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Temporal Politics: Entangling Fictions, Futures, and Histories in Contemporary and Historical Speculative Fiction

Introduction

This chapter addresses treatments of gendered difference, antisemitism, islamophobia, and race-based oppression in speculative fictions. The discussion centres on several novels that seek to counter practices of "othering", but implicitly rely on essentialised biological constructions of identity at key moments in their narratives in such a way as to expose ideological elements of the formal structures of speculation. Without intending to produce a typology of speculative temporality I consider in turn future alterity in selected 1930s works by Katharine Burdekin, alternate history in Jo Walton's *Farthing* (2006) and alternate future-history in Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016). While these modes of speculative fiction are well suited to countering discourses of othering and oppression, they may also serve to naturalise the logic of practices they attempt to critique. In so doing they perform acts of historical closure, ironically suggesting the possibility of utopian change can be accessed only through alternate reality fiction if at all. Yet, as the conclusion demonstrates via Ruha Benjamin's sociological speculation and Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017), speculative fiction can nurture utopian hope and counter the limitations of essentialised biological notions of identity.

In the 1930s Katharine Burdekin wrote a series of utopian and dystopian texts under the penname Murray Constantine. These modernist works conceptualised fascism as a hyper-masculine politics obsessed with aesthetic images of the racialised masculine body. Burdekin produced far-reaching critiques of dominant models of gender and sexuality, demonstrating the covalence of the fascist aestheticisation of masculinity and antisemitism. She lamented the oppression of Jews, yet her visions of future alterity saw the demise of Jews as inevitable. By way of contrast, Jo Walton's alternate history novel *Farthing* (2006), set during the 1930s-40s when Burdekin was writing, carefully positions antisemitism rather than Jewish integration as a social problem. As a naturalist, "traditional country house murder-mystery" (Hartland), Walton's novel differs from Burdekin's speculative futurities. Writing at the height of security and civil rights anxieties of the post 9/11 and 7/7 era, Walton focuses on historic antisemitism

and gender-based oppression in Britain's upper classes. Yet perhaps because she is concerned with resonances between (alternate) past and (empirical) present, her treatment of fascism is at times reductive, subsumed to narrow court politics and cut adrift from both the power of mass movements and the empirical historical popularity of fascism in Britain. Naomi Alderman's (2016) alternate future-history *The Power* is a more richly speculative text about social movements affecting change. Via temporally complex narrative nesting, she presents an alternate near future in which women worldwide discover the latent ability to transmit bolts of electricity from an organ in their chests called a "skein" (a science fictional device with roots in late Victorian science). Yet Alderman's focus on female embodiment relies on a flawed and implicitly binary model of gender constructed around a close association of femininity with nature and the natural. Although *The Power* critiques heteropatriarchy as historically contingent, it forecloses the sort of non-binary utopian thinking Burdekin presents.

These speculative fictions construct story worlds through which they invite readers to participate in contemplation about social and political issues, and as such are examples of a literary form with *theorising* at its heart.[1] An example of the critically self-aware power of speculative theorising can be found in the short story "Ferguson is the Future" by sociologist of science Ruha Benjamin (2016). Similarly, novelist Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) with which I conclude shows how speculative practices can be employed to resist and oppose hegemonic historical narratives in the service of utopian thought.

Future Alterity

Katharine Burdekin's 1935 novel *The End of This Day's Business* (first published 1989) depicts a matriarchal global society five thousand years in the future, in which "a man had to do what his strong muscles and weak mind and masculine nature fitted him for" (*TETDB* 4). While men remain physically stronger and "naturally" prone to violence in this society, they cannot achieve the education or social status of artists, engineers or politicians. Men's low perceived mental ability and emotional volatility are a counterpart to their supposed rude brawn and lack of artistic faculty. Burdekin's protagonist Grania describes how "men's rule was always emotional and based on physical force. Women's rule has always been reasonable, and based on psychic power" (*TETDB* 61). Women maintain this order as "the female psyche is the strong tough one *naturally*. The male is the weak soft one" (42). Grania can no longer accept peace and prosperity at the expense of subjugation of men. She begins to preach gender equality and is arrested for subversion. After talking with the General Secretary for Europe Anna K., she

and her son Neil are given poison to kill themselves, which Grania acidly likens to the Night of the Long Knives, when Hitler had the SA leader Ernst Röhm arrested and instructed to kill himself. For Grania, even in her "reasonableness" (the polar opposite of chaotic, violent male rule), Anna K. has fallen into the trap of binary gender thinking, which necessarily involves the subjugation of one gender by another.

Burdekin did not believe gender divisions cause social problems so much as that gender is *itself* an evolutionary problem, which humanity must eventually overcome to achieve spiritual unity. Burdekin thought the *telos* of humanity is to achieve a spiritual unity free from binary categories—the most important (though by no means only one) of which is gender (see Stock 117-118; English 46-47). She theorised that human biological evolution will result in a final form of asexually reproducing beings whose communal spiritual bonds transcend the need for both physical love and binary genders. As Elizabeth English argues, Burdekin's "defiance of binary gender categories and patriarchal authority" is a potential source "for social and political transformation" (44) toward a utopian futurity. Indeed, in another of her speculative novels, *Proud Man* (1934), a post-gender human with telepathic abilities from the far future returns to the present to experience the "pain, discomfort and grief" of binary sexed and gendered life (Burdekin, *PM* 23).

A problem with Burdekin's work is that she tends to treat social and cultural differences as similar types of "problem" to gender, which must be *transcended*, as it were, to reach the telos of spiritual unity even as she engages with some rather esoteric and culturally specific ideas about spiritual feeling. While she offers significant criticisms of masculinist Church doctrine and frequently refers to Stonehenge as a site of spiritual renewal, Burdekin's imaginaries are underpinned by discriminatory assumptions and values derived from cultural aspects of Christianity. In her 1937 dystopia *Swastika Night*, set 700 years after the victory of Hitler over the West and Japanese dominance in the East, the Jews of Europe have long been exterminated and Christians now occupy their place as the Other against which the "Hitlerian" religion defines itself. As I argue elsewhere, this manoeuvre rehabilitates *all* Christians for the support and participation of *some* notable Protestant and Catholic groups in the development of the Nazi State (Stock 106-114). In *The End of this Day's Business* Jews likewise no longer exist, though here due to assimilation:

> They did not realize that they were always a great nation, the greatest nation, in fact, and that when their bonds were finally struck from them they would cease to be Jews, or a nation at all. There are no Jews now. There are some people in Palestine who are descended from Jews who went there during the last persecution, but they're all mixed up with Arabs, and they're all called Arabians. The Jews that stayed behind in Europe just became Germans or English or French. (*TETDB* 70)

Burdekin was highly sympathetic to Jewish oppression (see Stock 115–116). But she consistently hypostatises Jewish identity as a problem, like gender, that *spiritual* evolution requires humanity to overcome, requiring Judaism's negation. In the process, terms like "people," "nation" and "race" are synonymously figured. Intracommunal differences (for example, between Hasidic, Modern Orthodox and Progressive; or Sephardi, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi) are erased. More importantly, Burdekin accepts terms by which antisemites posed "the Jewish Question" from the nineteenth century onward, in which the *existence* of European Jews is figured as the "problem".

This thinking incorporates traditional Christian theological prejudices: since the Middle Ages the flourishing of Jewish life has challenged the historically illiterate assumption that Christianity superseded Judaism. For Moishe Postone, modern antisemitism "is not simply a form of prejudice directed against a minority group but provides a framework for understanding an extremely complex and historically dynamic world" (Postone, "The Dualisms of Capitalist Modernity" 47). As Jay Geller (9) shows, there is a "paradoxical necessity for, and repudiation of, the Jews in modern Western society" (see also Cheyette and Marcus 3). Terming Jews "the greatest nation" while adhering to a deterministic view of their disappearance, Burdekin engages eschatological philosemitism. As Keith Kahn-Harris argues, "philosemitism and antisemitism are intimately connected" (126). Both involve seeing Jews as worthy of *special* attention, as objects characterised by distinctive differences and intra-communal social bonds.

Burdekin's Grania declares Jews' "greatness" lies in their "spiritual strength" yet she lists the three "greatest Jews" as Jesus, Marx and Freud: an apostate and two secular materialists, one of whom (Marx) was baptised. She holds there have been no "great" Jewish women because "a Jewish woman was more deeply and unconsciously convinced of her inferiority even than a Christian woman. She was nothing but a cow who might one day bear a Messiah" (*TETDB* 70). In viewing Jews as a social "problem" Burdekin reproduces an antisemitic politics she outwardly opposes, especially in relation to Jewish women. Burdekin's experiments in future alterity demonstrate the social relations governing a binary model of sex and the construction of gender are neither "natural" nor inevitable. Yet her work treats "nation" and "race" as concepts as durable as binary models of gender, from which she ultimately cannot free herself.

Alternate History

In the first instalment of Jo Walton's *Spare Change* trilogy, *Farthing* (2006), issues faced by British Jews around the period in which Burdekin wrote are re-framed. Here the discursive framing of "the Jewish question" is itself analysed in relation to antisemitism and wider social issues. This is a novel of the type Karen Hellekson terms "true alternate history stories" (253), in which the action is set some years after a "nexus event" where a single changed decision has far-reaching historical consequences. In Walton's 1949 story world a character named Sir James Thirkie, around whose murder the plot hinges, negotiated a 1941 peace deal with the Nazis. In consequence Churchill never became Prime Minister and it is unclear whether the Nazis' Final Solution was fully implemented. No anticolonial independence movements have been successful, the Soviet Union remains at war with the Nazis and Nazi sympathiser Charles Lindbergh is US President.[2] Unusually for the genre the novel is unconcerned with technological or scientific changes. *Farthing* thereby differs from a text like Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) in which Axis victory in World War II led to an acceleration of space technology so that Germany was in the 1960s planning trips to Mars (Winthrop-Young 113, n.7). Walton's narrative is told via chapters successively alternating between a third-person narration focalised through homicide officer Inspector Carmichael and first-person narration via protagonist Lucy Eversley, who has married Jewish banker David Kahn against her upper-class family's wishes. Members of the "Farthing Set," a ruling Conservative Party faction dominated by her parents, try to frame David for Thirkie's murder by pinning a yellow star to the corpse. A few days later, Lucy's father kills a gunman (subsequently found to be carrying a Communist Party membership card) who fires at them while they are riding. Inspector Carmichael unravels these crimes shortly after conspirator Mark Normansby is voted Prime Minister by the Parliamentary Conservative Party. David and Lucy have to flee to Canada under false identities.

Walton's text is focused on the anti-Jewish prejudices of an elite set who view Jews as *déclassé* and a threat to their class position due to belief in the antisemitic conspiracy theory that holds Jews responsible for Soviet Communism. Yet the setting of this story in an alternate 1940s Britain points to how modern antisemitism *can itself be read* as an alternate history, in the sense that it creates a fictional story which "purports to explain critically the modern capitalist world" (Postone, "Dualisms" 47), and does so by reading "the complex, impersonal, historical dynamic of capital in agentive terms as a Jewish conspiracy" (*ibid.* 49). As wealthy landowners themselves, the Farthing Set do not identify Jews with control of capital (as Nazism does). The framing of a Jewish banker for murder thus requires the Farthing elite to understand

and mobilise the popularity of antisemitic conspiracy instrumentally rather than as a core ideological belief in "global invisible conspiracy" (*ibid.*). At some level, then, the *real* conspirators (the murderers) understand antisemitism for what it is: make-believe, an alternate history fiction, or—to use an apt anachronism—"fake news" used to keep the upper class firmly in power.

The paranoid thrill of an abstract conspiracy to produce a concrete action is thereby (ironically) reproduced, a thrill heightened by the power of historical resonances: the Farthing Set faintly echoes (Lady) Nancy Astor's "Cliveden Set," which had been central to the adoption of the policy of appeasement from 1936-38. Astor frequently made antisemitic remarks, but by March 1939 was trying "to distance herself from Nazi anti-Semitism" (Gottlieb and Stibbe 183). While Lady Eversley is actively anti-feminist, putting family and class power first to the extent that even her closeted status is irrelevant,[3] Astor opposed Nazism specifically because "the regime represented an assault on working women" (Gottlieb and Stibbe 183). Likewise, at different points both Lucy Kahn and Inspector Carmichael compare the Farthing Set to the early-1930s era Nazi Party, but the former is not a mass political movement with a paramilitary wing. Indeed, despite membership the British Union of Fascists peaking at "between 40,000 and 50,000" in 1930s Britain (Gottlieb 108), such mass politics and even the public sphere as such are strangely absent in the novel.

Notwithstanding this inattention to mass politics, the novel's post-millennial account of antisemitism in the ruling classes of the mid-twentieth is deeply suggestive in the context of New Labour's Britain, just a few, months after the 7/7 bombings and with neo-colonial conflicts in both Afghanistan and Iraq ongoing. While the narration does not openly invite allegorical reading, the language and institutionalisation of antisemitism in Walton's novel resonates with contemporary forms of islamophobia. Such language may be observed, for example, in the tropes of outsider identity and stereotyped beliefs about how a Jew *should* look and behave. Thus Lucy's father tells her that despite being born in England and serving in the RAF, David Kahn is "a Jew, and not one of us" (Walton 16). Lucy herself, who has grown up in an antisemitic society, regularly conflates Jewish religious observance with Jewish identity, for example stating, "I hadn't taken up covering my hair as Jewish women do" (39); a practice that anyway varies widely by denomination. At a more institutional level, Lord Eversley accurately predicts that marrying a Jew will close doors for Lucy, a point confirmed when the *Daily Express* runs a headline announcing their marriage: "English Rose Plucked by a Jew" (43). This baldly turns Jewish masculinity into a predatory threat, a discriminatory rhetoric still widely used against men of South Asian ethnicities in Britain to this day.

At the turn of the millennium the New Labour Government had already made key measures permanent from the "temporary" (annually renewed) Emergency Provisions (Northern Ireland) Act 1973 and Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1974 via the Terrorism Act 2000 *before* 9/11 (see K. Fisher). When Walton's novel was published several months after the 7/7 terror attacks in which four suicide bombers killed fifty-two other people and injured several hundred more on London's public transport system, the British State was engaged in a process of "securitisation" which targeted Muslims in the UK as a "security threat" (Hussain and Bagguley 716). In the text, after Normansby makes his first speech as Prime Minister detailing "drastic measures" to deal with the "Jewish Bolshevik menace," a local policeman tells Inspector Carmichael, "we'll be able to have a crackdown on them now— some of the lads are quite cock-a-hoop about it" (Walton 276). In the post 9/11 era police were similarly keen to use both new and existing legal powers against racialised minorities, especially South Asians they assumed to be Muslim, justified by an "antiterror" agenda. To give one example,

> the number of Asian people stopped and searched under antiterrorism laws in the United Kingdom rose by near on 400 per cent, from 744 in 2001-02 to 2,989 in 2002-03 (Morris 2004). Following the 7/7 bombings, there was a seven-fold increase in the number of Asian people stopped and searched by British Transport Police (Dodd 2005). (Mythen et al. 738)

As Kathryn Fisher shows, the generalised framing of terrorism as a crime against democracy and Western values meant "antiterror" discourse was politically difficult to oppose. In post-9/11 era scholarly literature across security studies, criminology and sociology, authors are often at pains to stress the material reality of terrorist incidents as acts of murder and life-altering violence before beginning any analysis of a discourse grounded in racism. This attests to a broader atmosphere in which bad faith criticism was as likely to come from senior Labour politicians like Jack Straw or David Blunkett as from the tabloid press, who "routinely depicted second and third-generation Muslim youth as an unruly and risky 'alien within'" (Mythen et al. 740). Walton's take on this dystopian environment is briefly revealed when Lucy Kahn finds a copy of Trotskyist-turned neoconservative thinker James Burnham's text *Managerial Revolution* in her family's library. Burnham's vision of a world split between super-states was inspirational to George Orwell, who gave mixed reviews of his work on several occasions in the late '30s and early '40s. The point is less subtly reinforced later when Lucy Kahn buys her husband a copy of *Nineteen Seventy-Four* by "the man who wrote that animal book that was so popular a few years before, some sort of scientifiction thing" (Walton 301).[4] It is one of the

few occasions in the novel when Walton draws direct parallels between her alternate history world and empirical history. This kind of *knowing* strategy directs readers to draw comparisons and engages a sense of historical playfulness. As I shall now show, Walton's careful rationing of historical playfulness to delicately suggest contemporary resonances contrasts starkly with Naomi Alderman's direct comparative approach in *The Power*, using the complex narrative structure of her alternate future-history.

Alternate Future-History

Alderman's novel takes a radically different tack to Walton *and* Burdekin's speculative imaginaries both in its narrative structure and its treatment of gender-based oppression and antisemitism: while superficially a highly playful text using ironic strategies to draw parallels between empirical reality and a science fictional imaginary, the work makes careful and precise use of the relationship between content and form. For Alyson Miller, "*The Power* is double coded, involving a process of reading *through* the cultural narratives from which the novel stems in order to access the subversive strategies at play" (429). According to Carl Darryl Malmgren, "in establishing systems of correspondence" between a science fiction novel's narrative world and the reader's own, "the reader comes to know or understand his or her own world better" (27) via what Darko Suvin terms "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 372). In Alderman's case, this cognitive estrangement occurs through a complex structural manoeuvre starting with an epigram that is a *very* loose translation from the Book of Samuel I, then proceeding to a frame narrative set five thousand years into the future in which a male author (whose name is an anagram of Naomi Alderman) exchanges emails with a patronising female publisher. This alternate matriarchal reality appears similar to our own but with inverted gender politics. Next, an extract appears from this future's religious text *The Book of Eve* (apparently written thousands of years in that society's past, and our near future) as epigram before the story proper begins in the imagined prehistory of a story world substantively similar to our own patriarchal reality. The breakdown of patriarchy and eventual nuclear apocalypse which the novel describes within this nested story world is thereby positioned as a far-future matriarchal historical fantasy, heretical to that world's dominant religious framework.

The interaction between empirical reality and imagined world is further complicated by how Alderman uses a neo-Victorian *novum* (to borrow Suvin's designation for the fantastic element or technology of any science fictional text). In the nineteenth century, at a moment when "modern communications—the *nerves of empire*—were connecting up remote parts of the world through postal systems, railways, telegraphy, and the laying of submarine cables"

(Stott 297, emphasis added), writers like Edward Bulwer-Lytton (*The Coming Race*, 1871) and Marie Corelli (*A Romance of Two Worlds*, 1886) connected spiritual power and physical health with the ability to control electric energy. In Corelli's romance, the nervous system is described by one character as an "intricate network of fine threads—electric wires on which run the messages of thought, impulse, affection, emotion" (Corelli 38). The novel's visionary guru, Heliobas, states that "every human being is provided *internally* and *externally* with a certain amount of electricity, which is as necessary to existence as the life-blood to the heart or fresh air to the lungs" (76).

Naomi Alderman closely echoes Corelli's terminology, for whom the entanglement of the "threads or wires" of the nervous system are a "confused skein" (38). The fractal patterns Georg Christoph Lichtenberg first observed in the discharge of electrical currents in the eighteenth century—which are often characteristic of lightening burns (Wyatt et al. 266)—are mirrored in both lightening and victim in Alderman's novel: an early victim of electric shock is described as bearing "the trace of a Lichtenberg figure, swirling and branching like a river along his skin up from wrist to elbow as the capillaries burst" (17). According to *The Book of Eve* extract, power resembles "a living thing straining outward," and "the shape that electricity wants to take is of a living thing, a fern, a bare branch" (3). This logic is then applied to the body, which has "inward trees of nerves and blood vessels . . . The power travels within us as it does in nature" and "power travels in the same manner between people; it must be so" (*ibid*.). An essentialised notion of biological destiny hereby becomes the basis for political organisation. The *power* of electricity is both outside and within, material and (through its observation as aesthetic) spiritual. Repeated references to fractal patterning in electrical currents make the effects of this power legible via embodied experience as both scientific discourse and a religiously sanctioned natural order. As teenagers around the world begin to experiment with the power, a graffitied meme starts to appear on buildings and bridges, "a hand like the hand of Fatima, the palm containing an eye, the shock-tendrils extending from the eye like extra limbs, like the branches of a tree" (86). Male journalist Tunde likewise uses tree imagery when describing the spread: "Bud to bud and leaf to leaf. Something new is happening. The scale of the thing has increased" (98). For the graffiti artists and the narrative more broadly, grounding power discursively in the natural world serves to fetishise *and* aestheticise it. This point is emphasised via repetition in the very structure of the narrative itself: threads of multiple stories follow characters across London, Lagos, Alabama, Moldova and beyond. The narrative paths mimic initial reports of skein-power beginning to form a "*vast and spreading web*" (38).

The web that spreads is a concrete manifestation of physical power. It builds person-to-person via physical touch while also growing as a force in social relations. Yet because Alderman's ultimate aim—or, rather, the logic of her "*what if –?*"—is simply to show by its inversion the violent effects of patriarchy, the novel paints the domination of capitalism (and hence its reliance on gender-based oppression) as natural and inevitable. The complex temporal nesting serves only to hypostatise a view of history as linear progress. The far-future narrative framing points to the necessity of capitalist domination as the *only possible* eventual result of the unfolding of history even when human anatomy and gender relations are fundamentally altered.

It is little wonder that in what the frame narrative presents as a "historical novel," antisemitic conspiracy thinking develops as the main force of opposition to the matriarchal revolution. Here, the text powerfully highlights the ideological nature of modern antisemitism and its close relationship to both patriarchal obsessions and conspiracy thinking. Alderman, like Burdekin, links antisemitism to masculinist ideologies, but in *The Power* it is taken up by "nominally libertarian," "Men's Rights" activists not self-defined fascists. When Tunde goes to interview activist UrbanDox, he notes,

> You can't have a good conspiracy plot without any conspirators. He's only surprised that UrbanDox hasn't mentioned Jews.
>   "The Zionists used the concentration camps as emotional blackmail to get the stuff shipped out in the water."
>   There we go. (178)

The humorous confirmation of Tunde's expectations succinctly draws together multiple conspiracies including water adulteration, Holocaust fraud, Zionists (as code for Jews) having secret powers, and (implied) world government. As outlined earlier, when Jewish difference is fetishised (Geller; Postone, "Dualisms"), successful identification of "Jewishness" helps confirm the paranoid (delusional) "truth" of conspiracy. Alderman's text successfully undermines such conspiracy thinking through the physically powerful and strong-willed Jewish protagonist Roxy, whose actions and thinking stand in sharp contrast to the tropes and stereotypes of Jewish women we have seen in Walton and Burdekin's work.[5]

Roxy is one of several individual characters to use newfound physical capacities to co-opt existing structures, naturalising these powers in the process. As gender hierarchies are reversed in patriarchal institutions including armies and mercenary companies, the Catholic Church, Network television and organised crime, nothing else changes: they remain opaque, exclusionary and oppressive. Their hierarchies appear inescapable when one set of masters are

exchanged for another. The text satirically suggests these are the unavoidable seductions of domination. Yet unrelenting focus on a "natural" ability blunts the satire's force. As trans-inclusive anti-racist feminists like Sophie Lewis have shown with respect to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, such "natural" rhetoric tends to ignore and exclude certain types of women and their labour (7, 10-17).

The text's limitations extend from its abstract critique of capitalism as "natural" (see Postone, "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism" 109) to its wider treatment of oppressed groups, in which its sensitivity to the ideological content of modern antisemitism stands in contrast to its superficial representation of diversity via the protagonists' backgrounds: Allie is mixed race African American, Roxy is Jewish, Tunde is Nigerian, Jocelyn is queer (she "quite likes girls. She quite likes boys who are a bit like girls" (Alderman 154)), and Tatiana grew up in poverty. Yet Allie, Roxy and Tatiana are able to use skilled skein-strength to gain political power and material wealth just like wealthy white heterosexual American Margot. Through diverse representation, *The Power* reproduces what Iris Marion Young, leaning on black Marxist and other radical traditions, terms "cultural imperialism," in which, "the oppressed group's experience and interpretation of social life finds no expression that touches the dominant culture, while that same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life" (Young 286-287). Hence, while Allie is a destitute orphan and abuse survivor, once she arrives in the convent the structural barriers facing her are barely mentioned. Likewise, out of keeping with experiences of many travellers from the global South, Tunde never has to apply months in advance for an expensive visa to countries in the global North on his Nigerian passport. Introducing the character Ryan the narrator states, "there have been boys murdered for showing their skein in other, harder parts of the world" (Alderman 153), but if Ryan is—as this phrasing suggests—intersex, then life-altering medically unnecessary surgery is still practiced on intersex children too young to consent to it in the US (InterACT and Human Rights Watch). Cities like Riyadh and Delhi are at times exoticised in throwaway lines, described as "half-built" (59) or "constantly under construction, most of it unsafe" (134) respectively. In Delhi especially, "the streets stink of rot and the pregnant dogs wander, panting, in search of shelter from the sun" (32). Both Saudi and Indian women are encountered in Alderman's novel through the classic Orientalist trope of the angry crowd, as when "the street is filled with the sound" of women ululating in Riyadh (59) or when Tunde joins an animalised "*pack* of women *rampaging* through Janpath market" (133, emphasis added). It is surely significant too that a "men's army" run and financed by the deposed Saudi

Crown Prince on the eastern tip of Europe threatens the new secular-Christian European matriarchal order.

Alderman's narrative estranges patriarchal hierarchy but, with the exception of antisemitism, it fails to address other ways the liberal myths of European Enlightenment and civility reproduce structures of oppression. On the one hand, *The Power* attacks patriarchy while refusing to naturalise femininity as non-hierarchical and co-operative using parody, pastiche and ironic distancing. On the other its representational strategy, naturalisation of capitalist social relations and hermetically sealed narrative structure forecloses structural change and limit critical horizons. Bell hooks once stated, "I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility" (153). It is precisely the *possibility* of openness Alderman's text lacks. Even when placed against Burdekin's utopian desire to transcend or evolve beyond sex and gender binaries, Alderman's novel betrays what Tom Moylan has described as "an anti-utopian disposition that forecloses all transformative possibility" (147).

Resistance and Transformative Speculation

A sense of openness and possibility is critical to maintaining what we may call the *hope* of speculative thinking, a means to examine how even in catastrophic circumstances we can theorise richly detailed alternate worlds and resist resignation to the world as it is. An example of speculative fiction being consciously used as a mode of theorising can serve to show here how such resistance may function. In her short fiction "Ferguson is the Future," Ruha Benjamin provocatively and productively demands of the medical promise of stem-cell regeneration, "*if our bodies can regenerate, why do we perceive our body politic as so utterly fixed?*" (3, italics in original). Benjamin works with intertexts in radical black speculative fiction from W. E. B. Du Bois through Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler and beyond as a form of sociological praxis intended to "formulate a critique of the power/knowledge nexus through narrative" (Benjamin 3). In Benjamin's story, set in 2044, a "Reparations Initiative . . . covers the cost of regenerative medicine for victims of police brutality" (11) using stem-cell technology. Via well-known cases from the 2010s such as seven year-old Aiyana Mo'Nay Stanley-Jones (shot in the head by police in Detroit during a SWAT raid which was being filmed by a reality TV crew) and Michael Garner (killed by a police officer using an illegal chokehold), Benjamin's story uses genome technology to raise questions about abuses of power, the intersection of race and class,

and the structural consequences of disbanding the police. Aiyana lives in a future in which the total transformation of political and economic hierarchies belies an unjust situation where her "rising" is seen as privilege by those who do not qualify for regeneration and attempt to buy illicit replacement organs on the "white market." Despite being a figure with apparent power within the organisation responsible for regeneration, Aiyana's very existence is part of a "moral prophylactic" (17) for an elite whose ultimate aim is to cheat their own mortality. Here, people whose bodies are regenerated after dying at the hands of police violence are repurposed in the service of the perpetuation of social hierarchy by providing material for study and practice (the "power/knowledge nexus") and thereby stripped of the agency of full personhood. As an advertisement for a regeneration agency called "Middle Passage Mitochondria" (13) makes clear, the on-going consequences of slavery are tightly woven into the fabric of capitalism so even after the "2025 Reparations Act" black futures are tied to the historical experience of oppression. This suggests there is no "post-racial" future, much less a reparative framework for racial justice, possible in today's American biopolitical framework. Benjamin's story poses future resistance as a site coterminous with the demands of present resistance: "Ferguson is the Future" means just that—only through Ferguson (as synecdoche for resistance) is any future, much less a *utopian* one, possible.

Unlike Alderman's *The Power* which ties a fictional far future to a fictional near future via symbols like the neo-Victorian skein, Benjamin's text ties together fictional futures to the empirical past and the violence which white supremacy visited upon black people from the establishment of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade onward. To do so Benjamin uses a series of intertextual references, including an image entitled "Cellular Memory, Social Amnesia" which juxtaposes a plan of a crowded slave ship hull with a similarly shaped mitochondria. It also references Octavia Butler's far-future critical utopian *Xenogenesis*[6] trilogy (1986-89), which critiques settler colonialism, racism and gender-based oppression via a historically inflected speculative future. As Sandra Cox argues, "Butler . . . crafts her protagonists' . . . as both the product of settler colonialism and the solution to the hierarchical inequity produced by that colonizing impulse" (50). Like Butler, Benjamin's story demonstrates how a science fictional novum can "estrange the basic narrative world and thus . . . reveal the latter's inner workings or assumptions" (Malmgren 28). Benjamin's references to Butler's trilogy, which opens in the aftermath of an alien "Rapture," signals that she considers social condition for African Americans to be *already* post-apocalyptic due to the collective historical experience of enslavement and incarceration that "saturates black experience in the US" (Mann 68). Butler's postapocalyptic novel frequently draws parallels between historical experiences of

enslavement—including abduction, rape and forced reproduction—and protagonist Lilith Iyapo's experience of "rescue" from an Earth rendered apocalyptically uninhabitable by nuclear war. These echoes suggest that during the Cold War, nuclear apocalypse threatened the whole world with an experience comparable to historical traumas already suffered by groups including most notably (though not only) African Americans.[7]

The term apocalypse, which properly (and etymologically) indicates some form of revelation or unveiling, signals "the end of a *totality* . . . not the sum of all things but the ordering of those things in a particular historical shape" (Williams 5). By considering historical traumas as apocalyptic we may come to accept that, as Evan Calder Williams puts it, "there is no [apocalyptic] event to wait for, just the zones in which these revelations are forestalled and the sites where we can take a stand. This is . . . an effort to refuse either a sense of reconciliation with this world order or an illusion of the ease of bringing it down" (12). Such resistance to reconciliation maintains a sense of possibility without collapsing into narrow wish-fulfilment. We might highlight Burdekin's radically transformative utopianism, the critical uses of history to suggest resonances between historic and contemporary experiences of oppression in Walton's novel, and the cognitive estrangement through which Alderman critiques patriarchy as attempts at such resistance. But Ruha Benjamin's understanding that "race is a technology" central to the historical shape of capitalism (22) moves beyond the limitations of Burdekin's romanticism, Walton's abstraction of the political from the social, and Alderman's reliance on a fetishizing. of the "natural." Put another way, these texts never fully escape the logic of the practices and structures they critique.

In his migration novel *Exit West* Mohsin Hamid likewise takes up this challenge. The novel relies on the slenderest of science fantasy novums: a series of doors leading from one area of the globe to another by which protagonists Nadia and Saeed move from the (unnamed) Syria to Mykonos, London and finally the Bay Area, California. As Nasia Anam notes, the novel centres on "refugees who have already witnessed an apocalyptic civilizational transformation in the homelands from which they escaped" so that social breakdown they experience in London "amounts to no more than another trial to withstand" (674).

Hamid's "*what if. . .*" device allows the overturning of the border regimes by which Betsy L. Fisher argues, "states seek to limit individuals fleeing from persecution from accessing their territory, in an attempt to avoid legal obligations to those individuals" (1122). Using momentary passage through the "darkness" and "opacity" of doorways, Hamid highlights the inscrutable risks of voyaging by land or sea outside international regulatory frameworks, and the anxieties of the travellers for whom such travel is "both like dying and

like being born" (Hamid 98), a phrase oddly echoing the ambivalent opening lines of Octavia Butler's *Dawn* ("Alive! Still alive. Alive. . . again" (3)). The novel points out several times that a productive power of any border is to allow death to traverse upon life, so that in a war-torn city, for example, "a window was the border through which death was possibly most likely to come" (Hamid 68). Nadia and Saeed are subject to forces beyond their control, surviving war, pogroms and destitution. To recall bell hooks, these oppressive structures impose marginality. But the protagonists also demonstrate the strength found in the "marginality one chooses as site of resistance." Not only do they benefit from acts of solidarity and community by others (a place to rest, healthcare provision, protests in favour of their rights), they retain agency in their own acts of community-building and solidarity. They thereby work to counter the political structures of the present as it is, by nurturing spaces of alterity. Hence, Hamid's novel offers both critical reflection upon our own reality and the more utopian possibility of a rupturing of the "solidity of the present from within," to quote Caroline Edwards (65).

Exit West undercuts narratives of "civilizational clash," and the fears of reverse "conquest and colonization" which dominate European discourse by rendering ordinary apocalyptic experiences of war-driven migration. Instead, the "reactionary, retaliatory violence from threatened nativists" (Anam 675) becomes extraordinary. The protagonists refuse the role of insurgent in which the implicitly Christian telos of its European thinking tries to cast them. In contrast to the works I have examined by Burdekin, Walton and Alderman, and more in keeping with Benjamin's use of speculative fiction as theory, Hamid's text steps beyond the logic of the political structures it critiques as it refuses to concretize border regimes—or indeed the nation state—as natural or inevitable. Indeed, the ideology of the nation state is explicitly disrupted as "without borders nations appeared to be somewhat illusory" (Hamid 155). While the fractal patterns of *existing* history grow along linear paths in texts I have examined by Burdekin, Walton and Alderman, Benjamin and Hamid's texts foreground where life has been checked, lines broken, kinship destroyed. In such circumstances historical speculation is necessary to access those roots which are cut off, and the doorways which have been closed on life as it might have been in other imagined futures. Such imaginaries do justice to the past against the injustices of history. They thereby open new possibilities for utopian futurity, centred around community building, acts of solidarity and the agency of people marginalised by contemporary conditions.

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[1] "Theory" derives via French from the late Latin *theoria* meaning "contemplation, speculation," from an ancient Greek word denoting the acts of viewing and contemplating, as well as a spectacle itself ("theory, n.").

[2] The closest thing in the novel to a science fiction *novum* is David Kahn's 1947 invention of modern microfinance banking (a movement usually credited to Muhammad Yunus founding Bangladesh's Grameen Bank in 1983).

[3] Lady Eversley has a female lover as "companion-secretary," Mark Nomansby, Inspector Carmichael and minor character Tibs are gay, while Kahn is bisexual.

[4] The term is oddly placed here since "science fiction" had been a common term since the 1930s (Stableford, Clute and Nicholls).

[5] Significantly too, Roxy refuses any identification with or interest in visiting Israel when her father offers to send her there to hide with cousins (99-100).

[6] Titled *Lilith's Brood* in UK editions.

[7] Kyle P. Whyte makes a similar argument vis-a-vis the experiences of indigenous peoples under settler colonialism. On what he describes as Butler's "pessimistic futurism" in a postapocalyptic landscape, see Mann.