



## Conference Report: London Science Fiction Research Community Annual Conference

SF + Extraction  
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Online

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The London Science Fiction Research Community's (LSFRC) annual conference is a highlight for fans of speculative futures across disciplines and at any career stage. This year's theme of SF + Extraction blooms out of the group's robust focus in 2020 and 2021 on border-crossing and disruption, giving further shape to the spectres of capital, imperialism, and colonialism against which much contemporary SF stages its revolution(s).

Established in 2014 as a reading group for Birkbeck graduate students interested in SF, LSFRC is rapidly expanding into an international forum for lively academic engagement with speculative texts and theories. Their annual conferences, which began in 2017, have certainly sped up this process, although the group has demonstrated a commitment to traversing borders and dissolving barriers practically since its conception. Although this was the first year I had the opportunity to attend, the conference's reputation for provocative, passionate discussion preceded it; I was beyond excited for a weekend showcasing the kaleidoscopic arena of SF research and creative practice. The community provides a welcoming space for people of any background, institutional affiliation, or educational status to engage with SF in its myriad forms: its members explore new perspectives, delve into recent or recovered texts, and share ideas for further, expansive research. Diversity in SF research shapes LSFRC's mission and method. This was already clear from my brief interactions with its organisers before the event, but it was even more rewarding to see it in

action. As the directors explained, their conference is just one of the community's efforts to invite new perspectives and approaches into the realm of SF research. Reading and conversation converges around a core concept determined annually by participants, and later informs the theme of that year's conference: past years have explored organics, metaphysics, political economies, and empires as they are represented (and challenged) by SF texts and approaches.

"SF + Extraction" arose out of 2021's conference on activism and resistance, excavating the foundational structures of coloniality and human exceptionalism that continue to inform SF even as the genre responds to them. As last year's conference highlighted, SF's creative practice of imagining alternatives imbues the genre with radical potential; at their most revolutionary, SF texts enable vibrant and diverse disruptions of the status quo. This year's theme set out to explore how SF engages with contemporary capitalism's foundational practice of "extraction", with LSFRC encouraging participants to interrogate where the genre has covertly ratified its myths of "success-through-progress", expansion, production, control, and human exceptionalism. Extraction has been a tool of imperialist, (neo)colonialist practice for over five centuries, and it continues to inform the pillaging of labour, nutrients, knowledge, and fuel from nature, life-forms, and cultures. I was eager to see how, as a community dedicated to rejecting this practice and its associated ideology, conference participants would explore SF's revolutionary potential: how might its texts, research, and creative activism undercut extractive hegemonies, rooted as the genre is in the same discourses of modernity?

LSFRC's move to virtual conferencing in 2020 might have been out of necessity, but this year the organisers decided to continue hosting their highly anticipated weekend of SF play online. Controversial as this may be, I appreciated their commitment to adaptability and accessibility, which was further demonstrated in the moderators' sensitivity to the different needs or restrictions of attendees and presenters. Not only did their choice of platform, Blackboard, enable relatively seamless movement between virtual spaces for different panels, but the directors also thought through creative ways to facilitate the community elements of conferencing that many of us have sorely missed for the past three years. Moderators were present in every virtual space to tackle potential technical issues, but it was also clear that a lot of planning had gone into curating a vibrant, exciting, and stimulating experience for all involved. It is rare to have such engaging and lively discussion on a virtual platform; a thought-provoking weekend was made all the more enjoyable by the organisers' attention to detail such as slightly longer Q+A sessions, regular breaks, and attentive support members. In a dedicated slot at the end of each day to chat and wind down, Francis Gene-Rowe kept us entertained with SF soundscapes and friendly chatter as panelists and attendees discussed favourite papers.

This year's keynote speaker, Kathryn Yusoff, unfortunately pulled out of the conference due to health reasons. A Professor of Inhuman Geography at Queen Mary, University of London, Yusoff's presentation would have provided an intriguing glimpse into her research on materialities and futurity beyond the anthropocene. Her focus on the impact that "earth revolutions" such as extinction and abrupt environmental change have on social thought was an ideal choice for a conference on extraction and the politics of life. Although I

look forward to hearing Yusoff's paper at another time, it was fortunate that similar ideas of anthropocentric futurity were woven through a number of other presentations, so we did not miss out on the opportunity to start engaging with speculative representations of (in)humanity and climate change. Dr. Monali Chatterjee, for example, explored the potential of Adrish Bardhan's SF to inspire futuristic solutions for extractive practices, while Jamie Uy commented on SF cinema's role in critiquing and complicating the Singapore state's technoutopianism. Anthropocentrism came under close scrutiny in the very first panel of the weekend, with Iuliia Ibragimova's analysis of "space-faring animals" and Malgorzata Kowalcze's investigation into the "Areanthrop" in "The Man from Mars". In one of my favourite presentations of the weekend, Chiara Montalti drew these strands of thought about constructions of the "human" into dialogue with disability and environmental (in)justice. Drawing on Hanna Cormick's performance of *The Mermaid*, she argued for SF's unique ability to represent non-normative ways of being, to make them visible, and to demand a response from the otherwise passive viewer.

One of the most stimulating aspects of the conference was its effort to include papers that dealt with texts not yet fully translated into English, offering brief portals out of the Anglophone SF realm. Some texts under consideration included Han Song's *Hospital* trilogy, Chen Quifan's *Waste Land*, Lucas Bambozzi's *Ironland*, Adrish Bhardan's Bengali SF stories, and Singapore's first SF feature film, *Avatar/ 流放化身*. These explorations of work beyond the linguistic frontiers of mainstream western SF are essential for rethinking canonisation, normative linguistic power, and our own intellectual biases as we engage in a predominantly Anglocentric research culture. The attention paid to SF traditions beyond the USA, Canada, and England – including Brazilian, Chinese, Indian, Hawai'ian, Singaporean, Philippine, and Nigerian SF – felt like a tremendous step away from the genre's (and its research's) tendency to privilege western settings and authors. I found the emphasis on decentering Anglophone, western SF exhilarating, and left the conference challenged and excited to continue pushing past the boundaries of the "mainstream" in my own research and creative practice.

Many of this year's papers hinged on the speculative (and) fictional representations of extractive capitalism. Some papers such as Hugh C. O'Connell's "Extraction as Essence: SF and the Prehistory of Surveillance Capitalism" zoomed in on capitalism's mechanics of extraction, revealing their current manifestation in datafication (the "extraction, appropriation, and commodification of data from all aspects of life"). The vast majority of papers, however, drew on SF texts to consider capitalism's entanglement with other unjust structures, drawing a critique of value-making into dialogue with post-humanist, feminist, antiracist, and other liberatory discourses and theories. Extraction as pathology, for example, was a focal point for Diana Novacenu's presentation on visceral extraction, as well as in Lyu Guangzhao's reading of data surveillance and necropolitics in Han Song's *Hospital* trilogy.

I was particularly enthralled by those moments in which conversation lingered on the generic entanglements of SF and extractivism. Some papers, such as that of Frances Hallam, took a more direct approach in their analysis of texts that destabilise SF's generic conventions. Hallam examined the interplays of extractivist (neo)coloniality and oceanic Nigerian futurity in Nnedi

Okorafor's *Lagoon*, paying particular attention to the ways in which multi-species entanglements emerge as the text displaces the "first contact" trope. Katerina Genidogan's paper extended a similar critique to the dystopic mode and its overdeterminations of blackness for marketability. Perspectives such as that voiced in the Indigenous Anti-Future Manifesto, she argued, are capable of countering the despair that often permeates speculative disasters. Decolonial approaches to SF were afforded their own panel, and I was thrilled to present my paper on decoloniality in Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* alongside Dr Jasmine Sharma's reading of colonial extraction in Amitav Ghosh's "The Living Mountain" and Diane Hau Yu Wong's analysis of temporal and geological manifestations of Afrofuturism. Through anticolonial and Indigenous approaches to futurity and speculation, SF emerges as more than mere didacticism: it rejects the Eurocentric construction of a singular future in which imperialist whiteness survives the apocalypse it has created.

A highlight of SF + Extraction was its array of creative contributions and performances, each of which showcased the vitality of an ever-expanding, fundamentally interdisciplinary and unbounded speculative-creative perspective. In a panel dedicated to creative performances, Amy Cutler, Lorrie Blair, and Aily Chiu showcased their multimodal and expansive responses to the histories, realities, and threats of extraction. Cutler's current experimental project "7 Ways of Exploiting a Black Hole" formed the basis of her presentation, wherein she conceptualised the black hole as cinema's perfect antithesis, the inaccessible darkness to its science and play of light, the death to its bringing-to-life. It was a delight to engage with her creative practice not only as an example of research at the intersections of science and fiction, but also as a perfect encapsulation of what it means to envision new futures with, through, and about SF – in this case pertaining to cinema. Lorrie Blair's visual performance was equally stimulating and exciting, weaving together her childhood memories of a home devastated by extractivism, her experiences as a young art teacher, and photographs of the aftermath of a mine disaster. The acid mine drainage from abandoned coal mines is both the subject of Blair's performance and the medium through which it is expressed: her photographic palimpsests use paint that she sourced from the toxic-runoff found in streams that will never again run clear as they did in her childhood. Such a compelling testament to the violence of extraction was a perfect illustration of the conference's themes. It was a shame that Aily Chiu's presentation could not take place live due to VPN issues.

Chaired by Angela YT Chan – an independent researcher, curator, and artist as well as one of LSFRC's directors – Sunday's Creators Roundtable was set to feature Bint Mbareh, Shamica Ruddock, and Gautam Bhatia, but unfortunately the latter was unable to attend. Nonetheless, the roundtable offered a captivating insight into Ruddock's and Mbareh's creative practices, which both make use of sound as an evocative disruptor of temporalities, drawing history into the present moment to construct something new. Both artists engage with the idea that speculative practice – particularly the act of temporal blurring, collapsing historical fragments and hopes for the future into the immediacy of a performance – is inherently political. Ruddock explained how her interdisciplinary approach explores sound as narrative in black diasporas, which engage their own unified system of signifiers beyond traditional static forms of text and image. Their research occupies the nexus at

which sound, moving image, and text collide, but draws focus to the expansive possibilities of sound in its calling up of different times, cultures, and spaces. Rhythmically and technically grounded in the long history of Black sound culture and music production, Ruddock's work engages with a speculative perspective by tying in hauntology, Africa-centred space-time cosmologies, and black technopoetics. The samples they played in their brief introduction to their most recent project, "Deciphering a Broken Syntax", felt like samples of a sonic cosmos – techno harmonies, funk beats, and effervescent melodies rising as we imagined what it might have been like to experience it all in a calabash gourd-shaped listening dome.

Also inspired by the speculative potentialities of sound, Mbareh's research dwells on the musical practice of Palestinian rain-summoning. She described her interest in rain-summoning songs as an initiation into explorations of communal expression that, at its core, illuminates people's entanglement in the natural world. Song as evocation rather than remembrance remains an important focus in her current research into death and rebirth in landscapes and monuments. Tradition, Mbareh explained, provides her with a platform on which to question art as resistance, origin and immediacy, and the disjuncture between past and present. This final aspect is a critical element in her performance practice, which at the time was being showcased in "Stellar Footprints" at the "Call the Waves" group exhibition at the Chapter Gallery. Like Ruddock, Mbareh articulated the act of sonically seeking out traditions and histories, and combining these with natural and cosmic imagery to unravel her audience's perception of linear time. Chan picked up on this resonance early, expertly guiding discussion through each researcher's entanglement with personal and cultural histories. As the roundtable came to an end, I was struck by how effortlessly all three artists had swept us into the political momentum of their practice by simply describing it. The giddy inspiration to seek out those moments of temporal explosion remained with me for the remainder of the conference.

The creative performances reiterated a trend running through almost every conference paper: that SF is not simply an alternative vision of our world, but it is an *activity in visualising alternatives*. Imagining potential futures beyond, without, and as a result of extraction breaks its overdetermining hegemony: bearing witness to the violence of extraction helps us to envision modes of resisting it. SF, as Darko Suvin reminds us, is a "mirror to man" and a "mirror for his world" – a "reflecting" and "transforming" instrument for critical consciousness (17). SF + Extraction's carefully curated programme showcased the best of what speculative research has to offer the world, imbuing us each with a hope that extraction, reflected and refracted through the mirror-crucibles of our individual and collective imaginations, might transform into active resistance. In this, the LSFRC shared their vision for expansive, interdisciplinary, intersectional scholarly practice that simultaneously seeks out specificity, situatedness – much in the same way as SF seeks out new perspectives whilst reflecting, refracting, recreating the familiar. Conferences such as this one embody the disruptive possibilities of speculative research and intellectual communities, drawing individual threads and thoughts together and providing a catalyst for their vibrant explosion outward.

*Biography:* Amy Bouwer researches contemporary women's dystopian writing at the University of Nottingham. Her Midlands4Cities-funded PhD examines the crystallisation of feminist thought into speculative fiction from 2016 to 2020, particularly as it situates itself within (and reinforces) the tradition of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although she primarily studies the history of feminist utopianism, she is also interested in decolonial literary theory and women's anti-colonial writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Works Cited**

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