



Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and  
Fantasy Research  
journal.finfar.org

Book Review:

*Dis-Orienting Planets: Racial Representations of Asia in Science  
Fiction*

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Lavender, Isiah, III, editor. *Dis-Orienting Planets: Racial Representations of Asia in Science Fiction*. UP of Mississippi, 2017. ISBN 978-1496811523

Given his centrality to the study of race in science fiction, it is fitting that Isiah Lavender III begins the introduction to *Dis-Orienting Planets: Racial Representations of Asia in Science Fiction* autobiographically, showing how he was interested from a young age in stereotypes of techno-Orientalism and ‘Japanese cool.’ Later, he writes, these influences enriched his understanding of inaccurate, yet pervasive, Orientalist visions of Asia. His volume revisits these visions in the context of comparative racialization and the Orientalist imaginary to dispel and dismantle essentializing views of Japan, China, India, and Korea. His titular modifier is more than a timely call to ‘diss’ paternalistic and reductive stereotyping; it further argues for the necessity of ‘disorientation.’ Rather than connoting ‘a lost sense of direction,’ as ‘disorientation’ often does, here the term takes on a sense of looking to the stars anew to chart fresh courses, signaling the importance of Darko Suvin’s notion of “cognitive estrangement” to the effort (and to sf studies at large). Moving beyond Western-centric (often white) ways of envisioning the world can be disorienting, but productively so; Lavender highlights the revolutionary aspects of speculative fiction and hopes it “knocks our planet from its regular spin,” leading to a more inclusive orbit (10).

This volume therefore fits into the body of work on race, globalization, and decolonization that has been growing in sf studies for the past decade. Representative examples of Anglophone scholarship looking to Asia including a 2008 special issue of *MELUS*, a 2013 special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* on Asian sf, and one from 2016 on Indian sf. There have also been a number of edited collections, epitomized by *Robot Ghost and Wired Dreams* (2007) and *Techno-Orientalism, Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media* (2015). *Dis-Orienting Planets* adds vitally to the conversation already in progress, following Lavender’s *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011) and *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction* (2014). It acknowledges the niches to which Asia and Asians are often relegated, complicating and expanding beyond them to provide an importantly polyvocal purview.

Lavender divides this volume into three sections: “First Encounters” (four chapters), “Fear of a Yellow Planet” (eight chapters), and “Dis-Orienting Planets” (five chapters), centered respectively on the frisson of politics and race, the intersection of ‘Yellow Peril’ tropes and techno-Orientalism, and reconsidering inclusivity through fandom and cross-species kinship.

“First Encounters” begins with Veronica Hollinger’s “Estrangements of Science Fiction,” which follows up a special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* (2013) on Chinese sf that Hollinger co-edited. This essay suggests five ways that Chinese sf approaches the genre differently than Anglo-American sf and lauds it as “the language of globalization,” quoting *The Guardian*’s Damien Walter. This opening sets the stage for the rest of the volume, reminding the reader that comparisons are only valuable so far; Chinese sf is a different sort of sf, not a reductive, hybridized, or misshapen beast. Hollinger’s essay is of great interest for its content as well as its publication history: at the end of the essay the reader learns that the piece was originally published in Chinese translation in 2015, practicing its own message of contesting long-held notions of center and periphery. In the second essay, also previously published, Takayuki Tatsumi investigates two issues too rarely discussed in sf studies and in general: the aftermath of the atomic bombing of Japan and black humor, calling upon works from both the United States and Japan. Highlighted texts include Brian Aldiss’s controversial “Another Little Boy” (1966); Yasutaka Tsutsui’s “Everyone Other Than Japan Sinks” (1973); and Karen Tei Yamashita’s “Siamese Twins and Mongaloids” (1999). In such texts, black humor provides a wake-up call from amnesiac ideational saturation stemming from ongoing wars, normalized racism, and naturalized social taxonomies.

Next, Uppinder Mehan interweaves experiential commentary with his confrontation of ethnographic extrapolation in representations of India and Indians. Mehan contrasts the exoticizing gazes in Roger Zelazny’s *Lord of Light* (1967) and Arthur C. Clarke’s *Rendezvous with Rama* (1972), which appropriate, negate, and textually domesticate Indian cultural and scientific authenticity, with Ian McDonald’s more appreciative yet still touristy *River of Gods* (2004) and *Cyberabad Days* (2009). Conversely, Anuradha Marwah’s *Idol Love* (1999), Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Escape* (2008), and Rimi Chatterjee’s *Signal Red* (2005) avoid the schisms between technology, religion, and the mundane that the exemplar non-Indian authors often extrapolate into being. The last essay of this section, by Stephen Hong Sohn, asks what is specifically Korean about Korean American sf. The tension surrounding heteronormativity in Yoon-Ha Lee’s “Wine” (2014) questions the biopowered impulses of military technogeometries, the navigation of land, plot, and characters through warfare. Sohn finds these military technogeometries sustain a specter of perpetual war that typifies the genre in Korea and reflects the reality of its history of invasions.

The volume’s longest section, “Fear of a Yellow Planet,” opens with two essays that acknowledge the nineteenth century’s complex legacy. Amy J. Ransom probes into M. P. Shiel’s Yellow Peril novels: *The Yellow Danger* (1898), *The Yellow Wave* (1905), and *The Dragon* (1913 (later *The Yellow Peril* (1929))). Known to exploit and exacerbate narratives of racial hierarchies and the supposedly invasive threat of Asia to the West, Shiel’s works also contradictorily reject narratives of white supremacy. This ideological tug of war, Ransom argues, arose from a polarized cultural schema, which in turn led to the West Indian author’s own disjunctive sense of identity. Timothy J. Yamamura ponders narratives of domestic and intergalactic invasion, concentrating on how nineteenth-century diplomat and astronomer Percival Lowell’s ethnographic writings on Japan and scientific theories about Mars together serve to illuminate the multifaceted issue of “aliens” and alienation, in both cases mirroring back the image of the perceiver. Yamamura astutely finds that Lowell superimposes his impressions of Japan onto Mars, locating utopian possibilities such as alternatives to both capitalist modernity and cultural and racial superiority.

Moving from fantasies of the stars to those closer to home, Stephanie Li, Malisa Kurtz, and Haerin Shin investigate corporeal applications of techno-Orientalism. Li considers sexual fetishization / wishful youth vampirism in Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) while Kurtz looks to the reification of biopolitical valuations in Linda Nagata’s *The Bohr Maker* (1995) and Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* (2002). Shin explores the place where desire and commodification meet, looking to the evacuating yet eroticizing simulacrum of exoticized,

racialized bodies in the 2013 film *Cloud Atlas*, based on David Mitchell's 2004 novel, and *Robotskins*, a 2007 Philips TV commercial.

For Baryon Tensor Posadas, biopolitics and techno-Orientalism also come together in colonial discourse, which continues to limit imagined futurity in both Japan Studies and Japanese cyberpunk. However, humor, specifically satire, provides means to subvert these concretizations. To illustrate, Posadas utilizes Gorō Masaki's *Venus City* (1992). Likewise reflecting cultures against one another, Bradford Lyau strives to locate two of Cixin Liu's Three Body trilogy novels within a global purview, placing it within Chinese and alongside Western frameworks, particularly Voltaire's philosophy. The final selection in "Fear of a Yellow Planet" returns the reader to the section's strongly thematic fold: Jeshua Enriquez shows how capitalism-driven internalized oppression intensifies the production of model citizens as well as racial commodification in Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014).

Having built upon the theoretical firmament of the first two sections, the final and strongest section, "Dis-Orienting Planets," stretches more expansively, introducing paths less well-trodden in studies of Asian sf and sf more generally. It begins with two essays on the power of fandom, looking at the way fans often generatively combine cultural and political activism. Robin Anne Reid engages with how fans reacted to M. Night Shyamalan's 2008 filmic adaptation of the popular anime *The Last Airbender*, particularly the casting of white actors to play hitherto non-white characters. Aligning the work of activist fandom such as participating in LiveJournal communities, postcard campaigns, and other productively disruptive engagements with critical race scholarship, Reid calls for a destratifying recognition of fans' and scholars' common work. Tied companionably to this campaign for diversity in popular media is Cait Coker's "The Mako Mori Fan Club." Coker considers how Guillermo del Toro's 2013 film *Pacific Rim* serves as a mouthpiece for non-mainstream conceptions of personal and interpersonal diversity. Fans celebrate the film's Asian female protagonist in particular, seeing in her a hero for a new, more inclusive age. Suparno Banerjee shifts the focus to India and the implications of speculative visions of heroism for its emerging geopolitical realities. He writes that the future war motif in Indian sf has changed from "an anti-colonial initiative" to disillusioned extrapolation, contrasting the British writer Humphrey Hawksley's *Dragon Fire* (2000) with the Indian author Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* (2001).

The final two essays of the volume move yet further into the periphery. Graham Murphy explores how the (acknowledged) impact of Edward O. Wilson's conception of biophilia, a deep-rooted affiliative kinship with the natural world, plays out in Vandana Singh's "Entanglement" (2014) and "Are You Sannata 3159?" (2010). Murphy argues the latter magnifies the dystopian costs of anti-biophilia and dis-entanglement, as human and non-human animals alike are consumed by voracious urban centers and an insatiable economic sprawl. Pressing the entanglement clause forward, Joan Gordon's "Intersubjectivity and Cultural Exchange in Kij Johnson's Novels of Japan" steadies readings of Johnson's fantastic epistolary novels *The Fox Woman* (2000) and *Fudoki* (2003) on Gordon's own theory of the amborg gaze: a way of seeing that collapses the disjuncture between subject and object in human / non-human animal relations, and even "between humans of different cultures" (244). The amborg gaze, Gordon explains, promotes hybridity born of affinity and difference by relying on intersubjective, interactive seeing rather than hierarchical looking. In this way, Gordon's essay completes the circuit begun by Hollinger, in the work of translation between the familiar and the exotic, the personal and inauthentic, disrupting assumed norms and speculating upon a respectful juncture point.

On the whole, *Dis-Orienting Planets* fulfills the promise it sets out to achieve, both "dissing" and "disorienting" the pernicious cognitive monster into which Orientalism has multiplied. An appreciable range of contributor and authorial voices emerge in its pages. Moreover, the collection will be of use and of interest to scholars at a range of levels. One minor quibble with

the volume is that a few chapters, such as Lyau's, felt out of step with the surrounding conversation, causing me to pause and speculate on their location in the collection. Perhaps those imbalances were intentional, though, meant to press the reader to think about their roles as consumer and producer of meaning. At any rate, each valuable on their own, taken together these essays strengthen the long held claim that the personal is political. Likewise, as several of the contributors suggest, although the issues at hand are girded in sf, widely focused literary and cultural studies scholars would do well to consider them – the walls between genre and culture being, after all, permeable.

Finally, while I might normally hesitate to comment in a book review on matters possibly beyond the editor's control, given the overtly personal aspect of the editor's introduction, a number of contributors' essays, and the subject matter at hand, I feel I may as well join in. As I worked on this review, colleagues passing through my office in southern Japan spontaneously commented on the cover of *Dis-Orienting Planets* – its spectrum of purple hues, unexpected font, and cartoonish image. Then they would often pause for a closer look. Most seemed unsure of how to reconcile their first unsteady impressions with their intrigued second takes; its aesthetics unsettled their expectations. I assured them that if they read on, so too would the contents. In a good way.

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