



## Conference Report: GIFCon 2021: Beyond the Anglocentric Fantastic

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Online

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Organised from Scotland and taking place online, this year's Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations conference (also known as GIFCon) was titled "Beyond the Anglocentric Fantastic". Hosted by the Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic at the University of Glasgow, the three-day conference welcomed a group of both early-career and established scholars from a variety of disciplines. While focusing on widely different topics, the presentations were united by their goal of going beyond the typical Anglocentrism of fantasy research and examining the heterogeneity of fantasy and the fantastic in its full glory.

The title of this year's conference can be read as containing an implicit challenge, in at least two senses of the word. On one hand, the organisers challenged the Anglonormativity and Anglocentrism of the fantasy canon and fantasy research, inviting participants to consider alternative traditions of fantasy and the fantastic. On the other hand, this kind of framing – while justified and perhaps unavoidable given the current state of the field – represents a challenge in that it risks recentring the English or Anglo-American sphere by nevertheless treating it as a kind of a yardstick to which the presumed variety of other cultural traditions is compared. Tellingly, I have just referred to an *English* and *imperial* unit of measurement (one that I myself actually first recall encountering in Anglo-American fantasy novels and roleplaying-game manuals), which perhaps reflects the problems inherent in discussing non-

Anglophone traditions while still using English as the accepted common language.

However, the difficulty of going “beyond” in this sense should not be over-emphasised here, especially since the organisers and the presenters of GIFCon collectively did in fact succeed in bringing the sheer diversity of non-Anglophone fantasy to the foreground. In terms of distinct cultures, the fifty or so presentations and three keynotes included discussions of various African, East and South Asian, East European, Latin American, and non-Anglophone West European fantasy traditions, as well as different Indigenous perspectives. Moreover, the types of media examined included not only the usual literature and live-action film and television, but also, among others, comics and graphic novels, video games, animation, theater, and decorative artworks, illustrating the wide range in research topics among the presenters.

Delivered by Xia Jia, SF author and Associate Professor of Chinese Literature at Xi’an Jiaotong University, the first keynote of the conference examined how different American and Chinese science fiction narratives approach the question of “the future we used to believe in”. While Disney’s “supermedia movie” *Tomorrowland* (2015) seeks to establish a certain cultural identity through reference to the audience’s experiences of earlier works that subscribe to a hopeful view of the future, William Gibson’s “The Gernsback Continuum” (1981) portrays this same retrofuturistic dream as unnerving in its perfection and similarity to totalitarian understandings of utopia. Meanwhile, Liu Cixin’s novella “Fields of Gold” (2018) asks what it might take to rekindle humanity’s passion for space exploration, recalling the launch of the Chinese satellite Dongfanghong in 1970 and the role of radio in building a sense of identification with “the big ‘we’” among its listeners. Xia Jia finished her keynote by bringing up a still-unresolved question: how can Chinese science fiction continue to tell the story of believing in something, whether that “something” is future, hope, or simply what “we” used to believe in?

The second keynote, by Sourit Bhattacharya, Lecturer in Postcolonial Studies at the University of Glasgow, began with a timely reminder of the COVID-19 crisis in India and reflections on how much of the modern South Asian fantastic emerges from a sense of disbelief in the face of crisis. In his analysis of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s English-language story “Sultana’s Dream” (1905), Bhattacharya shows that the story features not only a reversal of gender roles, but also a focus on sustainable technologies that critiques colonial modernity and anticipates later ecofeminist thought. The speed at which the story moves from reality to dream and back, however, illustrates how the ethically better world of the narrator’s dream is simply another side of everyday reality, and asserts that “the technological and social revolution is just a matter of time.” In the Q&A, Bhattacharya commented on the exclusion of “Sultana’s Dream” from the canon of English-language feminist SFF, and noted that with regards to efforts to remedy the situation, “the point is not only to remember that Rokeya wrote, but also to remember why she was not read for a long time”.

The third keynote followed a somewhat different format from the first two, being more of an extended Q&A with poet and writer Amal El-Mohtar that began with a discussion of her short story “The Truth About Owls” (2014), inspired by her stay in Glasgow and love for the Welsh language as well as her Lebanese heritage and background. Among other aspects of the story, El-

Mohtar discussed how it reflects the “angst around Arabic” she had felt as a child of immigrants, as well as the freedom and process of discovery she encountered when learning a language that did not carry the same emotional connotations for her. In addition, El-Mohtar spoke about writing conversations and relationships between women, the process of creating the novella *This Is How You Lose the Time War* (2019) with Max Gladstone and how “the parameters of the project” such as the two authors’ distinct writing styles affected its shape, and “the kind of time travel inherent in letters.” Towards the end of the discussion, she also emphasised the difference between “writing what you know” and “writing what you’ve read,” positing that maturing as a writer involves learning to “send yourself out” instead of simply imitating or mixing earlier works.

In the papers presented, Orientalism and (mis)representation of non-Anglophone cultures were, unsurprisingly, major topics, such as in Emma French’s and Lizanne Henderson’s (both University of Glasgow) presentations on the “Monk” character class in *Dungeons and Dragons* and polar bears in folktales and modern-day fantasy, respectively. Several papers also explored how non-Anglophone traditions are revisited and reinvented by contemporary creators working within those cultures: for example, Mario-Paul Martínez and Fran Mateu (Miguel Hernández University) looked at mythology, history, and religion in two recent Spanish video games, while Chengcheng You (University of Macau) examined how the character of Ne Zha from the 17<sup>th</sup> century Chinese novel *Creation of Gods* has been depicted in several major adaptations. While these kinds of modern interpretations can introduce old stories to new audiences, they also showcase how changing societal values lead re-creators to focus on different aspects of the original, as You noted by highlighting the theme of individualism in recent versions of the Ne Zha story.

In addition to non-Anglophone fantasy traditions as such, several papers also explored the relationship between non-Anglophone works of fantasy and national histories. Primrose (National University of Singapore) posited that in Mo Yan’s novels, fantastical tropes and elements function as a way for the author to “contour the silence around historically repressed memories”, while Daniel Martin (Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology) looked at two works with a very different attitude towards Chinese history, analysing the fantasy movies *Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe* (2015) and *Mojin: The Lost Legend* (2015) as examples of the “cultured blockbuster” that is designed to in some way be “educational” or “culturally/politically uplifting.” Meanwhile, Ildikó Limpár (Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest) presented a paper on two highly interesting works from Hungary – the comic book *The West + Zombies* (2017) and the comedic film *Comrade Draculich* (2019) – in both of which undead creatures are used to recreate a fictional national past. All three papers also made reference to the connection between history and contemporary politics in works of fantasy, whether that connection manifests through state censorship and requirements for the content of the works or simply because the creators are influenced by ongoing political discussions.

Discussions of language in various forms were also given a prominent place at GIFCon, being represented by their own panel session. The independent scholar E. Dawson Varughese analysed the reality-shaping power of language in Tashan Mehta’s novel *The Liar’s Weave* (2017), while Namrata Dey Roy (Georgia State University) focused on the postcolonial issues

surrounding voice and language in Meg Vandermerwe's *The Woman of the Stone Sea* (2019) and Bettina Burger (Heinrich-Heine-University, Düsseldorf) explored how the use of oral storytelling markers destabilises the form of "the fantasy novel" in Marlon James' *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019). Dawson Varughese's and Burger's papers especially demonstrated how it is possible, even in works written in English, to employ non-dominant ways of using language to question cultural hegemonies, such as the Anglocentric fantasy novel formula or dominant ideas of "Indianness".

In the same panel, Martine Gjermundsen Ræstad (University of Glasgow) presented an interesting analysis of different strategies for translating the names of fantastic creatures, ranging from preserving the original term to substituting it with the name of a similar creature in the target culture. Gjermundsen Ræstad noted that reliance on conventional translations (such as using "giants" for the "jötnar" of Norse mythology) has reinforced the prevalence of "domesticative" translation strategies in Anglo-American translations and adaptations of fantasy stories, but suggested that changes in target audiences may lead to the adoption of different strategies. An intriguing possibility left open by her presentation is whether the widespread acceptance of a substitution translation can influence the use of the term in the target language (such as "giants") so that it becomes closer in meaning to the original concept in the source language (such as the Norse "jötnar"), and if so, under what kind of conditions this might happen.

While most papers were presented in the typical manner with slides and a voice-over, some also experimented with the format. In a presentation accentuated with looping animations that was both aesthetically pleasing and deeply insightful, Sandra Mondejar Revis (University of Glasgow) explored the art of "Ma", or "the ability to 'enjoy the blankness'", in the works of Hayao Miyazaki. Exemplified by quiet or "unnecessary" moments such as simple domestic scenes or a character pausing before doing some ordinary action, "Ma" in Miyazaki's films serves such functions as allowing the viewer to relate to the mindset of a character, leaving a child protagonist "space for growth", or providing a contrast to the ravages of war, while also reflecting the director's belief that children need to experience the joys of everyday life. In the Q&A, Mondejar Revis also commented on how Miyazaki's adaptations of Western stories differ from their source material in this respect, suggesting that in, for example, Diana Wynne Jones's novel *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986, film version 2004) such quiet scenes tend to be more comedic and lack the philosophical foundation in which Miyazaki's "Ma" is rooted.

One repeated theme of the conference was the reworking and subversion of Anglocentric stories by non-Anglo-American audiences, a "going beyond" where the starting point may indeed become less important than the destination. Nicole Brandon (University of Dundee) delved into the complex relationship between the Indigenous peoples of North America and *Star Wars*, from "Baby Yoda is Native" memes to the Navajo dub of *A New Hope* to contemporary visual artists commenting on the effects of colonialism by referring to the franchise. Brandon's examples highlight that Indigenous audiences are not passive recipients of dominant narratives, but rather meaning-makers in their own right. Meanwhile, in one of the final papers of the conference, Catherine Butler (Cardiff University) looked at Britain as a place for learning magic in Japanese fantasy such as the anime *Little Witch Academia*

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(2013–17) and the manga *The Ancient Magus's Bride* (2014–), which are themselves influenced by classic British works such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Noting that since at this point many in the contemporary Japanese audience may only be familiar with certain elements of real-life British culture via (Japanese) fantasy stories, Butler suggested that this supplanting of the original in popular consciousness might also offer one way of “going beyond” Anglocentrism, one in which the “centre” of Britain gradually becomes lost in imitation and therefore loses its importance.

On the technical side, GIFCon 2021's use of a Discord server for side discussions gave the conference a much more interactive and relaxed atmosphere than only using Zoom (as well as YouTube for the keynotes) would probably have allowed. Trivia competitions, bingo cards, and the frequent employment of jokes and gifs by the participants (appropriately enough, considering the name “GIFCon”) especially helped build a sense of camaraderie that is hard to achieve in an online event. However, the temporal overlap between sessions and some technical difficulties during the presentations raise the question of whether, for example, making the papers available beforehand and using the Discord for Q&As with the presenters (as was done at the CyberPunk Culture Conference last year) would have made for a smoother and more accessible experience.

The conference also included the launch of *Mapping the Impossible*, an open-access student journal dedicated to research into fantasy and the fantastic and open to submissions from undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as recent graduates. The first issue, to be published in October 2021, will feature papers from both GIFCon presenters and others centered around the theme of this year's conference, while the second (to be published in March 2022) will be a general issue. In light of the quality and variety of papers by early-career researchers at GIFCon, it is fortunate that there will be a dedicated space for pursuing the insights presented at the conference further, and especially the first issue of the journal is likely to be of interest to anyone seeking to understand the full of spectrum of global fantasy.

*Biography:* Eero Suoranta is a PhD candidate researching alienation in Chinese science fiction at the University of Helsinki. He has also worked as a translator of Chinese SF and as a freelance journalist and literary critic, and has been featured as an expert on Chinese literature and philosophy by the Finnish public broadcasting company YLE.