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Introduction

Hobgoblins of Fantasy: American Fantasy Fiction in Theory
James Gifford and Orion Ussner Kidder

“A frightful hobgoblin stalks through Europe.
We are haunted by a ghost, the ghost of Communism.”"
The Metamorphoses of Myth in Fiction, it is not hard to see that we cannot even agree upon terms at the centre of fantasy as a genre. That instability roots fantasy in a “negative capability,” possibly even an anti-foundationalist tendency, when it comes to theorizing it—definitions or rhetorics of fantasy abound amidst a paucity of agreement on what they mean. Darko Suvin or Fredric Jameson, for example, set fantasy in opposition to science fiction, its twin genre in many respects, especially under the increasingly-prevalent über-genre “fantastika.” So while fantasy finds more traction than SF in political allegory or feminist critique, that very capability to demand interest from the “school of resentment” (the most vital part of literary criticism today) clashes with the class theory of history, the critique of neoliberalism, and the derogation of identity politics as a distraction from the dialectic of history that SF ostensibly contains. It is as if we must remember that Helen Macfarlane, who penned the frightful hobgoblin, was not only a communist and Hegelian but also a feminist and a woman. The tensions between an essentialist and an intersectional Marxism are clearly early and deep. The result is that fantasy vacillates between Marxist critique, with its determinism and false consciousness, and progressive social commentary, with its politics of representation and even accusation. Where the grand narrative of class conflict elides all other forms of intersecting or conflicting identity, it finds fantasy lacking—where the proliferating narrative of intersectionality distinguishes such forms, fantasy flourishes with often radical potentials.

What then are readers to do? Must the hobgoblin be exorcised, or do we find a medium through which to communicate with it? Is the hobgoblin itself a product of the struggle between fantasy and rationality, or surrealism and mimesis? Must we surrender the concept of history in critical cultural theory, a materialism deep-set into our habitual modes of reading (and with enormous value to critique), in order to find fantasy’s forward potential? Is fantasy a literature of subversion or the literature of counter-revolutionaries? Do the identity politics of fantasy render it always reactionary even amidst a neo-liberal guise of progressivism and pluralism? Is there an antifoundational reading of its foundational myths? In his Introduction to “Theorizing the Fantastic” that appeared shortly after the Call for Papers for this issue, Brian Attebery remarks “fantasy is seriously under-theorized,” and we would argue this problem persists. However, this does not mean that it persists in the form we may tend to most readily imagine: an absence of critical theory. Rosemary Jackson’s Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion found its fusion of Marx and Lacan
through Fredric Jameson’s “Magical Narratives,” the article that went on to become the key chapter of his most influential book, *The Political Unconscious*—the result is a sense of fantasy’s exhumation of desire in a Lacanian sense based on Jameson’s refinement of the unconscious and the psychoanalytic deep structures of the psyche as mere manifestations of a bourgeois mode of production. It is a political and material unconscious much ahead of its time in 1981. So, it is not so much that fantasy is under-theorized as it is that we are not particularly made to heed the theoretical bases of our interpretive habits with fantasy. The hobgoblin stalks, not strides, and by remaining hidden and hunting, it protects itself behind a veil of ideology and cultural hegemony. The invisible hand of the interests of a ruling class remain hidden and disguised as normative values, all the more powerful for being unseen, but so too are many of our theoretical assumptions for how to read fantasy as genre. These are the questions and concerns that fuelled this special feature in *The New Americanist* under the title of *Hobgoblins of Fantasy: American Fantasy Fiction in Theory*. The answers we received to the question are varied and point to as many traditions in theory as they do in fantasy.

Robert Smith’s “Living in La-La Land: Speculative Fiction, Speculative Realism and the Lovecraft Virus” points to a post-rationalist tradition and the expanding terrain to which scholars like Steve Fuller and Nick Land alike (despite their great differences) drive other scholars at work on Actor-Network Theory and Object Oriented Ontology and the after-lives of continental philosophy toward a neo-reactionary Dark Enlightenment. By drawing on the worst excesses of H.P. Lovecraft’s racist fantastical forms, wandering between horror, fantasy, and SF in a real “fantastika” vision, Smith probes the whisperings of Cthulhu in our modern media age. It is as if this particular hobgoblin drives readers toward a dissolution of the rational and therefore self-determining subject of Western philosophical traditions. As a mid-point between critical fascism and a virulent infection that we must cure, Smith’s proposition is that our resurgent authoritarian historical moment must meaningfully struggle with the presumed estrangement of progressive science fiction and the presumed reactionary authoritarianism of fantasy. Whether there is any conflict between social anarchism and libertarian capitalism remains open and very much at stake in Smith’s provocation, beyond any neoliberal reading of fantasy or fantastika as genre. China Miéville observes in *Red Planets* that the SF project on which he worked with Mark Bould had begun subtitled “Marxism, Science Fiction, Fantasy,” but only in the editing process had been abridged of its fantastical stream. Whence fantasy and why
this trend? Bould would later draw on the same Macfarlane translation of Marx and Engels for his keynote at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts in February 2019 to invoke the magical amidst the materialist. Whence the magic and horror of his hobgoblin? A part of Smith’s answer to such questions may be the unconscious and structural hobgoblin of fascism driving off its progressive opponents, calling forth a very different revolutionary drive among the workers of the world in thrall to accelerationists who offer a counter-form of materialism. Jameson and Suvin welcome fantasy into history with the departure of magic, or precisely when it ceases to be fantastical, and this must leave readers questioning the struggle between history and accelerationist thought, as if the end of history is totalitarian and brings the emergence of utterly new forms of subjectivity consumed entirely by the perverse demands of a Cthulhu-like super-ego rather than a monstrous Id. If the shift from fantasy’s magical worlds to an acceleration into history points only to a fascist totalitarianism in some horrific messianic time, then perhaps some different form of forever deferred or forever provisional revolution is to be preferred.

We turn the issue then to Robert Tally’s play between the critique of neoliberalism and the impending global climate catastrophe as the dialectical negation of capitalism’s endless churning. In the child’s imagination and bedtime narrative A Monster Under Every Bed, Tally unfolds through a hermeneutical reading the monstrosity that connects the trivial utterances of the ostensibly naïve youth of the world to the nearly invisible operations of a monstrous system that is always out of sight and enacting a form of cultural hegemony. This “cartography of the invisible” per McNally, as a kind of terrible teratology, is then for Tally “a way of piercing the veil, exposing the apparent reality as so much false consciousness, and evoking potential alternatives” that makes fantasy into a form of ideology critique. In Smith’s terms, it is only in fantasy that we can detect Cthulhu’s monstrous whisperings and strive for their negation in forms of solidarity. Like Bould and Miéville’s initial project, Tally points to a progressive function in fantasy and its unveiling of ideology amidst magical narratives. The concern, as well, for such fantastical narratives is with the most pressing demands of the present, rather than a nostalgia-fuelled and fascistic idealization of the past. In this, fantasy offers precisely the estrangement that can create a “piercing of the veil” amidst our self-recognition in the cognition effect Suvin outlines. In a different stream, Misha Grifka-Wander argues for “forward fantasy” as moving against the root of patriarchal demands for a “hard” SF and
that see fantasy as a unit of value: that is, setting rigid paradigms of toxic masculinity as the measure of success, a paradigm that has infiltrated SF but that is, despite all its swords and lances and fear of rings, undermined in fantasy. Grifka-Wander insistently critiques the sexism of conflating a hard SF with an orientation to the progressive future in parallel with a feminized and weak fantasy nostalgically oriented to the past. The alternative appears in a forward-focused fantasy that enacts the kinds of ideology critique outlined by Tally and that opens the hidden conflicts of the present to the reader’s view. Grifka-Wander’s forward fantasy “encourages readers and critics alike to focus more on the work of marginalized writers” and undermines the patriarchal sexism that disrupts so much of the radical potential in materialist critiques that become bogged down in dismissing identity politics or ressentiment in what feminist and intersectional critics too often confront as the counter-revolutionary class-solidarity of patriarchal authority working under the guise of materialism.

As a further example of this kind of forward fantasy, Philippa Campbell turns to the campus novel as a genre and its further sub-subgenre of the campus fantasy novel, focusing on Lev Grossman and Pamela Dean. This in turn demands a rethinking of Althusserian Ideological State Apparatuses within the educational system and as a necessary component of the campus novel. In urban fantasy and identity politics that demand yet press beyond a politics of representation, Campbell finds a form of social critique and consciousness raising that situates higher education and the defamiliarizations of urban fantasy as a pathway to class consciousness and broaching of a struggle against the ideological systems of containment and delegitimization. If the Ur-campus novel is *Lucky Jim*, and if the turn of the genre has predominantly been to satirizing and peeling back the processes of cultural hegemony that obscure the construction of class solidarity among a ruling elite through institutions of higher education, then novels deeply entwined with institutions of higher education, like Dean’s *Tam Lin*, Patricia McKillip’s *The Riddle-Master of Hed*, or Esther Friesner’s *Unicorn U*, will provoke readerly awareness not only of those processes of class conflict but also its intersections with gender, race, nationality, and liberalism, anticipating by several years the more recent turn in critical studies of the campus novel. Like Grifka’s “forward fantasy,” the emergence of the magical in the campus fantasy novel shows its deep concerns with the contemporary world and its emerging futures. We may do well to remember that not only did Ursula K. Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* establish a magic school long before Rowling’s Hogwarts, but that the processes
and obfuscations of peer review and tenure provide the worm at the core of her utopia in *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. We are never far from the campus novel. Campbell’s confrontation with redundancy and the growing neo-liberal order of the modern university critiqued by Bill Readings echoes the calls for solidarity based on the intersections of other forms of identity as seen in Newson and Polster or Coleman and Kamboureli.

The historical orientation of these first four articles then shifts to methodological and institutional concerns, beginning with Taylor Driggers’s “Archaeologies of the Future: Deconstruction, Fantasy, and the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin.” The titular gesture here is doubly to Le Guin’s “Towards an Archaeology of the Future” of the Kesh and Jameson’s use of the phrase for his book *An Archaeology of the Future*. This kind of simple attention to the origins of phrases extends through deconstructive methodologies to an alternative paradigm to Suvin’s cognitive estrangement that derives from Bertolt Brecht: “By rearranging elements of the Primary World and rendering them as unfamiliar secondary worlds, fantasy can be seen to participate in the deconstructive activity [...] in order to draw attention to the other while retaining a sense of its otherness” that leads to the dismantling of hegemonic habituations. This is an alternative way of discovering a radical fantastic that “carries the potential to disrupt received wisdom, unified grand narratives, and binary hierarchies not by disavowing them, but, to borrow phrases from Derrida, by ‘[i]nhabiting them in a certain way’ and ‘constantly risking falling back within what is being deconstructed.’” This process of critique makes the praxis of fantasy more visible, and in doing so draws out the potential for a transformative or even radical politics in the genre. It may be possible to read in Le Guin’s Earthsea books a more daring expression of the anarchist commitments that famously shape *The Dispossessed*, but it is clear that this reading is “an affirmation of fantasy’s potential to break with oppressive norms and dismantle the ideological limits places around imaginations.”

Max Bledstein and Swatie complete the issue with two of the most topical fantastika texts in our contemporary moment, Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the latter of which is now even more ubiquitous with the televised serialization and sequel that has co-won the Booker Prize. In Bledstein we find that institutionalization of knowledge is a key component of the operations of power, shaping and contextualizing knowledge into styles that reflect those institutional priorities. In this, the obvious “forward
fantasy” of an imagined and transformed vision of the past of American slavery demands a critical re-engagement with the present’s racism and de-facto segregation. While we did not receive other works on Afrofuturism or African fantasy from American writers (perhaps the most theoretically-engaged and exciting area for current work in fantasy fiction, from N.K. Jemesin’s Inheritance Trilogy and Nnedi Okorafor’s *Akata Witch* to Marlon James’s trilogy begun with *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*), this is clearly the most urgent area of demand for critical discourse, but that is a critical project that must also be self-conscious of its own role in the production of knowledge as an exercise of power. If Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Ben Okri may be included as American, this is a full tradition, including the fantastical elements of Octavia Butler’s Patternist series. The Foucauldian understanding of disciplining through the panopticon bridges to Swatie’s study of Atwood, biopower, and governmentality as well. In both, the materialist problem of history with which this project opens, and its struggle with the simplification of conflict to a binary dialectic between a proletariat and the radical bourgeoisie that has overturned the aristocracy, is redirected outward to larger paradigms and institutions and institutional forms of thought. The materialist approach to the fantastic that dominates the study of fantasy from Suvin and Jackson through Monléon and Todorov, and that lingers in the structuralist fixation on definitions and taxonomies from Irwin to Attebery to Mendlesohn, then engages with a Foucauldian puzzlement over the institutions and disciplines of knowledge that are also built from these exercises of power. Just as critics like Edward Said leveraged this conceptualization to shift postcolonial theory from a Marxist politics of decolonization to a study of the disciplinary operations of universities through departments of Orientalist Studies living on today in Area Studies and so forth, through Bledstein and Swatie we begin to question how the materialism and definitional excursions in the scholarly study of fantasy are themselves also manifestations of other social forces and exercises of power that we may then subject to critique and deconstruction. Do such studies grant academics, with their possible distance from fandom, a way of building authority over discourses outside of the academy? Do the styles of knowledge in our taxonomies of fantasy reflect and protect exercises of power, and if so, how do they benefit from remaining out of sight? Both articles leave the reader of this special feature on “Hobgoblins of Fantasy: American Fantasy Fiction in Theory” returning to self-reflexive questions rather than determined answers.
Where does this work then leave us? Just as the workers of the world have only their chains to lose, Macfarlane’s stalking hobgoblin transforms Prometheus-like as a fire-bringer who grants knowledge, reflexivity, and the ideological critique entailed in that process of reflection and the breaking of chains to become Prometheus unbound. The hobgoblin of fantasy may be a great liberator, made horrific by the processes of cultural hegemony that refasten the “mind-forg’d manacles”\(^4\) to which we are born. The major theoretical works on fantasy have sought to sublimate its interiorities to a materialist determinism for which the unconscious is a political construct of a bourgeois society,\(^5\) to read fantasy symptomatically as the nostalgic appeal of reactionary forces,\(^6\) and to construct a definitive taxonomy of the genre.\(^7\) Benjamin Robertson has outlined this critical tradition as an approach to fantasy by disputing “fantasy’s development and reception as a genre, especially insofar as fantasy, in its fullest expression, actualizes a ground for history that history cannot provide for itself (a problem historicist genres such as sf often fail to acknowledge and one that antihistoricist genres such as horror do not acknowledge as a problem so much as a given). Fantasy thus acts as a foil for neoliberal capitalism.”\(^8\) His project, in its future book form as “Here at the end of all things: Fantasy after History, seeks to move beyond the historicizing and definitional work that has dominated the study of fantasy, or as he puts it, “This groundless ground, this condition outside of or beyond history, is precisely what fantasy can describe. Whether we can develop forms of thought adequate to this groundless ground, forms of thought that do not instrumentalize the groundless ground or seek to historicize it, remains to be seen.”\(^9\) The hope is that the essays of this special feature at least nervously trace the critical scotoma, the blind spot, that tell us through the invisibility where the optical nerve hides information from our line of vision. As Gerry Canavan has written about fantasy’s sibling rivalry with science fiction and their combination with horror as “fantastika,” it is “a subfield famously devoted to squabbling over definitions and policing generic boundaries.”\(^10\) If there’s an agreement to be found among the authors collected here, it is that the theorizing of fantasy fiction is antifoundational—it tears down the fences of definitions,\(^11\) analyzes those chain links and guard rails to expose the concerns and interests of their builders, and denies boundaries by trampling down desire paths that circumvent barriers.\(^12\) The desire path, as the beaten down channel carved by human praxis rather than planning, and in fact typically as a denial or resistance to planning, stands as a visual marker of what people do in contrast to that which they are meant to do.
If fantasy similarly bursts through the intentions of our critical cultural theory, the emerging problem for theory is how the desire paths of that overflow may lead us into new and spontaneous theorizations and ways of coming to know what we read.
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ABSTRACT
In “Fascism and Science Fiction,” Aaron Santesso queries conventional wisdom that SF is “naturally” liberal and progressive. It is of course well known that reactionary tendencies are embedded in SF’s pulp roots and links between the extreme right and SF still persist. Santesso wonders if the foundational tropes and traditions of SF “carry the DNA of fascism.” It is this element – the idea that certain tropes and strategies of speculative fiction sub-genres may carry the twisted helix of a fascist DNA and exert a “certain pressure” – that I wish to deploy in considering the recent turn to materialism in philosophy, particularly in its speculative realist and object-oriented ontology incarnation, and the deleterious impact of its origins in the speculative fiction of H.P. Lovecraft and theory-fiction hyperstitions of Nick Land. Can a progressive philosophy in the postmodern tradition be infected by a tropic virus encoded in its technological (SF), biological (Abstract Horror) or imaginary-world (Fantasy) fictional origins and can a “certain pressure” thus exerted from structuring fictions within the philosophical machine compromise a progressive postmodern critique and turn the textual body’s defense mechanisms against itself? Walter Benjamin defined fascism as “the introduction of aesthetics into political life” (241). But what are the consequences of a certain kind of “political life,” a monstrous narrative tropism, being embedded like a virus (in biological and technological senses) within a fictional aesthetics
that, re-activated later within a new philosophical host, might spontaneously assemble? What are the long-term cytopathic effects of such assembly and the degree of focal degeneration? Does the construction of ‘realism’ invoked by the new materialist philosophers inadvertently correlate with a thanatos-driven fascistic impulse?

**Keywords:** fantasy, horror, WEIRD, fascism, fantastika

### I: Where the Fascist Literature Is

In a recent article, “Fascism and Science Fiction,” Aaron Santesso queries conventional wisdom that SF is “naturally” liberal and progressive. It is of course well known that reactionary tendencies are embedded in SF’s pulp roots and links between the extreme right and SF still persist. John Campbell, the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* often called the “Father of modern SF,” expressed authoritarian and racist views. Key SF pioneer Robert Heinlein, the actual originator of the term *speculative fiction* used collectively to describe works in the genres of SF, fantasy and horror, was associated with the John Birch Society, argued that voter eligibility be based on IQ tests, and in his SF classic *Starship Troopers*, an overt fascist defense of militarism, has his protagonist Johnny Rico ponder that: “it may be verified by observation that any breed which stops its own increase gets crowded out by breeds which expand.” Contemporary SF authors Jerry Pournelle, Larry Niven and David Weber promulgate in their own fiction an extreme libertarianism. Moreover, the first online emergence of the so-called alt-right in its meme-infected trolling guise was not the Gamergate affair of 2014 but earlier controversies surrounding the Hugo Award nominations, those controversies culminating in the 2015 rigging of the Awards by right-wing SF authors and fans. Santesso in fact uses as his epigraph William Gibson’s humorous remark that “I took courses with a guy who talked about the aesthetic politics of fascism [...] and he wondered whether or not there were fascist novels—and I remember thinking, ‘Reading all these SF novels has given me a line on this topic—I know where this fascist literature is!’”

Santesso’s interest in the intertwining of fascism and SF is, however, unconcerned with the personal politics of SF authors and their audiences. Rather, he wonders whether “foundational tropes and narrative structures” align SF more closely with fascist politics than progressive thought and come to “exert a certain pressure on the work.” That “certain pressure” is pondered elsewhere by Elana Gomel who, adapting Fredric Jameson’s
concept of the “ideology of the form” asks if the narrative dimension of an embedded ideology might implicate a “narrative model of fascism that locates its survival in the matrix of (post)modern popular culture.”

Specifically, Gomel considers analogies between SF/fantasy and fascism noting that the “structural analogy” between fascism and science fiction could be “a particular organization of the semantic field.” In this way, Mark Rose’s definition of SF as a “narrative that is composed within the semantic space created by the opposition of human versus nonhuman” seems equally applicable to a fascist narrative of exclusionary racial definition, a confluence also historically explicable due to the fact that fascism and SF share an origin story in a turn of the century cross-fertilization of apocalypse and science, specifically developments in evolutionary biology and racial anthropology.

Santesso is moved to wonder if the foundational tropes and traditions of SF “carry the DNA of fascism [...] to the extent that even liberal, progressive authors working within the genre’s more refined strains often (inadvertently) employ fascistic tropes and strategies.” It is this suggestive element of Santesso’s inquiry—the idea that certain tropes and strategies of speculative fiction sub-genres may carry the twisted helix of a fascist DNA and exert a “certain pressure”—that I wish to deploy here in considering the recent turn to materialism in philosophy, particularly in its speculative realist and object-oriented ontology incarnation, and the possibly deleterious impact of its origins in the speculative fiction of H.P. Lovecraft and the related theory-fiction experimentation of the British philosopher Nick Land. Can a progressive philosophy in the postmodern tradition also be infected by a tropic virus encoded in its technological (SF), biological (Abstract Horror) or imaginary-world (Fantasy) fictional origins and can a “certain pressure” thus exerted from such structuring fictions within the philosophical machine compromise an ostensibly progressive postmodern critique to the extent of turning the textual body’s defense mechanisms against itself? Walter Benjamin famously defined fascism as “the introduction of aesthetics into political life.” But what are the consequences of a certain kind of “political life,” a slumbering monstrous narrative tropism, being embedded like a virus (in biological and technological senses) within a fictional aesthetics that, re-activated later within a new philosophical host, might spontaneously assemble? What are the long-term cytopathic effects of such later assembly and what is the consequent degree of focal degeneration? Does the endeavor *speculatively* to access what exists beyond or outside the correlation of being and world necessarily prioritize the aesthetics of SF horror,
specifically a disturbing narrative variant that eliminates the subject in its celebration of objects, cosmic chill, and the absence and dissolution of the human? Does the construction of ‘realism’ invoked by the new materialist philosophers elide significant political consequence or does it inadvertently correlate with a thanatos-driven fascistic impulse? For if so, here be monsters.

II: The Lovecraft Virus

For our monsters, we need look no further than Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Edmund Wilson remarked of Lovecraft’s “horror” fiction that the “only horror is the horror of bad taste and bad art.”12 As a modernist, Wilson was resistant to the dementedly adjectival excess of Lovecraft’s camp-baroque neo-Victorian prose style. A typical florid sample of Lovecraft’s verbal clotting from “The Lurking Fear”: “I felt the strangling tendrils of a cancerous horror whose roots reached into illimitable pasts and fathomless abysms of the night that broods beyond time.” “Surely,” Wilson wryly observed, “one of the primary rules for writing an effective tale of horror is never to use any of these words—if you are going, at the end, to produce an invisible whistling octopus.”13 But speculative writers of fantasy, horror and sci-fi, from George Martin to Stephen King to China Miéville, comment approvingly on Lovecraft’s bleak-world-building prowess. King has called Lovecraft “the 20th century’s greatest practitioner of the classic horror tale.”14 Established literary writers like Michael Chabon and Joyce Carol Oates have succumbed to the Lovecraft horror-show too, and in 2005 the author was welcomed into the Library of America, canonical at last. In Europe, the French embrace Lovecraft as they did his idol Poe, although Michel Houellebecq, his primary continental champion, grudgingly admits that the work is “not really literary.”15 And Lovecraft of course significantly permeates popular culture, a ubiquitous online presence as replicated meme with a substantial fandom. The day of the Cthulhu t-shirt is long upon us. Given the ever-increasing predominance of speculative fiction in the marketplace, in its SF, horror and fantasy iterations, we have been for two decades now in the throes of a significant Lovecraftian cultural revival.16 Indeed, the title of a recent volume of philosophical essays on the author advances the not altogether hyperbolic claim that we now live in The Age of Lovecraft.

Alan Moore has suggested that in Lovecraft’s fiction there may “exist a key to many of our present psychosocial dilemmas.”17 But the wide-ranging success of the Lovecraftian revival also suggests that it may also be a contributing factor towards those intractable dilemmas. For Lovecraft’s
speculative fiction is of course inextricably intertwined with his endemic racism. In much of his voluminous correspondence the writer notoriously itemizes in exquisite detail his prejudices against immigrants, African-Americans, Jews, women, and homosexuals while subscribing with enthusiasm to the racialist scientific theories of his day, at times expressing sympathy and approval for the Confederacy, the Klan, and the sort of “racial cleansing” literalized in Nazi eugenic programs. Philip Eil has usefully collated a range of Lovecraft’s racist remarks from the correspondence including a November, 1934 letter in which he described “extra-legal measures” such as “lynching & intimidation” in Mississippi as “ingenious”; describes Jews as “hook-nosed, swarthy, guttural-voiced aliens” with whom “association was intolerable”; laments that New York is full of “flabby, pungent, grinning, chattering niggers” and that New England has “undesirable Latins—low-grade Southern Italians and Portuguese.”

In 1922, Lovecraft, anticipating the Nazi gas chambers, opined that he wished “a kindly gust of cyanogen could asphyxiate the whole gigantic abortion” of New York’s Chinatown, “a bastard mess of stewing mongrel flesh” while another of his missives gloomily concludes, “America has made a fine mess of its population and will pay for it in tears amidst a premature rottenness unless something is done extremely soon.” In short, the U.S. of the 1920’s needed to be made great again. Similar racist and racialist views find expression within his fiction, most obviously in stories like “The Street” and “Shadow Over Innsmouth” that encroach on themes of hybridity and miscegenation (always bad), and in vicious poems like his scurrilous “On the Creation of Niggers.” Unsurprisingly, Lovecraft could if so inspired deliver this kind of characterization (from “Herbert West—Reanimator”) with relative ease: “The negro had been knocked out, and moment’s examination showed us that he would permanently remain so. He was a loathsome, gorilla-like thing, with abnormally long arms which I could not help calling fore legs, and a face that conjured up thoughts of unspeakable Congo secrets and tom-tom poundings under an eerie moon.”

The problem is that such racism is not incidental to Lovecraft’s fictional vision as an occasional ignorant characterization but is also essential to its aesthetic structure. The writer’s own disturbed reaction to ethnic minorities is replicated by the identical revulsion his protagonists and/or narrators feel in their forced propinquity to extra-terrestrial and loathsome subterranean creatures. Perhaps the most fearful experience such a victim undergoes is his transformation into an entity whose humanity is expunged (“The Thing at the Door”) or whose self becomes at once
a foreign-seeming and repellent thing (“The Shadow Over Innsmouth”). The definition of the ‘alien’ being in the Lovecraft oeuvre as a whole can be thus remarkably flexible: outer-space creatures, fish-human hybrids, Italian immigrants, Jews, and women. The demarcated boundary line between human and inhuman is always thin and osmotic. Unsurprisingly, then, Lovecraft can describe, in an especially vile letter to Frank Belknap Long, the residents of the Lower East Side as though they were another slimy efflorescence of his cosmic swamp monsters:

The organic things—Italo-Semitico-Mongoloid—inhabiting that awful cesspool could not by any stretch of the imagination be call’d human. They were monstrous and nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal; vaguely moulded from some stinking viscous slime of earth’s corruption, and slithering and oozing in and on the filthy streets or in and out of doorways in a fashion suggestive of nothing but infesting worms or deep-sea unnamabilities.

Houellebecq notes, surely correctly, that Lovecraft’s “descriptions of the nightmare entities that populate the Cthulhu cycle spring directly from this hallucinatory vision.” Thus, the hideous “thing that could not be” in his epic “Mountains of Madness” is later described as an “analogue [... of] a vast onrushing subway train,” an encroaching nightmare of “fetid black iridescence.” Beneath the torrential logorrhea of Yog-Sothoths and Shub-Nigggaraths lurks the invasive racial diversity of the 1920’s New York City transit system.

Lovecraft remarked in his essay “Defence of Dagon” that “I could not write about ‘ordinary people’ because I am not in the least interested in them,” but of course he always did so, albeit as obliquely and monstrously figured. “I do not think that any realism is beautiful,” he asserted while simultaneously encoding in his fiction the reality of a racial revulsion and terror reflective of his especially fraught historical moment. Lovecraft’s fiction is best read as being productively in dialogue with the new scientific racialism and eugenics movement, with Southern segregation and a resurgent Klan, with fascist stirrings in Europe (Lovecraft actually expressed occasional concern that Hitler might be Jewish), with a flood of immigrants stirring nativist resentment, with an exacerbation of the nation’s ongoing racial agony. Critical admirers tend to elide the full significance of his endemic racism by valuing Lovecraft’s work precisely insofar as it limns in a revelatory way this contemporary sociological dread; the strata of terror sustaining his weird narrative parables is a representative
symbolic expression of the latent fears of white, middle-class, heterosexual, Protestant males threatened by shifting social power relationships and it is precisely for this reason worthy of analysis. Lovecraft’s incredible racism (which is historically atypical in its virulence and raw extremity) is assumed merely reflective of its historical moment. Thus Moore argues that “coded in an alphabet of monsters, Lovecraft’s writings offer a potential key to understanding our current dilemma, although crucial to this is that they are understood in the full context of the place and times from which they blossomed.”

Of course there is great promise in such a historically informed critical reading. But a significant portion of our “current dilemma” must be to consider if the Lovecraft revival of recent years can also be understood in the context of the place and times from which it too emerged and if the new literary canonization of Lovecraft runs uncannily parallel to trends in postmodern philosophy whose recent turn to the writer may be, to quote from “At the Mountains of Madness,” “subtly menacing in a way I can never hope to depict.” The Lovecraft tale can occasionally assume the formal construction of invented scholarship, an academic paper studded with fake citations or a newspaper article devolving to an account of indescribable horror. But that his fiction may masquerade as scholarship is less significant to our own dilemmas than its inversion: the emergence of a philosophical scholarship inspired by Lovecraft’s example that deploys, intentionally or otherwise, his fictional tropes. In “The Shadow Out of Time,” Lovecraft in fact speculates at length about the possibility that an ‘elder’ creature from the past might later enter some future

[Organism’s brain and [set] up therein its own vibrations while the displaced mind would strike back to the period of the displacer, remaining in the latter’s body till a reverse process was set up. The projected mind, in the body of the organism of the future, would then pose as the race whose outward form it wore; learning as quickly as possible all that could be learned of the chosen age and its massed information and techniques.

Is the model of psychological transference described in this passage speculative SF fantasy or the narrational embedding of Lovecraft’s own affective fictional technique? Peter Brooks has argued that the potentially transferential relationship of storyteller and listener can be a “contamination” of sorts. Affected by narrative in palpable unconscious ways, a reader may feel the need to re-transmit that contamination, what Brooks calls “the passing-on of the virus of narrative, the creation of the fevered need
Brooks is concerned with how “the desire, power, and danger of storytelling” can become repetition compulsion. Hearing a traumatic story, we feel obliged to repeat it and through such narrative repetitions may inadvertently pass the wound to others. Given that Lovecraft’s SF/horror tales are sophisticated prose devices specifically designed to induce trauma in their readers, might that not make such readers more susceptible to just such inadvertent viral transmissions? How might that “fevered need to retell” concretize itself in the secondary text and what exactly may become virally repeated and/or activated? Even writers like Miéville who intuit that the precursor’s “ecstatic collapse of subject position—is predicated on master-race ideology, race hatred” and that “the anti humanism one finds so bracing in him is an anti humanism predicated on murderous race hatred” advocate only controlled study of the virus (under laboratory conditions as it were): “What one can do in the case of Lovecraft […] is to try to metabolize it and understand” which can “maybe give you a sense of the kind of imbrication of these kinds of toxic ideologies.” But to pursue these mixed medical metaphors further: can one process (metabolize) within the textual body a fundamental ideological toxicity when the imbrication (understood as the operative overlapping of tissue layers in the closure of wounds) is also the site of infection?

III: A Hiroshima of Metaphysics

If Lovecraft’s personal attitude to philosophy is perhaps most evident in his tendency to destroy the philosopher or academic who, like the befuddled antiquarians of M.R. James, inadvertently unleashes the dark forces of an occult cosmos and loses his mind, some continental philosophers view the writer now as actually having made significant philosophical contributions. The new enthusiasm for the Lovecraftian horror-show is related more generally to the ‘nonhuman turn’ in philosophy that, as Richard Grusin observes, “is engaged in decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies.” Erring too far on the side of the subject in subject-object relations, philosophy is presumed to have lost the weirdness of the non-human. Philosophy re-animates weirdness by revisiting a neglected monstrous perspective that, albeit revised subtly, challenges the anthropomorphism endemic to philosophy since Kant. Deleuze and Guattari, to take an obvious example, are intrigued in A Thousand Plateaus by the theme of becoming-animal in Lovecraft’s work, the way in which his narrators come to feel themselves becoming
non-human, exterior to primary processes, self-disintegrating, dissolving into *thingness*. Eugene Thacker contrarily suggests that Lovecraft’s tales demonstrate not a becoming-animal so much as a becoming-creature, which is significant because the monstrous merely violates the laws of nature, while the *creature* proves altogether more excitingly ontologically ambiguous. As Thacker would have it, “The nameless thing is a different horizon for thought.”35 Exploring that horizon, new materialist and posthumanist philosophers encourage us to abandon the bland illusions of a human-centered world and orient our thought to the *universe of things*, inquiring how that universe might look from the perspective of objects and attending with new respect to the world *without us*. But the world *without us* in Lovecraft’s fiction encroached on deeply unsettling unconscious fears of biological erasure and the “nameless thing” conjured up as a “different horizon for thought” when not implicitly coded as an embodied fear of the racial other seems nothing less than the obverse specter of a rising fascist reaction.

Regardless, the writings of the so-called speculative realists argue that “weird realism” is capable of liberating continental philosophy from the “humanistic” concerns of critical theory. The speculative realists seek to retrieve philosophy from its Kantian impasse, the doubt that the subject can ever know anything about the external world, that reality is ever mediated by cognition, that all entering the mind is contoured into thought. Initially exiling object being from his field of inquiry, the villainous Kant unfortunately initiated a flawed philosophic tradition in metaphysics that unjustly privileges human perception as the only available gauge of reality. Graham Harman dubs the Kantian tradition, which he refers to as “a Hiroshima of metaphysics,” and a “crime against humans and non-humans,” a “global apartheid”36 against non-human being. Post-Kantian philosophy, trapped into making the mind/object relationship the locus of philosophy, shut down metaphysical adventure, the search for absolute laws beyond that which can be established by empirical science. Quentin Meillassoux dubs the mind/object relationship—that impasse at the heart of the Kantian tradition—“correlationism,” a deeply flawed conviction that all the mind can ever know are mental phenomena, a process culminating in the unfortunate “linguistic” cul-de-sac of Wittgenstein and Derrida. Elsewhere, Ray Brassier’s *boundless* nihilism defines correlationism in thoroughly negative terms: “the philosopheme according to which the human and the non-human, society and nature, mind and world, can only be understood as reciprocally correlated, mutually interdependent poles of a fundamental relation.”37
To Meillassoux and Brassier the universe is preferably “hyper-chaos” amid which the only thing absolute is the mind/object relationship itself. Thus there is (somewhere out there in thereness) a form of ‘realism’ available to metaphysics, even in the universe of what will always be unknown to human consciousness and, if we are willing to accept this radical insight, a second Copernican revolution in philosophy is imminently upon us.

The consequent free-flow among a plethora of relations in speculative realism—from artificial to nature, from human to nonhuman, from “thing” to “idea,” with no hierarchy or taxonomy—is at least partially extracted from the “actor-network” theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour which posits the necessarily “hybrid” nature of reality. But to approach this non-semiotic networked world of never-ending hybridity requires a degree of experiment, a blending of philosophy with extra-linguistic techniques to better investigate the elusive perspective of objects. For example, Quentin Meillassoux deploys abstract mathematics while Reza Negarestani experiments with convoluted theoretical-fictions. But no matter the approach to the problem of objects, speculative realism, unlike the preceding continental philosophy it seeks to surpass and displace, often evades any overt political agenda. Ever cool devotees of pure philosophical reasoning, speculative realists in either their nihilist or object-oriented variants seem to be in the main relatively uninterested in political and economic theory and the ultimate societal ramifications of an anti-correlationist positioning seem sketchy, at least absent the hip cache of a self-congratulatory, virtue-signaling philosophical blogosphere.

What the speculative realists are very interested in, however, is Lovecraft, who was an object of fascination for all four original members of the speculative realist insurgency—Harman, Brassier, Meillassoux and Iain Hamilton Grant. In this new exciting metaphysical universe of speculation, Lovecraft’s own speculative version of ‘reality’ is somewhat validated for, getting beyond the minutiae of hovering semi-indescribable cosmic squid and so on, his fictional laws seem to function in ways that make all foundational certainties uncertain and contingent—Euclidean geometry collapses into new squidgy archipelagos of ruined Antarctic cities, the borders between dream and reality, human and animal, living and non-living crumble and decay in intriguing epistemological ways. The SF horror interface is in fact the aesthetic domain most perfectly suited to analysis of uncanny objects, dark cosmology and all things inhuman. In a sense, therefore, the Lovecraftian “weird” functions effectively as the anti-correlationist sublime. In Weird Realism: Lovecraft and
Philosophy, Harman enlists the precursor directly in this philosophical blitzkrieg on correlationism. That Lovecraft failed to engage in the linguistic experimentation of his modernist contemporaries is in fact only to his credit. This was a writer who did not claim that language was all there was and his use of words “fails” only insofar as his narrators cannot get into language an experience not fully available to the limited human mind. For Lovecraft, it is the universe and not language that is not what we think it is. Language isn’t weird at all. The universe and its objects are. Harman asserts that Lovecraft’s failures to describe (anything) adequately were a form of intellectual honesty rather than the consequence of an imprecise and ineptly turgid prose style and that he is, in fact, more important to literature than the likes of Proust or Joyce. Harman actually claims that Lovecraft “deliberately paralyzes his own powers of language.” From a literary-critical perspective this is madness. But not philosophically, for if Kantian metaphysics is a form of madness, post-Kantian speculative metaphysics is reflexively aware of the madness. Without the illusion of sufficient reason, Meillassoux informs us, in the throes of abject ecstasy: “we would have to conceive what our life would be if all the movements of the earth, all the noises of the earth, all the smells, the tastes, all the light – of the earth and elsewhere, came to us in a moment, in an instant – like an atrocious screaming tumult of things.”

Leaving aside the question of whether an “atrocious screaming tumult of things” is the best of all possible worlds or a zombie apocalypse, we might observe that in “The Call of Cthulhu” Lovecraft, seemingly anticipating the philosophical position he later inspires, contemplates his own correlationist problem:

"The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age."

The correlationist impulse inevitably leads to horror and madness, opening “terrifying vistas of reality.” It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that it is the prior philosophical exploration of the dissolution of the correlationist illusion that has most evidently exuded horror and madness.
in the “terrifying vista” of reality. For any charting of the Lovecraft obsession in continental philosophy requires a narrative that tracks also through the pitch-black Deleuzianism of philosophical renegade Nick Land. Because the speculative fiction of Lovecraft only begat speculative realism after a routing through Land, a terminal switching post of sorts for Lovecraftian philosophical appropriation. Philosophically, in fact, we might say that the anti-correlationist dreamer of new realities stutters-steps in La-La Land, whether they wish to or not, that territory being an anti-correlationist mindscape that is veritably a “screaming tumult,” a fantastic fictional universe of hybrid SF horror tinted by madness and/or intimations that a new dark age of fascism (or in Land’s euphemistic variant a ‘Dark Enlightenment’) is upon us. In Land’s combined philosophical and political evolution we see how the embedding of SF and horror fictional tropes in postmodern philosophy in time enables the re-activation of the zombie fascist virus and that such infection has potentially untoward political consequences.44

IV: The Origins of the Cthulhu Club
Land begins his voyage to the heart of philosophical darkness as a postmodern variant of the skeptical and nihilist tradition. He was, like his idols Nietzsche and Bataille, virulently hostile to Kant, believing rationality and selfhood flawed efforts to save human consciousness, or what Land calls the “Human Security System,” from being deluged by the inhuman chaos of the universe. Land’s Thirst For Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism, is a mix-tape of prose poem, autobiographical rant and philosophical explication. The materialism Land extracts from Bataille based on drive “implies a process of mutation which is simultaneously devoid of agency and irreducible to the causal chain.45 For Land it is ever thanatos that structures this drive: “all natural and cultural developments upon the earth [are] side-effects of the evolution of death, because it is only in death that life becomes an echo of the sun, realizing its inevitable destiny, which is pure loss.”46 The bleak conception of an impersonal force devoid of agency or teleology and its unstoppable acceleration toward a thanatropic energetics of pure loss never exits Land’s work, leaving humanity invariably: “a petrified fiction hiding from zero, a purgatorial imprisonment of dissolution, but to be stricken with sanctity is to bask in death like a reptile in the sun. God is dead, but more importantly, God is Death.”47 Iain Hamilton Grant, indebted as former student to Land’s earliest philosophical explorations, remarks approvingly: “academics talked endlessly about the outside, but no one went there.
Land, by exemplary contrast, made experiments in the unknown unavoidable for a philosophy caught in the abstractive howl of post-political cybernetics.48

The essays Land composed during his affiliation with the CCRU (Cybernetic Culture Research Unit) at Warwick University, collected as Fanged Noumena,49 a project which in retrospect initiates a sortie against Kantian correlationism, evidence not only that “abstract howl” in action but a deeply inflected weirdness (in the full literary sense of the word), a weirdness also very indebted to Lovecraft’s speculative fiction. In fact Land’s “outside” is, to all intents and purposes, in action the mere reiteration of Lovecraft’s “shadow-haunted Outside.” CCRU, founded by Land and Sadie Plant, was organized around their fascination with cyber-theory and Deleuze and Guattari. The collective mixed the rhetoric of cybernetics (information flows, coding, interactions of living and mechanical systems) with Lyotard and Deleuze and Guattari style theoretical exoticism (schizo-analysis, machinic desire, re- and de-territorialization, libidinizing flows). But it was particularly through fictions (or what Land called hyperstitions) that philosophical adventure was to be invigorated. For “cyber” connoted also “cyberpunk” and the CCRU aspiration was to compose subversive theory-fiction appropriating the form of exploratory dystopian-horror hybrid narratives. Land explained: “every great philosopher is producing an important fiction. Marx is obviously a science fiction writer.”50 CCRU’s goal of achieving nomadic thought that—in hyper-Deleuzian-romantic terms—would “deterritorialize” involved theory melting into speculative fiction, philosophy into natural science and, latterly, with unforeseen (and hilarious) consequence, philosophy into insanity. Land took to referring to himself as a “professor of delirial engineering” and, like a DJ at a drum and base rave, his concept-engineer was to be “a sample-finder.”51 Land explained his strategy thus: “I mix up different linguistic registers and narrative strategies so that the text writhes in the hands of the reader [...]. In that respect, there’s a lot more to be learned from fiction than theory.”52 The CCRU critique of technology was thus simultaneously to be a radical technologizing of critique; rather than writing about technology, Land’s intention was to harness the same energetics of dehumanization technology mobilized, a goal which ultimately required a melding of prose into the technologies it described.53

Land “melted” also into the CCRU collective which created a group “microculture” whose fiction-theory effusions occasionally conjured up inhuman entities including a personification of the collective itself in the form of recognizably Lovecraftian cryptographer Professor Daniel
Barker. In one essay, “Origins of the Cthulhu Club,” we are introduced to a particular sorcery that “does not seem to be at all interested in judgments as to truth or falsity. It appears rather to estimate in each case the potential to make real, saying typically ‘perhaps it can become so.’”

If the cyberpunk fiction of Gibson, Sterling et al could be interpreted theoretically as a textual machine for impacting reality by heightening an anticipation of its imminent future, so too would this hybrid theory-fiction cyber-gothic chaos experiment function in analogous terms. Of course, notably beneath this assay at ‘it can become so’ is Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos with all its subterranean viral infelicities and intimations of horror. As Land argues in “Qabbala 101”: “Lovecraft understood the epistemological affinity between natural science and programmatic (as opposed to doctrinal) occultism, since both venture into regions once declared mysterious...” In this way pure philosophical materialism might align with the void.

Without question, the experimentation evident in CCRU’s theory-fiction textual outpouring is bracing and provocative. The language deployed in CCRU texts poetically embraces neo-Gibsonian cyberpunk neologisms (“non-consensual wetware alteration,” “cybernetic backwash from its flip-over,” “meat puppets,” “techno-fuck buzz from the desiring machines”) and also imagery inspired by Terence McKenna-style shamanic overload (“occulted dimensionality,” “downstream of starburn,” “tumbler of mezcal”) with relative ease, given both discursive registers investment in and fascination with the disassembling of the self and confrontation with abject forces (“Voodoo on the VDU” as it were). The ultimate apotheosis of this wild intertextual strategy was to be phenomenally unphenomenal: using his “theory fiction,” Land supposed he could “exit” (a keyword in his writing) nothing less than the entire history of Western thought. A little ambitious one might suspect, but the essays in *Fanged Noumena* evidence the fact that his fascinations were oddly prescient. In the mid-90s Land sought to address and inter-relate issues then peripheral to mainstream philosophy but tangential to cyberpunk fiction explorations: texts like “Cyberrevolution” and “Meat” engage biotechnology, radical Islam, the Internet as addiction, the approaching threshold of the singularity and the rise of neo-China as economic powerhouse. Moreover, Land’s diffuse aesthetic influence has since been evident in novelists, musicians and writers, sound artists, visual artists and DJs. Demonstrating experimentally the possibilities of constructively fusing theory with music, art and performance, his anti-humanist philosophical screeds also enable the later philosophical adventurism
of both speculative realism and accelerationism in both its later left- and right-wing iterations.

But Land serves also as a cautionary tale about the excesses of philosophical exploration. By the end of his anti-correlationist voyage to the heart of his own Techno-Congo he was also claiming to be inhabited by “entities”—given Lovecraftian monikers like Cur, Vauung, Can Sah—and fueled by amphetamines, sleeplessness, mathematical obsessiveness and a massive theory overdose, Land commenced exiting reality altogether much like a befuddled Lovecraft narrator. His last essays for CCRU degenerate into mathematical and typographical gibberish. Another of his former students, Robin McKay, in a carefully appreciative essay, notes: “In any normative, clinical, or social sense of the word, very simply, Land did ‘go mad.’”66 The later revivified and “gone sane” Land identifies the writer of the CCRU essays as altogether a different person: “It’s another life; I have nothing to say about it—I don’t even remember writing half of those things[...]. I don’t want to get into retrospectively condemning my ancient work—I think it’s best to gently back off. It belongs in the clawed embrace of the undead amphetamine god.”67

The key philosophical rush unleashed by the “undead amphetamine God” is (perhaps not unexpectedly) the white light/white heat of “Accelerationism.” “Cyberpositive,” an essay written by Plant and Land in 1992, was a preliminary assault on the orthodoxies of British academia and an attempt to escape the impasse they believed caused by the mutual dependence of stultified academic thought and Gramscian anti-market ideas. Adapting Deleuze and Guattari, Plant suggested, “you don’t try and slow things down, you encourage them to go fast as possible.”68 “Cyberpositive” was a techno-Bacchic celebration of the “cyberpathology of markets,” of capitalism as “viral contagion” where “everything cyberpositive is an enemy of mankind.”69 Surplus value and commodity-fetishism could thus be theoretically reclaimed as creative tendencies. Land was seemingly now self-persuaded that a critique dissolving all claims to truth was (merely) the philosophical correlate of a capitalist system embarked on an unstoppable trajectory of technological and scientific intelligence-generation that would inevitably (and with massive libidinal thrill) dissolve the human in meltdown. CCRU encouraged this sexy acceleration towards chaos. Speed would thrill-kill. Capitalism was “an invasion from the future,” a kind of virus triggered by a later artificial intelligence to create the conditions for its own assembling. (The Terminator movies serve as another integral part of the mythos with fictional machines from the future serving as anthropomorphic avatars of capitalist acceleration).
Humanity, trapped in a reverse temporality, thus accelerates at ever increasing velocity towards Ray Kurzweil’s apocalyptic singularity and our only role is passively to celebrate the mechanic processes that destroy us as subjects, even if those processes also happen in doing so coincidentally affirm such pleasurable delights as free markets, untrammeled deregulation, and the collapse of all traditional forms of social organization. In Land’s proto-dystopian vision we are a “planet piloted from the future by something that comes from outside personal or collective human intention, and which we can no longer pretend has anything to do with reason or progress.”70 Terminators terminate: it is what they do. But this is also methodological and integrated as technique: the piloting by something temporally distanced outside human intention speaks also to the writer’s own transferential relation with his significant precursor insofar as it is evident that Land, much like the befuddled Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee of “Shadow Out of Time,” has to revisit and be possessed by the creatures of the past in order to glimpse a horrific futurity. In Land’s case, we might say he rode the Lovecraft into the future.

In later solo essays like “Machinic Desire” and “Meltdown,” Land’s vision goes full-on apocalyptic, evidencing a total anti-humanist surrender to capital and its technological avatars as it “rips up political cultures, deletes traditions, dissolves subjectivities”71 Lovecraft’s “old ones” apotheosize and rise again in the form of Gibson’s rogue supercomputer Wintermute. As Simon Reynolds pointedly remarks, the earlier “Cyberpositive,” possibly tempered by the contribution of cyberfeminist collaborator Plant, maintained that capitalism accessed “inconceivable alienations,” while the later collective CCRU barnburner “Swarmachines” concludes with the curiously Mel Brooksian: “alienated and loving it.” From positing that: “the state apparatus of an advanced industrial society can certainly not be defeated without a willingness to escalate the cycle of violence without limits”72 and advancing the (as ever hyperbolic) claim that radical guerrilla militant lesbian feminists were the only revolutionary subjects, Land ends in thrall to (and enthralled by) the crude impersonal force of libertarian capitalism. His theory-fiction evolution charts (and induces) a trajectory from radical ultra-left anarchism through self-induced madness to, in its final horseshoe iteration, the fascist-tinged political philosophy that he calls neo-reaction.73

For, since “resigning” his academic position at Warwick and moving to Shanghai, Land has reemerged as a significant thinker of the far right blogosphere. The account of this transformation in his thinking is explicated in Land’s (long) online essay/manifesto, “The Dark
Enlightenment,” which lays out a newer thesis of imminent apocalypse: “democracy is not merely doomed, it is doom itself. Fleeing it approaches an ultimate imperative.” Since representative democracy tends inevitably to “zombie apocalypse,” Land now advocates abolishing it altogether and instead appointing a national CEO. Individuals would have no say in government but would be left to their own devices (in more senses than one) and free to leave. The right of “exit” (the keyword remerging virally in a new context as veritable return of the political repressed) becomes the only meaningful right, and is opposed to democratic “voice,” where everyone gets a vote but is bound by the decisions of the (ignorant) majority. Land quotes Jefferson, Adams, and Hamilton with approval regarding their democratic skepticism. Pointing (albeit indirectly) to Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, the new Asian tiger economies, as utopian examples, Land maintains that economically and socially effective government legitimizes itself. The USA, a failed experiment in multiculturalism that made no allowance for (so-called) “human biodiversity” (HBD), is fated to a second civil war. In many regards therefore Land still views capitalism as an inhuman machine sucking humanity into a dystopian future—his latest project is merely to prevent leftist political intervention from dismantling it before the “phase shift” changes the dynamics of the system. Current democratic-capitalist frameworks are in this view incapable of dealing with ecological catastrophe and biogenetics. Technoscience accelerates ever more quickly than engaged political discussion about its evolution and in effect what prolonged or considered thought can there be in the age the meme and government by Twitter feed? Land still believes that “Nothing human makes it out of the near-future.” You still can’t stop what’s coming. What’s coming (a new “lunatic science fiction”) just looks a lot more sinister:

The step from lunatic science fiction speculation to established technoscientific procedure is increasingly taken in advance of any engaged discussion, without an interval for serious social reflection. That’s acceleration as it concretely happens. It’s not a new topic for prolonged thought, it’s the fact that the time for prolonged thought—and its associated space for collective ethico-political consideration—is no longer ever going to be available.

In very many ways, therefore, Land’s philosophy, despite his vague protestations to the contrary, has not evolved at all. His online blog “Outside In” is simultaneously a record of his involvement with (and defining of) the ultra-Right pseudo-libertarian thought that slots under the
heading of Neo-Reaction and the locale of his theoretical explications of the hyperstitional horror experiment he terms Abstract Horror, since developed at novella length in Lovecraftian experimental fictions *Chaos* and *Phyl-Undhu*. The two sides of Land’s Dark Enlightenment (bit) coin (SF horror/apocalypse and deep aversion to democracy) remain inextricably intertwined, stranded like DNA, just as they were over a century ago for his precursor in abstract horror, Lovecraft, whose viral vision has always irredeemably infected Land’s dual prose experiment/political philosophy.

**V: Fascism and the Fuzzy Sponge Zone**

The fact that Lovecraft still inspires the disturbing fiction of other writers is of little concern. The fact that the residual racism of this ‘fiction’ is so inextricably intertwined with right-wing inflected political nihilism and has the potential virally to infect related philosophical thought surely is. Contemporary fiction and pseudo-fascistic politics after all have their own permeable semantic boundaries. This is evident in Houellebecq’s celebration of Lovecraft as a prophet of anti-modernity who had “the heroic and paradoxical desire to go beyond humanity.” The value of Lovecraft’s work for the French racist curmudgeon is that “something is hiding beneath the curtain of reality [...] Something truly vile.” Houellebecq’s celebration of the “truly vile” inevitably devolves into praise of Lovecraft as a political reactionary who “considered democracy to be an idiocy and progress to be an illusion.” Naturally, Houellebecq, in his own non-fiction writings obsessed with immigration and Islamophobia and with a deep-seated animus against all things progressive, celebrates an author who “brutally takes racism back to its essential and most profound core: fear.” But we would do well to attend to Houellebecq’s conclusion that the “evolution of the modern world has made Lovecraftian phobias ever more present,” even if that may be because those same phobias have been inadvertently transmitted into contemporary philosophical thought concerned with what he so approvingly calls “absolute materialism.”

Fascinatingly, Houellebecq too metaphorically compares Lovecraft’s influence in French literature to a viral infection: “Ever since the virus was first introduced into France” while referring to himself as “[L]ike most of those contaminated...” This is insightful insofar as Lovecraft has indeed been transmitted culturally as a species of thought contagion. The proliferation of online memes involving the writer and his cephalopod creatures point to how in the matrix of conceptual (cyber) space his influence functions as an effective propagating “unit of cultural
transmission, or a unit of imitation.” Lovecraft’s obsession with questions surrounding viral infection, boundary collapse and invasion by the other is thus replicated formally in adaptive memetic combinations and aggregates. The Lovecraft viral-meme mutates across cultural texts; it survives by parasitizing the susceptible reader’s mind and achieving its own replication in the host cell through, to borrow a term from virology, a process of transcription. The prevailing textual thematics of infection and dis-ease are thus replicated formally by an infection of component matrices, a proliferating textual virus taking advantage of host entities to generate copies and mutating the textual coding with each reproduction. The virus is a textual unconscious that, like its psychic analogue, can make only the most fleeting of appearances, but is presumably most evident (the central lesson of psychoanalysis after all) in the later repetition of a prior scene of reading.

Speculative realism has been expressed and discussed as much on blogs and Facebook posts as in books and essays. Discussion of SR and OOO and ANT (the proliferation of weird acronyms its own version of digital coding) went viral online with rapidity. This is evidently a philosophy fit for the new cyber-millennium. But the cultic micro-world of contemporary materialist philosophy, that new Cthulhu Club of sorts, still often the province of privileged white men, bears more than a little resemblance to other online coteries of fandom and generates similar paranoid fantasies and phobias. In a sense, an affinity for the literary weird can be seen also a functional mutation of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) societies. That such phobias should reemerge so potently also in the male-dominated and correlated (sic) fields of computer science, engineering, national security, and not least corporate entities associated with the digital revolution is not coincidental. Concerns with data control, maximizing technical efficiency and the inevitability of progress are expressed most cogently in the tropes of social Darwinism. The replacement of humans by intelligent super-computers or our inevitable merging with machine (the central themes of cyberpunk and the CCRU after all and an implicit if unconscious desire of both SF and SR) is assumed by many technologists to be predetermined by natural selection. The supposedly liberal politics of Silicon Valley are often, scrutinized, libertarian to an extreme. CCRU’s accelerationism dovetails neatly with a belief in Silicon Valley that markets need to be fast moving and tech must be disruptive. PayPal founder and Trump confidante Peter Thiel’s revelatory address to the Cato Institute in 2009—approvingly cited by Land—that he “no longer believe[s] that freedom and democracy
are compatible”\textsuperscript{89} is not an outlier position in techno-culture. The technological corporate regimen in action evidences the potential of a future emergent techno-fascist culture. The threat to democratic integrity is in this context not SF encroachment on reality, but the danger of our reality blurring increasingly into the domain of theory-fiction. When hyperstition involves “fictional qualities making themselves real,” then realism, perhaps not least philosophical realism, succumbs to becoming a form of fascist-encoded SF where the aspirational postmodern “end” of the subject is realized in its disintegration into a specific non-human machinic process.

In his earliest incarnation as semi-sane philosopher, Land argued that there is “no integral identity or alterity, but only fuzzy sponge zones, pulsing with indeterminable communicative potencies.”\textsuperscript{90} In the “fuzzy sponge zone” (itself another veritable Cthulhu architecture made textually visceral) of speculative postmodernity nothing is real till it is communicated, nothing \textit{real till made real}. Land declared on behalf of the CCRU collective that: “We are interested in fiction only insofar as it is simultaneously hyperstition—a term we have coined for \textit{semiotic productions that make themselves real}…”\textsuperscript{91} This manufacturing of a new reality by means of hyperstitional semiotic production applies with equal fervor to fiction and philosophy and politics in their mutual capacity to define and contour semantic fields.\textsuperscript{92} The semiotic production that makes real is in action a definitive rhetoric of Orwellian political intervention and we might wonder, in the wake of what has been dubbed a post-factual election that our politics, permeated by “fake news” and “alternative facts” and a plethora of linked viral memes, may have become fully hyperstitional. Does perpetually asserting that reality “is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it”\textsuperscript{93} have deeper political ramifications? In “Circuitries,” Land claimed that “The high road to thinking no longer passes through a deepening of human cognition, but rather through a becoming inhuman of cognition, a migration of cognition out into the emerging planetary technosentience reservoir, into ‘dehumanized landscapes [...] emptied spaces’ where ‘human culture will be dissolved’”\textsuperscript{94} and how, one suspects for Land ideally, “Humanity recedes like a loathsome dream.”\textsuperscript{95} History demonstrates rather effectively how embracing the “becoming inhuman of cognition,” which in this context is surely also a veritable \textit{Holocaust} of metaphysics, leads to sadly “dehumanized landscapes [...] emptied spaces.”\textsuperscript{96} To return to the issues raised initially by Sangasso and Gomel, the key question is whether the “structural analogy” evident between speculative fiction and fascism is in its technological fusion and
iteration “exerting a pressure” also on the co-related “semantic fields” of politics and philosophy. It is also something more than guilt by association (although sometimes ownership should be acknowledged, sometimes in essence This Land is your Land) to inquire in all seriousness whether the anti-humanist tendencies of continental philosophy culminating in a new materialist reaction (or neo-reaction), have not only undermined contemporary philosophy’s progressive ideals but been the host for, and perhaps facilitated the incubation period of, the replicating virus of fascist thought itself through a process of narrative embedding, contamination and later traumatic repetition compulsion. Or at very least we need to consider the possibility that perhaps it can become so.
Bibliography


Notes

2. Santesso quotes Ken MacLeod’s assertion that SF “is essentially the literature of progress, and the political philosophy of sf is essentially liberal” (“Politics and Science Fiction,” *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 231) and notes that the modern perception of “naturally” progressive SF is the legacy of Darko Suvin’s Marxist-inflected suggestion that SF is essentially defined by “estrangement.” Santasso notes pointedly that this is to ignore the very different political tradition of “estrangement” that is fascism.
3. In “Constitution for Utopia,” (*Collected Editorials from Analog*, ed. Harry Harrison (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 181–92) written in 1961, Campbell maintained that the best government would only allow the wealthy to vote. In 1965 he argued that humanity was divided into genetic “citizens” who made civilization possible and “barbarians” who had to be crushed.
6. Santesso, 139. Santesso’s core tropes indispensable to the fascist and the traditional pulp SF narrative include a worship of masculinity, heroic sacrifice for the race or nation; a celebration of a “pure” race or group over a “decadent” one; a suspicion of “class struggle” but also of “corrupt” and unrestrained capitalism; and fascination with futuristic technology.
8. Gomel, 129.
10. Santesso, 139.
13. Wilson, 288.
19 For a compilation of some of Lovecraft’s most egregious remarks on the topic race, see the website “Great Minds on Race.” Alternatively, one can merely randomly browse the Joshi collection of his letters.


21 Qtd. in Houellebecq, 106. Accompanying the pervasive racism and anti-Semitism, sexual phobias are evident in monsters that tend to the slithery and gynecological. Stephen King dubs Cthulhu a “gigantic, tentacle-equipped, killer vagina from beyond space and time” and notes “The Dunwich Horror” and “At the Mountains of Madness” are “about sex and little else” (King, 13). The latent content of so much oozing liquid and primordial cephalopods is terrifying sexual revulsion.

22 Houellebecq, 106.


24 As late as the mid-1930’s Lovecraft praised Hitler. In a letter to J. Vernon Shea, he applauds “the honest rightness of the man’s basic urge [...] I repeat there is a great & pressing need behind every one of his major planks [...] I know he’s a clown, but by God I like the boy” (qtd. in S.T. Joshi, A Dreamer and a Visionary: H.P. Lovecraft In His Time (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 360).

25 In 1934, disagreeing with a friend who believed that the Scottsboro youths, accused rapists, were innocent, Lovecraft writes: “It doesn’t seem natural to me that well-disposed men would deliberately condemn even niggers to death if they were not strongly convinced of their guilt” (H. P. Lovecraft, Selected Letters, 1932–1934 (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1976), 367).

26 Moore, xiii.

27 Lovecraft, New, 730.

28 Lovecraft, New, 514.


30 Brooks, 221.

31 Brooks, 233.

32 Jeffrey Weinstock, “Afterword: Interview with China Miéville,” in Age of Lovecraft, ed. Carl Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 240.

33 Weinstock, 241 (emphasis added).


38 Obviously, several literary-cultural critics informed by speculative realism and interested in a green-materialist ecology—notably Timothy Morton, Jane Bennett, Stacy Alaimo—adopt and promote more explicit political positions. Yet such positions are typically informed in Morton by concepts like “hyperobjects” (objects so massively distributed as to transcend spatiotemporal specificity that they constitute a “demonic inversion of the sacred substances of religion”) where causality is revised as “realist magic.” In this way the enthusiastic embrace of “trans-corporeality” (Stacey Alaimo, Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2–3) by materialist theory seems always inevitably to encroach on the Lovecraftian monstrous imaginary.

39 Harman has said of the leading figures of the Speculative Realist movement that, though they shared no philosophical heroes, all had been enthusiastic readers of Lovecraft.


41 Harman, Weird Realism, 232.

43 Lovecraft, *New*, 355 (emphasis added). Notably, H.P Lovecraft had a nervous breakdown at 18 and for some time could not get out of bed, for five years doing little and speaking mainly to his mother. Both his parents went mad, his mother ending her days in an asylum complaining of "weird and fantastic creatures" (Joshi, 121) that rushed out at her from behind buildings.

44 The Editors’ Introduction to *Fanged Noumena* by Ray Brassier and Robin Mackay ponders why Land should not be dismissed as an "unsavory aberration, deserving of oblivion" (Brassier and Mackay, 4). The implied answer is that their own work leans so heavily upon their progenitor. Thus: "Nor can it be concluded that this alternative philosophical path cannot be further explored" (Brassier and Mackay, 53).


46 Land, *Thirst*, 45.


48 Qtd. in Robin Mackay, "Nick Land—An Experiment in Inhumanism," *Umelec Magazine* 1 (2012), no pagination.


51 Qtd. in Reynolds, no pagination.

52 Qtd. in Reynolds, no pagination.

53 Besides sampling cyberpunk, Land’s prose experiments were contoured by the rhythmic dislocations of the body enabled by techno, particularly the genre of jungle and its cut-up digitized sonics.

54 Land, *Fanged*, 577–78.

55 One imaginary correspondent records that "we have been convening a small Lovecraft reading-group" (Land, *Fanged*, 579) and within "twisted time systems" (Land, *Fanged*, 579) inadvertently allegorizes the imminent arrival of the speculative realists.

56 Land, *Fanged*, 592.

57 Land, *Fanged*, 347.


60 Land, *Fanged*, 344.


63 Land, *Fanged*, 399.

64 Land, *Fanged*, 373.

65 Besides Reza Negarestani’s adaptation of the theory-fiction method in *Cyclonopia*, Land’s influence can be seen in novelists (Hari Kunzru, James Flint), musicians like dubstep pioneer Kode9, critical writers like Mark Fisher, and artists like Russell Haswell and Jake and Dinos Chapman. Land was also the teacher of the core of Accelerationism, including Mark Fisher, Robin Mackay, Ray Brassier and Iain Hamilton-Grant, as well as the philosophers Alberto Toscano and Luciana Parisi, amongst many others. On Land’s pervasive influence see Mackay.

66 Mackay, 6.

67 Qtd. in MacKay, no pagination. Land describes his own drug-fueled meltdown, albeit obliquely, in the final essay in his collection, “A Dirty Joke” (Land, *Fanged*, 629–).  

68 Qtd. in Reynolds, no pagination.


70 This is related to David Roden’s disconnect thesis, which becomes in Land’s parlance the "escape." Roden claims that systems will disconnect from the human, either in the form of post-biological creatures derived from our basic biological template or as advanced artificial intelligence. As corporations increasingly invest research-development toward transhumanist, VR and AI goals, the posthuman becomes inevitable.


72 Land, *Fanged*, 79.
In many ways, the view of the contemporary New Right iteration that is Neoreaction reconciles the views of the illiberal Left and Right. Both groups scorn modernity and the Enlightenment and have their origins in Nietzsche.


Land, “Dark,” no pagination.

Land, “Dark,” no pagination.

The pessimism undergirding Land’s work is the inescapability of the crisis of second modernity. Ulrich Beck argued that the transformation of industrial society into a network or information society would be distinguished by a new awareness of paradox, that systems offering protection from natural and social risks simultaneously produced new risks on a global scale as a byproduct of their functioning. New information networks lead to hacking and cybercrime, new biological developments to cloning and genetic modification.


*Phyl‑Undhu*, for example, is a work of theory-fiction and pure Lovecraft, mixing experimental conceptual horror with SF elements. The text is an extended meditation on “The Great Filter” as proposed solution to the Fermi Paradox, the underlying suggestion being that technological civilizations as they develop may have a tendency to become lost in their own simulated realities, finding them preferable to actual reality, and thus accelerating their own demise.

Land in fact notes in “Meltdown” how “Philosophy has an affinity with despotism, due to its predilection for Platonic‑fascist top‑down solutions” (Land, *Fanged*, 443).

Houellebecq, 32.

Houellebecq, 33.

Houellebecq, 24.

Houellebecq, 24.

Houellebecq, 24.

Houellebecq, 34.


The scientific literature suggests that WEIRD subjects are actually particularly unusual compared with the rest of the human species and frequently outliers. See Henrich, Joseph, Steven J Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, “The Weirdest People in the World?,” *Behavioral Brain Science* 33 (June 2010): 61–83.


Land, *Thirst*, 579 [emphasis added].

Leftist manifestos like Srnicek and Williams’ *Inventing the Future* embrace this possibility too in their assertion that “[p]rogress must be understood as hyperstitional: as a kind of fiction, but one that aims to transform itself into a truth. Hyperstitions operate by catalyzing dispersed sentiment into a historical force that brings the future into existence” (Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015), 75). In their mutual adherence to the hyperstitional, the accelerationism of a political left arguing that “utopias are the embodiment of the hyperstitions of progress” (Srnicek and Williams, 138) and encouraging “an interventionist approach to the human that is opposed to those humanisms that protect a parochial image of the human” (Srnicek and Williams, 83) and a neoreactionary right welcoming the oncoming capitalist technological singularity fall into curious alignment.


Land, *Fanged*, 293.

Land, *Fanged*, 300.

Land, *Fanged*, 300
Teratology as Ideology Critique; or, A Monster Under Every Bed
Robert T. Tally Jr.

ABSTRACT
The contemporary scene is crowded with monsters, from alien invaders to the zombie apocalypse, set against the backdrop of darkly fantastic landscapes and dystopian visions. The predominance of the horror genre, broadly conceived, in recent years attests to the profound sense of anxiety and dread permeating late capitalist societies. The popularity of horror as both a genre and a discursive mode is itself a sign of the respect given by readers to authors who refuse to deny the existence of monsters. The presence of monsters, and of horror more generally, offers a figural representation of the world which reveals the unreality of the so-called “real world.” In this sense, the monstrosity explored in horror literature is a form of ideology critique, as China Miéville has suggested in his discussion of radical fantasy. That is, the world as seen through traditional realism is itself unreal, inasmuch as it masks the underlying “truth” in its very surface-level realism. In other words, in a world where reality is itself unreal, the non-reality of fantasy may offer the means to get at these hidden truths. Similarly, with horror, these hidden realities may be rendered visible through the legitimate emotion of fear, combined with the imaginative process of projecting new models for understanding that allow one to overcome the fear. The horror in the text helps to engender a political or historical sensibility, in which the pervasive feeling of generalized fear may crystallize into a more concrete sense of the underlying reality.
Note that this activity, within the text and outside of it, is not rooted in any ethical program. Regardless of what the author, parents, or booksellers might think, the point is not to scare the reader into behaving a certain way, but to create means of understanding the world itself. In this essay, I will focus on the ways in which fantasy-horror functions as a means of demystifying and mapping the so-called “real world.”

Keywords: Monsters, Fantasy, Horror, Mapping, Marxism

In popular culture as in the groves of academe, the contemporary scene is crowded with monsters, from alien invaders to the zombie apocalypse, set against the backdrop of darkly fantastic landscapes and dystopian visions. The predominance of the horror genre, broadly conceived, in recent years attests to the profound sense of anxiety and dread permeating late capitalist societies. The popularity of horror as both a genre and a discursive mode is itself a sign of the respect given by readers to authors who refuse to deny the existence of monsters. One could argue that the ostensibly childish fear of monsters serves a more broadly allegorical purpose in contemporary societies. For one thing that most children know, that many adults have forgotten or repressed, is that monsters are real. This is not a mere suspicion, some dimly descried or indistinct perception, or a vague apprehension of dread. Monsters exist, they are frighteningly nearby, and they mean business. Children’s literature has often registered this all-too-real horror. Horror, especially monstrous horror, remains a key theme or genre within and beyond the category of children’s literature, which itself occupies a privileged place within the North American publishing industry. Moreover, the outsized dominance of works of fantasy within twentieth- and twenty-first-century prose fiction may indicate the degree to which those inhuman beings—dragons, trolls, ogres, vampires, ghosts, zombies, among others—shape our sense of the world. As in Mercer Mayer’s delightful exploration of this experience, which I will discuss shortly, there really is one monster after another.

In this essay, I argue that the presence of monsters, and of horror more generally, offers a figurative representation of the world which, to put it somewhat paradoxically, reveals the unreality of the so-called “real world.” In this sense, the monstrosity explored in horror literature is a form of ideology critique, as the fantasist and critical theorist China Miéville has suggested in his critical examinations of fantasy and science fiction. That is, the world as seen through traditional realism is itself unreal,
inasmuch as it masks the underlying “truth” in its very surface-level realism. In other words, in a world where reality is itself unreal, the non-realis-
ism of fantasy may offer the means to get at these hidden truths. Similarly, with horror, these hidden realities may be rendered visible through the legitimate emotion of fear, combined with the imaginative process of projecting new models for understanding that allow one to overcome the fear. The horror in the text helps to engender a political or historical sensibility, in which the pervasive feeling of generalized fear, dread, anxiety, or similarly situated emotions may crystallize into a more concrete sense of the underlying reality.

The Advent of the Teratocene

While monstrosity and monsters have always been with us, the monsters of modernity stand out as distinctive figures of cultural significance. The famous etching of Francisco Goya, evocatively labelled “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters” (c. 1799), might serve as a point of departure, for the nineteenth century witnessed an explosion of monstrosity, ushering in a veritable Teratocene, an age of monsters. In art and literature, not to mention in politics and economics, one finds frequent and regular reference to monsters of all sorts, and the fear of such monsters as often as not represents other terrors of a rapidly changing social sphere and the anxiety over the unforeseeable effects of those changes.

In his evocative study of fantasy, *A Specter is Haunting Europe: A Sociohistorical Approach to the Fantastic*, José B. Monléon argues that the post-Enlightenment horror paradigmatically expressed in Goya’s famous image comes to reflect and be conditioned by the terrific uncertainties associated with the great social revolutions (especially, those associated with the year 1789 and 1848, for instance) and their aftermath in European cultures, not to mention the radical transformations of everyday life associated with growing urbanization, industrialization, and more generally, modernization. As Monléon observes,

the fears and uncertainties, the monsters of a material and social reality, were neither existential abstractions not expressions of some sort of human (psychological) attributes. Or, if there were, they were also much more. As social production, the fantastic articulated apprehensions that were deeply attached to the specific characteristics of capitalist society. The perception of monstrosity had significant correlations with the way in which dominant culture defined and redefined its political and economic supremacy, and depended upon concrete forms of class struggle. On the one hand, the fantastic
“reflected” very real social threats; on the other hand, it created a space in which those threats could be transformed into “supernaturalism” and monstrosity, thus helping to reshape the philosophical premises that sustained the fantastic and effectively reorient the course of social evolution.

Monstrosity in particular, along with the fantastic more broadly, became a means of making sense of the new social formations and relations that emerged and became increasingly dominant in societies organized in connection with the capitalist mode of production and its effects. Furthermore, as capitalism itself began to appear more and more monstrous, as all that was solid melted into air and all that is holy was profaned, to cite Marx and Engels’s evocative phrasing, the social system disclosed itself to be a kind of infernal machine, producing monstrosities and horrors even as it managed to organize and reorganize social spaces into a living Hell.

If this is the case for the relatively simpler era of industrial capitalism in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, how much more monstrous—in terms of both its size and its alterity—has capitalism become after the rapid and extensive expansions of the capitalist mode of production during what V.I. Lenin called the “age of imperialism” or monopoly capitalism or, even more so, during the post-World War II period of what Ernest Mandel has famously labelled “late capitalism,” a moment typified by the infiltrations for capitalist relations into the most remote corners of the planet and throughout postmodern societies at almost every level? In the era of globalization, that is, both the monstrosity and the accumulation expand exponentially. In order to keep track of these exponentially increasing moving parts of a protean and expanding system, one characterized if not known (since true knowledge of the system is itself becoming harder and harder to ascertain) by its complicated web of interrelated forces operating across continents and oceans, a sort of monstrous mapping project is required. In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Fredric Jameson has brilliantly elaborated on the ways that conspiracy may function as a sort of cognitive mapping, and I think that the rise and spread of fantastic horror in popular culture might reveal a similarly allegorical function, establishing both the desire for some sense of clarifying overview of a largely if not wholly invisible system, and the desire to overcome that system once and for all.

I hypothesize that the present fascination with the monstrous in literature, film, and popular culture as a whole is a sign of the unfulfilled desire to map this monstrous system. Monstrosity, horror, and dystopia provide
thematic forms or even genres by which the vast system may be made visible or conceived, but of course the image or conception itself relies on a broadly allegorical framework that can enable us grasp in the figures or tropes a more basic notion of the global ensembles of capitalist political, economic, and social relations.

To put it in a potentially oversimplified statement, monsters help us to make sense of our world. In Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters, Judith Halberstam famously asserted that “Monsters are meaning machines,” and went on to explain that an entity functions as a monster “when it is able to condense as many fear-producing traits in one body as possible into one body.” By engaging with monsters and the monstrous, Halberstam suggests, we help to define the contours of our own experiences and understanding of the world, mapping the social spaces while also navigating our way through them.

The monstrous appears as a warning, imbued semiotically with all many of taboos and proscriptions, while also interceding directly into our midst. As later “Monster Theory” will note, cultural relations to or with monsters speak to societal fears, and as monsters develop, their visibility and functions may change as well. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen famously developed seven theses with respect to what he called “Monster Culture.” These theses do not so much define what monsters are as they help to situate the monstrous within the larger space of a culture, showing how monsters help us to shape, maneuver within, and make sense of our societies and cultures.

Cohen’s seven theses can be briefly summarized and explained in his own words, but it may be useful to list the theses themselves first.

Thesis I. The Monster’s Body Is a Cultural Body;
Thesis II. The Monster Always Escapes;
Thesis III. The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis;
Thesis IV. The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference;
Thesis V. The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible;
Thesis VI. Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire; and
Thesis VII. The Monster Stands at the Threshold ... of Becoming.

As Cohen elaborates, “The Monster’s Body Is a Cultural Body” in that “[t]he monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence.” In this way, the monsters’ very corporeality figures forth the broader social issues of which the monstrous body may then serve as the
site of so many symptoms. The recurrence or resurrection of monsters after this or that apparent victory over them testifies to this allegorical significance, as the underlying anxieties represented by the monster cannot be so easily vanquished. And, in Cohen’s words, “[t]he monster always escapes because it refuses easy categorization. [...] Full of rebuke to traditional method of organizing knowledge and human experience, the geography of the monster is an imperiling expanse, and therefore always a contested space.”14 Unsurprisingly, the monstrous is experienced as a form of radical alterity, an otherness that threatens to destroy identities and familiarities by its very presences. Moreover, as Cohen points out, “[b]y revealing that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential, the monster threatens to destroy not just individual members of a society, but the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed.”15 Along these lines, then, the examples connected to Thesis V show how “[t]he monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographical, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. [...] The monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to draw horrid attention to the borders that cannot—must not—be crossed.”16 This observation, in turn, suggests the ways in which fear and desire are so inextricably intertwined in monstrous discourse, where “fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space.”17

Cohen concludes this discussion by observing that “Monsters are our children,”18 a nod toward Frankenstein’s Creature among many other such beings. This weird intimacy combined with a radical alterity enables monsters to help us understand and speculate upon our own world in new ways. As Cohen puts it, monsters “bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, human knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside. The monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place.”19 As such, we might add, monsters are fundamentally ideological, which is also to say, at the same time, that monsters are fundamental to ideology-critique. That is, they can serve to illuminate the contours of the social sphere as it is precisely by providing the perspective of estrangement, but this otherworldly point of view necessarily estranges the images it depicts, a process that in turn inevitably conjures into being radically alternative ways of seeing. In this sense, monsters can help to evoke new spaces of liberty, “the scandal of qualitative difference,”20 as Herbert
Marcuse once put it in reference to utopian thinking, even as they haunt us as we travel thought this vale of tears.

Space does not allow for an extensive discussion of trends within popular culture, but it seems to me that the enduring, and perhaps expanding, popularity of horror as a literary and cinematic genre is itself a sign of the respect given by readers to authors who refuse to deny the existence of monsters. The presence of monsters, and of horror more generally, offers a figural representation of the world which reveals the unreality of the so-called “real world.” In this sense, the monstrosity explored in horror literature is a form of ideology critique, as Miéville has suggested in his discussion of radical fantasy. That is, the world as seen through realism is itself unreal, inasmuch as it masks the underlying “truth” in its very surface-level realism. In other words, in a world where reality is itself unreal, the non-realism of fantasy may offer the means to get at these hidden truths. Similarly, with horror, these hidden realities may be rendered visible through fear, combined with the imaginative process of projecting new models for understanding that allow one to overcome the fear. The horror in the text helps to engender a political or historical sensibility, in which the pervasive feeling of generalized fear may crystallize into a more concrete sense of the underlying reality.

**One Monster After Another: An Exemplary Reading**

I would like to use as an example a much loved (by me, at least) little volume for children, Mercer Mayer’s 1974 picture-book, *One Monster After Another.* With more than 300 children’s books to his name, Mayer is a prolific author and illustrator who is perhaps most famous for his *Little Critter* and *Little Monster* series, and his distinctively drawn critters or monsters are at once disarmingly cute and altogether weird. *One Monster After Another* appeared before Mayer began these series, so it does not technically belong to either, but the world he creates and depicts in this book is much like that seen in his many other works. But, as I will argue below, for all the ostensible simplicity and good-natured fun represented by *One Monster After Another,* there is also a figural representation of a scarcely visible world system whose shape is made somewhat discernible through the presence of Mayer’s delightfully weird monsters and their activities. In reading about their behavior in this little book, I assert, we may descry a more complex world in which we find ourselves situated and in which we ourselves must operate.

The story is, unsurprisingly, quite simple. On account of the relative obscurity of the text, which some readers may have difficulty laying their
hands on, it seems worthwhile to provide a relatively detailed summary. Given the book’s modest length, this summary will be brief. Alas, no amount of description or skill in ekphrasis can fully do justice to the amusingly strange drawings of the creatures and the world they inhabit, so I encourage my readers to seek out copies of *One Monster After Another* or, failing that, to search online for images from the text. As with any picture book, the illustrations are not merely supplementary to the text, but very much part of the substance of the work as a whole, and in this case, the fine detail of even the background or marginal images makes the illustrations well worth studying in greater detail. In any case, no summary can hope to approximate the full power and enjoyment to be found in the original.

*One Monster After Another* opens with the following lines: “One day Sally Ann wrote a letter to her best friend Lucy Jane. She put it in an envelope and put the envelope into her mailbox.”22 The accompanying illustration shows Sally Ann, on tiptoes, placing her envelope in the mailbox as a bizarre-looking furry creature with pointy ears, prominent tusks, a top hat (!), and a satchel labeled “My Stamps” peers at her from behind a tree. The remainder of the narrative follows the surprising trajectory of this letter as it makes its circuitous way to the intended recipient. As the title suggests, the letter’s movements will be influenced by one monster after another, and so they are. Here is a brief summary of the key events in the plot after that opening page, with the names of the “monsters” highlighted:

1. Before the mailman arrives to take the letter, a *Stamp-Collecting Trollusk* steals the envelope, and “gabble[s] away with a smirk on his snerk.” (The Trollusk was, of course, the furry creature spying on Sally Ann in the first scene of the book.)
2. Before he can rip off the stamp and add it to his collection, a *Letter-Eating Bombanat*, which looks a bit like a cross between a dinosaur, a bat, and a possum, but also wearing a helicopter-beanie and a necktie, swoops down “out of Nowhere”—a sign on a nearby tree indicates “To Nowhere,” as if to clarify where this monster came from, while another sign beneath it and pointing the other way reads “and Back Again”—to take the envelope from the Trollusk and flies off.
3. But soon, while flying over the *Blue Ocean of Bubbly Goo*, it is snatched by the tentacle of a *Bombanat-Munching Grumley*, an immense anthropomorphic, bespectacled, crustacean-like octopus creature, heaving above the waves.
4. Before the Grumley can enjoy his freshly caught lunch, it is snagged in a large net and hauled aboard a fishing boat, along with a load of other fish. (The fishermen, presumably, are not monsters.)

5. Moments later, before the boat can reach land, it is struck by a Furious-Floating Ice-Ferg, an apparently sentient ice-berg hell-bent on wrecking watercraft.

6. As the vessel begins to sink, the fishing-boat captain stuffs the letter—remember the letter, which is the true protagonist of this tale?—along with an S.O.S. note, into a bottle and tosses it into the sea.

7. At that point, a Wild’n-Windy Typhoonigator, a sort of monstrous cloud-system with anteater-like features, sucks up the whole Blue Ocean of Bubbly Goo, along with its contents (including fish, fishermen, paddles, boats, the bottle, the Grumley, and so forth), and blows itself away into the distance.

8. Utterly full, “so full of fishing boats, bottles, and bubbly goo,” the Typhoonigator eventually had to disgorge all this stuff, which it does; so, amid the deluge, down rains the bottle (“KER-PLOP”) onto the head of a Paper-Munching Yalapappus, a large mammal with fearsome-looking fangs wearing a bib festooned with an image of a knife and fork. “The bottle broke, tinkle-plinkle, and out fell the Captain’s note and the letter.”

9. The pleasantly surprised Yalapappus quickly consumes the Captain’s note, but before he could munch the letter, none other than the Stamp-Collecting Trollusk, “who just happened to be passing by, snatched the letter in his snerk and ran away.”

10. The outraged Yalapappus gives chase, and suddenly, the Letter-Eating Bombanat reappears from the sky to snap up the letter once more, only to be captured almost immediately in a large butterfly net by a Bombanat-Collecting Grithix, who vaguely resembles a rhinoceros dressed in purple overalls with a bowtie, while the Yalapappus and Trollusk look on in dismay. (The distinctive head of a dodo can be seen observing these events from behind a tree.)

11. “The Grithix, as everybody knows, is a Bombanat collector, not a letter collector.” Thus the three other exasperated monsters—the Stamp-Collecting Trollusk, the Paper-Munching Yalapappus, and the captive Letter-Eating Bombanat, lodged firmly under the Grithix’s arm—are forced to watch helplessly as the Grithix calmly places the letter in a nearby “official-looking mailbox.”

12. Before the box can be stolen—we see the Trollusk and the Yalapappus attempting to carry the mailbox away—an “official mailman”
on an “official-looking motorcycle” arrives to stop the would-be thieves.

13. The mailman dutifully opens the mailbox, takes out the letters, and continues on his route, as the monsters gesticulate and wail in varying degrees of outrage. Several textless pages follow with illustrations indicating the letter’s continuing journey, as the Trollusk and Yalapappus chase after the mailman, whose motorcycle is visible in the distance.

14. The mailman then delivers the letter to its designated address, as Lucy Jane waves to him from her window, while the monsters—the Yalapappus holds his index finger to his lips, urging the Trollusk to be silent—spy on them from the corner of the house.

15. The girl retrieves the letter from her mailbox, opens it, and reads it, oblivious to the monsters lurking at the edge of her home. The missive, the complete contents of which I quote below, is in part an invitation to visit Sally Ann.

16. The final scene shows Lucy Jane, suitcase in one hand and purse (with a familiar-looking envelope protruding from it) in the other, briskly walking down the road as the expectant monsters leer at her from the verge.

So the basic plot of One Monster After Another involves the simple act of mailing a letter to one’s friend, but in following the letter’s movements, a fantastic or otherworldly series of events disclose a vast world apparently unknown or unseen by the letter-writer and its recipient. As one can see from this adventure, even the most quotidian activity—in this case, mailing a letter to a friend—is bound up in a larger, complex, and dynamic system of biological, social, economic, ecological, and even political relations. Once the letter leaves the writer’s hands, it becomes part of this wildly incomprehensible aggregation of monstrous activities.

Parenthetically, one might add that the strangeness of all this might be compounded by the relative eccentricity of writing handwritten letters and using “snail mail” in the twenty-first century. It is likely that few people today still write personal letters such as Sally Ann’s, opting instead to send email, text messages, Facebook posts, Snapchat photos, or any number of other means of communication. Had Mayer written a similar story using the media technology available to our own era’s Sally Ann’s and Lucy Janes, presumably the story and its monsters would be very different indeed. But if the monsters involved in the adventures of this letter could be said to represent unseen forces in a broader world system, as I suggest, then how much more unclear, complicated, and
alienating is a system of relations bound up in a web of global telecommunications and multinational corporate structures? If mysteries abounded concerning the goings-on between the moment we place a physical letter in a mailbox and the instant it is delivered to its addressee, then how much greater the questions and confusions surrounding simple electronic communications, with their reliance on software, servers, databases, “clouds,” and so on? (I mention this with due apologies to those experts in both the postal services and email, but the largely unseen character of the systems involved remain pertinent to this discussion.) The conditions for the possibility of texting a friend today would undoubtedly appear all the more monstrous than the infrastructure of yesteryear’s postal fantasies.

Mayer’s One Monster After Another concludes with a bit of a joke, or perhaps we could say that, in retrospect, the entire narrative may be seen as the extensive set-up to the joke. The punchline, if it may be so called, is delivered through, and takes the form of, the contents of Sally Ann’s letter. On the next to last page of the book, we see a picture of Lucy Jane reading the letter, with the Stamp-Collecting Trollusk and the Paper-Munching Yalapappus peering at her from the fringes, and on the verso page we see the handwritten document itself, which reads:

Dear Lucy Jane,

Nothing exciting ever happens around here. Please come and visit.

Your best friend,

Sally Ann

Lucy Jane apparently takes Sally Ann up on this offer, for the book ends with an image of her setting forth on her own journey. If the delivery of the letter to her house is the climax of the narrative, the reading of the letter functions as a denouement. Then, as a sort of coda, the illustration on final two pages of One Monster After Another depicts Lucy Jane, now in a coat and hat and carrying a suitcase along with a purse from which protrudes the envelope that featured so prominently in this tale, walking down the lane, as our two monsters peer at her covetously from behind a tree. Punctuating the tale of a remarkably exciting journey, albeit a journey undertaken by a letter rather than by a traditional hero, the letter’s actual contents are ironic. Sally Ann’s sense that “nothing exciting ever happens” is made possible by her ignorance of the great chain of monstrous being which apparently coincides with the all-too-normal, even boring, world as she experiences it.
The punchline-like ending to *One Monster After Another* also hints at a potential “truth,” which is that behind the apparently everyday, dull, and tedious processes of social or even biological existence lies an extraordinarily complex, unknown, and perhaps unimaginable system. From the perspective of Sally Ann and Lucy Jane, the transit of the envelope from the writer’s home to the recipient’s may have well been a simple matter of postal delivery, yet that system is itself vast and, in most cases, not really thought about by those who use it. Both the vastness and the relative invisibility of the intricate network makes it a perfect subject for conspiracy theories, as can be seen in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example, which makes much of the conspiratorial and labyrinthine world of the mails. The presence of monsters throughout the fabulously interlinked system of happenstance and adventitious events only helps to underscore, in a cute and humorous way, in this case, the inscrutability of these larger networks and their functioning.

In fact, even without the named monsters in *One Monster After Another*, there are already hints of a strangely tenebrous and sketchy system connecting “Nowhere” and “Back Again,” as a pair of road signs indicate in naming certain regions of the tale’s fictional geography. For instance, my plot summary left out descriptions of the many other persons, critters (as Mayer will famously call them), and sights that appear in the book. These include a variety on human onlookers, including a postal worker, a birdwatcher, a child dressed as a cowboy, a motorist, picnickers, and various heads poking out of windows. A number of “normal” animals—geese, dogs, rabbits, seals, fish, an alligator, and so on—supplement the more monstrous creatures that populate the scenery, and the presence of a Dodo, which ought to have been long extinct, suggests a weird crossover between real-world and otherworldly monsters. Diverse structures and businesses appear in the world between Sally Ann’s house and Lucy Jane’s home, each of which is presumably located in a strictly residential area, but as we follow the letter’s bizarre itinerary, we see a windmill, a pizzeria, a hamburger stand, an auto mechanic’s garage, a country store, and a gas station, this latter with a sign advertising “Free 150 lb. alligator with each 10 gallons of gas,” while another reads “We accept all credit cards.” (The national and later global system of banking and finance barely signaled in this reference to credit cards, nestled alongside the ever-so-local “deal” for a free alligator, might be seen as an allusion to that vaster international network of money and power later associated with the term *globalization*, which takes the “monstrous accumulation” of commodities as analyzed by Marx to its
planetary limit and frame of reference.) Mayer manages to depict so many things in this otherwise apparently simple little book, everything including a kitchen sink, one of which may be seen floating in the Blue Ocean of Bubbly Goo, that one might argue that the author intended to establish an entire world or world-system in which all these instances take place. But regardless of authorial intent, in the relatively limited space between the homes of Sally Ann and Lucy Jane, an entire world system unfolds itself.

This system is made entertaining, if not also intelligible, by the presence, appearance, character, and activities of the various monsters in *One Monster After Another*. Cute as they may be, the monsters themselves register aspects of the human, all-too-human condition, as their needs and desires mirror those of the people. The Stamp-Collecting Trollusk and the Bombanat-Collecting Grithix, presumably, are motivated by mere enthusiasms, devoted as they are to the hobby of collecting, whereas other monsters are likely driven by more pressing biological impulses, such as the need to eat, whether one’s preferred food is paper or Bombanats. Along the way, even ecological or environmental forces, as with the Ice-Ferg and the Typhoonigator, become legible reminders of the power of the natural world, which may or may not be at odds with economic endeavors (such as commercial fishing) or political institutions (such as “official-looking” postal services). As an aside, we might today ask whether Typhoonigators have become more common or more damaging as an effect of global warming, just as we might wonder about the sustainability of commercial fishing and the budgets for social services. That so many of these events, related in rapid sequence, discloses the existence of such a perilous, dog-eat-dog social and natural order, is itself significant, as it plays up at one and the same time both the dangers of this system and the largely unavoidable, random, or chance nature of those dangers. Throughout all of this, the monsters give color and shape to a system beyond the view, if not beyond the ken, of the Sally Anns and Lucy Janes—and all of the rest of us, of course—who dwell at the Edge of Nowhere and for whom nothing much exciting ever happens. The monsters, one could say, give meaning to a system that not only evades interpretation, but at most times evades notice entirely. Invisible forces are at work everywhere, and the study of such unseen monsters may disclose the mechanisms and processes by which they, and in turn by which our own lives, operate and are mutually affected.
Conclusion

I suppose I have been having a bit of fun with a fondly remembered children's book from my own youth, but my overall point about the way in which monsters, along with fantasy and horror more generally, help to give form to a world system that is often un theorized and taken for granted remains. In this, I draw upon some of the critical theory associated now with monsters, from Franco Moretti's well known essay on the "Dialectic of Fear," which identifies in the figures of Frankenstein's creature and Dracula (or, perhaps, the zombie and the vampire) the terror at the heart of "bourgeois civilization," through Cohen's famous seven theses on "Monster Culture" discussed above, and on to recent approaches to post-humanist or simply post-human monstrosity, the end-of-the-world narratives that seem to have audiences cheering for the monsters, even if that means eliminating the human race entirely (see, e.g., my "End-of-the-World as World System"). The explosion of critical and scholarly work on these and related themes is a testament to their timeliness, and what all of these studies point to is an enhanced concern with the monstrous accumulation that typifies the present social and cultural moment.

If monsters have always been around, then it is also true that they have also meant different things at different times and places. In the present configuration, it seems, monsters are enabling new ways of imagining the world, as the sorts of unseen forces the shape the biosphere and the social strata demand some form of recognition. For instance, the essential features of a capitalist mode of production and its ramifications are rarely immediately apparent. As McNally puts it in *Monsters of the Market*, "critical theory sets out to see the unseen, to chart the cartography of the invisible," and in his study, that critical theory emerges in the context of a study of society's monsters. Specifically, monsters aid the narrative in embodying a figural representation of the abstract and lived space of the world that reveals the unreality of the so-called "real world." That is, the world as seen through traditional forms of realism is itself unreal, inasmuch as it masks the underlying "truth" in its very surface-level attention to the actually existing state of things as they appear under the sun. In other words, in a world where reality is itself unreal, the non-realism of fantasy may offer the means to get at these hidden truths, what McNally refers to as the "fantastically real."

Teratology, in this context, is a way of piercing the veil, exposing the apparent reality as so much false consciousness, and evoking potential alternatives. It becomes a form of ideology critique, which is perhaps
another way of imagining cognitive mapping. Rather than haunting the fringes of our world, these monsters may prove to be central to its functioning. And, along those same lines, the apprehension of these monsters may prove essential for imagining other worlds.
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Moving Forward: Gender, Genre, and Why There’s No Hard Fantasy
Misha Grifka-Wander

ABSTRACT
Asking “is there a ‘hard’ fantasy that corresponds to hard science fiction” necessitates defining “hard” in this context. Hard science fiction has been defined by its level of realism and how much writers adhered to science as understood in their time. However, the fact that adherence to the rules of linguistics, anthropology, or other social sciences is insufficient to gain “hard” status indicates other determining factors—including masculine biases. It is as though social aspects of the world are not considered “real.” This “real world” focus led critics such as Darko Suvin to dismiss fantasy in favor of science fiction, arguing that science fiction differs from fantasy because it is a cognitive exercise, capable of inspiring its audience to critically engage their real lives, whereas fantasy is mere myth and wish-fulfillment. In determining whether there is such a thing as hard fantasy, these divisions start to resemble an argument for the material world exclusive of the social. To construct a theory of hard fantasy, we must determine what parts of the world can be impacted by genre literature, and why others are dismissed. The concept of estrangement developed by Brecht and then refined for science fiction by Suvin demands that literature should create an impact on the real world by reframing it in innovative ways. In stating that fantasy does not do this because it focuses on myth, Suvin implies that myth and narrative are insufficiently “real” to be estranged effectively. Myth, language, social construction, gen-
der—all these are typically dismissed as insufficiently material to create change in the real world. However, contemporary fantasy works by women, people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and other marginalized groups are not mere tale-spinning, but critical works that engage social structures such as racism, heteronormativity, capitalism, and more—the very structures that both Brecht and Suvin want to see challenged. I argue Suvin was misled by considering only masculinist, traditional fantasy, which is essentially conservative, reproducing and preserving ancient and medieval concepts of the European world. Just as masculine biases define what counts as real science in the hard versus soft science fiction debate, so too have these biases misunderstood the genre of fantasy, obscuring its potential impact and value and causing it to be vastly undertheorized. This paper complicates the notion of cognitive estrangement developed by Suvin, using examples drawn from writers such as N. K. Jemisin, Molly Tanzer, and Seth Dickinson to illustrate impactful social critique and estrangement achieved in fantasy literature. I then argue that the traditional critical conception of fantasy as a genre has been based on a subgenre within fantasy (masculine high fantasy a la Lord of the Rings), and that this conception is destabilized when put into conversation with contemporary “forward fantasy.”

**Keywords:** fantasy, science fiction, genre, cognitive estrangement, gender

Since Darko Suvin pointed out the political value of science fiction and its cognitive estrangement abilities, science fiction has occupied a position of prestige among other forms of speculative fiction.¹ Fantasy, meanwhile, sees academics still struggling to say exactly what it is, let alone whether it is as deep or influential as science fiction. This critical disparity between two fairly similar genres has been explained by pointing to science fiction’s use of a forward-looking gaze, contributing to progress and political change, and then pointing to fantasy’s archaic settings and overall backwards gaze as evidence of fantasy’s political irrelevance. These explanations parallel fan-driven discourse on science fiction, which emphasizes hard science fiction as the most valuable. Hard science fiction is more scientific, more rigorous, and more representative of the best of what science fiction can be. It is the quintessential science fiction, that which can inspire real innovation. In comparison, the quintessential fantasy subgenre
is high fantasy, which is conservative, past-focused, even regressive. Thus runs the discourse, and it would appear to explain why fantasy has not attained the academic prestige of science fiction. However, underneath the conversation about past versus future focus, innovation, and science, there is a strong current of gender. Both hard science fiction and high fantasy are associated with masculinity, and that gendered association is in no small part why the respective subgenres have come to stand for the genre as a whole in academics’ eyes. If we want to actually understand fantasy as a genre, we need to reveal the gendered assumptions about what fantasy is, and then look beyond them.

Some authors have proposed a category of “hard fantasy,” analogous to hard science fiction, as a way to redress the perceived injustice of dismissing fantasy as mere fairy stories. Articles by fantasy authors Tad Williams and Marie Brennan describe potential definitions of hard fantasy, with Brennan writing: “A hard SF story is one that takes the known facts of those sciences and extrapolates them […] The equivalent in fantasy, then, is the type of work I’ve often labeled ‘anthropologically rigorous’ — concerned with history, religion, politics, systems of magic, etc.” However, they continue to list the same flagship fantasy works as examples of hard fantasy: The Lord of the Rings, A Song of Ice and Fire, and so on. This is a regrettable tendency, as it attempts to simply re-label rather than refocus. Rather than try to reproduce science fiction categories in fantasy, in an attempt to borrow some of the prestige, it would be more effective to demonstrate that fantasy has always been capable of the same political weight as science fiction. The under-theorization of fantasy is due in part to the insistence on reviewing the same texts, which do not sufficiently capture the full potential of fantasy. This under-theorization, in turn, leads to a misunderstanding of the fantasy genre, and unnecessary favoritism for certain speculative fiction texts over others. Critics, academics, and fans continue to be drawn to the masculine texts that are labeled as central to the genre, even while those texts fail to capture the whole of fantasy’s potential.

In this paper, I propose a category of “forward fantasy,” fantasy that is capable of the rigorous realism, the political relevance (Šuvin’s cognitive estrangement), and the forward gaze of hard science fiction, but which remains fantasy. Crucially, I hope to demonstrate that this subgenre has gone unrecognized because its members are feminized, marginalized, and not associated with the masculine center of fantasy (i.e., high fantasy). By exploring the history of science fiction and fantasy, we can discover the gaps that have led to critically and aesthetically valuable fantasy being overlooked and undertheorized.
The Gendered History of Science Fiction

Science fiction as we know it today finds its roots in the pulp magazines of the 1920s and onward, especially *Amazing Stories* and other magazines published and edited by Hugo Gernsback. *Amazing Stories* was the first magazine to feature exclusively science fiction, and Gernsback was explicit that science fiction (which he called scientifiction) should be instructive as well as entertaining, hewing as close to accurate science as possible. His belief lay the groundwork for the valorization of forward-looking, scientifically-accurate science fiction, which would come to be called “hard science fiction.” In the first issue’s editorial opener, Gernsback claimed that “this sort of literature” contributed to public knowledge by “supplying knowledge that we might not otherwise obtain... in a very palatable form.” (“A New Sort of Magazine”). He returns to this rhetoric of improvement many times, including in a later editorial where he waxed effusive about the impact of science fiction on the young:

> If we can make the youngsters think, we feel that we are accomplishing our mission, and that the future of the magazine, and to a degree, the future of progress through the younger generation, is in excellent hands. Once upon a time the youngsters read Indian stories, which were not at all educational: nowadays it is scientifiction, which is an education in itself. All we can say therefore is “More power to the young men, and let’s have more of them.”

Gernsback set out to establish that science fiction was a serious business, an educational and scientific endeavor that not only improved the minds of readers, but that improved “the future of progress” by creating young people primed for scientific discovery. Just as vital, however, is his explicit assumption that these readers and future leaders are young men.

In her book *Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*, Justine Larbalestier traces how Gernsback and his successors connected science fiction with progress, with accurate science, and with masculinity. The easy association of science and progress, and the patrolling of the borders of scientific fact, was driven by both publishers and fans. Describing the science fiction pulps’ letters section, Larbalestier writes, “[T]he bulk of letters received are from readers pointing out the improbability of the science in a given story. The accuracy of the science in a story is, in these debates, the sole criterion for whether it is a good story or not.” In modern-day terms, the readers were demanding hardness from the stories. Prestige was granted to the hardest story, the hardest authors, even the hardest fans.
Performing hardness, both on the readers’ and authors’ sides, was a way to establish legitimacy in the field.

However, it was a performance limited mostly to men. Gernsback said as much himself, in response to a female letter writer asking why he did not publish as many letters by women as by men: “We have no discrimination against women. [...] The only difference is that our male readers usually bring up some point of scientific interest, while the ladies content themselves with general expression of approval or disapproval.” The main activity of science fiction fandom was the debate over scientific accuracy, an activity attributed to men, not women. It will likely not shock the contemporary reader to find that magazine editors of the 20s and 30s were sexist, but the important takeaway is that they expressed their sexism by casting doubt on women’s interest in accurate science, the very thing that they claimed made science fiction exceptional, thereby minimizing women’s presence in the science fiction community, and especially in science-heavy hard science fiction.

Women, in the world of *Amazing Stories* and its successors, were a threat to the intellectual integrity of science fiction – and thus to science fiction itself. A fierce debate raged in the fandom about whether there should be more stories with women in them, with authors such as Isaac Asimov claiming that female characters were unnecessary and even counterproductive in science fiction. Whether in the stories or in the community, women were a threat to science fiction. In her research on letters written to these science fiction magazines, Larbalestier described the policing of women’s access to science fiction spaces, writing, “[The] imaginary masculine space of science fiction is conjured up in the pages of science fiction magazines. [...] To keep this imaginary space masculine and populated only by ‘real’ men the borders of the field have to be policed and women have to be excluded.” Not only were most readers assumed to be male, but it was also assumed that the very presence of women weakened science fiction, and threatened the intellectual atmosphere that distinguished science fiction from mere adventure story. Furthermore, women are cast as inherently anti-scientific, embodied in a way men are not.

The anti-women rhetoric in science fiction was not limited to the early 1900s, either. A more recent example comes from Charles Platt, a writer and critic, who wrote an article titled “The Rape of Science Fiction” in 1989. The title alone gives an idea of the kind of gendered argument Platt makes. In it, he attacks “soft” science fiction, defending hard science fiction, specifically from the female authors responsible (he claims) for the appearance of soft science fiction:
Their concern for human values was admirable, but they eroded science fiction’s one great strength that had distinguished it from all other fantastic literature: its implicit claim that events described could actually come true. Of course, if you had a whimsical, muddled view of the world – if you didn’t know anything about science, and didn’t care – soft science fiction could seem perfectly plausible.

Ironically, women have raped the field of science fiction with their “soft,” implausible stories. In Platt’s view, the lack of accuracy in a story dilutes science fiction’s relation to the future – its sense of forward-looking-ness – and thus, dilutes the very aspects that make science fiction remarkable. Like Gernsback’s readers, Platt treats science fiction’s core value as its ability to make plausible scientific projections.

Supposedly, soft science fiction is that which relies on the more human-oriented sciences, such as anthropology, psychology, linguistics, and sometimes even biology. But more often, the term is used to label science fiction which is written by a women: as writer Lisa Goldstein notes, “It’s funny how the definition of ‘soft science’ changes depending on if it’s a man or a woman writing it […] If a woman writes about it, physics is a soft science.” The only consistent traits of soft science fiction is that it is associated with women. But because the hard/soft divide is masked in the rhetoric of scientific rigor, soft science fiction is framed as less truly science fiction than hard science fiction. The true core of the genre is hard science fiction, and it is understood as a mere coincidence that the periphery is occupied by science fiction associated with women.

This development of science fiction makes three things clear: one, that science fiction saw itself as capable of reflecting the real world and inspiring scientific innovation; two, that women were seen as “softening” the genre in a harmful way; three, that “hardness” is both a marker of scientific accuracy and a gatekeeping mechanism to keep feminine-coded content and people away from science fiction. Given that context, it is impossible to understand hard and soft science fiction without understanding its patriarchal roots. Softness is mapped onto women; hardness is mapped onto men; and hardness of science is required for science fiction’s claim to greatness: its ability to inspire real scientific progress through the education and inspiration of its (male) readers. This despite the fact that, as Larbalestier writes, “Hard science fiction has always been underrepresented in science fiction. Indeed, the idea of science, closely associated with the masculine, has always been central to the genre but at the same time has always been lamented for its absence.” But the
valorization of hard science fiction has never been about its ubiquity or rarity, but about its aspirations to masculinity under the guise of scientific progress.

Nor is this tendency restricted to the pulp magazines of yore. Even when the debate does not explicitly use the terms hard and soft, the place of women and marginalized peoples in science fiction is still furiously contested. In recent years, the Hugo Awards, one of science fiction’s most prestigious awards (named after Gernsback, in fact) have seen voting blocs attempting to tamper with the results. These voting blocs, called the Sad Puppies and Rabid Puppies, were reacting to the perception that the Hugos had become an “affirmative action award” that was awarded to women and people of color, or to stories that represented progressive themes. Although they did not use the terms hard or soft, they still were attempting to keep women out of science fiction, out of a fear that they had damaged the genre. For many fans, masculine science fiction, hard science fiction, remains the truest science fiction.

This emphasis on hardness carried over to academia as well. When academics such as Darko Suvin began to identify what makes science fiction critically significant, they focused on the forward-looking gaze—what Suvin called “cognitive estrangement.” Cognitive estrangement is the idea that science fiction is an intellectual exercise of sorts, wherein our world is made strange to us so that we may understand it better, using “cognitive” strategies such as scientific extrapolation to imagine out potential futures. It is this cognitive effect, Suvin argues, that makes science fiction merit academic focus, rather than fantasy, which he dismisses as mere myth-making. The value of science fiction, theorists argue, is its ability to provoke (political) change by estranging the real world until one can realize certain truths about it. This academic account of science fiction echoes the values long espoused by fans and publishers: the things that make science fiction “hard” (real-world plausibility) also make it academically worthwhile. However, there is a difference between “accurate science” and “relevant to the real political world.” Suvin was interested in seeing political change, more than intricate explanations of the physics of space travel. But the academics have a common alliance with the hard science fiction gatekeepers: both are invested in the forward-looking aspect of science fiction. Gernsback hoped to inspire the inventors of tomorrow, and Suvin hoped to inspire political change, but both identified science fiction’s use of the real and the almost-real as crucial to their projects. However, neither identified the gendered assumptions behind which works were considered sufficiently hard or forward-looking.
Fantasy, meanwhile, has been identified as backwards-looking by Laetz and Johnston, while Suvin and others dismiss it on this ground. When Suvin calls it “psychopathological,” he is relying on the trope of the feminine as hysterical. Even critics who would like to make space for fantasy in their arguments are dubious about the lengths to which they can go. In “Folklore and Fantastic Literature,” C.W. Sullivan III writes, “Although much science fiction and fantasy represent dominant western cultural attitudes, there is a large body of writing, most of it science fiction, which recognizes that those attitudes are only attitudes and asks the reader to examine their validity and viability.” Sullivan is willing to recognize the radical potential of science fiction, and to admit that some fantasy might do the same, but that mostly it remains backwards-looking and thus ineffective. Suvin, Sullivan, and others seem too often to be on the same page: fantasy’s backwards gaze prevents it from being cognitively estranging, or in the colloquial, hard.

However, this conclusion was formed based on a limited library of fantasy books. Just as scholars inherited from fans a gendered account of what science fiction books were doing, so too does fantasy and fantasy criticism reflect only a certain kind of fantasy, rather than a more diverse picture. In order to determine why Suvin and others have incorrectly concluded that fantasy cannot be cognitively estranging or “hard,” we must look at the history of fantasy as well as their presumptions.

A Gendered History of Fantasy

J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* marks the beginning of the fantasy novel as we know it today. While the field has gone in many directions since then and has many other precursors, *The Lord of the Rings* remains the touchstone for fantasy, the center of Brian Attebery’s “fuzzy set” of the fantasy genre. As the field diversified, and more terms were invented to describe types of fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings* also became the touchstone for “high fantasy,” a form of fantasy centered on epic quests, medievalism, a high quantity of magic, and battles between good and evil. As Tolkien was already the most prominent author in fantasy, and his work was high fantasy, high fantasy became the default central subgenre of fantasy. The genre as a whole became identified in effect as “that which is similar to Lord of the Rings.” This was especially true in the decades following the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, as other authors were inspired by the series, but also as Tolkien’s work created a traceable lineage for the success and merit of fantasy as a modern genre – other types of fantasy came into being, but high fantasy was accorded
a certain prestige because it was the type of fantasy that most resembled Tolkien’s epic.

When Suvin and later critics looked to write about fantasy, they naturally reached for the quintessential fantasy series, *The Lord of the Rings*. There they found one of the most notable traits of the high fantasy novel: the backwards gaze. In “Why We Need Dragons: The Progressive Potential of Fantasy,” Daniel Baker writes:

> In the West, the vast majority of fantasy, those multi-volume mega-series, have been reflections, if not products of conservative politics [… *The Lord of the Rings* is] a specifically nostalgic, golden-age, and reactionary utopian form. It becomes dangerously naïve. The impulse behind it becomes not so much a desire to create a “better” world but to escape into a pre-industrial landscape: it turns aside from the deep-rooted structural problems of post-global conflict modernity […] As the progenitor of “sword-and-sorcery,” Tolkien set the great majority of the genre on a seductive path, a path to the status quo.17

Because Tolkien is the grand master of the genre, it is unsurprising that anyone hoping to make claims about fantasy would look to his work first. Unfortunately, this has led to a misunderstanding of the potential of fantasy. Tolkien describes a European, feudal past, filled with masculine ideals of powerful warriors and kings, only lightly sprinkled with attractive women. The fantasy novels that followed were also modeled on this vaguely medieval setting: European in flavor, noble in its feudalism, and also rarely found in the modern world. Anyone who has read much fantasy is familiar with the medieval European fantasy world in its many iterations. This backwards gaze is the default mode for masculine, Tolkien-esque fantasy. There are authors that are extremely rigorous about their historical research, so the facts are more or less correct, but they still employ a backwards gaze, unlike science fiction. This backwards gaze is part of the reason why theorists like Suvin have dismissed fantasy so completely. In their view, fantasy is kin to myth: culturally meaningful, perhaps, but containing little political content and almost no propulsion toward future change. It is mostly irrelevant to real life. When Suvin and others thought of quintessential fantasy, they thought of this masculine fantasy, and concluded it had little in the way of cognitive estrangement.

Alternatively, academics have mixed it with a wider or totally different genre, as Jameson does in “Magical Narratives.”18 Jameson identifies
romance as the name of the genre which contains magic and other worlds, and does not use terms such as fantasy or science fiction to name genres in that article. This is problematic now in small part because of the ways in which contemporary literature refuses to fall into such neat categories, and because a reader looking for romance would no doubt be disappointed to be guided to the fantasy section of the bookstore, but largely because it makes sweeping judgements about the nature of fantasy that do not in fact correspond with the genre as such. Jameson contends that the key components of romance are magic and otherness, but also a black-and-white conflict between good and evil, writing “this genre is dependent for its emergence on the availability of a code of good and evil which is formulated in a magical, rather than a purely ethical, sense.”

Unlike Suvin, he admits that we should correlate romance’s abstractions “with the realities to which those abstractions correspond.” But his idea of such romance books – *The Brothers Karamazov*, for instance—little resemble what most readers would call fantasy. Indeed he argues that only the older forms of romances have magic in them, and as society moved on, the magic was replaced by something more palatable: religion. However, his conflation of romance and fantasy is clarified somewhat by the very last paragraph, in which he cites Tolkien and C.S. Lewis as responsible for “the revival of medieval romance.” Not all fantasy is romance, but perhaps Jameson wrote as if it were because Tolkien and Lewis wrote romances. George H. Thomson has elaborated on *The Lord of the Rings* as a traditional romance, using the same work by Northrop Frye as used by Jameson, and indeed *The Lord of the Rings* does resemble medieval romances to my eye, as Thomson proves by going over each step of the hero’s quest that Frodo fulfills. Thomson writes, “It is a well-known fact of the romance tradition that because the principal characters are simple types the complexity of human nature must be projected into the external world.”

Tolkien discusses in detail how this is true for Tolkien’s works, but at the risk of excessive repetition, what about the other fantasies, for which this is patently untrue? Perhaps Jameson was unaware of any, or they had yet to be written. More likely, I think, is that it was thought sufficient that these famous men, Tolkien and Lewis, should stand in for the rest of fantasy literature.

This leads to not only a misrepresentation of the very nature of fantasy as a genre, but also to privileging to near exclusivity fantasy which is romantic, archaic, and masculine. Why do I call Tolkien-esque fantasy masculine fantasy? *The Lord of the Rings* and its subsequent imitations were written about men, for men. There are few female characters, and
even fewer who are developed beyond simple types. The pulp magazines that established science fiction’s interest in accurate science and gendered gatekeeping also brought us plenty of fantasy covers with bulging barbarian warriors and buxom women for the warriors to save. Fantasy was established, perhaps unintentionally, as being about men, and about the past. Dungeons and Dragons represents this trend very well – over time, it has become more diverse, but its origin was the stereotypical fantasy setting, precisely this vaguely European medieval past, less rooted in history than in wishful thinking about some chivalric origin story for Europe, and about a masculine role of power for the protagonist-player. The first edition invited players to create their own “medieval” adventure, but also explicitly catered to men by naming the primary race Men rather than Humans. Men were presumed to be central to fantasy.

Thus, there is a crucial difference between masculine science fiction and masculine fantasy. The former is, or claims to be, valuable because it looks toward the future. The latter distinctly does not. Thus, the hardness of science fiction, which is both future-oriented and masculine, cannot be ported directly over to fantasy. Masculine fantasy is conservative, even regressive; it is often traditional romance. Given this, it is no wonder that a category of hard fantasy has failed to emerge. The “hard” term is tied to masculinity and gatekeeping, as well as scientific accuracy and the forward gaze of cognitive estrangement. In fantasy, however, those two axes are seldom co-present. Critics and fans looking for cognitive estrangement (hardness) would not find it in the high fantasy that was claimed to be the quintessential fantasy subgenre.

However, fantasy is actually well-equipped to provide cognitive estrangement. Fantasy may not deal with science as frequently as science fiction does, but it certainly can and does address the real political world. Multiple authors, including Baker and William J. Burling, have written on the progressive possibilities of fantasy, especially given fantasy authors’ license to represent radically different political realities from their own. Where science fiction takes science as its object, fantasy takes world-making. Baker writes, “As a form intrinsically linked to world-creation, fantasy will inevitably – to varying degrees – demonstrate the ways reality is constructed and related to through subjectivity. [...] Fantasy does not escape reality but exposes, subverts, and creates it.” In science fiction, realism is demonstrated through physics, chemistry, and so on. In fantasy, Baker offers, reality is instead constructed through worldbuilding and subjective human experience. This provides cognitive estrangement, as I will explore with a few examples momentarily.
If fantasy provides cognitive estrangement after all, then is there also such a thing as hard fantasy? Not exactly. To the extent that it is a useful descriptor rather than just gatekeeping rhetoric, the label “hard” indicates an interest in accuracy, in truth, rather than handwaving and myth-making. In her paper attempting a taxonomy of types of fantasy, Farah Mendlesohn wrote that “sufficiently well constructed fantasy is indistinguishable from sf: once the fantastic becomes sufficiently assumed, then it acquires a scientific cohesion all its own.” Fantasy world-making, through social construction, explanation of the cultures, geography, resources, and so on, assumes the truth-quality of a hard science fiction story. This rigorous attention to the forces that shape the human socio-political reality shows the same level of care and drive to accuracy that a hard science fiction story does when it details how its spaceships work. Thus, there is fantasy that seems governed by many of the same impulses as hard science fiction. However, the gendered gatekeeping and prestige associated with hard science fiction do not map well onto this “well-constructed” fantasy. As we saw, calls for scientific accuracy in science fiction are inextricable from gender. Women are thought to be dubiously scientific, and thus not “hard”; the sciences that are labeled feminine are somehow less scientific. Realism is masculine, and that scientific realism is what makes good science fiction good, both to fans and to people like Suvin, who re-label it cognitive estrangement. Fantasy took a different path. High fantasy achieved genre centrality because it was closest to Tolkien’s work, which started the wider genre of contemporary fantasy. However, Tolkien’s work was masculine, so high fantasy was masculine, and so the center of fantasy was taken up by backwards-gazing, masculine work. In both science fiction and fantasy, the most desirable subgenres were associated with masculinity—for science fiction, it was hard science fiction, and for fantasy, it was high fantasy. However, unlike hard science fiction, high fantasy is not driven by a concern for scientific realism, and so masculinity in fantasy was not associated with realism. High fantasy dominates the definition of fantasy—Attebery’s “fuzzy set” of fantasy still has The Lord of the Rings at its center, and other high fantasy novels clustered close around it. Hence, in both genres, masculinity drives the conversation around which works best represent the genre.

When academics turned their attention to fantasy, they naturally picked up on this, and understood the male-dominated high fantasy to be the quintessential fantasy. High fantasy’s backwards gaze became definitive for all of fantasy. While attempting to create divisions for subgenres
of fantasy, Mendlesohn writes, “Part of my contention is that the divisions which I suggest here are validated by their ability to map the past – hindsight as a valid critical tool.”28 She does not make room for a fantasy that does not attempt to map the past, that instead takes the present or future as its concern. This is not a shortcoming particular to her, but a general trend. This is why hard fantasy is not a term that has caught on – the backwards gaze that characterizes high fantasy and that academics have focused on is masculine, like hard science fiction, but lacks the forward gaze and cognitive estrangement that is also essential to hard science fiction. The dynamic in science fiction that binds scientific realism (hardness) and masculinity is not present in the same way in fantasy, because masculinity became associated with the unrealistic subgenre of high fantasy. Thus “hard” fantasy does not resolve into a clear meaning, because it is difficult to combine both realistic and masculine fantasy.

Instead, if we are looking to find fantasy that does what hard science fiction does in terms of cognitive estrangement, we need to look outside the high fantasy box. This is fantasy that is forward-looking, but it is neither high fantasy nor masculine. Unlike Baker, I am not talking about fantasy that is explicitly radical or progressive in its politics – it may or may not be. I propose that there is a forward-looking fantasy, capable of avoiding the backwards gaze that characterizes high fantasy, and which achieves cognitive estrangement and speaks directly to the concerns of the present and future. One might call it hard fantasy, but as I wrote above, I think that term is not quite accurate, and anyway is too connected with a history of gatekeeping to make desirable. It is also more than simply the contemporaneity of “urban fantasy” as a subgenre. Instead, perhaps we might call this subgenre “forward fantasy,” indicating that its primary difference from other fantasy is that forward-looking gaze.

**Defining Forward Fantasy**

The subgenre of forward fantasy that I propose is distinguished primarily by its responsiveness to the contemporary situation in which it is written. Forward fantasy is realistic in its portrayals of human sociopolitical reality, attentive to structural forces, and offers a view of alternate structures and realities that estranges the contemporary political reality. These aspects may be present in other forms of fantasy, but they are the primary focus of forward fantasy.

Previous writers have identified forward fantasy’s tendencies in fantasy as a whole. In *Strategies of Fantasy*, Brian Attebery writes, “[Fantasy] is a form that makes use of both the fantastic mode, to produce the im-
possibilities, and the mimetic, to reproduce the familiar... [fantasy] offers the possibility of generating not merely a meaning but an awareness of and a pattern for meaningfulness.”\textsuperscript{29} That is to say, fantasy stories are meaningful, and also draw attention to how we make meaning. This resembles cognitive estrangement, but perhaps more closely resembles meanings we find in myth and folktales, rather than the political meanings Suvin finds in science fiction. For a theory of political change in fantasy, I return to Daniel Baker’s “Progressive Fantasy” piece. Baker’s entire article is centered on demonstrating the power for progressive political change that fantasy holds. Baker finds that fantasy does indeed have an estranging power, writing “The progressive potential of fantasy can direct the subject (reader) towards a new, radical, (perhaps) emancipated subjectivity. Only after this process is complete will political praxis – action engendering changes to the dominant capitalist gestalt – be able to develop.”\textsuperscript{30} Rather than lacking the ability to create political change that comes from science fiction’s cognitive estrangement, in Baker’s view fantasy is essential to political change. It enables the reader to imagine outside of themselves, to inhabit new ways of thinking, which is a prerequisite to enacting transformative political praxis. Fantasy has the potential to provoke change in the extrafictional world, especially by portraying novel subjectivities.

The subgenre of forward fantasy combines Attebery’s awareness of patterns for meaningfulness and Baker’s progressive potential through new subjectivities. Through rigorous worldbuilding and attention to structural systems, forward fantasy is just as powerful a force for political change as Suvin showed science fiction to be. Part of this ability rests in, perhaps surprisingly, realism and research. In order to speak to the real world, forward fantasy stories must reflect the real world enough to make the linkages clear, while also changing the world enough to estrange it.

For example, one could compare a few treatments of economics in fantasy. Seth Dickinson’s \textit{The Traitor Baru Cormorant}\textsuperscript{31} is a rigorously-researched novel whose plot hinges on effective monetary policy. Set in an alternate world, the protagonist Baru orchestrates a successful rebellion by making use of her position as treasurer of a colonized state. As author Amal El-Mohtar wrote in an NPR review, “To read \textit{The Traitor Baru Cormorant} is to sink inexorably into a book that should not be anywhere near as absorbing as it is – to realize that the white-knuckled grip with which you hold it was provoked by several consecutive pages of loans, taxes and commodity trading.”\textsuperscript{32} It is a relentlessly tense, emotionally-gripping book, and this is because, not in spite of, the focus on
economics. Dickinson not only makes sense of the complicated ways in which economic policies get set, but also demonstrates how those policies affect the lives of the inhabitants of the state. He brings the same attention to detail to methods of colonial rule, including colonial educational systems; and to the difficulty of wintertime war-making amid starvation and disease. While there are portions of the world that he does not focus on, even the peripheral material is consistent with the realism of the primary focus. It is through his realistic portrayal of economic policy that Dickinson is able to demonstrate how colonial powers utilize economics as systems of rule, a demonstration that has clear relevance to our own world.

Another forward fantasy example would be *Amberlough*, a novel by Lara Elena Donnelly that one might describe as an alternate world gay cabaret spy drama. It is a novel rich with glamorous actresses and tragic gay double-crossers, with a cosmopolitan world filled with theatre, social clubs, and more. It is also focused with laser-like precision on the rise of a fascist government. Donnelly traces the political missteps, betrayals, propaganda campaigns, and cultural forces behind what feels like to the characters a sudden and horrible victory for fascism, but which Donnelly has carefully laid the groundwork for, causing the reader to both dread and accept its inevitability. *Amberlough*’s tone is very different than *Baru Cormorant*’s – the former is frothy and melodramatic, while the latter is measured and grim – but it takes its politics just as seriously. This is important, because forward fantasy is not merely a label of style or tone. Especially in the current political climate, a novel tracing the development of fascism and the limiting of personal freedoms (especially for queer and minority people) is clearly responding to the contemporary world and offering an estranged politics that exposes the patterns of change that can be mobilized in our own future.

N. K. Jemisin’s Broken Earth series also offers an excellent test case. In the Broken Earth series, the world is regularly subject to apocalypse, such that all of human society is structured around guaranteeing survival in the event that the world ends again. The close attention to the environment and methods of survival makes regular parallels to climate change. What I want to focus on, however, are the orogenes, residents of this world who have the ability to sense and manipulate geological activity, from preventing earthquakes to channeling the heat of magma. This world is constantly at risk of catastrophe by earthquake, volcano, and tsunami, and the orogenes are often all that prevent these disasters. However, they are also dangerous, capable of accidentally killing everyone around them.
if they lose control of their powers. Because of this (ostensibly), there is a tradition and expectation of both rigorously controlling orogenes and, if the government does not intervene, lynching them.

Jemisin draws parallels between the plight of the orogenes and of American black slaves, through repeated incidents of violence, control, and even forced reproduction. Orogeny is not just a metaphor for slavery, however. Jemisin complicates the issue through orogenes’ magical power to manipulate the earth, which makes them a source of tremendous power and also very real danger, which she illustrates freely, ensuring the reader understands exactly why the non-orogene population fears them to the point of homicide. Rather than falling back on the now-easy conclusion “slavery is wrong,” Jemisin troubles the readers’ conception of freedom, asking them to consider the point of view of the oppressor in order to fully understand why it is ultimately wrong. She does indeed make the point that enslaving the orogenes is wrong, but she also asks the reader to imagine a slavery born of fear of power, rather than exploitation of weakness. This more complicated format of oppression and exploitation estranges the rudimentary and instinctual articulation of “racism is bad, slavery is wrong” that most readers will accept without truly thinking through the racist structures of America. The Broken Earth series directly responds to the contemporary moment, where racist forms of oppression persist even while most Americans agree that racism is unforgiveable. A simple metaphor is no longer sufficiently estranging or radical, and so Jemisin pushes farther, providing new subjectivities (that of the orogenes and their oppressors) for the reader to inhabit and learn from.

Using contemporary novels rather than old standbys allows us to see the potential of the genre, rather than simply what is usually done. None of the three texts discussed above (Baru Cormorant, Amberlough and Broken Earth) resemble the traditional sword-and-sorcery novel, and all of them were published in or after 2015. Frequently referencing the same novels (The Lord of the Rings, but also academic favorites like Miéville’s Perdido Street Station) in academic analysis raises the possibility that our analysis will reveal characteristics of those novels particularly, rather than fantasy in general. Re-examining the same masculinist, nostalgic novels conceals the possibilities of fantasy, instead demonstrating only the conservative tendencies that also find a place within the genre. The three examples above, by contrast, are feminized — two by women, one by a Black woman, and stories which focus on “progressive” issues and queer, female characters of color. The novels are not high fantasy. Rather, they are fresh takes on fantasy, forward-looking novels with
urgent progressive criticism of our own world expressed through the eyes of those most affected: women and marginalized peoples. These are the perspectives that forward fantasy highlights.

A notable similarity between *Amberlough* and *Baru Cormorant* is that both are set in an alternate world with no magic. These kinds of stories are still classed as fantasy by almost all theorists, because they take place outside of our own world, but they fit somewhat uncomfortably under that label. A book which has realistic tone, setting, characters, etc.; which has no elves or dragons; which features no magic; and which has no quest plot seems to bear little resemblance to the vast majority of fantasy, even if it does take place in an invented location. A more famous example of this might be Mervyn Peake’s *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast*. These books seem less like fantasy because they are so different from high fantasy, which has served as a synecdoche for fantasy as a whole. Gathering these kinds of stories under the umbrella of forward fantasy acknowledges their distinct difference from other forms of fantasy, especially high fantasy, but does not reject them from fantasy altogether. Mendlesohn accounts for these stories under her label of immersive fantasy, writing: “[I]t is most commonly in the immersive fantasies that one finds oneself in a fantasy world in which no magic occurs. Sometimes this is because the magic takes place elsewhere, but there are many immersive fantasy novels which differ only from sf in that they are often set in apparently archaic worlds which are not connected to ours.” Moving on from Mendlesohn, “forward fantasy” enacts the progressive values of Suvin’s cognitive estrangement whether it is in “our world” (urban fantasy) or not, partly based on being realistic. Mendlesohn does not further explore the thin boundary between these magic-less fantasies and science fiction, but there is a significant question as to what the difference is between science fiction and fantasy which does not have magic and does not have an “archaic” setting. How old must a world be to count as archaic? Is that really the boundary between science fiction and fantasy, or does pointing out that fantasy does not always have a backward gaze also eliminate the boundary between the two genres? In fact, the very concept of forward fantasy does call into question the historic divisions between science fiction and fantasy, since it also questions the idea that cognitive estrangement belongs to only one generic mode. The dozens of articles that continue to attempt to define fantasy also speak to the difficulty in establishing exactly what fantasy is, especially when compared to science fiction. Thus, “forward fantasy” encourages readers and critics alike to focus more on the work of marginalized writers, who are constantly
creating thoughtful fantasy stories that offer us the chance to inhabit new subjectivities and embrace progressive political change via the experience of estrangement in our own worlds.
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ABSTRACT
In 2002’s fourth edition of *Historical Materialism*, Frederic Jameson and Carl Freedman acknowledged the difficulties of materialist-fantasy criticism, while offering specific texts which seem appropriate for such critique. Several contemporary works of campus fiction – novels with students as protagonists – overlap with fantasy fiction, generating further opportunities for the application of Marxist theory to the fantasy genre. Contemporary campus-fantasy texts reject some primary concerns of fantasy fiction. Novels such as Pamela Dean’s *Tam Lin* (1991) and Lev Grossman’s *The Magicians* (2009) maintain a realistic depiction of university education while also encouraging consideration of realistic concerns, such as the role of the social elite; ideological hegemony; and the alienation of (student-)workers. The conflict between campus fiction and fantasy implicates both genres, as well as possibilities for materialist analysis. The incompatibility of fantastical idealism and historical materialism is mirrored in campus-fantasy texts. This conflict emphasizes higher education’s departure from its idealistic, Enlightenment conception to its envelopment within capitalism.

In this article, a detailed analysis of Pamela Dean’s *Tam Lin* using Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology exemplifies the above dynamic. The fantasy elements of Dean’s novel serve to detach ideology from
its economic base and this detachment implicates the role of the university, particularly within a capitalist economy. Therefore, the isolation of the university in Tam Lin reflects several concerning trends within Higher Education scholarship, such as its lack of contribution to the public sphere, and inability to prepare students for future employment.

**Keywords:** Fantasy, campus novel, ideology, Marxism, Althusser

Throughout its development as a literary genre, fantasy fiction and Marxism have remained uncomfortable bedfellows. The prominent fantasy author and Marxist critic China Miéville has noted this conflict, highlighting that, despite “identifiable traditions of exploring fantasy within Marxist thought, there are Marxists who are uneasy with it.” This unease has manifested in the work of a number of Marxist scholars, of various literary genres, who have discussed the (im)possibility of Marxist-fantasy criticism. This scholarship particularly identifies the idealistic, escapist tendency of fantasy fiction as detached from the materialist concerns of Marx’s oeuvre, preventing Marxist analysis of fantasy literature. Campus-fantasy fiction – defined here as fantasy novels with college student protagonists – constitutes an important contribution to this discussion. The universities, in these novels, create a fundamental, historical context for the fantastic events therein. While this co-existence signifies a movement away from what might be seen as one of fantasy’s fundamental features, fantastic elements in these novels constitute an important aspect of their social commentary. A detailed reading of Pamela Dean’s *Tam Lin* exemplifies this dynamic. While stalwartly depicting the novel’s student-protagonist’s academic experiences, the novel also deploys its fantastic elements to interrogate the relationship between ideology and economy in its contemporary university setting. In this way, the novel interrogates the structural understanding of ideology as outlined by Louis Althusser, suggesting aspects of Althusserean theory to be updated, especially in order to appreciate the function of higher education institutions today.

**Marxism and Fantasy**

Throughout fantasy scholarship, analysis of historical, material conditions has remained problematic. Carl Freedman has referred to “such essentially ahistorical modes as fantasy,” arguing that, in the novels
of J.R.R. Tolkien, the absence of social concerns and conflicts, such as sexual desire, religious and political beliefs, and class conflict, precludes Marxist analysis. This ahistoricism has also been identified in previous critical works. In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson criticises Tzvetan Todorov’s influential study of the genre, arguing that “Todorov’s *The Fantastic* fails to consider the social and political implications of literary forms.” This limitation, for Jackson, justifies the use of a Freudian analysis of fantasy in her own work:

> For it is in the unconscious that social structures and ‘norms’ are reproduced and sustained within us, and only by redirecting attention to this area can we begin to perceive the ways in which the relations between society and the individual are fixed.

While Jackson’s analysis suggests the privileging of individual experiences in response to historical contexts, the limitations of this approach have been identified. In an overview of fantasy scholarship, Mark Bould has argued that the application of Freudian analysis, “suggests a rather simplistic model of the relationship between the subject and the social order which makes no distinction between varieties of psychic and social repression.” Just as Todorov rejected socio-historical conditions altogether, Jackson’s analysis requires their subversion, according to a defined framework.

In order to enable a specifically Marxist analysis, theorists of fantasy fiction have adopted various methods of analysis. Such scholarship has identified metaphorical links between works of fantasy and tenants of Marxist thought. Ishay Landa’s analysis of ideological contradictions in J.R.R. Tolkien’s work, for example, highlights metaphorical readings of race, property, and the significance of the Ring throughout Tolkien’s oeuvre. In *The Lord of the Rings*, “[t]he profoundly symbolic character now assumed by the Ring [...] offers the advantage of imparting with great metaphoric suggestiveness the harmful effects of property at the social, moral and psychological levels.” Landa’s analysis highlights the extent to which Tolkien’s work can be used to interrogate established aspects of Marxist theory. This approach is similarly adopted by Steve Shaviro in his analysis of “Capitalist Monsters.” Examining the figures of vampires, zombies and, in China Miéville’s work, slake-moths, Shaviro concludes that “monsters are intrinsic to the ordinary, everyday reality of capitalism itself.” Both of these works highlight the extent to which consequences of capitalism are reflected, or physically manifested, in fantasy
works. A similarly cohesive approach can be found in Jordana Rosenberg and Britt Rusert’s work, addressing the role of capital in Samuel Delany’s *Nevèrýon* series. Their analyses “come from a tradition of thinking about how literature encodes (rather than mirrors) and encrypts (rather than reflects) the contradictions of history.” For Rosenberg and Rusert, Delaney’s novel “presents an allegorical comment on the late twentieth century—one in which the financialized present is figured through an uncanny image of a feudal past.” These articles, then, employ a figurative method of Marxist analysis of fantasy, in which existing social structures are transposed to fantastical worlds.

However, an alternative method of analysis offers more fruitful opportunities for the campus-fantasy novel. Rather than a metaphorical analysis, Frederic Jameson has highlighted the preoccupation with social organisation in Marxist fantasy analysis:

> It is the trace of this history and this historical trauma that opens the possibility, from Le Guin to *Perdido Street Station*, of a materialist fantasy, a fantasy narrative apparatus capable of registering systemic change and of relating superstructural symptoms to infrastructural shifts and modifications.

Jameson argues that fantasy’s narratives allow the possibility for identification of various structural “shifts” and their consequences, inaccessible to other literary modes. This focus is exemplified in Joshua Yu Burnett’s article “The Collar and the Sword: Queer Resistance in Samuel R. Delany’s *Tales of Nevèrýon*” which resists metaphorical commentary, highlighting the importance of structural analysis. Yu Burnett’s consideration of slavery in Delaney’s novels, for example, emphasizes the extent to which “[t]he slavery Gorgik encounters in the mines resembles, in several ways, the historically familiar antebellum American slavery, taking the form of backbreaking physical labor, enforced by harsh corporal discipline.” However, “Nevèrýon’s slavery is also quite different from what our familiar conceptions of slavery would lead us to expect since Delany uncouples slavery from both race and reproduction.” This intricate web of race-relations means that “race in Nevèrýon is complicated in a way that speaks to the complexities of race in postmodern America.” A similar deviation from recognizable power structures is noted in Delaney’s examination of gender. For Yu Burnett, the female warrior Raven embodies “how old narratives of resistance can be transformed into a new and more complex understanding of the role
Referred to as “the ivory towers,” repeated subversive tendencies in Raven’s character are noted: “[s]he wears a mask whose purpose is not to hide her identity but to create it; “Raven’s sword, which, as we have seen, is double-bladed, and [...], in a reversal of the psychoanalytic reading of sword as phallic symbol, Raven’s sword explicitly becomes, instead, a vaginal symbol.” This examination of the structural subversion in Delaney’s novels emphasizes the extent to which Delaney “forces us to consider new narratives of resistance more suitable to our current, postmodern era.”

Yu Burnett’s work contrasts metaphorical readings of fantasy novels by highlighting the extent to which existing social structures are challenged in Delaney’s work. However, these structures are prominent in works of campus-fantasy novels. With the university comprising a fundamental, realistic link to “reality,” precluding metaphorical analysis, these novels also maintain recognizable social structures, using fantastic elements to interrogate their mechanics.

**Campus-Fantasy Novels: An Opportunity for Marxist Analysis**

As a sub-genre of college fiction, campus-fantasy novels maintain the social concerns which have been identified throughout the genre. Scholars of college fiction have consistently noted a genre tied to readers’ expectations and educational experiences. In a study of some of the earliest campus novels, of the nineteenth century, Gunila Lindgren has noted that “the fictional texts satisfied a curiosity prevalent in society at large.”

Of more contemporary university fiction, Janice Rossen has asserted that such literature “creates a dialectic in which fiction reinforces popular views and yet also reflects those which are innately present in the culture in the first place.” As well as demystifying the institution of the university, professors have been used to illustrate individual responses to broader social turmoil. Ian Carter and Elaine Showalter both structure their studies of academic fiction thematically, juxtaposing the professors’ struggles with changes caused by increased diversity and broader upheaval in higher education.

Similarly, Jeffrey J. Williams has asserted that academics typify “the managed professional anxiously negotiating his or her way through postmodern institutions.” Such realism is a constituting feature of university fiction and can be found co-existing with fantastic elements in campus-fantasy novels.

Contemporary campus-fantasy novels exemplify the broader realism of the genre, preserving a fundamental link to “reality.” Pamela Dean’s *Tam Lin* (1996) and Lev Grossman’s *The Magicians* (2009) exemplify this realistic grounding. In their respective novels, the relationship between
our reality and the fantasy worlds is emphasized. Grossman has confessed to the objective of grounding the magical world of Fillory in a more realistic experience: “I’m taking a Narnia-style fantasy world and forcing it to behave consistently.”25 This objective is further identified in a publisher’s review of Dean’s novel which concludes that the novel “anchor[s] its fantastic elements in a solid, engaging reality.”26 Furthermore, the university institution itself constitutes a particularly recognizable connection to existing reality. Grossman has confirmed that the descriptions of Brakebills, his magical college, were modelled on Brideshead Revisited.27 Dean’s novel transposes a traditional Scottish ballad completely to a college campus in Minnesota, with the author detailing in the Author’s Note that the song “reminded [her] of college.”28 As well as the settings of the university comprising a realistic intrusion, students, in these fantasy novels, study and learn in a realistic way. Learning magic at Brakebills, which requires “Middle English, Latin, and Old High Dutch,” leads Quentin to conclude that it was “as tedious as it was possible for the study of powerful and mysterious supernatural forces to be.”29 Of Dean’s novel, Martha P. Hixon argues that Dean “allowed the realistic narrative of Janet’s college years [...] to take over the plot.”30 In campus-fantasy novels, then, the worlds, universities, and students’ experiences are overtly recognizable in contemporary society.

From the establishment of the elite class to the functionings of ideology, a range of social structures are interrogated in works of campus-fantasy fiction. After the concluding battle of The Magicians, Quentin accepts employment at a prestigious finance firm, “Grunnings Hunsucker Swann,” where he “had few actual responsibilities beyond attending the occasional meeting and being civil to whatever colleagues he happened to bump into in the elevator.”31 Brakebills, in fact, has the power to provide these roles for magicians who are unable to live in the magical world, as they did for Emily Greenstreet, an alumni of the college:

They set her up with an easy corporate job, I don’t know, management consulting or something. We own part of some big firm. Lots of magic to cover up the fact that she doesn’t do anything. She just sits in an office and surfs the Web all day.32

Grossman’s novel, then, queries the relationship between higher education and elite social positions, and the skills required for such valuable employment. These novels depict the individual experiences of students, while also contextualising these experiences alongside
the structural role of the university in contemporary society. Jameson and Yu Burnett’s method of Marxist-fantasy analysis is, therefore, fundamental for the appreciation of the social commentary in campus-fantasy novels. While the context of the novels includes more than a “trace” of historical context, their fantastic elements serve to interrogate various structural alterations. In *The Magicians*, fantastic elements perform recognizable social functions, such as connections between elite universities and professions. However, campus-fantasy novels interrogate a range of social issues, requiring detailed examination to reveal the extent of their social critique. Such a reading, of Pamela Dean’s *Tam Lin*, reveals a novel which foregrounds the role of culture in the students’ lives. Furthermore, the novel interrogates the role of the educational institution of Blackstock, where Janet attends college. The dual concerns of culture and educational institutions interact with the work of Louis Althusser on ideological state apparatuses. Indeed, while Althusser’s essay provides a framework for discussing the role of such institutions within capitalism, Dean’s novel suggests deviations from Althusser’s definitions in the lives of its protagonists.

“Though she be little, yet she is fierce” – Ideological Indoctrination in *Tam Lin*

Pamela Dean’s *Tam Lin* centres around the experiences of its protagonist, Janet, at Blackstock College in Minnesota. The majority of the text follows the entire duration of Janet’s college degree encapsulating her studies, romantic relationships, and platonic friendships. Concluding the novel, Janet becomes pregnant, necessitating her involvement in the spell which maintains the power of the Queen of the Faeries, one of the Classics professors at Blackstock. Typically for the campus-fantasy genre, the novel is particularly preoccupied with Janet’s academic experiences, whilst also including the procedures for choosing dorm rooms, friends, and boyfriends. However, the novel is also dominated by Janet’s chosen major – English literature – and literary references and conversations dominate the text.

The prevalence of literary references, and literature’s influence on Janet’s life, interrogates the role of ideology in contemporary society. In his famous essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” Louis Althusser outlines the structural role of ideology and the extent to which ideology is based on, and contributes to, the reproduction of the material means of production. Althusser asserts that “[t]he ultimate condition of production is therefore the
reproduction of the conditions of production” and his essay outlines the role of ideology in this reproduction. Althusser analyzes Marx’s “metaphor of a topography” of “the infrastructure, or economic base” and “the superstructure” of “the politico-legal [...] and ideology.” He concludes: “this metaphor suggests something, makes something visible. What? Precisely this: that the upper floors could not ‘stay up’ (in the air) alone, if they did not rest precisely on their base.”

Althusser includes the “cultural [ideological state apparatus]” and “educational [ideological state apparatus]” in his work, however, the entire structural understanding of the role of ideology is fundamentally questioned in Tam Lin. Pamela Dean’s novel, with its foregrounding of culture and the experiences of the students within such an overwhelming force, certainly illustrates Althusser’s characterisation of the nature of ideology – as eternal, and encircling individuals within itself. However, Dean’s novel, particularly in its conclusion, questions the broader social function of ideology. The novel’s supernatural elements serve to detach ideology from the novel’s socio-historical context, and therefore economic concerns. This interrogation, in a novel set in an institution of higher education, also fundamentally questions the role of the educational ideological apparatus. What is more, the role of the fantastic elements in Dean’s novel, within this structural understanding of ideology, exemplify a number of trends identified in contemporary higher education scholarship.

Throughout Tam Lin, Janet’s experiences are restricted by pre-existing expectations and experiences illustrating one aspect of ideology’s historicity in Althusser’s theory. Dean’s adaptation of a Scottish ballad constitutes a metatextual enclosure within which Janet’s experiences are defined. In the Author’s Note to her novel, Pamela Dean describes how she had “wanted to adapt a ballad,” although the ballad insistently rejected the setting of Elizabethan England, which Dean had initially attempted. This difficulty was overcome with Dean’s realisation:

This was a song about adolescents. I could set it in a college. I did; and everything else, including the ghosts, who had no part in the original outline, sprang from that.

Janet’s experiences, then, are pre-determined by the ballad from which the novel is adapted. Distinguishing himself from Marx’s work in The German Ideology, Althusser asserts that “on the one hand, I think it is possible to hold that ideologies have a history of their own [...] and on the
other, I think it is possible to hold that ideology *in general has no history.* Ideology, he continues, has “an *omni-historical* reality, in the sense in which that structure and functioning are immutable.”40 This immutable structure, in Dean’s novel, is reflected in the recognizable structure of the Tam Lin ballad. In her study of retellings of the ballad, Martha P. Hixon has highlighted one function of the genre:

Through their depiction of incidents in which “goodness” is rewarded and “evil” deeds punished, folk and fairy tales function as pedagogical tools that illustrate cultural values, enforce the status quo, and define socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.41

In Dean’s novel, then, the function of the ideological framework is to communicate socially-defined behaviour.

As the pre-determined and established ideological formation envelops the characters, their experiences and behaviour are similarly defined throughout the novel. Janet’s literary knowledge, in particular, is fundamental to the development of her friendship with Nick and the other Classics students. Janet is first motivated to speak with Nick after hearing him sing Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and the influence of boys’ performances extends further: “Janet, having seen that his expression was going to remain blank, looked at Molly. He’s got her, she thought; I’m enchanted by Eliot, and Molly’s done in by Homer.”42 Considerations and discussions of various literary texts dominate segments of the novel as the students bond over their interest in literature: they attend productions of *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead,* for example, with discussions of the former stretching to twelve pages of the novel.43 As well as determining the events of the novel, canonical culture determines the characters themselves. The students regularly quote literary texts, highlighting the extent to which literary precursors determine their speech.44 Furthermore, at the conclusion of the novel, Janet’s decision to save Thomas is explicitly tied to literary principles. She reflects that “[w]hatever else fairy tales might be good for, they taught you to keep your promises.”45 This justification is re-iterated in a conversation with Molly:

“I don’t guess you could think of it as a life for a life?”
“No, it’s not that. I don’t know what I think about abortion; but I can’t take advantage of being pregnant and then just go merrily off and not be pregnant anymore. Those that dance must pay the fiddler.”
“You read too much.”

The characters’ interest in literature prominently defines their behavior which, in turn, further illustrates points identified in Althusser’s essay. The determination of the students’ social organization, interests, and individual choices illustrates the relationship between ideology and individual subjects, which Althusser further discussed. Fundamental to the unity between ideology and material conditions is the manner in which ideology is concretized and performed throughout society: “an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material.” Certainly the institutionalised functioning of ideology is illustrated in the novel, through the college classes Janet attends, and the theatre trips the group enjoy. In addition, Althusser’s mention of “practice” alludes to the experience of individuals within ideological systems:

I shall talk of actions inserted into practices. And I shall point out that these practices are governed by the rituals in which these practices are inscribed, within the material existence of an ideological apparatus.

The students’ insistent quoting and analysis of literary references illustrates the ritualization of ideology which Althusser describes. Furthermore, the ideological institutionalisation emphasises the role of the ideological apparatus, in this case, the university. Janet’s decision at the end of the novel highlights the extent to which literary ideology determines her actions, or “practices.”

While Tam Lin illustrates the structural function of ideology, the supernatural elements of the plot detach this ideology from economic concerns. While Althusser claims that ideology is omni-historical, simultaneously, it can have no history as “it is determined in the last instance by the class struggle.” This assertion suggests that ideology itself has no fundamental, consistent content, determined as it is by the specific socio-historical conditions of the class struggle. However, Dean’s novel depicts the continuation of an explicitly unchanged ideology. As well as the reinterpretation of the ballad comprising a connection between past and present, other characters embody the confounding of the passage of time. It is revealed that Nick and Robin “are some of Shakespeare’s actors,” living eternally after being enchanted by the demonic Professor Medeous. Thomas explains, “they’re all old, and you know [...] Robin remembers Shakespeare, at least a little.” Janet’s experiences in the novel are also explicitly prefigured. Dean’s addition of ghosts, “who had no part
in the original outline” constitute the precursors to Janet’s experiences.52 One of the novel’s subplots is the story of Victoria Thompson, the ghost of Fourth Ericson, the dormitory in which Janet lives. Janet investigates Victoria’s death, discovering, in the Thompson collection of the library, that “Victoria Thompson killed herself because she was pregnant.”53 This experience is relived by Margaret Roxborough who “killed herself on Hallowe’en in 1967. She had been two months pregnant and had known it.”54 These experiences are repeated in the contemporary events of Dean’s novel: upon discovering her own pregnancy, Janet wonders “Good God, Victoria Thompson. Is that it? Am I doomed to relive her tragedy, because I lived in her dorm?”55

While Althusser argues that the content of ideology is contingent upon specific class concerns, this assertion is contradicted in *Tam Lin*. Nick and Robin’s eternal life and the ghosts of Fourth Ericson collapse the division between past and present, justifying Terri Windling’s observation in the introduction to the novel that it is “both modern and timeless.”56 It is these fantastic elements of *Tam Lin* which remain emphatically unchanged, signifying their detachment from “the class struggle.”57 The novel’s Scottish roots, the functioning of the Fourth Ericson ghosts, and the transportation of Shakespearean actors to modern-day Minnesota, where they can “[m]ingle with college students and nobody would notice [them] twice.”58 In these instances, then, fantasy causes the detachment of ideology, particularly the ballad intertext and Nick and Robin’s association with the English literary canon, from specific socio-economic conditions.

Janet’s experiences with birth control, and her subsequent pregnancy, emphasize the role of the novel’s supernatural elements. The student’s travails with contraception are explicitly mundane. Planned Parenthood is described as “like an assembly line at a factory,” from which Tina and Molly return “looking a little white and subdued.”59 After taking the pill, they “spent the entire night in the bathroom, being sick, and walked around hollow-eyed from lack of sleep all next day, refusing to walk in the woods in the most beautiful weather imaginable.”60 However, despite taking the contraceptive pill, Janet becomes pregnant with Thomas’ child. After Thomas reveals the extent of Professor Medeous’ magical powers, Janet concludes that the failure of the pill is caused by supernatural elements in the college:

I was on the pill. Do you expect me to believe you didn’t know Chester Hall would—would counteract it? Chester Hall, that’s got lavender growing
around it all summer when you can’t grow lavender in Minnesota this far north; Chester Hall that’s got yarrow blooming next to it in October when yarrow stops blooming in September.61

Martha P. Hixon notes that “Dean’s choice of college life in the 1970s is significant,” being the time “when socially defined acceptable sexual behaviour for young adults was in a state of flux.”62 However, Hixon further notes the extent to which the conclusion of the novel prioritizes broader concerns:

Despite her inclusion of the sexual freedom that Janet is exploring in the novel, Dean does not ultimately focus on rebellion against restrictive communal standards of behaviour [...]. In this respect, she incorporates the romantic idealization of the earlier editorializations of the Tam Lin ballad that imply that the ballad’s message is that life in this world is only possible when love is brave enough to endure severe testing.63

Hixon’s analysis highlights the extent to which Janet’s supernatural pregnancy diverts the novel’s concerns away from the social concerns of the novel’s setting. The consequences of birth control’s wider availability, and subsequent female sexual liberation, are not investigated in the text. Instead, the supernatural intervention of Janet’s pregnancy turns the novel’s attention towards the nature of love, and, in the novel, cause Janet to sacrifice her desired future.

Janet’s pregnancy endangers her declared intentions for her future after college. Following her degree, Janet intends to “[g]o to graduate school and read some more” and this intention is repeated throughout the novel.64 However, her pregnancy causes her to become embroiled in the spell which maintains Professor Medeous’ power. Thomas informs Janet that “every seven years, the Queen of Faerie [Professor Medeous] pays a tithe to Hell [which] she pays with one of us.”65 Thomas believes, correctly, “in something nasty that Medeous needs to feed [him] to.”66 However, there is a method, according to the other bewitched students, by which this sacrifice can be averted:

They have all these theories on how one escapes. But the only method anybody has ever seen actually work was to have a pregnant woman come and drag the intended victim off his horse on Hallowe’en and hang onto him for dear life while he turned into everything under the sun.67
Janet saves Thomas, and her subsequent hope to attend graduate school is jeopardized. While her future is not confirmed in the novel, a conversation with Janet’s parents implies that she is unwilling to put her child up for adoption, or allow her mother to help with childcare while she attends graduate school. 68

The sharp deviation from Janet’s intentions throughout the novel to her future as a mother destabilizes the relationship between ideology and social functions. Althusser asserts that “it is clear that it is in the forms and under the forms of ideological subjection that provision is made for the reproduction of the skills of labour power.”69 The function of the educational ideological state apparatus emphasizes the cohesion between ideology and the conditions for material production:

Each mass [of students] ejected en route is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfil in class society: the role of the exploited (with a “highly-developed,” “professional,” “ethical,” “civic,” “national,” and a-political consciousness); the role of the agent of exploitation (ability to give the workers order and speak to them: ’human relations’).70

Althusser’s description highlights the extent to which the content of university education, exemplified here by the qualities outlined, coincides with the economic function of students in a broader capitalist society – the roles of “the exploited” and “the agent of exploitation.” However, this relationship is undermined in Tam Lin.

The cohesive understanding of ideology and economy has been shattered within Dean’s novel. Quite literally, Janet’s future as a mother exemplifies the “reproduction of labour power” Althusser describes.71 However, while Althusser highlights the interrelation of the content and function of ideology, Tam Lin depicts a clear conflict between Janet’s experiences at university and her role as a mother. Thomas’ conclusion mirrors Janet’s fate. He concludes, “I could get a job; I understand babies are expensive,” illustrating the movement away from the students’ university experiences, to a life determined by financial concerns. 72 While Althusser presents a cohesive relationship, in form and function, between ideology and the means of economic production, in Tam Lin Janet’s supernatural pregnancy fragments this connection. While ideology continues to subjugate individuals, and prepare them for their economic function, the content of this ideology, in fact, is superfluous.

The fantastic elements in Tam Lin interrogate recent trends which are similarly discussed in contemporary higher education scholarship.
The fantastic elements emphasize the enduring nature of ideology—in the ballad intertext; Janet’s ghostly precursors; and the eternal lives of Shakespearean actors—illustrating the detachment of ideology from the class struggle, its economic base. Ever-present in higher education scholarship are the ideals of a liberal, detached university institution, isolated from social concerns in favour of disinterested academic pursuit. In contemporary higher education, however, these principles are contrasted with universities’ economic role, as Mary Evans has highlighted:

The shift suggested here is not, therefore, a shift from the very good to the very bad. Rather it is a shift from a collective world in which independent and critical thought was valued, to a collective world in which universities are expected to fulfil not these values but those of the marketplace and the economy.73

Evans highlights the movement away from college’s pretrained intellectual pursuits, towards economic priorities, additionally emphasizing the fundamental contradiction between these functions. The chasm Evans identifies, between an idealised version of higher education and economic requirements, is reflected in Tam Lin.

This detachment of content from function has been further discussed in contemporary analysis of the higher education sector. Bill Readings has discussed the measurement tool of “excellence,” prevalent in contemporary higher education discourse. Readings argues that, “Excellence’ is like the cash-nexus in that it has no content; it is hence neither true nor false, neither ignorant nor self-conscious.”74 Readings emphasizes how the absence of content from higher education terminology signifies its alienation from objective concepts such as truth. This, he argues, is symptomatic of a broader cultural shift:

I will also refer to this process as “dereferentialization.” By this I mean to suggest that what is crucial about terms like “culture” and “excellence” (and even “University” at times) is that they no longer have specific referents; they no longer refer to a specific set of things or ideas.75

Readings’ conclusion is illustrated in Dean’s novel. While literature pervades the novel, forming a particularly visible structure and preoccupation for the students, its content, and the lessons learned through literary studies, have no place in contemporary society. This redundancy
therefore mirrors Readings’ broader concerns regarding contemporary higher education institutions.

This detachment further implicates the individual experiences of college students. Alasdair McIntyre has noted the alienation of Enlightenment university principles, while also suggesting the consequences for students:

Our inheritance from the culture of the Enlightenment is so pervasive that we cannot rid ourselves of attitudes to the arts and sciences which presuppose that the introduction into membership of an educated public of at least some of our pupils is one of the central aims of our educational systems. But, so we have claimed, there is no such public for them to be a member of.  

Here, McIntyre emphasises the enduring nature of Enlightenment principles, whilst also stressing their redundancy in contemporary society. This detachment coincides, and perhaps causes, the isolated experiences of students which is illustrated in Dean’s novel. Just as Janet’s literary skills are not required for her role as a mother, contemporary discourse has highlighted the redundancy of university education. In 2010, a number of student protests erupted on university campuses across the globe, documentation of which is collected in Springtime: The New Student Rebellion. A manifesto produced during this wave of protests articulated the students’ position in explicitly Marxist terms: “The crisis of the university today is the crisis of the reproduction of the working class, the crisis of a period in which capital no longer needs us as workers.”

These processes of detachment, of culture from economy and content from function, contextualize Dean’s novel within existing Marxist scholarship of fantasy fiction. Highlighting the possibilities for Marxist analysis of fantasy novels, China Miéville references Marx’s understanding of commodity fetishism, wherein the relationship between individuals “assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.” This foundation leads Miéville to assert that, for Marx, “[r]eal life under capitalism is a fantasy.” Marx’s definition of the consequences of commodity fetishism, as well as Mieville’s interpretation, is reinforced throughout analysis of the fantastic elements of Pamela Dean’s novel. The consequences of increased commodification, particularly identified by Evans and Readings, are the result of the fantastic elements of Dean’s novel, particularly the fairy tale intertext, ghosts, and immortal university students. Furthermore, Janet’s supernatural pregnancy severs the relationship between her university education and her future role as a mother,
illustrating the individual alienation discussed by McIntyre. In Dean’s novel, therefore, the fantastic causes ramifications similar to those caused by the increasing commercial concerns of higher education in contemporary society.

Conclusion
Campus-fantasy novels constitute a bridge between the recognizable institution of the university and the fantastic adventures the students in these novels experience. As campus novels, these works fundamentally interrogate the social and academic experiences of students, as they pursue their degrees, develop friendships and romantic relationships. Furthermore, these novels depict students’ entrance into broader society, through and after their experiences at university. Campus-fantasy novels, then, trace the journey of individual characters within a broader social structure, signified by their educations and subsequent social positions. The fantastic elements in these novels do not serve to challenge these social structures, as has been noted in scholarship of other fantasy novels. Rather, in these novels, magic plays a recognizable function, relatable to contemporary social impact of capitalism, particularly in higher education. With magic, these novels mystify various aspects of higher education: its role in the formation of elites; the subjugation of individuals; and the contemporary role of the established culture these institutions represent and impart. The variety of experiences depicted in these novels highlights the range of concerns troubling higher education today while, furthermore, justifying the need for further analysis of individual novels.

The reading of Pamela Dean’s Tam Lin exemplifies the incisive social critique which these novels yield. Fundamentally concerned with Janet’s experiences at university, Dean’s novel depicts the inescapability of ideological definitions, as well as their detachment from social, economic concerns. This fundamentally Marxist concern, in the context of the campus novel, also interrogates the state of higher education today. Dean’s novel, with its suffocated individuals and cultural isolation, reflects the fragmentation noted in the contemporary higher education sector, emphasizing the difficulties experienced by students in contemporary society.
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ABSTRACT
In a 1989 essay entitled “Of Lunacy and Laundry Trucks,” Kath Film-
er castigates Derridean deconstruction as “the deluded intelligenc-
es of a philosophical cloud-cuckoo-land,” against which she posits
mythopoetic fantasy fiction as an alternative form of deconstructive
writing that initiates transcendence by simultaneously affirming and
unsettling the familiar. Although her oppositional argument betrays
a fundamental misunderstanding of Derrida, filmer’s characterization
of fantastic worldbuilding as deconstructive activity also inadvertently
highlights the homologous structures and radical potentiality shared
by fantasy and Derridean deconstruction, and suggests that a re-eval-
uation of the two disciplines’ relationship to each other is overdue. This
essay will posit that despite its conservative reputation, fantasy fiction,
like Derrida’s philosophical project, carries the potential to disrupt re-
ceived wisdom, unifying grand narratives, and binary hierarchies not
by disavowing them, but by, in Derrida’s words, “[i]nhabiting them in
a certain way” and “constantly risking falling back within what is being
deconstructed.” The fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin embodies a decon-
structive endeavour to contend with radical alterity and the religious,
political, racial, cultural, gendered, and sexual difference(s) located in
the margins, silences, and traces of myths and grand narratives. With
particular attention to the Earthsea novels, I will demonstrate how
Le Guin’s writing draws attention to deconstructive movements at
work in her mythmaking through her embrace of polyvocal storytelling and her emphasis on magic and religious practice as the continual making and unmaking of worlds through speech acts. In Le Guin’s hands, mythopoetic writing is not the re-inscription of a unified grand narrative, but an affirmation of fragmentary and plural mythologies as openings toward (im)possible sites of encounter with difference and the advent of a justice which is yet-to-come.

**Keywords:** deconstruction, Derrida, fantasy, Le Guin, myth

In a 1989 essay entitled “Of Lunacy and Laundry Trucks,” the fantasy scholar Kath Filmer castigates Derridean deconstruction as a “philosophical cloud-cuckoo-land” that consists of “the disruption and denial of textual meaning.” To Filmer, such a discipline “depends on the absence of an objective reality; since there is nothing to be perceived, there can be no perception.” As an alternative or antidote to such apparent nihilistic madness, Filmer presents mythopoetic fantasy as “a kind of deconstructive activity which is every bit as radical as Derrida’s, with the considerable advantage that the mythopoetic mode makes good sense.” For Filmer, the tangible forms found within fantasy are far better equipped to challenge received notions of reality than the horrifying, alienating void that deconstruction signifies to her.

Filmer’s characterization of deconstruction is based on a commonly held assumption, both within and without the academy, that deconstruction’s movements consist of little more than splitting hairs and poking holes in linguistic or philosophical structures, denying “sensible reality,” and transforming good sense into sound and fury. And yet, the impulses underpinning her engagement with fantastic mythmaking as deconstructive activity are closer to those that inform Derrida’s philosophical project than they may initially appear. If for Filmer fantasy’s power is that “of speaking to the human individually and across cultural gaps, [and] of breaking down barriers,” this suggests a need to re-examine fantasy criticism’s misreading of, and fantasy literature’s relationship to, Derridean deconstruction, which in Derrida’s words consists not in the disavowal of meaning but in “opening, uncloseting, destabilizing foreclusionary structures.” This essay proposes that fantasy literature and Derrida’s deconstructive philosophy have homologous structures as forms of writing primarily concerned with disrupting received notions of reality and highlighting devalued difference. Furthermore, I argue that deconstructive
readings of fantasy texts can draw attention to these tendencies while also exceeding the ideological and metaphysical assumptions embedded within the texts themselves. Thus, despite its conservative reputation, fantasy fiction carries the potential to disrupt received wisdom, unified grand narratives, and binary hierarchies not by disavowing them, but, to borrow phrases from Derrida, by “[i]nhabiting them in a certain way”7 and “constantly risking falling back within what is being deconstructed.”8

This essay begins by offering a brief overview of deconstruction as understood by Jacques Derrida, which will then lead into a Derridean reading of widely recognized theories of fantastic worldbuilding developed by J.R.R. Tolkien and Ursula K. Le Guin. Attention to deconstruction’s ethical, political, and theological openness toward alterity—difference which cannot be theorized in advance and which is always yet to come—will also be given as I situate Derrida’s project within the same socio-cultural context in which modern fantasy has become codified as a genre. These points will be practically demonstrated through Derridean readings of Le Guin’s Earthsea novels (1968–2001). Le Guin’s fiction, I argue, exemplifies the deconstructive potential of fantasy by endeavouring to contend with difference(s) located in the margins, silences, and traces of myths and grand narratives. Through its constant revisions of its worldbuilding and emphasis on magic and religious practice as the continual making and unmaking of worlds through speech acts, Le Guin’s writing works to dismantle hierarchical structures that attempt to close themselves off from the other, and marks out openings toward a future justice that cannot be fully anticipated.

**Defining Deconstruction, Deconstructing Definitions**

Due to the broad mischaracterization of deconstruction present in Filmer’s work, as well as the reluctance of fantasy scholarship at large to directly engage with deconstructive philosophy, a brief rehearsal of several key aspects of Derrida’s project is necessary for re-evaluating its relationship to fantasy. Defining deconstruction is difficult because, according to Derrida, “all the predicates, all the defining concepts, all the lexical significations, and even the syntactic articulations, which seem at one moment to lend themselves to this definition or that translation, are also deconstructed and deconstructible.”9 Deconstruction insists, in other words, on the impossibility for signs (such as words and their definitions) to be unities that are fully present with themselves, and its movements within signifying structures consist of an unravelling of their presumed stability. One of its principal concerns as a philosophical discourse is the
disruption of logocentrism, a metaphysical assumption that, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s words, is “centred on the sovereignty of the engendering self and the determinacy of meaning.” By contrast, Spivak characterizes deconstruction as the acknowledgment that

in order to be able to speak, at the beginning of the discourse there was something like a two-step. The two-step was the necessity to say that a divided is whole. [...] This leaves something like a mark, a thumb print, a little design at the beginning of a discourse which is covered over.]

This “mark” of originary difference in the articulation of a whole is what Derrida identifies as the “trace,” which in his words “[retains] the other as other in the same.” By the “same,” Derrida means the apparently unified structure of sign-systems, as well as the apparent wholeness of the subject who signs; the “same” in deconstructive discourse refers to the appearance of self-continuity within units. Where logocentrism takes this continuity as given, deconstruction holds that meaning is made possible only through the simultaneous retention and obscuring of difference, and that “without a trace [...] no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear.”

It is understandable why, to the outside observer, such pronouncements seem to herald a nihilistic denial of meaning and death of God. Yet on the contrary, Derrida argues that his deconstructive project “is not a question of ‘rejecting’ these notions [of textual meaning]; they are necessary and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable without them.” Derrida’s claim is not that textual interpretation is impossible or to be discouraged, nor is it that reading is a free-for-all in which any interpretation is valid; rather, it is that textual meaning is not rooted in a monologic, unitary, or closed signification. What makes meaning legible within signifying structures turns out, for Derrida, to be the very “pure trace” that threatens their stability and enables their deconstruction, and that Derrida terms “différance.” Deriving from a verb that means both to “[suspend] the accomplishment or fulfilment of ‘desire’ or ‘will’” and “to be not identical, to be other,” différance refers to “the difference between two phonemes which alone permits them to be and to operate as such,” and which by extension “permits the articulation of signs among themselves within the same abstract order.” In other words, defers-differs, separating signs in time and space and allowing them to take on meaning in their differentiation from each other (thus enabling signification), while by this same movement deferring meaning without
an ultimate signified (thus enabling deconstruction). Crucially, however, as the pure trace that precedes signification, *différance* is not itself part of the signifying structure, the letter *a* in its spelling (which distinguishes it from mere “difference”) dramatizing the heterogeneity it represents.21

Deconstruction, then, is not a destructive act wrought upon the text by an outside force, nor is it even a method of scholarly analysis; its destabilizing movements within texts, structures, and speech acts do not preclude meaning but are instead inherently implicated in its production. Moreover, because deconstruction works within signifying structures, “[logocentric] concepts are indispensable for unsettling the heritage to which they belong.”22 This is what Derrida means when, in *Of Grammatology*, he famously proclaims that “[t]here is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*].”23 Deconstruction shows that any reading produced from a text is itself a text, reliant on *différance* in order to signify anything at all and thus necessarily incomplete, in that it cannot be closed off. It is concerned with revealing the processes involved in producing knowledge, and particularly the limitations and exclusions inherent within these processes that are concealed by a logocentric understanding of meaning.

As the latter point suggests, this is no mere abstract mind game or intellectual curiosity, and Derrida is no conjurer of cheap tricks. His deconstructive philosophy can be situated within wider efforts in Western philosophy, politics, and the arts to meaningfully contend with alterity and marginality (and crucially, alterity as marginality) following the devastation of the Holocaust and the Second World War. Derrida’s writing is particularly indebted to the distinctly Jewish ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who sought “the exaltation of a thought *other* than that of Aristotle, of a thought other than civilized.”24 The primary theme of Levinas’s philosophical project is that of the face of the other, a face “from beyond the plastic forms that keep covering it up like a mask with their presence in perception,”25 existing prior to and interrupting any mode of representation. This face, for Levinas, does not inhabit the mode of the visible and should not be confused with any system of features or characteristics that can be perceived. Instead, it is an ethical imperative towards an unlimited responsibility for the other. This responsibility destabilizes self-identity as defined by secular Western philosophy26 and opens towards a transcendent relation in which “the difference between the I and the other remains.”27 What then emerges, Levinas concludes, is a politics that envisions “[p]eace as relation with an alterity”28 rather than a sameness that erases and suppresses difference within the status quo.
For Levinas, the transcendent subject of Western philosophy failed to prevent the atrocities of the early- to mid-twentieth century because its very articulation requires a violent disavowal of difference, so much so that difference per se eludes assimilation into systems and categories devised by Western thought even as it is inscribed along specific religious, cultural, racial, gendered, and sexual lines. Attempts to appeal to “the human” as the basis of philosophy or of ethics, for example—which Filmer’s essay does in insistent opposition to Derrida’s dismantling of such categories—ignore the strategic means by which those deemed “different than” are de-humanized and denied sovereign subjectivity by dominant socio-cultural and political forces. What leads Derrida to “dream of [the] inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession” that is deconstruction is the realization that this violence toward and erasure of the other is inherent within Western signifying structures and the logocentric assumptions underpinning them. Derrida dismantles transcendent sovereignty and unity (of the human subject, of God, of “sensible reality”) not out of a desire for demystification, but out of a longing for “a certain experience of the impossible: that is, of the other.” The affinity that Derrida identifies between the other and impossibility according to a “sensible reality” constructed on normative terms is particularly pertinent to analysing the deconstructive potential of fantasy literature, and deconstruction’s potential as an interpretive framework for fantasy.

Derrida Among the Dragons
J.R.R. Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-stories,” which began as a lecture delivered in 1939 and continues to influence critical discourse on fantasy fiction, also dreams of impossible encounters with the other in its desire to re-envision ancient myths and folklore. Tolkien’s longing “to hold communion with other living things” and “open a door on Other Time” through the creation of fictional “Secondary Worlds” eventually led him to create his Middle-earth *Legendarium*, with texts such as *The Hobbit* and later *The Lord of the Rings* helping to form the basis for what would eventually become the contemporary fantasy genre. Like Levinas’s ethical project, Tolkien’s longing for encounters with textual others in the pages of fantasy stems from crises arising within twentieth-century Western modernity. Tom Shippey has even gone so far as to characterize Tolkien and his fellow fantasists T.H. White, C.S. Lewis, and, to a lesser extent, Ursula K. Le Guin, as “traumatized authors” who turned to fantasy as an attempt to contend with the otherwise unspeakable atrocities they witnessed, as well as bring to light knowledges, voices, and experiences
erased or destroyed in their wake. While Brian Attebery’s work on fantasy has taken cues from Tolkien’s theory to allude to a potential affinity between fantasy and deconstructive theoretical projects, there remains a need for a more rigorous critical discussion of fantastic worldbuilding as deconstructive activity.

Though Tolkien extensively defends the desire for escape and consolation which fantasy both fulfils and awakens, he is also clear that fantasy is not to be understood as purely escapist. Equally crucial to him is “recovery,” which he defines as

regaining of a clear view. [...] I might venture to say “seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them”—as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness.

Readers could be forgiven for interpreting the above as a purely conservative or normative claim; at the very least, “seeing things as we are meant to see them” is a much more deterministic statement than anything found in Derrida. Yet I contend that Tolkien’s rejection of possessiveness here, and his implication that fantastic recovery is not so much a restoration of an ideal status quo as it is a disruption of familiar habits and assumptions, suggests an affinity between his characterization of fantasy and Derridean deconstruction. For Derrida, normative and unified constructions of reality are oppressive because in their presumptions of essentialist universalism, they assimilate the other within sweeping categories of “the subject” and “the human” that fail to acknowledge the other’s difference, as well as the difference within such concepts.

In fact, what is so bizarre about Filmer’s oppositional view of deconstruction and fantasy is its investment in the same vague notions of “sensible reality” toward which fantasists are notoriously sceptical. Although I have demonstrated above that Derrida is far from rejecting sensible reality outright, neither is he in the business of taking it at face value, and neither, for that matter, is most fantasy literature. As Attebery notes, fantasy has always been characterized by “creative and disruptive play with representations of the real world,” and much of it is engaged in contesting the grounds on which these representations are constructed. Tolkien, for one, balks at the definition of “real life” adhered to by fantasy’s naysayers, arguing that “[t]he notion that motor-cars are more ‘alive’ than, say, centaurs or dragons is curious; that they are more ‘real’ than, say, horses is pathetically absurd.” Le Guin, drawing on Tolkien’s theory of fantasy, goes
even further in offering fantasy as a remedy to a homogenized, neoliberal capitalist reality in which “there is no other, there is no escape, because there is nowhere else.”40 In her view, “seemingly by a denial or evasion of current reality, fantasists are perhaps trying to assert and explore a larger reality than we now allow ourselves,”41 one in which not only magic but also alternative social, ethical, and political orders become thinkable. If fantasists are invested in “reality” at all, it is in the same sense that deconstructionists are: as a necessarily incomplete and unstable textual construction and representation open to disruption in the face of alterity.

It would be naïve and overly deterministic, of course, to conflate centaurs and dragons with alterity per se; fantasy texts, for all their preoccupation with the strange and alien, are still texts and thus are themselves open to deconstruction. From a deconstructive standpoint, it is most useful to think of secondary worlds and the characters and creatures that inhabit them as figurations that can unsettle the reader’s preconceived notions and gesture towards an alterity that is still yet to come, even if this potentiality is not deliberately invoked within the texts themselves. In this regard, a deconstructive understanding of fantasy shares an affinity with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s reading of monsters as “difference made flesh,” across which “[a]ny kind of alterity can be inscribed.”42 Like its close cousin, the monstrous, the fantastic explicitly marks out spaces where alterity has been covered over in textual representations of the Primary World and draws attention to the deferral performed by all texts.

As Tolkien acknowledges, “[f]antasy is made out of the Primary World,”43 and can no more promise direct and unfettered access to actual other worlds or to alterity per se than any other genre of text. Yet its power comes from its overt gestures toward an ineffable alterity that Tolkien terms “Faërie,” which shares a homologous structure with Derrida’s (non)characterization of the other in that it “cannot be caught within a net of words,”44 always eluding the textual forms and names ascribed to it. Attebery goes even further to note that “[t]he fundamental premise of fantasy is that the things it tells not only did not happen but could not have happened,” and through this conscious invocation of impossibility it “denies [the] [...] validity” of all modes of representation, including its own.45 By rearranging habitual representations of the Primary World to create impossible figurations, fantasy texts draw attention both to their own fictitious constructions and to their openness to future disruption in the face of the other.

Even the most ostensibly conservative impulse Tolkien identifies within fantasy—the consolation of the happy ending—can on closer inspection be understood in terms of deconstructive openness toward the
other. For Tolkien, whose interest in the fantastic overlaps significantly with his Roman Catholic theology and spiritual practice, the happy ending of a fairy-story carries distinctly messianic overtones, serving as “a far-off gleam of *evangelium* in the real world” that offers “a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world.” Yet although he chooses to understand it in terms of the structure of his own religious belief, Tolkien once again clearly characterizes the happy ending not as a restoration of an ideal status quo but as a rupture in the perceived order of the text. The consolation of fairy-stories is not primarily therapeutic but cataclysmic, a curious movement of “eucatastrophe” (literally, “good catastrophe”) that consists of a “sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur” and never, for that matter, to be properly anticipated in advance. The eucatastrophic turn can be every bit as disruptive to the structure of a secondary world as the construction of that world can be for representations of the Primary World.

Although Derrida resists aligning the advent of the other’s justice with a specific theological tradition in the way Tolkien does fantastic eucatastrophe, he ascribes an almost identically messianic structure to the former. In this case, however, it is a “messianicity without messianism [...] without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration,” since any messianic movement that could be fully encapsulated within a theological or philosophical programme would be part of the structure of the same. The other’s approach, for which deconstruction leaves texts open, is a shattering “event” that heralds “the invention of the impossible” as “the only possible invention.” Elizabeth Anderson has even criticized Tolkien’s particular use of fantastic eucatastrophe in his fiction from this deconstructive standpoint, claiming that his texts’ “endgame” is “a colonizing logic of sameness that focuses on the defeat of an evil Other.”

It is crucial to remember, however, that the dismantling of the same in anticipation of the other is not the same as rejecting it; indeed, without it no deconstruction can take place. Nor does Tolkien, for all that he aligns eucatastrophe with his religious beliefs, perceive fantasy as a definitive reflection of a metaphysical reality or deny its potential complicity in oppressive causes; on the contrary, he acknowledges that “[f]antasy can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be put to evil uses. It may even delude the minds out of which it came.” Nonetheless, what must be emphasized about eucatastrophe in adopting a theory of fantasy that shares deconstruction’s ethical and political concern for alterity is its unpredictability, as well as its ability as a self-consciously fantastical figuration to resist the closure of its own representation. As with the fantasy genre in
general, attention to these elements of eucatastrophe allows for readings of secondary worlds as exceeding the limits of their own textual constructions, as well as the philosophical and ideological assumptions they belie. Understanding the structure of fantastic eucatastrophe in deconstructive terms means reading it not as textual closure, but as an open-ended gesture toward the approach of the other.

Tolkien’s theory of fantasy highlights fantasy’s ability to subvert ideological assumptions about the Primary World. Its positioning of fantasy texts as spaces which simulate encounters with textual others, as well as figurations of a future, catastrophic arrival of messianic justice that defer ultimate closure, lends it a structure homologous to Derridean deconstruction. I am far from suggesting that deconstruction and Tolkien’s or any formulation of fantasy literature are reducible to one another, and I certainly do not wish to argue, as Filmer does, that the latter is a substitute for the former, or vice versa. However, careful attention to the shared vocabulary of deconstruction and fantastic storytelling opens a critical space in which to think fantasy as a genre concerned with dismantling hegemonic structures and habits of representation, even and perhaps especially the hegemonies re-inscribed either intentionally or inadvertently by fantasy texts themselves. By rearranging elements of the Primary World and rendering them as unfamiliar secondary worlds, fantasy can be seen to participate in the deconstructive activity of “bending [the] rules [of signification] with respect for the rules themselves” in order to draw attention to the other while retaining a sense of its otherness.

**Light Flowing Through Silk: Deconstruction and Ursula K. Le Guin**

All fantasy texts share the deconstructive potential I have identified in the genre above, but this does not mean that all texts are conscious of it or take advantage of its political power. While Attebery is right to point out that even the most “mass-market paperback fantasy with a lurid cover” is “outside the culturally defined norm” and deemed other by the literary establishment, this does not automatically translate to a challenge to other Primary World cultural norms, and in fact many fantasy texts are far from it. It is true that the recent popularity and acclaim enjoyed by authors in the genre such as N.K. Jemisin, Nnedi Okorafor, Nalo Hopkinson, Toni Adeyemi, and Jeannette Ng demonstrate that fantasy’s unique ability to dismantle normative constructions of reality is well-suited to telling stories from positions of marginal alterity within white supremacy, Western colonialism, and cis-hetero-patriarchy. However, the
genre is equally susceptible to reactionary politics that either implicitly or explicitly articulate a nostalgia for the above, of which the Sad Puppies anti-diversity campaign initiated at the 2013 Hugo Awards is perhaps the most recent reminder. The fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin has been highly influential in terms of opening a space for fantasy that explicitly dismantles the normative logics and structures of Western societies, and her approach to constructing secondary worlds dramatizes the deconstructive movements at work within her texts.

At the outset of her experimental novel *Always Coming Home* (1985), Le Guin outlines her belief in fantastic worldbuilding as an “archaeology of the future,”56 seeking communion with “those who slip weightless among molecules, dwelling where a century passes in a day, among the fair folk.”57 In the way that an archaeologist pieces together fragments of long gone people and cultures by unearthing traces of their past, Le Guin employs fantasy to highlight traces (in a deconstructive sense) of alterity covered over not only in normative constructions of the Primary World, but also in the secondary worlds presented in her own texts. In her fiction, encounters across axes of difference coincide with irruptions of fantastic figurations into characters’ lives, often breaking with the established rules even of their own created worlds. These moments of rupture also create textual fractures in which subjectivity and worldbuilding alike are gradually revealed to be unstable, contingent, fluid, and often multifarious, and eucatastrophic openings toward impossible futures are uncovered. The Earthsea novels begin by using the linguistic structure of magic and naming to dramatize the processes involved in worldbuilding, revealing the hidden heterogeneity of apparently unitary structures and eventually adopting a marginal narrative voice within their own secondary world to intertextually critique its construction.

The general arc of the Earthsea novels can be understood as one in which the ostensibly conventional coming-of-age fantasy of *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) is gradually revised and subverted—in terms of both narrative focus and worldbuilding—in subsequent entries, with *Tehanu* (1990) and *The Other Wind* (2001) especially serving to question the fixity of the series’ lore and highlight sites of marginality and alterity that were previously overwritten. Yet explicit deconstructive tendencies can be detected even from the beginning. The Earthsea series is notable for its emphasis on naming; not only is there ample space devoted to the various names characters, places, and things accumulate, but naming is also central to the function of magic in the series. Admittedly, the series’ rooting of magic in the notion of “true names”—names in the Old Speech of the
Dragons which correspond to the essences of people and things—jars significantly with a Derridean, anti-essentialist approach to signification. After all, Derrida insists on the impossibility for signs to grant direct access to the essence of things, claiming instead that “the circulation of sign defers the moment in which we encounter the thing itself.” Yet the notion of true names and how they are used becomes complicated almost as soon as the concept is introduced.

At the beginning of the young wizard Ged’s studies at the magical academy on the island of Roke, the Master Hand teaches him the dangers of the magic of Changing:

To change this rock into a jewel, you must change its true name. And to do that, my son, even to so small a scrap of the world, is to change the world. It can be done. Indeed it can be done. [...] But you must not change one thing, one pebble, one grain of sand, until you know what good and evil will follow on the act.

The world of Earthsea is one composed entirely of words and names, in which to change something’s true name is to transform not only the thing itself, but by extension the composition of the world in yet more unpredictable ways, for, as the Master Hand says, “[i]f the Isles of Earthsea were all made of diamond, we’d lead a hard life here.” From one interpretive standpoint, this would seem to further establish the logic governing Earthsea as the essentialist metaphysics implicit in the very notion of “true names.” From another, however, it opens a space for a deconstructive interpretation of magic as an act of signification akin to those involved in fantastic worldbuilding; Earthsea, after all, only exists as words in the pages of Le Guin’s text, and therefore the construction of that world is indeed dependent on the words and names used and the play of différence among them that enables interpretation.

From a deconstructive standpoint, Earthsea’s existence as a fantastic secondary world also serves to highlight that all worlds are composed of signs, that there is no outside-text, and that any “Primary World” or “sensible reality” is itself a textual construction. True names are far from fixed and universal; they can be altered through spells of changing and there are many places away from the wizards’ native Archipelago where they hold no power. Even in the former case, spells of changing can carry unforeseen or undesired consequences; for instance, assuming the shape of an animal for an extended period of time can result in the caster’s subjectivity becoming that of the animal, the surface appearance
transforming the supposed “essence” of the person. From this standpoint, the linguistic basis of magic in Earthsea is not only metatextual commentary on the novels’ own worldbuilding, but also an illustration of the performative function of discourse (that is, its tendency to enact that which it purports to describe), as well as its proneness to take on a life of its own through interpretation, reconstruction, and repetition. As Derrida puts it, “[s]peaking frightens me because, by never saying enough, I also say too much.”

Signification is perilous in its ultimate inadequacy precisely because “[i]t does not know where it is going”; it simultaneously risks inscribing its own limitations as law or totality and opens itself to a proliferation of unforeseeable meanings.

Such provisionality, precarity, and unpredictability is also suggested by Le Guin’s literalization of the linguistic processes involved in world-making through her portrayal of magic. Even the “true names” that threaten to establish an affinity between magic and logocentrism serve, in deconstructive fashion, to throw the ultimacy of their own “truth” into question. As the Master Namer Kurremkarmerruk (whose name “[has] no meaning in any language”) explains to Ged and his peers,

> [t]he sea’s name is \textit{inien}, well and good. But what we call the Inmost Sea has its own name also in the Old Speech. Since no thing can have two true names, \textit{inien} can mean only ‘all the sea except the Inmost Sea’. And of course it does not mean even that, for there are seas and bays and straits beyond counting that bear names of their own. [...] Thus, that which gives us power to work magic, sets the limits of that power.

Although the ability to gain unfettered access to the essence of people, places, and things through the knowledge of true names remains at odds with a deconstructive critique of logocentrism, the complexity of true names described above does highlight the deconstructive notion that anything perceived as a unified whole is in fact divided and heterogeneous. This heterogeneity is what enables wizards’ power, but it is also what sets limits around it and, as Ged learns over the course of \textit{A Wizard of Earthsea}, makes the magic of naming an intimate relationship with rather than hierarchical domination over what is named. When read as a dramatization of textual worldbuilding, the Earthsea series’ emphasis on language as the driving force of magic also draws attention to the novels’ own textuality and the fundamental instability of their construction. These points are all reflected in characters’ shifting understandings of their world and relations with others, as well as the series’ constant revisions to its own lore.
The Earthsea novels’ staging of fantastical encounters can be read as a dramatization of Derrida’s notion that “every other (one) is every (bit) other. Tout autre est tout autre.” That is, the radical alterity on which deconstruction opens is revealed in every individual other, disrupting the “I” of subjectivity. The setting of Earthsea, a vast collection of islands, each with their distinct traditions, cultural heritage, and mythologies, lends itself to a wedding of fantastic strangeness to a contention with difference. Rather than lapse into mere cultural relativism, fantasy in the Earthsea novels often heightens the extent to which characters (and readers) feel displaced and even completely unmoored from their accustomed ideologies and understanding of the world in their encounters with others. This also offers the novels a freedom to disrupt and revise their own previously established worldbuilding, critiquing the oppressive logics that it re-inscribes and drawing attention to previously marginal voices within the texts as they do so.

One of the most striking examples of the former occurs in The Tombs of Atuan (1972) in which Arha, the One Priestess of the nameless powers of the earth, imprisons Ged in her underground labyrinth for desecrating the sacred domain of her masters with his magic. Brought up from a young age in the isolated desert of Atuan in the Kargad Empire, Arha is indoctrinated with the religious fanaticism of the cult she serves, taught that the dark-skinned wizards of the Archipelago are a “black and vile” people who “have no immortal souls,” their magic seen as a blasphemous affront to the Nameless Ones. Arha interrogates Ged endlessly about his travels, initially dismissing his tales as “nonsense, fool’s babble, sacrilege.” Her later reactions are more revealing as she declares, “You’ve seen dragons dancing and the towers in Havnor, and you know all about everything. And I know nothing at all and haven’t been anywhere” but still insisting, “I know […] the one true thing.” Arha’s insistence on knowledge of the “one true thing” is perhaps best understood in terms of Derrida’s characterization of sovereignty, a difference-suppressing “concentration, into a single point of indivisible singularity (God, the monarch, the people, the state or the nation-state), of absolute force and the absolute exception.” The sovereignty inherent within Kargad religious practices not only allows them to claim theological exceptionalism over the people of the Archipelago, but also serves to legitimize their imperial power under the banner of the God-King.

The wizard’s appearance in the Tombs, by contrast, shakes the very foundations of Arha’s sense of self-identity and the narratives she has internalized about the outside world, and yet she craves his tales of dragons
and magery such that she is moved to spare his life against the word of her advisors. Arha’s role in the novel is that of the reader of deconstructive fantasy, longing for stories that open onto a larger reality even as they pose a threat to her sovereign devotion to the dark powers of the earth. Ged’s stories frustrate Arha’s presuppositions both about himself and about the world he represents; she finds that “[s]he never seemed to say what she intended to say to the prisoner. He always confused her with his talk about dragons, and towers [...] He never said what he was supposed to say.”

As her dogmatic understanding of the world is gradually and tortuously dismantled in her encounters with this other from the Archipelago, she ceases to be Arha (or “the Eaten One” in her native Kargish) and resumes her forgotten birth name Tenar. She flees the Tombs with Ged, the structures of the labyrinth and the monolithic standing stones above violently shifting and collapsing in on themselves as they depart to mirror the unravelling structure of Tenar’s beliefs and old habitual life.

Such seismic shifts in the textual world of Earthsea begin to occur on a much more fundamental level in the series’ fourth volume, *Tehanu* (1990), which inhabits a deconstructive position within the fantasy genre itself, in addition to drawing attention to the deconstructive tendencies of fantasy as the previous novels do. Not only does the novel’s action shift away from the high adventure, sweeping vistas, and focus on great rulers and master wizards of Roke that defined the first and third volume especially, but the very socio-political structures that dictate the terms of such narratives are relentlessly called into question. Where the previous novel, *The Farthest Shore* (1973) concluded with balance being restored to the world with the closing of a portal between Earthsea and the land of the dead and the installation of a new king, Lebannen, on the throne in Havnor, *Tehanu* concerns itself with the lives of marginalized others, particularly women and disabled people, whose continued struggles are covered over in order to maintain a triumphant ending in the immediate aftermath of the former text’s events. The novel signals this from the very beginning, as Tenar, now a wealthy farmer’s widow on the isle of Gont, takes in Therru, a child who was sexually trafficked by her father and uncle, nearly burned to death, and abandoned.

Though still firmly rooted in the genre of high fantasy, the text foregrounds the extent to which mythic and fantastic imaginaries are complicit in the vilification of women and disabled people as monstrous “others.” When met with the sight of Therru’s scarred and disfigured face, the superstitious people of Gont “make the sign to avert evil,” believing that “[t]he rich and strong must have virtue; one to whom evil has been done
must be bad, and may rightly be punished.” Here, conventional notions of narrative justice, and of good triumphing over evil, jar with the senseless suffering Therru has endured at the hands of male authority figures, and the association of her scars with monstrosity causes her further marginalization in society. The impasse between the hegemonic norms reaffirmed by some fantastic discourses and the figurations of alterity depicted in *Tehanu* also rears its head when Moss, the witch woman of Re Albi, takes Therru under her wing:

“Come into the forest with me, dearie!” said the old witches in the tales told to the children of Gont. “Come with me and I’ll show you such a pretty sight!” And then the witch shut the child in her oven and baked it brown and ate it, or dropped it into her well, where it hopped and croaked dismally for ever, or put it to sleep for a hundred years inside a great stone, till the King’s Son should come, the Mage Prince, to shatter the stone with a word, wake the maiden with a kiss, and slay the wicked witch…

“Come with me, dearie!” And she took the child into the fields and showed her a lark’s nest in the green hay, or into the marshes to gather white hallows, wild mint, and blueberries. She did not have to shut the child in an oven, or change her into a monster, or seal her in stone. That had all been done already.

Watching Moss with Therru, Tenar realizes that the monstrosity ascribed to those who inhabit sites of alterity within dominant cultural discourses is not an essential attribute, but one instead produced by the violent disavowal of difference.

The shared affinity between Moss and Therru as women deemed monstrous calls to mind Cohen’s observation that

> [l]ike a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again. These epistemological spaces between the monster’s bones are Derrida’s familiar chasm of *différance*: a genetic uncertainty principle, the essence of a monster’s vitality, the reason it always rises from the dissection table as its secrets are about to be revealed and vanishes into the night.

The severe facial scarring that renders Therru’s appearance monstrous behaves like the trace; it is a mark bearing witness to her male captors’ violent attempt to cover up their wrongdoing by killing her, throwing into question the coherence of the textual world of Earthsea as it has
previously been understood and confronting the series with its silenced others. The reader is asked to question not just the vilification of witches in classic fairy tales, but also the supremacy claimed by the male wizards trained on Roke and the stability of their lore regarding true names and essences. In Tenar’s and Therru’s friendship with Moss and Therru’s discovery of her own power, the Gontish aphorisms “[w]eak as woman’s magic” and “[w]icked as woman’s magic,”76 which are invoked somewhat uncritically in A Wizard of Earthsea, are directly challenged, and as the wizard Ogion lies dying, he instructs Tenar to “[t]each [Therru] all,” but “[n]ot [on] Roke. They are afraid.”77 Indeed, the wizards on Roke are impotent for much of Tehanu and The Other Wind, unable to comprehend the Master Patterner’s prophecy regarding “a woman on Gont”78 in lieu of a new Archmage. The magic of men is even more severely called into question in The Other Wind as it is revealed that the first mages stole a piece of the dragons’ land in their quest for eternal life, creating the Dry Land, a bleak and unchanging afterlife that in The Farthest Shore already threatened to overwhelm Earthsea as a result of the wizard Cob’s quest for immortality.

Tehanu and The Other Wind (and, to a lesser extent, The Farthest Shore) are thus in part a critique of the unitary, transcendent subject nearly identical to Derrida’s. In “[seeking] the bodiless, immortal self,”79 the earliest wizards implicated themselves in an oppressive logic that still lingers in the elitism, insularity, and masculinist homosociality of their institutions. This manifests not only in the immediately apparent settler colonialism with which The Other Wind concerns itself, but also the violent suppression of women depicted in Tehanu. Dragons’ power is subtextually linked to the threat women pose to patriarchal structures of dominance and discourses of the unitary self throughout Tehanu, beginning with Ogion’s encounter (related second-hand by Tenar) with a fisherwoman of Kemay who appears to him alternately as an old woman and a dragon, and who tells him a legend of how dragons and humans were once one people. Ogion remarks to her, “When I first saw you I saw your true being. This woman who sits across the hearth from me is no more than the dress she wears,” to which the dragon-woman laughs and replies, “If only it were that simple!”80 Ogion’s encounter with the dragon-woman reveals the limits of his wisdom concerning the “true being” of people and things, destabilizing its logic and uncovering possibilities other than what has been previously established. It seems no accident that the fixity of the structure of magic, so often metatextually linked to the series’ worldbuilding, should also be disrupted in these final two volumes.
The dragon lore introduced here brings Le Guin’s treatment of magic even further in line with a deconstructive understanding of signification within the same, as the wizards’ art magic stems from their hybrid subjectivity, dependent on the very others whose land they encroach upon in seeking immortality. Defining the dragon-woman’s selfhood turns out not to be as simple a matter as discerning her one “true” being, as the one is always intrinsically bound up with the other. In a subtler way, all of the women in *Tehanu* grapple with the patriarchal sovereignty that disavows this ethical relation with heterogeneity and refuses to acknowledge “that one’s freedom meant another’s unfreedom, unless some ever-changing, moving balance were reached, like the balance of a body moving forward.” The devaluing of women as “others” denied the sovereign subjectivity granted to men within Earthsea’s dominant cultural order results in scenarios in which, in Cohen’s words, “difference, like a Hydra, sprouts two heads where one has been lopped away, [and] the possibilities of escape, resistance, disruption arise with more force.” Le Guin repeatedly implies that women’s joy, rage, and healing from trauma indicate a spiritual communion with their dragon heritage as it both eludes and disrupts the limits placed around womanhood as defined by cultural norms in Earthsea. This is seen in Tenar’s repeated invocation of the name of the dragon Kalessin in moments of distress, anger, or strength, but it reaches its culminating moment in *The Other Wind* when Therru, now a young woman bearing the true name Tehanu, transforms into a dragon after her literal dismantling of the wall placed around the land of the dragons by the first wizards.

The latter Earthsea novels are instructive for reading the entire series deconstructively, with dragons serving as fantastic figurations of the alterity erased within the texts’ pages and implicitly drawing a connection to the more familiar and banal violence overlooked in Le Guin’s earlier writing. This is most clearly dramatized when Tenar admires a decorative fan in the weaver Fan’s shop, which ordinarily depicts a scene of daily life in Havnor Great Port, but when held to the light reveals a flip side ordinarily hidden from view:

Dragons moved as the folds of the fan moved. Painted faint and fine on the yellowed silk, dragons of pale red, blue, green moved and grouped, as the figures on the other side were grouped, among clouds and mountain peaks. [...] [She] saw the two sides, the two paintings, made one by the light flowing through the silk, so that the clouds and peaks were the towers of the city, and the men and women were winged, and the dragons looked with human eyes.
The Earthsea series, as with all of Le Guin’s speculative fiction, demonstrates a fantastic impulse to open onto broader realities than the one(s) constructed by the dominant discourses of our Primary World, and as I have demonstrated throughout this article, such an impulse is also a deconstructive one. The series goes further, however, to inhabit a deconstructive relationship to its own textuality, and in doing so draws critical attention to the hegemonic norms re-inscribed within fantasy texts and the utterly other that is concealed even as the texts gesture toward its approach. Earthsea is a landscape constantly in flux, both physically and in terms of its textual construction, and Le Guin’s fantastic imagination behaves like the light flowing through the silk of the fan, revealing figurations of difference within structures of the same, necessarily problematic though they may be.

**Conclusion**

Over the course of this article I have demonstrated that the fantasy genre is uniquely equipped to highlight deconstructive movements at work in every text and to draw attention to sites of alterity concealed within normative constructions in the Primary World. I have also shown that contrary to common anxieties about deconstruction, this activity does not result in a nihilistic end of meaning, but rather a more radical variant on the tendencies already found in many fantasy texts. The unbuilding of the wall and the dragons’ reclamation of their land in *The Other Wind* does not, as the wizard Gamble fears, spell an end to the art of magic. However ill-built the Great House of Roke and the institutions it represents is ultimately revealed to be over the course of the Earthsea series, the solution is not to obliterate such structures but to affirm them, “[s]o long,” Azver the Master Patterner remarks, “as the wind can blow through the windows.” Le Guin’s Earthsea series is keenly aware of the violent suppression of the other that can be re-inscribed in fantasy, often in the name of preserving supposed essential truths. However, it is ultimately an affirmation of fantasy’s potential to break with oppressive norms and dismantle the ideological limits placed around imaginations. While the fantastic can no more offer unmediated access to the other than any other mode of writing, it can draw readers’ attention to the openings created by its repetitions of elements of the Primary World, and herald the still-to-come advent of the other.
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Notes

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ABSTRACT
Colson Whitehead’s fantastical depiction of the nineteenth century United States in *The Underground Railroad* (2016) uses tools of speculative fiction to demonstrate very real applications of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975). As much as Whitehead calls attention to societal truths unearthed by Foucault, the novel also highlights what Paul Gilroy refers to as a blindspot in Foucault’s chronicling of human development: the failure to adequately account for racism. Whitehead fills this gap with his imaginative vision, in which protagonist Cora travels a US where escaped slaves (such as Cora herself) can flee plantation owners via the literal railroad of the novel’s title: a train carrying people to ostensible freedom. As Cora rides across the country, she sees elements of the “carceral archipelago” Foucault describes, suggesting that so-called “free states” have more in common with plantations than she initially thinks. Such elements stand out most in Whitehead’s South Carolina, in which blacks and whites live alongside one another. The novel quickly dispels illusions of harmony when Cora works as a living taxidermal model in the Museum of Wonders, where her and several other black women perform humiliating recreations of plantation life for white audiences. The state’s medical system for people of color involves sterilizing women and treating syphilis with sugar water. These institutions reflect a Foucauldian view of society. Like Foucault, Whitehead depicts medical treatment as an essential
apparatus for state control of marginalized subjects. The Museum of Wonders evokes Tony Bennett’s suggestion that the “exhibitionary complex” of museums in Victorian England fulfilled functions similar to what Foucault ascribes to prisons. I argue that Whitehead’s use of fantasy demonstrates understandings of surveillance described by Foucault while also adapting them to account for the particularities of American racism.

**Keywords**: Fantasy, Foucault, race, racism, American slavery

Colson Whitehead’s fantastical depiction of the nineteenth century United States in *The Underground Railroad* uses tools of speculative fiction to demonstrate very real applications of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. As much as Whitehead calls attention to societal truths unearthed by Foucault, the novel also highlights a blindspot critical race theorists have identified in Foucault’s chronicling of human development: the failure to adequately consider racism. Whitehead fills this gap with his imaginative vision, in which protagonist Cora travels a US where escaped slaves (such as Cora herself) can flee plantation owners via the eponymous, literal railroad: a train carrying people to ostensibly freedom. While Cora rides across the country, she sees that the so-called “free states” have more in common with plantations than she initially thinks, as exemplified by elements of the “carceral archipelago” Foucault describes.

Following a brief discussion of the relevance of such elements to the novel’s depiction of plantation life, I will focus on Whitehead’s South Carolina, in which black and white people live alongside one another. The state is the first to which Cora travels after fleeing her Georgia plantation, and she arrives with the hope of a life free from the brutality of enslavement. But Whitehead imagines a South Carolina in which ostensibly benign, government-supported institutions, specifically museums and hospitals, turn out to have insidious commonalities with slavery. These commonalities, in the case of all three institutions, evoke Foucault’s description of the “society [...] of surveillance” vital to sovereign power. Whitehead’s depiction of the violence of South Carolinian hospitals further reflects Foucault’s analysis of medical treatment as an essential apparatus for state control of marginalized subjects. Similarly, the novel’s museum suggests Tony Bennett’s argument that the “exhibitionary complex” of museums in Victorian England fulfilled functions comparable
to what Foucault ascribes to prisons. Given the novel’s American setting, albeit a speculative one, Whitehead likewise brings to mind the extensive racist histories of both museums and hospitals in American society. I argue that the historical references of The Underground Railroad engage with the fantastical elements and understandings of surveillance described by Foucault. The engagement shows how speculative fiction can use the insights of Foucauldian analysis of institutional power while adapting them to reflect the specificities of American racism.

**The Foucauldian Plantation**

Foucault’s account of the development of modern day prisons begins with a description of the spectacle of punishment under the *ancien regime*. Foucault describes the “juridico-political function” of public executions, in which governments demonstrate their power through the highly visible murder of transgressors. These demonstrations thereby function as “a school rather than a festival” where instructors (rulers) teach their pupils (the populace) about the violent price to be paid for breaking laws. The educational process occurs as a result of the visibility of executions, which disseminates their lessons amongst mass audiences. Foucault’s illustration of the brutal instruction of the *ancien regime* constitutes an establishing component of the narrative of *Discipline and Punish*.

The spectacle of earlier criminal justice then becomes the surveillance of modern discipline. The “apparatus of corrective penalty” Foucault describes as the *ancien regime*’s latter-day heir relies not on the depictions of the earlier spectacle, but rather on controlling people’s bodies. The construction of prisons is a crucial part of this apparatus, as they allow for the surveillance of prisoners essential to the control. The surveillance facilitates the self-sustainability of power over prisoners. Foucault emphasizes that this power must not be understood in a negative sense: “In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.” This system of production creates the conditions necessary for contemporary organizations of control. In Foucault’s telling, criminal punishment evolves from relying on the visibility of public violence to mobilizing the controlling functions of surveillance.

Although Foucault’s analysis contains compelling insights, his work does not sufficiently account for race. Paul Gilroy describes this myopia well in his explanation of Foucault’s failure “to consider how the idea that Africans and their New World descendants were less than human might have affected” the sorts of processes he describes in *Discipline and Punish*. Such considerations are, of course, essential to understanding
modern-day criminal justice in any context, and all the more so in light of the US’s history of slavery and segregation. In spite of this shortcoming, Gilroy nonetheless sees Foucault as “an important resource” due to the perspicacity of his understanding of the sociocultural elements he does manage to address. Thus, Gilroy’s critique outlines both the continued relevance of Foucault’s work and the need for additional context in order to maximize that relevance.

Building on Gilroy’s identification of gaps in Foucault’s thinking, scholars have begun to adapt his arguments to take race into consideration. For example, John Fiske examines surveillance in a manner he likens to both Foucault and George Orwell, while also suggesting that the process “has been racialized in a manner they did not foresee.” In a thorough and detailed application of race to Foucault, Simone Browne argues that his description of the changes in state control over people’s bodies must be altered to reflect American racialized violence: “when that body is black, the grip hardly loosened during slavery and continued post-emancipation.” Accordingly, Browne uses Foucault’s understanding of power for a thoughtful analysis of the brutality of slavery, while also recognizing throughout that the relevancy of that analysis depends on a cognizance of the specificities of American racism. Browne thereby seeks to apply valuable insights gleaned from Foucault and make them even more useful for understanding the American context. Such adjustments in Browne’s work epitomize the ongoing potential of well-handled Foucauldian scholarship.

Browne’s use of Foucault to discuss the treatment of black people in the US also demonstrates the importance of properly contextualizing any reading of his ideas. Richard Brodhead’s description of the centrality of corporal punishment in nineteenth-century American literature exemplifies such contextualization within Foucauldian criticism. While Brodhead correctly identifies that literary depictions of whipping reflect Foucault’s view of the significance of visible punishment, Brodhead also argues that applications of Discipline and Punish require “considerable adjustment for historical specificity.” Like Fiske and Browne, Brodhead does not discount the usefulness of Foucault’s ideas, but he also suggests that their applicability relies on a comprehensive understanding of a given milieu.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s theorization of the “racial project” as a way to understand racism helps to provide the context necessary to use the value of Foucauldian insights to analyze racial relations in the US. Omi and Winant describe racial projects as reflecting structural
inequalities within the individual practices of daily interactions.\textsuperscript{17} Race can thereby be understood as a societal mosaic of racial projects, in which people’s behavior towards one another both reflects and perpetuates broader injustices.\textsuperscript{18} As a result of this interplay between micro and macro social relations, racism must be analyzed through attention to both structural causes and everyday exchanges.\textsuperscript{19} The two are inextricable from one another, and must therefore be understood as being in dialogue rather than isolated individually. The attention to this dynamic provided by Whitehead’s novel can facilitate a use of Foucault in the American setting.

The Underground Railroad contains a myriad of racial projects throughout its fantastical landscape. Cora takes the railroad of the novel’s title to a number of different states, each of which is “a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things,” as station agent Lumbly explains.\textsuperscript{20} Although the customs Lumbly describes exist within ostensible “free states” without slavery, Cora soon learns that they have more in common with plantations than would appear at first glance. The states’ racial projects perpetuate discrimination beyond plantation life. Whitehead’s detailed depictions of the racial projects begin to show the value of using Foucauldian analysis with proper contextualization.

Prior to Cora’s escape, descriptions of the treatment of enslaved people on plantations reflect Foucault’s analysis of the role of spectacle in criminal punishment. Whitehead describes the witnessing of Cora’s whipping as “moral instruction” through which enslaved people learn about the consequences of transgressions.\textsuperscript{21} These violent lessons facilitate the consideration of “the slave’s pain and the day sooner or later when it would be their turn at the foul end of the lash.”\textsuperscript{22} The transmission of this message fulfills the edifying function Foucault ascribes to public brutality committed against convicted criminals, as both acts serve the dual purposes of punishing transgressors and informing others of the threat of similar attacks through spectacle. Such acts thereby maintain power structures. Reading plantation whipping as a racial project links its individualized violence with those structures, since the action must be understood within both the context of the plantation and the broader system of slavery. Whitehead thereby brings the racialized act of whipping into productive contact with Foucault’s reading of public attacks of police violence, which helps to make it more applicable to nineteenth-century American racism.

Slave catcher Ridgeway’s motivations for committing acts of violence similar to what Cora suffers show his cognizance of their role in maintaining the conditions of slavery. Ridgeway and his fellow patrollers “stopped
niggers they knew to be free, for their amusement but also to remind the Africans of the forces arrayed against them, whether they were owned by a white man or not." These sorts of reminders perpetuate the logic underlying slavery, which, as the passage’s reference to the treatment of free black people highlights, has ramifications outside of plantations. Whitehead’s use of the racial epithet within free indirect discourse suggests the naturalization of racism: slurs are not distinctly quoted from people enforcing slavery, but rather a normalized element of the novel’s milieu. The normalization emphasizes the success of Ridgeway’s endeavors, while the slur’s jarring presence nonetheless highlights their brutality. Whitehead then connects Ridgeway with the previously quoted description of whipping, as the act soon follows. These passages thereby demonstrate both the role of visible violence in preserving systems of power and the understanding of that function by those in power. Furthermore, the use of the slur marks the violence as a clearly racialized act, distinguishing it from Foucault’s account.

The visibility of spectacle coexists with disciplinary surveillance in plantation life. The novel’s prologue captures this simultaneity in describing the experience of Cora’s grandmother, Ajarry: “Since the night she was kidnapped she had been appraised and reappraised, each day waking upon the pan of a new scale. Know your value and you know your place in the order.” The appraisal process referenced in the quotation, used for the purpose of maintaining “the order,” evokes Foucault’s understanding of discipline. Not only do Ridgeway and others use whipping to show the consequences of attempting to disrupt that order, but the system of slavery functions epistemically to control enslaved people by reminding them of the surveillance to which they are subjected. This duality reflects Robyn Wiegman’s observation that Foucault’s identification of the evolution from visible violence to surveillance exists, in the case of American racism, “not in successive stages but as intertwined technologies that worked simultaneously to stage the hierarchical relations of race.” Like Brown, and, I argue, Whitehead, Wiegman aims to make use of Foucault’s valuable cultural critique while also transforming it to speak to the specificities of the American context. The depiction of the appraisal in the quotation illustrates such a transformation.

Further revisions of Foucault come through the novel’s speculative elements, which respond specifically to the real apparatuses facilitating the racialized violence of slavery. Whitehead describes these tools when Cora first enters a railroad station: “She saw the chains first. Thousands of them dangled off the wall on nails in a morbid inventory of manacles
and fetters, of shackles for ankles and wrists and necks in all varieties and combinations.” The chains lining the station walls recall Foucault’s description of the instruments of spectacle wielded by the ancien regime, similarly used by defenders of slavery such as Ridgeway. The appropriation of these instruments then suggests the promise of freedom the station offers. Simultaneously, the passage’s representation of those instruments links the fantastical possibility of escape via the train with the torture of enslaved people, for which Whitehead needs no speculative prose. Laura Dubek argues that the novel’s use of fantasy “draws attention to the fiction of the Underground Railroad, how it has been mythologized, like so much of our history, to tell a triumphant story about America.” While Dubek rightly points to how the fantastical elements foreground the constructed nature of national narratives, I aim to build on her insights by demonstrating how engaging those elements with Foucault shows his relevance and limitations for understanding American racism. Whitehead’s use of fantasy, I argue, transcends those limitations while drawing on the ideas that do relate.

This dialogue between The Underground Railroad and Discipline and Punish illustrates how Foucauldian analysis can highlight a novel’s critique of the violence of disciplinary institutions, which contrasts with some prior or Foucauldian literary scholarship. In a reading of depictions of policing in the work of Victorian authors such as Charles Dickens, D.A. Miller suggests that the novel “inspires less a distaste for power than a fear of it.” Although fiction may seem to disconnect itself from the police, the illusion of detachment renders their presence even more insidious. Mark Seltzer’s similar conclusion, drawn based on the work of Henry James, identifies “a criminal continuity between the techniques of the novel and the social technologies of power that inhere in these techniques.” This association constitutes “the politics of the Jamesian text.” Foucault himself concurs when he argues that literature “forms part of that great system of constraint by which the West compelled the everyday to bring itself into discourse.” Although Foucault does not clarify to which authors he refers, the Jamesian and Dickensian texts referenced by Miller and Seltzer clearly differ from Whitehead’s contemporary speculative fiction. Thus, The Underground Railroad provides a contrast to the valuable insights of earlier Foucauldian literary scholars by illustrating the space for societal critique generated by speculative fiction.

My Foucauldian reading of the novel thereby continues scholarly discussion of the relationship between speculative fiction and race. In writing specifically about The Underground Railroad, Matthew Dischinger
argues that the novel’s fantastical elements lead “readers to first see the work as an obviously fantastical fictionalization that seemingly removes them from its field of vision before slowly reassembling its sharp critique.” Dischinger’s reading, then, highlights the relationship between Whitehead’s criticism of American racism and his engagement with speculative fiction. Dischinger draws on the work of Ramón Saldívar, who suggests that the speculative aspects of novels that also have elements of historical fiction highlight the “deficit between the ideals of redemptive liberal democratic national histories concerning inclusiveness, equality, justice, universal rights, freedom guaranteed by rule of law, and the deeds that have constituted nations and their histories as public collective fantasies.”

While the preceding section has focused on segments of the novel with a close relationship to history (with the exception of the railroad, which still maintains the brutal historical link of the shackles and chains), the subsequent discussion of South Carolina will illustrate how Whitehead’s imaginative vision of the state exemplifies the gap Saldívar describes. Although the novel’s South Carolina never severs its historical ties, the combination of them with elements of fantasy facilitates a stark, Foucauldian analysis of American racism.

**Panoptic Medicine**

When Cora arrives in South Carolina, she hears of the supposedly idealistic nature of the treatment of black people in the state, which appears to be contrary to the conditions of violence and surveillance from which she escapes. The station agent Sam greets her: “You’re a long way from Georgia […] South Carolina has a much more enlightened attitude toward colored advancement than the rest of the south.” At this point, she has no evidence to contradict Sam’s view, and therefore does have reason to hope that she is as far from plantation life as he claims. However, the tepid description of the enlightenment of the state’s population also foreshadows the similarities to slavery she will soon experience. Sam promises no alleviation of the actual forces oppressing her, but simply a change in “attitude[s].” His lack of specificity becomes even more suspect as he continues to praise South Carolinian life: “Perhaps you’ll decide to stay. As I said, South Carolina is like nothing you’ve ever seen.” Whitehead’s depiction of the state ultimately does support this statement, but only through discrimination for which Sam does not account.

Cora’s initial acknowledgment of positive changes in her own physical condition reflects her internalization of Sam’s optimism. Upon considering her wellbeing, Cora “realized the headaches she had suffered since
Terrance’s blows had disappeared since she came to South Carolina.”38 She refers here to Terrance Randall, her violent former owner. The attacks described in this passage occur in response to her valiant effort to defend Chester, a fellow enslaved person whom Randall beats for failing to satisfy him.39 The headaches thereby evoke the violence of spectacle Whitehead depicts as being endemic to plantation existence. Accordingly, their absence suggests that perhaps Cora truly is as far from Georgia as Sam leads her to think.

But the novel’s description of the context in which Cora recognizes the improvements reflect ways in which she continues to experience oppression. She makes the observation about her headaches upon being examined by a doctor. Whitehead explains that the “window in the examination room granted her a view of the configuration of the town and the verdant countryside for miles and miles.”40 The room’s building is thereby a “stepping-stone to heaven”41 which grants observatory powers to those inside. Although Cora looks out the window here, the quotation implies that others (i.e. the white doctor) more often have the benefit of the capacities for surveillance. She has escaped the plantation, but not the American system of racial power relations.

Whitehead thereby begins to suggest a Foucauldian analysis of the building, and, more broadly, medical practices in South Carolina. Discipline and Punish’s most famous chapter, on “panopticism,” concludes with a pointed rhetorical question: “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?”42 Foucault makes the answer clear through the preceding description of the rules and processes shared between these institutions, all of which function to control individuals.43 As a result, “society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance.”44 When focusing specifically on hospitals, Foucault emphasizes how their buildings were “organized...to allow a better observation of patients.”45 The structures became “no longer simply the roof under which penury and imminent death took shelter.”46 Likewise, Cora’s view “for miles and miles” suggests a building that has been constructed to optimize its observatory abilities. She continues to exist within the purview of a “society...of surveillance,” of which the medical system is clearly a key element.

As Foucault describes, the spaces constructed for hospitals are used in part for examinations (i.e. what Cora undergoes), which are a core component of medical observation. The former irregularity of testing became the more standardized exam practices of panoptic society.47 This standardization allowed the hospital “to become a place of training and of the
correlation of knowledge; it represented a reversal therefore of the power relations and the constitution of a corpus of knowledge.” The reversed system of relations describes the culture of control and observation which succeeded the ancien regime’s use of violent spectacle. The culture permeated throughout the criminal justice system, but also extended into hospitals and other medical institutions. Exams constituted an aspect of this extension.

The description of Cora’s exam thereby evokes Foucault’s analysis. After she removes her clothes, the doctor’s “fingers traced the scars from her whippings. Hazarding a guess as to the number of lashes, he was off by two. He examined her privates with his tools. The exam was painful and made her ashamed.” The accuracy of the guess speaks to the power of the medical “corpus of knowledge”; the doctor is omniscient enough to be able to figure out how many times Cora has been whipped with near precision. In spite of his ability, he nonetheless touches her with invasive physicality. Her feelings of pain and shame reflect the brutality of the exam. It thus suggests how the controlling practices of the South Carolinian medical system perpetuate the racialized surveillance Cora initially seems to leave behind upon fleeing the plantation.

When Cora undergoes another exam, the heinousness of the process becomes even more pronounced. Whitehead describes the second exam as comparable to “being conveyed on a belt.” The mechanical language reflects the dehumanizing affect of medical treatment. The dehumanization continues as the exam gets more violative. The doctor interrogates her: “You’ve had intimate relations. Have you considered birth control?” While the question would be intrusive under any circumstances, Whitehead emphasizes its callousness due to the “relations” referring to a scene on the plantation in which a group of men rape Cora. She reflects on the grotesquerie of the doctor’s language: “To compare what had happened the night of the smokehouse with what passed between a man and his wife who were in love. Dr. Stevens’s speech made them the same. Her stomach twisted at the idea.” Cora thereby recognizes the violence of the medical system, to which, as per Foucault, exams make an important contribution. The passages also emphasize the gendered nature of that violence through the reference to Cora’s rape and the invasion of her privacy by a masculine figure of authority.

The novel further reflects Foucault’s project of situating the hospital within a broader regime of power through surveillance by comparing South Carolina’s medical system to a plantation. When Cora enters the room for her first exam, Whitehead describes the “gleaming steel
instruments [..] look[ing] like tools Terrance Randall might have ordered from the blacksmith for sinister purposes.” This quotation makes the connection between medicine and slavery explicit. The language likens medical tools to the weapons used against enslaved people. Although the uses of the instruments are not identical, Whitehead nonetheless calls attention to similarities between the racist violence of slavery and that of the medical system. The passage thereby highlights the role of medicine in furthering racism, just as Foucault connects hospitals to modes of control prevalent throughout society.

The similarity between the violence of medicine and plantations suggests a reason for their lack of a doctor, which itself facilitates the novel’s critique of racism in the American medical system. At the onset of Cora’s exam, Whitehead describes her lack of experience with doctors: “On the Randall plantation, the doctor was only called when the slave remedies, the roots and salves, had failed and a valued hand was near death. In most cases there was nothing for the doctor to do at that point but complain about the muddy roads and receive his payment.” Read in tandem with the analogy between the doctor’s tools and those of Randall, this passage solidifies the association of slavery and the medical system. On the plantation, Randall has weapons with which he can enforce racialized surveillance, and therefore has little need for doctors. Those who do have a presence fulfill limited functions. But in a place with the “enlightened attitude[s]” of South Carolina, racial inequality requires further means of enforcement. Medical practices substitute for the violence of slavery.

Whitehead further highlights the substitution through the description of sterilization. Following Dr. Stevens’s invasive questioning of Cora, he tells her “about a new surgical technique” which will prevent her from becoming pregnant. He explains that, for her, the procedure is optional, but black women who have had more than two children or are “otherwise mentally unfit” do not have the same choice. Cora recognizes that sterilization has even longer lasting consequences than the brutality of slavery, as horrific as it may be: “Cut you open and rip them out, dripping. Because that’s what you do when you take away someone’s babies—steal their future. Torture them as much as you can when they are on this earth, then take away the hope that one day their people will have it better.” This quotation shows Cora’s awareness of the racism of the medical system, and its similarity to plantation life. In fact, the inhibition of the hope of a “future” for enslaved people through the possibility of childbirth grants sterilization an evil with which even Randall and Ridgeway cannot compete.
The novel continues to emphasize the violence of South Carolinian medicine through the depiction of black people being the unwitting subjects of a syphilis study. Cora finally decides to leave the state after Sam tells her about a white doctor treating his black patients for syphilis with sugar water in order to conduct research on them without their consent. The doctor describes the research as “important,” since it will help him to understand “how a disease spreads, the trajectory of infection, and [how] we approach a cure.”

Both the study itself and the scientific justification confirm the racism of the medical system. As with the description of sterilization, Whitehead shows how doctors’ claims of protecting people’s interests obscure the maliciousness of racist practices. While the abuses on plantations do not have the guise of such masking, the two institutions facilitate similarly racialized surveillance, albeit through different means. Although Cora escapes from slavery, she continues to experience racial oppression.

The references to syphilis invoke the very real historical racism of the American medical system within Whitehead’s speculative context. As Dischinger notes, the events in South Carolina make an explicit reference to the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. Between 1932 and 1972, the US Public Health Service conducted a study of black men with untreated syphilis in Macon County, Alabama. The study examined around 400 men with the disease and 200 healthy men as controls, none of whom were treated with new drugs. As a result, a third of the syphilitic men died from the disease. Although results had been published in medical journals throughout the study’s history, only coverage in the popular press in the early 1970s led to the experiment shutting down.

The novel’s alignment with American history through Tuskegee epitomizes what Dischinger calls “speculative satire”: “the practice of using speculative premises to realign through satire our understanding of national and regional histories.” Dischinger reads the invocation of Tuskegee as exemplary of Whitehead’s use of this technique to critique American racism, since the syphilis study simultaneously highlights historical racist processes and dehistoricizes them through the imagined milieu. Whitehead brings his speculative prose into constructive correspondence with the nonfictional controlling practices of American medicine, practices Foucault would undoubtedly recognize as reflective of his analysis.

Like the references to syphilis, the novel’s descriptions of sterilization similarly reference racist practices in American history. In parts of the US, sterilization procedures eclipsed those of Nazi Germany, with women of color often being targeted. For example, in North Carolina,
59 percent of patients sterilized by the state from 1958 to 1960 were black, and the number rose to 64 percent from 1964 to 1966.\textsuperscript{70} In 1920s California, black people and immigrants were sterilized at close to double the rate of the rest of the population.\textsuperscript{71} The Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls, founded in 1915 and a recipient of state funding in 1920, “funneled women to the eugenic surgeon’s table.”\textsuperscript{72} Whitehead again shifts the time and place of the practice in his fantastical literary context while nonetheless calling attention to the history of discrimination in the American medical system. In doing so, the novel illustrates Foucault’s reading of hospitals and compensates for its limited ability to address the particularities of American racism. The entanglement of fantasy, history, and Foucauldian perspectives in \textit{The Underground Railroad} demonstrates a way of seeing the relevancies and shortcomings of \textit{Discipline and Punish} when applied to racial relations in the US.

However, the directness of Whitehead’s invocation of Tuskegee contrasts with the less pointed evocation of restrictions on black reproduction, and the two together thereby show different ways in which the novel puts history in dialogue with the fantastical. Although black women were often the targets of sterilization, many white women were subjected to the procedure as well. Thus, Whitehead’s depiction of it makes a less explicit reference to a specific racist practice than does the appearance of syphilis. The description of sterilization as “steal[ing] their future” also evokes Frederick Douglass’s reference to the possibility of “the downfall of slavery by the inevitable laws of population.”\textsuperscript{73} Douglass raises this issue in relation to the many children birthed by enslaved women and fathered by their owners: “if their increase will do no other good, it will do away the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right.”\textsuperscript{74} The quotation suggests that the biracial children exemplify the potential epiphany of slavery’s inherent evil. But the sterilization of Whitehead’s South Carolina removes that potential, and replaces it with a brutal depiction of racist violence calling attention to the history of American oppression.

The novel intensifies this representation through a broader critique of systemic racism. The explanation of the hospital’s imbrication within South Carolinian life contributes to the articulation of this critique. Although Cora hopes to warn people of the medical system’s evils, Sam doubts her ability to do so: “There is no authority to turn to for redress—the town is paying for it all. And then there are all the other towns where colored pilgrims have been installed in the same system.”\textsuperscript{75} The system he describes facilitates the racist practices Cora witnesses. The governmental
funding of those practices suggests that they cannot be isolated from the “society...of surveillance” South Carolina exemplifies.

Medicine in the state thereby epitomizes the racial project, as the intimate violence of the syphilis study and forced sterilization personalize the structural racism which creates the conditions necessary for that violence. The racial project of the South Carolinian medical system interacts with Whitehead’s use of speculative fiction and Foucauldian analysis to help Discipline and Punish speak to the specificities of the American context.

Museum of Power
The system facilitating the violence of medicine in South Carolina also supports a museum: the Museum of Natural Wonders. Whitehead’s introduction of the museum’s offerings makes an explicit link between them and the medical system: “The exhibits opened the same day as the hospital, part of a celebration trumpeting the town’s recent accomplishments. The new mayor had been elected on the progress ticket and wanted to ensure that the residents associated him with his predecessor’s forward-looking initiatives.” The novel connects the hospital and the museum on the basis of both being “forward-looking initiatives” conducive to the town’s development. Although the sterilization and experimentation highlight the insidious underbelly of this growth, the mayor nonetheless includes the system supporting them in his “celebration.” Like the “enlightened attitude[s]” Whitehead reveals to be hollow, the mayor’s “progress ticket” clearly draws on a limited notion of progression. Thus, the novel establishes the associations between the medical system and the museum due to both being interwoven within the town’s political structures.

In addition to the common systemic support, the museum shares the hospital’s reliance on physical structure to impose control. Cora’s first impressions of the building emphasize its dominance: “It occupied an entire block. Statues of lions guarded the long flat steps, seeming to gaze thirstily at the large fountain. Once Cora walked into its influence, the sound of the splashing water dampened the street noise, lifting her into the auspices of the museum.” Whitehead’s description of the museum occupying the street calls attention to the powerful physical presence. Just as Foucault describes the importance of the layouts of hospitals to the control of patients, which The Underground Railroad reflects, the museum similarly relies on its structure. The panoptic language describing the lions’ “gaze” further links the museum with Foucault’s analysis of hospitals. The limiting of sounds from outside suggests the museum to be closed off from public influence, an autonomous structure of power.
independent of external forces. In South Carolina, the museum, like the hospital, is an institutional center of control.

The museum’s curator, Mr. Fields, personifies the building’s structure. When Cora meets him, she initially assumes that she will be employed as a cleaner. However, he soon explains that she will have a more direct role in what he describes as “the business of museums”: “Some people never left the counties where they were born [...]. Like a railroad, the museum permitted them to see the rest of the country beyond their small experience, from Florida to Maine to the western frontier. And to see its people.” As Mr. Fields explains, although some Americans of the era do not travel much, the museum facilitates their engagement with more of the country. This experience includes both terrain and people (as the end of the quotation emphasizes), among whom Cora soon finds out that she will be one, as she and two other black co-workers model for the exhibits. The simile links the exhibits with the train by which she discovers life beyond the plantation, which begins to suggest its relationship with the museum (much as Whitehead also compares the plantation to the hospital). In contrast to this damning association, Mr. Fields values the museum’s ability to teach people about “the rest of the country,” though he does not appear to consider the particularity of the perspective being taught.

Whitehead problematizes Mr. Fields’s belief in the museum’s educational capacity by challenging his view of the singularity of historical veracity. Whereas he aims to present a single view of the country to museumgoers, the novel calls the accuracy of such a perspective into question. Mr. Fields describes a display showing an Indigenous man receiving a treaty from white men as depicting “the truth of the historic encounter.” Although the certainty of the language juxtaposed with the events being shown indicates Mr. Fields’s misguided thinking, the emphasis on that indication increases as the passage continues. In a facetious conversation with the wax dummy with whom she shares an exhibit, Cora asks rhetorically, “What do you say, Skipper John [...]. Is this the truth of our historic encounter?” The echo of Mr. Fields’s language demonstrates a direct mockery of his confidence. Whitehead further undermines Mr. Fields in the final lines of the following paragraph: “Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking, alluring and ever out of reach.” At this point, Whitehead has put the word “truth” in the mouths of three characters in short succession: Mr. Fields, Cora, and the narrator. Whereas Mr. Fields believes in the existence of one version of history, the three truths suggest the “changing
display” closer to capturing the multiplicity and inherent subjectivity of historical representation.

The novel’s multivalent conception of history contrasts with the limited representation of black experience shown in the museum. Although it does contain three different settings for black people, they remain circumscribed within the limited boundaries of the three locations, between which Cora and her co-workers rotate. In the first, entitled “Scenes from Darkest Africa,” birds hang overhead a hut and cooking fire. The second, “Life on the Slave Ship,” depicts a boat carrying enslaved people to the life from which Cora has recently escaped. Finally, “Typical Day on the Plantation” brings Cora and her black coworkers back to a simulacrum of that life, in which they work at a spinning wheel on an imitation of a Southern farm. She acknowledges the accuracy of the costume for Typical Day, “which was made of coarse, authentic negro cloth. She burned with shame twice a day when she stripped and got into her costume.” Here, the authenticity Mr. Fields celebrates uncritically contributes to the painful affect Cora experiences. His desire for truth trumps her feeling of “shame.” Typical Day combines with the other two displays to present museumgoers with a narrow view of black life, in which people can only live in huts, on a slave ship, or on a plantation.

The exhibits evoke Tony Bennett’s Foucauldian reading of museums in Victorian England. Bennett works from Foucault’s conception of state power in the carceral archipelago to understand the British “exhibitionary complex,” although the latter relies on public displays of surveillance where the former conceals power dynamics. In contrast to the carceral archipelago’s treatment of lawbreakers, the exhibitionary complex publicized state control through its open and accessible nature. British exhibitions introduced a “spectacle” of power which advertised state repression. At the same time, they also interpellated people as the subjects of government restriction, thereby encouraging them to enforce state principles and regulations upon themselves. Thus, Bennett complicates Foucault’s notion of power as emanating from concealment. Bennett’s application of this Foucauldian view of prisons and hospitals (amongst other institutions) to museums resembles Whitehead’s implication of the associations between the shared panoptic qualities of plantations, hospitals, and the Museum of Natural Wonders.

Rather than simply reverse Foucault’s description of prisons, Bennett argues that museums combined the carceral insularity with a newfound “self-monitoring system of looks.” The exhibitionary complex incorporated the principles of the Panopticon found in prisons with panoramic
ideals, controlling the populace by giving them visibility of themselves.\textsuperscript{95} Thus, the complex’s institutions moved towards an arc “of the opening up of objects to more public contexts of inspection and visibility” rather than “a history of confinement,” as was the case with the carceral archipelago.\textsuperscript{96} Both working- and middle-class people were brought together in the exhibitionary complex, and the middle-class were thereby able to display their customs to the working-class (presumably encouraging them to adopt bourgeois norms).\textsuperscript{97} In a similar way, Mr. Fields hopes to present Americans who have lived parochial existences with a broader view of their country. However, this conception of breadth clashes with the limited depiction of the lives of black people, which reflects the limits of the museum as an educational system.

According to Bennett, the museum’s “system of looks” combined with an indoctrination of information designed to make state-influenced perspectives appear as naturalized fact, whereas the “disciplines” linked with prisons were intended more for controlling people.\textsuperscript{98} Historical exhibits proposed a “universal history of civilization,”\textsuperscript{99} which later acquired a nationalist tinge. Science museums espoused a teleological view of industrial development, celebrating the achievements of capitalism and effacing detrimental effects or externalities.\textsuperscript{100} Anthropological installations expressed a Eurocentrism which privileged Western countries at the expense of other histories.\textsuperscript{101} Together, these systems of knowledge distribution conveyed a “temporally organized order of things and peoples” which interpellated viewers as the recipients of this “truth.”\textsuperscript{102} Bennett’s skepticism of the museum’s representation of history calls to mind the depiction of Cora’s experience in South Carolina; the three truths shown in the novel contradict Mr. Fields’s idea of accuracy. Whitehead, like Bennett, uses Foucauldian analysis to interrogate the edifying capacities of museums.

Given Whitehead’s depiction of the museum in the context of a speculative US, the novel also evokes the discriminatory treatment of black artists in American museums. Langston Hughes captures this experience succinctly: “The road for the serious black artist [...] is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high.”\textsuperscript{103} Numerous art history scholars have fleshed out Hughes’s point. For example, Susan Cahan describes the “de facto segregation” created through white curators rarely featuring artists of color outside of exhibitions specifically intended to feature their work.\textsuperscript{104} To make matters worse, museums rarely hired black people in administrative or curatorial positions.\textsuperscript{105} The canonical nature of art historical discourse often led to the marginalization of black artists.\textsuperscript{106}
James Smalls argues that this discrimination has engendered the commonly held view “that African Americans have not created anything of note outside of the cultural sphere of music and literature.”

Cora’s life in the Museum of Natural Wonders reflects the experience of countless black American artists: museums have often facilitated racism.

The discrimination against black artists has occurred in part through the narrow engagement with their work, which Whitehead also suggests. In a number of reviews of a 1939 exhibition of the painter Jacob Lawrence, critics relied heavily on stereotypes to evaluate Lawrence’s art. This reliance epitomizes what Kobena Mercer calls “the gamut of value-laden assumptions that placed prescriptive demands on minority artists.” As a result of these expectations, black artists faced a myriad of restrictions. Mary Ann Calo thereby identifies “a critical and historical establishment that either failed to acknowledge their work as deserving of attention in terms of mainstream ideals, or […] failed to take into account the wide range of expressive possibilities that emerged under the specific conditions of African American life.” Whitehead’s depiction of the museum calls attention to this failure. The specificities of black experiences certainly escape the three exhibits. Instead, the Museum of Natural Wonders shows museumgoers a circumscribed perspective of black Americans. Although Mr. Fields claims to present the world with a holistic accuracy, the novel highlights the hollowness of this notion.

Mr. Fields’s view impacts Cora’s experience in the fantastical museum, which is in dialogue with the historical challenges faced by black artists in twentieth century American museums. She develops a daily routine in which she goes between the three exhibits in reverse order: she starts her days at Typical Day, then goes to Slave Ship, and ends in Darkest Africa. Whitehead describes this routine as creating “a soothing logic […] that] was like going back in time, an unwinding of America. Ending her day in Scenes from Darkest Africa never failed to cast her into a river of calm, the simple theater becoming more than theater, a genuine refuge.” The caustic descriptions of the exhibit as a “refuge” and the rotation between it and the others as “soothing” capture the pain of Cora’s life in South Carolina. That she should see the humiliating displays as respites emphasizes the heinousness of the discrimination she faces elsewhere. Simultaneously, her act of “unwinding” resists the teleological perspective to which Mr. Fields aspires, which also reflects the view of museums Bennett describes and the constraints of white curators limiting the presentation of the work of black artists. Whereas the individuals upholding the restrictions of museums aim to present knowledge in a singular
manner, Cora’s resistance complicates their narratives. Her actions within the speculative context of The Underground Railroad engage with museums’ history of oppression.

The lives of Cora and her co-workers constantly call attention to the museum’s insidiousness. Her friend Isis asks “if she could switch rooms with Cora. She was feeling poorly and wanted to rest at the spinning wheel” of Typical Day. As with the bitter irony of Cora’s refuge in Darkest Africa, the comfort Isis finds in the plantation exhibit foregrounds the pain of her other options. After the women flee the horrors of a real plantation, the supposed progressiveness of South Carolina leads only to a recreation of slavery feeling like relaxation. The real violence of racism follows Cora throughout her journey through the novel’s speculative states.

Whitehead underscores the oppression of the museum by explicitly likening it to plantation life, as the novel also does with the medical system. Cora’s experience engenders her recollection of living under Randall: “Her recent installation in the exhibition returned her to the furrows of Georgia, the dumb, open-jawed stares of the patrons stealing her back to a state of display.” In this quotation, Cora’s reminiscence emphasizes the connection between her life as an enslaved person and her work in the museum. Although she has escaped the literal slavery of the plantation, the racism of the museum brings the experience to mind. Whitehead does not connect plantation owners directly with the museumgoers, but the museum they support nonetheless leads Cora to recall enslavement. The novel thereby shows how discrimination exists beyond the confines of the plantation, due in part to institutions such as the museum and the medical system.

The museum’s audience intensifies the racism Cora faces. As she works, she deals with “the white monsters on the other side of the exhibit [...] pushing their greasy snouts against the window, sneering and hooting.” These “monsters” play a crucial role in supporting the cruelty of Mr. Fields and the museum itself. The discrimination he perpetuates would not have its power without the museumgoers’ enthusiastic embrace of the institution. Whitehead’s description highlights the brutality of their actions. Although attending a museum may seem to be less violent than the actions of Mr. Fields or the doctors, the tacit support nonetheless allows the institution to thrive at the expense of Cora and her co-workers. The racial project of the museum channels the structural racism of the nineteenth-century US into the interpersonal interactions between Cora and the museumgoers.
In spite of the museum’s oppressive environment, Cora still finds ways to fight it. She makes resistance part of her routine in the exhibitions:

She picked the weak links out from the crowd, the ones who broke under her gaze. The weak link—she liked the ring of it. To seek the imperfection in the chain that keeps you in bondage. Taken individually, the link was not much. But in concert with its fellows, a mighty iron that subjugated millions despite its weakness [...]. If she kept at it, chipping away at weak links wherever she found them, it might add up to something.116

This quotation highlights both the role of the museum’s attendees in facilitating racism and Cora’s attacks against it. The description of the museum as “the chain that keeps you in bondage” makes the connection to slavery even more explicit. Cora escapes the violence of the plantation only to encounter the “mighty iron” of the Museum of Natural Wonders. But just as she flees the clutches of Randall and Ridgeway, she also resists the feeble attempts of the “weak links” to oppress her. Although she clearly does not abolish the museum’s panoptic power on her own, she creates the possibility that the acts of defiance eventually “might add up to something.” Cora’s actions offer a hopeful answer to Imani Perry’s rhetorical question about American racism: “If we don’t look to the actions of individuals—social workers, police, parents—how do we believe in the capacity of citizens to effect change?”117 Cora’s resistance to the museum’s oppression, which reflects Bennett’s Foucauldian analysis of the institution and the racist history of American museums, embodies Perry’s point. Whitehead’s speculative South Carolina provides both a scathing indictment of the real racism of American society and an illustration of how to challenge it.

Whitehead thereby brings the fantastical prose of *The Underground Railroad* into contact with aspects of the multivalent history of American racial discrimination. The intermingling further suggests a dialogue with Foucauldian readings of societal control, albeit one in which Whitehead revises the analyses to consider the specificities of the oppression of American black people. This revision comes through speculative fiction, which allows for “state[s] of possibility” beyond the grasp of realism.118 Using fantasy, Whitehead shows the generative opportunities Foucault presents for analyzing and interrogating American racism.
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ABSTRACT:
I examine the use of ritual and torture as central to the establishment and maintenance of totalitarian structures of authority. I situate *The Handmaid’s Tale* as representing dystopia which finds resonance in the post-9/11 political climate. While *The Handmaid’s Tale* was published in 1985, sixteen years prior to 9/11, its resurgence post-Abu Ghraib is evidence of the topicality of its concerns. I examine the return of sovereign power as bio-sovereign power and comment on the role of ritual and torture as related phenomena, characteristic of bio-sovereign power. I analyze the role of the biopolitical state in Gilead. Biopolitics is normativized in Gilead at three levels: a) through the use of repetition to normalize certain forms of desired behaviour and practices; b) through a display of sovereign power to harness the transgressions to desirable behaviour and practices through torture and murder; and finally c) through a state practice of knowingly un-looking, whereby certain forms of carnivalesque behaviour and practices are rendered as exception to the normal, in a manner that helps strengthen the norm. Margaret Atwood highlights the nexus between totalitarian regimes and bio-sovereign power in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and shows its use on women as well.

**Keywords:** Margaret Atwood, biopolitics, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, 9/11, Abu Ghraib, dystopia, torture
In 2004, CBS’s 60 Minutes and Seymour Hersh reported on Abu Ghraib and brought the debate about American torture under the Bush administration into the public sphere.¹ The Abu Ghraib scandal brought forth issues of unchecked military aggression toward the perceived enemy and the ethicality of torture. Seen as post-9/11 phenomena, military torture and the pervasive American surveillance state came to be an Orwellian nightmare come true. While there was a prevalent anti-torture campaign during the tenure of US President Barack Obama, discussion of his torture legacy prevailed as well.² Donald J. Trump’s presidential campaign and administration’s thrust on the usefulness of torture have renewed the torture debate and its ethical implications.³ In the wake of the Trump administration’s pro-torture and anti-women policy measures, the popularity of novels such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* cannot be discounted. The book became very popular after the US election surprise of 2016. There is now a successful Hulu television series based on the novel and the novel’s setting has inspired multiple protest posters and demonstration themes in the United States and beyond.

In this paper, I examine the use of ritual and torture as central to the establishment and maintenance of totalitarian structures of authority. I briefly foray into Michel Foucault’s work on biopower and sovereign power to show how Gilead highlights the dangers of bio-sovereign power come to fruition. I further illustrate how this concern with bio-sovereign power addresses a gap in Foucault’s own work: the question of how biopower specifically situates and subjectivates women. I analyze the role of the biopolitical state in Gilead. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, biopolitics acts through sex as a tool for the social production and reproduction of the norm as normal. I situate *The Handmaid’s Tale* as representing dystopia which finds resonance in the post-9/11 political climate.

**Foucault and the Ascendancy of Bio-sovereign Power**

Michel Foucault describes the treatment of Damien the regicide.⁴ The grotesque description illustrates punishment (as opposed to discipline) as the fate of the prisoner under the stronghold of sovereign power. Foucault describes in detail the hacking of limbs and the enactment of pain on the body of the prisoner as a phenomenon by which the sovereign right to kill asserts itself. The spectacle of medieval torture becomes a literal sight of display. The sovereign creates spectacle as a tool for asserting sovereign command, the right over the life and body of the prisoner, and the right to display this enactment of power over sovereign subjects. The subjects are made to view the horrors as a mark of punishment for
transgression. This display is spectacle, ritual, torture and the sovereign assertion of power simultaneously. Yet, for Foucault, this sovereign power and its impulse to display torture is seen as giving way to an epistemic shift where discipline becomes a mode of generating the subjects willing consent into the social matrix.\(^5\) This sort of normativization through disciplinary techniques such as timetables and routines is called disciplinary power. However, at around the same time that *Discipline and Punish* was first published in 1975, Foucault also delivered a set of lectures at the Collège de France.\(^6\) In this work, Foucault sketched out a theorisation of biopower/biopolitics. The totalitarian right of the sovereign to make live or let die, in other words, the sovereign right over the subject’s very biological existence, is the mark of Foucauldian biopower. Foucault is interested in the manner in which subjects become subjectivized by power’s hold on their everyday existence.

While Foucault’s work is on how the normal (the ordinary as norm) becomes a possibility, theory after 9/11 looks at how this norm is renegotiated such that what was hitherto contingent and part of an emergency structure is normativized. Giorgio Agamben observes the return of sovereign power and totalitarian regimes after 9/11. For Agamben, elements such as indefinite detention at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base become routine in the operations of the state. However, both Agamben and Foucault do not address specifically the operations of biopower or sovereign power on women. For them, women are subsumed under the so-deemed universal category of mankind. Subjects, for Foucault, are not gendered first and disciplined later. The state, for Agamben, uses sovereign power on both men and women equally.

It is here that the popularity of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* after 9/11 and Abu Ghraib can be accounted. Atwood, I argue, looks at biopolitics as bio-sovereign power in her speculative fiction. The working of (sovereign) biopolitics which informs her novel sets not only to update Foucault’s insights for generations to come, but they also relocate power over women as central to certain modes of operation of biopolitics. For Atwood, unlike Foucault or Agamben, biopolitics is the prevalent mode of functioning for the totalitarian state precisely because of the manner in which it specifically targets women as women. *The Handmaid’s Tale* becomes a feminist corrective to Foucault’s and Agamben’s insights.

**The Biopolitical State of Gilead**

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been compared to George Orwell’s *Nineteen-Eighty Four* due to its vision of torture and political
pessimism. While Atwood prefers to name her work speculative fiction rather than dystopia, it is clear that her work resonates with that of Orwell’s dystopian classic. Atwood takes a male-centred narrative genre and renders it as focusing on women’s concerns. For Atwood, speculative fiction becomes a term to warn her readers that her world is meant as a speculation of things that could be possible. Atwood uses events recorded in the 1980s and transfers them into a possible future. The context of the backlash against the gains made by the feminist movement in the 1970s is relevant to the text.

Written a year after the setting of Orwell’s dystopian vision, the novel describes a near future world in which the US government has been hijacked by a Christian totalitarian system of rule. War and a state of emergency are declared, the Constitution is suspended, and women’s freedom and rights are steadily chipped away such that women become property. Not allowed to even own a name, women in the Republic of Gilead are hierarchized. The dystopian future shows a vision of socially grouping women according to the function they perform within militarized patriarchy. Women are Wives, Marthas, poor Econowives, diminishing Widows, Handmaids, unacknowledged prostitutes, Unwomen, and so on. Handmaids are women prized for their fertility and offered a chance at survival if they perform reproductive labour for a high ranking male official. In the novel, sex becomes a ceremonial duty aimed at procreation rather than pleasure. The procreative duty to the state is used as a tool for social and ideological production and reproduction. The Rachel and Leah Centre, housed in what used to be a high school, becomes her place of residence. Here, protagonist Offred along with the other Handmaids is educated and sought to be conditioned to fit the demands of her role as the bearer of a fertile uterus. The Aunts become the tools through which the biopolitical state enforces and seeks to produce certain forms of behavior in the Handmaids. The Handmaids, addressed diminutively as “girls” by the Aunts, are sought to be regimented into a patriarchal system that moulds subservient female behavior.

Through episodic narrations of her past, the female narrator is able to point toward the manner in which she and her partner Luke and their daughter sought escape through a land border. They were separated, the daughter taken away and Luke’s whereabouts uncertain. The novel is Offred’s narration as a Handmaid who, true to the conventions of the genre, is caught in an impossible situation, transgresses and is met with an uncertain end. Reduced to the reproductive function of her body, Offred (her name derived from that of her Commander, Fred) becomes the
subject of biopolitical tactics of the Republic of Gilead. Offred’s political function in the new Republic of Gilead is the reproductive function her uterus performs. She is subject to routinized biopolitical measures and tactics that enable her to become, literally, fertile ground for reproduction. “I’m taken to the doctor’s once a month for tests: urine, hormones, cancer smear, blood test; the same as before, except that now it’s obligatory,” Offred informs. The mandatory nature of the tests, their role in sealing Offred’s reproductive role as well as the ritualized form these tests take is but one instance where the ritualistic biopolitical imaginary of Gilead resides. Sex becomes both the mode of ideological production and reproduction through forced reproductive labour by unnamed women. This mixture of coercion and consent generation through ideology generates the biopolitical state.

Gilead as the epitome of the biopolitical state is invested in the proliferation of some selective forms of human life (for instance, the near-eugenic production of white male babies). Foucault terms biopolitics as the machinations of power whereby a subject’s very biological existence becomes the subject and object of statist ends. Foucauldian biopolitics operates with a conglomerate of disciplinary and sovereign power to establish totalitarian rule in the world of the novel. Biopolitics is normativized in this state of Gilead at three levels: a) through the use of repetition and ritual to normalize certain forms of desired behaviour and practices; b) through a display of sovereign power to harness the transgressions to desirable behavior and practices through torture and murder; and finally c) through a state practice of knowingly un-looking, whereby certain forms of carnivalesque behaviour and practices are rendered as exception to the normal, in a manner that helps strengthen the norm.

The first practice is used as exercise of power to codify social behavior as regimentation. Foucault would call this disciplinary power, though maintain its close relation to biopower. Ritualistic practices of surveillance and self-surveillance are abundant in Gilead. The panopticism of the novel is evident with surveillance of men and women as pervasive and everyday. The manner in which the Handmaids are taught and forced to practice self-censorship is used to elicit docile female behaviour. The practice of going into the central part of town in pairs is a primary example: “We aren’t allowed to go there [to the market] except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already.” The notion of security – the procedures are for the women’s protection – is used to establish a connection between the surveillance state and the securitized state. Surveillance becomes
a necessity for the state’s own existence as a securitized state, resonating with post-9/11 security measures in the United States such as the *Patriot Act*.

Each Handmaid becomes the spy of the other as she is in turn surveilled upon by her shopping partner. “She reaches me and we peer at each other’s faces...” Offred states, adding, “[s]he is the right one.”18 Peering and surveilling the other for signs of non-conformism add to the eerie atmosphere of the dystopian world. “She is my spy as I am hers,” Offred says.19 The task of self-censorship and surveilling the paired Handmaid is the price paid for the deviance in behavior of the other. If something happens to a Handmaid, her paired partner will be held to blame.20 Further, the very practice of visits to the market disallow solitude by making the pairing of Handmaids compulsory. The practice grounds salutations as behavior encoded within social space.

Their exchange is thus accompanied by ritualistic chants of greetings and prayers which self-fashion the Handmaids as pious and conforming women:

> “Blessed be the fruit,” she says to me, the accepted greeting among us.
> “May the Lord open,” I answer, the accepted response.21

The greetings become a mode of sedimenting a certain form of behavior to normalcy. Biopolitics is ritualized through language and impregnated with meaning through the underpinnings of reproductive labour. Greetings perform the task of recognition while interpellating each of the Handmaids into dehumanized ‘fruit’ and other such symbolism. This continues in the conversation that Offred and Ofglen have during one of their routine walks to the market:

> “The war is going well, I hear,” she says.
> “Praise be,” I reply.
> “We’ve been sent good weather.”
> “Which I receive with joy.”
> “They’ve defeated more of the rebels, since yesterday.”
> “Praise be,” I say.22

Similarly, the parting of two Handmaids requires a socially acceptable salutation – “Under His Eye”23 – which seeks to normalize as banal the pervasive patriarchal surveillance state. That the state enters into the private realm of individuated ordinariness of a subject is highlighted by the
Aunt’s repetition that “Gilead is within you.”

The biopower of Gilead permeates to the very personal realm of the body and the female subject’s perception of her relation to it. Offred states:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will.

I could use it to run, push buttons, of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me.

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is more real than I am and glows red with its translucent wrapping.

The earlier subject perception of the body as instrumental, “solid,” an implementor of a will, and unified with one’s sense of self is replaced by Gileadean biopower with a self that is more pervasive than any notion of the self: the body which is “more real than I am” becomes the central aspect of the subject’s being. The sense of self is couched in the metaphorical cloud (implying fleeting airiness) whose cover of red “wrapping” gives more weightage to clothes than to any sense of interiority. The body, described as “flesh,” is juxtaposed to the self, described as an ephemeral “cloud.” The subject’s self and the subject’s body are separated. The body becomes the focal point of the biopolitical state. This disassociation of the self and the subject’s body is used by Gileadean biopower to mass generate consent for the Ceremony.

Called simply the Ceremony, the name is suggestive of its status as a regimen of social codes that forms the foundation of Gilead as a biopolitical state. The ceremony is the name given to the ritual of procreation whereby the Handmaid is placed between the presumed barren Commander’s Wife and Commander as a bodily instrument. This practice is carried out with the assumption that it will enable procreation in a more fertile female body:

Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy [the Wife] is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed.

The fact that they are ritually obligated to hold hands is supposed to signify the union of the flesh. It is supposed to represent that all products
of the transaction are for the Wife to hold claim to the baby, should any transpire. The sheer mechanics of the Ceremony are further described by Offred thus:

What’s going on in this room, under Serena Joy’s silvery canopy is not exciting. [...] This is not recreation, even for the Commander. The Commander too is doing his duty.27

This aspect of dutiful procreation is underlined in the text by Offred narrating her hesitancy in calling the act “making love” or “copulating” (which involves partners while here only one is the agential subject). She does not call the Ceremony rape: “Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose.”28 Yet Atwood writes the scene into the narrative in a manner that makes the reader question the supposed choice that Offred deems she possesses. She does this by bringing to light the dehumanization and transformation into the non-human that accompanies Offred’s deemed choice in consenting to such an act.

In describing the Ceremony which “goes on as usual,”29 Offred uses imagery of clouds that harkens back to her use of the cloud imagery to describe her sense of self. In the description of the ceremony, Offred’s body and self dissociate in a manner that enables her to describe the scene without emotion. “I lie on my back,” she says, invoking the word “lie” in its passive usage.30

What I could see, if I were to open my eyes, would be the large white canopy of Serena Joy’s outsized colonial-style four poster bed, suspended like a sagging cloud above us, a cloud sprigged with tiny drops of silver rain, which if you looked at them closely, would turn out to be four petalled flowers.31

In the passage above, Atwood uses the cloud imagery for furniture to align Offred with the bedroom’s inanimate inhabitants and declare herself as one with them. Not only is Offred described as a self that is separated from her body, as decorporalized, but also as de-animated. The cloud used to describe her ‘self’ previously is now used for the bedroom furniture. As the former is displaced onto inanimation, her agency in her presumed choice is foregrounded to show the Gilead-ean biopolitics as all-pervasive in the dystopian imaginary. This process of disassociation and displacement is highlighted when Offred claims soon after the Ceremony: “[o]ne detaches oneself.”32
Just as the Ceremony is part of events that must be routinely performed as Gilead-sanctioned regimen, there are other ceremonies too that have the backing of the state. While the Ceremony is a privatized de-interiorized affair, the public ritual of spectatorship that Foucault associates with sovereign power is also prevalent in Gilead. The second level on which the biopolitical state of Gilead operates is the site of sovereign power. Situated next to the Church is a structure called the Wall on which corpses are hung for display.

... the gates have sentries and there are ugly new floodlights mounted on metal posts above it... No one goes through the gates willingly. The precautions are for those trying to get out, to make it as far as even the Wall, from the inside, past the electronic system, would be next to impossible.33

The description of the Wall makes it clear that the prisoners on display are not those trying to escape but those willingly displayed by the state for a show of sovereign might.

Beside the main gateway there are six more bodies hanging, by the necks, their hands tied in front of them, their heads in white bags tipped sideways onto their shoulders. There must have been a Men’s Salvaging this morning. I didn’t hear the bells. Perhaps I’ve become used to them.34

The ceremonial aspect of the Men’s Salvaging points to a ritualistic display of sovereign power. Torture and death of the subject is the jurisdiction of the biopolitical state, the sight seems to suggest. The crimes of these bodies are unimportant in the narrative. Rather, they are prized for their exemplary nature. As Offred recounts, “They have committed atrocities, and must be made into examples, for the rest.”35

The ceremonial ringing of the bells and the fact that citizens of the state are habituated to the ceremony are also suggested by the excerpt. The aspect of the citizen’s gaze and its harnessing for purposes of enforcing punishment for transgression are what the following lines signal:

It doesn’t matter if we look. We’re supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they’ll be there for days, until there’s a new batch, so as many people will have the chance to see them.36

The gaze of the citizen is moulded into a subservient one by practices that allow for some forms of looking.37 The citizens are not just encouraged
but mandated to look, in a “society of spectacle.” It has been suggested that the visual imaginary of the novel allows for surveillance practices to prosper as spectacle and surveillance submerge. In the mentioned incident, affect is used as a tool for regulating the visual field. The sight of the Salvaging allows for a visual catharsis that purges the emotions otherwise pent up by not looking. Tired from turning a blind eye to routine state practices of power, the citizens are offered a chance to look. Yet, emotional catharsis in the dystopia does not allow for the complete purgation of fear as an emotion. Torture as ritual and death becomes a spectacle, similar to Foucault’s example of Damien’s torture, ensuring the production of fear as synonymous with the might of the power of the sovereign.

Further, women’s rituals, such as the birthing ceremony where Handmaids and Wives are assembled to watch a woman giving birth, are also relegated as aspects of “women’s culture.” What is left to the reader’s assumption is the carefully state-orchestrated role each woman plays in viewing such ceremonies: each woman is left as viewer to cathect difficult maternal emotions and channelize them for the state. This is enacted in a manner similar to the Orwellian Two Minute Hate, where emotions are ritualistically purged against Emmanuel Goldstein and citizens return to a normal reverence of Big Brother in the classically dystopian Nineteen Eighty-Four. The regime of Big Brother is cemented by the state-prescribed rituals of affect regulation. The Two Minute Hate and Hate Week become, like the Damien episode in Foucault, modes of ritually investing subjects’ energy and emotion onto a figure of hate (state enemy Goldstein). The ritual is en masse and state-mandated, thereby interpellating and strengthening the Orwellian community.

If the ritual display of death is used to garner the emotion of fear, then incidents such as when a van pulls up near Offred and Ofglen and two Eyes (servants of the state) grab a man next to the two women are thus used to harness relief of a particular kind. Offred narrates, “[w]hat I feel is relief. It wasn’t me.” The incident also reveals the routinization of sudden state sponsored disappearances of ordinary citizens, producing what Orwell would term an “unperson.”

The use of the sovereign right to kill and/or torture is also referred to in the narrative by Offred’s imaginative supposition of Luke’s possible fate(s). Offred first imagines Luke’s possible condition as murdered by the state:

I pray that the hole, or two or three, there was more than one shot, they were close together, I pray that at least one hole is neatly, quickly, and finally
through the skull, ... so that there would have been only the one flash, of darkness or pain, dull I hope, only the one and then silence.

I believe this. 43

The account shows that the first possibility is in the realm of the probable and that such occurrences are frequent. It shows the power of the state on the ultimate biological existence of the individual. The sovereign right to kill exercises itself when transgression, in this case of literal state borders, becomes a possibility. The second probable explanation of what happened to Luke shows torture as rampant:

I also believe that Luke is sitting up... the hair is ragged, the back of his neck is nicked, that's hardly the worst, he looks ten years older, twenty, he's bent like an old man, his eyes are puffed, small purple veins have burst in his cheeks, there's a scar, no, a wound, it isn't yet healed...

He finds it painful to move his hands, painful to move. He doesn't know what he's accused of. A problem. There must be something, some accusation. Otherwise why are they keeping him, why isn't he already dead? I can't imagine. I can't imagine he hasn't said whatever it is. I would. 44

The Guantanamo-esque torture and Kafka-esque fate of Luke the prisoner depicts biopower as central to the functioning of the state's right to defend itself unilaterally when its boundaries are breached. The lack of a crime with which Luke can be legally charged shows the lack of due process and the arbitrariness of the state in enacting punishment. That the ritual of torture in the novel is not clandestine shows the ascendance of sovereign power. The same treatment of not naming the crime is meted out during the enactment of the Women's Salvaging ceremony. 45 The banal tone reveals the ordinary and routine aspect of the ceremony where women are asked to comply and consent to sentencing another woman to death and executing her by hanging her from a rope in full public display. 46

Personal accounts and narration of the self, once ritualistically crucial to the feminist movement have also been appropriated to serve anti-feminist purposes. The ceremony of Testifying that the Handmaids learn at the Rachel and Leah centre is relevant. Testifying involves narrating a painful account of trauma which is processed by the Aunts and the rest of the Handmaids. Offred states:

It's Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an
abortion. ... But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger.

_Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison._

Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.

_We did. She did. She did._

Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?

Teach her a _lesson._ Teach her a _lesson._ Teach her a _lesson._

The sing-song nature of the episode points to a situation where a crime on a woman’s body is reformulated in the all too familiar patriarchal logic that _she was asking for it._ While the misogynist undertones of such a logic that demands victim blaming are self-evident, it is also noteworthy that the accusers are women being taught to behave in a certain accusatory manner. The chant and sing-song manner of the accusations point to a culture where women have been infantilized (the chant is almost a school chorus) and made to repeat the logic of the patriarchy. The repetition in the successive chants also points to the ceremonial aspect of turning a misogynistic lie into the normativized “truth.” Even though Offred believes Janine’s narration of her rape and innocence, she is nonchalant about pointing a finger at her. The manner in which biopolitics pervades not just the body of the subject (Offred), but also her will by moulding it to suit statist needs is also a feature on display. The ritualistic victim blaming is used, as with the bodies on the Wall, for exemplary purposes. “You are an example,” Aunt Lydia says.

However, while the Ceremony, the spectatorship of bodies hanging on the Wall, and the ceremonial chant of ‘her fault’ are regimented within the official, there are ceremonies that defy this logic. The third level at which the biopolitical state operates is with what Gayatri Spivak calls “the slant,” or the deviation from the norm that helps further entrench the norm as normal. By showing the abnormal as an aberration, the norm positions itself as the usual. The state of Gilead deliberately chooses to unknow certain forms of knowledges about events within its boundaries to enact a carnivalesque space. The purpose of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, however, is to enable a space where codified behaviour is defied in order to purge dissent and further solidify the norm. In the space of the novel, this happens with Moira’s tale and ultimate fate as a prostitute. The physical space of the hotel Jezebel’s, where prostitutes are allowed and prosper in secret to the rest of the public, operates as a deviant space. On seeing the existence of prostitutes when the state openly defies them, Offred’s reaction is not shock or dismay:
“What I feel is not one single thing. Certainly I am not dismayed by these women, not shocked by them. I recognise them as truants. The official creed denies them, denies their very existence, yet here they are.”

While the official response is denial, the existence of these women reveals the inability of the state to have such subjects “assimilated.” Yet Gilead produces a deviant space for such unassimilated subjects to be assimilated in their very lack of assimilation. The deviance becomes a way for the state to point to the abnormal to further entrench the norm as normal and ordinary.

This aspect of the state knowingly turning a blind eye is also relevant for Offred’s own deviance and transgression with having a sexual liaison with Nick. Nick is introduced in the novel as a worker for the Commander with the possibility that he might be an undercover worker of the state of Gilead:

Perhaps he was merely being friendly. Perhaps he saw the look on my face and mistook it for something else. Really what I wanted was the cigarette.
Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do.
Perhaps he is an Eye.

The uncertainty of Nick’s position – is he part of the underground movement called the Resistance? Is he a worker for the surveillance state? – is the driving force of the uncertain end that Offred meets. Nick’s affinity with O’Brien in *Nineteen Eight-Four*, as the torturer who the protagonist confesses their sins to, points to the former. The ending – where Offred has either been captured or set free – is used to highlight uncertainty as the product of the totalitarian state. Offred’s tale is either an act of confession or an act of resistance and the uncertainty of the ending is used to foreground unknowledge of the average citizen as a symptom of the totalitarian state.

Overall, the biopolitical state of Gilead is one that is all pervasive, armed with the intent to murder, torture or disappear non-compliant citizen-subjects. It is in a state of constant war such that what was once exceptional becomes normativized (Agamben calls this “the state of exception”) through biopolitics. Foucault has theorized about the progression of biopower in governmentalized states and later day neoliberal democracies. For our purposes, it is beneficial to see how this sovereign right to kill is marked today by an ascendancy of dictatorial rule: the return of the centrality of sovereign power to modern government. Contemporary
sovereign power has been read as a state of exception where the contingent is normalized as emergency powers of the state. In modern societies, however, the ritual of torture is rendered secret: democracies sign treaties banning torture while simultaneously practicing it covertly. The leak of pictures of torture from Abu Ghraib highlights the hitherto invisible functioning of sovereign power. The pictures show sites of atrocity and deliberately inflicted torture by military personnel on unarmed civilians. The very taking of the pictures becomes an act of torture where the camera becomes an active participant.

The rumoured disappearances and incarceration around American borders is a phenomenon after 9/11 that finds a chord in the politics of the novel discussed. Neologisms such as ‘homeland’ become linguistic markers of power after the 9/11 biopolitical state of emergency seizes power. The selective amnesia and carefully selective reading of the law that accounts for unconstitutional measures to be opted is another feature that resonates with The Handmaid’s Tale.

I have analyzed how various forms of biopower operate in the literary world of the novel to constantly bring to being the securitized and surveillance state of Gilead. I have also sought to highlight the various rituals that interpellate the security state as normal. I have barely scratched the surface to show how the world of Gilead is similar to our own after 9/11. Literature can be a prophecy but can also be steeped in its own socio-historical context. When it becomes a cautionary tale, close to home, showing its dystopian future as possibly the present time, the warning mandates our attention.
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Kauffman, Linda. “Special Delivery: Twenty-First Century Epistolarity in The Handmaid’s Tale.” In *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on...*
Notes


5. Foucault, *Discipline*, 54.


10. Shirley Neuman, "‘Just a Backlash’: Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2006): 857–68. The gains of the so-called third wave of feminism as being disrupted are the point of the television rendition of the book. The 2019 Booker-winning sequel to the novel, *The Testaments*, is premised on the fall of Gilead and also holds relevance to the contemporary world. The article, however, concentrates solely on the original 1985 novel.

11. This classification is hierarchical. It is meant to highlight how bio-sovereign power pervades women’s lives. The allotted category defines the woman’s role and status in Gilead. Wives are those married to Commanders (high-ranking government officials). Marthas carry out domestic labour for the Commanders’s households. Econowives are married to poorer men and are meant to perform wifely duties, sexual labour and domestic labour for their husbands. Handmaids are prized for their fertility in a world increasingly going infertile. They are intended to produce children who would be the property of the Commander and his Wife. Prostitutes are also called Jezebels and along with Unwomen (infertile, feminist, nuns, etc) form the social outcasts of Gilead. In addition, Aunts are women who have risen to the ranks of officials whose task is to train and control the Handmaids. The categorization shows how a specifically gendered form of biopolitics operates in the dystopia. It shows that control over women happens in intimate ways.


20 Atwood, 29.
21 Atwood, 29.
22 Atwood, 29.
23 Atwood, 54.
24 Atwood, 33.
26 Atwood, 104.
27 Atwood, 105.
28 Atwood, 105.
29 Atwood, 104.
30 Atwood, 104.
31 Atwood, 104 (emphasis added).
32 Atwood, 106.
33 Atwood, 41.
34 Atwood, 42.
35 Atwood, 43.
36 Atwood, 42.
37 Laffren, 99.
39 Laffren, 104–5.
40 Atwood, 137.
41 Atwood, 178.
42 Atwood, 179.
43 Atwood, 114.
44 Atwood, 114–15.
45 Atwood, 284–88.
46 Atwood, 287–88.
47 Atwood, 82.
48 Atwood, 82.
49 Spivak, no pagination.
50 Atwood, 256–62.
51 Atwood, 246.
52 Atwood, 247.
53 Atwood, 249.
54 Atwood, 27.
55 Atwood, 307.

Asad Haider’s *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* is a short, sharp, and altogether welcome contribution to a debate about “identity politics” that is presently animating important sections of U.S. political discourse. In the wake of the election of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016, self-identified liberals like Mark Lilla denounced “identity liberalism,” calling instead for a “post-identity liberalism” that embraced commonalities of interest. Haider’s book, by contrast, constitutes an attack on “identity politics” from the perspective not of mainstream American liberalism but of a newly resurgent left whose political debates are being articulated across an emergent counter-public sphere formed by multiple new magazines and other discursive forums. Representative of these wider discussions, *Mistaken Identity* culminates in a call for a politics of left “universality” that raises important questions about how to think about race and class in the twenty-first century United States.

Haider is a founding editor of *Viewpoint* magazine, which has aimed to “reconstruct radical history” and “reinvent Marxism for our time” since its first issue appeared in October 2011, in the midst of the Occupy Wall Street action. It makes sense, then, that he prefaces his critique of “identity politics” with an account of that term’s emergence. This he traces back to the work of the Combahee River Collective (CRC), a black, feminist,
lesbian, anti-capitalist group that was active in the Boston area between 1974 and 1980. Named after the Combahee Ferry Raid that Harriet Tubman led in the Civil War, the CRC declared in a 1977 statement that systems of “racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression” are “interlocking” and form “the conditions of [their] lives.” Focusing on their “own oppression,” the CRC argued, “is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression.” The stance of the CRC was informed by dissatisfaction with the lack of emphasis on the position of black women in earlier social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. “[I]t is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves,” the group argued. Yet this, according to both the CRC and Haider, was never as narrowly particularist a position as it may sound, since, as the 1977 statement put it, if “black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”

Haider laments that “identity politics” no longer means what it meant to the CRC in the 1970s and, in its present iteration, no longer holds out the promise of destroying the systems of oppression against which present-day leftist theory and practice ought to be aimed. His definition of what he means by identity politics today is “the neutralization of movements against racial oppression” (12). In Haider’s telling, the liberal centre of U.S. politics, represented in the early pages of the book by the same failed Clinton 2016 campaign that drew Lilla’s rebuke, has long since co-opted and diffused what was once radical about the kind of focus on identity pioneered by groups like CRC. This has been a process rooted in what he calls, drawing on Judith Butler, “a condition of liberal politics” in which Americans have found themselves limited as subjects of a bourgeois state to merely appealing to that state for forms of recognition on the basis of their identities. That process threatens no far-reaching or conclusive dismantling of the overlapping structures of oppression (capitalism, racism, patriarchy, heterosexism) the CRC opposed and has, on the contrary, enabled the effective “neutralization” of the radical energies of earlier anti-racist movements like the CRC by co-opting their language in pursuit of nothing more radical than a nominally more diverse composition of the existing ruling class.

Over its four brief chapters, Mistaken Identity draws on the work of Butler, Wendy Brown, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and others to present
a well-synthesized, persuasively argued left case against modern-day identity politics. What is needed now, Haider demonstrates, are not particularist demands for recognition from various identity groups, but a universalist left politics that reaches across the borders of specific identities of race, gender, sexuality or “cultural nationalism” to achieve socialist emancipation on the grand global scale. Those who view race and class oppression as fundamentally intertwined (on the model, say, of Hall’s analysis of British politics in the 1970s in *Policing The Crisis*) may find little to quibble with in Haider’s argument, while those who see structural racism as operating more or less independently of capitalism will not.

Whichever of the many available camps one falls into as far as that last question is concerned, it is unquestionably a sign of the liveliness of contemporary left discourse in the United States that shortly after its publication, *Mistaken Identity* was part of a minor controversy. This was after Haider’s fellow socialist Melissa Naschek reviewed the book in *Jacobin* magazine (est. 2011) and accused the author of himself failing to “overcome the limits of identity politics.” Given the vituperative nature of some of the discussions that ensued, it is worth emphasizing that Haider’s book is a work not of political strategy but of critical theory. Indeed, he freely admits in his concluding remarks that all that the “insurgent universality” for which he calls lacks are “program, strategy, tactics.” Debates over those, of course, have been grist to the mills of lefts old and new for centuries; that such discussions have begun again in earnest in the United States seems to be a significant development in itself.

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Phil Neel’s *Hinterland* is a meditation on the topographies of inequality in America and the shifting proximities and relationships to the power of capitalism revealed by the landscapes around us. The “hinterlands” that preoccupy the book are not simply rural or remote landscapes but are conceived more metaphorically as everything “beyond the palace walls” (13, 170). The effect is to re-focus the more literal categories of urban, suburban, and rural for a different kind of analysis. Even the center-periphery model of postcolonial theory becomes insufficient to Neel’s metanarrative of American geo-spatial politics. The “hinterlands,” instead, represent continuing processes of dispossession and exclusion. The term is meant to capture the turbulent dynamics in many different “outside” zones, which are as much shaped by global capitalist circulation as “inside” ones. The common features of these outside zones include uneven relationships to past and present industrialism, the rise of local and often reactionary and/or racially-driven politics to fill economic vacuums, and the increasing militarization of law enforcement. With the “long crisis” of stagnation, precarity, and underemployment as a backdrop for his analysis, Neel argues that “The geography of the cities can be best characterized not simply as a wealthy core interacting with a poor periphery, but instead is an archipelago of wealthy islands rising above an ocean of industrial sprawl” (121).

Perhaps the book’s most useful point is its argument that the analysis of global capitalist circulation must step outside the urban project. It urges attending to “peri-urban” (12) spaces such as decaying suburbs, homeless encampments, and banlieues. Within these peri-urban spaces, the demarcations between urban and nonurban look increasingly feudal. These spaces are filled with people who come back to press against the cities’ walls; their inhabitants are in this sense internal refugees, “increasingly surplus to the economy, though also paradoxically integral to it” (13).

Peri-urban and suburban hinterlands are not abandoned by capital—far from it, they are likely to operate as capital’s backrooms, annexes, auxiliary sites, and storage spaces. Neel points out that the hinterland “is often a heavily industrial space—space for factory farms, for massive logistics complexes, for power generation, and for the extraction of resources from forests, deserts, and seas. It is not an exclusively ‘rural’ space, and it is by no means truly secondary to global production” (17).
distinction between near hinterland and far hinterland also comes usefully into focus. The near hinterland is not necessarily a wealthier space, even if it is closer to the source of power. Often it is a ring of formerly prosperous suburbs that have been turned into immigrant and ghetto zones for people being pushed out of the re-gentrifying urban core. Near hinterlands are usually surrounded by another, outer ring of whiter and more conservative exurbs which “act as an interface between the metropolitan and nonmetropolitan” (57). As in the case of Ferguson, Missouri—a site Neel analyzes at some length—the white exurbs at a greater distance than Ferguson from the St. Louis city area serve as a recruitment zone for the police and other authorities, who are charged with defending the mainstream interests in the urban core against the resistances of those caught in the middle. What emerges, then, is a kind of dysfunctional sibling relation between far and near, in which the far earns its own tenuous living at the expense of the near, even while the near more directly and obviously confronts the politics of inequality. One of Neel’s conclusions is that it is the near hinterland—poorer and with more “industrial density,” often the place where capitalism sets up its warehousing and material operations, often the place where the surplus population is most apparent—that “will likely be the central theater in the coming class war” (146).

These are valuable claims, yet this brief book does not go far in building them out; it offers more of a synthetic logic of new geographies than a thick description of them. Uninhabited new-economy villages in China, disputed federal land in the American West, and semi-industrial riot-prone suburbs all become part of the same metanarrative of global boom-and-bust cycles. Neel is right to point to the complexity of anti-establishment politics in the far hinterlands, as in American far west, where disaffected and right-wing politics flourish. He observes that the tendency to simply dismiss anti-government and anti-tax movements is often to ignore a specific kind of economic disempowerment in rural areas, where people “experience class exploitation as largely a matter of rents, rather than wages.” This interesting statement, in my view, deserved more attention. Western small landholders, for example, perceive their natural rights of economic self-determination as being blocked from distant D.C. If economic disempowerment is experienced in some extreme rural areas not as a matter of underemployment (lost wages) but a simultaneous expropriation of rents through taxes and as a dispossession of rentier power through regulation, then this invites consideration of how the aspirational rentierism of the hinterland economy modifies more traditional leftist narratives of post-industrial decline based on the diminishing influence of labor.
In my view there remain genuine questions about what kind of local, self-sustaining hinterland economics might be possible. Neel’s view, in contrast, is that under the dynamics of global capitalism, the “peasant politics” of the past is simply no longer possible. Economic peripheries become defined by expulsion and exclusion. This may be accurate as a historical diagnosis of the present, but it doesn’t follow that it is inevitable in all futures. For Neel, a full revolutionary disruption of these exclusionary dynamics seems to be the only possible way forward; not coincidentally, the latter third of the book turns into a meditation on leftist insurgencies in the spirit of Occupy. Topography become less literal and more of a metaphor for repressed class dynamics. Here the book falls into conventional Marxist tropes about “constellations” (168) of leftist struggle and about the riot as a category of event. It includes a few dubious speculations about the political future, such as the claim that “the election of Trump represents a premature seizure of power, opening more potentials for the far left than for right-wing militias” (45). Much as I hope this proves true, I’m less sanguine than Neel that “the election of Donald Trump will...likely have a dampening effect on the most extreme wings of the far right, even while it emboldens a minority to violent action.” It seems difficult here to reduce a complex landscape of political conflict to a single economic narrative, even a narrative as capacious and convincing as that of capitalism’s long crisis. Contemporary political resistance takes many forms and valences, some more obviously linked to the economic than others, and there are complex U.S. histories of protest and struggle to take into account. Nonetheless, Hinterland contributes toward a more nuanced understanding of the spatial dynamics of late capitalism.

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Students of immigration and refugee studies are quite familiar with narratives of displacement and separation from one’s homeland. Literature on the experience of migrants in the twenty-first century reveals a series of complicated stories: for a variety of economic and political reasons, migrants are forced to leave their homes and resettle in distant and unfamiliar places—or even they resettle in nearby places they are familiar with. Staples works in the field by scholars like Oscar Handlin or Simone Weil offer views of the causes of uprootedness and displacement of peoples, while others look at the consequences that migrants face in an uncertain world. Less commonly does the literature examine migrants’ affective experiences. In A Place to Call Home: Immigrant Exclusion and Urban Belonging in New York, Paris, and Barcelona, Ernesto Castañeda blends individual experiences of migration with ethnographic sources to shed new light on aspects of migrants’ lives that need to be incorporated better into the literature. His study examines the experiences in three cities: in New York immigrants obtain economic security in jobs they might not find elsewhere, in Paris they seek integration but are isolated, and in Barcelona they create new bonds with community members that seek separation from the Spanish state in Catalonia. To understand how one feels attached to a place, Firsthand accounts revitalize previous scholarship by moving beyond historical factors and towards an analysis of the current state of immigration in three cities and the “sense of belonging” that immigrants feel in those places.

Castañeda addresses these themes through three case studies: New York, Paris, and Barcelona. Castañeda positions his case study of these cities as vital to understanding the migrant’s sense of belonging as they all differ between migrants and local community members’ experiences. Ultimately, Castañeda argues that Paris is the outlier, where immigrants do not feel a sense of belonging, or are welcomed by the local community into the city. By comparison, New York and Barcelona provide a place for immigrants to thrive and gain that sense of belonging they had been searching for. Although he does not fully explain the reason he selected these cities, his transnational methodology demonstrates “how the immigrants’ place of origin shapes immigrant expectations abroad” (13). With that said, the book’s significance makes one wonder
how immigration in massive urban centers compares to immigration in other cities, maybe non-western, or smaller cities.

Castañeda addresses a recent turn in politics by acknowledging that Hispanics in New York come not only from Puerto Rico, but also the Dominican Republic and Mexico (25). While immigrants vary within New York, Castañeda focuses on Mexican immigrants. Castañeda’s ethnographic research stems from over 700 interviews with migrants in all three cities. The appendix offers a blank research questionnaire in which he used to obtain data and learn more on the immigrant’s personal experience. He also gained perspective and knowledge by living in these places, especially New York City. Mexican immigrants coming to the U.S. experience a sense of belonging as job opportunities flourish, and ethnic enclaves thrive throughout the different boroughs and areas of the city. Castañeda argues that social mobility and economic integration—living out the “American dream”—plays a significant role in Mexican immigrants feeling connected to New York, as many can find jobs or situate themselves in diverse ethnic communities (41,45). Further, Mexican immigrants, while dealing with undocumented status and legal recognition, find themselves socially connected to the city through social movements to better their living situations (37).

The chapter on Paris concludes that Algerian immigrants and their descendants face a different experience than do immigrants to New York, still eagerly searching for urban belonging. Segregated from middle-class Parisians neighborhoods and urban centers, immigrants do not have opportunities to grow and succeed (47). Despite the fact that most of the Algerians he spoke to wanted to become and be treated as French citizens, their communities were distant from employment opportunities and often subject to police surveillance. Due to this, immigrants continue to feel excluded from their new home even though they are legally recognized by the government and supported through social welfare programs.

In the final case study, Barcelona stands out as an intriguing case for immigrants seeking belonging and inclusion into a new urban space. The Latin American and North African immigrants Castañeda interviewed generally felt welcomed into Barcelona society. Catalonians seek separation from Spanish cultural expectations. They use their own language and accept those not deeply connected with Spanish ways of life. These Latin American and North African immigrants, with their own ethnic identity, language, and culture move into this region, they feel more accepted as the local communities adopt a more traditional
experience separate from the typical Spanish language, culture, and expectations.

While Castañeda’s work is a transformative study on immigrant exclusion and urban belonging, the book could have been strengthened through a greater focus on narrative and story-telling. By doing so, the author potentially could have placed more emphasis on migrants rather than on the inclusion to a new place and the factors that dictate objective or subjective belonging. Additionally, a deeper investigation on how the migrants are displaced to New York, Paris, or Barcelona, could have provided context to the reasons they sought new lives away from home. Historicizing the experiences could offer possibilities to compare and contrast personal experiences over time. Other studies contend that there needs to be a change in how scholars look at migrants and the communities in which they live. Notably Ayse Caglar and Nina Glick Schiller reflect the field’s movement away from the “ethnic community,” which methodologically examines “the social and historical processes as if they were contained within...the boundaries of nation-states and assume that the members...share a common history and set of values, norms, social customs, and institutions.”1 While not directly addressing the call by Caglar and Schiller, A Place to Call Home could have further explored the possibilities and experiences of the immigrants better through a historical and contemporary lens. By broadening the scope of these communities, we see that migrants interact with the communities, regions, and nation-states through the policies, expectations, and thoughts of native inhabitants of those places. A Place to Call Home attempts to add nuance to the field of migration studies to show how local politics and feelings towards migration challenge or reject opportunities for migrant to feel “at home” in these new places.

Castañeda seems to focus more on immigrant incorporation to a city rather than the reaction of “home” in distant places, including the degree to which immigrants maintain their cultural identities, languages, and neighborhoods to create their own sense of belonging. The understandings of the immigrants themselves differ from case to case, however his inquiry into the immigration question concludes that New York and Barcelona are urban centers where immigrants feel welcomed and gain that inclusion into these migrant hubs. A Place to Call Home is an excellent resource for those studying immigration at a transnational level,

and it further develops a broader understanding of an immigrant’s sense of inclusion and the subjective feelings of “home.”

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The character of Uncle Tom, developed more than a century and a half ago by author Harriet Beecher Stowe as a moral exemplar, physical powerhouse, and, ultimately, “Christ-like martyr” (1), assumed in later decades a constellation of cultural meanings unimagined by Stowe herself. Once a heroic figure, “Uncle Tom” became an epithet powerful enough to make a grown man and public figure (Ralph Ellison, in a stunning introductory anecdote) break down sobbing with horror at the accusation that he might be one. How did this cultural transmogrification happen? Spingarn asks. It is not a new question, but it is one that she reevaluates—successfully—in the light of a wealth of newly available source material.

The traditional assumption, Spingarn explains, is that the “myriad theatrical adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*”—frequently regressive in their racial stereotyping, often comic in their approach, and (after 1865) nostalgic for an imagined Southern past—“turned Stowe’s Christ-like hero into a submissive old fool” (4). But what happens to that easy narrative if we reevaluate the nature and impact of this corpus of theatrical work? Here Spingarn’s scholarship benefits immeasurably from the recent availability of a wealth of digitized “historical American newspapers from cities large and small”—including many of those which catered to a largely African American readership (6). After assembling and analyzing thousands of references to Uncle Tom plays (and later, films) as well as their casting, staging, choreography, attendance, and critical reception, Spingarn is prepared to offer a powerful challenge to the conventional narrative. Staged renditions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, she contends, did not cause the reinterpretation of Uncle Tom’s character. The character’s new meaning, rather, emerged from a different cultural sphere—that of politics, rather than art.

This is not to say that the Uncle Tom plays were irrelevant. What they did, Spingarn observes, was open a space (or many spaces) and offer a vocabulary with which Americans could debate “the fraught, twin issues of slavery and race” (11-12). After a close read of the original novel, Spingarn delves into a chronologically organized exploration of the numerous attempts made to stage the tale, enabled, as noted, by newly available contemporary accounts. Her argument here is bold, and directly challenges the scholarly consensus that “the Uncle Tom plays quickly became more harmful than helpful to black Americans” (52). First of all,
black Americans themselves enjoyed the plays, clearly finding something valuable in the representation they saw on the stage. Indeed, so many attended the plays that some theater venues found it necessary to add extra segregated seating to accommodate them. Then too, the plays outraged white southerners. Although indubitably racist by our standards, the Uncle Tom plays left the white South scrambling to either deny their portrayal of slavery entirely or to reclaim Tom as the kind of virtuous soul only slavery could produce. Overall, she contends, antebellum Uncle Tom plays had a positive impact, “moving the American masses to sympathy for enslaved people and opposition to slavery” (74). Northern white audiences, even those comprised of working class toughs not initially likely to sympathize with the cause of emancipation, responded positively to Tom’s wholesome heroism.

Nor did the plays’ salience diminish after Appomattox. The story was an “elastic” one, suited to multiple genres, and Tom an elastic figure, slipping between history and fiction in ways that made him a touchstone “in American debates about the legacy of slavery and the future of black Americans” (80). Although the Uncle Tom plays of the late 19th century certainly incorporated elements of the era’s virulent racism, they continued to draw black audiences to the theater. As reflected by the responses of black newspapers, the plays’ status as some of the few popular forms of entertainment to present “negative images of slavery and positive images of black people” endured, and moreover began to open opportunities to the “talented black artists who were awakening Americans to the richness of black performance” (90). And white southerners remained staunchly opposed, mobilizing ex-Confederates, female activists (including the United Daughters of the Confederacy), and citizens frightened of even the mildest challenges to white supremacy not only to avoid the plays but to boycott or censor them.

But new questions arose. Uncle Tom’s character, and the activist nature of Stowe’s novel, had met the representational and political needs of earlier generations of black Americans. Did they still? By the early twentieth century, the answer was largely No. Increasingly, Uncle Tom’s Cabin became a relic of the past (charmingly quaint to some; nauseatingly regressive to others), not a vector for present-day community uplift. And in politics, a younger generation of black leaders challenged their forebears as well as the rising tide of white supremacist violence to assert themselves as “New Negroes” – bold, masculine, and “less interested in heaven’s salvation than in earthly progress” – and to prove “just how far from ‘the days of Uncle Tom’ – and from Uncle Tom himself – the race
had progressed” (132). It was in politics first, Spingarn argues, that “Uncle Tom” became a slur; the cultural valence of the term shifted considerably later.

Spingarn offers a sweeping history of an almost endlessly fascinating set of cultural texts – a history of both the character of Uncle Tom and of the cultural vehicles that, for good or ill, made him a household name – and perhaps more importantly, what this character has meant to Americans both black and white over the past century-and-a-half. Her research is meticulous, and her source base extensive and – up until this point – under-utilized. This book, readable enough for a popular audience due to Spingarn’s lucid prose style and careful explanation of theoretical concepts, should be of interest not only to scholars in literary or cultural studies, but to historians of the Black Freedom Struggle, the Civil War era, and material and popular culture as well.

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Contributors

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