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Essays in Honor of Gunlög Fur

Hennessey, John L.

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PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00



CHAPTER 1

Introduction to History and Speculative Fiction: Essays in Honor of Gunlög Fur

John L. Hennessey

Anyone can identify what seems odd or false in the mental habits of an alien “somewhere.” But if something is the very texture of any insider’s thought, anywhere, it is the work of genius, not of ordinary men and women, to think that one’s thought is wrong. That is why I suggest that it is important to complement... [the] strategy of making the strange familiar, with the opposite one of making the familiar strange. (Fields and Fields 2012, 223)

History and speculative fiction have different epistemological starting points; simply put, history is based on fact and speculative fiction, as manifested by both parts of its name, is not. Nevertheless, when at their best, the two perform similar work in “making the strange familiar” and “making the familiar strange” by taking their readers on journeys through space and time. Excellent history, like excellent speculative fiction, should cause us to reconsider crucial aspects of our society that we normally overlook or else help us to break free of such discursive constraints through the process of familiarizing ourselves with radically different forms of social organization, whether in the factual past or the fictional future (or past or present).

J. L. Hennessey (✉)
Lund University, Lund, Sweden
e-mail: john.hennessey@kultur.lu.se

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This applies especially to the subtle structures of power that organize our own societies, whether through notions of gender, race, coloniality, or others that we do not so readily imagine. These structures become most apparent in liminal spaces between cultures or in contacts between societies, a phenomenon that Gunlög Fur has explored through the concept of *concurrances*. As will be described in more detail below, *concurrances* describes separate, parallel worlds or cultures that operate according to different internal logics, but come into contact, generating complicated relations of agreement and/or competition (Brydon et al. 2017a).

How varied can the organization of human society be, and what are the common denominators between different cultures and lifeways? How do we define the “human” and imagine its relationship to what we accordingly define as “non-human”? Are the different societies imagined by the authors of speculative fiction viable in real life (whatever that means) or too “inhuman” to be plausible? To what extent are historians able to immerse themselves in and understand the world of past individuals who lived in vastly different social arrangements, and to what extent are they limited in this endeavor by their own cultural baggage?

These questions pose great challenges, but working through them also holds the promise of exposing unjust and discriminatory power structures within societies, promoting understanding between societies and maybe even preparing humanity to cope with crises, whether pandemics, climate change, or currently unimaginable future issues. In this, history and speculative fiction, which have hitherto seldom been considered together (at least from the history side), may be able to learn from each other and even become allies. Despite their different premises, is the knowledge generated by each somehow compatible or complementary? How might historians become better equipped to study the past through a consideration of fictional societies, and how might authors of speculative fiction write better works with more nuanced understandings of history? How might a more profound understanding of historical approaches help literary scholars in their work?

With contributions from a variety of disciplinary perspectives that consider diverse examples of speculative fiction and historical encounters, this volume provides a robust opening to a serious discussion of these questions. At a time that the discipline of history has been described as being in deep crisis even as historical claims are increasingly mobilized in the service of political battles and identity creation (Bessner 2023), a productive engagement with speculative fiction may provide one avenue for

reinvigorating the discipline and creatively addressing future challenges. The authors of this volume hope in any case that this book will be a fitting tribute to 30 years of groundbreaking scholarship and conscientious teaching by our colleague, mentor, and friend Gunlög Fur, not least through new applications of the concept of *concurrences*.

CONCURRENCES

To see and name emergent patterns of globalization, and to look again at the histories that have brought the world to this place, requires experimental methodologies that proceed from fresh assumptions about modes of knowing and value. (Brydon et al. 2017a, 30)

The present volume shares the same overarching concern expressed here by Diana Brydon, Peter Forsgren, and Gunlög Fur in finding creative new methods to understand human societies. The method that these two literary scholars and one historian argue for in the anthology from which this quote is taken, *Concurrent Imaginaries, Postcolonial Worlds: Toward Revised Histories* (2017b), is Gunlög Fur's postcolonial concept/methodology of *concurrences*. One of the key aims of *History and Speculative Fiction*, both here and in the chapters that follow, is to demonstrate that concurrences and speculative fiction are especially productive in combination, in several different ways. Both center around the meeting and evaluation of different cultures, languages, and ways of life. As described in more detail below, science fiction has strong ties to historical colonialism and, like the postcolonial concept of concurrences, is unusually well-suited to critique its legacies. Moreover, history and speculative fiction can be understood as concurrent modes of exploring the human condition and shaping our view of possible futures. Perhaps most importantly, speculative fiction is an especially apt tool for helping us to understand the meaning and significance of concurrences and explore its potential, while concurrences as a critical historical method offers the possibility of enriching and overcoming the colonial tropes that still shape much science fiction.

But first it is necessary to better explain what *concurrences* is. As Brydon, Forsgren, and Fur themselves admit (2017b, 15), concurrences can be challenging to understand abstractly. The concept was developed to better explain the meeting of two different cultures, epistemologies, or value systems, a situation that frequently arose historically in the context of

colonialism. Such meetings were particularly frequent and important in the early modern contact between Europeans and Native Americans, Fur's primary area of expertise. As Fur herself explains,

“Concurrences”... refers to disparate spheres of existence and meaning that are interlinked but do not necessarily overlap and are not organized hierarchically—even though asymmetrical power-nexus will influence these relations. The nature and evolution of these power-relations, however, are questions of historical study and context, not an organic or essential (or theoretically predictable, or even predestined) aspect of these relations. (2017, 54)

Concurrences seeks to understand this contact between different “spheres of existence and meaning” without privileging one or the other, but also without naïvely ignoring the presence of the very real unequal power relations that such meetings often involve. As an approach, it does not view these inequalities as inevitable or reflecting the essence of either sphere, however; to do so would risk perpetuating colonial tropes like that of the “dying race” (see, for example, Brantlinger 2003) or the superiority of certain forms of “civilization.” “To think in terms of concurrences is to reject both binary models of opposition and absolute models of relativism,” as Brydon, Forsgren, and Fur put it (2017b, 11). Concurrences aims therefore to complicate our view of the world by bringing in multiple perspectives, while not falling victim to either absolute relativism or conceiving of these meetings on an idealistic plane outside of real-life power differentials on the one hand, or oversimplified, stereotypical, or Manichean views of cultural difference on the other.

Concurrences is not about a meeting on “neutral ground,” but often involves competing claims, or what Fur frequently refers to as “jurisdictions”:

It is not the multiplicity of histories per se that interests me but the way in which they become entangled, ensnared by their competing jurisdictions. *Concurrences* points to those zones of entanglement where simultaneous presence in time and space reveals not only separate claims on jurisdiction but also how people deal with difference and similarity, closeness and distance, in ways that belie simplistic categorizations and predetermined hierarchies. (Fur 2017, 46)

As such, the notion of *place* or spatiality is central to concurrences, both in terms of the real-world situatedness of such encounters and in the importance of the place from which the scholar is researching and writing. Like many postcolonial approaches, concurrences argues that researchers should pay especially close attention to their own specific baggage and remain humble to the fact that they will only be able to see an incomplete picture of the phenomena they are studying (Fur 2017, 40). This applies to all of the different epistemological positions, “worlds,” or “cultures” involved in concurrent meetings; echoing Donna Haraway, Fur makes sure to point out that it is a mistake to romanticize “the other” or succumb to the temptation of “uncritically favouring subjugated or subaltern perspectives” (2017, 49).

Fur chose the term *concurrences* because it contained a richness of meaning, with different connotations that capture the different perspectives and approaches described above. Besides the most common present-day meaning of “simultaneous,” *concurrence* can signify both agreement or (in its archaic English form or current Swedish form) competition, reflecting the different possible results of contact between different worlds.

A term such as *concurrences*, then, contains in its bag of meanings both agreement and competition, entanglement and incompatibility as it slides uneasily across time (“archaic” noun-forms) and space (different languages). It signals contestations over interpretations and harbours different, diverging, and at times competing claims that will inflect studies of things such as home, travelling, subjectivity-identity, voice, and space. (Fur 2017, 40)

Like much speculative fiction, Fur’s concept of concurrences suggests that understanding other cultures, lifeways, languages, and epistemologies that one comes into contact with is difficult, but possible (within certain limits set by one’s own cultural baggage), and above all, important.

Many works of speculative fiction dramatize the meeting of mutually incomprehensible societies or worlds described by *concurrences*. In science fiction, difference is typically represented by alien species, as effectively demonstrated by Ella Andrén in her chapter on *Star Trek*. Even if Babel fish or universal translators are a frequent convenience in science fiction that allows authors to circumvent, instead of exploring, the difficulties of translation and epistemology involved in concurrent encounters, there are still countless examples in which these very difficulties form the crux of the story. This is a central theme in Charlie Jane Anders’ novel *The City in the*

Middle of the Night (2019), explored in Karen Ordahl Kupperman's chapter, which draws insightful parallels between the regimented colonial society of the planet January, that depicted in Harry Martinson's *Aniara* (1956) and that of colonial Jamestown. *Children of Time* (2015) and *Children of Ruin* (2019) by Adrian Tchaikovsky, the *Binti* stories by Nnedi Okorafor (2015), and *A Memory Called Empire* (2019) and *A Desolation Called Peace* (2021) by Arkady Martine are only a few other recent examples that come to mind. Even *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, with its heavy reliance on universal translators, dramatized the difficulty of understanding a completely different way of communication (however implausible) in the episode *Darmok* (1991). These examples mostly have happy endings in which some form of mutual understanding is established, but there is also a tradition in science fiction that emphasizes the impossibility of understanding alien others. This is true of Stanisław Lem's *Solaris* (1961), Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973; at least before the sequels were written), and Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic* (1972) [2012]), all of which involve encounters with extremely powerful, but completely inscrutable aliens.

I would argue that one of the best dramatizations of *concurrences* in speculative fiction, and one that can help us to better understand and reflect on the term itself, is Ted Chiang's *Story of Your Life* (2002, originally published in 1998). This award-winning novella was the basis of the film *Arrival* (2016), but the original story has certain key differences. In a few dozen pages, the story richly connects profound reflections on linguistics, parenthood, the nature of time, and epistemology. But it is the contact between two previously isolated species or civilizations and their worldviews that is the most relevant for a discussion of *concurrences*. In the story, humanity is unexpectedly visited by an advanced alien race, which they call "heptopods." The heptopods remain in orbit around Earth but send down 112 "looking glasses"—a kind of two-way audiovisual communication device through which they come into contact with humanity. The story centers on the narrator, Louise Banks, a linguist, and Gary Donnelly, a physicist with whom she is paired in order to establish communication with and study the heptopods, under the command of the U.S. Military. The military officers and other representatives of the U.S. Federal Government represent a narrow-minded, binary approach to otherness. They are completely flummoxed by the intentions of the heptopods, whom they perceive first as a military threat and later, greedily, as a potential source of advanced technology. Frustrated by the government's

lack of flexibility and creativity in this first human contact with an alien species, the researchers, who are driven primarily by a will to understand the heptopods, come to a far deeper, though still incomplete, understanding of these visitors.

As Louise slowly comes to comprehend the heptopods' significantly different language, one of Gary's physicist colleagues finally makes a breakthrough after weeks of being unable to communicate about physics concepts when the heptopods react with understanding to a description of Fermat's principle. The resulting physics discussion is (predictably) omitted in the Hollywood movie but is arguably essential to the plot of the story. In discussing Fermat's principle, which describes how light always "chooses" the fastest path between two points, even when traveling through different, refracting, mediums, a key difference between human and heptopod epistemology comes to light. Donnelly explains that laws of physics are typically expressed in causal terms, but that mathematically, it is just as correct to describe them in other terms, as variational principles: "The thing is, while the common formulation of physical laws is causal, a variational principle like Fermat's is purposive, almost teleological" (124). As stated even more clearly later,

The physical universe was a language with a perfectly ambiguous grammar. Every physical event was an utterance that could be parsed in two entirely different ways, one causal and the other teleological, both valid, neither one disqualifiable no matter how much context was available. (133)

It dawns on Louise that the heptopods' language and physics reflect an entirely different epistemology and way of relating to time: humans have a "sequential mode of awareness" and heptopods a "simultaneous mode of awareness" (134).

As Louise increasingly masters their written language, she begins to think like the heptopods and suddenly has access to her own "memories" from the future. Unlike in the movie, however, Louise realizes that she cannot use her knowledge of future events to affect them:

Freedom isn't an illusion; it's perfectly real in the context of sequential consciousness. Within the context of simultaneous consciousness, freedom is not meaningful, but neither is coercion; it's simply a different context, no more or less valid than the other... But you can't see both at the same time. Similarly, knowledge of the future was incompatible with free will. What

made it possible for me to exercise freedom of choice also made it impossible for me to know the future. Conversely, now that I know the future, I would never act contrary to that future... (137)

In the story, this is not a “gift” from the heptopods, per se, but a result of Louise understanding their worldview, albeit one that she cannot completely share. A mutual exchange does play a role in the story, however. At the insistence of the researchers, the government decides to eschew attempts at trade and instead engage in mutual “gift-giving” with the heptopods. In the movie, the heptopods intentionally “gift” humans the ability to see into the future as a kind of quid pro quo arrangement (so that humanity will be able to help the heptopods in the future), but in the story, the gift giving is much freer, more whimsical, and of less perceived value to the U.S. government. In the end, the heptopods leave as mysteriously as they arrived; Louise has gained new perspectives on the universe but still does not fully understand the heptopods or their motives.

In many ways, Chiang’s story demonstrates the concept of *concurrents*. The heptopods consistently resist human governments’ attempts to place them into predefined categories or understand them according to human cultural logic; it is only through curiosity, openness, and a cognizance of their own subject positions and cultural embodiments that researchers like Louise are able to come to a greater understanding of them. The gift-giving paradigm that the heptopods positively respond to is also emphasized in the theorization of concurrents. Based on calls from indigenous scholars, gift-giving is highlighted as “a proper stance for academic intercourse”—the free exchange of stories and knowledge (Fur 2017, 41). Most interestingly, Chiang’s story, like much of his work, can be characterized as “hard science fiction,” engaging in an informed way with physics, linguistics, and mathematics. And yet, *Story of Your Life* still embraces the possibility of multiple but equally “true” worldviews, even when it comes to fundamental scientific principles. The story therefore not only illustrates *concurrents* in a particularly nuanced and striking way but also demonstrates how multiple epistemologies or worldviews need not be merely the fantasies of “soft” subjects within the humanities and social sciences but that the social construction of even the “reality” of the universe may be mathematically plausible. Explicitly or implicitly, the rest of the chapters of this volume explore the productive synergies between history and speculative fiction through the lens of concurrents.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN “HISTORY” AND “SPECULATIVE FICTION”

Concurrences, then, is arguably a productive way of conceiving of the relationship between history and speculative fiction, but implies that they are separate logics or fields that can intersect in complex ways. Such a sharp distinction, however, is not uncontroversial. The difference between history and fiction has been the subject of debate for centuries, although the attempt to make history a more “scientific” discipline in the nineteenth century is generally seen as a turning point, with the creation of a sharper boundary between the two (see, for example, Burke 2012). More recently, the debate flared up and became the subject of countless articles and books in the final decades of the twentieth century, with Hayden White as a major figure of controversy. As David Carr has pointed out, both the positivist defenders of historical “objectivity” and many critics, like White, who argue that history is inherently more literary than these positivists would like to admit, share the same assumption that “creative” or “literary” elements in historical studies are suspect and that fiction is analogous to falsification or deception (2004). In fact, as Carr astutely argues, novelists are hardly deceptive, as it is clear from the context in which their works are read that they are not intended to be taken as “true.” Nor does the use of literary elements automatically invalidate historical research; the distinction is rather one of the intentions. Both history and fiction can use similar techniques, but history is characterized by its production of “assertions, theories, predictions, and in some cases narratives, about how the world really is, or will be, or was,” while fiction is not—a distinction which, according to Carr, nearly all readers understand (2004, 255).

Despite the massive literature on the relationship between history and literature, or fiction, in general, *speculative fiction* or related categorizations such as science fiction and fantasy have received virtually no consideration in the context of historical methodology or epistemology. Since speculative fiction cannot be mistaken for a factual account of the world, it has been overlooked in the aforementioned discussions of history and literature (for a rare exception, see Liedl 2015). Nevertheless, as Carr contends, such discussions have largely missed the point of how both history and literature can shed light on the human experience in different, often complementary, ways. Speculative fiction’s unrealistic nature can actually make it particularly useful for understanding the nature of historical truth and why scholars believe in certain facts. As Brian Attebery has argued for

the fantasy genre, “Because fantasy has those irreducible elements of the impossible, the unreal, the extremely extraordinary, it helps us understand better what’s the possible, what’s the real, what’s the true” (2022). The essays in this volume provide clear examples of the productive synergies between academic history and speculative fiction that can enhance historians’ research and teaching.

Speculative fiction can be broadly defined as literature of the fantastic, using clearly unrealistic elements to explore hypothetical scenarios or bring aspects of the reader’s world into sharp relief. It overlaps to a great degree with science fiction but can also be considered a broader, umbrella category that includes fantasy literature, which does not have the same focus on technology that typically characterizes science fiction. Science is often, but not always, the main focus of speculative fiction, and many creative stories take place in low-technology societies in the distant past or future that are at least as thought-provoking as literature involving high technology. In her exploration of postcolonialism and science fiction, Jessica Langer argues against the term “speculative fiction” in favor of “science fiction,” which she feels better highlights the dark sides of scientific “progress” and its “conflict” with indigenous epistemologies that are often criticized in postcolonial scholarship (2011, 9). This is a valid point in the context of Langer’s book, but even though much of the present anthology discusses colonialism, it is not limited to this topic, and I contend that “speculative fiction” is more useful when discussing synergies between this kind of literature and history-writing in general.

The emphasis on literature that is *speculative* highlights the intellectual, contemplative dimension of the best of this literature. In my view, “science fiction” is too-closely associated in everyday speech with space opera. I find it difficult to categorize works like *Star Wars* as “speculative” or engaging with important questions of how society is organized. For such “science fiction,” spaceships, lasers, robots, and other high technology are mostly exotic scenery that could easily be swapped for sailing ships, castles, and horses. In speculative fiction, however, the fantastic elements form a crucial part of the plot and its *raison d’être*, making it perhaps a more serious (though not always less fun) type of fiction. For these reasons, this book will use both “speculative fiction” and “science fiction,” but the former is preferred when discussing this kind of literature and its relationship to history in a more general way. In addition, the diverse chapters that follow are not limited to print literature, but explore different media used to convey creative speculation.

Reflecting the close affinity between these genres or modes of writing, two literary critics' explanations of what science fiction is apply equally well to speculative fiction. David Seed describes science fiction as "an embodied thought experiment whereby aspects of our familiar reality are transformed or suspended" (2011, 2). Darko Suvin has similarly characterized science fiction as "literature of cognitive estrangement," in which rigorous coherence in world-building according to fantastic premises is paramount (Suvin 1979, quoted in Rieder 2011, 62). This last definition of science fiction is particularly useful for the present discussion of science- or speculative fiction's connections to history, for cannot history also be described as a "literature of cognitive estrangement"? The great challenge for historians is becoming so immersed in the language and culture of the "foreign country" of the past as to be able to understand its obscure references and oblique jokes. Failure to properly do so could have disastrous consequences, with historians completely misunderstanding and misconstruing key texts, events, and processes.

I often try to explain to my students that the people of the past were not stupider than we are, even if they were ignorant of later developments and even though their worldviews can seem laughably wrong in our eyes. The deeply engrained narrative of explosive technological progress on which our modern identity rests tends to obscure the many things that the people of the past knew but that have now largely been lost. Myriad philosophical and religious ideas, once-canonical texts, social norms, and even basic knowledge of agriculture, nature, or the uses of various tools that were common knowledge in specific times and places have now fallen into obscurity.

Though this insight can be gained through the detailed study of a historical period, it is quickly and usefully dramatized in a great many time travel stories within science fiction. The time traveler, wary of being uncovered as an imposter and burned as a witch, or worse, must become extremely well-versed in the local language and culture, almost like a spy. This is particularly skillfully executed in the time-travel novels and short stories of Connie Willis, in whose universe time travel is the domain of academic historians conducting fieldwork, since the inability to alter the timeline has made it unprofitable and therefore uninteresting to commercial actors. In Willis' different stories, the theme of past alterity is depicted in varying registers, whether in the somber account of the struggles of a time traveler stuck in the Bubonic Plague in *Doomsday Book* (1992) or the comedy of errors that ensues from the protagonist's inadequate

preparation for his mission to Victorian England in *To Say Nothing of the Dog* (1997). Infiltrating the society of the past in time travel narratives like Willis' not only forms an exciting narrative but also exposes the richness of the past and all that has been lost in a particularly vivid way. Even later historians' (or archaeologists') errors of interpretation are the subject of works like *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (Miller 1959) or *Motel of the Mysteries* (Macaulay 1979). In the former, a twentieth-century mechanic's shopping list becomes venerated centuries later as a holy relic. In the latter, a lampoon of the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb, a future archaeologist completely misunderstands the purpose of the everyday objects he excavates from a twentieth-century motel room.

The confusing mix of familiarity and radical alterity in the past in many ways mirrors the construction of fantastical worlds in speculative fiction. In both historical sources and speculative fiction, the present-day reader can be lured into a sense of security by familiar cultural or material elements that both their own society and the society they are reading about hold in common before being jarred by an unexpected difference that reveals the similarities to be mostly superficial. Insight into the complexity and distinct internal logic of other societies and the ability to convey some of this through a richness of detail in world-excitation or world-building are what mark both high-quality history and speculative fiction. History aspires to the analysis and interpretation of the past made possible by a deep knowledge of its innumerable contextual minutiae, whereas speculative fiction attempts the creation of an imaginary world that involves fantastic elements, but with a consistency and complexity that makes it seem plausible. Both involve a large degree of "cognitive estrangement" from their author's internalized assumptions about how the world and society are.

After the postmodern turn, most historians have been increasingly wary of their ability to set aside their own cultural biases when evaluating source material and writing history. The historian's attempt at "cognitive estrangement" will always be imperfect, limited by their own culturally- and linguistically-determined cognition. Similarly, virtually all works of speculative fiction can be criticized for logical or internal inconsistencies, or the seeming implausibility of the world that they create, distracting from their intended message. But as incomplete or imperfect as they inevitably are, history and speculative fiction still both offer unique possibilities to question the seeming inevitability of aspects of our current society, our current world.

COUNTERFACTUAL SPECULATION

There is little research into the possible creative synergies between history and speculative fiction in general, but a great deal has been written about more specific types of speculative fiction or from other perspectives that shed light on this topic in useful ways. There are naturally many literary histories *of* science or speculative fiction, which often provide useful insights into the origins of certain conventions that have shaped these overlapping modes (see, for example, Seed 2011; Luckhurst 2018). This is particularly true of colonialism, whose special relationship to science fiction requires its own section later on.

More directly, although it only represents one subcategory of speculative fiction, a body of literature has arisen around the study of counterfactual history. This has become an increasingly popular and influential literary subgenre and one with clear implications for the study of history (see, for example, Rosenfeld 2005; Evans 2013). In one of the most important recent studies of the counterfactual, Catherine Gallagher argues that although counterfactual history has existed for centuries, it has become widespread and a significant political tool only comparatively recently. Starting in the 1970s, counterfactual methodologies became the object of serious discussion in both the historical and legal professions, the latter to address issues of restitution for historical crimes. In literature, Gallagher contends that counterfactual history went from being a science fiction subgenre to a mainstream literary mode in the first decade of the twenty-first century, in part thanks to the popularity of simulated historical battles in the gaming world whose outcome was open to change (2018, 1). Indeed, as this book demonstrates, especially Piia Posti's and Cecilia Trenter's chapters on romance fiction, this development has not been limited to realistic historical fiction, but counterfactual, fantastic, or speculative elements that were previously limited to science fiction have increasingly been used within other genres, further transgressing the already blurry boundaries of speculative fiction.

Gallagher's timeline demonstrates that interest in counterfactual speculation grew concurrently in different fields, including academic history, law, and literature. Historians have a long history of skepticism towards counterfactual speculation, but as Gallagher notes, many have come to see this as a possible supplementary tool for the profession. The counterfactual is a useful tool for considering issues such as "the role of human agency and responsibility in history, the possibilities of historical justice

and repair, and the coherence of identity—of individuals, nations, and peoples—through time” (2018, 4). Just as this anthology argues for speculative fiction in general, counterfactuals can provide a useful means for reflecting on some of the core issues that make history meaningful.

While counterfactual history is of obvious relevance to the historical profession, it is only one of many types of speculative fiction. As I discuss in my chapter on what I label *counterphysical* fiction, the dominant form of merely changing the outcome of a battle or other historical turning point does not go very far in challenging our established ways of thinking about the world or how society could be. This anthology seeks to move beyond this narrow focus of much existing research and explore how other fantastic or speculative elements can enrich the writing of history and vice versa.

COLONIALISM AND POSTCOLONIALISM

It should be apparent to anyone familiar with the pervasive science fiction tropes of galactic empires, (alien) race warfare, and the settlement of other worlds that science fiction has a close relationship to and is often directly inspired by real-life colonialism. This has been the subject of several major studies that, while not having the same focus on history-writing as this volume, discuss many of the same issues and theories explored here. Perhaps the most important study of the relationship between science fiction and colonial ideology is John Rieder’s *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008). Rieder, like a majority of literary scholars, argues that the height of European colonial expansionism in the late nineteenth century was also, not coincidentally, the formative period for the most familiar aspects of modern science fiction (2). As a result, early science fiction is deeply infused with colonial themes and ideology, characteristics which have tended to persist over time. As Janne Lahti’s chapter in this volume demonstrates, even recent science fiction blockbuster films in many ways reflect and perpetuate settler colonial ideology.

Rieder identifies several “powerful ideological fantasies” that characterize both colonialism and much science fiction. The first of these is the “discoverer’s fantasy” of the *terra nullius* that is actually inhabited by indigenous peoples. Rieder defines a “missionary fantasy” as the attitude that “Although we know that our arrival disrupts and destroys the traditional way of life here, we believe that it fulfills the deep needs and desires of all right-thinking natives.” The “anthropologist’s fantasy” temporally

displaces contemporaneous indigenous peoples by considering them as living in the past, “in fact, to be our own past” (31–32). Finally, there is the colonial fantasy that limited natural resources are actually unlimited, highlighting the close relationship between colonialism, capitalism, and environmental destruction (37). While not discussed explicitly by Rieder, his very use of the term “fantasy” points to yet another telling link between colonial history and speculative fiction: colonial ventures were in many ways based on speculation (in both senses of the term) about the profitability or usefulness of foreign lands, speculation that was very often inflated by a lack of reliable information and greed-induced delusions (Varnava 2015). In this way, a great deal of real-life colonial history was in fact based on fantasy and speculation more than reality, even though the terrible consequences of colonial expansionism were very real.

Rieder’s ideological fantasies of colonialism and science fiction reflect many of the main colonial ideologies exposed by leading postcolonial theorists. Mary Louise Pratt’s classic *Imperial Eyes* (1992), for example, presents a detailed analysis of the “discoverer’s fantasy,” which she describes in terms of the titular “imperial eyes” that see what they want to see and envision a concrete domination of the colonized landscape. The “anthropologist’s fantasy,” as the core of the colonial worldview, is discussed by a great deal of postcolonial scholarship, but perhaps most notably in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000), with its insightful discussions of the use of historical time by colonial ideology. Chakrabarty famously argues that European colonial ideology “consigned Indians, Africans, and other ‘rude’ nations to an imaginary waiting room of history” (8) while attacking the strange, atemporal “universalism” claimed by Europeans.

For Rieder, the centrality of time to colonial ideology is strongly related to its prevalence and importance as a motif in science fiction. This is particularly true of the common time travel motif. For those who accepted colonial notions of “civilization” and progress, travel in space was often understood as a kind of time travel (76). Early European travelers to Japan, for example, saw in Japanese society a mirror of Europe’s Middle Ages. Those who visited a variety of so-called “primitive” cultures around the world frequently described them as “Stone Age people.” Indeed, the idea that we can learn about, or from, “our primitive ancestors” by studying present-day human groups who have been isolated from globalized modern culture is still extremely prevalent today. The leap from spatial to

time travel in science fiction, therefore, was not so great in the late nineteenth century and arguably facilitated by colonial ideology.

Since colonized “Others” were often considered to be not only culturally different but the colonial explorer’s *own past*, both anthropology and science fiction often investigate “to what extent the limitations and weaknesses of contemporary humankind are effects of social organization rather than qualities intrinsic to the species” (Rieder 2008, 77). In my view, this is exactly the kind of difficult question that both history and speculative fiction should be jointly contributing to answering. Both types of writing remain unavoidably bound to their authors’ preexisting worldview but can to some extent break out of these constraints, albeit in different ways: history by exploring the artifacts of different cultures and modes of social organization that actually existed in the past, and speculative fiction by using or constructing a rationally operating, consistent, but unreal, world in which to test such ideas. Despite its colonial legacies, then, (and, perhaps, despite history’s Eurocentric and nationalist legacies) speculative fiction has the potential to productively challenge existing hegemonic ways of seeing the world in ways that can help to address current and future problems.

Indeed, while emphasizing science fiction’s colonial origins, Rieder points out that from its very beginnings in the late nineteenth century, it was used both to reinforce and to question, critique, and destabilize colonial ideology (10). Nineteenth-century protagonists of science fiction stories were often the weaker party in a cross-cultural/cross-temporal colonial encounter, as travelers to the distant future were awed by its awesome technology in much the same way as colonial subjects visiting the metropole were supposed to be. As in many other contemporaneous empires, Japanese colonial authorities, for example, arranged “sightseeing tours” of Japanese cities for leaders of anti-colonial resistance in Japan’s empire in an attempt to overwhelm and intimidate them into submission (Matsuda 2003, 48–49; Hennessey 2018, 228). Even more dramatically, the recurrent trope of the invasion of Earth by technologically superior aliens closely mirrored actual (and often contemporaneous) colonial conquest but placed familiar, “modern,” or “civilized” characters in the position of the victim with whom the reader was intended to sympathize.

Catastrophes are indeed often central to speculative fiction, which frequently makes use of the related mode of dystopia. Kristín Loftsdóttir’s chapter astutely discusses different ways that such imaginative works are linked to real-world “crisis-talk,” intervening in current political debates.

Discussing the motif of catastrophe in science fiction that undermines technological and civilizational optimism, Rieder importantly argues that

such logical or emotional inversion of the fantasies of appropriation is not just an imaginary effect. Environmental devastation, species extinction, enslavement, plague, and genocide following in the wake of invasion by an alien civilization with vastly superior technology—all of these are not merely nightmares morbidly fixed upon by science fiction writers and readers, but are rather the bare historical record of what happened to non-European people and lands after being “discovered” by Europeans and integrated into Europe’s economic and political arrangements from the fifteenth century to the present. (124)

In this way, the “fantastic” or “speculative” elements of literature involving futuristic alien invasions or similar plots are actually startlingly real. This is in fact the very theme of the research project “Surviving the Unthinkable: Ecological Destruction and Indigenous Survivance in North America and the Nordic Countries, 1600–2022,” initiated by Gunlög Fur shortly before this book went to press. The project will study whether humanity as a whole can learn from the experience of resilience after devastation experienced by a great many indigenous peoples around the world to be able to better cope with the devastation wreaked by climate change (Olsson 2022).

Based on Rieder’s observation, much early science fiction could be said to reflect colonialists’ fears of falling victim to their own methods or perhaps even, in some cases, their guilty conscience. Indeed, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were characterized by an obsession with alien invasion and other forms of race warfare not only in science fiction but in non-fictional and even “scientific” works warning of a decline in white manliness or virility as a result of “over-civilization” (the Eloi in H. G. Wells’ 1895 *The Time Machine* come to mind) or even outright “race suicide” in the face of an invasion by non-white masses (Bederman 1995; Painter 2010). This particular discourse has in fact recently been reinvigorated by the anti-immigration extreme-right in many European and European-settler countries, who use the language of “invasion” or “replacement” and, explicitly or not, fear that non-whites will in some way repeat the colonial crimes historically committed by Europeans (Bracke and Aguilar 2020). Adopting the position of the colonized victim in science fiction, then, does not necessarily lead to greater empathy with the

historical victims of colonialism, but such fantasies can actually strengthen an “eat or be eaten” sense of being threatened by the Other and provide a more socially acceptable setting in which to explore such fears.

Besides the colonial origins of many classic science fiction tropes, the genre is also frequently criticized for its strong links to Eurocentrism and normative “whiteness” (see, for example, Carrington 2016). Ashleigh Harris’ chapter explores how globally circulating views of science and science fiction produced in Europe and America could reinforce notions of whiteness in apartheid South Africa. Fortunately, the last several years have witnessed an upsurge of interest in postcolonial speculative fiction that uses the mode’s various tools to creatively undermine persistent colonial ideology. In the afterword to a pioneering collection from 2004, *So Long Been Dreaming*, Uppinder Mehan argues that speculative fiction is a necessary complement to critical history in order to complete the work of decolonization:

postcolonial writing has for the most part been intensely focused on examining contemporary reality as a legacy of a crippling colonial past but rarely has it pondered that strange land of the future. Visions of the future imagine how life might be otherwise. If we do not imagine our futures, postcolonial peoples risk being condemned to be spoken about and for again. (270)

This is likewise the focus of the increasingly salient literary movement Afrofuturism, which seeks to ensure that Black people have a prominent place in imagined futures that have long been predominantly white and reflect a homogenized Western culture (Carrington 2016; Lavender 2019). Such postcolonial speculative fiction contests persistent colonial tropes of the “inevitable” extinction or assimilation of non-dominant languages, cultures, and peoples.

In her 2011 book *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*, Jessica Langer argues that science fiction need not necessarily be colonial, in spite of its origins, but in fact has characteristics that can be especially useful for overcoming the corrosive legacies of colonialism in postcolonial societies. One such characteristic is the capacity of science fiction to explore and dramatize otherness in particularly striking ways, whether through alien encounters or, as Rieder notes, cyborgs (Langer 2011, 85; Rieder 2008, 111). “In science fiction,” Langer points out, “otherness is often conceptualized corporeally, as a physical difference that either signposts or causes an essential difference, in a constant echo of zero-world [real world]

racialization” (82). As discussed above, tropes of alien invasion can, in their simplest forms, simply be a thin veneer for racist fears of immigration and “replacement,” but they can also problematize real-world stereotypes through their critical examination of what the “human” consists of in contrast to actual aliens. Langer sees postcolonial science fiction’s subversive potential to lie in a productive use of the hybridity theorized by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha:

Rather than shying away from these colonial tropes [of the Stranger and the Strange Land]... postcolonial science fiction hybridizes them, parodies them and/or mimics them against the grain in a play of Bhabhaian masquerade... Their very power, their situation at the centre of the colonial imagination as simultaneous desire and nightmare, is turned back in on itself. (4)

The violence of the colonial encounter cannot be undone, but science fiction is one way to turn its own tropes against it and expose its injustices.

Langer also makes the important point that the study of science fiction needs to move away from the dominance of Euro-American and English-language works by highlighting literature from other languages and cultures (11). Langer does so in her book by discussing Japanese science fiction, much of which has never been translated and therefore has received little attention in English-language scholarship. As she points out, even postcolonial studies’ predominant focus on the former British and French Empires, particularly India, “fails utterly to take into account the diversity of postcolonial experiences” (11). While this volume also does not completely overcome this bias, Martin van der Linden’s, Anna Höglund’s, and Cecilia Trenter’s chapters treat Japanese, Korean, and Nordic speculative fiction, respectively, and, importantly, Hans Hägerdal’s chapter takes up “the inclusion of Europeans in legendary and even fantastic contexts” by historical Southeast Asians, reversing the colonial gaze. That chapter in particular can hopefully serve as inspiration for future studies of speculative fiction from non-Western perspectives.

ECO-CRITICISM

As one of the defining issues of our time, climate change has naturally been the subject of a great deal of recent speculative fiction and related literary scholarship. Speculative fiction was something of a forerunner in this regard, and Johan Höglund’s chapter in this volume argues that

Ursula LeGuin's 1971 novel *The Lathe of Heaven* presciently registers the violence done to ecology by colonial/capitalist society. Science fiction has been especially well-suited to exploring a future climate calamity, not only because of its focus on the future but because it has a long tradition of focusing on catastrophes and post-apocalyptic worlds. As Johan Höglund's chapter shows especially clearly, climate change is inextricably linked to both colonialism and capitalism (themselves closely intertwined), a connection that much critical speculative fiction has dramatized in particularly striking ways. Climate change or ecological devastation are therefore not separate phenomena but ones that are closely related to other forms of colonial destruction. The obliteration of people, ecosystems, lifeways, and epistemologies go hand in hand in the totalizing, chauvinist logic of colonialism.

As we have already seen, Rieder argues that colonial "history haunts science fiction's visions of catastrophe," which often works through the actual destruction of cultures and peoples in a futuristic, exotic setting (2008, 124). This not only reflects subconscious processes but often involves a deliberate identification between colonial and speculative genocide and other crimes. As Rieder points out, H. G. Wells quite explicitly draws parallels between the Martian invasion and the Tasmanian genocide in *The War of the Worlds*, for example (1898; Rieder 2008, 132). With catastrophe being as strong a motif in classic science fiction as technological optimism, Rieder argues that

visions of catastrophe appear in large part to be the symmetrical opposites of colonial ideology's fantasies of appropriation, so much so that the lexicon of science-fictional catastrophes might be considered profitably as the obverse of the celebratory narratives of exploration and discovery, the progress of civilization, the advance of science, and the unfolding of racial destiny that formed the Official Story of colonialism. (123–124)

Science fiction, then, from its nineteenth-century beginnings was at least as frequently characterized by technological skepticism as enthusiasm, reflecting the major reconsideration of technology driven by present-day climate change.

Though science fiction is typically associated with shiny spaceships and complex machinery, a great many modern examples of eco-critical speculative fiction use more of a natural idiom. Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone's 2019 novel *This is How You Lose the Time War* takes place

amidst a temporal war across history between two sides with different visions of the future that they fiercely defend. The two sides or futures can be seen as metaphors or perhaps actual embodiments of the nature-technology (or perhaps, more fundamentally, nature-culture) divide, with one being characterized by a mechanical/cyborg/networked intelligence style while the other, Garden, is characterized by natural imagery (though equally ferocious as its opponent and able to manipulate time and genetics in staggeringly advanced ways). The latter, with its depiction of natural elements as both immensely powerful and open to a different kind of high technology than the nuts-and-bolts kind most associated with science fiction, has become an increasingly common mode as genetics has taken a more prominent place at the forefront of humanity's scientific imagination. Monsters, instead of invading from other worlds, increasingly are the result of twisted genetic experiments or else come to symbolize the reaction of a personified Nature against human overexploitation. Two of the essays in this collection, by Anna Höglund and Martin van der Linden, take up these themes, both coincidentally involving boars as symbolic, destructive forces in Asian cinema.

Speculative fiction has played a crucial role in helping contemporary society imagine the potentially catastrophic effects of climate change in a near future. As the depth and seriousness of the situation becomes increasingly well-recognized, however, many commentators have questioned whether doomsday scenarios do more harm than good by sapping people of the hope and optimism that they require to effectively tackle the problem. In what could amount to a paradigm shift in the subgenre, Kim Stanley Robinson has attempted to restore some sense of optimism with his 2020 novel *The Ministry of the Future*. This novel depicts a potentially realistic (as in, not relying on "miracle" technologies) future in which humanity manages to bring down carbon emissions fast enough to mitigate the worst effects of climate change, even while suffering several massive catastrophes. It is unusual for speculative fiction to be so detailed and practically oriented, as a kind of a potential road map for overcoming climate change, blurring the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, but the success of Robinson's novel may herald more such works in the near future. Though using more fantastic elements, this anthology's final contribution, an original short story by David Belden, similarly explores how humanity can productively work towards a more hopeful future.

“FREE YOUR MIND”?

The imperative to “free your mind,” as expressed by Morpheus in *The Matrix* (1999), is a common one in both critical academic history and speculative fiction. This introduction has argued that the two genres, fields, or modes of writing have much in common and stand to mutually profit through a deeper and more deliberate dialogue. Both offer the potential, using different strategies, to reach alternative understandings of human society through creatively engaging with the past and possible futures. How have humans lived before, and how might they live in the future? But the obvious related question, “How *should* humans live?” is a harder one, and one that academic history has often shied away from, in spite of the normative nature of much critical theory. In much the same way as envisioned by discourse theorists, examining the past and imagining the future can help us to break free of the epistemological, cultural, and cognitive limitations to which we all inevitably belong, if not completely so.

But what exactly is freedom? We live in an age often characterized as “neo-liberal,” literally of “new freedom,” and the well-off among us have unprecedented freedom to travel, consume, and mold our own identities. And yet, the unsustainability of our lifestyles has increasingly called into question the desirability of this form of freedom. Might it be that a knowledge of alternatives opens up for a new kind of freedom or desirable way of life? Just as Louise in *Story of Your Life* discovers that “knowledge of the future was incompatible with free will,” could such alternative ways of thinking involve new responsibilities or burdens? Acknowledging climate change and the evils of colonialism is indeed a burden, but perhaps an awareness of alternate lifeways, whether from human history or speculation, can provide us with some degree of agency in shaping a desirable future as our present form of social organization becomes increasingly untenable.

The remainder of this book is divided into four sections. The first, “Colonialism, Oppression and Concurrences,” directly addresses colonial and other forms of injustice as depicted or engaged with in speculative fiction, drawing heavily on the concept of *concurrences*. The second, “Alternative Histories, Alternative Realities,” looks at the particularly direct engagement between history and speculative fiction through the counterfactual, or counterphysical. The third, “Defining and Defying the Boundaries of Cultures and the Human,” investigates eco-critical

speculative fiction with historical themes and the concurrent, uneasy relationship between the realms of nature and human culture, along with works that investigate the very nature and limits of what humanity is. The final section, “History, Speculative Fiction and Real-World Social Change,” investigates how history and speculative fiction can be tools of activism in the present-day, real world. The final chapter in that section, and the book, is an original short story by science fiction author David Belden, highlighting how both types of writing can productively engage with one another.

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