

“Whose Science? Whose Fiction?” Uncanny Echoes of Belonging in Samosata

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Abstract

This is the first of two special issues and the articles are grouped according to two themes: This first issue will feature articles that share a theme we call Technologies and the Political, while the second issue will feature the theme Subjectivities. However, we could equally consider them exercises in provincialization in the (counter)factual register in the first issue, and by affective historiography as conceptual-empirical labor(atory) in the second issue. What we have generally asked of all authors is to consider that the relation between science and society is often heavily influenced by and identified in the intermediary figurations portrayed in the genre of science fiction.

Keywords

introduction, science fiction, editorial, technology, political

“Samosata. It’s a magical place.” Someone would be tempted to say, as Western imaginaries, for good *and* ill, have shaped much of the world’s current state of being.¹ Not for nothing do we presently speak of our era as that of the *Anthropocene*: A time of genuine *geological impact* of human agency itself, or, rather, of human geopolitics—which are, after all, a geopolitics of knowledge (DeLanda, 1997; Mignolo, 2011; Parikka, 2010) as much as an ontology of geopolitical production (DeLanda, 2015; Karatani, 2014; Nishida, 2012; Parikka, 2015a). This spatiotemporal qualification would need to be unpacked (Malm & Hornborg, 2014) much further, of course, for it does require a specific type of imagination to project the succession of eras—and of geological ones at that: It takes history, historiography, and the questions of who and what possess agency and what level of influence they possess over the agency of others (i.e., in terms of activity and passivity). This much and more: some pressingly necessary provincialization of the Western imagination, its imaginaries, and its Global Northern geopolitics has been impressed upon us by the scholarship of decolonial (and/or decolonizing) authors such as Walter Mignolo (2014) or Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) and science fiction authors such as Kim Stanley Robinson and David Brin. And yet we are still shy of a “theory for the anthropocene” for which Jussi Parikka (2015b) gifts us the possibility of thinking with the conceptual laboratory of the *anthrobscene*—an echolocation of the “deep-temporal” obscenity that our (*and we add*: Western) technopolitical vocabulary presents—or which we find in *cutting-together-apart* (Barad, 2013, 2014) the “Russian science fictional” political of Alexander Bogdanov and Andrey Platonov with feminist science studies perspectives of Donna Haraway and Karen Barad and the Californian

science fiction *real-politik* of Kim Stanley Robinson as proposed by McKenzie Wark (2015) in *Molecular Red*—a recurring point of reference is and remains the humanly achievable yet always political—economically elusive goal of stepping and living on Mars (Like California, the “colonization” of Mars would be, after all, a perilous “terra-forming project”).

When we emphasize that Western imaginaries have had and continue to have this effect, we encourage authors to do so critically: Critically in terms of (a) being critical of the prevalence given to ideas from the Western/Global Northern imagination, the colonial matrix of power, and urban normativity in the social sciences and humanities, wherein “prevalence” refers primarily to the idea that the Western imagination provides unconditional universals and (b) a critique that is a means to help us understand how these imaginaries have and are continually *becoming* and becoming possible, which, in a decolonial view, must also mean to effectively provincialize—*provincializing* (Chakrabarty, 2008) here meaning that we try and comprehend both the (counter)factual and the theoretical/affective-historical registers of the concepts and life-forms in play, in order to

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understand what their true limits are, that is, that they are precisely not universal, and that, in turn, we are allowed to appreciate the existence of the border as a point of dwelling in existence that celebrate differences and pluralities (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Tlostanova, 2013, 2014).

For the Western imaginary (see also Blumenberg, 1990, 2000; Bottici, 2014; Bottici & Challand, 2012; Fujimura, 2011; Taylor, 2003), we find the interplay between science and science fiction was and is constitutive and interdependent as well as coproductive. Historically speaking for the West/Europe, the specific genre of writing any fiction/poetry (including anything “fantastic/supernatural” or “science fiction-y”) and science as a “field” (Bourdieu, 1975) or “social (sub)system” (Luhmann, 2009; also see Stichweh, 1992; Taschwer, 1996) can perhaps not be easily considered as differentiated until very late into one of those games called *Enlightenment*, *Industrialization*, or *Modernity* anyway, with their eschatological differentiation of labor, publics, and sub-systems, and not to forget the dissemination of general and scientific literacy and education. Historically, we would like to say, the interlocutors—the producers and the audience—of Western science and of Western (science) fiction were part of the same discourse. And to what extent has that effectively changed, when, for example, Global Northern popular publications repeatedly compare new medical technologies with *Star Trek*’s “medical tricorder,” and when the fit or failure of this very image determines the stock market value? Not to mention that this latter aspect seems today more important than whether or not more people are effectively being helped in both the Global North and South. The Westernness and Northernness of this story is both colocated in the history of coloniality as it is in the Western deep history: Going back to the Greeks and Romans and the origins of Western possessive individualism, that is, its obsession with “property,” “oikos,” and “individuality,” and stretching from there to the *Enlightenment* program and to colonialism (aka the *colonial matrix of power*).

In Lucian of Samosata’s (ca. A.D. 125-180) *Alēthē diēgēmata* (True History), which either is a comment to Antonius Diogenes lost *Wonders Beyond Thule* or exists in parallel to it (Morgan, 1985; Mheallaigh, 2008), we find simultaneously and coproductively the first mappings of the inhabited world (*oikouménē*), of the world as inhabited by (urban/human) bodies, and of “the body” as a colonial act wherein “[k]nowledge, space, and imperial power are imbricated” (Nasrallah, 2005, pp. 284, 285). These mappings present as a—perhaps original—pattern that Walter Mignolo (2011) identifies in the geopolitics of (geographical) knowledge, of drawing borders, and of the strategies of *De-Westernization/Re-Westernization*. Herein, the “truth” in question in Lucian’s story is, indeed, not found in the dichotomies of “truth/false,” that we have become used to in Western science, in the way we consider “myth” as “fictional” and “fictional” as “false.” The true histories of Lucian are political myths in the way that the Greeks did not

originally consider “myth” to be an untruth, but to indicate the openness to pluralism as discussed with much erudition by Chiara Bottici (2007). In Lucian, we find a journey to the moon and the story of a war between the rulers of moon and sun over the colonization of the Morningstar: The “mythical” existence of aliens factual, theoretical, and/or symbolic stretches from there to Immanuel Kant’s deconstruction of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (Kant, Johnson, & Magee, 1766/2002) and his “anthropological Other” (Böhme & Böhme, 1985; Clark, 2001; Dick, 1984). Here Kant’s anthropology does also introduce a distinction between *moral-practical* and *technical-practical reason*, which should raise some eyebrows in the Science, Technology, and Society Studies, for any subject (or agent) is subject to both, and both are comprehensively systematic, seeing Kant asking for our “technological condition” and for the status of the “technological object,” where we today find the likes of Bernard Stiegler, Luciana Parisi, or Erich Hörl. The point here is that while science fiction does implicate, it also intensifies how we imagine the world as well as others in the world and make the world and others accord to this imagination. In this Lucianian-Kantian Western imaginary, perhaps we should consider this myth to be self-evident: Science is, thus, always science fiction, and science fiction is, thus, always technology.

In many respects, we will have to say that this special issue and its subsequent second volume on science and science fiction (that we had the pleasure of editing), is more a continuation and expansion on what J. M. van der Laan’s (2010) *care-ful* collecting and editing accomplished in this journal 6 years ago (and for which he had contributed an erudite and comprehensive editorial), which we feel can still stand as a frame for the two issues we have had the privilege to edit. We received an impressive number of submissions, and while we regret that our limited space allowed us to only accept some of them, we take this as a sign that this is a lively and prolific conversation that ought to continue across publications and social circles. We are deeply grateful to Susan Losh, the editor-in-chief of the *Bulletin of Science, Technology, & Society*, as well as Manish Nainwal, who have put their trust and confidence in us, as well as been very patient and helpful at every corner. We also want to thank those reviewers who took both time and the authors seriously. Writing and reviewing are tasks that should never be done mindlessly and carelessly, but, precisely mindfully, *care-fully*, and *response-ably*: Writing and reviewing, just like the articles of this first special issue on “Science and Science Fiction” are (about) technologies and are, thus, political.

This is the first of two issues, and the articles are grouped according to two themes: This first issue will feature articles that share a theme we call *Technologies and the Political*, while the second issue—published later this year—will feature the theme *Subjectivities*. However, we could equally consider them exercises in provincialization in the (*counter*)

factual register in the first issue, and by *affective historiography as conceptual-empirical labor(atory)* in the second issue. What we have generally asked of all authors is to consider that the relation between science and society is often heavily influenced by and identified in the intermediary figurations portrayed in the genre of science fiction. This depiction evokes, of course, a simultaneously important and yet all too simple dimension: Western popular culture has reflected on the signs and portents, utopian and nightmarish potentials, and promised comforts and current and future ethical crises of science in form of narrativizations from Jules Verne, Robert Heinlein, Ursula LeGuin, Iain Banks, Gene Roddenberry, Octavia Butler, Ron Moore, Margaret Atwood, and Charles Stross, in the form of novels and short stories, whether the *Island of Dr. Moreau*, *Starship Trooper*, or *Halting State*, *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*, *Dune*, *Oryx and Crake*, to movies and television, such as *Star Trek*, *Babylon 5*, *The Jetsons*, *Orphan Black*, *ReGenesis*, *I, Robot*, *A.I.*, *Minority Report*, *Gattaca*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Expanse*, and so on. The influence on the popular perception of the potentials and promises of science as well on many innovative ideas that would become science offer exciting opportunities for critical reflections on these texts and media. The contributions in both issues touch upon general reflections on this discourse as well as specific contributions that focus on a particular aspect of science or a chosen fiction, as well as social studies of “geek” or “nerd” culture that focus on the relation of geeks and science. But the issue (whether the issue of Science/Sci-Fi or our “special issue[s]”) is not exhausted with a discourse on science and science fiction that identifies Western popular culture with a global popular culture. And even within the Western or Northern Sci-Fi discourse, ideologies, imperialisms, and biases determine the inclusion/exclusion of authors, characters, plots, and so forth. An author such as Octavia Butler is to this day the exception rather than the rule in a genre that is still dominated by White male writers. We think, therefore that van der Laan’s (2010) as well as our two special issues should be considered a first and careful invitation for further and farther reaching conversations that address the issue increasingly with feminist, standpoint, intersectional, decolonial, and/or queer discourses in mind. Science Fiction is not a Western invention nor exclusive to the Western discourse, and must be interrogated and troubled in the same terms that Science, Technology, and Society Studies has interrogated the Western colonial attitude in the terms of “Science [Fiction] for the West and Myth for the Rest” (Scott, 2011) toward non-Western and indigenous knowledges and the means and machines it deployed in disqualifying these *knowledges otherwise from elsewhere and when*. Along those lines, the aim of these special issues is to also continue to encourage writers who work with non-Western, postcolonial, and decolonial subject matters and to encourage new kinds of experiments in *social science fictions* as tools to “think with.” Science fiction as well as Science, Technology,

and Society Studies at their very best present as promises and predictions about what the future would, could, or should look like. An active conversation between science fiction, science studies, and the social sciences may prevent us saying one day “Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda.”

While often hailed for allowing the imagination to “run wild,” to “spur creativity,” and to promote an idea of freedom—often with the help of science and technology—we must also critically note that science fiction, also in and because of its relation with science and technology, is a zone that at times both implicates and intensifies what we have come to know under terms such as *phallogocentrism* and *White male privilege*: The 2015 Hugo Awards Controversy, when

activists [known as *Sad Puppies* and *Rabid Puppies*] angered by the increasingly multicultural makeup of Hugo winners—books featuring women, gay and lesbian characters, and people and aliens of every color—had gamed the voting system, mounting a campaign for slates of nominees made up mostly of white men. (Wallace, 2015)

While not Sci-Fi per se, but more in the realm the fantastic, both *Star Wars* as well as *Young Justice* deliver questions as to the deliberate “White male” limits of the Western imagination and how and where they are executed: Whether the limitations of *Star Wars* merchandise featuring female characters adequately (Ratcliffe, 2015; Yamato, 2015) or the cancellation of the successful, popular and acclaimed, but girl-centric *Young Justice* after only two seasons in 2013, the examples are plenty how many forms of speculative fiction that do challenge the “White male protagonist” are not allowed into or quickly removed from the main capillaries of media distribution, and with them the techno-scientific imaginaries they feature. Counterexamples (see the discussion by Simis, in this issue), such as the recent TV show *Orphan Black* notwithstanding.

And yet there would be a science fiction pluriverse rich in imaginaries available for a wider audience to sample, which the master-nodes in Western media would merely have to acknowledge: There are rich cultures of Black Science Fiction (Edwards, 2011; sdonline, 2011), African Science Fiction (Bridle, 2015), Latin and South American Science Fiction (Ferreira, 2008, 2011), Asian Science Fiction, Indigenous and Native American Science Fiction—and it must of course be said, that any one of these “collective labels” is itself problematic, and we do apply them here with some caution only due to the availability of collections of stories as well as academic appraisals under these labels that try their best to direct attention to these literatures, games, comics, and films (see also Anders, 2014; Bernardo, Palumbo, & Sullivan, 2014; Bould, Butler, Roberts, & Vint, 2009; Malik, 2009; Puwar, 2004; Ransom, 2009), and which set them against not only “White male privilege” but also against *care-less* “techno-enthusiasms” (Chachra, 2015) and

ir-response-able “techno-orientalisms” (Roh, Huang, & Niu, 2015).

The political and technological hegemonic discourses in science fiction focus on a Western, normative trajectory, that is, the idea of establishing, maintaining, and promoting an “oikoumene of civility by technology” which is considered “progress” in terms of being on display in either “utopic” or “dystopic” stories, three undercurrents of which of importance for the provincialization that the articles in this first volume allow for citizenship, urbanity (technological), civilization. The model for societies, participation, and social development in Western science fiction is one that is based on the idea of the urban city, the idea of citizenship that was given birth with the colonialization of “America” and the emergence of the modern territorial nation state following the Peace of Westphalia 1648 (Fraser, 2014; Grosfoguel, 2013; Quijano, 2000), which became the sole intelligible mode of political participation in Western epistemology and is delimited by notions of the possession of certain cultural techniques and technologies, literacy being prime. As we have learned from authors such as Partha Chatterjee (2004), political participation and also rule (see Damnjanovic, in this issue) cannot empirically be limited thus, and science fiction literature should reflect and/or critique this notion. As laudable as the idea of all us coming together to be living on a “Star Trek planet” is—to pick up on the worldview of former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, as described by his aides (Ramo, 2004)—we should be aware that the mode of participation and mode of belonging represented in the idea of “citizenship” is also restrictive and constraining—and even repressive—in its urban, technological, and civilization-procedural normativities (see also the list of “usual suspects”; Johnson-Smith, 2005). The narrative dialectic of science and science fiction, in other words, is at its worst when it proscribes any form of political, social, moral, or vital (biological or otherwise) agency that cannot be universalized in terms intelligible to what the West understands within the brackets of *anthropos* and *humanitas*.

And yet the authors of this and the subsequent issue, read as efforts that help us locate the geopolitical point from which science fiction is enunciated (and experienced as enunciated), help us *critique*—in the Foucauldian sense of “not being governed so much by”—the Western citizenship technologies and modes and technologies of belonging, precisely by considering, not the regression to a dystopic or utopic foundation but instead by enabling to think postfoundational political alternatives (see Pearson, in this issue; furthermore, see Koobak & Marling, 2014; Marchart, 2007, 2010; Mouffe, 2013; Sykes, 2006).

Both issues will, thus, offer mappings and lines of flight as “alien thoughts” that lead to alternative and alternatively “strange” mappings. As we have argued before (Stingl & Weiss, 2015), even in science fiction (and fantasy) there are various permissible and nonpermissible—aka *silenced* and sometimes “violated” (Cisneros, 2013)—forms of Otherness,

which inform technologies of inclusion, inclusive exclusion, and “silent Othering”/“silence Others”; only the prior two, inclusion and inclusive exclusion, allow for *belonging* (Massumi, 2002; M’charek, Schramm, & Skinner, 2014; Stengers, 2005). Science Fiction is an amazing resource to imagine *Other belongings*, *belonging Other(nes)s*, and *Belonging otherwise*, which specifically science and technology do not merely want to “progress”—that is, path dependently on an predetermined teleology—but constantly “become” openly require to cut-together-apart new imaginaries (see Dahms & Crombez, in this issue). Imaginaries that make available not only the transhuman/posthuman but more important—and here, we find a recent intervention of Donna Haraway’s informative: “We have never been posthuman, we are compost” (Tsing & Haraway, 2015)—render newly vital and tentacular other bodies (Alaimo, 2010; McWeeny, 2010, 2014), places and temporalities (Egbert et al., in this issue) that—instead of being (Wright & Austin, 2010)—*become* (Stingl & Weiss, 2015), thus, ecologies whether alien and strange found in fictional or actual (Viveiros de Castro, 2004, 2012) elsewhere or even at home (Heise, 2008; Helmreich, 2009), both with and without nature (Descola, 2013; Ingold, 2011; Morton, 2009)—artifacts (Ahmed, 2006; Castañeda & Suchman, 2014; Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell, 2007), and agencies (Bennett, 2010; Connolly, 2010, 2013; Coole/Frost, 2010; Hornborg, 2015; Pisters, 2015). Indebted as we all are, here, to Langdon Winner’s (2001) timeless (although the meaning of “timeless” itself must always be up for debate) question “Do artifacts have politics?” the present articles and those of the second issue allow us to ask “Are elsewhere, otherwise, and (silenced) agencies political?” We live in response and, so to speak—that is, in giving voice—in connections and tunnels that we need to recover and give voice to, by allowing for *frictions* (Tsing, 2005) and *partial connections* (Strathern, 2004).

We should understand that science and science fiction are not only about different places but temporalities: Otherwise are not only elsewhere but *elsewhens*: Science Fiction, and the science it makes possible to think, is not only that of the future but also of other pasts and presents: Think of counter(factual) histories, such as Steampunk. As Foucault has attempted to show for the ontological, that is, “magical place” of the Global North and of Western epistemology, so too can we uncover the choices that led to certain paths and recover the different paths that may have been possible, that were silenced but are, as Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari, Delanda, Stengers, and Braidotti would probably remind us, virtual. The same applies with decolonial perspectives: They allow us to think pasts and presents differently together with Others. Therein and thereby they enable other futures. And this is, precisely, Science Fiction at its best, is it not?

Provincializing science fiction, as the articles in these special issues do, means to enable *different mappings* against the *coloniality of Being* (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). We are in

a better situation than ever before to accomplish another kind of thinking within and through science/Sci-Fi: We are enabled to think through the deployment of transmedial (Condry, 2013; Morfakis, in this issue; also see Lempert, 2014) and hetero(chrono)topic (Bal, 2008; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Foucault, 1984; Hengehold, 2010; Mendieta, 2001) ways of knowing and belonging. In this deployment, the contact zone of *Science and Fiction* should open up a pluriverse not constitute a *uni*-verse. Donna Haraway, most recently, has set sails to chart the entrance to the tunnels of this new pluriverse, which she has—to show us the way—given a name:

So, I think a big new name, actually more than one name, is warranted. Thus, Anthropocene, Plantationocene, and Capitalocene (Andreas Malm's and Jason Moore's term before it was mine). I also insist that we need a name for the dynamic ongoing sym-cthononic forces and powers of which people are a part, within which ongoingness is at stake. Maybe, but only maybe, and only with intense commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans, flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages that include people will be possible. I am calling all this the Chthulucene—past, present, and to come. These real and possible timespaces are not named after SF writer H.P. Lovecraft's misogynist racial-nightmare monster Cthulhu (note spelling difference), but rather after the diverse earth-wide tentacular powers and forces and collected things with names like Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa (burst from water-full Papa), Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Spider Woman, Pachamama, Oya, Gorgo, Raven, A'akuluujjusi, and many many more. "My" Chthulucene, even burdened with its problematic Greek-ish tendrils, entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus. Even rendered in an American English-language text like this one, Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa, Medusa, Spider Woman, and all their kin are some of the many thousand names proper to a vein of SF that Lovecraft could not have imagined or embraced—namely, the webs of speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction, and scientific fact. It matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. Mathematically, visually, and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systematize systems. (Haraway, 2015)

We invite you, thus, to both provincialize and (re)imagine with the authors of the following pages, by figuring out which figures figure which figures, and to find old, hidden tunnels and grow (rather than dig) new tunnels as a new multiplicity of *lines of flight* to escape from under the map from Samosata.

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