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SFRA Review

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CFP: SFRA Annual Conference 2019

Friday, 21 June - Monday, 24 June 2019

Chaminade University, Honolulu, Hawai'i

Conference Theme: **Facing the Future, Facing the Past: Colonialism, Indigeneity, and SF**

Keynote Speaker: **Nalo Hopkinson**

The SFRA invites proposals for its 2019 annual conference, to be held on the campus of Chaminade University, Honolulu, Hawai'i.

"I ka wā mua, ka wā ma hope" is a Hawaiian proverb that can be translated, "In the past lies the future," or more literally, "In what is in front of you is found what is behind you." In the Native Hawaiian way of thinking, according to scholar Lilikalā Kameʻeleihiwa, "The Hawaiian stands firmly in the present, with his back to the future, and his eyes fixed upon the past, seeking historical answers for present-day dilemmas." Another way of interpreting this saying might be, you must face the past to prepare yourself for the future. Thinking about this Hawaiian proverb in the context of science fiction brings up questions about ways of knowing, ways of orienting ourselves in time and space, the relation of our notions of the possible to our understanding of history, the ethical and political obligations of our scientific-technological practice in relation to the past and the future, and our expectations of social change as well as our sense of how it comes about.

SFRA 2019 will meet in Hawai'i, a set of islands that after two and a half centuries of Western contact has become the world leader in species extinction, while being transformed during the nineteenth century from a wholly self-sustaining civilization into a plantation economy dominated by export crops and ravaged by epidemics that reduced the Native Hawaiian population by 80% or more, and whose political sovereignty was stolen by the settler-controlled and US-military-aided overthrow of the monarchy in 1893. As we plan to meet on this occupied land with its long history of indigenous resistance to colonial incursion, we welcome papers and panels on the relation of science fiction to colonial history and its ongoing effects, to the contemporary ecological crisis, to issues of political and economic justice, and to past and ongoing visions of the future.

300-500 word abstracts should be sent to SFRAHonolulu@gmail.com or through the Abstract Submission form by 1 March 2019. Notification of acceptance will occur by 8 April 2019.

Questions concerning this call for papers, preconstituted panels, & roundtables can be directed to SFRAHonolulu@gmail.com with the subject line "CFP QUESTION," or to the conference's local organizers, John Rieder (rieder@hawaii.edu) and Ida Yoshinaga (ida@hawaii.edu) of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, and Justin Wyble (justin.wyble@chaminade.edu) of Chaminade University.

protagonist's body is "corrected," he/she is allowed to become part of society again.

The sex/gender/sexuality correlation presented in the story seem to be based on an underlying assumption that biology dictates clear rules for how men and women should look and what their bodies should be capable of doing. The potential of a queering of either the sex/gender binary or heterosexuality is therefore never actually realized and the protagonist (as well as the story) stays firmly rooted within heteronormativity.

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Alternate History and Racial Capitalism in Shawl's Everfair

Afrofuturism's Specter: Alternate History, Racial Capitalism, and Nisi Shawl's Everfair

Sean Guynes
Michigan State University

Day 3 | December 8, 2018 | 9am
Afrofuturism

IN THIS PAPER I discuss the generic lines that course through Nisi Shawl's 2016 novel Everfair, and in doing so I use the novel as a conceptual space for thinking about Afrofuturism's relation to history, temporality, and the political present. For those who don't know—and I hope I can convince you to get the novel right away—Everfair is about the creation of a multi-racial, intergenerational, queer-friendly, disability-championing, anti-colonial state in Central Africa, in and around the land formerly known as the Belgian Congo, and which is today in our world occupied by the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. The novel spans the years 1889 to 1919, telling the story of the initial impetus behind the creation of Everfair by the British socialist Fabian society, together with a black American orator and former slave (modeled on George Washington Williams), and some money from a black missionary society, all the way up to the integration of indigenous tribal governments into the new state, and the decolonial revolution that the socialists, Christians, and indigenous Africans of Everfair lead against King Leopold of Belgium, with the novel ending shortly after WWI and a series of treaties that ratify Everfair's existence in the international legal sphere. While the novel was largely well-received by sf readers and critical audiences, it was also sharply criticized for its form: a series of short, temporally disjointed but chronologically organized narratives, none longer than 18 pages (out of a 400-page novel). In part, this is a matter of style: Nisi Shawl is well-known as an author of short stories, which she has been writing professionally for almost 25 years; but it is also a matter of utopian praxis. More on that later.

For now, I want to contextualize some of the generic concerns the novel raises, and in particular the relationship it indexes between Afrofuturism, alternate history, and history itself. In a broadly Marxist reading and certainly following John Rieder's understanding of the mass cultural genre system, if genres emerge in response to certain social and historical formations, and are forms that narrate the material conditions of those producing the genre, then it stands that the emergence of late-twentieth-century Afrofuturism was a response to, well, something. A rather obvious statement, but one that has yet to be fully historicized even now, in a post-Black Panther moment when Afrofuturism is trending across the media industries both because it provides representation and hope for Afrodiasporic peoples and because, like other forms of black popular culture in the colonial and especially American world: it makes money. While we can—and certainly should—speculate about the many reasons why Afrofuturism emerged when it did, I want to scale out and suggest that Afrofuturism, particularly in the American black diaspora, is at its core a response to formations of racial capitalism.

What this means, ultimately, is that Afrofuturism

is as preoccupied with the past, with the legacies of colonialism and racial slavery that brought racial capitalism into existence, as it is with imagining the future, and in doing so it is, like all of speculative fiction, a meditation on the conditions of the racial-capitalist present. Shawl's Everfair evidences contemporary Afrofuturism's simultaneous embrace of futurism and countermemory in its efforts to imagine, create, and embody a world hospitable to black folks and other people of color. In doing so, it complicates understandings of the relationship between futurity and history as they might be (albeit rather simply) understood in Afrofuturism. In a very clear, formal, narrative, and ultimately utopian sense, Everfair achieves its pan-Afrodiasporic framing of a hopeful futurism by remaking the past through the genre of alternate history.

Shawl's novel charts the birth of a utopian Afrofuturist project by asking not "what could be, in the future, if" but instead "what if" the most devastating genocide in modern African history had become the cause for anti-colonial struggle and decolonization half-a-century early. Like other writers of alternate history, Shawl rethinks what might be considered a "turning point" or what Karen Hellekson in the only sustained treatment of alternate history calls a "nexus event." Like other black writers of alternate history, such as Steven Barnes and Colson Whitehead, the pivotal moment Shawl chooses is specific to the history of black racial oppression, one that represents a flashpoint in the life of racial capitalism. In Everfair, Shawl offers a new temporality for imagining utopian possibilities springing from the atrocities of the commodification of black labor, bodies, and life.

Shawl's Everfair, both the novel and the world-making project that gives the novel its name, contextualizes the relationship between Afrofuturism as a political mode of cultural production and the alternate history genre as a unique articulation of science-fictional worlding. Presently understudied, precisely because they buck the typical narrative of future-oriented speculative fiction that the "futurism" of "Afrofuturism" is meant to invoke, Afrofuturist alternate histories represent a key textual-political ground for contesting the intersection between discourses of history, power, race, capital, and empire. To borrow a term from Frank Herbert, where he uses it in the context of religious colonialism in Dune, the "demanding

memory" of racial capitalism in the history of blackness is what ultimately seems to motivate Afrofuturism's constant return to the past even as it beckons better futures. And we see something like the now quintessential contemporary Afrofuturist text and blockbuster hit Black Panther, where the world of Wakanda is created both out of notions of black African cultural history through the somewhat incongruous pastiching of cultural objects, music, art, dance, and language from all over sub-Saharan Africa in order to create "Wakandan culture," but Wakanda is also produced in opposition to this history, having ultimately avoided and defended itself against racial capitalism's commodification of the continent's black bodies.

If Afrofuturism is haunted by the history of racial capitalism, then alternate history confronts and reimagines the history that haunts the genre. The historical situatedness of Afrofuturism is especially evident in alternate history novels that return to nexus events where the presents and futures of racial capital are either in flux or made hypervisible. Terry Bisson's Fire on the Mountain (1988), though he himself is not black, and Steven Barnes's Lion's Blood (2002) and Zulu Heart (2003), for example, offer alternate worlds that refigure the historical terrain and legacy of racial slavery in both global and U.S. contexts. Racial capitalism, as Jodi Melamed makes clear, is bound up with colonialism, but also with the more recent discourses of the nation-state, of nationalism, and of the nation in an always global context. Shawl's utopian nation operates at the juncture of these formations of power, placing her narrative about the formation of this joint socialist-European/indigenous-African revolution against colonial forces of the Belgian Congo at the chronological crux of what Hobsbawm labels, in world-historical terms, the "age of empire."

Set during the European "scramble for Africa" but clearly concerned with an activist hermeneutics for the present, Everfair is important to thinking about the relationship between history/futurity and alternate history/Afrofuturism because the novel simultaneously articulates multiple vectors of colonial, capitalist, racial, and even religious power as they operate in relation to racialized bodies. Shawl achieves this—and here's where I return to my observation about utopian form in the novel—by accreting multiple viewpoints in a sprawling, complex narrative that communicates the

shifting, always-becoming promises of the Everfair revolution against European powers. Everfair probes the relationship between an Afrofuturist conception of black liberation, the scars of racial history, and the generic legacies through which these discourses are mediated. By assembling Chinese indentured servants, black American former slaves, white British socialists, and indigenous Africans from multiple cultures, the novel offers a hopeful meditation on possibilities for cross-racial justice movements while also emphasizing the necessity of decolonial projects that place black liberation before the appeasement of whiteness and white allies.

To backtrack and clarify some of the narrative: Everfair, as a state, comes into existence when European socialists purchase land in the Congo from Belgium, thereby superseding anything like autochthonous rights to the land and producing a legal state, from the Euro-American vantage, on indigenous land. Everfair thus begins as a colony, although one explicitly set up to fight back against Belgium's slaving practices in the Congo. The Europeans and black Americans arrive in Everfair, build a city, start preaching—although there are tensions about proselytization among the socialists and black Americans—and eventually take in refugees fleeing Belgium's colony. Parallel to this, Shawl also narrates the internal struggle of the Congolese King Mwenda to maintain authority in his conflict with Leopold and other indigenous African peoples. Ultimately, the Everfairers and Congolese join forces under the Everfair banner, with Mwenda as King but a representative council advising him; it works something like the early Roman Republic, which saw a tension between the Senate and the occasionally appointed military dictator.

Mwenda and the Congolese, including a people called the Basanga who gift the Everfairers with steampunkified nuclear power, join the colonizers largely out of necessity, and there is constant tension among the factions over their competing visions for Everfair—perhaps best exemplified in the Europeans' attempts to name the first national holiday after Jackie Owen, the Fabian leader whom Daisy, Everfair's British poet laureate, refers to as the nation's founder. That there is always a tension drawn across racial-capital lines of whiteness/blackness, settler/indigenous is underscored by the novel's refusal to situate its narrative voice in any single protagonist. There are eleven POV characters,

and most of them get 5 to 8 chapters, meaning that the novel gives the reader no time to settle in to the mindset of any single political position, but keeps them always separate, and so maintains an openness and indefiniteness formally congruent with the narrative inability to pinpoint a singular political direction for Everfair. The chapters scramble for narrative space as the Everfairers fight for land and black liberation, and as the indigenous Africans fight for sovereignty from European powers altogether.

It is thus no great surprise, at the end of the novel, though perhaps surprising and maybe even unsettling for the average white reader who imagines themself in solidarity with the most sympathetic white characters (of which there are few), that Everfair kicks the white colonizers out of the country, only allowing mixed-race Lisette to stay (and then only because of her close friendship with Queen Josina). King Mwenda allows the black Americans to remain, as well as the Chinese laborers, saying that both represent populations forced to leave their places of origin, whereas the white settlers actively took the land from indigenous Africans, purchasing it in a capitalist system of international trade that ultimately corroborates the forces of racial-capitalism that brought about the atrocities in the Congo in the first place. For Shawl's African Everfairers, the nation is a decolonial African nation, one that rejects whiteness but recognizes the geopolitical necessity, because always forced by colonial power relations, to interact with whiteness nonetheless.

Everfair offers narrative closure of a sort, but actually ends at a new beginning, an unforeseen and contingent moment in which the always-becoming process of utopian world-making becomes and becomes. Like its formal properties of non-closure, of chronological, perspective, and geographical displacement from chapter to chapter, Everfair turns to multiplicity and thus rejects the utopian narrative since Thomas More that follows a (typically male) protagonist through the architecture and social planning of this or that improved society. Everfair is fragmentary, composed of many parts and people, some of whose motivations and visions for the state change over time as they interact with other characters, and so Everfair comes formally to represent the social body of Everfair itself. Like the social novels of the period during which Everfair is set, Shawl's Afrofuturist, alternate historical,

steampunk (or steamfunk) novel attempts to capture the whole of a utopian society that is in the process of becoming. Shawl's formal intervention in the utopian novel's structure stitches together the struggles of European socialism, African decolonialism, and US anti-racism while recognizing that the very project of Everfair is always imbricated with the forces of racial capitalism, that it is itself a product of the colonial scramble for black land and bodies.

To invoke the terminology of this conference, Nisi Shawl's Everfair is an exercise not purely in this very sf-y practice of world-building, but an actual praxis of worlding that remakes history in order to repurpose how we think about Afrofuturism, about genre, history, blackness—and all of their possibilities for mobilization in the present.

Eschatology in Star Trek

World Re-Building: Eschatological Thought in the Science Fiction Genre as Exemplified by Star Trek

Agnieszka Urbańczyk
Jagiellonian University, Poland

Day 3 | December 8, 2018 | 3:30pm
Star Trek II: Before Discovery

IN THIS PAPER I focus on the notion of Star Trek as a utopia and more specifically on the franchise's use of eschatological imagery—especially the phantasm of an inevitable catastrophe.

I am using Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction as it is surprisingly applicable to Star Trek. I do realize that Suvin himself would consider Star Trek a space opera but it is widely known Suvin is very selective in his approach and treats cognitive estrangement as essential to "high literature" even though the same effect can be evoked by texts he would call pulpy. Though there were many blunders in Star Trek's history, the respective series were often counter-hegemonic in their time. Star Trek isn't extremely scientifically accurate but the notion of science and the limits science describes is pivotal to the entire franchise. As opposed to stories taking place "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away," Star Trek almost obsessively brings up historical time,

with the stardate given at the beginning of each episode. The franchise creates a world based on the analogical paradigm and its very objective is to estrange and show the contemporary reality as unjust and arbitrary. Even if the metaphors were blunt and the artistic value questionable, Star Trek never was purely "ideological" in the Marxist sense of "false consciousness" and thus, I believe, it should be considered science fiction. It does present us with cognitive estrangement and—at least until Deep Space Nine (DS9)—it was utopian.

Suvin makes a compelling argument for science fiction's descent from utopia, calling it "if not a daughter, yet a niece of utopia" (Metamorphoses 76). And here lies the problem. Suvin claims that,

> As different from religious ideas about other worlds such as Paradise or Hell, utopia is an historically alternative wishful construct. Its islands, valleys, communities or worlds are constructed by natural intelligent beings—human or humanoid—by their own forces, without transcendental support or intervention. Utopia is an Other World immanent to the world of human . . . and not transcendental in a religious sense. This differentiates it from myth, horror-fantasy and fairy-tale, which happen outside history—even an alternative or hypothetical history; it similarly differentiates SF from kindred yet opposed genres. (Positions and Presuppositions 34)

Utopia in Suvin's understanding is secular. But Thomas More, universally recognized as the father of the genre, considered religion integral to his utopia. Moreover, he himself was proclaimed a saint by the Catholic Church. Even if we try to define SF as an essentially rationalist genre and make this rationality its constitutive feature, we must remember that religion was historically there at its core. I believe Star Trek is a great example of the paradoxes this may lead to.

It is quite obvious that Star Trek was created as a utopia—the Federation is a post-scarcity, just, and egalitarian society in which (at least declaratively) race, class, gender or sexuality cannot legitimize exclusion. With the universal replicators introduced in The Next Generation (TNG) the need for the market economy dissolves. And the point of this utopia is "it could be us." Gene Roddenberry was trying to show Americans that a better world could be created if they embraced humanism and rationalism, and that