something important which is currently possible - that kinds of texts that we might not think of as "speculative" under the current umbrella definition of "speculative fiction" (like literary realism) might well be capable of participating in multiplicative speculation if they want to. If you're expanding someone's horizons, prompting them to question the status quo, inspiring them to imagine alternatives, you're doing multiplicative speculation, and I don't think books about talking squids in outer space have a monopoly on that.

And that's good – I think given how natural and pervasive hopelessness, resignation, and dystopian conditions seem to be these days, we can use all the multiplicative speculation – and by extension, all the hope - we can get. Ultimately, my research of multiplicative speculation has been a somewhat selfish thing – after reading my fiftieth hopeless dystopian novel, seeing parts of these novels come to pass, and finding it hard to get out of bed in the morning or imagine that the world could get better instead of worse, looking for multiplicative speculation, giving it a name, and celebrating it were as much a survival strategy that helped me personally remain hopeful in the face of darkness as it was an attempt to produce a literary-academic concept that I could leave behind for others to use. In that spirit, as I close here, I want to express a hope we can all find our own ways to do this work - to create hope, question our norms, and inspire alternatives. I can guarantee that someone out there needs to see what only you can imagine.

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