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BEYOND BORDERS: EMPIRES, BODIES, SCIENCE FICTIONS (SEPTEMBER 10-12, 2020)

Conference Report by Beatriz Herrera Corado

"Beyond Borders: Empires, Bodies, Science Fictions." London Science Fiction Research Community. 10-12 September 2020. Online.

"Beyond Borders: Empires, Bodies, Science Fiction" was a virtual conference organised by the London Science Fiction Research Community (LSFRC). As the title reads, this event addressed borders not only as a narrative object of analysis, but transgressing the term itself, considering all the structures that usually configure conferences as 'academic' events. From this perspective, the conference welcomed various artistic expressions, academic fields, and activists. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the online platform opened the possibility to participate from many places and enrich the already multi-geographical virtuality. With three simultaneous panels, workshops and roundtables, time zones and household duties were the only restrictions for attending the conference.

As a participant, I was stranded and locked down in Maryland, USA, since the airport of Guatemala City, as many others around the globe, had been closed since March 13th. I may describe myself as a Guatemalan *mestiza* specialised in dance anthropology who found a conference with a wide conception of research and creativity compelling. For this report, I have chosen the moments in which voices and activities that are sometimes excluded from academic events shook up the borders of the discussion.

The first activity I attended was the Science Fiction and Translation panel, which featured a dialogue between Sawad Hussain (UK), Emily Jin (Yale University, China), Guangzhao Lyu (University College London, UK), Sinéad Murphy (King's College London, UK), and Tasnim Qutait (Uppsala University, Sweden). Starting from a conceptual clarification of the wide Fantastika genre, the discussion addressed whether speculation necessarily entails the construction of the future, or if the hyperbolic and exaggerated tropes which enlarge the present is equivalent to a projection of the future. Speakers agreed that Science Fiction (SF) emerges as a quest for exceptionalism and innovation in contrast to the normatives of the present. In the case of Arab and Chinese translation to English readers, language innovation is complex to translate, especially when dealing with culture specific terms. They mentioned how translation is like a cognitive mapping of semantic fields, but the borders are raised from the publishers that expect the works to fit into stereotypes and orientalism. As translators, they find themselves in the dilemma of spoon feeding anglophone

readers and negotiating with foreignization. For example, Jin discussed how anglophone readers have prompted the idea that Liu Cixin's *The Three Body Problem* (2008) is a representation of all Chinese fiction, and especially, Chinese youth worldview. The panel concluded with questioning how much the SF industry still responds to ideas of modernity, and is not free of global politics of production and circulation of works.

Two workshops addressed the creative and affective reflection around SF. The first one led by Rhona Eve Clewes (UK) looked into expressive possibilities of embodied experiences and allowed a practical approach to speculation. She discussed how acknowledging that we are embodied beings is an act of subversion in the digital world. She invited us to breathe, to use analogue instruments, to be physical writing or drawing. Clewes asked us to lie on the floor and write about the border of acceptance and rejection of our body parts. The second workshop guided by Bretton A. Varga (California State University, USA) and Erin Adams (Kennesaw State University, USA) focused on the relationship between humans and machines and the affective dimension of droids. Varga claimed that posthumanism is about connectivity, but capitalism makes us forget about the connections. In order to approach the social imagination of the 'we,' Adams and Varga asked who is marginalised or made Other? How can we connect to the weird? To the world? Based on Donna Haraway's observation of who makes and who is made, they proposed to acknowledge relationships of affect and attachment with droids and machines, which are usually background characters in SF narratives.

Keynote speaker Nadine El Enany (UK, Birkbeck University of London) talked about the fictional nature and history of law enforcement and race in the British Empire. She considered Britain's legal history is based on race science, and its institutions founded on the fantasy of sovereignty. El Enany posed how the mythological roots of British history conceived race as an ordering principle that colonists used as a category which violently constructed the difference between humans. El Enany addressed British supremacy in current migration practices and described how a legal status distributes chances of life and death: Borders follow people in them, they are embodied memories and inherited in the corporeal dimension. She wondered: what do colonised people desire? What are our psyches, dreams, and futures? As she described immigration as an obstruction of movement, thus Britain is a fiction of racial inclusion. Where do migrants come from? Why are they aliens? She concluded by proposing to disrupt law's pedagogical role and posing a re-imagination of space in order to re-conceptualise migration.

The panel "Against Extrapolation: Reimagining SF" transgressed the borders between SF and science production. Filip Boratyn (University of Warsaw, Poland) presented a paper on the dichotomies in the representations of racial minorities, which are usually related to affect and emotions in contrast to the rationalised dominant races which, as sociologist Max Weber described, are disenchanting. Boratyn posed as an example N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* (2015-2017), in which he analysed the dichotomy of disenchantment as an excluding category and enchantment entails an epistemic practice based on a sense of wonder and female empowerment. Following, Andrew Ferguson (University of Maryland, USA) looked into a reflection on decolonising the Novum, a term coined by Darko Suvin based on the premise that SF as a genre should search for cognitive

estrangement, but nevertheless, in the imperialist anglophone context. Ferguson wondered how to re-elaborate SF poetics without the myth of a 'first contact' linked to a colonial gaze. His inquiry on the post-coloniality and the quest that sets characters in motion was very much connected with the last paper on the panel by Alessandra Marino (The Open University, UK). From her experience in knowledge production within space science, Marino contested both the myth of male-heroes in the space industry and the myth of depletion, which is limited. By acknowledging the feminist view on care and ecology elaborated by Ursula K. Le Guin *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) and Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Marino called for a re-elaboration on space travel, linear time, and technofixation both in space science as in SF.

Moving from academic insights towards activist milestones negotiating with 'real' life borders, the amazing roundtable "Provocations Beyond Fiction" chaired by Ibtisam Ahmed (University of Nottingham, UK) presented two perspectives regarding identity and embodied borders. Michael Darko (Freed Voices, UK) started off describing his expertise by experience in the UK immigration detention system, which he defines as a policy of ignorance. He regarded how the indefinite detention time for immigrants increases xenophobia and suicide. He questioned who detention benefits and criticised charities that operate as white saviours. Then, Jordan Wise (Notts Trans Hub, UK) addressed transgender representation in fiction and the rare possibility for transgender characters to lead narratives of their own. Wise claimed that transgender community members are not an ideology, an agenda, or a debate, but people who deserve to be included in the narrow framework of mainstream media. Wise's critique encompassed the crisis of creativity and originality related to the threat to the status quo of cisgender gaze, and the precariousness of liberal art careers (including student loans). Both perspectives addressed the battle for imagination and the restrictions of otherness in the lived and fictional worlds.

Another exciting event in the conference was the creators roundtable with Chen Qiufan (China), Larissa Sansour (UK/Palestine), and Linda Stupart (UK/South Africa). Sansour opened the discussion by addressing the trauma of the Palestinian identity and the fear of environmental disaster. For example, her recent work *In Vitro* (2019) which challenges the notion of the expected aesthetics of a 'third-world' artist, in which she addresses her own point of view of the Israel/Palestine conflict. In that particular work, SF operates as a medium that allows for different audiences to relate to a conflict without situating it under a specific nationality. Stupart shared their work [Watershed](#) (2019) which addresses abjection, a concept from Julia Kristeva that refers to the crossing of the body's borders, an idea of disgust and transgression. Stupart commented how bodies transgress borders in leaking, and how leaky bodies relate to melting ice caps. Chen Qiufan talked about his work as an installation artist which provides an experience that complements storytelling, in which he refers to both electronic waste and the cyborg as waste people. The creative disciplines allow them to take revenge from the conflicting realities of territorial dispute and ecological crisis. They use formats that are unexpected. Sansour mentioned the role of memories from the diaspora in terms that acknowledge the trauma and seek for a future.

Similar to Jordan Wise's claim on the representation of who gets to write SF, along the roundtable it was mentioned the need to reinvent the genre. How can creators engage with the world? They agreed on SF as a field for discussion and reflection of our own time/space identity constructions. The roundtable concluded with remarks about climate change and the continuous concern of climate change as a continuation of colonisation. More discussion on Chen Qiufan's work was done in the panel 3C "Upon the Wasteland Chinese SF 2."

Florence Okoye (AfroFuturesUK, UK) delivered the final keynote, about the development of visual representations of technology as a fictional narrative. She focused on how technology reifies social beliefs and values, and also conveys inequality as in the fifteenth century (a period recognised for innovation but also for restriction of the commons). By analysing maps of the sugar colonies, as a playground for European's new dreams, she highlighted their omissions and silences in the narrative of the conquest. Similarly, with plantation islands' sugar machinery, Okoye claimed that such technology was built for surveillance and concealment. Neither the maps nor the sugar machinery referred to the workers' realities, but float in the vacuum, highlighting the contradiction among the invisible disparities of labour versus the rationalisation of slavery as progress. Okoye wondered about the split consciousness of settlers who wish to live like royalty but do not face the labour force, as in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). So then, representations of land and technology portray a futurity of both indigenous and black people vanishing, and thus, genocide. Okoye connected these absences with Francis Bacon's idea of science as "action at a distance" pointing out the vanishing of the intermediate ties of humanity's relationship to nature and each other. The existence of indigenous and black people has always been the material that transmitted action into force.

The final plenary following the keynote talk addressed the notion of free labour and privilege as layers of margins existing within margins. In such a context, technology might be seen as a fiction that has served oppressive agendas, overlapping the lived and imaginary borders of identity. A topic that also resonates here is gender/sex identity and human/animal borders and representations, which were addressed in other panels that I was not able to attend.

As concluding thoughts, considering the representation of east-Asian, Arab, and black futurities, in the global scope of SF and virtual interactions, I do find a possibility of enlarging the participation of Latinx authors and scholars. As a territory that was colonised within a different regime, the debates on slavery and humanity, and the continuation of indigenous narratives from Latin America might inspire new perspectives of inquiring about Science Fiction. Still, in the midst of the lockdown, the diversity of voices presented in the conference already encompassed many possibilities of reimagining research. From the embodied experience of confinement, we might be able to strengthen the community of scholars, artists and activists who stand for an integrative view of fictions, knowledges, and human beings.

BIONOTE

Beatriz Herrera Corado (Guatemala City, US) is a researcher, dance artist, and writer. Herrera holds a BA in Anthropology and Literature and graduated from the MA program *Choreomundus: International Master in Dance Knowledge, Practice, and Heritage*. Trained in ballet, modern dance, and contact improvisation, she has also published the poetry book “*Hacia la tempestad*” and literature essays. Currently she writes about Guatemala's dance scene and co-organizes the webinar “*Multílogos: Danzas, cuerpos y movimientos.*”