
Reframing Human Autonomy: Contemporary Feminist Speculative Fictions

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What does it mean to be human and what are the stakes involved in how we answer that question?¹ This paper begins with the premise that we need to decolonize the kind of mind that defines the human in exclusionary ways before those currently denied full human status can realize their potential for taking part in what Cornelius Castoriadis describes as the social and individual project of autonomy, understood as the continuous self-aware interaction of the instituted and instituting democratic imaginary (163). Understood within such a framework, autonomy and relatedness are not opposites but rather intertwined (Fajans). The terms currently defining the human, and even the category itself, are deservedly in question (Haraway, Povinelli), yet people still matter. It is the nature and practices of our humanity that are in question. How and why humans matter is imagined in the stories we tell, in both fictional and factual form. This paper begins by discussing two theoretical articles, cast loosely in the form of thought experiments, before turning to several contemporary novels that work through related questions in forms usually described as science fiction and fantasy.

Challenging the Imagination: Asking What If?

In probing the category of the human and its limits, Elizabeth Povinelli asks “what if” current thinking about Anthropogenic climate change is leading “to the acceptance that the human did not exist in the past, does not in the present, and will not in the future? What if,” she asks rhetorically, “there is no *human*, or even any *humans*, but merely regionally more or less densely compacted forms and modes of existence, one component of which has been abstracted out and named ‘the human’?” (294, 300 italics in the original).² This hypothesis frames my argument. In asking where we can find useful representations of those “more or less densely compacted forms

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2. See also Nicholas Gane, “When We Have Never Been Human, What Is To Be Done? Interview with Donna Haraway. *Theory, Culture & Society*. 23. 7-8 (2006): 135-158.

and modes of existence,” from which what passes for the human (and its constituting others, the subhuman and the nonhuman) have been abstracted, I turn in this paper to contemporary feminist speculative fictions as they reframe human autonomy away from its “toxic modalities” (as identified by Povinelli) toward the kind of relational forms of autonomy imagined through Karen Barad’s queered quantum perspective as “*material entanglements enfolded and threaded through the spacetime mattering of the universe*” (261 italics in the original). It is the tension between Castoriadis’s political focus, repurposed through a relational feminist lens, and Barad’s focus on an ethics of response-ability³ that I find explored in the fictions discussed below.

Povinelli turns to Australian settler colonial and Indigenous relations to insist that they cannot be understood in terms of conventional liberal settler colonial binaries. Her provocative questions are designed to push left political thinking in new directions, revealing the inadequacy of current frames and the need to decolonize them. Focussing on Indigenous Australians, she follows contemporary critical race theorists in arguing the need “to find a mode of belonging outside these Western imaginaries” of antagonistic sociality, which opposes “the *autological subject*” of Western modernity (defined by a possessive and insular understanding of autonomy) to what it sees as the backward “*genealogical society*” of Indigenous peoples and their non-extractive relations to the land (302 italics in original). She concludes that the “illusions of our epoch are the autonomous and antagonistic” (308). She rejects both these frames for categorizing the human because “anthropogenic toxins do not obey the settler colonial spatial technology of a barbed wire fence or the concept of a border. They seep through and corrode” (307). I will argue, however, that there are other concepts of autonomy than those that depend on such fictions of non-porous borders separating the human from its others.

The kind of autonomy I explore in this paper owes more to feminist theorizations of “relational autonomy” (MacKenzie & Stoljar) and the rejection of an antagonistic politics in favour of thinking through the “agonistic pluralism” of Chantal Mouffe. Such understandings of the politics of relational autonomy recognize mutual dependencies and the co-constitution of selves in the “dilemmatic spaces” (Honig 567) of everyday negotiation and choice. I think these models are compatible with Barad’s endorsement of the need to think with an acceptance of indeterminacy over uncertainty and with her understanding of entanglements as “not intertwinings of separate entities, but rather irreducible relations of responsibility” (“Quantum” 265). I believe these irreducible relations are enacted in much of the fiction examined here.

Literary Thought Experiments

Povinelli sets up an imagined encounter between Italian autonomist theorist Franco “Bifo” Berardi and science fiction writer Philip K. Dick as the stage for her argument in “The Ends of

3. This term, employed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Karen Barad, and Donna Haraway combines the meanings of response and responsibility to stress the importance of listening and acting as related modes of ethical accountability.

Humans: Anthropocene, Autonomism, Antagonism, and the Illusions of Our Epoch.” Barad sets up her article “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come” as a thought experiment in imagining “how electrons experience the world” and as a “way of thinking with and through dis/continuity ...” and much else that challenges the imagination (240, 244). Taking Povinelli and Barad as models, in this paper I think through the productivity of the literary thought experiment, narratives that in asking their own versions of the “what if?” question enable readers to experience imaginatively how to think and act beyond the supposed givens of our times. These fictions bring complex ideas into the more accessible realm of stories and the embodied lives of individuals. They include Annalee Newitz’s *Autonomous*, N.K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth* trilogy, Ann Leckie’s *The Imperial Radch* trilogy, Nnedi Okorafor’s *Who Fears Death* and *The Book of Phoenix*, Vandana Singh’s *Entanglement*, and Martha Wells’s *The Murderbot Diaries*. These texts reframe the concept of individual human autonomy away from possessive and bounded identity toward shifting understandings of how to live our human interdependence with others in the world, such as through “making kin” (as Donna Haraway advises) among humans, aliens, and machines, or recognizing, as Barad suggests, that “Ethicality entails noncoincidence with oneself” (“Quantum” 265).

In a related vein, but with a stronger focus on how such processes might be institutionalized within near and far future human-centred communities, Malka Older’s *The Centenal Cycle* and Ada Palmer’s *Terra Ignota* series rescale democracy beyond the nation-state system, reimagining the exercise of individual autonomy within self-chosen communities operating within an institutionalized global system at macro and micro scales. Following Anna Tsing’s example in *Friction*, where she begins with the question, “how does one study the global?” (1) these writers explore what it means to describe “multiple situated worldings and multiple sorts of translations to engage globalism” (Haraway “Tentacular” fn 17), I argue that in such texts, the concept of autonomy is reframed beyond the bounded units of both individuals and nation-states in efforts to renew democratic practices and reframe what community could be.

Decolonizing the Humanist Mind

Decolonizing the mind involves rethinking what is meant by mind and the ways in which mind/body dualities still largely operate to enable ongoing inequities separating one group of humans from another, and humans from animals and machines. This decolonizing critique of the humanist mind is the territory claimed by many contemporary speculative fictions as well as some versions of contemporary posthuman theory. The fictions analyzed here decolonize a genre once associated with colonization and the building of empires, to reframe it for an age dominated by “the ruins” of empire and capitalism (Tsing, *Mushroom*, Stoler). Many of these texts seek inspiration in premodern stories for reconfiguring the human and its others. Globalization, Anthropocene pressures, and new technological developments have each contributed in interconnected ways to put pressure on

modern ideas of the human that are best represented in Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. For Rosi Braidotti, the human is "a normative" and highly regulatory "historical construct that became a social convention." It operated by "transposing a specific mode of being human into a generalized standard" (26). That is the mode being challenged in many of the fictions I consider here. Braidotti argues the need to embrace "alternative ways to look at the 'human' from a more inclusive and diverse angle," such as those emerging from feminist, decolonial, and postcolonial thinking (26). Such alternatives are likely to reframe what is meant by human subjectivity, as the texts examined here clearly show. My argument in this paper is that these fictions enable readers to experience such reframings of the human in both visceral and intellectually exciting ways.

In recent years there has been an explosion of writing loosely termed science fiction/fantasy that problematizes normative humanist images of the human while advocating for recognizing the autonomy and "human rights" of characters normatively excluded from this category: not just women and racialized peoples, although they are often central, but also androids, clones, robots, zombies, animals, sentient plants (Story), and figures from mythologies old and new. *The Fifth Season*, the first volume of N.K. Jemisin's Broken Earth Trilogy, is dedicated "For all those who have to fight for the respect that everyone else is given without question" (ix). That expansionist agenda is reflected in more specific form in the dedication to Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*: "To the stolen girls of Chibok, Nigeria."

Jemisin's trilogy and Okorafor's adult fictions (*Who Fears Death* and *The Book of Phoenix*) may fuel intense anger at past and current injustices while turning to narratives of the exceptional girl on a mission to destroy the old and enable the new. In contrast to these apocalyptic fictions in which a chosen figure from a despised race and gender fulfils a heroic destiny, many of the other texts considered here depict collectivities exploring new ways of living together, often in future worlds that are ambiguously a mix of the utopian and dystopian, what Margaret Atwood describes as "ustopian." Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* begins with the end of the world, while the rest of the trilogy explains why that apocalypse was needed while dramatizing attempts to start again with a new set of inter-human and inter-species relationships. Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* builds to such an apocalypse, destroying a future 21st century world. Her *Who Fears Death* works through those ruins to enable a new world to emerge, yet again only after enacting mass destruction. Jemisin and Okorafor's fictions critique the historical system of transatlantic slavery while situating such oppression and dispossession within other practices of racism and genocide.

A key scene in *The Book of Phoenix* shows two characters who are the subject of unethical scientific experiments in a New York Tower discovering a memory hole that shows horrific scenes of genocidal violence that are being accessed many years later as if through a portal into the past by the scientists who are experimenting on them. Phoenix, an "accelerated organism" (9) has been created ("mixed, grown, and finally birthed" [9]) by these scientists. Her friend Saeed has been tortured by them after his retrieval from Egyptian slums to turn him into another kind of genetically manipulated "speciMen" (6). When they compare notes as to what each saw through the portal,

Phoenix recalls seeing white bodies being led to slaughter in a scene that explicitly recalls the Holocaust (24-25 & 33). However, Saeed saw Africans being led to slaughter (128). They conclude that there are many precedents for the inhumane cruelties practiced by the scientists in their Tower 7 and all should be acknowledged. For Saeed, ultimately, “Genocide is genocide” (128). A humanity capable of such acts is not the humanity they envisage nor the humanity they seek to enact.

Alternative Collaborative Futures

The dystopian worlds of Jemisin and Okorafor draw inspiration from empires of the past and the rising power of corporations in the present, as do those of Leckie, Newitz and Singh. The futurist fictions of Older and Palmer, in contrast, present worlds in which it seems possible for people to work collectively to reconstitute global society after devastating wars have left them searching for different ways of creating and maintaining peace. The historical range of Older’s global tale is relatively narrow whereas its geographical range is broad. She describes *Infomocracy* (the first in the series) as “a global book” (7), concerned in part with themes of “risk and [...] local government” (9). These play out on the human scale in ways that prompt questions about both the changing and unchanging image of the human in the 21st century. The title, *Infomocracy*, draws attention to the ways in which human attachment to informational devices is changing how many people live and also how they think, including the very ways in which their brains work and how they access information and entertainment. At the same time, when voting, many still demand a human face at the head of a political party as they always have. Despite its name, the fictional party called PolicyFirst, finds its insistence on policy before personality a drawback when seeking to win voters to its cause. Like Older, Palmer imagines a future in which nation-states and political parties have fragmented into a multipolar system in which individuals exercise more freedom of choice in choosing the governments and laws they wish. Palmer sets her 25th century story within a context that goes back to “the first human who thought to hollow out a log to make a boat ...”, as she puts it in the dedication to *Too Like the Lightning*, the first book of her series. Palmer describes her work as her contribution “to the Great Conversation ... my little contribution to the path which flows from Gilgamesh and Homer to the stars” (*Too Like*: 431). Yet despite their many differences, what links Older’s and Palmer’s series is the ways in which they prioritize individual choice in selecting the local laws by which groups of humans will abide, but within a globalized management system that involves massive bureaucratization, intensive surveillance, and control of information in ways that create doubts for readers about whether or not such a system might be seen as either utopian or dystopian.

Reframing Autonomy Beyond the Bounded Individual

Each of these texts enables multiple interpretations of the meanings they make, thereby

conveying different implications for social change. Some may be read as commentary on past and present injustices perpetrated by some members of the human race on others, such as the Atlantic slave trade, the annexations of territory by Empires, settler colonialisms, neoliberal capitalism, and various genocides. Others suggest recognizing human kinship with other lifeforms, such as animals, aliens, and plants, and with our own creations, whether they be dreams or gods, or more obviously material constructs such as Artificial Intelligence and machines. Many create empathy for alternative forms of spirituality and blur the lines between science and magic, as do Jemisin and Okorafor, forcing a rethinking of both. What ties these texts together, I argue, is a reframing of autonomy: away from notions of exclusive boundedness toward a recognition of entanglements and their constantly shifting borders. Similarly, social autonomy in these texts is always a work in process, because the autonomous society is continuously recreating itself in interaction with the choices made by humans and often, by their others as well.

These fictions bring together often separated domains of political commentary and theoretical speculation in ways that demonstrate the entanglements of animal, human, and machine worlds as well as those of material and spiritual realities. If once, as in *Frankenstein*, speculative fictions expressed a fear of new versions of technological life (of hybridized cyborgian identities, robots, and artificial intelligence), much contemporary speculative fiction follows theorists such as Donna Haraway and N.Katharine Hayles in embracing its revolutionary potential, “especially as it challenges patriarchal and heteronormative values” (Brown 2). Writing in 2010 about Latin American cyborgs, J. Andrew Brown suggests that the works of these American theorists “often failed to transcend the North American and European contexts in which they are articulated” (3). Nonetheless, there are increasing examples of concurrent streams of thinking that set such work in implicit dialogue with streams of thought from elsewhere. In one explicit example, Vandana Singh, while drawing on ancient South Asian narrative traditions, also recognizes affinities between her thinking and that of the U.S.-based theorist Karen Barad, author of the influential book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Singh explains: “Some years ago I read Karen Barad’s work, and I am still trying to understand it, but it changed the way I look at the world. The universe is a far more creative, happening place than I imagined—matter speaks, we make cuts that create worlds, and it is in these intra-actions with matter that cultures and sciences come into being” (Kurtz 539).

Singh is especially insightful in explaining the value of speculative fiction in reframing the human away from texts in which people live only in “people-ville” (Kurtz 540) toward writing that incorporates “awareness of the non-human—animal, alien, machine or for that matter, proton” (539). She explains that the mechanical universe of the Newtonian imaginary is no longer sufficient to address all the ways in which the universe works, and she draws a parallel between this inadequacy and the limits of the stories that can be told within the Western modernist paradigm (Kurtz). In an interview with Malisa Kurtz, Singh claims that “Science fiction is the only modern literature I know of where the great questions of our place in the cosmos—things of deep concern to the

ancients—are still central” (Kurtz 535). She explains that there are other ways to tell a story than to show humans interacting only with humans, while the rest of the universe functions as background only. In her texts, as in the title of Barad’s book, humans meet “the universe halfway.” Just as “the ancients in many cultures were active participants in the cosmos,” she notes, so characters in contemporary science fiction and fantasy may also move between different realities and across various borders, whether they be “physical, metaphoric, or psychological” (Kurtz 535). That more expansive universe “in which the imaginative reach spans space and time” (Kurtz 540) can create “cognitive dissonance” (Suvin), enabling space for alternative framings of the human in the world. Singh argues “We need to let other species, aliens and other non-humans, into our stories more generously and honestly. We need to deconstruct the individual, to subject that notion to contextualization, to history and circumstance, so that we can acknowledge how different we are under different lights” (Kurtz 540).

Arguing along somewhat similar lines, Michelle Reid suggests that the strategy of literalizing otherness in science fiction “can encourage the white, Western science fiction audiences to examine prejudices and assumptions that they might be reluctant to face head-on” (Reid, cited in Bannerjee 284). But such an experience is open to all readers, and equally necessary for them. Although advocates acknowledge that such fiction risks dismissal as merely escapist, Suparno Bannerjee and Uppinder Mehan agree that diverse audience may be encouraged to “imagine futures different from the hegemonic Western pattern” (Bannerjee 284). Even while science fiction as a genre certainly carries a history of complicity with imperial conquests and their derogatory stereotypes of others, it may also enable the dismantling of such stereotypes and the opening of alternative ways of imagining the human.

Reimagining Relational Forms of Human Autonomy

The rest of this paper delves more deeply into some of those ways of reimagining the human, recognizing as Singh points out, that they may not all be new to formerly colonized or Indigenous peoples but only seem new to those accustomed to Western forms of modernity. Singh draws attention to the wider cast of figures with agency in both ancient and science fictional stories. Other ways in which narrative form and linguistic choices make meaning include attention to how naming confers or withholds human identity, elevating some while denigrating others as sub-human or non-human. Those named as outside the human can embrace their identity as monsters and fight back as such (as does Okorafor’s Phoenix) or rename themselves according to their own criteria, as does the protagonist of Jemisin’s trilogy, whose learning curve through life is reflected in her adaptation of different names for each stage of her journey. The reframed human often involves recognition of the multiple and transforming selves that form any subjectivity. This multiplicity is sometimes indicated through alternative pronoun usages or through blurring the boundaries between entities once thought to be separate.

In Martha Wells' *Murderbot Diaries*, the central character and first person speaker Murderbot has adopted that derogatory name in part as an act of self-flagellation in memory of a massacre it was told it had completed. It chose this name yet it does not entirely identify with it. When research proves it was not the perpetrator of the massacre, the name takes on a more ironic character, but it still functions to create a certain distance between the speaking and acting selves in these diaries. *All Systems Red*, the opening volume of the series, ends with Murderbot reflecting: "I don't know what I want....But it isn't that, it's that I don't want anyone to tell me what I want, or to make the decisions for me" (150). The central issue for Murderbot is autonomy. In a similar vein, Newitz's *Autonomous* is dedicated: "For all the robots who question their programming." In postmodern fashion, these texts invite human readers to question their own programming, the social conditioning that determines who they think they are and where they belong. Freedom of choice is a major issue for those excluded from human rights in these texts, and most also recognize that autonomy is complicated. Many exist in heteronomous societies in which people are ruled by dominant belief systems about a god (as in Okorafor) or an ideology (such as neoliberal capitalism). Time after time, Murderbot puts the needs of others above its own, not because of its programming, which it has disabled, but because of complicated feelings of affection, respect, and a desire to act for justice, even in situations where this is apparently against its own best interests.

I use the pronoun "it" uncomfortably here. Murderbot is not gendered as humans are and the only alternative might be "they," which in this context could be confusing, although in its recognition of the multiple nature of subjectivity, "they" is probably more appropriate. Murderbot has a core of sentient selfhood but is also, like any human, conflicted and evolving. Newitz's *Autonomous*, in its depiction of the growing relationship between the combat bot, Paladin, and its partner Elias, shows how complicated pronouns can become when humans anthropomorphize bots that have no human gender. Elias can only deal with his complicated feelings for Paladin by thinking of it as she. For the first part of the novel, Paladin is referred to as he, but after Elias decides the proper pronoun should be she, ostensibly because the human brain implanted in Paladin's stomach came from a human woman but more likely because he fears being thought what he calls "a faggot," then the pronoun shifts to she. The incongruity of Paladin's appearance and gender assignation works to "queer" assumptions about gendered identity, thus throwing them into confusion. Similarly, Jack and her friend Bluebeard's male names complicate their identities as women and Threezed's non-human name similarly renders his human identity uncanny. Because Threezed has been a slave for so long, when Jack first sees his empty eyes, she mistakes him for a bot.

Attention to the pronouns distinguishing male from female and human from non-human is one of the more contentious and interesting dimensions of the fictions discussed here, several of which employ linguistic systems to "queer" normative expectations of the human as gendered and human identity as singular. Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy, Newitz's *Autonomous*, Palmer's *Terra Ignota* series, and Jemison's *Broken Earth* Trilogy constitute some of the better-known examples.

Jemisin's trilogy does not play with gender as the others do, but it moves back and forth between second and first person address, heightening the multiplicity and transforming identities of her characters. Her chapter, "you, at the end" in *The Fifth Season (Book One)*, begins: You are me. She is you. You are Essun. Remember? (15). Essun is telling herself her story, seeing herself from the many different perspectives of the lives she has led and how others have seen her, most especially as despised "orogene," disparagingly termed "rogga," a person capable, if trained, of controlling earthquakes, and if not, of actually causing them. *The Obelisk Gate (Book Two)* begins with Essun claiming: "After all, a person is herself, and others. Relationships chisel the final shape of one's being. I am me, and you....You are Essun, after all. You know this already. Don't you?" (e-book). Essun begins her life as Damaya and becomes Syenite before she becomes Essun. Eventually, as the price of using her powers to save the world, she slowly transforms into stone and eventually becomes a stone eater. The stone eaters, originally oppressed peoples with certain superhuman powers, have thrown off their chains and metamorphosed into a new form of stone-embodied humanity, who live according to the timescales of deep time rather than that of an embodied human life of relatively short duration.

Gender pronouns are an issue in Newitz, Leckie, and Palmer's books. In retrospect, Ursula K. LeGuin regretted her earlier decision to employ the generic masculine pronoun to refer to androgynous Gethenians in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In later introducing her story, "Winter's King," in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*, she explains her decision to revise this version "to use the feminine pronoun for all Gethenians—while preserving certain masculine titles such as King and Lord, just to remind one of the ambiguity" (93-4). Leckie's imagined Radch culture similarly employs a language that makes no gender distinctions, while designating the female pronoun as the default setting for referring to citizens. Although this linguistic refusal to prioritize gender differences might seem progressive, the insistence of the Radch to use the same word for human and citizen of the Radch indicates the limits of its own views of the human. Further complicating matters, many of the other cultures with which the Radch interact, do employ gender distinctions and gendered customs of dress, rendering social interaction confusing. These authorial decisions can shock, confuse, displease or please readers, with considerable impact on how the novels are read and valued. In Leckie's fiction, pronouns maintain ambiguity rather than resolving it in most instances, working to reframe the human away from the privileging of gender as central to all human activity and providing more space for multiplicity. Palmer's series seems to work differently, problematizing gender in many instances but also rendering it more central. The first person narrator of Palmer's series approaches gender in an idiosyncratic fashion, using male and female pronouns for the same individual depending on the narrator's stereotypical assessment of the nature of their behavior in that instance. In that way, this character often seems to reinforce dominant stereotypes while at the same time confusing them when descriptions of a character's physical attributes seem to clash with the gendered pronoun employed

Posthuman Subjectivities

The first person narrator of Leckie's trilogy is One Esk 19, posing as Breq from the Gerentate, a human tourist, at the opening of *Ancillary Justice*. She was originally an "ancillary," part of the troop carrier, Justice of Toren. As ship and with a distributed consciousness among many ancillary bodies, with immediate access to multiple perspectives and to the ship's coordinating brain, she had the ability to be in many different places at once, participating in a hive mind, and even having the ability to sing "choral music *all by itself*" (Interview 395; italics in original). However, at the time the novel begins, she is living as a single, fragmented unit, cut off from the multi-bodied and complex mind she once was. She is still a "corpse soldier," termed an ancillary, a human body with artificial intelligence and implants, made to function as a tool of Empire, but who has been pretending to be human for nineteen years when the trilogy opens. In the course of her quest to avenge a beloved lieutenant who was wrongly charged and murdered by the Ruler of the Radch, she learns more about herself, gaining autonomy as she questions her choices and actions, which carry wide-reaching consequences for her world.

Because One Esk 19 knows what it is like to be both originally multiple and also autonomous, and the Ruler of the Radch, Anaander Miannai, has come to be divided amongst her several selves, with at least two sides and maybe more, at war with one another, the trilogy breaks assumed links between a unified subjectivity and the agency to govern oneself and others. It challenges the borders established by "possessive" forms of individualism (C.B. McPherson) to imagine alternative modes of being-in-multiplicity in the world.

As I have suggested so far, the texts discussed here reject images of the human as separated into public and private realms as well as the gendering of these realms that has characterized humanism, and the societies it has made in its image, in its modern iterations. They also complicate distinctions that genre fiction sometimes makes between inner and outer space. In these texts, inner and outer space are entangled in co-constituting and shifting respects, not just through technological enhancements but also through a recognition of their constituting entanglements. These texts recognize, as Leckie puts it, that "People are who they are because of the world they live in, and the world is the way it is because of the people who live in it" (Interview 393). Whereas the modernist aesthetic asserted that art's value lies beyond social relations, these texts posit that the two are intertwined, not to insist upon any kind of determinism but rather to stress their continuous co-creation along lines theorized by Cornelius Castoriadis in books such as *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Whereas much contemporary fiction in the form of modernist realism focusses on private lives, and some genre fiction privileges action above introspection, these speculative fictions more often concentrate on characters (humans and non-humans) immersed in the creative world of work, and on the entanglements of what were once divided into public and private.

In these fictions, characters find satisfaction and identity in the work they do. Even long retired people, octo- and nonagenarians in Older's *State Tectonics*, often choose to work, craving

occupation. People in Palmer and Older's texts work in recognizable jobs such as bureaucrats, politicians, policy analysts, technical experts, translators, video producers, security providers, taxi drivers, migrant workers, and aid workers. In Palmer's series, there are a range of professions both old and new: assassins, businessmen, Olympic athletes, scientists, producers of smellscapes for cinema, human sex dolls, new forms of cyborgs called setsets, spiritual advisors called sensayers, censors, and brothel madams. The range of employment described is extensive and most of these professions are central to the plot.

Other texts are equally work-focussed although with less variety in the range of employment. Murderbot is a contract security worker, mostly with research expeditions around the universe. Eliasz (a human) and Paladin (a military bot) are also contract security workers employed by big businesses enforcing patent regulation in Newitz's *Autonomous*. They are contracted by Big Pharma to kill Jack Chen, a microbiologist who has turned drug pirate to reverse-engineer patented drugs in order to make them available to those who need them but cannot afford the prices. She works with Threezed (a human slave she has freed from a bad master) and Med (a born-autonomous bot), along with a team of university researchers, to engineer an antidote to a dangerous drug that is killing people even as she flees her pursuers. Perhaps ironically, that drug has been engineered to render work so addictive it leads people to literally work themselves to death. The future world Jack inhabits is a place where distinctions between human and AI are less important than the division between those who have autonomous status, which depends on money, and those who do not. Bots such as Paladin can theoretically earn autonomous status after years of indenture or have their status bought for them by someone willing to pay, but until they do, their minds and memories are not their own. Paladin knows that "Until he was autonomous, the Federation would always hold a key to the memories he'd encrypted in the Federation cloud....He was a user of his own consciousness, but he did not have owner privileges" (124). Humans such as Threezed, sold into slavery by impoverished parents, have even fewer options available to them.

These shifts represent one logical end-result of current practices of neoliberal capitalism, in which everyone's worth—human or machine—is determined by their capacity to generate wealth. Only the wealthy have access to a degree of self-determination and full human status, which in this text is named as "autonomous." Jack's choice to leave her research career with a university in order to become a pirate is a choice between two types of autonomy. As a researcher dependent on research grants, she had little freedom to follow her conscience but considerable security. As a pirate working outside the system, she has the freedom to set her own research agenda and follow her conscience, but at the cost of living a more precarious existence. Furthermore, she would be unable to survive were it not for her circle of loyal friends. Because the novel alternates between the growing partnerships between Jack and Threezed on the one hand, and that between Paladin and Eliasz on the other, it is successful in generating respect and understanding for all its characters, in the face of the dehumanization each encounters.

In these examples, much of the plot is determined by the nature of the work depicted. In Palmer

and Older's texts, innovative future governance systems are challenged by dissident elements seeking their own gain. People work to maintain the system, to reform it, and to overturn it for a variety of well-articulated reasons. Characters seriously debate complex issues from multiple angles in situations where there seems to be no single, correct answer. Their discussions illuminate issues without necessarily resolving them. They depict the "dilemmatic spaces" of democratic debate in action. In contrast, and at a much simpler level, *The Murderbot Diaries* show a character internally debating his decisions and who he is. He has initially internalized his maker's definition of his identity as a weapon before gradually reframing his sense of self so as to form community with other sentient bots as well as humans, defining his emergent self through a practice of "relational autonomy." Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* shows a character undergoing a similar transition from accepting others' definitions of who she is (as abomination and as weapon) toward realizing she can direct her own transformations. In her case, she has friends with whom she can debate her decisions but in the end, she makes up her own mind. From fleeing physical captivity she spends much of the novel discussing the differences between justice and vengeance with other previously dehumanized and dispossessed characters. These texts challenge the distinction between "tools," whether they are designated as human or non-human, and fully articulated humans, in part by the showing the ways that many humans who think themselves autonomous are in fact being used by the dominant systems of their worlds, whether they be governments, corporations, resistance or nationalist movements, or a combination thereof.

These texts present the human as a relational concept and not an ontological status. In this way, they seem aligned with Haraway's stress (in an interview with Nicholas Gane) on "our constitutive relationalities with the machinic but also more than the machinic—the non-living and the non-human" (143). Believing that "this is where many urgent questions in the world are," she concludes: "We need new category work. We need to live the consequences of non-stop curiosity inside mortal, situated, relentlessly relational worlding" (Gane 143). I am arguing that this is the situated territory of much contemporary speculative fiction. Through reading, readers may live these consequences in ways that strike more deeply than does talk of category work. In her article, "Tentacular Thinking," Haraway asks: "What happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social? Seriously unthinkable: not available to think with" (1). These texts begin to answer this question, by exploring different dimensions of that impasse in ways that make the imagination available for exploratory kinds of creative thinking.

Working with Entanglements

Each of the writers discussed here see border territories as contact zones in which identity and difference are produced and reproduced in unstable power relations. Singh often addresses environmental concerns, in which entanglements of the human and the non-human play central

roles. In *Entanglement*, for example, a whale rescues a scientist whose equipment has failed while she is diving in the Arctic as part of her work to combat global warming: “The whale pushed her until all she had to do was to tumble over the rail onto the deck” (*Entanglement* 12). Remembering the Inuit wisdom of her grandparents, she thanks the whale for saving her life (14). Her equipment is also depicted as a sentient learning environment that was designed as “linked artificial intelligences with information-feedback loops ... [that] was based on biomimicry, inspired by natural systems like ecosystems and endocrine systems” (Ibid. 15). As she thinks about how each broolly communicates with the others, “She had a sudden vision of a multilevel, complexly interconnected grid, a sentience spanning continents and species, a kind of Gaiaweb come alive” (Ibid.15). The humans in this world are linked globally through their scientifically-based efforts to save the world from the ravages of human-induced climate change. Upon leaving the Amazon, another character sees a businessman and thinks “how alien her own species seemed whenever she returned from the forest” (Ibid. 21). Later this character, Fernanda, thinks: “the days of the Lone Ranger were gone; this was the age of the million heroes” (Ibid.29). Instead of the model of autonomy embodied in the white male hero of American Westerns, she posits an autonomous social imaginary through which living beings work collectively to achieve a heroic goal that can only be earned through working together.

In arguing that science fiction has often engaged economic and political concerns in its explorations of new technologies, Annalee Newitz argues that “[w]hat often gets forgotten about the origin story of this term [cyberspace, in *Neuromancer*] is that Gibson wasn’t just talking about the future of computers, but of a world where tech corporations rule every aspect of our lives” (“Rise”)—in other words, about a heteronomous world in which the image of the human and the rights that entails are radically changing. Each of the writers whose works are discussed here share that concern for their view of the need to protect a reimagined relational human autonomy from systems designed to limit or destroy it. In this sense, Newitz’s pirates and those who pursue them, the exploited ancillaries of Leckie’s space opera and the orogenes, stone-eaters, and Guardians of Jemisin’s Broken Earth trilogy serve similar functions, of humanizing the dehumanized in the name of imagining a world in which everyone has a hand in worlding and reworlding the evolving social imaginary.

These writers seem to agree with Arjun Appadurai that it is the imagination itself that is at stake in current societal debates, I have examined how various contemporary fictional thought experiments challenge their readers to reimagine the human beyond the limits of today. My focus has fallen on changing notions of embodiment, relationality, and autonomy and the linguistic and governance structures to which they give rise. In re-envisioning these key humanist concepts, these writers imagine alternative futures for the global community and all the inhabitants of the earth we inhabit. I see these texts are part of a current trend to bring science, literary, and social justice studies back into closer dialogue, redefining creativity and culture through renewed engagement with the unrealized potential of decolonization, women’s equality, and a reimagined ethics of entangled engagements.

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