

Utopianism After Utopia: VICFA 2022 Guest Scholar Keynote

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THANK YOU PROF. FRELIK, IAFA management and committee members, and the IAFA community for inviting me as Guest Scholar this year. It is an honor to be here, and humbling, even more so because past ICFA guest scholars and guests of honor have been some of the people whose work I admire most in the field, and whose work has been inspiring for my own. There are also so many incredible scholars, writers, creators, translators, editors, and publishers here at the conference, who are enriching the fantastic field every single day, that my own modest body of work seems rather inconsequential.

This ICFA theme is the Global Fantastic, which is also doubly humbling, because I do not consider myself an expert on the global fantastic, and because having any one person speak to or represent such a theme and what is going on all around the world goes against one of the central ethical tenets of the CoFutures philosophy, which is complexity. I speak only five languages, and while that is definitely a step up from being solely Anglophone, I do not think myself qualified to represent things of which I know nothing. Better

and more qualified minds have devoted themselves to such work. I will thus not dwell on the contradiction my being here as a speaker entails, but rather begin with something else, which is the sorrow and the joy that an idea such as the Global Fantastic entails, and perhaps some of what I say will resonate with those of us who have been working with the idea of the “fantastic” in different ways for a while, and outline some of the struggles faced by many in the community worldwide especially over the last decade and a half to be recognized.

Introduction

So I begin with a question: what does the “Global” of the Fantastic mean?

Asking this question at the beginning forces us to think with the processes by which the global is made and sustained. In her 2003 *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak had already alerted us to the “global” of comparative literature, calling for a shift to planetarity as opposed to the global. This tectonic shift in the structuring of disciplinary knowledge—especially Humanities, which Spivak named—is still registering its effects. The call was and remains radical since the reducibility of alterity remains at the core of older style “comparative” projects that rely on expertise rather than knowledge, on the facsimile of thought rather than the intention.¹ As Spivak argued: “We must persistently educate ourselves into the peculiar mindset of accepting the untranslatable, even as we are programmed to transgress that mindset by ‘translating’ it into the mode of ‘acceptance.’”²

The “Global” of the Fantastic is a perverse way to force translation. It is also, in some ways, its essence, in the sense of essential. The global allows us to communicate with each other, over spaces online and offline, through infrastructures that are

inseparable from globalitarianism as much as capitalism, using languages, language filters and language tools, all enabling a common vocabulary and register of critical thought. Especially in the last decade, the phenomenal growth of the translation industry captures but a tiniest speck of the mountain that is the fantastic imaginary worldwide. Scholars such as Dr. Rachel S. Cordasco have provided us with a fascinating view of SF in translation, although the translation is into the Anglophone world, rather than into and between other languages. The pressbook of this global and its translatability follows the Anglophone markets of dominance. While translation is key, it is also translation that gives the aura of cultural knowledge and expertise to those who have no expertise in reality but benefit materially from passing as experts and sustaining the illusion of knowledge.

But what if it did not? What if the role of translation, what if the role of “reading” the Global Fantastic was something else: not to make us “colonize” the knowledge structures of another language and its community, or to claim expertise of what we do not know, but as a way to share emotion, especially trauma and the messiness of history? What if its role was not primarily to make us know, but to feel, letting those emotions wash over us without curing us, giving us a sense of how little we know, rather than mastery? What if its role was not to make us stake a claim to knowledgeable speech, but to bring us to the structures of listening to those who know better?

This trauma and messiness of history that lies at the heart of the fantastic globally, as we well know, is born from a shared yet discrete understanding of historical violence, whether the violence is pre-colonial, colonial, or future-colonial. It is this violence that makes so many of us shudder at the thought of yet another colonization or civilization game, another alien contact story, another space warfare movie. It doesn't matter how these narratives

go, the very idea of them pulls us to historical trauma, makes us shudder.

PART 1: Retrofuturist Politics

Especially in the last decade and a half the tropes of the fantastic have come under increasing examination from diverse parts of the globe, and in many cases these tropes have been inverted, they have been challenged, and they have been dismantled in different ways. One of the biggest tropes of this kind is the political impulse (not the aesthetic one) of retrofuturism. The political impulse of retrofuturism is what makes some people cry hoarse when you have a “non-traditional” non-white non-male character leading TV series or movies. These people long for the good old days where things were all great and unsullied by so-called woke nonsense—for example the good old days of a series like *Star Trek*, thoroughly implicated in the American imperial mission (and one of my favorite shows too). So, when Captain Pike takes the chair of the *Enterprise* in *Strange New Worlds*, the newest *Trek*, things suddenly begin to look good, because things are as “they should be.”³ This is also the kind of impulse that was behind issues such as Puppygate (which might have died as an attempt to rig the Hugos but hasn’t died as a phenomenon). Puppygate might be dismissed as a backlash against progressive politics, but it is much more than that – it is also a backlash against a certain idea of “genre” development. It is an argument for the purity of the fantastic, that is the preservation of its tropes. The preservation of ideas that made the genre what the puppies considered the right way for the genre to be. Brad R. Torgersen, one of the leading Puppies, famously compared the fantastic to nutty nuggets:

Then, one day, you get home from the store, pour a big bowl of Nutty Nuggets . . . and discover that these aren’t really Nutty Nuggets.⁴

When we talk about the global fantastic, we are especially talking about ideas that dismantle those tropes of the fantastic that are at once comforting for many, but leave so many others – most of the world population in fact, with a shudder. While on the one side we have an organization like IAFA hosting a conference on the theme of the “global fantastic” now and Afrofuturism next year to recognize these new spaces for the fantastic, there are also conventions that are specifically targeted towards a different crowd and clientele, one decidedly against any such idea of the “fantastic,” let alone “global.” Take for example, the BasedCon, now in its second year, which boldly claims:

Whether you’ve never been to a con before or you’re a frequent con-goer who is tired of having social justice propaganda shoved in your face, BasedCon is the place for you!⁵

Their philosophy page goes into further details:

Cons became increasingly dominated by a small clique of authoritarian jerks who made them into venues for pushing social justice dogma and, in the name of ‘inclusiveness,’ shut down any opinions that didn’t align with progressive orthodoxy.⁶

What we have right now, and why we have an ICFA with a theme like this is because we are in a very interesting space for the fantastic. We are in a space where these new ways of thinking, new ways of seeing, new ways of recognizing trauma, are actively challenging the stability of what the fantastic might be. But perhaps even more importantly, they are challenging the illusion of mastery and control, certainties of what the past and the future might be like. The sense of control, in terms of genre, especially since the world outside is going haywire, is what I mean by retrofuturism.

Retrofuturism as a kind of politics which drives science fiction not outwards towards this idea of a globe or untranslatability or planetarity thinking and so on, but rather inwards towards preserving the so-called core of the genre, maintaining its core tropes, its core crowd and clientele, its institutions of knowledge and production, its infrastructures of publishing and dissemination, its recognitions and award systems, even in some cases its ethnic or cultural purity. The idea of there being people who might think differently, believe differently, or act differently, challenges this retrofuturist politics.

What is this retrofuturist politics? Retrofuturism is fundamentally connected to a certain idea of progress—of a world that could have been if only things continued to be the way they used to be. If *Star Trek* was still 60s *Star Trek*, if its hope and optimism were still alive, and so on.

To take a classic retrofuturist genre, steampunk goes back to the empire, to a world where, you know – what if those independence movements never happened, what if those pesky Indians from South Asia (who are not thankful for the railways the British so kindly made for them) never asserted themselves, what if Africa was still colonized by the “great” European powers, what if North America still had those plantations and slavery? I talk right now from Europe, where a dictator wants to restore a Russian empire by annexing a neighboring country and threatens to plunge the world into nuclear chaos if he is challenged. Other retrofuturist politics do not need to travel that far, just the 40s and 50s would do, which gave us some of the most gee-whiz fantastic of all times and generated what is most commonly identified as retrofuturist aesthetics, as Elizabeth Guffey and Kate C. Lemay have pointed out.⁷ In terms of aesthetics, retrofuturism is all over the place—this is the future as it should have been or would have been only if so and so—which is the Dean Motter Mr.X kind of future. Retrofuturist aesthetics can favor retrofuturist politics, or be strongly or weakly

critical of it, but the connection between the aesthetics and politics is undeniable. As Nora K. Jemisin points out in her 2013 essay “How Long ‘Til Black Future Month?”:

Thing is, not-white-people make up most of the world’s population, now as well as back in the Sixties when the show was created. So what happened to all those people, in the minds of this show’s creators? Are they down beneath the clouds, where the Jetsons never go? Was there an apocalypse, or maybe a pogrom? Was there a memo?

I’m watching the Jetsons, and it’s creeping me right the fuck out.⁸

While retrofuturist aesthetics are all over the place, it is retrofuturist politics, one where the future stems from an alternate past, that is the key to understanding much of the fissures in the contemporary fantastic. Retrofuturist politics provide a nostalgic comfort for a time of possibility where things were better and simpler. The retro as an alternative imaginary for that which might have been provides a reset to the possibility of a different future than humans have. In its simpler form, it provides the contentment of technological and/or societal wish-fulfilment of the might-have-been, and in its more complex forms, it provides the contentment of avoiding the problems of the present by displacing systemic faults to another time and place. Whether it is one side or the other, all that we have is the wasteland of *déjà vu* futures. Such ruination is the symptom of a time of psychological and social catastrophe, born out of visions of civilizational or ecological collapses. Guffey and Lemay point out that while the term “retrofuturism” is coined in the 1980s, it emerges in the 1970s as a response to the turbulence of the period, which for many directly contrasted with the overly optimistic visions of the future in early science fiction (SF) and futurist speculation more broadly. Within the field of Anglophone and Francophone SF, this is also the period of new wave

experimentation, of *Metal Hurlant* and *2000AD*, and later, of cyberpunk and steampunk responses to the growing awareness of the end of the future. As Mark Fisher explains the period:

The future didn't disappear overnight. This dyschronia, this temporal disjuncture, ought to feel uncanny, yet the predominance of what Reynolds calls 'retromania' mean that it has lost any unheimlich charge: anachronism is now taken for granted. ⁹

This retromania is all around is—whether in pop TV series or movies or fiction, or in actual design and art—all travelling to a time when things were simpler, lives less complicated, and using that version of the past to think of futures, rather than inhabiting the present we live in, because the present is unrecognizable Nutty Nuggets.

Yet this death of the “future” so lamented by many, which fuels retrofuturist politics is the death of only one kind of future. For many, those we now classify as the “global” of the fantastic: the marginalized, the colonized, and so on, that past expressed in nostalgic terms whose future you can unravel was not a good space, but rather a source of trauma, of subjugation, and the experience of genocidal violence.

The futures of the Global Fantastic clash with these retrofutures and their creators: those who believed they had control over what the future would look like. The “disappearance” of the future is not a real disappearance, but a sentiment arising from those who feel they are being forced to acknowledge the erosion of their future by other, global, versions of possible futures. Withdrawing into retrofuturist politics becomes one way of feeding nostalgia, fossilizing the future in the realm of past imaginaries, in the never-ending yearning for jetpacks, lunar bases, and space forces instead of any equal future. The vision of retrofuturist politics is not the vision of a just world, but in going back to the past it seeks to recover

a future that should have been. Here, one must make a distinction between utopia and utopianism. While utopianism unfolds as a composite ethic of continual worldmaking that thrives in polyphony, and is thus in the spirit of the Global Fantastic, utopia unfolds as a political project of nation-building. The nostalgic lament of retrofuturist politics has the same philosophical form as “make X great again,” whether that is traditional values, an ethnostate, or missions to colonize outer space and go to the final “frontier.” Utopia is within reach, if only that return were possible, if only we could have yet another middle-aged white guy sitting on the captain’s chair of the Starship *Enterprise* and taking us to space.

The denouncement of diversity in fantastic literature stems from this drive to control not only one’s vision of what a possible future can be but also the future of others, those who have been historically denied speech but who are now thinking, writing, talking back. As Jemisin expressed in the piece which I excerpted above, retrofuturist politics – but in many cases its aesthetic – easily slips into an erasure of who or what is allowed to exist in the future. The world of never-changing Nutty Nuggets which some people would gladly bring back is a world where other fantastic traditions will never germinate and never find a ground.

If this politics is what the Global Fantastic positions itself against, what might its form be, and what can it do with the past? If the fantastic cannot escape the trappings of the past, how may it visit this past without the rose-tinted glasses of nostalgia? Can the global fantastic show us a way of dealing with memory and trauma that goes beyond the idea of control? Can it reveal a future that is speculatively utopian without being caught in the trappings of utopia?

In the second half of this talk, I turn to some of my favorite texts in the contemporary fantastic and their ways of dealing with the past without slipping into retrofuturist politics, and even actively resisting it. They are Global in the sense of being part of the “Global

Fantastic,” if one might want to call them that, because what work isn’t global? But they are also not global, because what work isn’t local? How would we identify or name their globality or locality? By the author’s nationality? Ethnicity? The location of the story? I’m not sure we can get any easy answers for any of these narratives or their creators. These works represent a way to think with planetarity, especially alterity, and they do not glorify the past any more than they glorify any kind of future.

PART 2: Folding: Histories and Cyclicalities

In his conversations with Bruno Latour, the philosopher Michel Serres uses the idea of “folded space”¹⁰:

This science of nearness and rifts is called topology, while the science of stable and well-defined distances is called metrical geometry. [...] As we experience time—as much in our inner senses as externally in nature, as much as *le temps* of history as *le temps* of weather—it resembles this crumpled version much more than the flat, overly simplified one. (60)

What does one make of a space that is folded – in which the world is not unequally stretched out and distorted? To think beyond the Mercator-Gall-Peters debates, the necessity of coevalness in the spaces of political imagination precedes utopianism. Since spaces fold into each other, distance needs to be rethought topologically—that is, within the narrative of equality. For instance, the distance between the Global North and the Global South, or between Europe and Asia, are not absolute distances, whether conceptually or economically, let alone in terms of genre.¹¹ The metrical idea of distance is also inherent to the contemporary idea of the Global Fantastic, as if there is something called Fantastic to which there is a global component, rather than recognizing that everything is local

and global at the same time (that is, if we want to retain such terminology at all). Metrical distribution creates the illusion of distance and difference, for instance, geopolitically, between the West versus the Rest, Global North and Global South, and the First versus the Second versus the Third world. Metrical distribution creates standards against which things are measured. They harmonize what topological distribution crumples into complexity. Utopianism is the simultaneous operation of coevalness and complexity: a consistent corrective surgery to parse history into the manifold overlaps of the local and the global to get a clearer understanding of its political nature. I discuss two such ways of parsing below, one in which the personal and the political project of utopia building clashes against the stream of history, and one in which history is rescued in the prospect of a possible future.

The temporal logic in Baoshu's (Li Jun) novella "What Has Passed Shall in Kinder Light Appear"¹² (2015) is that of progress: one in which political projects are launched to lead to utopias but which clash against both the experiences of the flow of history and the experience of biological life. The author tells us in the endnote that it is not time that is reversed, only history, which is why historical events are experienced backwards against personal time. The central arc is the personal one, a love story of the protagonist Xie Baosheng and Zhao Qi (Qiqi), from childhood until the end. Within this narrative arc are standard subplots of complications of romantic narratives such as other loves, failed or broken marriages, etc. What in some ways creates these tensions are the historical forces which begin with the Beijing Olympics and move towards the events of the Cultural Revolution and beyond. In the opening pages alone, the narrator/protagonist quickly takes us on a whirlwind tour of late 20th and early 21st-century history, from the Arab Spring to Beijing Olympics to the SARS outbreak to the Iraq war to 9/11, and how these global events merged with the tremendous shifts in global and Chinese geopolitics, the reconsolidation of Communist

power, the USSR and so on. Major events are linked to philosophical movements such as existentialism, historical figures such as Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong, as well as ostensibly minor cultural events, including a recurring theme of genre events such as the work of the SF writer Ye Yonglie and the release of *Star Wars*.

The author states in the endnote that his work is not a “political manifesto,” but rather, “what life would be like if society moved backward in history”:

...while each person lives their life forward, the sociopolitical conditions regress backward. [...] The frame of this story might be seen as a reversed arrow of time, but strictly speaking, what has been reversed isn't time, only the trends of history. [...] If one must attribute a political message to it, it is simply this: I hope that all the historical tragedies our nation has experienced will not repeat in the future.
(222)

Hence the breathless pace of the events described in the story. The events themselves are thus backdrop to personal histories, rather than political commentary, for the simple reason that while the progress of individual lives can be mapped, the scale of history is expressed as much larger and operates like a whirlwind in which people are caught. The endlessness of what counts as events lends them a certain circularity and transposability: wars, revolutions, endless conflicts, catastrophes, environmental disasters, apocalypses and post-apocalypses as the state of the world, against which individual lives are experienced. The utopian political quest can be detrimental to personal life, but the espousal of utopian quests, especially when understood as happiness or peace, is precisely what gives life its meaning. The dreamlike final section, set against the ruins of revolution and Qiqi's death, imagines a cosmic cyclicity:

In the deepest abyss of the world, the beginning of consciousness stirred, ready to choose new worlds, new timelines, new possibilities....
(Baoshu, 221)

Baoshu's novella incorporates themes of time travel and retrofuturism's penchant for the backward glance, but it transforms the obsession with linearity with a speculative circularity. The return to the past is not a happy one, because the chaos of history ensures it cannot be, and the little bit of happiness that is snatched in these histories derives from the everyday. The irreversibility of one kind of understanding of time-stream, that of biological life, is the antidote to the possible reversibility of everything else. Humans will die, as will their worlds, but everything else, and our experience of them, can be moved around.

Mariam Mekiwi's film *'Abl Ma 'Ansa (Before I Forget)*¹³ (2018) mixes Arabfuturism and Afrofuturism for its experiments with time. In the opening words, one learns that the world is flooded and that there are amphibian species who alone can save the humans. The drowned world SF motif places the narrative in a time yet to come, before the narrative slowly unravels its internal history and draws parallels with other metaphorical-speculative uses of drowning. The central character is that of Dr. Sharaf Fakhr al-Behar (Dr. Pride of the Seas), who plans to reunite the secret amphibian society. Dr. al-Behar is the secret architect of a genome modification plan that could transform the human species into an amphibious one, but he has lost his memory and needs to locate the missing El Captain, something of a leader to those who live underwater. Aiding him in his quest are the Captain's amphibian daughter, two women connected to the Captain, and the Captain's followers. The narrative ends almost as it begins, with a kind of a pageant, this time reuniting—or birthing—the secret amphibian society.

The central theme of the film is memory. The title, often used as a casual aside in regular conversations to signal a shift to an

unrelated topic, is the engine that drives the different quests: the daughter wants to remember/know her mother, the women want to remember the captain, the Doctor wants to recover his memory, etc. As in Baoshu's novella, personal history and political history are deeply intertwined—without the one, the other cannot be discovered. Even though the incidents and relationships are deeply personal, they are only ever expressed in political terms. When the Captain and the three women are reunited, the Captain puts his political duties before the specificities of the personal, telling his daughter that the amphibious society needs her strength, for instance. The personal is both larger than and subsumed by the historical and the political. Personal memory is also only ever partial; its fullness of detail cannot be captured and in times of momentous historical shifts it becomes further fragmented and absorbed by the concerns of history. Left behind are traces of futures yet to be born.

A key undertext of the whole film is the Middle Passage and Transatlantic Human Trade, and the drowned bodies of the millions of people who died on these enslavement ships. “The Deep” by the hip-hop group Clipping, which imagines an underwater civilization born of the pregnant African women thrown overboard from these enslavement ships, is used as a theme song. As many of us know, the rich speculative possibilities of this song also lead to a separate novel, *The Deep* (2019) by Rivers Solomon. Mekiwi's text partly adopts the motifs of this song, connecting the Afrofuturist experience of a history of struggle with the Arabfuturist experience of a region permanently besieged by oil wars and foreign interventions, and she specifically contrasts the amphibian dream with the violence of the space race. El Captain's disappearance is orchestrated by the Doctor to prevent him from being killed/kidnapped by the Space Agencies, who are interested in traveling outwards to the stars instead. The alternative, proposed by El Captain, is impossible to reconcile with the technofetishistic

imaginary of travelling in generation starships in neo-colonial missions of colonizing other planets. Harmony with a planet on the verge of destruction, with rising seas and oceans, in order to rescue the species, is not even imagined as a solution when there is a possibility of indulging in the fantasy of escape and travelling outwards to the final frontiers. Mekiwi's story thus rejects historical linearities: it is a narrative of a possible future built upon speculations on a historical past. The story is aware of the separation between historical past and possible past, hence its projection of the future is consciously not based on historical past but a speculative past. Unlike mythical pasts of the retrofuturist mode, it does not glorify the past, nor does it believe its speculations about the past are real in any sense, but instead it applies the speculative mode to the past as a takeoff point for an alternate imaginary of a possible future.

PART 3: Tangling: Quantum Fiction in the Archives

Like retrofuturism, quantum fiction can be considered a variant of alternate history. While the retrofuturist mode takes its energy from an alternate imaginary of the future expressed from a relatively fixed singular point of history and origin, quantum fiction relies on the instability of history—questioning the fixity of origin and history by inserting into it other histories and other narrative possibilities. Its parallel worlds are thus not the world as it is, but just one of many possible worlds born out of similar dynamics. When quantum fiction engages with real history, it is to uncover or make prominent those aspects of history considered absent, lost, or marginal. Thus, unlike retrofuturism, the narratives are not driven by the linearity of progress of a singular timeline, but by circularity, parallelism, and what we can call space-time dilation: the present (of the real world or the world of the narrative) opens up as a result of quantum

effects. In terms of the relation between history, memory, and the future, quantum fiction contributes to pluralizing history, making it freeform and dissociated from the fixity of singular desires.

In Ken Liu's novella *The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary*¹⁴ (2011), the speculative element/novum of the narrative is the Bohm-Kirino particle and its use in an invention that allows a form of time travel where a person can travel to/spectate a moment in the past due to the quantum entanglement of two of these particles. However, the act of spectating destroys the spatio-temporal link, that is, the journeys can only be taken once. The device makes it possible to verify the authenticity of history, but at the same time destroys the ability to reverify the authentic. The invention is made by Eric Wei and Akemi Kirino, a Chinese-American and Japanese-American couple. Their personal histories collide in the WWII actions of Unit 731, an infamous organization under the control of the Japanese Imperial Army that conducted gruesome and inhumane biological and chemical experimentation on Chinese civilians, similar to Nazi experimentations in concentration camps. Wei believes that time-travel would make people care about these atrocities, and the invention uncovers a way for him to make it possible: "If people could see and hear the past, then it would no longer be possible to remain apathetic" (393).

The personal mission to establish facts about the brutality of Unit 731 is the focal point of political fights between the Chinese, Japanese, and other governments, each of which seeks to defend their idea of history. The Japanese government's position is defended by the United States, which sees Japan as an ally against China for its Asian military interests. In the effort to remain objective in the service of truthful history, Wei distances himself from the Chinese government and its influence, which creates problems from the other side. Ultimately, hounded by both, facing death threats, denied academic credibility, Wei commits suicide.

The documentary nature of the story makes it possible for Liu to employ two different kinds of fragmentation of history. The first is the fragmentation of voice and perspective. The whole narrative, including the political and personal trials as well as the experiences of historical brutality, are broken down into multiple narrators and narrative voices, which provide different perspectives on the same events. It is especially telling that the narrative carefully sculpts the structure of historical truth from the edifice of historical events, but then breaks down the structure with the hammer of subjective opinion: historical truth is hardly relevant where the past is given the status of religious orthodoxy:

He had sought to end history as mere history, and to give the past living voices to speak to the present. But it did not work out the way he had intended. The past did come to life, but when faced with it, the present decided to recast history as religion. (425)

The first form of fragmentation preserves the historicity of the historical event but tempers its expressibility beyond the socio-political layers of which the historical event is part. Liu points out that history needs to be recounted, and the truth is more important than national or political interest, but the truth is also deeply inconvenient for those who govern since it is based on structures of violence and oppression. Within the story, all governments decide to sign a time travel moratorium, to make sure this kind of time travel is banned (428-9). Liu is careful to mention that many nations and peoples at different points of time have resorted to extreme violence, and having a time travel machine of this kind makes it impossible to ignore historical injustices.

The other form of fragmentation is that of the personal through the political. The central plot holding the different experiences together in the form of the memoir or the autobiography is that of the relationship between Kirino and Wei. Their whole relationship

is built on top of historical tensions between the Japanese and Chinese people, but we also learn at the very end that it is ultimately built not on history but its elision, since Kirino hides the fact that her grandfather was a part of Unit 731 and one of the people who conducted the gruesome experiments. Other personal narratives, of their memories together, the genesis of their quest and so on play against this fundamental silence, which is perhaps the silence of history itself: “The truth is not delicate and it does not suffer from denial—the truth only dies when true stories are untold” (434).

If Liu’s story is about the future, then it is the future conditioned by one question: what remains of the future when the past is denied? Clearly, for any idea of the future, it is important to recognize the past, but it is important to do so without its luster - it also needs to be experienced and felt in all its horrors to find a way for the future:

Every moment, as we walk on this earth, we are watched and judged by the eyes of the universe.

For far too long, historians, and all of us, have acted as exploiters of the dead. But the past is not dead. It is with us. Everywhere we walk, we are bombarded by fields of Bohm-Kirino particles that will let us see the past like looking through a window. The agony of the dead is with us, and we hear their screams and walk among their ghosts. We cannot avert our eyes or plug up our ears. We must bear witness and speak for those who cannot speak. We have only one chance to get it right. (435)

Liu’s story rejects the retrofuturist impulse to create an alternate possible future; the future it seeks to turn to is built on a deeper recognition of history: it is a continuously evolving future built on constantly deepening understanding of historical facts. It turns historians into stewards of the openness of futures instead of bearers of the sanctity of the past (435). The mythologerm comes

into play when the luster overtakes and represses the horrifying, making history the plaything of utopia via the evocation of a mythic past.

Vandana Singh's short story "With Fate Conspire"¹⁵, like Liu's, plays with the notion of entangled particles or time-streams. Here too certain beings are afforded a glimpse into the past. However, the setting could not be more different, nor the characterization, since Singh's concerns are different from Liu's. Singh's narrative is directly linked to the understanding of the past as a possible way to change or transform the future. The story is set in Kolkata in an undefined future (the end of the 21st century) at a time when most buildings of the city are underwater. Scientists have invented a kind of telescope that allows a select few to "see" the past. The protagonist, Gargi, is a poor illiterate woman, whose only reason for entry into the scientific circle is her ability. The scientists require her to focus on 1856, to Wajid Ali Shah, the tenth and last Nawab of Awadh (Oudh), believing that focusing on him—especially his poetry—might change the eventual course of history. It takes some time for Gargi to figure out their scheme:

See, [their] idea is that time is like a river delta, lots of thin streams and fat streams, flowing from past to present, but fanning out. History and time control each other, so that if some future place is deeply affected by some past history, those two time-streams will connect. When that happens it diverts time from the future place and shifts the flow in each channel so that the river as a whole might change its course. They're trying to change the future. (16)

Focusing on the Nawab is thus focusing on events of significance, for a ruler's life is by default considered more significant than that of common people, especially in directing the course of history. Yet Gargi is not interested in that regal history—she discovers early on that she can *connect* with someone else, the writer Rassundari Devi,

regarded as the first Indian woman to write an autobiography. Gargi's connection with Rassundari is instant: the fact that the latter was a homemaker whose main part of the day consists of household activities and their management make her a far more interesting and identifiable figure for Gargi than a "large, sad, weepy man" (2). Her childhood memories learning about poetry are rekindled by her connection with Rassundari and she decides to learn things that were denied her while growing up, such as learning how to read. Across times, she becomes the keeper of Rassundari's "secret" life as an author, a life lived in the midst not of grandiose opulence and self-pity as the Nawab but in the mundanity of the everyday, the ability to find humor in the routine, and passion from dreaming. It is ultimately that world—the world of Rassundari, mostly forgotten to the future or cast aside in the search for larger historical patterns—that Gargi decides to save. By deceiving the scientists about her connection to Rassundari, she is able to make a "time-loop", that is, bring about a possible future from a fixed point in the past, but one that is unconnected to the future desired by the scientists.

There are two concerns here that I can highlight that have to do with memory and the future. The first is with the past in its historicity, since the scientists are interested in discovering the missing parts of the narrative in order to create a time-loop. Their focus on the Nawab is a focus on significant history due to the "weight of events" (11). However, in defiance, Gargi chooses to turn this quest to something closer in line to microhistories and invisible histories, a path leading away from the big sweeps to the people who make history but are often sidelined by its records, such as the women, the poor, and those who live their lives at the margins, people like Gargi herself:

How could they have done something of this magnitude, not even knowing whether it would make for a better world?

‘That’s why we didn’t tell you,’ she said. ‘You don’t understand, we—scientists, governments, people like us around the world—tried everything to avert catastrophe. But it was too late. Nothing worked. And now we are past the point where any change can make a difference.’

“‘People like us,’ you say,’ I said. ‘What about people like me? We don’t count, do we?’ (24)

The story thus refocuses our attention to the people who make history in their everyday lives, and but who are left out of its calculations when it comes to thinking about the future, whether the omission is a conscious deliberated strategy or simply callous indifference. After all, it is this disregard for some life that makes it possible to imagine or create eugenic experiments, holocausts, wars, and other kinds of disasters that disproportionately affect the marginalized.

The second is with the future of the future itself. If there seems to be no escape from climate disasters in the future, then it is perhaps necessary to reimagine how one thinks about the future, not just reflecting the biases and dreams of the past, nor dreaming of collective escape fantasy turned towards the stars, but thinking about it past the spectacle of disaster to some other way of being and becoming. In offering this other way, the narrative both opens up the past in terms of what has been left out or ignored, as well as open up the future to possibility, if one could only think of what kinds of futures one wants differently. After all, if it is the pursuit of those other futures, whether retrofutures or shiny spaceship ones that are likely to lead us to the climate disaster, then one cannot have a future imaginary that is based on those dreams. The story ends with a tinge of speculative utopianism that is a recurring trait in Singh’s work¹⁶, the possibility of remaking of the world while recognizing the constraints of the old—and despite them: utopianism without utopia.

Conclusion: Utopianism in Space-time Ruptures

To connect history and the future—as future history, or future fiction—is to actively initiate spatiotemporal entanglement between memory and possibility. If the future cannot be predicted or its abstractness made tangible in any concrete sense, it is the entanglement that creates the illusion of a future within the fiction. What one thinks one knows, or what one can know, of the future, is conditioned by memory, and it is through memory that the nature of possibility is realized. As the discussions above show, it is the use and abuse of memory that makes the possible future appear as the plausible future within the speculative mode, whether or not the plausible one is the preferred one.

Yet the problem is not one of time, but of the spatiality of time – whether these are discursive surfaces of genre or phenomenal realities of borders and boundaries, the Globe—if you will—through which our notions of time are filtered and made concrete, activated, used, and abused. It is these spaces that are essential to the problem of the denial of coevalness, whether the argument is made from the perspective of genre, history, or memory.¹⁷ Space is the place from which distributions of time occur, which allows narratives of origin, precedence, guilt – who or what came first, who or what was before, who cast the first stone? – from which derive the values of the singularity or linearity of the time-stream.¹⁸ If future utopias of a certain order, which I have termed here retrofuturist politics – can only emerge from the subjective narrowing of the future as a horizon to deny coevalness to the multiplicity of possible futures, then utopianism is the struggle against such denial, to restore to the space of futures the first stirrings of such coevalness.

It is this attempted restoration which comes across as a common thematic unit for all four narratives discussed above and

what marks out their difference from the retrofuturist mode. My focus here has been on coevalness and complexity, especially a call for coevalness in history and memory, that is, whose past it is that counts in telling and retelling and whose past is used to construct the future. If there is a call made from the perspective of the global fantastic, then it is this call, an urge for us to “inhabit other times, other places,” as Homi Bhabha put it in *The Location of Culture*.¹⁹ The past has never been perfect. In playing with time, history, memory, and the future, the narratives display new strategies of how one can activate the past without rendering it in shades of mythological perfection. In all four narratives, the past and the future are sites of struggle and sites of trauma, whether it is the violence of a cultural revolution, the genocidal history of slavery, undeniable human brutality across the ages, or capitalist and colonialist violence leading to ecocide. There is no nostalgia for a past except in the deeply personal rather than the historical sense, but even that nostalgia ultimately needs to be discarded for the promise of a possible future. As we move through the planet, from one end to the other, living in the ruins, the past cannot be raised as mythology—as a mythologerm—but as trauma that must be reckoned with, recognized, faced, and lived past if one seeks to imagine a better future.

Notes

1. Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva, Aakriti Mandhwani, and Anwesha Maity. “Indian Genre Fiction – languages, literatures, classifications.” In *Indian Genre Fiction: Pasts and Future Histories*, edited by Chattopadhyay, Mandhwani, and Maity. London & New York: Routledge, 2019.
2. Spivak, G. C. “Planetarity” (Box 4, WELT). *Paragraph* 38(2), 2015. 290–292. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44016381>. 292
3. Many review articles of the latest live action Star Trek series show this trend. Some examples:
 - a) McFarland, Melanie. ““Star Trek: Strange New Worlds” boldly takes us where we’ve been. Right now, that’s what we need”. *Salon.com*. 8

- July 2022. <https://www.salon.com/2022/07/08/star-trek-strange-new-worlds-season-1/>.
- b) Fullerton, Huw. “Star Trek: Strange New Worlds review – It’s the real thing, at last”. *Radiotimes.com*. 1 May 2022. <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/sci-fi/star-trek-strange-new-worlds-review/>
- c) Bastián, Angelica Jade and Kathryn VanArendonk. “Hooray, Star Trek Feels Like Star Trek Again”. *Vulture.com*. 13 June 2022. <https://www.vulture.com/article/star-trek-strange-new-worlds-yes.html>.
- d) Weldon, Glen. 2022. “‘Star Trek: Strange New Worlds’ goes there, boldly.” *NPR.org*. 1 May 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/01/1095258710/star-trek-strange-new-worlds-paramount>.
4. Torgersen, Brad R. “Sad Puppies 3: The Unraveling Of An Unreliable Field.” 4 February 2015. <https://bradrtorgersen.blog/2015/02/04/sad-puppies-3-the-unraveling-of-an-unreliable-field/>.
5. <https://www.basedcon.com/>.
6. https://www.basedcon.com/?page_id=85.
7. Guffey, Elizabeth and Kate C. Lemay. “Retrofuturism and Steampunk.” *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*. Ed. Rob Latham. Oxford University Press 2014. Online.
8. Jemisin, N. K. “How Long ‘Til Black Future Month? The Toxins of Speculative Fiction and the Antidote that is Janelle Monáe”. In *Adventure Rocketship: Let’s All Go To the Science Fiction Disco*, edited by Jonathan Wright. Bristol: Tangent Books, 2013. 105-113.
9. Fisher, Mark. *Ghosts of My Life: writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures*. Zero Books, 2014.
10. Serres, Michel and Bruno Latour. *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*. Translated by Roxanne Lapidus. University of Michigan Press, 1995. 60.
11. The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly revealed the myth of safety built on distance between geopolitical entities. Cf. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, “The Pandemic That Was Always Here, and Afterward: from Futures to CoFutures.” *Science Fiction Studies* 48.3, 2020.
12. Baoshu. “What Has Passed Shall in Kinder Light Appear” (2015; translated by Ken Liu). No Chinese publication; first English publication in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, edited by C C Finlay, March-April 2015. In: *Broken Stars: Sixteen stories from the new frontiers of Chinese science fiction*. Edited and translated by Ken Liu. Head of Zeus, 2019. 151-222.
13. Mekiwi, Mariam. *Abl Ma ‘Ansa (Before I Forget)*. 2018. 30 mins.

14. Liu, Ken. "The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary". First published, *Panverse 3*, edited by Dario Ciriello, 2011. In: Ken Liu, *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories*. Head of Zeus, 2016. 376-437.
15. Singh, Vandana. "With Fate Conspire". First published in *Solaris Rising 2*, 2013. In: *Ambiguity Machines and Other Stories*. Easthampton, MA: Small Beer Press, 2018. 1-24.
16. Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva. "Speculative Utopianism in Kalpavigyan: Mythologerm and Women's Science Fiction." *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, No.127, Spring/Summer 2017. 6-19.
17. Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva. 2021. "Manifestos of Futurisms." *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, No. 139 vol 50 no.2, 2021. 8-23.
18. Within the spaces of genre history, for instance of SF, the quest for origins (whether Gernsback or Frankenstein or Arabian Nights or Lucian or Indigenous mythologies or the Indic or Graeco-Roman Epics), often gives "meaning" to what SF is, was, can, and sometimes even should be. The collapse of such prescriptivism is the reason for the many deaths of science fiction, as has been theorized by numerous critics. Similarly, the notion of origins, or who came first and thus who belongs, also underlies the claims to space, and the right to occupy land, which is at the political heart of most geopolitical conflicts today, as is the question of who started the conflict.
19. Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London & New York: Routledge, 1994. 256.