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Transing Science Fiction: Border-hacking and Queer Utopias of *Sense8* and *Transfinite*

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# TRANSING SCIENCE FICTION: BORDER-HACKING AND QUEER UTOPIAS OF *SENSE8* AND *TRANSFINITE*

ksenia fir

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To write Science Fiction (SF) – to imagine other worlds and futures – is always a political act. As feminist SF scholarship has demonstrated, the genre’s unique ability to both perpetuate the *status quo* by extrapolating upon contemporary inequalities and offer liberatory potentialities that act as powerful tools of resistance (Imarisha 3-4; Vint 10-12). Queer SF scholars have also underscored the genre’s capacity to make the familiar strange, including its visions of other worlds that question and refuse normatively gendered bodies and nuclear family structures, that makes the genre primed for queer and trans readings (Keegan 3; Lothian 15-16). In its orientation toward futurities, SF resonates with the ways queerness has been conceptualised by queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz as a way to “dream and enact [...] other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (1). Media theorist Cael M. Keegan draws an explicit connection between SF and transness, arguing that “[l]ike science fiction, trans\* is about how what could happen haunts the present, asking us to consider where elements in reality might lead if permitted to reach” (3). SF, thus, has the potential to not only represent various gender identities and sexual orientations but *embody* queerness and transness as theorised by queer and trans scholars — as a radical refusal of hegemonic binary thought and oppressive hetero-patriarchal systems in favour of other forms of being and relating to one other.

Bridging the fields of Science Fiction, utopian studies, queer theory, trans theory, and media studies, this article offers a conceptualisation of a subgenre of SF – *Trans-SF* – through two recent examples of trans-authored and trans-centred SF cinema/television – the Netflix series *Sense8* (2015-2018) and an independent omnibus film *Transfinite* (2019). *Trans-SF* goes beyond being *about* queerness and transness, or even *by* queer and trans creators – though these elements are certainly important to both examples. Instead, it visually and structurally embodies trans aesthetics, affectively evoking what Keegan refers to as “the *feel* of transition” (114; original emphasis) and what Muñoz, drawing on Ernst Bloch, identifies as queer “utopian impulse”: a “doing in and for the future” (26). In both *Sense8* and *Transfinite*, such affect is achieved through what I term *border-hacking* elements, which include cinematic techniques, narrative choices, and subversion of generic (used herein to mean ‘of the genre’) expectations.

By connecting 'Trans' and 'SF' with a hyphen, I am building an assemblage – which, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari conceptualise in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), “in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously,” refusing the borders between the material ‘reality’ and ‘representation,’ as well as resisting the static formations of a unity (22-23). Instead, the focus is shifted toward the relationality of the elements – the spaces and formations in-between and the unlimited potentialities they may offer. In their introduction to “Trans-,” a special issue of *Women’s Studies Quarterly* (2008), Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore offer the hyphen as one that “marks the difference between the implied nominalism of ‘trans’ and the explicit relationality of ‘trans-,’ which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix,” inviting “categorical crossings, leakages, and slips of all sorts” (11). These categorical “leakages” and intentional border crossings are crucial to Trans-SF.

Queer theorist Jasbir Puar utilises Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage to augment the notion of intersectionality, central to feminist, critical queer theory, and critical race studies scholarship (Eng et al. 1; Chen and cárdenas 473). Introduced in the 1980s by legal theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the intersection of racist and sexist oppression experienced by Black women, the term intersectionality has since been expanded to include “the mutually co-constitutive forces of race, class, sex, gender, and nation” (Puar, “I Would Rather” 49-50). Puar, however, points out the limitations of the intersectional model in its fixed framework, proposing to expand it with an assemblage model that “account[s] for time and transition” (cárdenas 75). Puar’s intervention offers to rethink the intersectional approach to include spacio-temporal orientation as inseparable from understanding one’s positionality. By framing Trans-SF as an assemblage, I aim to point toward the multiplicity of processes involved in the creation, distribution, and reception of a Trans-SF work, – which should not be seen as static or limited to a particular understanding of what constitutes ‘transness’ or ‘SF’ as categories, but rather as a multitude of shifting formations and not-yet-imagined possibilities – while foregrounding the materiality of any such work and its entanglement with the capitalist, hetero-patriarchal, and other oppressive structures under which it exists.

The two cinematic works discussed in this article differ greatly in their production scale, visual and structural approach, and subject matter, signalling toward the multitude of forms Trans-SF can take. *Sense8*, a big-budget Hollywood series created by the Wachowski sisters with J. Michael Straczynski, tells the story of eight people from around the world who become connected to each other through a psycho-physical bond, forming a ‘cluster’ of ‘sensates.’ In a rather conventional SF blockbuster fashion, the main plot revolves around the sensates being hunted by a secret organisation that wants to use their abilities for its own nefarious agenda. The sensates’ power, however, is inherently queer in its affect as they can inhabit each other’s bodies, share their physical sensations and memories, and quite literally see the world through each other’s eyes. In turn, *Transfinite*, directed by an indie filmmaker Neelu Bhuman, is a collection of seven independent stories created through a unique form of collaboration between several queer artists of colour. The segments do not share an overarching plot. Instead, they are woven through Bhuman’s visual aesthetics, which include animation elements mixed with live action, and their overarching premise where each collaborator was asked for their story to explore a political idea and for the main characters – all of

whom are queer and trans people of colour – to possess some form of superpower and not to die. Queer survival, pleasures, and kinships, thus, are central to both *Sense8* and *Transfinite's* narratives as Trans-SF works orientated toward trans futurities.

### Generic Transgressions

Science Fiction is notoriously hard to define. Discussing the history of American SF literature, Gary K. Wolfe argues that it “persistently failed to cohere as a genre” and began to “disassemble itself” as soon as it was shaped by the publishing industry into an identifiable category (21-22). In the foundational text in SF film studies, *Screening Space* (1980), Vivian Sobchack notes that, while lacking stable iconography, SF is often described as having a specific “look” or “feel” that is recognisable to the audiences when they encounter it (87). As mass media products, SF films are particularly affected by the audiences’ expectations, built on prior experiences of the genre (which typically mean big-budget Hollywood blockbusters). SF film scholars often identify the genre as a “cinema of attractions,” emphasising the importance of special effects and the “spectacle” on its affective impact on the viewers (Bould 61). Identifying cinematic SF with spectacle, however, becomes an issue when discussing indie, low-budget, and non-Hollywood productions, where special effects might not be an attainable or desired aesthetic (Feeley and Wells xii).

Historically, the debates around SF’s denotation were focused on whether the definitive element of the genre is the “science-focused extrapolations” or “politically engaged visions of the future” (Vint 8). An influential definition of SF from the latter perspective – as literature “of cognitive estrangement” – was provided by Science Fiction and utopian studies theorist Darko Suvin in the 1970s (15). For Suvin, what is central to SF is its transformative potential, where radical imaginaries are “tethered to a practical possibility in the material world” (Vint 10). Furthermore, postcolonial approaches to SF studies problematise the connection of the genre to ‘science and technology,’ questioning the hegemonic understanding of what constitutes either outside of the Global North and the supposed ‘universality’ of the ‘scientific language’ – a colonial humanist notion that has been and continues to be used to erase the Global South and Indigenous knowledge and practices (Vint 72; Feeley and Wells xviii). Similarly, Queer SF challenges us to expand the hegemonic understanding of what can ‘qualify’ as SF. For example, Alexis Lothian identifies Queer SF cinema through temporality, arguing that its “futuristic orientation is marked not by technology but by an alternative mediation and reproduction of political and social life” (176). To refuse to rely on Western notions of science and technology as markers of the future and transformative change is an ontological shift that is embraced by Trans-SF.

SF’s political power to imagine and potentially inspire social change necessarily connects it to utopian studies. In fact, Suvin identifies Utopia as a “sociopolitical subgenre” of SF (76). In addition, Wolfe points out SF’s propensity to “evaporate,” both in the sense of instability of its generic borders and its ability to influence other cultural forms and to have a material affect on the ‘real’ world (23, 50-51). “Science fiction is better conceptualized as a tendency,” writes Vint, drawing on Wolfe (6). In explicitly social justice-oriented SF – what Walidah Imarisha terms Visionary Fiction

(3-4) – this ‘tendency’ can be seen as a form of utopian *potentiality*: “a certain mode on nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense” (Muñoz 9). Although Muñoz, in his theorisation of queer utopias, does not mention SF, his understanding of utopia as an act of *doing* toward different, more just worlds – in other words, as a *praxis* – echoes the conceptualisations of SF as a genre uniquely fit to do just that. Lothian, in turn, identifies Queer SF as “a form of utopian writing that makes the queer future imaginable” (16). Following queer and trans SF scholars, I see Trans-SF as necessarily connected to the queer utopian thought – not in the sense that it prescribes blueprints of ‘ideal’ societies but as an act of *doing* toward trans futurities.

Trans studies can offer critical additions to the theorising of SF. In her influential essay, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” (1987), Sandy Stone considers gender as a genre, offering to see trans as “a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored” (164). Building on her work, Keegan proposes to reverse the order and think “about how genre is like gender” (Bailey et al. 79). Genres are gendered texts, but their gender expectations can be subverted and refused – can be *transed*. Drawing on queer theory’s notion of ‘queer’ as a verb, Stryker, Currah, and Moore propose “transing” as a type of “practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly,” offering a “pathway toward liberation” (13). To *trans* a gender/genre is also to *hack* it (and vice versa): to make the binaries short-circuit, revealing the endless possibilities between the zero and one.

The question of gender/genre also brings up the issue of ‘passing.’ For queer, trans, and GNC (gender non-conforming) folks, especially trans people of colour, passing is always associated with safety and survival. Passing is a performative, subjective process, the outcome of which depends on the complex set of variables, most critically on ‘the eye of the beholder.’ As media and trans studies scholar micha cárdenas argues, “[p]assing involves both the modulation of visibility by the person who is passing and the reception of that image by the viewer, who makes a decision about whether or not a person fits into a particular category” (78). As material products, generic works that do not pass as ‘belonging’ to their announced generic category are always at risk of not getting published and distributed, not reaching the intended audiences, and failing to enter the cultural archive. Furthermore, passing is a continuously negotiated process, not an atemporal event. Works that do pass at one point (such as, for example, in promotional materials) may stop doing so during another (the final work or a specific plotline), leading to confusion and even anger from certain audience members who are expecting a particular form of pleasure from it, based on the presumed generic conventions. To abruptly stop passing is a potentially life-threatening situation for many queer/trans people, where the queerphobic anger over being ‘misled’ often leads to violence. In terms of media, certain SF fans – most typically cis-straight white men who may feel possessive toward the genre and what, in their view, it is ‘supposed to’ represent – might express a related reactionary impulse, such as accusing the work of not being ‘real SF’ or even harassing those involved in the production for ‘ruining’ the film or franchise (commonly due to diversified casting and increased representation of the minoritised communities). Underscoring the materiality of cultural products, including Trans-SF, helps us see such reactions to ‘failure to pass’ as existing on the same

spectrum of reactionary gatekeeping, though each individual situation may differ drastically in scope and consequences.

The two Trans-SF works I discuss occupy a contested space, being both legible and illegible as SF, which has material consequences for their production and distribution. Trans-SF cinematic aesthetics, such as temporal shifts and generic ruptures, often prevented these works from fully passing as SF, making them 'unsellable' to wide audiences. The director of *Transfinite*, Neelu Bhuman, shared with me in an interview that "it has been a massive challenge to 'sell' the film for distribution, even to LGBTQ+ venues [...] Ninety-nine per cent of the distributors said they don't know where to place this film and so wouldn't know who the audience would be." *Transfinite* was eventually acquired for international distribution by trans-owned and queer-operated Mattioli Productions. Meanwhile, while *Sense8* was able to use the fame of the Wachowskis sisters as established SF directors to its advantage to get greenlit and funded, the series' Trans-SF aesthetic elements, in particular its queer temporality, disrupted the expectations of the audiences used to certain SF temporal rhythms, leading to common complaints about the series as "slow and confusing" (Quigley 1). The series was consequently cancelled on a cliffhanger after two seasons and resurrected for a final movie-length episode after a worldwide fan campaign. "You have to deal with the reality that you are a part of a smaller group, a smaller subculture, and, yes, your story is just as valid and your story matters, but it doesn't produce revenue in the same way that a large audience produces revenue," commented Lana Wachowski (Keegan 132). Generic passing centres the [assumed cis] observer and their pleasures, as well as the market forces that dictate generic definitions, and is in opposition to Trans-SF's utopian orientation.

In *Poetic Operations* (2021), cárdenas offers the concept of "shifting" as an alternative to passing (78). Unlike passing, shifting gives agency to the trans/GNC person rather than the observer preoccupied with gendering/categorising them. Shifting, cárdenas posits, "invites one to imagine gender beyond binaries, as an infinite field of expressive texture. In place of rigid categories, the ability to modulate gender at will points to a future in which gender can be a multidimensional, multi-spectral field of play" (73). Trans-SF works like *Sense8* and *Transfinite* 'shift' to survive under a capitalist heteronormative system and reach the intended audiences without succumbing to the market demands to fit into a generic mould. They utilise SF's malleability and offer radical queer-utopian potentialities and glimpses of other futures, even as they run into the restrictive realities of the 'here and now.' *Sense8*, for example, uses the strategy of both hailing queer audiences through its narrative choices and aesthetics while continuing to appeal to mainstream audiences through more 'palpable' plotlines and recognisable generic protagonists, such as Will-the-cop. A low-budget production, *Transfinite*, in turn, prioritises the 'niche' audiences through distribution strategies of screening at queer festivals and working with queer distribution companies. Both, furthermore, rely on the community's support to be completed and distributed, such as *Sense8*'s fan campaign and *Transfinite*'s financial support from queer and trans organisations. As is discussed in the latter section, some of these strategies, however, have limitations and can even be in direct opposition to the texts' transformative potential. As material objects under global capitalism, Trans-SF works cannot escape this tension, remaining utopian both because of their inability to be fully

realised in the 'here and now' and their unwavering persistence to try.

### **Border Hacking of *Sense8* and *Transfinite***

“‘Hackers Unite to Destroy Borders’ is a call or a mantra for all who are working to disrupt oppressive dominant methods of world-making.”

— Neelu Bhuman, personal interview, May 2021.



**Figure 1: Utopian praxis of *Transfinite*'s "Bahari." Screenshot by the author.**

The border-hacking elements of *Sense8* and *Transfinite* include hacking of the generic conventions and structures through generic jumps and animation ruptures, respectively; temporal shifts that refuse "straight time" create queer-utopian "ecstatic time" (Halberstam, "Queer Temporality" 5; Muñoz 32); and narratives of geo-bodily border crossings that refuse the racialised state control over trans people's embodiment and movement. It is important to note that the border-hacking techniques discussed should not be seen as fully descriptive of Trans-SF, nor should their absence be counted as a sign that a cinematic work is not Trans-SF; rather, they serve as examples of the many ways the genre can manifest itself. In other words, my focus is not on the exact parameters that could define Trans-SF aesthetics but rather on what it can *do*, meaning its affect and power to embody queer utopian potentiality.

Hacking, in the case of this article, is used to reference both narratives which feature trans characters who hack government structures to secure needed documents and ensure the safety of trans, undocumented, and otherwise minoritised people, as well as to signal toward the utopian futurities glimpsed in these stories – ones where queer and trans liberation does not stop at a checkpoint. The word hacking evokes an association with a transgressive and often political activity ('hacktivism'), which signals the agency and intentionality behind the hacker's actions. Halberstam suggests that, "[q]ueer subjects constantly recode and, within limits, rebuild the worlds they enter.

Since the world as we know it was not designed for queer subjects, then queer subjects have to hack straight narratives and insert their own algorithms for time, space, life, and desire" ("Queer Gaming" 187). Trans-SF aesthetics hack the structure and visual language of generic mainstream cinema, transing it and writing queer and trans lives, pleasures, and kinships into the future(s).

As demonstrated in the previous section, SF, as a whole, is a malleable genre. Wolfe argues that it has a unique ability to "colonize" other genres, using its own tropes "as instrumentalities for moving the narrative into a different mode altogether" (35). Reframing Wolfe's argument, one could see the process as transing other genres, refusing the borders between them and creating assemblages – a sum greater than its parts. That is to say that there is always *something trans* – and queer – about SF. Trans-SF, however, takes things further, intentionally playing with other genres and forms in a promiscuous manner as a commentary on genre/gender. Thus, Trans-SF can embody the radical trans politics of disrupting "spatio-temporal orders that determine and regulate the borders of knowledge, life/death, embodiment, movement, and social value established to secure the heteropatriarchal white settler state, liberal civil society, and the territories of the national body" (Chen and cárdenas 472). Furthermore, through the lens of cárdenas's concept of shifting, Trans-SF transcends binaries and borders, shifting in and out of recognisable genres/genders to offer a kaleidoscope of new generic formations.

In his book on the Wachowski's *oeuvre*, Keegan argues that *Sense8* intentionally positions its characters in predictable, racialised and gendered generic bubbles in order to burst them whenever the characters utilise their sensate powers, or, as I would put it, whenever Trans-SF takes over (116). For example, sensate Lito, a gay Mexican actor, exists in the generic world of a Telenovela; Korean sensate Sun is in a Martial Arts story; trans sensate from San Francisco, Nomi, occupies a Hacker Thriller – and so on (116). When the characters are 'reborn' at the beginning of the series, becoming a 'cluster,' they gain the ability to visit one another by either sharing another sensate's body (and consequently gaining access to their feelings, memories, and knowledge) or by something akin to an astral projection that allows the sensates to interact in one space, jumping from the location of one to another, essentially participating in an 'unauthorised,' unrestricted and unpoliced form of immigration. The sensates' newfound abilities thus subtextually hack geo-bodily and generic borders which are subverted by the sudden jumps from one location/body to another. Jumping into variously gendered bodies transes the sensates as well as their genres; or, as Genevieve Newman argues, the "genre and gender become indistinct, leaving only the body as bearer of excess" (Bailey et al. 78). Crucially, temporal rhythms change depending on the generic conventions (the slow pace of a Melodrama may suddenly be replaced by an Action sequence), causing disorientation in the viewers to mirror the characters' and thus allowing the viewers to affectively experience the transition rather than simply observe it.

*Sense8*'s use of temporal subversions – specifically, queer and trans cinematic temporality and utopian ecstatic time – is an important aspect of the series' Trans-SF aesthetics and its radical potential as a queer utopian work. Conceptualised by Halberstam, queer time is in opposition to straight time, the latter focused on heterosexual reproduction and linear movement from the past



to the future, which maintains the *status quo* of capitalist production, heteronormativity, and state power ("Queer Temporality" 5). Queer time, instead, "lingers or refuses, flashing up in moments of ephemeral utopia or doubling back to reanimate the pleasurable and/or painful past" (Lothian 3). Similarly, Muñoz offers the concept of ecstatic time – which is queer utopian – as one that "is signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure, and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one's past, present, or future" (32). Such refusal of the temporal linearity and one-directionality toward a prescribed vision of the future is further echoed in Chen and Cárdenas's theorisation of trans temporality as multidirectional and sometimes disjunctive (473-475). In cinema, the multidimensionality and multidirectionality of queer and trans times can be represented visually through techniques of queer cinematic temporality, such as that of intentional slowness that, as film scholars Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt explain, "wastes [the viewers'] time, asking us to spend time in visibly unproductive ways, outside efficient narrative economies of production and reproduction" (261, 277). *Sense8* utilises cinematic devices of slow-motion, commonly employed in its prolonged scenes of sexual encounters, dancing, and other seemingly 'unproductive' acts. Furthermore, *sensates'* encounters frequently evoke queer time through their 'reanimation' and sharing of past experiences, which allow a *sensate* (and the audience) to affectively re-live and re-feel another's past: such as, for example, when Nomi shares with Lito a queerphobic assault committed against her in her childhood ("Death Doesn't Let You Say Goodbye"), or when the *sensates*, who have all been born simultaneously, remember and re-experience their own and each other's physical birth ("What Is Human?"). Furthermore, one of the series' defining characteristics is its mind-orgy scenes, in which *sensates* engage in group pleasure by both utilising their powers to interact with each other's bodies (without needing to share a physical space). Analysing their visual language, Keegan argues that its slow-motion cinematography envelops the viewers in an ecstatic time (111). The mind-orgy scenes hack generic borders, removing cluster members from familiar generic bubbles and their established temporal rhythms and into a queer space-time, such as when a macho gym workout of Will, a straight male detective *sensate*, suddenly morphs into a queer pool/bedroom sex scene with Nomi, Lito, and Wolfgang ("Demons").

In turn, *Transfinite* creates cohesion through the overall aesthetics and the narrative foci, each story focused on queer and trans kinship and empowerment through SF elements. Each of the segments includes stop-motion animation ruptures, which introduce a fantastical interference into the characters' lives, embodying a queer/trans utopian potentiality. The animated elements include a physical transformation into another being ("Najma"), another world where lovers can meet without needing to cross physical borders ("Bahari"), or a futurity that provides rights and freedoms to marginalised communities ("Viva"). I further posit that the stop-motion animation used in the film cinematically represents queer and trans temporality and ecstatic time through its disjunctive movements, utopian imaginaries, and contemplative reflection on one's "past, present, or future" through estrangement from the 'reality' of the live-action. Examining animation as a queer cinematic form, Halberstam points out its ability to let the audience "enter into other worlds and other formulations of this world" (*Queer Art of Failure* 181). In *Transfinite*, such animated alternative formulations of the characters' worlds are inseparable from the film's utopian visions of trans and

queer liberation, making this cinematic choice an example of a Trans-SF aesthetic. Halberstam points out stop-motion's explicit disjunctiveness and its reliance on "the relations between stillness and motion, cuts and takes, action and passivity" (*Queer Art of Failure* 178). Unlike the classical Hollywood cinematic approach that aims to present itself as a seamless, sutureless progression of images (recalling Halberstam's straight time in its 'productive' linear movement), stop-motion animation makes explicit the pauses, transitions, and disjunctions between frames, embodying trans temporality. In *Transfinite*, stop-motion animation sequences hack the borders of the live-action narratives, disrupting its temporalities and transporting the viewers into a world made otherwise – a utopian vision of trans of colour futurities offered by the author of each segment.

Finally, both *Sense8* and *Transfinite* incorporate narratives of border-hacking through the inclusion of trans hacktivist characters who aim to ensure trans safety and resist racialised, queerphobic, and gendered violence perpetuated by capitalist forces and state agents, such as the police and border control. In *Sense8*, San Franciscan trans protagonist Nomi is a former hacktivist whose narrative role is to free herself and others from the state's surveillant gaze. Nomi can 'hack' the borders of states and corporations by creating fake documentation and often uses her skills to save the cluster by allowing them to gain access to otherwise restricted places. In the past, Nomi has been arrested for creating fake IDs for trans people like herself. She remains criminalised, hunted by the FBI in addition to the dangers posed to her by the enemies of the cluster. Importantly, Nomi's ability to hack and countersurveil is central to the cluster's safety – in contrast to the police character, Will, who has to leave law enforcement, unable to maintain split loyalty. Will also becomes 'the weakest link' of the cluster at the end of the first season, when the main antagonist, Whispers, is able to look through Will's eyes in order to spy and hunt the cluster members. Symbolically, then, Will's positionality makes him most prone to being compromised as an unwilling tool of the surveillant security state. The only way for Will to resist this exploitation is not only to leave his job in law enforcement but cross legal boundaries, becoming a fugitive reliant on the illicit drug trade to keep himself subdued and purposefully disoriented. This de-powering of a straight white male cop protagonist is another twist on the generic conventions of both SF and Procedural/Mystery (the generic world which Will originally occupies), where such characters commonly remain front and centre.

*Transfinite's* segment "Bahari" offers another vision of trans border-hacking. The story focuses on Neruda, whose love for a Swahili poet Bahari, who is undocumented, cannot be stopped by the border patrol – they meet in dreams, travelling outside their bodies to share moments of intimacy. The lovers' encounter shifts between live-action and stop-motion animation, as Bahari reads Neruda their latest poem: "Panapo Majaaliwa, tutaishi kwenye dunia isiyo na mipaka, tuwe huru kupendana, bila vizingiti / I wish us a future in a world with no limiting borders, to freely love each other, with no obstacles" (28:50-31:15). These transitions and ruptures of generic borders, once again, connect geographies and bodies to escape both limitations through a utopian vision. Neruda's dedication to a future without borders continues to empower their partner Dave, a hacktivist working to make such a world a reality. The last shot of the segment zooms in on Neruda hugging Dave. Neruda is looking straight into the camera, their expression one of clandestine confidence, as if they are letting the audience in on a shared secret – a world without borders is not only possible

but imminent. Here, the breaking of the fourth wall creates an affectual response in the viewers, aiming to inspire in them the same conviction. As *Trans-SF*, “Bahari,” thus, is committed to not only imagining but *doing* for the future – a trans utopian praxis.

### When Utopias hit a Wall

The inherent contradiction of a queer utopia, however, is its inability to co-exist with the “prison house” of the “here and now” (Muñoz 1), where cinematic interpretations are bound to run into the capitalist realities of production and distribution. Neither *Sense8* nor *Transfinite* can escape relying on tropes or defaulting to plotline resolutions that tether them to the ‘here and now’ of neoliberalism which glosses over structural issues in favour of blaming an individual while offering ‘quick fixes’ of reformism and legalism. While *Transfinite* has yet to receive scholarly attention, *Sense8* has been critiqued extensively for its various limitations, such as problematic racial representation and unquestioned class privilege of most cluster members (Bailey et al. 80-81, Keegan 116, Lothian 168). In my critique, I draw on the work of critical queer and trans studies scholars such as Dean Spade, who offers critical trans politics as one that “demands more than legal recognition and inclusion, seeking instead to transform current logics of state, civil society security, and social equality” (1). Spade’s framework is explicitly abolitionist and aligned with the work of abolitionist feminists who recognise that the safety of people of colour, queer, trans, and GNC people, and other marginalised communities around the globe is always in an inverse relationship with state powers such as the police, the carceral system, and the military-industrial complex. Such approaches recall Puar’s assemblage method in their relation to temporality by not seeing liberation as a defined, static point in the future but as a continuous practice that is “already unfolding” at the same time as it remains in a utopian not-yet (Spade 2, Davis et al. 15).

Will’s character remains at the forefront of *Sense8*’s reluctance and the eventual failure to fully acknowledge the “historically situated struggles” of minoritised people it aims to represent (Muñoz 3). His positionality within the cluster as a white police officer, now with irrevocable access to everyone’s memories and private lives, is never addressed in terms of power dynamics, especially considering that at least three of the sensates – Nomi, Sun, and Wolfgang – are criminalised. Instead, *Sense8* continuously reinforces Will as a heroic cop dedicated to saving the innocents, blames ‘bad apples’ for police transgressions, and goes insofar as to add another detective to the mix as a love interest for Sun. Though Will’s compromise by *Whispers* subverts generic tropes, his continuous status as the cluster’s ‘protector’ derails the queer potentiality of the series. One of the most egregious examples of a false equivalence of oppression comes in the Holiday special episode (“Happy F\*cking New Year”), where a series of juxtaposed images lists the slurs used against the sensates. Here, Will being called a ‘pig’ is equated to the other sensates’ experiences with racist, queerphobic, and misogynistic verbal violence. Ultimately, the series remains stuck in a neoliberal call for unity through erasure of difference rather than critically examining and untangling the complexity and messiness of a cluster formed by forcing together eight strangers from different worlds into each other’s bodies and lives.

Lisa Duggan coined the term homonormativity to describe queer liberalism that “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them” (179). Puar develops the concept further, proposing *homonationalism*, in which homonormativity is inseparable from US imperialism and militarised violence aimed at the Global South (“Mapping US Homonormativities” 68). *Sense8*’s homonormativity and erasure of difference is evident in the finale’s ‘happy ending,’ where all the sensates come to Paris to share a traditional Western wedding ceremony between Nomi and Amanita. A Parisian wedding, thus, is framed as a universal celebration of love: an act of homonationalism that centres and universalises white cultures and experiences and positions Western Europe as the apex of queer international tolerance. Moreover, Amanita and Nomi’s wedding ceremony is held by the new head of BPO – the ‘Biologic Preservation Organisation’ that hunted the sensates for two seasons, serving as an easily identifiable metaphor for conversion therapy. The newly ‘reformed’ BPO is positioned as a ‘queer ally,’ however, and thus given the power to symbolically confirm Nomi and Amanita’s viability to corporate capitalism, which, in exchange, ‘allows’ them legal rights and freedoms. While Nomi and Amanita are legitimised by the state through gay marriage, other sensates, in a deus-ex-machina way, ‘just stop’ being poor and criminalised in order to participate in this ceremony. Though Nomi is capable of hacking borders, she is only shown to do that for Sun and not Capheus, a matatu driver from Nairobi, who somehow is able to both afford the trip and get an urgent Schengen visa, soon followed by his mother, girlfriend, and best friend. This is another unfortunate missed opportunity where the series could have utilised Nomi’s skills as a hacktivist to explicitly address the issues of racialised border control, criminalisation, and class inequality.

*Transfinite*’s concluding segment, “Viva,” revolves around Honey, a Black trans woman with superpowers of persuasion. Honey seduces and ‘hacks’ a sleazy President with her powers, making him issue executive orders to enact radical changes: “No more mass incarcerations, deportations, or immigration bans. Return stolen lands to Native people. Gender liberation for all trans people. Free and un-whitewashed education for all. No more lynching of Black people. Free healthcare for all. Unbiased gun control.” An animated sequence of the segment demonstrates a scene at the White House, where the President reads the executive order to the crowd cheering, leaving us to imagine what the world would look like tomorrow, after the ink has dried up and the orders, presumably, become enforced. While powerful in its defiant and recognisable political commentary (the film was made and released during Donald Trump’s presidency), the conclusion also ends up reifying the same political power it sets out to critique. The simultaneous vagueness and specificity of Honey’s demands, combined with the forcefulness of an executive order, become prescriptive in its utopian vision: a blueprint that is, perhaps, unnecessarily limiting in a film that otherwise offers so many visions of queer utopian potentialities.

Yet, such ‘failures’ of utopian imagination, as Fredric Jameson argues, are not unavoidable but inherent to the SF genre, whose “deepest vocation is to bring home [...] our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself: and this, not owing to any individual failure of imagination but as the result of the systemic, cultural, and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another

prisoners” (289). Jameson finds the greatest power of SF exactly in its utopian failure that makes our “ideological imprisonment” tangible and in its capacity to inspire new texts, ones that aim, perhaps, to amend or expand on the limited vision of their predecessor – to offer another way out (xv). It is interesting to note, then, that *Transfinite*, released the year after the finale of *Sense8*, was filmed in the San Francisco Bay Area (California), where Nomi and Amanita’s adventures take place, and the productions shared several cast and crew, including *Transfinite* stars D’Lo (*Sense8*’s minor character “Disney”) and Tina D’Elia (*Sense8*’s “Dyke #1”). In this way, the film is akin to a spin-off about minor characters of *Sense8* who were sidelined by the white-centric Hollywood gaze. Despite its narrative shortcomings and failure to escape the grasp of Hollywood’s heteronormative and imperialist vision, a popular, globally-watched *Sense8* – with its queer cinematic temporality and other Trans-SF visual aesthetics that discomfort the audiences conditioned to a specific (‘straight’) *look and feel*; its explicit representations of queer and trans pleasures and kinships; its trans authorship behind and in front of camera – quite likely opened the doors for works like *Transfinite* to not only be imagined but materialised.

To imagine trans futurities is, in itself, a form of radical resistance. In the wake of the rising neo-fascism, assault on bodily autonomy, and transphobic violence, a call to focus solely on neoliberal representational politics of adding ‘visibility’ and diversity in the media falls short: scholars of colour Kara Keeling and micha cárdenas have connected increased media presence of minoritised people with increased risks of violence and surveillance such communities face, thus questioning its value as an intersectional praxis (cárdenas 75-76). Instead, we need more works that push beyond representation and challenge established conventions and ways of seeing; that disturb and question what is understood as ‘pleasurable’ in a genre or a form of media; that refuse capitalist straight temporality, chipping away at its borders that dictate our pasts, presents, and futures. No genre is better suited than SF to bring us one step closer to abolishing the borders of the ‘here and now’ – and to a space-time made otherwise.

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