

Reflections

Beyond Dystopia: Joy, Hope, & Queer Ecology in Sam J. Miller's *Blackfish City*

Christy Tidwell, Ph.D., South Dakota School of Mines & Technology

Science fiction often turns to dystopia and apocalypse to address environmental destruction and climate change. We imagine flooded worlds—J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* and *Waterworld* (1995)—and worlds without water—Ballard's *The Drought* and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife*. We imagine worlds full of trash—*WALL-E* (2008) and Chen Qiufan's *The Waste Tide*—and worlds without food—*Soylent Green* (1973). We imagine the destructive forces of climate change—*The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *Snowpiercer* (2013), Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy. These narratives provide clear warnings, but Saffron O'Neill and Sophie Nicolson-Cole find that although fear-inducing climate change stories might get attention, they “are also likely to distance or disengage individuals from climate change” (O'Neill & Nicolson-Cole, 2009, p. 375). Similarly, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson indicates that the negative emotions generated by frightening environmental narratives can lead to helplessness rather than action (Schneider-Mayerson, 2018). After all, despite decades of seeing these fears played out in fiction and film, we have done nothing to slow our movement into these very futures.

Some recent environmental SF, however, including Sam J. Miller's *Blackfish City*, imagines not just environmental loss and destruction but also survival in the face of frightening environmental change. (Charlie Jane Anders' *The City in the Middle of the Night* does similar work, and I highly recommend it, but space does not permit me to discuss both.) *Blackfish City* is set on a floating Arctic city marked by severe class stratification and shaped by massive climate change that has led to the downfall of the U.S. This is clearly dystopian, but the inevitability of this future is challenged when an orcamancer (a woman nanobonded to an orca) arrives, both prompting significant resistance to the capitalist status quo and

creating the possibility of a more hopeful and equitable future.

Miller simultaneously challenges environmental SF's pessimistic tendencies and provides a model for queer ecology in SF. Catriona Sandilands defines queer ecology as including “practices that aim [...] to disrupt prevailing heterosexist discursive and institutional articulations of sexuality and nature” and rethink “environmental politics in light of queer theory” (Sandilands, 2016, p. 169). *Blackfish City's* environmental politics are inextricable from its queerness, indicating that a future in which the planet has a chance must also be a future that welcomes queer people and is built upon queer relations. Nicole Seymour notes, however, that queer ecology has often lost “queer theory's trademark sensibilities: its playfulness, its irreverence, its interest in perversity, and its delight in irony” (Seymour, 2018, p. 23). She argues that queer ecology should reject feelings such as “gloom and doom, [...] as well as the heteronormativity and whiteness of the [mainstream environmental] movement” (Seymour, 2018, pp. 4-5), and asks, “*might reclaiming gaiety and other contrarian modes enable us to create new modes of resistance, new forms of community, and new opportunities for inquiry into environmental crisis?*” (Seymour, 2018, p. 24, italics in original).

Blackfish City presents an affirmative answer to this question, partly because, despite the environmental crisis at its heart, it is a fun read. One central character is an orcamancer (the detail that drew me in initially), some characters are entertainingly snarky, and the city itself—although marked by poverty, class and culture divisions, sickness, and violence—is bustling and lively, a place that the characters clearly love even while they are critical of it. The novel is able therefore to “reclaim gaiety” as part of its damaged but not broken world.

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Of course, “gaiety” signifies both joy and queer-ness, and *Blackfish City* is not only fun but inclusive. *Blackfish City* features a lesbian couple, gay men (more than one of whom has the breaks, a clear analogue to AIDS), and a nonbinary person. Perhaps more importantly, the novel treats them as a regular part of the world, and these characters’ identities are normalized without being erased. This is not a story primarily about LGBTQ identity, then, but one featuring people with a variety of identities and desires. *Blackfish City* does not posit queer identities as merely problematic nor does it rely on queer saviors. It’s not that only LGBTQ people could change the world but that the openness that makes room for them spills over into an openness to alternative ways of being and thinking in other arenas as well—including challenges to capitalism and colonialism.

The queerness embedded in the novel also involves engaging deeply with nonhuman beings. Nanobonding, which irrevocably ties a human to an animal, is central to *Blackfish City*. This process creates deep and meaningful cross-species relationships, but it is also dangerous—especially if the connection is disrupted. For instance, one of the main characters was nanobonded to a polar bear as a child and then separated from his animal, which caused him psychological pain for years. Without knowing of this past, he thinks of himself as an animal: “He was amphibious. He was a polar bear” (Miller, 2018, p. 21). He carries the strength and power of the polar bear in his sense of self, but he is not able to understand this or feel whole. In the end, the bonds between human and nonhuman are crucial to revolution within the city itself and to finding a way to fix what has been broken in the larger world and environment. The novel tells a story of hope in a damaged world, and this story cannot be told without the embrace of queer relationships, both human and more-than-human, demonstrating that “certain queer affects and sensibilities [...] are not just *compatible* with politics but *inseparable* from them” (Seymour, 2018, p. 123).

Miller’s novel indicates that environmental SF can be more than dystopian but must still acknowledge the dangers we face going forward. Allyse Knox-Russell describes “*a futurity without optimism*—that is, a futurity cleared of fantasies projected from the (patriarchal, anthropocentric) past and thus a futurity radically open to difference and change” (Knox-Russell, 2018, p. 218, italics in original). The hopefulness of *Blackfish City* is located in this kind of futurity, which functions by rejecting heteronormativity and anthropocentrism and creating a space open to both queerness and reciprocal relationships with the more-than-human world. This openness also makes room for a more joyful encounter with environmental SF itself. There is a lot to be afraid of, but—as both Miller and queer environmental futures more broadly indicate—there’s also a lot to live for.

References

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