



Conference Report: London Science Fiction Research Community

Beyond Borders: Empires, Bodies, Science Fictions
September 10–12th, 2020
Online (London, UK)

Filip Boratyn

The 2020 edition of the London Science Fiction Research Community's (LSFRC) annual conference largely took place online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though this meant less opportunities for direct personal contact and socialising, the new format opened some new doors in the conference experience by facilitating participation from geographically remote locations, which increased the diversity of the participants and the proceedings in general. The conference's theme this year was decolonising science fiction and SF studies, under the banner "Beyond Borders: Empires, Bodies, Science Fictions". Although the organisers have admitted that they decided on this theme right after last year's event, it was an apt topic for a gathering that literally took place beyond national borders, with presenters from a variety of countries and continents. This diversity of backgrounds – a rare positive effect of the pandemic, which removed the barrier of finding funds and resources to actually travel to London – was a highlight of this stimulating intellectual feast.

The LSFRC team made sure that the technical side of the event, so crucial in the videoconferencing era, ran as smoothly as possible. There were very few technological crises, and those that did inevitably happen were dealt with in a quick and professional manner. Apart from a moderator who introduced the presenters and managed the Q&A, each panel had a member of the

organisational team present who was vigilant about all possible technical issues. The panels I have participated in were all characterised by quite lively interactions in the Q&As, and, as the audience in most of the panels was between 20 and 30 people, the discussions were dynamic yet manageable. Whenever there was a lull in the discussion – which seems to happen in video conferencing more often than at in-person events – the LSFRC members and panel moderators stepped in with thoughtful comments and incisive but friendly questions. The friendliness and lack of hostility was actually key in making this conference feel like a safe space for everyone – the questions and comments were challenging enough, but there were no attempts to embarrass the interlocutor, which sometimes contribute to making academic conferences a miserable experience for everyone involved.

After the first day (Thursday, 10 September), which mostly served as a prelude to the conference proper, with a panel on SF and translation and two workshops, the event kicked off on Friday with a fascinating keynote by Dr. Nadine El-Enany, the author of *Bordering Britain* (2020), who discussed how British legal history is entangled with the country's approach to race and colonial violence. Referring to the conference's theme, El-Enany showed how borders affect the poor and the wealthy to a different extent. For example, strict visa requirements and racial profiling affect racialised subjects much more strongly, and the easy navigability of the borders in Western Europe and North America over the last few decades is actually much less available for the racialised. She also demonstrated how contemporary migration law is continuously entangled with racialised legal categories developed over the years of colonial history. One of her examples was the British Nationality Act of 1981. A follow-up to the 1971 Immigration Act, which effectually equated Britishness with whiteness, the British Nationality Act introduced a much more rigorous separation of Great Britain from its former colonies. El-Enany interpreted this act as an instance of colonial theft in that it separated the colonial subjects from even the possibility of benefiting from the wealth stolen from the colonies. She identified a key distinction between settler and non-settler colonialism and showed how the difference between these two categories is blurred by such acts of legal violence. The way British law defined who gets to be seen as a citizen and who is treated as a migrant continues to perpetuate colonial relations long after the colonies have gained formal independence from the United Kingdom. After this illuminating keynote, the participants relocated to three breakout rooms dedicated to conference panels, which took place over most of Friday and Saturday.

Participants took on the conference's aim to go "beyond borders" in a variety of ways: the event was as much an opportunity to highlight the postcolonial themes in texts by classic SF authors like Isaac Asimov and H. G. Wells as it was to highlight certain, often less well known, texts from outside of Europe and North America; two panels specifically tackled Chinese SF. The speakers approached a variety of genres with critical focuses ranging from contemporary body studies (Ewa Drab's presentation about Clayton's *The Belles*) through posthumanism (presentations by Agnibha Banerjee, who discussed Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, and Rimi Nandy, who proposed a posthuman reading of the superhero genre), to Alessandra Marino's recounting of Donna Haraway's and Ursula Le Guin's critical dialogue, informed by what Haraway calls "speculative fabulation". Postapocalyptic dystopias received

their own panel, which included three fascinating presentations: Seyedhamed Moosavi's analysis of borders in the films *Grain* and *Blade Runner 2049*, Glyn Morgan's interrogation of various types of borders in Whitehead's *Zone One*, as well as Hasnul Insani Djohar's reading of borders and cybersphere in Wilson's *Alif the Unseen*.

The papers analysing the theoretical implications of a critical focus on borders within the contexts of the critique of imperialism and the postcolonial turn were among the most intellectually stimulating of the whole event. Andrew Ferguson presented a fascinating deconstruction of the colonial and imperialist roots of Darko Suvin's famous concept of the novum. Both Amy Butt's presentation, which focused on threshold spaces, and Nivi Manchanda and Sharri Plonski's paper on the critical juxtaposition of "the border" with "the corridor" represented fascinating implications for introducing the consideration of border into thinking about public and private space and architecture. The conference concluded with a brilliant second keynote address delivered by Florence Okoye, investigating the intersection between technology and speculation. Okoye related this to the process of the production of imperial and colonial identities based on the "worldbuilding" performed by the practice of mapping, focusing as much on what maps of colonial territories concealed as what they showed. The absence of any representations of the indigenous and enslaved peoples in maps of Barbados that she showcased marks the maps' role as tools of speculation created to conjure a certain speculative future – hence, the use of the SF-related term "worldbuilding". Okoye also investigated how the mechanisation of colonial labor was represented as affecting the conditions of life for enslaved and indigenous peoples – although it did not affect their status at the most essential level of the relationship to colonisers.

LSFRC's "Beyond Borders" conference was thus a fascinating occasion for confrontation with diverse points of view from all over the world. It is easy for conferences on the topic of colonialism and imperialism to facilitate discussion between economically and geographically privileged academics taking advantage of their imperialist legacy while disparaging imperialism. Thanks to its geographical, racial, and gender diversity, though, "Beyond Borders" did not fall into this trap. It also showcased the strengths of an online conference format while avoiding most of its shortcomings. No matter if the 2021 edition of LSFRC's annual event takes place online or not, it will have already proven its worth.

Biography: Filip Boratyn is a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Humanities, University of Warsaw. His dissertation focuses on the cultural work of enchantment in the contemporary ecological imagination. He recently received the 2020 David G. Hartwell Emerging Scholar Award from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts.