MOUNT ROYAL UNIVERSITY

Recognizing the Alien: Science Fiction Storyworlds and the Reader's Reality

By

Audrey Leaurie Jamieson

A PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS (Honours, English)

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

CALGARY, ALBERTA

December, 2020

ABSTRACT

This project is a critical study of the science fiction storyworld as the platform for the genre to contribute meaningfully to the literary canon. In the process of *world-building*, the author weaves a *fabric* of world elements in the categories of nominal, natural, cultural, and ontological. Through the crafting of an *alien*, secondary world, the author creates binary parallels between the reader's reality and the fictional world. The reader is encouraged to engage with the text by filling the gap between worlds, and thus critically think about their own status quo. The secondary world is formed using *departures* from the current reality and these departures juxtapose the unfamiliar elements with the familiarities that go unchecked because of their ubiquitous nature. The science fiction storyworld disembodies social issues from their human categories and allows the reader to reconsider perspectives while distanced from the self.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Recognizing the Alien: Science Fiction Storyworlds and the Reader's Reality

Introduction	3
Scholarship	4
Storyworld and Literary Gap	9
Analyzing *Bloodchild*	18
Conclusion	26
Works Cited	28

Recognizing the Alien: Science Fiction Storyworlds and the Reader's Reality

Introduction

Storyworld is the defining feature that distinguishes science fiction from other genres. Especially with the genre's rise in visual media, science fiction (SF) is associated with a certain aesthetic, with conventions such as *innovative technology* and *Alien encounters* making the genre easily recognizable. Marketing genre is about setting up expectations, creating a sense of familiarity between the text and the potential reader. Both familiarity and unfamiliarity lie at the heart of science fiction.

SF's unique interplay of familiar and alien within its world-building is the genre's key addition to the literary canon. World-building is accomplished through a series of *departures* from the reality which the reader occupies. These departures create a literary gap between the reader's reality and the storyworld which the reader must fill, to some extent, in order to engage with the text. Because the reader is engaged, there is a willingness to reflect on their reality and expose the status quo, a current status quo that is filled with limitations due to its preoccupation with binaries. The SF storyworlds I will discuss in this essay are built from binaries, using them as tools to reflect critically on the familiar. This includes Octavia Butler, whom I reference frequently for her excellence in the craft of writing, and to honour her contributions to SF, as her writing opened doors for female writers, black writers, and SF writers (Grigsby-Bates) because her storyworlds allow for the deconstruction of these labels.

The SF storyworld is an incubator for both the author and the reader to explore topics while being distanced from themselves. The unfamiliar nature of the storyworld, though also the block that discourages many readers from serious consideration of the work, is the prime tool for SF authors to extricate issues in reality from their human categorical bindings which negate

productive discourse. Science fiction allows the author to craft an "alien" storyworld, using departures from the reader's reality to expose what is familiar in juxtaposition to the alien, thus inviting the engaged audience to contemplate the nature of the status quo.

Scholarship

The contentious history between science fiction and literary fiction (a reductive binary in itself) has been reproduced countless times. Scholars debate the origin of the genre, most attributing it to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, while others attribute the earliest SF to "the origins of recorded history" (Menadue and Cheer 1). "The Golden Age of Science Fiction," largely considered to be the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, cemented genre conventions still used today to deride the entire genre, namely, space/ time travel, Alien encounters, and innovative technology. These elements will recur throughout this essay, as they are part of the aesthetic associated with SF, as well as conventions that contribute to the genre's strengths. According to Mary Hemmings, who analyzed the cover art of Golden Age pulp magazines, these covers "generally presented adventure, strange machines, bizarre alien creatures and other images designed to attract male readers" (Hemmings 83). Though the Golden Age presented women in the categories of Virgins, Amazon Queens, and Good Wives, it also must be acknowledged "that male protagonists tended to be equally as flat and stereotypical, since authors were busy churning stories for pennies a page" (88). Hemmings' statement exemplifies why the dominant association with SF is this Golden Age flatness. It was an oversaturated market concerned with quantity over quality. Now, the market for SF has changed but many of the preconceptions have not. It is considerably more difficult to publish SF, and to reach a wide audience with it, because most literary publishing houses explicitly reject submissions of science fiction. This is based on a survey I performed on the submission guidelines of Canadian, American, and other international literary publishing

houses. The academic world seems to have caught up with SF, with many texts published exploring its critical contribution to fiction. However, publishers, writers, and readers of exclusively literary fiction appear to be left behind, perpetuating a Golden Age image of SF. Meanwhile, the literary techniques specifically afforded to science fiction because of its conventions are overlooked.

Sarah Ditum synthesizes the "genre snobbery" that authors often emit as they perpetuate outdated criticism by publishing novels with clear ties to SF tropes while insisting that the text "isn't science fiction." The insinuation of this claim is that science fiction cannot accomplish the same thematic relevance to human experience that literary fiction can. Household names in literary fiction—such as Ian McEwan and Margaret Atwood—are/ have been ardent in their denial of a relation to "lesser" genre fiction (Ditum). Though not a scholarly source, Ditum's article in *The Guardian* reaches a wider audience and exposes the socially-felt, "de facto" derision, which cannot always be qualified by scholarly evidence. In other words, there are not many articles by scholars tearing down the genre, but authors of speculative fiction are not always treated as writers of "real literature." Ditum does lean on critical theory from Ursula K. Le Guin and Roger Luckhurst to bolster her argument, creating the bridge needed between the rigorous method of scientific/literary studies, and the larger audience who enjoys or wants to enjoy good literature, an act similar to science fiction itself.

Some critics claim hack genre conventions such as space or time travel have narrowed science fiction's scope and the genre is only enjoyed by the SF "addict," the reader so absorbed in the conventions of SF that they are willing to overlook mediocre characterization in order to be immersed in the divergent storyworld, the individual technology being incidental to the experience (Huntington 347). Another camp of critics and readers find the jarring unfamiliarity

of the SF storyworld to be a brick wall of terminology and technology. I have also experienced the SF brick wall, which made William Gibson's *Neuromancer* almost unreadable to me, despite being regarded as a classic of the genre and the birthplace of the cyberpunk subgenre. Both of these camps raise some good points about the standard of good science fiction. However, any genre can become weighed down by the expectations of what has been done before, resulting in recycled and uninteresting writing. Each genre also has its strengths, which stem directly from the nature of the medium.

Currently, SF's greatest obstacle is the expectation of genre. Genre is about categorization in order to familiarize. Science fiction is about the unfamiliar. In 2017, Gavaler and Johnson demonstrated how genre expectations are an obstacle for SF when they performed a scientific study using a sample of 145 participants, dispersing four versions of the same core text, altered by setting and Theory of Mind application. In this study, theory of mind is defined as "'the inference and representation of others' beliefs and intentions,'" (found in Gavaler and Johnson 81). Two versions of the core text were set in a diner, one with and one without expository thinking statements that allowed the reader to access the character's state of mind. These were deemed narrative realism stories because of their storyworld, proving my assertion that the world is the largest factor separating literary and science fiction.. The other two texts were set in a space station gallery, both with and without insight into character thoughts, distinguished by their adherence to SF tropes with words like "airlock" and "antigravity." The study determined that the narrative realism story set in the diner with no thinking statements garnered the same level of audience immersion as the SF story with thinking statements. The authors state that "science fiction with high inference demands may also constitute literary fiction" (Gavaler and Johnson 79). Using the energy requested of the audience to define literary

fiction does not exclude SF from this genre, though the authors of the study conclude that inference demands may be less to blame for lack of reader immersion than reader expectations of the SF story (100). Words like "airlock" insinuate science fiction and the reader turns off their engagement because of preconceptions of genre tropes, associated with an overall lower quality of story (98).

Sometimes genre expectations and familiar conventions are the object of desire, as they are for the ardent SF fan. Writing in 1975, John Huntington distinguishes the literary reader from the SF "addict." The stereotype of the "SF addict" is generally used to deride the genre as a whole, fueling criticism that SF appeals to readers not looking for more substance than space stations and time machines (Huntington 346). Huntington finds "value even in the mediocre hack work" (346) and his essay on "Science Fiction and the Future" is not meant to attack SF, but rather counteract the apologists who have touted SF as an exercise in preparing for the future, saying it "probably does not have the educational value that is claimed for it" (345). He states that SF is a conventional and conservative genre, not because of political alignments, but because of its representation of the now and "its ability to engage a particular set of problems to which science gives rise and which belong, not to the future, but to the present" (345). Addicts and apologists of the genre claim that "SF trains its readers to anticipate the unexpected and helps them to encounter change," but "rather than assaulting the unknown by bold risks of the imagination, [SF] tames the threat of the future and in doing so articulates one aspect of our present human situation in a way no other literary form can" (345). The SF storyworld provides a means for both author and reader to critically engage with human phenomenon. The scientific elements that define the genre are not obstacles for the author or reader to overcome, but integral to the work's ability to engage with the reader's reality. As a more contemporary critic, Marie

Jakober, asserts, SF allows the audience to "look at [the story] in some way where we are not distracted by particular cultural context, where we can consider [reality] for itself, simply as a phenomenon of humankind" (29).

If the difference between science fiction and literary fiction is science, is this the qualifying feature that apparently precludes the genre from serious consideration by many publishing houses? Huntington argues that the SF storyworld and the science/technology within it "is usually as magical as it is scientific" (347). Joanna Russ, a prominent science fiction writer of the 1970s, disagrees, writing that SF "must not offend against [or ignore] what is known" (114). In fact, science fiction which does so is "bad science fiction" (Russ 114). Russ is openly critical of books which have "degenerated into outright adventure story with science fiction frills" (113). While Russ adamantly defends the preservation of science in SF, Huntington acknowledges the paradox created in the very name of "science fiction": "Whereas science deals with necessities, fiction offers freedoms. Whereas science explores and explains what absolutely must happen, fiction creates its own sequences and consequences" (347). The science fiction paradox "that unites…scientific necessity and imaginative freedom" (348) is where the SF reader derives pleasure, finding that freedom in place of necessity "permits us to transcend nature's limitations through control, prediction, and invention. By understanding the law of gravity we can escape Earth" (Huntington 347).

Because of the genre's unique intersection between science and fiction, Russ argues that it must be met with its own conventions of literary criticism. She outlines the limitations of criticism designed for entirely different subjects, and identifies the critic's improper set of tools as a leading cause of the genre's status of inferiority; "[a]pplying the standards and methods one is used to can have only three results: the dismissal of all science fiction as non-literature, a

preference for certain narrow kinds of science fiction… or a misconceiving and misperception of the very texts one is trying to understand" (Russ 118). I agree that a separate set of critical tools is necessary to properly approach SF, but rather than this being based on rigorous scientific research, our critical tools should allow us to appreciate how an SF storyworld can represent a "human phenomenon, and compel the reader to understand it better by living it through story" (Jakober 28). This particular critical lens can apply to all fiction, but in SF, there is the additional factor of how well the narrative "makes us re-imagine things we thought we knew" (30) by demonstrating the familiar as alien, and vice versa. SF's strength is intersecting the observable natural world with imaginative storyworlds, and as Jakober writes,"by lifting [the world] *out* of its familiar contexts [we can search] for the elements that might be universal" (29).

This essay does not intend to proclaim SF as the ultimate mode of storytelling, but rather reasserts Jakober's idea that "factual works, realistic fictions, and speculative fictions all lie along a continuum of meaning, each fulfilling a function the others cannot, each adding to the total of human understanding" (28). Additionally, this essay does not defend all science fiction which has been written, as every genre has contributions on a spectrum of quality. I do, however, wish to provide a basis for the legitimate consideration of SF, not despite its genre conventions, but because of how they are, according to Ken Simpson, an "opportunity to create worlds that [call] contemporary political realities into question [and offer] an indispensable strategy for social change" (56).

Storyworld + Literary Gap

For the purposes of this essay, I will be discussing the *reader's reality*, or the world in which a text exists and is interpreted by an audience. Though I want to acknowledge that individual reader realities differ immensely and this diversity of experience impacts the reading

process, this goes beyond the breadth of this essay. Additionally, SF's implementation of the Alien puts humans into perspective as a unified species, and thus this essay will define the reader reality as the collective history and experiences of humans as a whole.

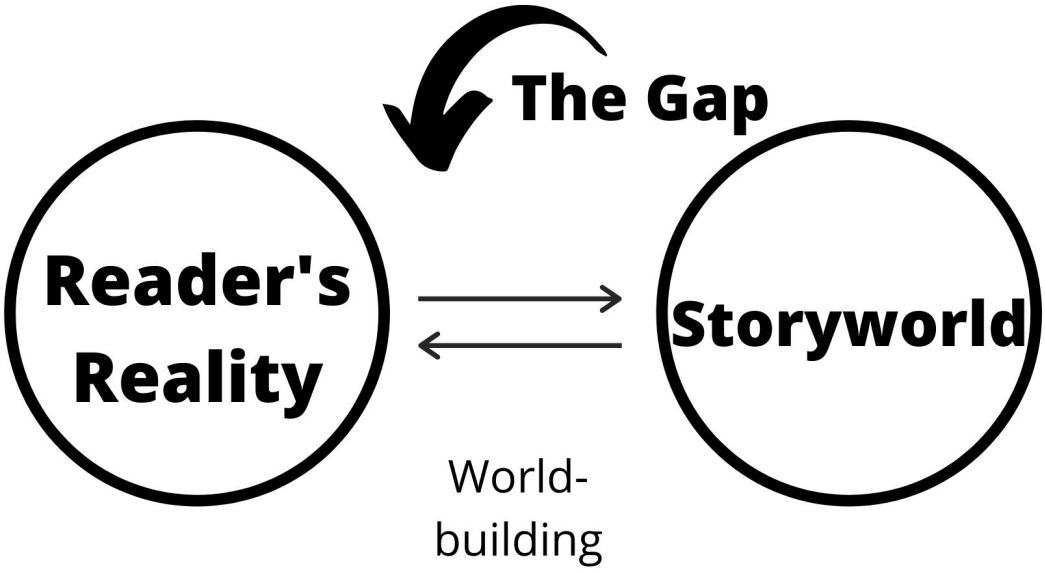
Similar to our own reality, the well-crafted fictional storyworld is inspired and informed by a dynamic and complex collection of history and culture. From the perspective of its characters, the storyworld is reality. All of the complicated and nuanced social conditions that form our reality also make up the well-crafted storyworld. These conditions form the *fabric* of the world. The image of fabric captures the idea of different strands weaving together to form a cohesive whole. This fabric directly influences (or is influenced by) themes discussed within the world's story. This bidirectional influence occurs in the worldbuilding process.

It is critical to define both storyworld and world-building, as they have both been used in different contexts frequently. World-building can describe three actions that occur around the text: "the construction of an imaginary world carried out by an author; the re-construction of this world that a reader performs; and the way in which a world is presented through a text" (Ekman and Taylor). Storyworld does refer to the physical place in which the text is set, but more importantly, it embodies "many varied building-blocks" and can "comprise anything from geographical and topographical details, to flora, fauna, and ecologies, to social groupings and behaviour, political factions and ideologies, and cultural traditions" (Ekman and Taylor). These elements all contribute to the fabric of the storyworld.

As David Gerrold explains in his instructive text *Worlds of Wonder*, "everything you add to the [world] tells us more about the civilization that built it." For example, in Butler's *Dawn*, the Alien species lives in a symbiotic relationship with the organic, living space ships on which they travel. This element of setting demonstrates the convention of innovative technology. It also

shows how the Aliens wish to live in a symbiotic relationship with humans as well. Through interactions between humans and the living ships, the world's fabric contributes to the story question of what it means to be human. The text's dynamic fabric must be understood by the author in order to craft a compelling and verisimilitudinous world, even if this world includes Aliens or time travel. But the author is only one side of the world-building process. The world needs a reader.

The storyworld exists fundamentally as a literary gap, "an opening in the text that is either permanent or requires some degree of filling in order for the text to do its work" (Abbott 107). However, for the argument of this paper, it is easier to visualize the storyworld as its own construct beside the reader's reality, with a gap between them where information is exchanged both ways. This concept is illustrated in the figure below. Abbott explores the idea of the unknown in narrative and the reader's role in filling (or not filling) the gap. His theories can be adapted to my discussion of the distance between storyworld and reader reality. Gail de Vos states that a "crucial aspect to storytelling is its use of the audience to help develop visual detail, to fulfill and co-create the story" (92).



The reader enters any storyworld with the inherent *principle of minimal departure*, where the storyworld is assumed to operate the same as the reader's reality unless told otherwise (Abbott 109). The reader brings their experience—their reality—to the storyworld. The author has created a storyworld through a series of departures from the reader's reality. This is the process by which the reader is distanced from the *self*. If an author sets their story on the moon, "the first and most obvious difference is gravity," which means "physical activity that we take for granted on Earth must be adjusted for lunar gravity" (Gerrold). In Gerrold's statement, the word "adjusted" implies the author is not simply building a radically different world from nothing, but starting from our malleable reality and remodeling it to serve the story. The

audience is not completely baffled by the idea of gravity because it is familiar, taken for granted even, but the reader is now made to think of their own gravity because they are faced with this force in an alien context. This is the power of the SF storyworld.

Science fiction allows for a greater gap between worlds; the audience is entering the genre with a higher suspension of disbelief because they know there will be departures. An author, through their worldbuilding, asks the reader to suspend their disbelief and "imagine what the world would be like if it actually existed" (Wolf 25). Any storyworld should connect with the reader in such a way that it appears as a functioning reality in itself. Regardless of what technology contributes to the fabric of the world, it must engage the reader and compel them to keep reading and continue understanding theme through storyworld. Appealing to Russ' desire for new critical tools, those in the scholarly field of SF have adapted new language for SF criticism.

Critics of speculative fiction distinguish between *primary worlds*—"the material, physical world, as opposed to imaginary worlds made within it" (Wolf 380)—and *secondary worlds*, which exist apart from our natural laws, history, cultures, and people (Ekman and Taylor). The term primary world is similar to that of the reader's reality, but differs in that it does not account for the individual experience brought to the text by the reader.

The secondary world does not operate by the same laws as the reader's reality, but this does not mean it is random. The storyworld is beholden to an internally consistent logic which accounts for its history, cultures, and ideologies; in other words, it "sets up fictional necessities and then obeys them" (Huntington 348). The secondary world resides on the other side of the literary gap and engages the audience in a juxtaposition of the alien and familiar.

The human capability of categorization through contrast and comparison, described by the psychological theory of *schema*, is at its highest in SF storyworlds where extreme jumps in reality or story logic incite the reader to consider "the toxicity of binary thought, especially in its various configurations of self/Other, center/margin and power/powerless" (Schroeder 14). Because they are faced with the unfamiliar, the reader must re-perceive the familiar. In other words, the reader must actively engage with the storyworld in order to perceive the departures and understand how they correlate to their reality. Jakober defines "the phenomenon of Othering" as " the process by which humans decide that another is an Other, both different and inferior" (29-30). I wanted to bring up this definition because science fiction's application of the Alien and other binaries, as Schroeder expands on, contribute to the genre being a platform to portray and deconstruct certain "us versus them," or "Othering" ideologies, if a reader is willing to cross the gap and reflect on their own reality. Certain "storytelling forms require the audience to actively participate in the understanding of the story" (de Vos 93) and science fiction necessitates that the reader reflects on the similarities and differences between their world and that of the text. For example, in Butler's *Dawn*, Nikanj—one of the Oankali (Aliens)—says "she was like a fourth parent to my siblings and me" (79). The line's implication is that Oankali parents usually occur in threes. This is a departure from the audience's traditional two parents (biologically speaking), and thus leads the reader to consider how their reality is constructed around a binary idea of parenthood. The gaps between worlds have different purposes per text, as they are constructed for and contribute to each text's individual theme.

The cyberpunk future of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is a very distant gap as the world is almost beyond conception, especially for the reader unfamiliar with hard SF genre conventions. Other authors choose a smaller gap between themselves and their written world.

Iain Reid presents a more familiar world in *Foe*, setting his story in an old farmhouse, in a time when people are recruited to populate Mars and synthetic humans replace them while they are gone. The futuristic technology of *Foe* is perceived as alien, outside of the reader's realm of possibility, yet the reader can relate to this world, and relate to Junior as he goes to his mundane job at a feed mill. The reader then implicitly agrees to fill the gap between themselves and the alien aspects because they can attach to some level of familiarity. Both Gibson and Reid utilize the first lines of their novels to prepare the audience to enter their storyworld. Gibson begins with "The sky above the port was the colour of television, tuned to a dead channel" (3), immediately placing the audience inside the port, staring upwards at an atmosphere of neon static. The mention of television hints that this storyworld will be predicated on innovative technology, but with a signature sci-fi rot around the edges. The scholar Lars Schmeink would call this "[tipping] over into the dystopian" (155). Alternatively, Reid begins with "Two headlights…. Odd because of the distinct green tint" (3). The first image is familiar, imaginable, but perverse and unnerving due to its unnatural colour. Reid replicates this twisting of the known into the disturbing throughout his novel as departures from reality are introduced to the audience, demonstrating how this is an SF storyworld.

Kazuo Ishiguro's first lines in *Never Let Me Go* are subtle in their introduction of the science fiction storyworld, but simultaneously replicate the rest of the novel's style of dispensing departures from the reader's reality: "My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for eleven years" (3). Being a first person narrative, the opening lines of the book introduce the speaker in an innocuous manner and only the second-time reader will identify the peculiarity of her introduction with only a letter for a last name, symbolic of the dehumanization inflicted on children who were genetically constructed to grow and eventually

donate their organs. Similarly, Ishiguro nonchalantly introduces the term "carer," and later the "donor," without definition. The narrator already steeped in the storyworld does not need this exposition, and thus the audience must engage with the storyworld in order to uncover the words' meaning.

In the discussion of crafting storyworld, it is important to identify what I distinguish as *entrance stories* and *immersion stories*. In entrance stories, the protagonist is brought into the new storyworld and thus acts as a surrogate for the reader in discovering how the world operates. Octavia Butler's *Dawn* is an example of the entrance story, as the protagonist wakes up among an Alien species, and the audience learns some storyworld details alongside the main character. Immersion stories, on the other hand, are crafted with protagonists who already understand the world, and thus the author must find alternative methods for constructing the storyworld on the page of the text. Returning to Ishiguro, the journey through Kathy's childhood narrative replicates disjointed memory in its nonlinear reveal of information; the audience only fully understands the science fiction nature of the storyworld at the climax of the novel, when it is revealed that Kathy herself is not exactly human, merely a walking petri dish for the cure to cancer. Gibson, Reid, and Ishiguro implement the gap between reader reality and storyworld in dramatically different ways. However, each constructs their storyworld by intentionally departing from the reader's reality, utilizing science fiction's dimension of possibility.

In discussing any fiction, it must be disclaimed that authorial world-building cannot be fully known by anyone other than the author, and all subsequent assertions about storyworld are interpretive (Ekman and Taylor). Secondly, the audience's reactions towards world-building that I discuss come from "an ideal reader who understands and reacts to information in the text as we,

the critics, would have them do" (Ekman and Taylor). Thus, this essay will focus on what SF storyworlds have the potential to accomplish by utilizing their conventions.

SF storyworlds are criticized for recycling conventions of the genre without sufficient adaptation to make it unique. A heavy leaning on traditions of Aliens or time travel can be derivative, but it can also be used to focus the audience's attention on the text's core meaning. Soft science fiction is not always concerned with properly conveying the quantum mechanics behind space travel, and instead dwells in the relationship between characters and the storyworld they are exploring. Within writing, "[t]he use of stereotypes… assists in the immediate transmission of information about the characters or setting without having to furnish a great amount of detail" (de Vos 93). Obviously, in both writing and real life, stereotypes can be lazy or used to discriminate. In literature though, stereotypes, archetypes, and conventions are traditions used for economic storytelling. Conventions can be utilized to balance the text in terms of what is and is not known. The role of the author is to selectively release information, presenting enough familiar that the reader can engage with the material, and enough unfamiliar that they engage with their own reality.

By familiar, I mean the subjects which spark a connection to the reader, such as in *Foe*, where the story is set in a farmhouse and we follow Junior's morning routine of getting coffee. I am also referring to the deeper-set familiarities that go unchecked because "all cultures and all histories encourage us to accept certain givens—certain assumptions, certain beliefs, certain ways of thinking" (Jakober 30). The SF storyworld has the power to disassemble these "givens" by presenting what could be, and inviting the reader to reflect on what is.

In *Foe*, the audience's expectations are overturned when we discover that the protagonist, the character we have been rooting for, is actually a synthetic recreation of the real Junior. By

telling the story through the lens of a synthetic human, Reid invites us to question how we connect and empathize with other beings whom we may assume have no similarities to us. The innovative technology of synthetically recreated humans indicates the goals of this futuristic society while simultaneously adding to the fabric of the storyworld. This fabric also contributes to the theme of Othering, as throughout the story the idea of synthetic humans is viewed as uncomfortable and unfamiliar. Yet, they are shown through the replica Junior's perspective to be living, feeling beings with emotions with which the audience can empathize. In this way, the genre conventions that often contribute to the fabric of an SF storyworld also directly influence theme.

To summarize thus far, the science fiction storyworld is one that is alien, unfamiliar, based on science, and constructed from our current reality. The storyworld must adhere to an internally consistent logic or set of storyrules constructed around the fabric of the world. This fabric must be known by the author, and given to the reader through story. The reader then brings their own knowledge and experience (which make up their reality) to the text, and thus both parties contribute to worldbuilding. This action, the process of filling the gap between worlds, is the critical momentum of the SF storyworld to inspire reflection on the status quo, or the familiarities taken for granted. Marie Jakober writes, "We rarely concern ourselves with entrenched patterns of behaviour until we are persuaded that there is something wrong with those patterns" (30). Science fiction presents a dynamic storyworld that does not just show dystopian consequences of world issues, but persuades the audience to enter the world and believe these possibilities and consequences to be true.

Analyzing Bloodchild

Though the storyworld may present as bizarre to the reader stuck in their reality, Mark J.P. Wolf appreciates "fiction's truth-value" and "its unique position between actuality and unreality" (18). In his instructive text *Building Imaginary Worlds*, Wolf uses a model similar to mine to distinguish the storyworld from the reader's reality. He adapts Samuel Taylor Coleridge's idea of the Primary and Secondary Imagination. The Primary Imagination "allows us to coordinate and interpret our sensory data, turning them into perceptions with which we make sense of the world around us" (Wolf 21). This concept relates back to the psychological theory of schema, and the idea of lifting issues out of their categorical bindings of context. Once we perceive something in a specific way, it is difficult to change that perception. This is why the familiar becomes numb; we are no longer needing or trying to perceive. Thus, the familiar must be disembodied, and the reader's perceptions shaken, in order to decontextualize and criticize the status quo. The Secondary Imagination affords this decontextualization, as it "'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates' the concepts and elements of the world around us so as to recreate something new with them" (21-2). These two imaginations give rise to the primary and secondary worlds.

Butler's "Bloodchild" offers a classic example of constructing a complete secondary world, where humans have become submissive to an Alien species called Tlic. The humans enter Tlic families as designated hosts of the Tlic eggs, fertilizing them until they are ready to be removed painlessly. The story centers around Gan, a boy designated from birth to be a host, as he witnesses a birthing process go wrong.

Butler demonstrates the creation of storyworld through departures within the first two lines: "My last night of childhood began with a visit home. T'Gatoi's sisters had given us two sterile eggs" (499). The opening line introduces the reader to the familiar theme of growing up or a loss of innocence. The audience is brought into the story through a recognition of familiar

expectations. However, Butler immediately demonstrates the unfamiliar, introducing the idea of people giving away sterile eggs casually. And Butler isn't talking about chicken eggs. In this way, Butler destabilizes expectations from the opening paragraph.

But how does Butler recontextualize the familiar? She portrays the nuanced relationship between Lien, who is Gan's mother, and T'Gatoi, the Tlic who claimed Gan to be her host. Lien jokes that she "'should have stepped on [T'Gatoi] when [she was] small enough,'" hinting at a jovial kinship between them (Butler 500). But Lien is also protective of her son, saying "'Nothing can buy him from me'" (501). These opposing emotions set the foundation for their relationship. This relationship informs the interaction between T'Gatoi and Gan as well, as she prods him with one of her many limbs, saying that Gan is "too skinny" (499). In light of Lien and T'Gatoi's relationship, the interaction reads like a stereotypical aunt or family friend commenting on healthy weight. However, as the true nature of Gan and T'Gatoi's relationship is established, this line is recontextualized by the fact that T'Gatoi is priming Gan for what is essentially pregnancy, but in an alien context where the babies can eat their host from the inside out if not removed in time. A pleasant image, to be sure.

The SF details of *Bloodchild* classify it firmly within the genre, but more importantly they establish a world that feels full, complete, and known by the author. Wolf articulates that a storyworld feels full when "enough information is present both to raise questions and suggest answers about the missing pieces in the world's history and organization" (198). We can bring this into conversation with Abbott's definition of the literary gap, described as "an opening in the text that is either permanent or requires *some degree* of filling in order for the text to do its work" (emphasis added 107). A storyworld does not need every hole filled with expository detail. In fact, this is discouraged. But through the text, the reader should gain a sense that this

secondary world stretches beyond what is written. According to Wolf, the "completeness of a world is what makes it seem as though it extends far beyond the story, hinting at infrastructures, ecological systems, and societies and cultures whose existence is implied but not directly described or clearly shown" (42). For example, Gan tells of how his mother taught him "to be respectful and always obedient because T'Gatoi was the Tlic government official in charge of the Preserve, and thus the most important of her kind to deal directly with Terrans" (Butler 499). There is a lot to unpack in this short segment. Firstly, the reader gets a sense of the overarching laws that govern this society where Aliens rule and humans are cordoned off to a private piece of land. Humans being designated as "Terrans," in reference to their planetary origins, suggests that this world is not set on Earth and we are entering a very divergent secondary world. However, every detail of this alien world contributes to the story, which in turn invites reflection on the reader's reality.

In order to fully unpack Butler's storyworld, I want to use the framework of Wolf's four realms of world-building departures, or ways the storyworld diverges from the reader's reality (35). These realms are the nominal, natural, cultural, and ontological, and are instructive in both criticism and creative writing. The nominal realm describes the changing of names. This can be a powerful tool of the SF storyworld as "[n]ew names may call attention to different aspects of familiar things, or even define new concepts, since language bears an inherent cultural worldview within it" (Wolf 35). Butler uses the word "host" to describe the carriers of Tlic young. The word carries a clinical, detached tone, which alludes to the almost business-like transactions of hosts being sold to Tlic families. T'Gatoi, as ambassador of the Preserve, "[sells humans] to the rich and powerful for their political support" (Butler 500). Gan's character arc is

about disillusionment and critically considering whether he is just a commodity to T'Gatoi. As Butler signaled in her opening line, this is a story about a loss of innocence.

Returning to the idea of immersion stories, Gan is already aware of the ontological workings of his own world. His position as child allows him to sometimes work as a point of entrance for the reader, but mostly Butler must find alternative ways to deliver world through story. When T'Gatoi brings a sick man, Lomas, inside, she calls him "N'Tlic." This is the first time the audience is introduced to this term. Gan, already a part of the world, only asks, "'Here? Alone?"' (502). The audience is cued that something is wrong, but it is only when Gan comments that Lomas "was thinner than he should have been" (502), that the audience recalls the priming information I discussed earlier about hosts needing a healthy weight. The term N'Tlic, thus referring to a host, indicates the submission of the human species, where they adopt the title of their sovereigns. A contradictory reading of N'Tlic could propose that the name indicates "the joining of families, putting an end to the final remnants of the earlier system of breaking up Terran families to suit impatient Tlic" (500). In either reading, or in any other interpretation a reader may have, the audience pieces together the information, rather than it being directly stated. If the name's meaning was explained, there would be less of a gap, and less room for the reader to bring their own reality to the reading, thus having a less unique reading experience.

Moving into the natural realm, departures of this kind "include not only new land masses…but new kinds of plants and animals, and new species and races of creatures" (Wolf 36). The term "storyworld" is often associated only with geographical details, but Butler actually does very little to build the physical world. T'Gatoi speaks of Gan's "ancestors, fleeing from their homeworld" (Butler 510), confirming this is not Earth, but very little else is done to topographically map the world. On the level of new creatures, achti are domestic animals with

"about three times as many teeth" as Gan, which his mother raises for their fur (503). This detail adds a sense of economy to the world, and in just this small mention, alludes to a greater world than is on the page. But this worldbuilding also directly drives the story (or the story drives the worldbuilding), as Gan shoots the achti with a gun so that T'Gatoi can use it as a host for the worms hatching inside Lomas' body. The killing of the achti is an impactful step in Gan's character journey towards self-actualization, while also a departure that contributes to the fabric of the secondary world.

Next, the cultural realm "consists of all things made by humans (or other creatures), and in which new objects, artifacts, technologies, customs, institutions, ideas, and so forth appear" (Wolf 35). As I already mentioned, Lien is not willingly sacrificing her son's body, but is following the customs as per the culture established in this world. Her resistance to this culture is to "[promise] T'Gatoi one of her children," as Lien "would have to give [one] to someone, and she preferred T'Gatoi to some stranger" (Butler 501). These customs are informed by the violent past hinted at between Terrans and the Tlic, when "whole Terran families [were] wiped out in reprisal back during the assassinations" (504). Again, Butler interweaves worldbuilding with story when Gan sees "a car coming toward the house….[but since] Terrans were forbidden motorized vehicles except for certain farm equipment, [he] knew this must be Lomas' Tlic with… a Terran doctor" (506). Prohibiting humans from motorized vehicles reinforces the theme of cages and being trapped, which I will discuss shortly. The mention of farm equipment also indicates an economy where the Terrans are subjected to this physical labour for survival. Alternatively, it could be read as the Tlic and Terrans having a symbiotic relationship. The gap between the cultures of Gan's and the reader's realities means both of these interpretations, and many more, are valid, depending on what the reader is bringing to the text.

Finally, we enter the ontological realm of departures, "which determines the parameters of a world's existence, that is, the materiality and laws of physics, space, time, and so forth that constitute the world" (Wolf 36). In this world, Tlic cannot reproduce by themselves, requiring an external host, whether this is an animal or Terran, but Gan states that "Tlic from Terran bodies were always larger as well as more numerous" (Butler 507). The natural laws of this storyworld propel the story into being. Though it appears that there is a choice between using a host animal and a Terran, this is really an illusion. All Gan wants is a choice. In an argument with T'Gatoi, he confronts this desire, saying, "'No one ever asks us….You never asked me"' (510). Gan's internal struggle is externalized, mapped over the storyworld. Gan's brother, Qui, "began running away" when he was young, "until he realized there was no 'away.' Not in the Preserve. Certainly not outside" (507). Both brothers are running in a cage where the only possibility is to return home and face a choice that was made for them. How is this a reflection of the reader's reality? The cage storyworld allows Butler to explore themes of reproductive rights and their limitations on choice.

Bloodchild is a science fiction narrative about the gendered nature of parenthood and a woman's choice to create a family, despite a male protagonist and a setting among an Alien species. The storyworld's alien setting allows for the story's content to be separated from gender issues plaguing culture at the time Butler was writing, and that continue to affect people today. The default expectation of motherhood placed on women limits choice. The storyworld removes this discourse from the turbulent context of "men vs women," a reductive binary within our reality, and instead isolates the issue to the role of "birther" and how this person, in this case Gan, should be given a choice in the matter. Context cannot be completely detached and thus still interacts with the text to make parallels and observations. The extremification of the birthing

process makes it alien, but also, if the reader reflects on their own reality, alludes to the parasitic nature of human pregnancy. I mean this in the truest sense of the term. Even Gan knows "birth [is] painful and bloody, no matter what" (506).

As Gan was marked from a young age as T'Gatoi's host, he "had spent most of [his] time with T'Gatoi while [his] brothers and sisters were learning the family business" (503). This correlates with women's designated role as birther and how the stereotypes attached to this role preclude them from other roles in society. Butler uses the departure from the reader's reality to demonstrate the ridiculousness of this expectation. When there is a need for Gan to protect his family—when he must kill the achti—he struggles because he was never taught those skills, due to his assigned position from birth.

Juxtaposing alien with familiar, Butler also imbues the story and the birthing process with elements of the grotesque to give perspective to the expectation so casually asked of women. Lomas' "babies" are much more insidious to their host than their human parallels, as "they would eat any flesh except its mother's" (505). In Lomas' stomach, T'Gatoi sees "movement on the right side—tiny, seemingly random pulsations moving his brown flesh" and when she removes the first grub, it is "fat and deep red with his blood—both inside and out" (505). Only because of the science fiction storyworld and horror elements is Butler able to capture this birth scene which might otherwise be portrayed as beautiful and ethereal. The birthing process is marketed as a natural part of a woman's life in the reader's reality, but when Gan sees the consequences of being a host, he realizes he just wants a choice in whether or not he partakes.

By tying Gan's emotional arc to the parameters of the storyworld, Butler proves that world-building and theme are inextricably linked in science fiction. Wolf also points out that "world information that does not actively advance the story may still provide mood and

atmosphere, or further form our image of characters, places, and events" (29). In this assertion, the word "may" should be replaced with "must." Everything on the page still needs to have purpose. World-building should accomplish one of the tasks Wolf mentions in order to be considered appropriate to the story and the text, even if the information is not driving the plot.

Returning to *Bloodchild*, Butler shows T'Gatoi reading Lomas' name from an arm band and Gan "[feeling his] own arm band in sympathy" (503). This ultimately extraneous world detail is an easy way to learn the unconscious man's name, but it also contributes to the idea of Terrans being a caged, segregated, and patrolled group. Butler thus references the countless times in primary world history where people have been given identity markers, encouraging the reader to reflect on their reality. Wolf admits to a common criticism of speculative fiction, saying these "works often exhibit an 'encyclopedic impulse' for explanatory interludes; points at which the narrative halts so that information about the world and its inhabitants can be given" (30). These expository statements should be kept to an absolute minimum. As Butler proves, there are so many other ways to build the world into the story while keeping the reader immersed. The audience has to fill the gap for themselves in order to interpret and engage with the storyworld. This is the epicenter of science fiction's entertainment, as well as its contribution to the Literary canon.

Conclusion

In science fiction, the author presents a storyworld that has elements of the alien, unfamiliar, and scientific, and is ultimately inspired by the reader's reality. Wolf's framework of four realms offers concrete critical tools and terminology for the study of science fiction worlds, as Joanna Russ wanted, along with much emerging scholarship in speculative fiction studies. Early scholarship obsesses over SF's placement within or outside of the literary sphere, and the

strengths or weaknesses of genre tropes that traditionally categorize SF as "genre fiction." However, contemporary critics have more room to discuss the reflection SF has on our reality, as it is becoming recognized as a respectable topic of study. This critical reading appropriately illuminates the science fiction elements which are its greatest assets for representing reality in a disembodied state, where it can be considered for itself. SF's objective ability to discuss the "Other" feels like a meta-commentary on both its turbulent history in the literary sphere, and the labeling and categorization that seems to fund human behaviour. The binary between primary and secondary worlds is the foundation for portraying other binaries, deconstructing the toxicity of their perpetuation.

I have now laid the groundwork for the theory that a gap exists between the reader's reality and the storyworld, one which encourages the reader to engage with the text by filling in said gap. Every secondary world is divergent from the primary world. Though the alternative reality of science fiction storyworlds allows current societal issues to be disembodied from their human categorical bindings, that human context is inseparable from the fictitious parallels. The storyworld is considered successful when it presents and adheres to an internally consistent logic or set of story rules. To use Wolf's terminology, departures of the nominal, natural, cultural, and ontological realms must be consistent. The author must understand this fabric of the world in order to craft a coherent and verisimilitudinous world, even when writing about spaceships and alternate realities. After the author has their world on the page, world-building becomes a process between the text and the reader. The author, the reader, and the text are all integral players in the world-building process. The reader brings their own knowledge and experience, or in other words, their reality, to the text. The reader supplies the necessary momentum for the SF

storyworld to reflect on the status quo, or the familiarities taken for granted, as they actively engage with the text and fill the gap, making connections between worlds.

Works Cited

Abbott, H. Porter. *Real Mysteries: Narrative & The Unknowable,* Ohio State University Press, 2013.

Butler, Octavia. "Bloodchild." *Science Fiction: The Science Fiction Research Association Anthology*, Harper Collins, 1988, pp. 499-515. Print.

_____ . *Dawn*, Warner Books, 1987. Print.

De Vos, Gail. "Storytelling and Folktales: A Graphic Exploration." *The Influence of Imagination*, Ed. by Lee Easton and Randy Schroeder, McFarland & Company, 2008, pp. 92-98.

Ditum, Sarah. "'It drives writers mad': why are authors still sniffy about sci-fi?" *The Guardian*, April 18 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/18/it-drives-writers-mad-why-are-authors-still-sniffy-about-sci-fi. Web.

Ekman, Stefan and Taylor, Audey Isabel. "Notes Towards A Critical Approach to Worlds and World-building." *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*, Volume 3, Issue 3, pages 7–18.

Gavler, Chris and Johnson, Dan. "The genre effect: A science fiction (vs. realism) manipulation decreases inference effort, reading comprehension, and perceptions of literary merit." *Scientific Study of Literature*, Volume 7:1, November 2017, pp. 79-108.

Gerrold, David. "To Build A World." *Worlds of Wonder: How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Writer's Digest Books, 2001.

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*, Ace Publishing, Ace trade paperback edition (author introduction and Womack afterword), December 2018. Print.—

Grigsby Bates, Karen. “Octavia Butler: Writing Herself Into The Story.” *Code Switch* from NPR, July 10 2017, https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/07/10/535879364/octavia-butler-writing-herself-into-the-story. Web.

Hemmings, Mary. “The Changing Role of Women in Science Fiction: *Weird Tales*, 1925-1940.” *The Influence of Imagination*, Ed. by Lee Easton and Randy Schroeder, McFarland & Company, 2008, pp. 83-91.

Huntington, John. “Science Fiction and the Future.” *College English*, Vol. 37, No. 4, December 1975, pp. 345-352.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*, Vintage Canada Edition, Vintage Canada, 2010. Print.

Jakober, Marie. “The Continuum of Meaning: A Reflection on Speculative Fiction and Society.” *The Influence of Imagination*, Ed. by Lee Easton and Randy Schroeder, McFarland & Company, 2008, pp. 27-31.

Menadue, Christopher Benjamin and Cheer, Karen Diane. “Human Culture and Science Fiction: A Review of the Literature, 1980-2016.” *SAGE Journals*, Volume 7, Issue 3, August 3 2017, pp. 1-15. https://journals-sagepub-com.libproxy.mtroyal.ca/doi/10.1177/2158244017723690. Web.

Reid, Iain. *Foe*, Simon & Schuster, First Edition, August 7 2018. Print.

Russ, Joanna. “Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction.” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, July 1975, pp. 112-119.

Schmeink, Lars. “Individuality, Choice, and Genetic Manipulation.” *Biopunk Dystopias*, Liverpool University Press, January 27 2017, pp. 146-178. http://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/31629. Web.

Schroeder, Randy. “Introduction: Polarities at the Singularity.” *The Influence of Imagination*, Ed. by Lee Easton and Randy Schroeder, McFarland & Company, 2008, pp. 5-26.

Simpson, Ken. “‘Dancing on the Edge of the World’: California and Utopia in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home*.” *The Influence of Imagination*, Ed. by Lee Easton and Randy Schroeder, McFarland & Company, 2008, pp. 55-69.

Wolf, Mark J. P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: the theory and history of subcreation*, Taylor and Francis Group, 2012.