Introduction

Writing Back: Speculative Fiction and the Politics of Postcolonialism, 2001

Nancy Batty and Robert Markley

"Look, here we are." So begins an impassioned speech delivered to the new Martian colonists by the first human to set foot on Mars in Kim Stanley Robinson's award-winning novel, *Red Mars*. Implicit in these words, first, is an exhortation to belief: *Look*. The unachievable has been achieved. It is here before us, imminent, to be seen, to be experienced. But looking also implies a taking possession, the beginning of a process of colonization—a process that invokes a host of competing, often half-buried dreams, images, and nightmares. Looking has other implications as well: *here we are*. Who exactly are we? What do we mean by here? What are we supposed to do when this destination—at once temporal and physical—is reached? What are we to make of this passage from dream to reality, from immanence to imminence? And what will "our" ongoing redefinition of "our"selves reveal about the always double nature of here: the "here" of an imagined future of colonization and the "here" of turn-of-the-millennium science fiction?

Look, here we are. 2001: a date long since burned into the human imagination by the progressivist, technophilic visions of the future portrayed in Arthur C. Clarke's novel and Stanley Kubrick's film, a date pregnant with the promise not only of their techno-future but of the future itself. *Look, here we are*. In the future. What are "we" to make of this passage from dream to reality, from immanence to imminence?

This special issue of *ARIEL* marks the arrival and the passage of the year 2001 by exploring the crucial roles that postcolonial concerns—the complex issues of race, nationalism, ethnicity, gender, political authority, cultural hegemony, and economic exploitation—play within the genres of speculative writing. Such a project seems, in fact, long

overdue. Colonialist, anti-colonialist, and, later, postcolonial themes have long been staples of the genres that figure prominently in twentieth and twenty-first century popular culture: science fiction, fantasy, magic realism, and horror. Whether we begin with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, or H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, or go further back to ancient epics or renaissance utopias as precursors of contemporary speculative fiction, stories of travel to and "discovery" of "new" worlds; encounters with aliens; depictions of contacts with cultural, racial, and biological difference; and the costs and consequences of territorial expansion have provided striking parables of European and American imperialism. As several of the contributors to this special issue argue, science fiction and utopian writing, in particular, have historically invoked and interrogated visions of colonization on earth as well as in outer space. The imbrication of postcolonial concerns and horror literature, fantasy, and magic realism marks the advent of 2001 as perhaps a watershed in critical responses to speculative fiction in general.

At their best, such thought experiments in fictional form have contested dominant ideologies of the white man's burden. Wells' *War of the Worlds* begins by projecting the politics of Western imperialism onto invaders from Mars: Europeans are to Martians as the Tasmanians were to British colonists, both a nuisance to be exterminated and a natural resource of the planet to be exploited. In the 1940s and 1950s when mainstream fiction often toed the party line of American triumphalism, science fiction offered searing indictments of colonialist ideology. C. M. Kornbluth and Judith Merril (writing under the name Cyril Judd) in *Gunner Cade* (1952) and *Outpost Mars* (1953), Lester del Ray in *Police Your Planet* (1956), and Leigh Brackett in *The Nemesis from Terra* (1961) depict the corruption, brutality, and moral degeneration that accompanies interplanetary colonization by outfits such as Brackett's aptly named Terran Exploitation Company. From within an ideology of American economic imperialism, such science-fiction writers contested the manifest destiny of the human "conquest" of space. In an important sense, then, science fiction and other speculative genres have a long history as the sites where "we" confront the implications of "our"

looking here and now. As in Robinson's Mars trilogy, discussed by Elizabeth Leane in this issue, science fiction can force us to consider the consequences of territorial and economic aggrandizement—its effects on imagined indigenes, on ourselves, and on the lands that it exploits.

Contemporary speculative fiction explores such issues in fascinating ways, working out, for good and for ill, our encounters with radical otherness; our desire to explore and, it seems inevitably, to exploit fantastic new worlds; and our xenophobia and imperialist impulses. Science fiction and fantasy in a postcolonial era redefine who "we" are, calling into question the unwritten values and assumptions that identify "us" as white, privileged, technologically sophisticated, or, in the case of the ethnically diverse crews of *Star Trek* and its spin-offs, avatars of a "dominant" techno-scientific culture. What has changed in the last decades of the twentieth century is that speculative fiction has become an important vehicle for writers from outside the metropolitan centres of Europe and North America.

In his essay in this issue, Dominic Alessio relates the following, possibly apocryphal, story: when NASA astronauts were training in the Arizona desert for a moon landing, they came across an elderly Navajo shepherd and asked him if he had any messages for people on the moon. The shepherd advised the lunar inhabitants: "Be careful. They will steal your land." His response gives voice to the other half of the dialectic: if *here we are* points us to a future, *They will steal your land* reminds us of the violent heritage and potential consequences of pushing on to a "final frontier." The frontier metaphor itself—shot through with the values and assumptions of American imperialism—becomes in contemporary speculative fiction the margin from which Navajos and others can write back against the empire.

Some of the essays in this special issue of *ARIEL* explore a growing body of speculative fiction written by women and people of colour who traditionally have been marginalized within its constituent genres such as science fiction. This work has challenged not only white male dominance of the genre, but also its notoriously sexist and imperialist tendencies. If twenty or thirty years ago the canon of speculative fiction centred on apologists for the American empire such as Robert

Heinlein, the contemporary canon-in-the-making includes writers such as Samuel Delany, Joanna Russ, Octavia Butler, Nicola Griffith, and Nalo Hopkinson, who openly explore racial and postcolonial issues in their works. Indeed, if we broaden our definition of speculative fiction to include more "mainstream" works of magic realism, we can see that writers such as Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Peter Carey, and Ben Okri have long used the strategies and techniques of science fiction and fantasy to depict the psychic, social, and cultural dislocations of imperialism. Yet even as postcolonial approaches have made inroads within the criticism of speculative fiction, there has been comparatively little attention paid by postcolonial critics to the ways in which contemporary literature from Africa, South America, Asia, and the Pacific aligns itself with, borrows from, and reshapes the traditions of science fiction, horror, and fantasy. In turn, the uneasy status of these genres within departments of literature has contributed to a general failure to understand the complex ways in which postcolonial literature since the 1950s has actively participated in and responded to the ongoing evolution of speculative genres.

In both traditional and postcolonial approaches to literature, then, science fiction usually gets the short end of the stick. It is, as Delany argues, as much an interactive community of writers, readers, editors, illustrators, and collectors as it is a "genre." As literary critics have come to emphasize the permeability and instability of generic categories, there has been some recognition that the rigid demarcations between "high" and "low," "popular" and "serious," even "realist" and "fantastic" art forms are themselves products of exclusive ideologies—the values, assumptions, and habits of mind that establish hierarchies and teleologies and that reinforce and are reinforced by a narrow, parochial nationalism. If "we" have learned anything from the Marxist critique of ideology, it is that we inhabit imagined, consensually fabricated worlds. Consequently, the thought experiments conducted within speculative literature, according to Fredric Jameson, create alternative "histories" from within which we can imagine and possibly create "the now open space for something else" (537). While Jameson's renovation of Marxist/ Utopian thought may seem at odds with an early twenty-first century

cynicism "about the prospects for human perfectibility" (Jacoby 74), his analysis also reflects the recognition within the science-fiction community that there are, and always have been, alternatives to boys-and-their-toys "hard" science fiction. Since H. G. Wells' scientific romances a century ago, speculative fiction has engaged many of the same issues as those that concern postcolonial writers and critics: issues of race and class, and social justice; issues of authority and freedom; and issues of a "universal," inclusive human destiny—of our survival as a species. *Look, here we are*: a speech addressed to the decidedly multicultural "First Hundred" out to settle and transform an alien world.

The political uses of science fiction and related genres play crucial roles in the efforts of our contributors to explore the implications of 2001. In "'Thinking about the Future': Ireland and the Irish Conflict in Irish Utopian Literature Since the Nineteenth Century," Ralph Pordzik offers a broad overview of the recent history of utopian writing in Ireland, providing focussed analyses of novels by writers as different as Brian Moore, Frank Herbert, and Eilís Ní Dhuibne. He claims that "writers of utopian literature [in Ireland] have never ceased to engage the complex power relations that helped shape the cultural consciousness of Ireland and the Irish." In this respect, he contends, these works "pave the way for a 'quantum leap' of the imagination towards an entirely different state of affairs, towards future opportunities not yet intuited or imagined." In other words, they suggest the possibility of moving beyond the seemingly intractable "troubles" toward "the now open space for something else." For Pordzik, utopian writing in Ireland does not seek to escape from or simply satirize, but deconstructs the categories and habits of mind that underlie the troubled history of the Republic.

Dominic Alessio also turns his attention to the utopian genre of speculative fiction, in this case the anonymously written novellas from New Zealand, initially published in 1881, entitled *The Great Romance*. In his effort to rescue these works from obscurity, he argues that they claim a place in the history of both utopian writing and science fiction. Alessio elsewhere has made a strong argument that Volume I of *The Great Romance* is "the principal source for the frame story of Edward Bellamy's [...] influential utopian novel *Looking Backward 2000-1887*

(1888)," while "Volume II, which was assumed nonexistent or lost until uncovered during the mid-1990's [...] is also of importance [...] for its innovations within the genre of late nineteenth century science fiction, particularly with regard to a focus on technological developments in space travel." In its surprisingly sympathetic portrayal of an alien species, the "Venuses," *The Great Romance* offers a thinly veiled allegory of early Pakeha-Maori encounters in New Zealand. What is not so surprising, perhaps, is that this work from New Zealand is not entirely "free from latent Orientalist assumptions." Written from an outpost of the British Empire, this anonymous work registers the complexities of contact narratives: the encounter with the alien other that becomes a staple of interplanetary romance in the decades to follow.

While not as obscure a work as *The Great Romance*, M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901) is only now starting to receive the attention it deserves as an important contribution to the long line of last-man-on-earth dystopias. Not only has John Clute just issued a new edition of *The Purple Cloud*, but, in a recent essay, Delany, often credited with being the "first" African-American (or African-originating) science-fiction writer, generously concedes precedence to Shiel (383), the Montserrat-born son of Irish and free slave mulatto parents. In her essay, "Representing the World Instead of Reproducing It: M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud*," Maria Cristina Fumagalli explores the "eccentricity" of both the author and his most famous novel. She suggests that the complex structure of the novel, with its multiple narrators, heteroglossic entries, and strategies of reversal and indirection decentre what has been defined as "Europe's academic rhetoric of (unitary) identity [and its] obsession with linear origin" (Balutansky and Sourieau, cited in Fumagalli). Fumagalli concludes her essay by arguing that "*The Purple Cloud* can be read as a very dense, mobile, and complex work" whose "science-fictionality" enables "Shiel to explore ambivalent feelings towards the 'other[s]' and to articulate a set of preoccupations about the imperial enterprise that, if acknowledged, contribute to dismantling the notion of a monolithic, unimpeachable, and unchallenged imperial/colonial discourse." In this respect, Shiel's novel reveals the dark

underside of racial and social anxieties that inform turn-of-the-century fears of annihilation.

Possessing arguably one of the strongest voices "writing back" to challenge the empire, Salman Rushdie invites the type of treatment elicited by this special issue. Judith Leggatt, in her essay "Other Worlds, Other Selves: Science Fiction in Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*," argues convincingly that Rushdie has long been engaged in a complex "cross-cultural" and "cross-dimensional" project that relies as much on engagement with contemporary speculative fiction as it does on magic realism. She contends that "Rushdie's use of speculative fiction not only challenges readers' assumptions about the genres available to postcolonial writers, but also subverts the cultural norms often perpetuated by mainstream works in that genre." Moreover, she claims that, by "purposely evoking science fiction, as well as fantasy" in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Rushdie "prevents his readers from falling into a Manichean reasoning that interprets the speculative aspects of his fiction as a symptom of his status as a writer from the exotic, mystical east." Leggatt's essay offers not only a challenge to the critical exoticization of Rushdie's work, but also an insightful analysis of the ways in which the novel's multiple and complex worlds unsettle "the ground beneath our feet," and make us "question the validity of our own, culturally defined, versions of reality."

Rebecca Tillett in "'Your Story Reminds Me of Something': Spectacle and Speculation in Aaron Carr's *Eye Killers*," similarly explores the potentially unsettling effects of genre fiction, in this case, the horror-thriller set in contemporary Arizona. Carr, a Laguna/Navajo filmmaker and novelist, uses a well-known convention—a vampire on the loose—to defamiliarize the genre and give it significant political force. In her analysis of this novel about the struggle between a nest of awakened vampires and a Native American teacher who must rediscover the moral and ethical values that she thought she had left behind, Tillett finds an allegory of "the role played by exploitation, oppression, and inhumanity in the contemporary recolonization of Native peoples and lands." Her essay explores the stark realities underlying Carr's novel, adducing "real" examples of white exploitation of Native identity, land, and, more

recently, genetic resources to draw a grim analogy between the vampires depicted in *Eye Killers* and a blood-sucking corporate culture that exploits Native Americans and that eradicates or neglects their traditions.

It is such a link between science and colonialism that Elizabeth Leane examines in her essay on Kim Stanley Robinson's trilogy, *Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, and *Blue Mars*. In her essay, Leane quotes Paolo Palladino in support of her argument: "[F]or most of humanity, the history of science and imperialism *is* the history of science." Drawing on the work of feminist science scholars such as Denise Albanese and Evelyn Fox Keller, as well as Jameson's as yet unpublished analysis of the trilogy, Leane demonstrates the way that Robinson uses "hard" science in his novels, specifically physics, not only to to deconstruct the boundaries between "hard" and "soft" science, and, therefore, hard and soft science fiction, but also to reveal the limitations of science and to suggest what she terms a "utopian chromodynamics." She locates Robinson in a tradition of utopian speculation that re-imagines the conditions under which colonization might be redefined as an expansion of human possibility rather than as a single-minded pursuit of territory, power, and profits.

Finally, Matthew Candelaria, in his essay "The Overlord's Burden," takes on one of hard science fiction's most revered writers, Arthur C. Clarke, and one of its seminal texts, alleging that, at its core, *Childhood's End* is an unabashedly imperialist novel. Candelaria makes a strong claim for considering the novel, published shortly after India had gained independence, a patriotic defense of Britain's involvement in South Asia. Candelaria asserts that *Childhood's End* is "Clarke's most complete statement on British colonialism," and he argues that the novelist returns repeatedly to the theme of colonialism "to demonstrate not only the necessity and profitability, but also the ultimate morality of the colonial endeavour." Using Kipling's "White Man's Burden" as a surprisingly apt intertext, Candelaria exposes the imperialist ethos that finds its fullest expression in *Childhood's End*, but that informs many of Clarke's novels, including *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Look, here we are. 2001. So it is appropriate that this special issue of *ARIEL* includes Batty's interview of the Caribbean-born Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson, who possesses a refreshing new voice that is

leading speculative fiction into the twenty-first century. Hopkinson is the award-winning author of *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *Midnight Robber*, and the editor of *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction*, released in 2000 (see the review of this anthology in our Reviews section). Her short stories have received prestigious awards from the science fiction and fantasy establishment, and they have been widely collected, most recently in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (also reviewed in this issue). In the interview, Hopkinson talks about everything from the imperialism of *Star Trek* to the influence of writers as diverse as Louise Bennett, Octavia Butler, and Samuel Delany on her work. She also reveals, during the course of the interview, a refreshingly new take on the work of Robert Heinlein.

Look, here we are. As with the achievement of any dream of arrival, this one—the launching of *ARIEL*'s special issue on speculative fiction—comes fraught with conflicting emotions and certain regrets. We received many excellent essays that we were not able to publish. There is, now, considerable interest in the topics discussed in this special issue, as a perusal of any recent Speculative Fiction Convention will demonstrate. This issue, with its sampling of essays, can do no more than to allow *ARIEL* readers a glimpse into a fascinating field of study.

Finally, "we" did not arrive here entirely as a result of our own efforts. We would like to thank the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Red Deer College, as well as the college's professional development program; Maria Haubrich, our copy editor; and the editors of *ARIEL*, Pat Srebrnik and Victor Ramraj, for their generous support. Most of all, however, we would like to thank all of our contributors for the cooperation and kindness they exhibited throughout this journey. To them, we can only say: *Look, here we are.*

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