

11-1-2012

Decolonizing the Future: Review of Jessica Langer's  
*Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* and Ericka  
Hoagland and Reema Sarwal's *Science Fiction,  
Imperialism and the Third World*

Gerry Canavan

Marquette University, [gerard.canavan@marquette.edu](mailto:gerard.canavan@marquette.edu)

## REVIEW-ESSAYS

Gerry Canavan

### Decolonizing the Future

Jessica Langer. *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. ix + 188 pp. \$80 hc.

Ericka Hoagland and Reema Sarwal, eds. *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011. viii + 223 pp. \$35 pbk.

“The need for [decolonization] exists in a raw, repressed, and reckless state in the lives and consciousnesses of colonized men and women. But the eventuality of such a change is also experienced as a terrifying future in the consciousness of another ‘species’ of men and women: the *colons*, the colonists” (1). These words from the first page of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) suggest deep affinities between anti-colonial and science-fictional ways of thinking: radically altered futures, utopian historical breaks, even the suggestion that there may exist multiple “species” of human being living on a single planet, fundamentally alien to one another. Both anti-colonialism and sf, we might note, share as a kind of first principle the assertion of other possible futures for humanity beyond the endless repetition of the same historical mistakes—and in the left-wing sf most commonly cited in the annals of post-Suvinian criticism, this future-oriented vision is most typically a critically resistant one that reveals (as anti-colonial thinking does) the unacknowledged crimes at the heart of modernity. The conclusion of *The Wretched of the Earth* makes both the futurological investment of anti-colonial thinking and its strident rejection of modernity quite clear; Fanon calls upon the decolonized not to repeat Europe in “a grotesque and generally obscene emulation” but to embrace a new future whose possibilities once again sound science-fictional:

But if we want humanity to take one step forward, if we want to take it to another level than the one where Europe has placed it, then we must innovate, we must be pioneers.... For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man. (239)

In short, both postcolonialism and sf are, or ought to be, about “hating the way things are, wanting to make things different,” to borrow the late Ray Bradbury’s personal definition of science fiction (163)—both anti-colonialism and sf seek to imagine alternate futures for a human race whose history is not doomed always to be a nightmare.

Recent scholarship in the field of sf studies, however, has tended to focus not on these critically resistant aspects but rather on the genre’s participation in and complicity with the very fantasies of empire that made decolonization necessary in the first place. In recent “imperial turn” criticism from Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, John Reider, Patricia Kerslake, and others, we find proposed an opposite genealogy for sf from the one above: sf becomes instead empire’s

propaganda arm, its R&D lab, prototyping the weapons of the future and accommodating us to tomorrow's genocides today. In the one genealogy, then, sf's utopian impulses align it with anti-colonialism's on-the-ground fight for global justice; in the other, sf fantasies of race, exclusion, and violence make it not an ally but yet another object for anti-colonialist critique.

This dialectic—call it the bad conscience of sf—is at work in both the Langer and the Hoagland and Sarwal volumes under discussion here, each of which begins with the fraught question of how we might properly commence to speak about postcoloniality and sf in the same breath. Langer's *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* starts with the recognition that both interpretive categories are hybrid and deeply unstable, allowing multiple entry points and polyvalent conversations to occur while at the same time instilling the persistent and regrettable feeling that we are all just talking past each other. Evoking the famous Heinlein title, her attempt to unite the two fields within a single theoretical constellation focuses on two key figurations that forever align the writing of sf with the history of coloniality and postcoloniality: the Stranger and the Strange Land. The mutual imbrication of sf and empire can be clearly seen in their shared reliance on Strangers/Others and Strange Lands/Colonial Spheres in the construction of imperial fantasy; postcolonial science fiction, in turn, takes up the task of “dispelling” the attractiveness of these figures as it “hybridizes them, parodies them, and/or mimics them against the grain in a play of Bhabhaian masquerade” (3-4). A postcolonial approach to science fiction, Langer suggests, requires a perspective that is skeptical of the material publication history of the genre without tilting into totalizing final rejection; in fact, she argues that science fiction actually has a crucial role to play in the postcolonial construction of identity as decolonization turns to postcolonialism and the ideologically straightforward task of throwing out the colonizer becomes instead “the process by which a decolonizing society negotiates its identity apart from that of its colonizer, and apart from its identity as a colonizer people or place, within the context of both colonial history and decolonized future” (8). Postcolonial science fiction becomes an important (even, perhaps, necessary) participant in this process of decolonizing the future, or at least a liberated people's newly freed imagination of it.

The proposed subgenre of postcolonial science fiction is consequently a subcategory of sf that (like Suvin's and Jameson's Marxist approaches to the genre) necessarily has a strong political valence. Langer's postcolonial science fiction is always on the right side politically—which is to say it is always on the Left. Even the “science” of “postcolonial science fiction” is to be read against the grain:

A central argument of this book is that postcolonial science fiction utilizes these same generic conventions in a radically different way: to explore the ways in which Western scientific discourse, both in terms of technology and in terms of culture (both real cultural effects and effects on cultural production), has interacted with colonialism and the cultural production of colonized peoples. It also foregrounds the concept that indigenous and other colonized systems of

knowledge are not only valid but are, at times, more scientifically valid than is Western scientific thought. (8)

If, as Walter Mignolo's aphorism had it, "there is no modernity without coloniality" (155), Langer suggests there was no science-fictionality without coloniality either. The adjective "postcolonial" thus resolves the dialectic between sf as an imperially complicit literature and sf as a critically resistant one only by carving out a narrow exception to the general case; in much the same way that Suvinian sf tossed out 95% of what is published as science fiction to focus only on the good stuff, postcolonial science fiction stands apart from the main body of sf precisely through its refusal of the colonial visions that have otherwise dominated the genre.

The risk here, of course, is that critical readings of postcolonial science fiction could become as overdetermined as the similarly exclusionary Suvinian approach: postcolonial science fiction as a tamed and domesticated genre, whose meaning and political import is always safely known to us in advance without our ever actually having to bother to read any of it. This is by no means a new problem for politically infused literary criticism; recall the morass Jameson fell into with his infamous essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," which similarly reduced all cultural production in the Global South to "national allegory," commentary on the imperial situation to the exclusion of all other possible themes and concerns. (For that matter, just think of the criticisms leveled at Jameson's utopian readings of literature more generally.) This risk is registered in the title's use of *-ism* rather than *-ity* to suggest a unified front, a politics, rather than a stage of history that contains multiple voices and perspectives. A tamed postcolonialism, reduced to a slogan, risks losing its ability to challenge and inspire us—it risks becoming dead theory.

And so here Langer does something interesting in order to sidestep this trap: rather than turn to examples of postcolonial science fiction from formerly colonized nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as one might expect, her book focuses primarily on sf from Japan and First Nation Canada. Neither nation fits cleanly into the category of the postcolonial as academic theorists typically imagine it: Japan is a former imperial power as well as a former colony, while First Nation Canada is arguably not yet *postcolonial* at all. What first appears as a structural weakness of the text comes to seem instead, in this light, something of a bold choice; Langer resolves to test her theory of postcolonial science fiction at the margins, where the categories are at their murkiest and the questions at their thorniest. In chapter three, the book diverges even further from its expected roadmap as it dives into a study of *World of Warcraft*, a text whose status as either *postcolonial literature* or *science fiction* seems significantly troubled at best—and Langer's analysis goes beyond kneejerk denunciation of *Warcraft*'s racism and violence to explore the possibilities of parody and subversion that are made possible by the game's identity-tourist, become-the-Other mechanics. The first words of the conclusion similarly dislocate us: "To be frank, science fiction's initial forays into 'postcoloniality' were a bit of a failure" (153). The description is of Mike Resnick and Gardner Dozois's seemingly well-intentioned but wildly

wrongheaded *Future Earths* collections *Under African Skies* and *Under South African Skies* (both 1993), useful demonstrations of the way that attempts to evade the colonialist paradigm can sometimes wind up reproducing it. Such a critique is extended in *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* to well-intentioned English-speaking scholars in the First World who have been able to sample only a tiny fraction of postcolonial science fiction (usually in translation) before declaring themselves masters of the subfield—the unhappy academic reality with which Langer begins her text (1-3)—as well as to First World sf as *itself* a series of colonizing practices, exported from the metropole to the rest of the world while crowding out local traditions and voices (2, 24-25). It is important, Langer says, to remember that postcolonial science fiction happens “despite, rather than because of, the way the genre—and its publishing mechanism”—and the academy in which our own critical practices are based—“is structured” (158). And as Langer herself foregrounds in her introduction, allowing ourselves to inhabit and interrogate these kinds of ambivalences is crucially important if postcolonialism is to remain vital and not fade into “a vague ‘postcolonial aura’ as Arif Dirlik warns” (3). A properly rigorous postcolonialism requires the flexible and multiple strategy highlighted by Langer’s text (and the future ones that will need to follow in its footsteps) if it is to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

If anything, the multiple authorship and focal points of Ericka Hoagland and Reema Sarwal’s *Science Fiction, Imperialism, and the Third World* allow it to chase this kind of unresolved (and unresolvable) ambiguities with an even more relentless verve. Recalling Langer’s critique of science fiction’s ideological assumptions and material publishing practices, Andy Sawyer’s introductory essay to the collection begins with a quotation from Uppinder Mehan’s highly influential 1998 article on Indian sf from *Foundation*: “Sf is as Western as Coca-Cola, big cars, and computers” (54). Talk about damning with faint praise! Sawyer goes on to argue, however, that despite this compromised origin, “the *tools* of sf, its speculative drive and its ability to distort language, are among the most powerful weapons available” to radical and anti-colonial thinkers. Sawyer’s mandate holds that “an explicitly postcolonial science fiction not only has to be *written* from outside the traditional strands of Western science fiction (claiming them as progenitors, perhaps, while recognizing that the future nowadays is a very different world to that which it once was) but explained and criticized from outside them too” (1-2; emphases in original).

The rest of the book destabilizes even this edict substantially, however, in interesting and I think productive ways. Postcolonial science fiction, in Hoagland and Sarwal’s own introduction, looks instead like a “middle ground” or “hybrid genre” that registers “intriguing affinities between two genres [postcolonial writing, and sf] whose own parameters continue to be vigorously contested” (5). (But perhaps this is not so far from Mehan’s line: sf, Coca-Cola, big cars, and computers all register complex networks of global exchange that only *seem* to originate in one place.) This spirit of contestation becomes a mission statement for the entire collection, which contains critiques that locate themselves both inside and outside the traditional sf canon. The opening essay,

Gerald Gaylard's piece on Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), takes dead aim at the supposed opposition between Western sf as an uncritical celebration of modernity and postcolonialism as modernity's absolute denunciation that tends to characterize discussions of postcolonial sf. After noting that neither sf nor postcolonialism is nearly so univocal in practice, Gaylard goes on to argue that what ultimately unites the two poles of this theoretical binary is the category of the "transhistorical," on which both sf and postcolonialism are predicated in different ways: "[T]he transhistorical mode has become central to postcolonialism because it has witnessed the betrayal of so many of the promises of history. Sf similarly deals in the realm of the transhistorical though this is more often for the reason of futurological interest than present political disenchantment" (35). (And we might go further still, recognizing in the quotations from *The Wretched of the Earth* with which I began this review postcolonialism's own constitutive futurological optimism, still alive despite all the evidence of history.) *Dune*, through its "keen interest in the light that is shed upon the present by the transhistorical," therefore unites these two forms in a single work (35); indeed, Gaylard ultimately makes the bold claim that Herbert deserves a place in the canon of postcolonial literature alongside such giants as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and Gabriel García Márquez through his construction of a "nationalist postcolonialism" that shows "imperialism is truly universal and perennial in the form of greed for resources and ruthless self-interest" (26)—truly, this is a long way from the claim that postcolonial literature and sf are in some basic way incompatible.

A later essay in the collection identifies an even unlikelier recipient of postcolonial literature's imprimatur: Robert Heinlein! Despite the pulp legacy of explicitly racist novels such as Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold* (1965) and *Sixth Column* (1949), and the genocidal fantasy inherent even in his recognized classic *Starship Troopers* (1959), Herbert G. Klein's contribution to the collection nevertheless argues that

his novel *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* fulfills many of the criteria that one has come to expect from postcolonial fiction: it tells of the struggle for independence of a subjected and marginalized people, it is told in the voice of one of their own, and it describes the indigenous culture and its changes in this act of transformation. (141)

Putting aside the impulse to immediately object to this proposed genre classification—and Klein, to be sure, is quite aware of the myriad problems with his claim—the astounding suggestion that an American sf novel by a white, pro-military author about an imaginary lunar uprising might meaningfully be described as postcolonial literature is not *merely* a provocation. By straining the category of the postcolonial to (and perhaps well past) the breaking point, the essay challenges us to think with a new sense of precision about just what "postcolonialism" includes and excludes. Perhaps we might in the end throw Heinlein back off the shelf—but what about Ray Bradbury, or Isaac Asimov, or Arthur C. Clarke, or Judith Merril, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman? Is not the first great novel of postcolonial science fiction, after all, that early classic of the genre, H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898)? Perhaps we must reconsider the

idea that First World sf is in the main fundamentally hostile to anti-colonial and postcolonial thinking; perhaps there's something to recoup in the body of the Western sf tradition after all.

I have focused on these two essays precisely because they strike me as intriguing outliers in postcolonial criticism, usefully problematizing taken-for-granted assumptions from that field—but to have done so nevertheless replicates the very biases of sf criticism that the book was intended to unsettle, and risks unduly selling short the tremendous usefulness of Hoagland and Sarwal's volume for anyone interested in an expanded, globalist discussion of the structures and stakes of postcolonial science fiction. Heinlein and Herbert aside, it is the collection's extended focus on non-white and non-US authors that makes it such an important intervention in the body of sf studies today. It is an especially rich resource with respect to science fiction from the Indian subcontinent, a region too often neglected in these discussions despite its wide readership and the growing global significance of Bollywood cinema—but its fourteen essays also speak to Afrofuturist themes in Octavia Butler and Stephen Barnes, dystopia in the Mexican cyberpunk novel *La Primera Calle de La Soledad* (Solitude's First Road, 1993), themes of apocalypse and resistance in contemporary indigenous sf from Australia and North America, and much more. It will take a long time to correct the US and Eurocentric biases that have long deformed sf studies (and the Western academy more generally)—but *Science Fiction, Imperialism, and the Third World* (like *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*) is a worthy addition to that cause. But still we have only just begun to scratch the surface.

#### WORKS CITED

- Bradbury, Ray. "No News, or What Killed the Dog?" *Quicker than the Eye*. New York: Avon, 1996. 141-50.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. 1961. Tr. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove, 2004.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88.
- Mehan, Uppinder. "The Domestication of Technology in Indian Science Fiction Short Stories." *Foundation* 74 (Autumn 1998): 54-66.
- Mignolo, Walter. "Coloniality: The Darker Side of Modernity." *Cultural Studies* 21.2-3 (2007): 155-67.