

Speculative Fiction Panel: The Politics of Speculative Fabulation

(Rebekah Sheldon, University of Indiana, respondent)

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"The Ultrasound as a Technology of Racial Future-Making in Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*"

Allie Arend (English)

Louise Erdrich's 2017 novel *Future Home of the Living God* describes a massive biological event that disrupts reproduction's regular operation; new life—including new human life—draws on long-dormant genetic material, resulting in bizarre offspring strangely reminiscent of prehistoric creatures. The government rounds up and imprisons pregnant women and, eventually, all women with the capacity for childbirth in order to safeguard humanity's future. Although some believe that evolution has reversed, the origins of the biological event and its precise effects on human babies, including that of the pregnant protagonist, are never revealed—something several critics consider to be a weakness of the novel. I argue, however, that it is precisely through these spaces of uncertainty, of ambiguity, that the novel offers ways of thinking about temporality and relationality outside of western teleology and hierarchy. *Future Home of the Living God* thus invites the reader to recognize our collective need for new ways of thinking about and being in the future, and to explore with the protagonist what it might look like to inhabit those ways of thinking and being right now.

In this paper, I consider the ultrasound image as one such space of ambiguity through which *Future Home* figures the future otherwise. First, I consider how the state uses the ultrasound to fix into the future "the human" as a special and racial project that manifests in the figure of white, western man. This depiction, I argue, reveals the novel's moment of political, social, and environmental crisis (and our own) to be not an exception in the history of the United States or western "civilization," but part of the ongoing twin catastrophes of racial capitalism and settler colonialism, here managed through reproductive control. Next, I consider the ultrasound as an inherently interpretive technology whose image cannot convey with certainty specifics about the fetus withheld by the novel. Instead, I argue, the ultrasound's ambiguity allows for the figuration of an alternative future: one that is not predicated on reproductive futurity, white supremacy, or hierarchical relationality, but grounded in indigenous epistemology and a longer conception of history outside of colonial, reproductive time. Looking at the ultrasound image of the fetus within her, the novel's protagonist figures her future child as "the Soul of the Word," ushering in a new kind of life that does not require the preservation of the human, but is situated in "timeless time," and in relation with all other beings, including the divine.

"A Community 'to which Anyone might Belong': A Critique of Political Units in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*"

Walter Merryman (Comparative Literature and Languages)

This paper interprets Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* in the context of the changing relationship between peoples and states in an era of migration and globalization. Sociological and political analysis by writers such as Arjun Appadurai and Jürgen Habermas has argued that the current formation of states is inadequate for responding to migration and the increasing economic and

political interdependence of peoples. These critiques raise the question of what kind of political unit is sustainable and viable for responding to our twenty-first-century context, and the future may be built on a more heterogeneous order than our current conglomerate of states. The critique of political units I develop evaluates how heterogeneous political units integrate, how a kind of unit—the state, the individual—may interfere with the interests of other units, thereby hampering or facilitating a sustainable political order that is inclusive and equitably democratic. I argue that *Exit West* motivates this critique by representing the individual as a political unit that can sustain a heterogeneous order of greater political units. The individual is both the source of our normative value of autonomy, represented in the novel through the practice of a universally inclusive democracy, and the individual is the unit that is most viable for tracking global movement. *Exit West* follows two migrants as they leave their families, join temporary migrant communities, and eventually separate from each other to join different communities. The single person is the unit that lets us track the breakdown of older collectives and emergence of new ones, and is the unit best suited for tracking movement in general because all other collectives may be dissolved in the stress, tragedy, and opportunity of human relocation. By attaching the norms of democratic autonomy and freedom of movement attached to the single person, *Exit West* offers the single, voting person as the political unit on which we could build a sustainable and inclusive heterogeneous political order.

"Energy Aesthetics in J.-H. Rosny aîné's *La mort de la terre* / *The Death of the Earth*"

Sean Singh Matharoo (Comparative Literature and Languages)

Francophone Belgian author and philosopher J.-H. Rosny aîné's weird novella *La mort de la terre* (1910) / *The Death of the Earth* describes the desertification of a future Earth plagued by earthquakes as the consequence of the exploitation of fossil fuels. We learn of the ferromagnetics [ferromagnétiques], iron-based lifeforms that were generated by human industry. For a time, humanity thought they could exploit the ferromagnetics and derive energy from them. However, it became evident that the ferromagnetic substance, inaccessible to scientific epistemology, was harmful to humans. The ferromagnetics, without antagonism, drain the iron from the blood of any nearby human. It then became evident that humans needed to expend massive amounts of energy to stop the ferromagnetic proliferation. What few humans remain harnessed technology to create impenetrable, interconnected oases where they limit procreation and practice population control through euthanasia. Throughout the text, we follow Targ, who passionately searches for and eventually discovers a new source of water. But, this discovery merely delays doom, as continuing earthquakes drain what water remains. As the ferromagnetics occupy the oases, Targ becomes the last carbon-based lifeform on the planet: he and the rest of humanity will die.

This paper argues that *La mort de la terre* offers an alternative to what Christopher F. Jones identifies as the "petromyopia" of the energy humanities, which limits our linguistic imagination of energy to oil. Petromyopia is an anthropocentric perspective that sees oil as an easy, limitless resource. Petromyopia is speciesist insofar as it presumes that the inherent capacity for rationality supposedly unique to humans is a sufficient reason to exploit nonhuman nature. Thus, petromyopia is isomorphic with the colonial and racial violence that structures the nonwhite, non-European, "irrational," and ultimately nonhuman nonstraight nonmale as the easy, limitless energy resource of its opposite, the white European rational straight human

Man, the structural-ontology of anthropos. This violent commodification of energy precludes the development of alternative expenditures of energy outside the capitalist economy of use and exchange. The first part of this paper presents a theory of energy aesthetics. The second part examines Rosny's novella as a weird literary work that realizes energy aesthetics so that I can explicate the usefulness of the energy it gifts us: Rosny's language at the end of the *La mort de la terre* entails a posthumanism that asks us to consider the possibility that an absolute negation whereby self and society are lost to one another will maybe culminate in a future world of egalitarianism and justice, a nonrelationally relational project of human-nonhuman coevolution.

"Critical Fabulations vs. the Fabulist Imaginary of Donald Trump"

Summer Sutton (English)

Supposedly, we live in a post-truth era, in which under-qualified political figures like Donald Trump continually ignore the advice of experts in order to spread politically expedient counterfactuals throughout the public sphere. For speculative studies scholars like myself, whose research focuses on troubling the easy binary between the real and the imaginative, this presents a conundrum: has the speculative turn been co-opted by the fabulist imaginary of the far right? This presentation will explore this conundrum by turning to the concept of 'critical fabulation' developed by black studies scholar Tavia Nyong'o. For Nyong'o, critical fabulation is a theoretical mode of investigation that prioritizes fabulist storytelling, whether performed through literature, art, or film, precisely for its ability to interrogate both the enforced irreality of marginalized lives and the phantasmic nature of reified social strata, such as racial and gendered identity. Critical fabulation thus moves past the reductive question of what is an objective fact of reality and what is a figment of the subjective imagination in order to pursue the more politically urgent question of how a given power structure, particularly, in Nyong'o's work, anti-blackness, controls the discursive realms of truth and fabulation. My presentation will first put Nyong'o's concept of critical fabulation in conversation with the formally innovative work of other black studies scholars, such as Saidiya Hartman and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, to contemplate how us academics may enact critical fabulation within the very structure of our writing, particularly through the use of speculative poetics. I will then conclude by looking to contemporary literature and film that similarly employ speculative aesthetics as a form of critical fabulation. By considering the specific formal strategies of speculative scholars and artists and the ways in which they exemplify the theoretical rigor of critical fabulation, I hope to show how the public discourse surrounding post-truth politics provides an opportunity to rigorously interrogate the heritage of truth as governance rather than cling more tightly to truth's false promises.