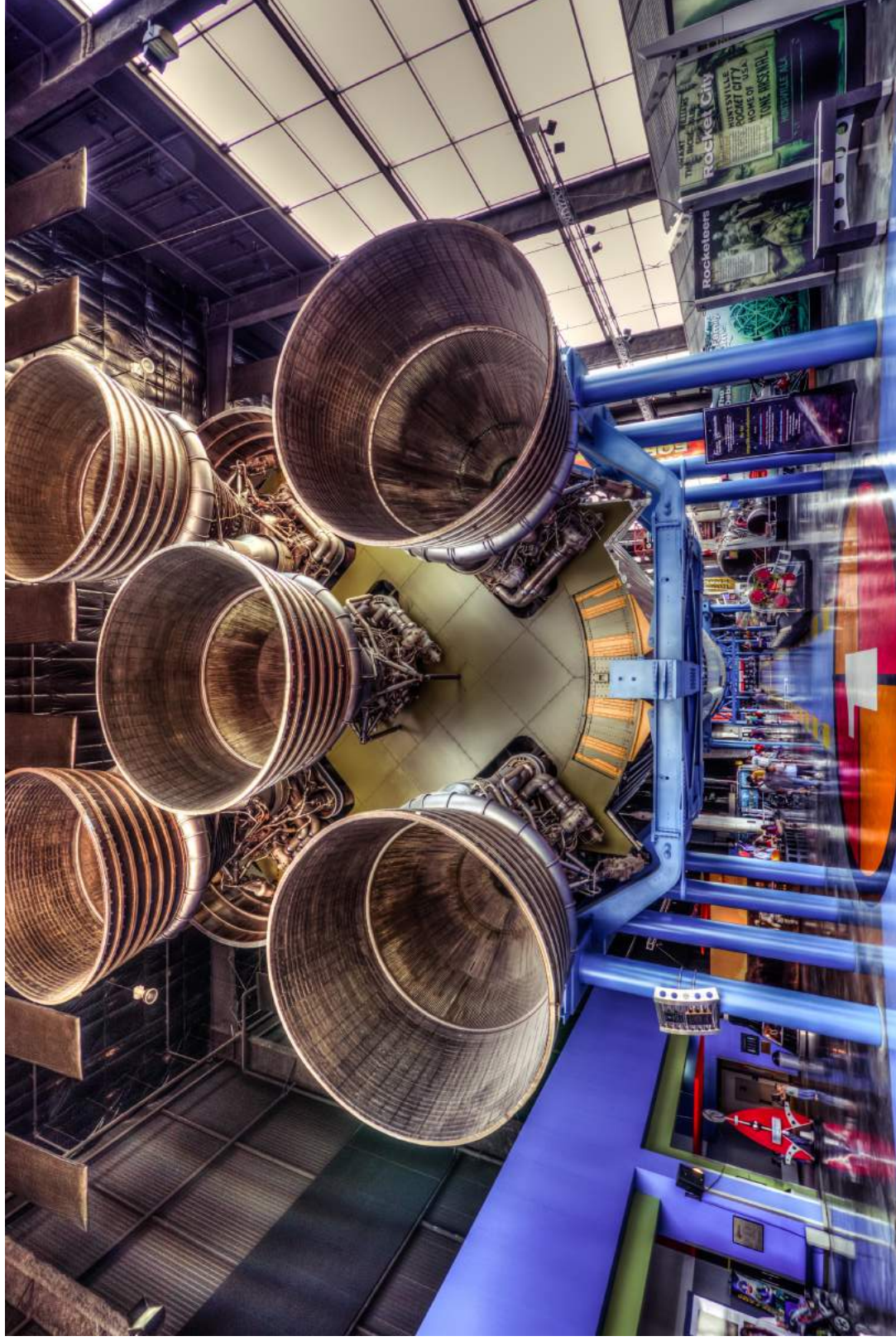




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Representation of History in the Brothers Strugatsky's Novel *Hard to Be a God*

By Julia Gerhard

"A Long Way Away": Unreachable Freedoms in Contemporary Afrofuturist Neo-Slave Narratives

By Nadine Knight

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## From the Editor

Hello, faithful readers of the JOSF!

As 2018 draws to a close, the *Journal of Science Fiction* is preparing for a transition: this is my last issue as managing editor of the journal. I joined the staff as an editor in October 2015, when it was a brand-new publication, and it has been both exciting and rewarding to be involved with the launch of a scholarly enterprise.

Part of the reason I'm leaving the *JOSF* is to finish my long-languishing book—a critical study of the companions in the television series *Doctor Who*. As I've watched the most recent season of the show, I've been thinking a lot about the role of sci-fi, the evolution of sci-fi criticism, and the encouraging signs of greater inclusiveness and intersectionality in the world of science fiction.

If you're a *Doctor Who* fan—and maybe even if you're not—you know that the Doctor has been played by a series of different actors since the show began in 1963. One of the main conceits of the show is that, at the point of death, the Doctor can regenerate into a new body. The current incarnation, the Thirteenth Doctor (we'll just set aside that issue of

counting the regenerations), is played by Jodie Whittaker, the first female actor to play the part. The first female Doctor travels in her time-and-spaceship, the TARDIS, with Yasmin Kahn (a young Indian woman, played by Mandip Gill), Ryan Sinclair (a young black man, played by Tosin Cole), and Graham O'Brien (a middle-aged white man, if we use the common convention of using "middle-aged" to mean "significantly past the middle of one's life," played by Bradley Walsh). There's been a great deal of discussion about the race and gender breakdown of this TARDIS team; while of course some viewers were unhappy with the decision to overturn decades of precedent by casting a woman in the starring role, the overall response has been quite positive, and this season garnered strong ratings, giving proof that many viewers are not just ready to see a woman at the helm, but eager.

Did Series 11 *earn* its high ratings? Maybe not. I have serious reservations about the season—about its handling of a variety of cultural questions, about the development of the characters, about its engagement with the central ethos of the show. And I



have long felt that the show has not received proper credit for how progressive it usually is, which means that I do not see this season as a radical departure from Series 10. (Editorial Aside: the Steven Moffat era of the show is feminist and progressive, and if you want to hear more about why, my book will be out... someday.)

Regardless of how huge a step forward it really is, though, this season of *Doctor Who* fills the TARDIS with a diverse group of characters; has more than one story focused on people of color; and stars the first Doctor who is anything other than a white cisgender man. So, yes, it holds an exciting set of possibilities, and the creative team (headed by showrunner Chris Chibnall, creator of *Broadchurch*) makes an obvious and concrete effort to explore those possibilities.

Series 11 features more historical stories than most seasons of the modern show: three, out of a season of ten. In each case, the historical settings offer the opportunity to examine race, gender, or both. In this season, the TARDIS crew meets Rosa Parks; visits Lahore in 1947, during the Partition of India; and lands in the middle of a witch hunt in 17th-century Lancashire. While I don't feel that all of those stories handle these cultural questions with the sophistication or grace that I would have

hoped, the very presence of these stories is important. They have sparked valuable conversation among critics—both those who love Series 11 and those who do not. Critical reception of the season runs the gamut, from solidly positive to lukewarm to angry. Mainstream publications such as *The Atlantic* took notice of Series 11, too, running Kelly Connolly's wildly popular (if, in my view, also wildly problematic) opinion piece, "[The Radical Helplessness of the New Doctor Who.](#)"

What I find most heartening about these critical discussions is this: they hinge on the quality of the show. Few critics are still asking whether anyone will watch a show with a diverse cast headed by a female Doctor. That question is basically off the table now, because we're a whole season in, and the answer is "yes," just as the answers to the questions, "Will anyone watch a superhero movie about a black superhero?" and "Will anyone buy a movie ticket to see Wonder Woman?" are both "yes." These are stories that should be told—but they are also stories that can be sold, and the market has made it clear that commercial concerns are no reasonable excuse for placing white, cisgender, able-bodied men at the center of every narrative. We're seeing a wild burgeoning of different types of texts, too, with sci-fi making use of music and music videos, poetry, and audio drama podcasts, among



other forms. (Check out Nadine Knight's article in this issue, which compares Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* with the album *Splendor & Misery*, by the rap group clipping.)

In other words, it's an exciting time to be a sci-fi fan, not just a *Doctor Who* fan.

At any rate, I hope you'll forgive my foray into discussion of a show that many people would categorize as fantasy or fairy tale rather than sci-fi at all, because I offer it as just one example of a slow, sometimes subtle reshaping of the landscape of science fiction (and, indeed, of our culture at large). What's happening on *Doctor Who* is just one tiny fragment of the larger picture—I happen to get more of a view of the *Doctor Who* critical landscape because that's my favorite show, but readers and viewers can see these shifts happening everywhere.

Any quick survey of the current state of sci-fi and speculative fiction shows a vibrant, growing collection of diverse texts. The popular Syfy series *The Expanse* depicts a future in which the leaders come in all races and genders. Books such as Anne Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* explore the complexities of gender and break down binary limitations (picking up ideas popularized by Ursula Leguin). The recently-canceled Netflix series *Sense8*

melded queer representation and the transhuman. The 2018 Hugo Awards went to a diverse slate of authors, mostly women, including N.K. Jemisin (who won Best Novel for *The Stone Sky*, the third installment of her Broken Earth trilogy; both of the earlier novels also won the Hugo); Martha Wells (Best Novella, "All Systems Red"); Suzanne Palmer (Best Novelette, "The Secret Life of Bots"); and Rebecca Roanhorse (Best Short Story, "Welcome to your Authentic Indian Experience(TM)").

It's not all about demographics, either; thoughtful sci-fi is all over the place, in every philosophical debate, asking the questions that sci-fi is supposed to ask. Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* take up environmental anxieties. Ted Chiang, Alex Garland, Kazuo Ishiguro and Marissa Meyer explore the complications of artificial intelligence, cybernetics, and cloning (in Meyer's case, while overturning age-old stereotypes about sci-fi being for boys by creating the Lunar Chronicles series, which is straight-up sci-fi aimed at young adult girls). I could spend all day—and more—listing examples of texts that present provocative, progressive characters and ideas, without scratching the surface, so I'm going to leave off, but you get the picture.





None of this is new. Science fiction has long been an incubator for ideas about what's wrong with the world, what could be better, and what "better" might look like (or what the worst might look like). But the landscape of science fiction is peopled with a constantly broadening range of different kinds of bodies and minds all the time, and it's radically exciting to see.

In the grand scheme of things, does it matter whether these texts—some of them long-established, much-beloved texts—embrace a wider range of representation? Yes, of course it does. In our current political climate, we need these gains.

If I had to name the element of the Journal of Science Fiction that I'm most proud of, it is this: the journal was founded with an emphasis on celebrating and interrogating inclusivity and diversity in science fiction, and we've worked hard to carry out that mission. Our founding editor, Monica Louzon, envisioned a publication of broad scope that covered texts from around the world, and we've invested a great deal of time and energy into offering editorial support for our authors, which has enabled scholars from many different disciplines and walks of life to make their voices heard. Some of our writers are from academic disciplines that seldom appear in literary journals (such as the sciences); some of them are not from academia at all,

but from other spheres. We're working to break down the divide between academic writers and the rest of the world. (That's also the main reason that the JOSF is, and always will be, open-access.) During my tenure at the journal, we have published arguments about everything from particle accelerators to zombies; produced our first themed issue; and been added to EBSCO's humanities index.

At the same time, Monica spearheaded the release of the Museum of Science Fiction's first take-home exhibit, an anthology entitled *Catalysts, Explorers, and Secret Keepers: Women of Science Fiction*, and Aisha Mathews (current assistant managing editor of the JOSF and my successor as managing editor) developed exciting new literary programming for the Museum's annual convention, *Escape Velocity* (including panels on Afrofuturism, gender and embodiment, disability, and more).

Every move toward more inclusive sci-fi and criticism is a move toward realizing the most significant promises of the genre. The JOSF aims, in its small way, to be part of the cultural machinery that pushes sci-fi forward. As the journal goes on—taking on new staff and streamlining editorial processes to manage our ever-increasing flow of submissions—we are committed to the mission of promoting scholarship



about sci-fi texts of all kinds, from classic tales to cutting-edge new works. Aisha, our assistant managing editor, will be taking over at the helm, and she has exciting plans for the *JOSF* in 2019. We are taking on new staff (let us know if you want to join us!), and we're planning a themed issue on disability in science fiction. And in terms of journal management, we're

streamlining our editorial processes to manage our growth, as we're getting far more submissions now that the word is out in the scholarly community. So, even though I am saying goodbye to the *JOSF* as an editor, I'm eagerly following its progress as a reader—I can't wait to see what comes next.

—Heather McHale, Ph.D.  
Managing Editor, *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction*

## Representation of History in the Brothers Strugatsky's Novel *Hard to Be a God*

By Julia Gerhard, University of Colorado, Boulder

**Abstract:** The brothers Strugatsky's popular science fiction novel *Hard to be a God*, which depicts the appalling consequences resulting from the interference of a group of historians from Earth who arrive on a distant planet Arkanar in order to speed up its course of history and help to establish communism, not only critiques the Stalinist repressions of the Soviet intelligentsia of the 1930s, but also provides an interesting socio-political commentary on the life and role of the intelligentsia during the 1960s. Persecuted for their art, like the Soviet intelligentsia in the 1930s, the citizens of Arkanar face repressions: citizens who display literacy or artistic talent are exterminated on a mass scale. In addition, the Strugatskys seek to disprove the dominant in the Soviet Union Marxist theory of history and propose that—contrary to a Marxist perception of history as a sequential chain of events that will undoubtedly lead to communism—history is cyclical and in fact tends to repeat itself. A telling example of their view on history is their depiction of a Fascist coup that anachronistically occurs in medieval Arkanar, suggesting that Fascism is not merely a phenomenon of modernity and, in fact, can reappear at any time. For the Strugatskys, Fascism acquires a broader meaning: it is any totalitarian regime that oppresses the masses, annihilates culture, and controls intellectual thought. Ultimately, the Strugatskys propose that the intelligentsia is the main source of resistance to a Fascist regime. Only the intellectuals, who still haven't lost their critical thinking capacity and are not afraid to question the status quo, have the potential and power to fight back against oppression.

**Keywords:** Arkady Strugatsky; Boris Strugatsky; Strugatsky brothers; Soviet sci-fi

The science fiction of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky gained immense popularity among Soviet readers in the 1960-1980s and had a substantial impact on the Soviet intelligentsia and their ideological outlook. Such popularity can be attributed to the fact that unlike Western SF—which provides an alternative, speculative perception of reality with the chief focus on socio-political commentary as well as technological progress—most of Soviet SF, though

still incorporating socio-political critique, mainly centers around ideological, philosophical, and ethical problems. The Strugatskys' novels are a telling example of this, as they are particularly well known for incorporating and reflecting on contemporary philosophical and moral issues. Moreover, their novels also provide an interesting insight into the concept of history and progress, as well as function as a social blueprint or an ideological model for the

## Representations of History, continued

communist future. One of the most popular novels of the Strugatsky brothers' oeuvre, *Hard to be a God* (1964/2014), addresses some of the moral dilemmas facing Soviet intelligentsia during the 1960-1980s.

This novel attracted a lot of critical attention due to its rich thematic content. While some Strugatsky scholars (Il'ia Kukul'in, Dmitriy Volodihin and Gennadiy Prashkevich) analyze the theme of "progressorstvo," the figure of the Progressor—what it symbolizes and entails—others (Elana Gomel, Irina Kaspe) focus on the use of the Aesopian language and allegorical devices targeted especially toward the Soviet intellectuals of that time. Another group of literary critics explores the notion of history and historical progress in this text. Specifically, Simonetta Salvestroni and Elana Gomel discuss the Strugatskys' treatment of history, which seems to contradict the Marxist theory of historical materialism and implies that history in fact does not follow a number of "social" stages of historical development or modes of production that inevitably result in the establishment of communism.

I agree with Salvestroni and Gomel's arguments and propose that what Strugatskys' *Hard to be a God* presents is a multi-layered commentary on history. On the one hand, the novel contains numerous allusions to the "real" history, specifically to the Soviet past, reminiscent of Stalinist repressions, and the present history under Krushchev, whose unpredictable treatment of the artists precipitated the fear that the oppression of intelligentsia, similar to

conditions under Stalin's regime, was reemerging. At the same time, the Strugatskys undermine the Marxist theory of history (historical materialism), widely popular at that time, thereby suggesting that perhaps the concept of history and social relations in the traditional Marxist sense have to be reevaluated in order for us to ever attain or step foot in the "realized" communist utopia. Ultimately, I argue that history in this novel not only deviates from its prearranged course, but in fact repeats itself—thereby depicting time as cyclical (chaotic), rather than sequential.

## Soviet Science Fiction

One of the important goals of science fiction, as many scholars contend (Levitas, Goodwin, Plattell, Sargent, Jameson), is to provide a social and political commentary/criticism of the existing conditions via the creation of a science-fictional novum and the rhetoric of "estrangement." While both Western and Soviet science fiction raise important ideological and political questions and offer a variety of speculations about the future, Soviet science fiction has been particularly preoccupied and actively engaged with pondering the destiny of its country. Indeed, beginning with the October Revolution of 1917 through the 1930s, and later through the Thaw period, the Soviet intelligentsia has been enthusiastically involved in the discussion of the possible blueprints for the country's future. As suggested by Rafail Nudelman in his work "Soviet Science Fiction and the Ideology of Soviet Society" (1989), "in contrast to Western models,

## Representations of History, continued

Russian social thought and, accordingly, Russian literature have always displayed a heightened sense of their ideological potentiality" (p. 38). Specifically, historical events of the twentieth century afforded ideal conditions for that creative ideological modeling: "Russian SF . . . was viewed as a convenient means of fictionalizing certain statements about the future rather than as a new artistic method of reflection and cognition" (p. 38-39). During the Thaw, the Soviet intellectuals fervently speculated about the future of the USSR: with the death of Stalin, a massive destalinization project was initiated, which also required the revisiting of communist principles. Soviet people felt that they were given another chance to restore the true essence of communism. Utopian dreaming was reawakened: hopes for the bright communist utopian future resumed and resurfaced.

Since literature and art played an essential role in reifying the utopian imagination, science fiction was expected to supply readers with possible social blueprints to satisfy that imagination. As Il'ia Kukulin explains in his article "Alternative Social Blueprinting in Soviet Society of the 1960s and the 1970s, or Why Left-Wing Political Practices Have Not Caught on in Contemporary Russia" (2011), during the Thaw years in the Soviet Union, "a particular form of activity" was born called "alternative social blueprinting," which mainly flourished in art and literature (p. 53). Consequently, Soviet science fiction narratives seldom featured groundbreaking technological innovations and explorations of exotic worlds—as the majority of Western science fiction did—but were mainly

situated within somewhat "real political and social space contemporaneity" (Nudelman, 1989, p. 40). Ultimately, Soviet science fiction excelled in participating in what Frederic Jameson (1988) refers to as "cognitive mapping," i.e., producing, via imaginative processes, "a vision of the future that grips the masses," and thereby offering necessary rhetorical tools to understand and find our place in history, enabling us to reclaim the past, dream about the future, and do something about the present (p. 355).

## The Strugatsky Brothers

The renowned brothers Strugatsky were among those Soviet science fiction writers who vigorously partook in providing the long-awaited social blueprints for the communist future. Their famous novel *Hard to be a God* is a vivid exemplar of that.

First, let us briefly examine how Strugatskys managed to comment on the contemporary socio-political historical situation in the Soviet Union (and somehow avoid censorship) and explore how the conventions of science fiction as a literary genre enabled them to do so. It has to be noted that the novel was originally conceived, as Kukulin (2011) affirms, "as an optimistic adventure story," but the plans changed when, in 1962, Khrushchev "caused a public commotion at an art exhibition at the Manezh and presented artistic celebrities with some harsh ideological ultimatums" (p. 59). The Strugatskys began to worry that the oppression of intelligentsia, similar to the one

## Representations of History, continued

under Stalin's regime, was coming back, shattering once again their hopes for the utopian communist future. As the Strugatskys themselves articulate:

One thing became, as the saying goes, painfully clear to us. Illusions are out. Hopes for a bright future are out. We are being managed by niggards and enemies of culture. They will never be on our side. They will always be against us. They will never allow us to say what we hold to be right because what they hold to be right is something altogether different. And while for us communism is a world of freedom and creativity, for them communism is a society in which the people at large carry out, swiftly and with pleasure, all the instructions of the Party and the government. (as cited in Kukulin, 2011, p. 59)

Thus, a positive adventure story, originally conceived as a utopia, turned into a daring (though not open) condemnation of the Soviet regime.

Like many other authors at that time, the Strugatskys could not openly criticize the Soviet state and hence, to escape from the watchful eye of censors, had to use literary devices that allowed them to mask some of the more obvious allusions and comparisons with contemporary Soviet life. At the first glance, however, it appears that the Strugatskys follow the guidelines of the socialist realist aesthetic doctrine, established in the 1930s, which, as sug-

gested by Patrick McGuire in his work *Red Stars: Political Aspects of Soviet Science Fiction* (1985), prompted the authors to propagate communist ideals and "encourage the Soviet population by painting a vivid picture of the happy era of full communism" (p. 25). As I explore in more detail in my dissertation titled "Post-Utopian Science Fiction in Postmodern American and Russian Literatures" (2018), science fiction authors were to depict their futuristic Soviet societies as having already attained or striving to attain communism (the portrayal of which must, of course, be positive), which was typically contrasted with the "negative" depiction of the Soviet state's enemies—usually represented by foreign planets stuck in the earlier stages of historical development (under capitalism or feudalism), which are in desperate need of help. Through the obvious juxtaposition between the "perfect" utopian Soviet state and "barbaric" alien planets, Soviet SF authors, including the brothers Strugatsky, were able to employ the conventions of the SF genre to insert hidden allusions to communism and Soviet social norms—so subtle that they managed to pass through censorship—in their depictions of alien planets, with their evil oppressive regimes and inferior socio-political structure (p. 233).

In *Hard to be a God*, the aforementioned dichotomy between the two planets—in this case, between the medieval Arkanar and progressive Soviet Earth—is not only presented and clearly outlined, but is also markedly emphasized through the mission that the protagonist and his crew are assigned to carry out.

### Representations of History, continued

The story unfolds on a distant planet in a kingdom of Arkanar, to which the main character Anton and other Earthlings are sent. Earth apparently has already reached the perfect state of communism; the Earth people are sent to help the local society to “uplift” their civilization and bring it closer to communism (Gomel, 2004, p. 92). Anton and the other Earthlings are young historian-scientists, supporters of Marxist ideals and the theory of inevitable progress, who attempt to prove and materialize their theories in real life on Arkanar. They are what Strugatskys call “progressors”—outsiders who come from a society with a superior socio-political structure, transplanted into less developed or “backward” societies to speed up the historical progress and bring them closer to the establishment of communism, the final stage of historical development. Progressors are not supposed to interfere with the flow of events. They are to simply observe and slowly, using no force or violence, to initiate the process of moving toward the formation of communism. As Kukulín (2011) asserts: “A Progressor is someone sent by a more highly developed civilization to one that is less developed, with the aim of acting secretly, through political agreements and other covert actions, to start social process there moving ‘in the right direction’ (toward communism, that is) and to rescue intellectuals and the ordinary men from their dire straits” (p. 58). The seemingly exemplary SF novum created in this novel, which sets up the anticipated “us-vs.-them” scenario, in which the medieval Arkanar and its residents are going to be reeducated and saved by the Earthlings from what appears to

be a fascist coup, is brilliantly used to critique the very regime it was supposed to extol.

The most powerful allusion to the contemporary Soviet society in this text is the persecution of the local intelligentsia—or, indeed, anybody who can read or write—in Arkanar. The sudden and abrupt domination of the army of Grays, who, first and foremost, decides to exterminate any remnant of intellectual thought to pave the way for the establishment of the supreme fascist rule of the Black Holy Order, painfully resembles the political situation of the Soviet Union under both the Stalin and Khrushchev regimes. As expressed by one of the Grays:

Literacy, literacy is the source of it all, my brothers! First they tell us money can't buy happiness, then they say peasants are people, too, and it only gets worse—offensive verses, then rioting. Hang them all, my brothers! You know what I'd do? I'd ask them straight out: Can you read? Off to the gallows! Write verses? Off to the gallows! Know your multiplication tables? Off to the gallows, you know too much! (p.26)

The main Earthling character, Anton, or Don Rumata as he is best known among the locals, works undercover and attempts to save the Arkanarian intelligentsia from the total and unjust extermination by the Grays: he hides and helps to transport doctors, teachers, poets, etc., to the neighboring kingdoms. The oppressed existence of the intellectuals of

### Representations of History, continued

Arkanar, who have become alienated in their own country, symbolizes the life of the Soviet intelligentsia under Stalin and Khrushchev. As Mark Lipovetsky argues in his article "Eshche Raz o Komplekse Progressora" (2015) («One More Time about the Concept of Progressor»), the figure of the progressor, a symbol for the contemporary Soviet intellectual, is surrounded by the culturally and intellectually empty society, which he tries to modernize (p. 6). Indeed, in the medieval-turned-fascist setting of Arkanar, "Soviet intellectuals of the 60s recognized in the Strugatskys' progressors charming metaphors of their own socio-cultural situation" ("Советские интеллектуалы-шестидесятники опознали в прогрессорах Стругацких обаятельные метафоры своей собственной социокультурной ситуации") (p. 6). Other hidden allegories and allusions in this fictitious society to the actual "historical" reality of Soviet life at that time include the figure of Don Reba, the leader of the Grays and Prime Minister of Arkanar, who originally was named Don Rebiia—a blatant satire on the historical figure of ruthless Lavrentii Beria, the chief of the Soviet secret police during 1940s-50s, who supervised the Gulag labor camp system and managed "sharashkas," the secret research laboratories in labor camps where many distinguished Soviet scientists labored for free. In addition, the merciless extermination of doctors whom Don Reba blamed for trying to poison the King of Arkanar undoubtedly brings to mind the infamous "Doctor's Plot" (1953), in which prominent Jewish doctors, accused of plotting to assassinate Stalin, were arrested and tortured. The omnipresent

state propaganda of the Stalinist era can be easily identified and detected in the novel's depiction of the Arkanarian court, which, under Don Reba's supervision, is now prohibited to perform any subversive ballads or poems and quickly turns into a propagandistic machine, glorifying the King and justifying the actions of the Gray army with plays like "The Fall of the Barbarians, or Marshal Totz, King Pitz the First of Arkanar." And of course, multiple references to the long bureaucratic processes and paper work, such as the scene where Don Rumata goes to the Merry Tower to ask for the release of Doctor Budach, reveal the familiar details of the everyday existence ("byt") of the Soviet life.

All these allusions to the Stalinist totalitarian regime are delicately situated within the not-so-subtle context of the burgeoning Fascism in Arkanar, making the two regimes virtually identical. As pointed out by Gomel in her article "The Poetics of Censorship" (1995), the spreading Fascism in Arkanar can be read as a nod toward Nazism—the gray army in the novel is perceptibly compared to the "storm-troopers," the "black 'Order' which supplants them after a violent purge recalls the SS," while Don Reba brings to mind the dark figure of Hitler himself (p. 93). Thus, the unsettling parallelism between Fascism/Nazism and Stalinism reveals Strugatskys' acknowledgement and critique of the atrocities committed during Stalinist times and, simultaneously, warns us that the contemporary society under Khrushchev might see the recurrence of that brutal history.



## Representations of History, continued

These skillfully crafted veiled allusions had appeared before in the Strugatskys' earlier novels, and the Soviet readers were already trained to look for them. As suggested by Irina Kaspe and Yvonne Howell, the Strugatskys were known for their employment of Aesopian language to express their political ideas. Kaspe, in her article "The Meaning of (Private) Life, or Why Do We Read the Strugatskys?" (2011), maintains that Soviet readers were aware of the Strugatskys' affinity for veiled allegories and read their works attentively, searching for hidden messages and allusions. Kaspe notes: "More often than not, the Strugatskys' interpreters seek to 'decipher' or 'decode' the text, to explain what is 'signified' or 'symbolized' by 'strange' or 'fantastic' elements of the narrative. An encrypted message is, of course, primarily treated as a fully realized ideological statement and even as a political manifesto" (p. 32). Howell (1994) also comments on the Strugatskys' masterful ability to convey their message without being caught by the censors. She argues that Strugatskys employed a literary device of what she calls "plot prefiguration" which involves the incorporation of "a well-known motif" or a familiar allusion in the text presented under the guise of an entertaining extra-terrestrial narrative (p. 21). The prefigurative motif then serves as means of "providing a symbolic commentary on certain events and characters" as "it offers a familiar analogy to help the reader understand the modern situation described in the novel" even if the action takes place on a distant planet inhabited by the aliens (p. 21). Readers then can look for "recognizable patterns of al-

lusions" in order to decipher the allegorical layer of the plot (p. 21).

## The Interpretation of History and Historical Progress

In addition to their commentary on the current "history" and socio-political situation in the country, the Strugatskys also offer their insight and reflection on the concept of history in a broader sense. For the purpose of this article, I want to specifically focus on the Strugatskys' interpretation of history and historical progress in this novel, which seems to challenge the traditional Marxist view on the concept of history (historical materialism). To begin with, it should be noted that Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* explain their belief in a sequential model of history and historical progress. They believe that the development of civilization is grounded in material forces and thus, societies are organized according to the arrangement of material forces and production. Their understanding of history presupposes a somewhat "linear" trajectory with certain stages of development wherein an evident transformation from the primitive classless society, to slavery, feudalism, then capitalism and finally socialism takes place. The stages are successive: in every stage of historical development, there emerges a new class, precipitating an inevitable class struggle, and ultimately leading to the evolution of a new historical stage. At every stage of historical development, something is lost, and yet something is gained, as the society will continue to progress, while the oppressed masses

### Representations of History, continued

will slowly begin to notice their oppressed status and will gradually form a new class—the proletariat—which will revolt against its oppressor (the bourgeoisie) and put a stop to the perpetual class struggle:

Altogether collisions between the classes of the old society further, in many ways, the course of development of the proletariat. The bourgeoisie finds itself involved in a constant battle. At first with the aristocracy; later on, with those portions of the bourgeoisie itself, whose interests have become antagonistic to the progress of industry; at all time with the bourgeoisie of foreign countries. In all these battles, it sees itself compelled to appeal to the proletariat, to ask for help, and thus, to drag it into the political arena. The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education, in other words, it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie. (p. 19)

Thus, every stage in history, with its ebbs and flows, arranges the suitable conditions for the proletariat to finally become enlightened and start a revolution against the ruling class. As Marx and Engels maintain, during the capitalist stage it will become apparent that “the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law . . . Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society” (p. 20-21). Hence, at the capitalist stage, the proletariat

attains class consciousness and a possibility of the revolution emerges, as a result of which socialism can be established. If that does occur, at the later phase of socialism, stateless communism with a classless and propertyless society emerges as the last stage of history with which history ends: since there will be no more class warfare, means will be distributed evenly, and class oppression will cease to exist.

Marx’s historical theory, therefore, implies a certain predetermined progressive nature of history, which grants his historical materialism its defining character. This understanding of history inspires the progressors’ expedition to Arkanar in *Hard to be a God*. Their goal is “to guide the feudal society of the planet Arkanar along the path of historical progress,” thereby ensuring their smooth transition and eventual formation of communism (Howell, 1994, p. 8). However, the events occurring in Arkanar do not seem to fit in the Marxist theory. At the very beginning of the novel, Anton acknowledges this discrepancy during his meeting with Don Kondor:

I want to once again draw your attention to the fact that the situation in Arkanar is not within the scope of basis theory . . . Everything in Arkanar has changed! Some new, systematic factor has appeared. And it looks like Don Reba is intentionally inciting all the grayness in the kingdom against learned people . . . And I’m aware of the theory. But here there are no theories, here there are typical fascist practices, here animals are

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murdering humans every minute! (p. 36-37)

Thus, their main weapon, as Anton refers to their carefully developed theory of Marxism, does not appear to be successfully working in practice (p. 281). Hence, the fascist putsch, a phenomenon typically associated with the age of modernity, anachronistically occurs during the Middle Ages in Arkanar. This illustrates that perhaps historical development is much more complex in nature and doesn't necessarily reflect the Marxist model. The Earthlings, who were convinced that they were well-equipped to control the situation in Arkanar, quickly lose control. As Gomel points out in her article "Gods like Men: Soviet Science Fiction and the Utopian Self" (2004), Anton gradually becomes disenchanted with Marxist theory, since it is obvious that the events in Arkanar do not abide by it: "...history itself suddenly deviates from its utopian route and loops around in strange and painful convolutions" (p. 362). Simonetta Salvestroni also refers to the depiction of the concept of history in this novel in her work "The Ambiguous Miracle in Three Novels by the Strugatsky Brothers" (1984), in which she mentions that Earthlings' attempt to "give rational explanation for everything" and "compartmentalize the given world into a pre-established and fixed system, is clearly tied to what is, to all appearances, an optimistic and orthodox vision of things according to which history proceeds according to wholly foreseeable and reassuring scenarios" (p. 294).

If the sequential historical progression, as suggested by both Gomel and Salvestroni, is being questioned in the novel, then Strugatskys' representation of history seems to favor the cyclical model. I propose that, in *Hard to be a God*, the Strugatskys not only disagree with the Marxist theoretical approach to history and historical progress, but in fact depict a completely different view of history: history, for them, is unpredictable and cannot be put into a predetermined system. Moreover, history, for the Strugatsky brothers, is a cyclical phenomenon that constantly repeats itself. In this sense, their comprehension of history echoes Nietzschean theory on the eternal recurrence.

**The Eternal Return and The Concept of History**

The idea of the eternal return was first proposed by Eastern philosophers and analyzed at length by a French political activist Louis Blanqui in his work *Eternity via the Stars* about ten years before Friedrich Nietzsche developed this idea in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Blanqui writes:

Here, nonetheless, lies a great drawback: there is no progress . . . What we call 'progress' is confined to each particular world, and vanishes with it. Always and everywhere in the terrestrial arena, the same drama, the same setting, on the same narrow stage—a noisy humanity infatuated with its own grandeur, believing itself to be the universe and living in its prison as though

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in some immense realm, only to founder at an early date along with its globe, which has borne with the deepest disdain the burden of human arrogance. The same monotony, the same immobility, on other heavenly bodies. The universe repeats itself endlessly and paws the ground in place. In infinity, eternity performs—imperturbably—the same routines. (as cited in Benjamin, 1921/2004, p. 26)

Nietzsche further explored the concept of the universe and history repeating itself in his famous work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883/1972). During a conversation between the dwarf and Zarathustra, Zarathustra explains the way history and universe works:

All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle . . . Must not all things that can run have already run along this lane? Must not all things that can happen have already happened, been done, run past? . . . For all things that can run must also run once again forward along this lane. And his slow spider that creeps along in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and I and you at this gate whispering together, whispering of eternal things—must we not all have been here before? And must we not return and run down that other lane out before us, down that long, terrible lane—must we not return eternally? (p. 178-179)

To elaborate, the theory of the eternal return is grounded in the idea that the number of events in the universe is limited, and yet the time itself is endless. Thus, the events occurring in history are bound to repeat themselves an infinite number of times and recur over and over again. Ultimately, a combination of every event will be completed and repeated an unlimited number of times in an infinite number of combinations. Thus, according to this theory, time is cyclical and doesn't follow a linear trajectory.

**The Idea of the Eternal Return in *Hard to Be a God***

The return of history becomes evident in this novel and in fact occurs on two levels. Within the plot level, the story literally unfolds in a historical time that has reversed itself, and the main protagonist, who represents modernity and everything it entails, has to live and survive in a civilization that is still in the "backward" medieval phase of development. This experience compels the protagonist to reevaluate his ideals and principles, ignites doubt about the efficacy of his mission, and challenges his faith in the Marxist theory of history and progress. Such displacement or "estrangement," which is considered one of the main features of the SF genre, according to Jameson (2005), "enacts and enables a structurally unique 'method' for apprehending the present as history, and this is irrespective of the 'pessimism' or 'optimism' of the imaginary future world which is the pretext for that defamiliarization" (p. 288). He explains that, living in

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the postmodern world, we are unable to experience present as history due to the weakening sense of historicity and a cynical belief that change is no longer possible, and thus SF's main function is to make us feel estranged from our own present, enabling us to give meaning to the current moment in history. This is precisely what the Strugatskys' SF novum in this novel accomplishes.

On a thematic level, the return of history happens, as I already discussed above, when the fascist putsch suddenly occurs within the medieval setting and overthrows the King, proclaiming its supreme power. Fascism's anachronistic emergence gestures toward the idea that Fascism in this novel is a metaphor for any totalitarian state that oppresses and subjugates the masses, controls creativity and art, and exterminates anyone who defies its laws. In that regard, Fascism is not connected to any particular historical period, and in fact can appear and reappear at any historical time. Rumata admits himself that "wherever grayness triumphs, black robes come to power" (p. 171), meaning that the Middle Ages can appear again, creating ripened conditions for the Grays to dominate culture, appeasing and indoctrinating the masses, and ultimately "inviting" Fascism to come back again. As Gomel astutely sums up, "Gray is the color of self-satisfied mediocrity, while black is the color of terror and repression" ("The Poetics of Censorship" p. 95). Similarly, Dmitriy Volodihin and Gennadiy Prashkevich, in their work *Brat'ia Strugatskie* (2012), also conclude that in *Hard to be a God*, "the apparent Middle Ages be-

come simply the code message for socio-psychological roots of totalitarianism: vulgarity, ignorance and dullness" ("Мнимое средневековье оказывается попросту кодовым обозначением социально-психологических корней тоталитаризма: мещанства, невежества и тупости") (p. 115).

The main protagonist thus faces a difficult task: to observe the barbarities happening right in front of his eyes without being able to help. As a consequence, as he becomes disenchanted with Marxist ideals, Anton also becomes disillusioned with himself as he finds out that there is nothing he can do to help these people. He is forced, as Dmitriy Volodihin and Gennadiy Prashkevich (2012) underline, "to look at all this, tolerate it and coldly play the role of God-observer" ("А прогрессор вынужден все это видеть, терпеть, холодно играть роль бога-созерцателя") (p. 112-113). Thus, when Anton realizes that Marxist theory fails, he suddenly also comes to realization that the laws of history—which he thought he knew so well—do not fit in the theory of historical materialism. Thus, he begins to have doubts regarding the role of God he has to play on this planet (when Earthlings arrived on Arkanar, they have convinced everyone that they were Gods in order to explain their superior knowledge, better physical health, and skillful use of weapons). This is where his internal struggle begins, and the ethical dimension of the novel unfolds. As Gomel (2004) asserts, Anton, as a representative of the Soviet New Man, at the beginning perceives himself to be "the judge of time and

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history" with absolute conviction that he will be able to materialize the Marxist theory of history and test its efficiency on this society (p. 364). Gomel writes that the Soviet New Man "marches along the one-way road of historical progress toward the revelation of his own glorious self," hence their Godlike status. However, she concludes that "as the gap between Soviet ideology and the reality of its implementation becomes impossible to ignore, the New Man turns from a millenarian promise into an apocalyptic threat" (p. 362). Throughout the novel, Anton is caught in a perpetual dilemma: to help these people or not. As a historian (and "God"), he is not allowed to directly interfere in anything that is happening. However, as a human being, he cannot remain indifferent to the injustices around him. He desperately wants to help, but at the same time, he doesn't want to sink to their level, to respond to violence with violence: "I was this close to cutting them down, he suddenly realized. If they hadn't cleared out, I would have cut them down . . . Some god! Turning into a savage . . . Just an outburst . . . After all, I'm human, and humans are still animals" (p. 71).

The growing disillusionment in his own powers prevents him from remaining God, as Anton in the final scene of the novel can no longer simply be an idle God-observer. When his girlfriend is killed, he denounces his Godlike status and by doing that, he goes against the theories, the goal of their mission, and the Marxist conception of history itself. As Mark Amusin (2005) suggests: "The protagonist's emotional breakdown in the end should be

interpreted as an act of self-will, as a rebellion against the laws of history—and simultaneously against instructions, dry theories, directions from the authority" ("Эмоциональный срыв героя в финале нужно рассматривать именно как акт своеволия, как бунт против законов истории—и одновременно против инструкций, сухих теорий, указаний вышестоящих инстанций"). Indeed, his violence implies refusal to accept a position of power. By shedding blood and mercilessly killing the enemy in order to have revenge for the death of his girlfriend, Anton embraces his humanity and fights as a human being, not a God or an experimenting historian. For Anton, to be a God means to lose his own humanity, to suppress his pity and not interfere when blood is being shed daily. In the end, Anton is just a human being who wants to help his brothers to overcome oppression and violence: he simply cannot remain an idle observer anymore, cannot be a God. As Anton contemplates when the fascist violence commences all over the Arkanarian kingdom: "My brothers, thought Rumata. I'm yours, I'm the flesh of your flesh! He suddenly felt with tremendous force that he was no god, shielding the fireflies of reason with his hands, but instead a brother helping a brother, a son saving a father" (p. 148). This is where the ethical dimension emerges: to be a progressor and consequently a God, one must disregard his humanity. Anton chooses not to do so.

If the Strugatskys are correct in their assessment that violence and oppression can come back at any time unexpectedly, why is

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this happening? Why is the Fascist regime, in its various manifestations, returning to history?

Walter Benjamin in his essay "Critique of Violence" (1921/2004) explains that the sovereign state in general has to utilize violence to legitimize itself. Benjamin distinguishes between two types of violence as a means: law-making and law-preserving violence. If violence "lays claim to neither of these predicates, it forfeits all validity" (p. 243). The law-making violence is a type of violence used to legally declare war, terror, etc., while the law-preserving violence is realized through the state institutions such as police force to ensure the citizens' obedient enactment of the state law. These two types of violence constitute legal violence or "militarism," which Benjamin defines as "the compulsory use of violence as a means towards the ends of the state" (p. 241). However, these two kinds of violence are sometimes difficult to differentiate because they depend on one another to function successfully. State police is a good example of this mutual dependence. While the main function of police is to preserve the law, it does so by creating new laws and regulations. Hence, the power of the police that uses violence legally to protect and legitimize the state is "formless, like its nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states" (p. 243).

Along the same lines, Susan Buck-Morss in her work *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000) comments on the legal use of violence by the state and contends that state's violence is really a self-fulfilling cycle, because those who

want to challenge the existing order of things are punished by the law-preserving violence, thereby making it difficult to ever break the cycle of violence: "By the exercise of violence over those who challenge the existing law . . . the latter reaffirms itself. But in this very violence something 'rotten in the law is revealed,' not its justice but its monopoly of the (violent, physical) power to determine, in the last analysis, what justice is" (p. 6). Buck-Morss goes on to suggest that the state can grant itself absolute power through state violence: "For it is the real possibility of war and the threat of a common enemy that constitute the state not merely as a legal entity but as a sovereign entity, the legitimate embodiment of the collective with the power to wage war in its name. As sovereign of the collective, it has sovereignty over the collective, with the right to order to their death the very citizens in whose name it rules" (p. 8). Thus, here lies the destructive power of the state law: it can annihilate its own citizens if the state—the embodiment of the collective—decides that it would be beneficial somehow for the collective body. And this is exactly the kind of violence that Fascism exhibits in this novel.

But what social stratum in the collective body of citizens would want to question the perpetual cycle of state violence that has almost become seamless in our everyday life? As Strugatskys suggest in this text, only an intellectual has the capacity to go against the flow and question the status quo, thereby putting the government's existence and order in jeopardy. In one of Anton's internal mono-

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logues, in which he contemplates the fate of the Arkanarians and its oppressed intelligentsia, he openly expresses his opinion of the crucial role of intellectuals in any society. He says:

If they were all identical, there would be reason to throw up your hands and lose hope. But they were still people, the bearers of the spark of reason. And here and there in their midst, the fires of the incredibly distant and inevitable future would kindle and blaze up. They would kindle despite it all. Despite all their seeming unworthiness. Despite the oppression. Despite the fact that they were being trampled with boots . . . They didn't know that the future was on their side, that the future was impossible without them. They didn't know that in a world belonging to the terrible ghosts of the past, they were the only manifestation of the future—that they were an enzyme, a vitamin in society's organism. If you destroy this vitamin, society will rot . . . Without arts and general culture, the country loses its capacity for self-criticism, begins to encourage faulty tendencies, starts to constantly spawn hypocrites and scum, develops consumerism and conceit in its citizens. (p. 145-146)

Thus, any society, according to the Strugatskys, no matter how oppressed it is, is able to produce those "sparks"—thinking people who can rise up against the docile crowd and

challenge the current ideology in order to ensure a just future for all. Consequently, since the intelligentsia has the capacity for critical assessment of the state and state policies, it undoubtedly threatens the legitimacy of the state. When that happens, the state has to implement violence to reaffirm its sovereignty and suppress any criticism by attacking the intellectuals. And this is how the return of Fascism occurs. Nonetheless, Strugatskys' message here is to never give up, to never become too complacent, be vigilant if certain rights are being slowly taken away from you, and fight back. As Anton proclaims during his conversation with Budach, in a powerful speech apparently aimed directly at the Strugatskys' readers, the majority of whom belonged to the intelligentsia: "And I cannot figure out why you, the keepers and only holders of high knowledge, are so hopelessly passive. Why do you meekly allow yourself to be despised, thrown in jails, burned at the stake? Why do you separate the meaning of your life, the pursuit of knowledge—from the practical requirements of life, the struggle against evil?" (p. 205-206).

To sum up, the Strugatskys' brilliantly written novel *Hard to be a God* provides us with a social blueprint for communist future with a warning that unless the state stops oppressing the intellectuals, the utopian future of the Soviet Union is in jeopardy. The novel's commentary on history illustrates the Strugatskys' disenchantment with contemporary Marxist historical theories and their refusal to accept the Marxist interpretation regarding how utopia can be achieved. Their powerful message that





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Fascism can suddenly strike any society unpredictably at any given time remains apropos in our current global situation, in which right-wing movements seem to be on the rise, prompting us to not disregard the warning signs and to not be hesitant to defy it.

## Representations of History, continued

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## "A Long Way Away": Unreachable Freedoms in Contemporary Afrofuturist Neo-Slave Narratives<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Both Colson Whitehead's celebrated novel, *The Underground Railroad* (2016), and the hybrid rap/space opera by the group clipping., *Splendor & Misery* (2016), present Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives. Both the novel and the album are obsessed with the relationship between enslaved persons and technological advancement. In each text, technological advancements (a railroad, a sentient spaceship) initially represents the financial and militarized empowerment of the enslaver; in each text, the technology is suborned by the enslaved and used to carry them to what they imagine is freedom. Whitehead, in an homage to Octavia Butler, literalizes the underground railroad in order to provide a vehicle for Cora, the novel's lone surviving escapee, to witness and reject other "advancements" in civilization (in particular, eugenicist gynecological medicine and anthropological museums) as she moves North and, eventually, hopes that she has "pushed beyond" America (305). In mastering the mechanical function of the railroad, Cora masters a kind of futurist promise of refashioning: "On one end there was who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light" (304). In *Splendor & Misery*, set in some presumed distant future and far in space, a sentient cargo ship narrates its growing attraction to the sole surviving "cargo" which has rebelled and overridden the shipping route. Daveed Diggs, the rapper in the group, explicitly acknowledges his debt to Octavia Butler, Samuel Delaney, and N.K. Jemison in conceiving this album; its textual and afrofuturist roots run deep. By the end of the album, the ship and the otherwise-unnamed Cargo #2331, much like Cora, decide to just keep moving away, hoping to find "a better place" somewhere in uncharted space. Each of these works is experimental and genre-bending; more importantly, each work offers an anti-triumphalist emancipation narrative.

For neither Cora nor Cargo #2331, however, is freedom actually fully realized. Both end their narratives still in transit, still far from where they came but equally far from where they hope to be. And, in a tragic throwback to many traditional ex-slave narratives, even the chance of freedom is perforce a largely solitary one; "Who got time for this love shit anyway?" the ship/cargo reflects at the end of *Splendor & Misery*. I argue that for each of the enslaved characters, emancipation rings hollow and freedom is precarious. Given that the novel and the album appeared within months of each other, taken together they become a powerful joint indictment of our not only our current

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Stephen Levin and the Clark University English Department colloquium for insights on an early version of this, as well as the helpful suggestions from Laura Thiemann Scales, Heather McHale, and the journal's readers.

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political climate and longstanding amnesia about the technological and institutional ills of slavery. They also become indictments of the way that this nation has often stopped short by celebrating "freedom" but failing to offer any tangible security to actually live a full life beyond that point. These texts ask us to reconsider how Afrofuturist texts will come to define freedom's relationship to place.

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism; Neo-Slave Narrative; African American Literature; Science Fiction; Music; Rap Music; clipping; Colson Whitehead

In Mark Dery's now familiar formulation of Afrofuturism, two things stand out: the "African American signification that appropriates images of technology," and the determination to stake a claim on the "unreal estate of the future" (Dery 180). Similarly, Ytasha L. Womack's accessible overview, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, published two decades later, situates Afrofuturism at the "intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (Womack 9), a notion that she later explicates as a "liberation edict in Afrofuturism" (Womack 38). The relationship between Afrofuturism, technological ad-

vancement, and liberation is at the heart of two Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives that appeared within a few months of each other in 2016: Colson Whitehead's acclaimed novel, *The Underground Railroad*, and an experimental album, *Splendor & Misery*, by the rap group clipping.<sup>2</sup> These works interrogate freedom and the limits of technology in attaining freedom for the formerly-enslaved, and they also ask us to consider the relationship between freedom and movement. Taken together, the works suggest that we must rethink both the relationship between human intervention with technology as well as the capitalist notion of freedom represented by claims to land, even the as-yet "unreal estate." *The Underground Railroad* and *Splendor & Misery* both question the scope and sustainability of racial progress in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in works where freedom for the protagonists continues to recede on the horizon. Each of these works strands the protagonist in an indeterminately free space (literally, in the case of *Splendor & Misery*). These endings contrast to the more optimistic early days of Afrofuturism. After all, when Sun Ra promised followers that "space is the place" as an alternative to the intractably-racist Planet

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<sup>2</sup> The precise appearance of the group's name appears to be fluid: Clipping, clipping., and clipping have all been used in print; the group appears to favor clppng (or CLPPNG) on its website and social media but clipping. for its YouTube videos. For consistency and visual convenience, I have chosen to use clipping in reference to them.

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Earth, there was still a tangible, known planet that he depicted in his genre-defining film.<sup>3</sup> The correlation between land/place and freedom has long been a hallmark of Afrofuturism and narratives of slavery. By retreating from a celebratory stance toward technological appropriation and ending with protagonists still on the run, the works of Whitehead and clipping ask us to dwell more fully in the present and to re-assess the certitude of freedom located in new frontiers.

In *The Underground Railroad* and *Splendor & Misery*, technological advancements, in the form of railroads in the novel and a sentient spaceship in the album, initially represent the financial and militarized empowerment of the enslaver. Whitehead's Cora and clipping's Cargo #2331 both begin their works as enslaved people whose value is in their more primitive capacity as physical laborers, in contrast to the wide-ranging financial and technological interests of their captor-owners. Cargo #2331 is in the midst of his own Middle Passage-like transport to a life of servitude: his rebellion is mostly physical, in contrast to the sentient spaceship's advanced technological supervision and counter-measures. The Mothership emphasizes Cargo #2331's physicality

by observing "spiking in the pulse" and "endorphins" and "rage in the nervous system" more attentively than any precise technological capability ("The Breach").<sup>4</sup> The contrast between Cargo #2331 and the Mothership is heightened by their different musical styles. As the Mothership, Daveed Diggs raps swiftly, with a mechanical feel, while Cargo #2331's expression is through slower, mournful songs that invoke traditional African American spirituals. By beginning with the emphasis on un-free laborers and physical toil, clipping and Whitehead mirror the "typical cyberpunk acceptance of capitalism as an unquestionable universe" (Bould 182). Much as Afrofuturism accepts the subversion or appropriation of technology as the next necessary step toward emancipation, there tends to be a capitalist equation of freedom with property ownership of one's own. We see this in the long legacy of the famous "40 acres and a mule" edict issued by General William Tecumseh Sherman during the Civil War (and notably recalled today in the name of filmmaker Spike Lee's production company); I argue that both *The Underground Railroad* and *Splendor & Misery* are working within a framework that has long held that freedom requires a place in which to be free—

<sup>3</sup> For a quick summation of *Space is the Place* and its influence, see Womack 60-62. See also van Veen 77-79, in which he invokes Sun Ra and discusses the "dynamic" potential of the "extravagant expression in Afrofuturism, in which 'Earth' and 'human' are abandoned apace" (78), a move that van Veen characterizes as "progressive" (78)—though the space-faring Afrodiasporic future considered by van Veen seems to invoke a tangible eventual alternative location.

<sup>4</sup> clipping does not appear to provide lyrics with the album book or on their official website; all lyrics are quoted from repeated listening and corroborated through Genius.com's extremely helpful transcriptions: see <https://genius.com/albums/Clipping/Splendor-misery>

**"A Long Way Away," continued**

even if that place is no longer on Earth. By revealing the continued inaccessibility of a place upon which freedom can rest, both of these works suggest that the sustainable liberatory promises of Afrofuturism have stalled because of this tether to the idea of place.

Let me offer some historical background for this edict and this particular understanding of freedom. In December of 1864, General William Tecumseh Sherman, at the end of his famed and feared "march to the sea," captured the city of Savannah, Georgia. He flamboyantly gifted it to President Lincoln for Christmas, and he and his army occupied the city through the holidays and into mid-January. During this time, the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, came to inspect the city and to question Sherman about his army's conduct during the march—a line of inquiry, in Sherman's opinion, driven by political maneuvering that sought to score abolitionist points and to undermine Sherman's accomplishments. Stanton and Sherman gathered together nearly two dozen African American leaders from the Black population in the city, the majority of whom had been enslaved until either freed by the Union army or through financial self-manumission. Only five of the men were free-born, and those all the sons of slaves, per their descriptions in the *New York Daily Tribune's* report of the event. Stanton submitted them to a patronizing series of questions about their understanding of freedom and their opinion of Sherman. As recorded in Sherman's *Memoirs* (and corroborated by the *New York Daily Tribune*):

Second question: State what you understand by slavery, and the freedom that was to be given by the President's Proclamation?

Answer: Slavery is receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent. The freedom, as I understand it, promised by the proclamation, is taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we can reap the fruit of our own labor, and take care of ourselves and assist the Government in maintaining our freedom. (Sherman 725-726)

What I find vitally important in this answer is the emphasis on not only self-determination ("take care of ourselves") but also the requirement of property—the "placing us where we can reap the fruit of our own labor." While the men of course cannot name a particular place, certainly the importance of spatial/geographic security and autonomy can be seen reflected in Sherman's famous Special Field Order No. 15, the "40 acres and a mule" command. In this order, issued on January 16, 1865 from Savannah, Sherman is actually quite specific about where such land may be found: "The islands from Charleston south, the abandoned rice-fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the St. John's River, Florida" (Sherman 730). In short, we have a textual precedent for quite concretely imagining the geographic boundaries and promises of freedom for the formerly enslaved where "the sole and exclusive man-

**"A Long Way Away," continued**

agement of affairs will be left to the freed people themselves" (Sherman 730). And yet, in the neo-slave narratives of Whitehead and clipping, the geographic imagination has, in fact, regressed. Each work has become even less certain that there is actually a place for the fruits of the protagonists' labor. Each narrative is open-ended, making us question whether the protagonists will ever be able to stop running and to settle—and if settling is, in fact, the true enjoyment of freedom. We can read these newest Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives as texts of the Black Lives Matter Era indicting the continued failure for Black lives to find sustainable safety. In particular, "home" and "freedom" are forever a dichotomy that cannot be resolved: as clipping sings, in their refrain made to sound like an authentic "sorrow song": "I can't go back home/'cause I want to be free" ("Long Way Away").

In this, *The Underground Railroad* and *Splendor & Misery* position themselves as warnings against the complacency of seeing freedom as tangible and assured. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century American slave narrative traditionally enacts a trajectory from the horrors of slavery to the triumph of emancipation and the life—a home life—beyond it. Afrofuturist works, similarly, posit escape, be that literal (escaping Earth) or more metaphysical (resituating one's frame of mind, or reshaping technoculture and the future to benefit the marginalized). Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones emphasize this liberatory promise in their definition of "Astro-Blackness," which they position as an update of Afrofuturism "in which a person's

black state of consciousness, released from the confining and crippling slave or colonial mentality, becomes aware of the multitude and varied possibilities and probabilities within the universe" (vii). But as A. Timothy Spaulding reminds us in *Re-Forming the Past*, the "triumph" of escape is one beset by ongoing trials: "A free identity in the slave narrative is one wrought with the physical and mental abuses of enslavement, the cultural and familiar alienation of being stripped from one's homeland and family.... And, in many instances, the slave narrators point out that theirs is, at best, a contested freedom" (9). In short: "Even when he or she gains the internal sense of a free identity, the external world operates in opposition to that self, making freedom always a deferred and conditional concept" (Spaulding 10). Cora and Cargo #2331 may have gained self-awareness by the end of their narratives, but they are still in many ways physically restrained and far from a certain destination: Cora confined to the wagon that hopes to head West but seems unlikely to make it, and Cargo #2331 confined to the ship that is keeping him alive but possibly setting its own course.

Spaulding's reminder of the contingency of freedom serves as an important supplemental view to the more triumphalist generic markers of the slave narrative form, particularly in the weight given to the first-person perspective in more traditional narratives. The traditional narratives, especially Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, highlight the importance of narrative control as self-realization "by writing themselves more resolutely as agents



**"A Long Way Away," continued**

who can and do manipulate discourses" (Rushdy 130). For many of the original fugitive authors, Ashraf Rushdy and others argue, "autobiography" allows the ex-slave "to assume and construct a subjectivity which frees him from a former identity as a slave" (Rushdy 216). Douglass's famous "written by himself" appended to this title "certifies that Douglass has authored his own existence in much the same way that naming his own postslavery name...certifies his identity" (Olney 5). Each of Rushdy's primary exemplars in *Neo-Slave Narratives* hews to a first-person narrator, though he notes that works like Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* do not sustain this conceit for long: "Reed's strategic silencing of the first-person narrator is also a critique of how slave narratives required the absence of the African American voice" (Rushdy 119), a result of the problem of white abolitionist intervention in traditional slave narrative publication. Notably, *The Underground Railroad* and *Splendor & Misery* eschew the first person, and thus the enslaved characters are denied this kind of liberatory self-fashioning.<sup>5</sup> Whitehead's protagonist reclaims only her enslaved name, and the enslaved protagonist of *Splendor & Misery* is never named and thus perhaps never truly escapes his categorization as property. Both are rendered passive by the narrators that intervene to tell their stories for them, and even often cut away from their stories to focus on other plots.

**"Liberty was reserved for other people": *The Underground Railroad's* uncertain future**

Where Octavia Butler's Afrofuturistic "vehicle" for imagining the slave experience was to literalize time travel for her protagonist, Dana, Colson Whitehead instead literalizes an underground railroad to assist his protagonist, Cora, in her escape. Whitehead begins the novel with the story of Cora's grandmother's kidnapping in Africa, her survival of the Middle Passage, and her experience of (and death in) slavery on a plantation in Georgia. Observing her death, at work in the cotton field, the narrator dispassionately discounts the idea that she could have changed her life once enslaved: "Liberty was reserved for other people, for the citizens of the City of Pennsylvania bustling a thousand miles to the north" (Whitehead 8). In this, we get some sense of geographic specificity, if only to make escape seem all the more distant a possibility: "To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible" (Whitehead 8). But though Whitehead gestures to a triumph in Cora's escape, ultimately the novel acknowledges that freedom comes at the price of the "fundamental principles of [one's] existence"—and that requires a longer journey than even the 1000 miles to Pennsylvania.

<sup>5</sup> Morrison's *Beloved* also largely eschews the first person, perhaps signaling a shift in the genre. As Arlene R. Kiezer observes in *Black Subjects*, "it is striking... how few contemporary narratives of slavery are written in the first person" (3).

**"A Long Way Away," continued**

In Whitehead's novel, the underground railroad is not a smoothly operating vehicle. It is described as "an ungainly contraption" that is "soot-colored" and has just one "dilapidated boxcar" (Whitehead 69). Through the depiction of the railroad apparatus itself and the microcosms of horror that Cora experiences when she surfaces—including narrowly escaping eugenics experiments to sterilize Black women, being put in a living museum display as a savage, and witnessing public lynchings—Whitehead forcefully challenges the romanticized notion of the underground railroad as viewed in popular American memory. Kathryn Schulz's *New Yorker* essay covering the novel and the recent boom in Underground Railroad narratives reminds us to "incite our curiosity and skepticism" (Schulz 66) about the feel-good aspect of the typical underground railroad myths (often emphasizing white heroics) and sees Whitehead as a challenge to this: "he turns our most evocative national metaphor into a mechanical contraption. It is a clever choice, reminding us that a metaphor never got anyone to freedom" (Schulz 68). This echoes David W. Blight's critique, in *Passages to Freedom*, that in "our need to find an ennobling past through which to establish our identities, we have sometimes used the story of the underground railroad as a comforting 'midway world'" still somewhat far from reality (Blight 4). Cora, initially seduced by the possibilities, ultimately becomes horrified by each new stop on the railroad as she recognizes the abuses and further entrenchment of racism that the railroad, medicine, museums, and

even abolition-minded hosts represent. By the end of the novel, she seems to abandon all faith in America when she hopes that she has "pushed beyond" the nation while riding the rails (Whitehead 305). Thus, in Whitehead's novel the railroad carries Cora to ill-defined and precarious freedom, one that questions whether America can ever offer Cora any security or stability. As Julian Lucas so aptly notes in a review of the novel, "[Whitehead's] railroad is little like the emancipation superhighway imagined by abolitionists—a metaphor in which the railroad's techno-optimism underwrites the inevitability of freedom. It is, instead, an incomplete warren of provisional refuge—a maze filled with precarious junctions and alarming dead ends" (Lucas 3). Advancement, whether in railroad technology or medical practice, brings very little that is safe or healthy for Cora; rather, she must instead reject the promises of "advancement" and return to the "old-fashioned" values of her own embodiment. In short, technology holds little lasting promise for Cora, while the body hardened by a life of enslavement allows her to physically vanquish her the slave-catcher who has stalked her across three states and propels her as she moves herself along the railroad tracks. Whitehead's novel rejects the railroad's technological promises of futurity in favor of more traditional, low-tech solutions: "the miracle you made with your sweat and blood" (304).

So although the underground railroad is, for Whitehead, literally a Black-propelled enterprise, it still tethers Cora to the past and is abandoned for more old-fashioned travel by

**"A Long Way Away," continued**

the novel's end. To heighten the rejection of the Afrofuturist promise of not only an intervention into the past but also an appropriation of the future, first Whitehead gestures toward the ways in which Afrofuturism needs to "re-purpose... motifs of the past" (van Veen 82). An example of what van Veen might characterize as the "production of counterrealities" is legible through the inclusion of an altered runaway slave ad that fully and plainly inscribes Cora's humanity and rights near the novel's end (van Veen 84). The ad notes that she escaped "from her legal but not rightful master" and concludes with all all-caps declaration that "SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY" (Whitehead 298). Here, then, is the novel's most significant rebuke of the narrator's initial condemnation of Cora's grandmother and of the capitalistic weight of white supremacy. And yet, Whitehead undermines his own triumphalist and potentially Afrofuturist ending by mirroring the narrative and his protagonist in the past, and then through the Huck Finn-like conclusion that sees Cora condemning what she knows and lighting out, as it were, for the unknown frontier—except that this is a frontier that will continue to see Black bodies as "alien" and that readers know full well

will be hostile to Black lives for centuries to come.

Whitehead's rejection of a subversive fusion between past and present challenges the conventions of Afrofuturism and the neo-slave narrative as literary genres, both of which tend to correlate a reformulation of the past with the potential for an improved future.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the novel moves toward repeated scenes of failure and a curtailing of future promise. The final straw for Cora is her experience at the Valentine farm project in Indiana, which was a thriving a free Black community where generations of African Americans were successfully working the land. In offering a "haven" (Whitehead 265) that was "too big, too prosperous. A pocket of blackness in the young state," (Whitehead 276), the Valentine farm's mere existence eventually invites fear and loathing from the surrounding White community: "white towns had simply banded together to rid themselves of the black stronghold in their midst... If they can't control it, they destroy it" (279-280). The farm's destruction seems to anticipate the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot that forever destroyed the "Black Wall Street" in the West. During one of the final debates within the community about proposed reloca-

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<sup>6</sup> For example, as Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu writes approvingly, "[t]he women writing neo-slave narratives are indeed concerned both with the past and with the future; their special talent rests in their ability to use the past and the treasures they have uncovered there to evoke the promise of the future" (156). Or as Spaulding argues, "[b]y erasing the boundaries of time and space, African American writers claim the authority to re-form history from their present perspective and compel readers to embrace an expansive, imaginative, and *liberating* representation of slavery" (19, emphasis mine). See also Ricardo Guthrie's persuasive chapter, "The *Real* Ghost in the Machine" in which he argues for "far more optimism, or at least the possibility of emancipation through an embrace of technology and the elevation of an Afrofuturist awakening" (46).

**"A Long Way Away," continued**

tion, one of the leaders, Lander, states plainly: "Here's one delusion: that we can escape slavery. We can't. Its scars will never fade" (Whitehead 285). Thus, for all that Whitehead plays with technology and advancement, the experience of slavery will forever anchor his characters in body and mind; this novel, then, becomes less a celebration of escape than another reminder that, as Lander concludes, "This nation shouldn't exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty" (Whitehead 285). The Valentine farm is indeed betrayed and overrun, and Cora once again must strike out on her own; any solidarity or companionship she enjoyed—as was the case for the entire novel—was short-lived.

Whitehead further emphasizes the dead-end nature of freedom by making freedom and death effectively the same thing, collapsing the choice famously offered by Patrick Henry.<sup>7</sup> In the novel's penultimate chapter, Whitehead suddenly cuts away from Cora in order to backtrack to and expand upon the story of Mabel, Cora's mother. To this point in the novel, the narrator had implied that Mabel ran away and chose freedom over her daughter. While that suggestion does provide an interesting re-vision of the traditional narrative arc for a woman's slave narrative, in which maternal duty is more important than any solitary

attempt at freedom, Whitehead retreats from this intervention into the genre's history to make Mabel's story tragically pointless.<sup>8</sup> Mabel runs away in the swamp, enjoys some solitude and some turnips, and realizes how incomplete, unsatisfactory, and fleeting her freedom feels: "She was free. This moment" (Whitehead 294). This is immediately followed by: "She had to go back" (Whitehead 294). But does this become a Harriet Jacobs-like moment of a mother realizing that freedom without one's children is worthless? Not quite, since Whitehead then mercilessly dispatches Mabel to death by snakebite and unmarked burial as the swamp takes her body. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century slave narrative, as Melvin Dixon notes, often borrowed from spiritual autobiography to emphasize the fugitive's "wilderness confrontation" as a solitary "trial" that resulted in "regeneration": "Through the text and trial of his faith he has fixed time and space in his quest; he has conquered the future by realizing it now; he has gained free territory by stepping forth from bondage; he has conquered life as a slave by being struck dead. Rebirth and immortality are his rewards" (Dixon 314). For Mabel, there is no rebirth, spiritual or otherwise. For Cora, there is no actual realization of the future because her final thoughts, as we shall see, are still on the past. Time and space remain unattainable by the end of Whitehead's narrative in a prolonged deferral of Afrofuturist promise.

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<sup>7</sup> Popularly remembered as "Give me liberty or give me death!"

<sup>8</sup> For more on the gendered elements to traditional slave narratives, see Valerie Smith's definitive *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, 9-43; see also Beaulieu 1-25.

## "A Long Way Away," continued

In revealing Mabel's story, Whitehead undercuts the myth he had previously made of her; rather than her "success" constantly haunting the slave-catcher Ridgeway and inspiring Cora, her success turns out to be empty, her death no better (and arguably much worse) than that of Cora's grandmother at the start of the novel, as Mabel's final experience is "no sound but pain" and being "swallowed ... up" (Whitehead 295). This complete consumption—and then negation—of being frames Cora's final movement, makes it clear that she will never find her family, and warns readers that freedom rarely brings safety. When Cora emerges from her final railroad tunnel, she takes a step backwards in transportation technology by first "decid[ing] to go on foot" before hitching a ride in a horse-drawn wagon (Whitehead 304). The wagon's driver is another ex-slave who hopes to make it to Missouri and then California. In response, rather than thinking about the future, Cora's final thoughts are for the past: "She wondered where [the wagon driver] had escaped from, how bad it was, and how far he traveled before he put it behind him" (Whitehead 306). We find ourselves with a neo-slave narrative that concludes by looking backwards rather than forwards; by remembering pain rather than anticipating peace; where any sense of a definitive place for Cora to live free seems to require still more luck and good fortune. Will the aged Ollie really be able to make it to St. Louis? Would they really be accepted into a wagon train? Both possibilities seem rather unlikely. We end, then, with a sense of motion but no fixed des-

tinuation and no clear plan for freedom in a tangible place. In wondering about Ollie's own history, Cora can affirm a desire in the human-interest story; that is, Cora can only focus on trying to forge human connections rather than celebrating technological advancement. While I do not wish to go so far as to say that Whitehead's novel is anti-Afrofuturist (and certainly not that it is Afro-pessimistic), I do think that the novel cautions us against uncritically celebrating the railroad as a liberatory technology. In particular, Ollie and Cora's plans to head West should jolt readers into considering not just the advancements that westward expansion (and railroad expansion above all) brought to the nation, but also the terrible cost to indigenous and immigrant lives along the way.

### **A Long Way Away: *Splendor & Misery's* Unending Space**

The uncertainty with which Whitehead ends *The Underground Railroad* is echoed in the uncertain frontier traversed in *Splendor & Misery*. Over the course of the album, a sentient cargo ship narrates its fascination with and increasingly protective stance toward the sole surviving "cargo" which has rebelled and overridden the shipping route. Daveed Diggs, the group's rapper and the voice of the ship, explicitly acknowledges his debt to the great figures of African American science fiction, citing Octavia Butler, Samuel Delaney, and N.K. Jemison as major influences (Caramanica), while fellow group member William Hutson further emphasized their SF literary debt, list-

**"A Long Way Away," continued**

ing Tolkien, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy*, and *Star Trek* as major sources of his reading and media consumption (Heller).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the title of the album, and one of the most poignant lines in the album's final song, is taken from the title of Samuel Delany's unwritten (and much awaited) sequel to *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, which was to be titled *The Splendor and Misery of Bodies, of Cities*.<sup>10</sup> Thus, this novel's literary and Afrofuturist roots run deep; indeed, perhaps the ultimate genre credential for the album is the fact that it was nominated for the prestigious Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form.<sup>11</sup>

Diggs and his partners, William Hutson and Jonathan Snipes, amidst the industrial noise and quick rapping that are signatures of clipping's sound, here also incorporate songs that sound like traditional African American spirituals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, one song was "interpolat[ed]" from "I Know When I'm Going Home," published in *Slave Songs of the United States* in 1867 (liner notes). Diggs wrote

the lyrics beyond the single borrowed line, but the sound is strikingly traditional; it adds both an historic depth to the album but also a strain of sentimentality, of nostalgia for this "authentic" art form that stemmed from the experience of slavery. Notably, these sorrow songs come across on the album as slightly scratchier, and perhaps more distant, as if they were discovered in antiquated records. It recalls what Alondra Nelson has characterized as "past-future visions" of historical interpolation in Afrofuturist projects (Nelson qtd in Rambsy 208). As Caitlin White writes in an excellent, in-depth look at the group and the album for Uproxx<sup>12</sup>:

Clipping's work grapples with the generational trauma of racism that has been going on for centuries – how it has and does lives [sic] on in black bodies – and embraces the ideas of Afrofuturism for offering an alternative to that. Incorporating the long-sought quartet [members of Take 6, a renowned gospel group] on those intermittent story songs

<sup>9</sup> Further situating this album in the tradition of African American migratory experience, Hutson also cites Jacob Lawrence's famous *Migration* paintings as an influence (Heller).

<sup>10</sup> For a reading of *Stars in My Pocket* as a science fiction neo-slave narrative, see Spaulding 110-122.

<sup>11</sup> That is not to downplay the essential tradition of Afrofuturist music itself as an inspiration. There is excellent scholarship on Janelle Monáe, OutKast, and other acts currently less commercially successful but no less vital: as Howard Rambsy writes, "Music, for centuries now, has been one of the most consistently innovative sites in black creative life; thus, not surprisingly, thinkers interested in Afrofuturism and African American culture in general have viewed black music as a vital source of knowledge" (Rambsy 206). And Diggs himself also gives credit to Monáe and P-Funk as musical inspiration in addition to his literary reading list (White 10).

<sup>12</sup> Link found thanks to the annotations at genius.com.

**"A Long Way Away," continued**

is a huge part of remembering and acknowledging that history.

"So much about coded slave spirituals were about leaving behind where they're at," Diggs said. "They're actually coded messages about how to get north, but the philosophy behind them was about transcending place. They were about home actually being in the unknown.... So we have these spirituals and work and story songs appear as interludes to indicate that." (emphasis mine)

Diggs offers an optimistic read on the eternal binary of home and freedom as experienced by the enslaved, where movement is now transcendental. It is a "repurposing of the past," to recall Van Veen, similar to Whitehead's allusion to historical figures (the eugenicist doctor, inspired by J. Marion Sims) and texts (the runaway slave ads which appear in Whitehead's narrative). The final song on *Splendor & Misery*, however, seems to undermine this pleasure of the unknown, given that, as with Whitehead's Mabel, escape may only hasten death.

Ruben Ferdinand, writing for Medium, gives a lengthy and appreciative analysis of the album that praises it as "an Afrofuturist memory that uses science-fiction to retell the Atlantic slave trade, making use of the genre's surgical and chilling vocabularies" that is reinforced by the "minimalist sonic cartography" of the music. While Ferdinand does note the

technological critique embedded in the album's conceit of the Mothership-narrator, calling it "a comment on how technological advancements have benefitted institutionalized racism by improving, augmenting, and actualizing it," still Ferdinand ultimately reads this album as one full of positive messaging, from the "catharsis" of the spiritual song interludes to what he sees as the "elation of true freedom" in the final song. Ferdinand's enthusiastic insights into the messaging of the individual songs are provocative, but his interpretation of the final song fails to take into account the ongoing and future violence to the human body still within the ship. The album is filled with the Mothership's repeated reminders of the frailty—psychological as well as physical—of the human it carries. The newly-emancipated survivor is fully dependent on the Mothership's loving protectiveness, but even a sentient ship cannot actually find a permanent safe location for Cargo #2331's freedom beyond the ship's own confines.

At first glance, *Splendor & Misery* appears to present the emancipation of two enslaved and dehumanized subjects: first, the Mothership (a literalization of the dehumanizing mechanics of the slave-trade-economy); then the flesh-and-blood subject known only as Cargo #2331, the sole ex-slave who survived an attempt to take over the ship. The album does flirt with an intriguing role reversal from the standard slave narrative: here the male figure is the object of fascination, while the Mothership is the one making increasingly rash decisions in order to express its attraction

**"A Long Way Away," continued**

to the subject incapable of granting consent. In some ways, this is certainly a refreshing twist, one that gestures toward rich readings of posthuman romance and genderqueer readings, given Daveed Diggs's voicing of the Mothership and the domestic enclosure of the ship. However, even in a technologically miraculous future, this narrative cannot imagine a world where the slave family can escape as a unit, where a home can be made among the emancipated. Escape remains as depressingly solitary as it was in Douglass' *The Heroic Slave*. Freedom becomes even more nebulous.

Daylaine K. English and Alvin Kim, in praising the "new liberatory possibilities" (218) of Janelle Monáe's work, quote Monáe's *Wondaland Collective*: "We believe songs are spaceships. We believe music is the weapon of the future" (qtd. in English and Kim 218). The Mothership is our narrator and the main actor; Cargo #2331's most effective actions happen before and during the first song. *Splendor & Misery* in many ways literalizes the idea that songs are spaceships by devoting the narrative privilege of the album to the Ship: the ship gains a first-person perspective with a fullness never granted Cargo #2331. This lack of narrative self-authority for Cargo #2331 is a regression from the celebrated and hard-fought assertions of self-narration passed down from the likes of Douglass and Jacobs. Though we learn much about Cargo #2331's habits and culture—his prayers, his actions, his music, in sorrow and work songs that seem to speak for him—in many ways the Mothership is a more fully developed character across the album. In

the third and pivotal song on the album, "All Black," we learn that Cargo #2331 "has commandeered the vessel," which might indicate action—but the rest of the Mothership's narration undermines any sense of control Cargo #2331 might have by emphasizing how "inconsolable" his actions are, how they seem to indicate "madness" and, to the ship, how he enacts unfathomable traditions:

The subject seems upset by that to which he is subjected

[...]

That's why he roll with a Bible on the console

Inconsolable, no consolation, no cancellation

Not turning all keys, he puts the ship through paces

And paces the halls, pacing is madness ("All Black")

As reported by the Mothership, there is no celebration of a Black mastery of technology as a means of liberation here; as with *The Underground Railroad*, the fugitive slave must still rely on more old-fashioned, physical skills and hope to provoke a sympathetic response for assistance. While the ship defends Cargo #2331's escape, he has no direct control over it. He remains a passenger rather than the captain of this venture.



**"A Long Way Away," continued**

Cargo #2331 is mostly along for the ride as the Mothership decides to ignore its own programming and not return him to the "Administration" to which the Mothership reported in "The Breach."<sup>13</sup> The end of "All Black" suggests that the Mothership has perhaps been humoring him out of fascination, which slowly turns to support and a maternal feeling of protectiveness:

He is still a runaway slave and so lonely

If only he realized this ship is more than metal

There's friendship in the wiring, and so lonely

If only he realized this ship has many levels

There's pleasure in here hiding, come find it

Don't mind this frame, time has made stranger bedfellows

[...]

Warning: Mothership reporting

This love will be defended at all costs

Do not fuck with it

In claiming a maternal protectiveness over Cargo #2331, the Mothership, too, becomes a fugitive who has broken free of her obligation (read: enslavement) to her corporate overseers. This raises intriguing questions about the affective reaches of abolitionist sentiment, but still the Mothership carries the power in their relationship, as the vehicle of freedom and, of course, the literal life-sustaining environment for Cargo #2331. Even in his putative freedom, Cargo #2331—who never gets to name or re-name himself—is rendered wholly dependent on the Mothership. And he is completely without the hope of family or community, unless we accept the Mothership's assertion that the "frame" does not matter and that this high-tech relationship is an adequate replacement for the human family and community commemorated in Cargo #2331's sorrow songs. Perhaps: after all, as Kodwo Eshun argues in his deeply influential *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, "machines don't distance you from emotions, in fact quite the opposite" (Eshun 002, original emphasis). Perhaps the Mothership's emotional investment in Cargo #2331 can eventually become sufficient.

There is the suggestion that the Mothership and Cargo #2331 reach some kind of agreement which makes their relationship seem more collaborative. By the end of the album, the Mothership, possibly in consultation with Cargo #2331, decides to just keep mov-

<sup>13</sup> It is intriguing to consider the Mothership and Cargo #2331 as their own hybridized version of Monáe's alter-ego of Cindi Mayweather, the futuristic fugitive rebel android; see English and Kim, "Now We Want Our Funk Cut," Gipson, "Afrofuturism's Musical Princess Janelle Monáe," and Womack 74-76.

**"A Long Way Away," continued**

ing away, hoping to find "a better place" somewhere in uncharted space. This ending mirrors Cora's decision to be carried West at the end of *The Underground Railroad*. *Splendor & Misery* returns to the theme of loneliness that framed the introductory song and "All Black" in the album's conclusion. In "A Better Place," the final song on the album, Cargo #2331's perspective is represented in the plaintive singing of: "It's a long way away/ A long way away/ And I'm all alone, alone." Thus, in this moment, at least, the Mothership does not yet seem to be fully adequate for Cargo #2331's needs; the Mothership bridges neither distance nor emotional support for Cargo #2331. And much like Cora does with her vague sense of heading westward, Cargo #2331 and the Mothership gamble on something utterly unknown, with no guarantee that they will find either freedom or happiness:

Set a course

It's a bet upon an endless Roulette  
wheel

Odds are ungodly

As are the odds of the body

Making it through and surviving the  
gravity shift

[...]

There must be

A better place... ("A Better Place")

It is important to note here the dogged uncertainty embedded in the refrain: "there must be a better place" indicates no sense of surety, as "there is a better place" would. Not only that, but the Mothership expresses strong doubts that Cargo #2331 can survive their journey. Cargo #2331's final subject position, at the end of the album, as one who is "missing where the air tastes gritty/ The splendor and misery/ Of cities/ Of bodies, of being missed" seems to indicate a permanent liminal state for Cargo #2331: forever severed from his human community (there is no one left alive to miss him, per the Mothership's implication) and forever severed from actually escaping from space, as the Mothership "set up a random course away from suns" ("A Better Place"). This seems like a regression to what Ruth Mayer has argued is represented by the Middle Passage in an earlier generation of slavery narratives: "the fantasy spaces in-between and nowhere at all, spaces that present themselves as mixed-up, ambivalent, floating" (Mayer 556). There is no future here, as even the industrial future's grandest hopes in the form of a sentient spaceship with faster-than-light capabilities signal failure by every metric: failure to perform as programmed (as a slave ship); failure to definitively deliver "a better place" to the cargo for whom it has developed feelings; failure to even chart a definitive new course to something rather than merely "away." The Mothership may have helped a rebellious slave escape, but now they're going nowhere fast, nowhere tangible. The frontier, here, is fully de-romanticized, and Cargo #2331's own

## "A Long Way Away," continued

insufficient identity is constantly cast into doubt by the song's suggestions that he will "be somebody else." But who? And where? Without answers—without a locatable future in a fixed place—the older Afrofuturist escapist fantasy of finding another place in space sours slightly. Much like Whitehead's novel, this narrative, too, condemns the places that participated in the institution of slavery but seems skeptical that other locations free from slavery can actually be found.

### Conclusion

Afrofuturism is clearly a term and a concept that is ever in flux, always evolving: the cultural productions that are considered Afrofuturist seem to be held together with only the loosest set of parameters, as suggested at the start of this article. In probing the Afrofuturist hopes of technological mastery, *The Underground Railroad* and *Splendor & Misery* both offer anti-triumphalist emancipation narratives. As in the lived experience of the freedmen after the Civil War, no 40 acres and a mule, to say anything of other significant reparations, were offered to either Cora or Cargo #2331. In a challenge to the Afrofuturist emphasis on technological mastery, the ex-slaves' travels require an abdication of technological control in favor of passivity. Moreover, each journey posits that truly free Black communities are still prone to failure or wholly unreachable. Taken together, their narratives become a powerful joint indictment of our current political climate, with its longstanding amnesia about the technological and institutional ills of

slavery as well as its continuation influence upon Jim Crow, segregation, and the newest incarnations of white supremacy in the "Alt-Right."

*Splendor & Misery* and *The Underground Railroad* approach the technological future with a more measured enthusiasm; they ask us to perhaps slow down on the posthuman bandwagon and the heady possibilities of the future and to instead spend more time recalling the lonely toll on the human body that any hope of emancipation requires. The technology, in each of these works, is ultimately of far less importance than the unrelenting reminders of the need for connection, of a partner for one's journey—especially the pragmatic realization of making the best of the partner you find, rather than the partner you love and miss. We are left trying to find satisfaction in the alliances formed by Cora and Ollie and Cargo #2331 and the Mothership. If you "can't go back home/ 'cause [you] want to be free," then you must keep taking your home with you, in the form of a vehicle and co-traveler. In order to fully access future liberation, these works suggest that we need to reject our longstanding faith that property ownership offers security; certainly, American history shows us that this has never been the case for Black (and other non-white) lives. More broadly, these narratives are valuable for asking audiences to accept uncertainty and movement; to no longer see constant exodus as dystopian even if it is disappointing. Home cannot be material, and so technology serves best when it provides a pathway to relationships, unexpected



**"A Long Way Away," continued**

or non-normative as they may be. To truly embrace the future, space—without any hope of place—must become adequate. As Tracy K. Smith writes in her poem "Sci-Fi," which opens her evocatively Afrofuturist collection, *Life on Mars*: "Eons from even our own moon, we'll drift/ In the haze of space, which will be, once,// And for all, scrutable and safe" (Smith 7).

**"A Long Way Away," continued****References**

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