



BOOK REVIEW:

*Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction,
Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-Victimhood*

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Higgins, David M. *Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-Victimhood*. U of Iowa P, 2021. ISBN: 9781609387846

Considering the continued global rise of racism and misogyny, David M. Higgins's *Reverse Colonization* delivers a timely investigation into how far-right reactionaries have misappropriated science fiction using overt themes of imperialism and, specifically, narratives of reverse colonization. By "reverse colonization," Higgins refers to works in which readers are made to confront fears of foreign or alien invasion, thereby reversing the perspective of an audience from its usual identification with the colonizer to that of the colonized. Higgins proposes two modes of reading these narratives: the intended reading, in which the reader is made to consider the perspectives of those who have been harmed by imperial violence, and an alternate reading, in which readers who have benefited from imperialism are drawn to view themselves as victims. The reverse colonization narratives are ones which "invite identification *with* victims, but they can also provoke identification *as* victims" (18, emphasis original).

Looking at the works of canonical New Wave science fiction authors, Higgins presents this alternate reading, dissecting points where this identification with victimhood can be misread or misappropriated, resulting in what he terms "imperial masochism," "the way subjects who enjoy the advantages of empire adopt the fantastical role of colonized victims to fortify and expand their agency" (2). While Higgins focuses on influential authors of the 1960s, he extends the discussion to contemporary events which have occurred over the last decade, "demonstrat[ing] how pivotal changes in imperial fantasy that occurred during the 1960s have led to dire consequences

in the contemporary era” (4). In so doing, he is also taking into account, for example, the Hugo Awards’ Puppygate fiasco, in which a select group of voters contended that – due to the nominations of several non-white, women, or LGBTQIA+ authors – the award was being granted on the basis of social justice rather than merit.

Higgins’s choice of texts and authors is revealing; throughout the five chapters, he examines the works of Robert Heinlein, Frank Herbert, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, Thomas M. Disch, Michael Moorcock, J. G. Ballard, and Samuel R. Delany. With the sole outlier of Delany (who, I would like to point out, is the usual outlier when one lists canonical 1960s SF writers), these authors are all white heterosexual men. Higgins does not justify his choice of authors or even draw attention to the obvious lack of women, POC, or LGBTQIA+ authors. While the choice could have been explained with practical considerations – including a wider spectrum of authors would have easily doubled the length of the book – the lack of justification is disturbing because it implies that canonical SF writers are all men, white, and heterosexual (with the exception of Delany who proves the rule). However, bearing in mind that Higgins chose canonical texts that have been misappropriated for audiences who are “incels, antifeminists, white nationalists, alt-right activities, and neoreactionaires,” his choice of texts can be considered to be reasonable. Even so, I would have liked to see some reflection on how this choice might potentially skew his reading and analysis.

For instance, in Chapter One, “Liberating Psychedelic Masculinity,” Higgins examines masculinity alongside colonization in three foundational science fiction texts: Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965), Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), and Arthur C. Clarke’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in comparison to the Stanley Kubrick film (1968). Each text has been examined in great detail by SF critics analyzing both masculinity and postcolonialism, but rarely paired in the intersectional manner that Higgins draws attention to. Integrating this scholarship that has come before him, Higgins’ own contribution feels like the natural next step in the conversation. Each text, Higgins argues, “invit[es] men to identify as colonized victims undertaking a heroic struggle to liberate their personal power. This reversal is made possible by the trope of reverse colonization, which imaginatively situates elite male heroes as psychically colonized victims” (33). Turning to such critics as Frantz Fanon, who argued that decolonization also includes decolonizing the self (and patterns of thinking), Higgins examines how decolonization in these texts is linked to the liberation of the masculine self. In other words, decolonization in these texts simultaneously reinforces masculine elitism. This conclusion is drawn out and expanded on in the first half of the book as Higgins focuses the first three chapters on the theme of masculinity.

Throughout, Higgins gathers evidence from real-life examples, noting in each instance how the radical right uses allusions to popular science fiction texts to justify their visions of the society. This critical methodology in Higgins’ approach is particularly strong in Chapter Two, “Threatened Masculinity in the High Castle,” which he begins with the manifesto written by Elliot Rodger, a mass shooter who killed six people and injured several others before killing himself in May 2014. Rodger’s actions inspired other “incels” (involuntary celibates), an “online community of (mostly white) men who regard themselves as victims because they believe that women refuse to have sex with them” (58).

Dissecting Rodger's own testimonials, Higgins highlights several popular works of science fiction that feature prominently within Rodger's writing. Higgins is careful to avoid making any claims that science fiction would lead to dangerous patterns of behavior, but instead considers the ways in which science fiction can be misread and misappropriated in order to normalize dangerous ideologies. Looking at Philip K. Dick's (PKD) *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), Higgins analyses moments in which the racist antique dealer Robert Childan's interactions with other characters result in a perceived threat of emasculation, a threat which audiences may identify with. However, as Higgins points out, Childan is not a character we are meant to sympathize with; while in the position of colonized subject, Childan "identif[ies] with the Nazis and their embodiment of white superiority. Childan doesn't want to overthrow the social hierarchies that oppress him; he just wants to be the one at the top of such hierarchies" (76). Childan is, in fact, a Nazi-sympathizer, an identity that audiences are not meant to align with – unless they are a Nazi-sympathizer themselves.

Here, Higgins turns to the works of PKD as an author prolific in "ontological reverse colonization narratives – in other words, stories that imagine that 'reality' as we experience it is a prison and humans have been oppressively colonized by false beliefs and attitudes" (64). To do so, Higgins examines the parallels with this ontological reverse colonization in Rodger's own writing where he "questioned the very fabric of reality" (109 quoted in Higgins 63). The case study and focus on PKD is sensible. Yet, I would have liked to see more than one case study, especially as PKD is infamous for the way in which he presents women characters. For instance, while Higgins briefly mentions the *Matrix* franchise in the chapter, he easily sidesteps any discussions of queerness, which are prominent in the films. Given that the theme of these chapters concentrates on the threat of emasculation, the exclusion of queer readings is an apparent gap.

Indeed, Higgins seems to sidestep controversial discussions quite often, perhaps in order to maintain some semblance of neutrality between alt-left and alt-right, but the overall effect is a critic that is playing it safe. In Chapter Three, "The Whiteness of Black Iron Prisons," Higgins concentrates on the prison narrative, or the carceral reverse colonization fantasy, "stories that imagine relatively free (and usually white) subjects as incarcerated prisoners" (92). Here, Higgins analyzes PKD's "Black Iron Prison" in his *Exegesis* (1970s) alongside the British television show *The Prisoner* (1967–68), Thomas M. Disch's novelization of the show (1969), and Disch's novel *Camp Concentration* (1968). As carceral reverse colonization narratives invite audiences to imagine themselves as victims, Higgins draws attention to how these narratives, rather than inspiring empathy with oppressed peoples, instead support elite audiences' own claims of victimhood. However, as he points out, "Imagining liberation struggles as universal ... fails to pay attention to the intersectional nature of specific oppressions" (92). This observation allows Higgins to make brief commentaries on political events concerning citizenship and incarceration while, once again, avoiding digressions into full political analysis. These brief mentions of political insights are both a strength and weakness of Higgins's book. While the book potentially misses depth, the range and breath of ideas is stunning, leading the reader to extend the analysis on their own. While I would have liked to see more detail, Higgins, I believe, made the right choice in

covering a number of interconnected ideas as it reveals a larger picture, one which establishes a long-running narrative of alt-victimhood.

After this thought-provoking first half of the book, Chapter Four, “Victims of Entropy,” and Chapter Five, “Cognitive Justice for a Post-Truth Era,” are both to some extent outliers. While Higgins still examines the alt-victim narrative, Chapter Four shifts the attention to the British authors Michael Moorcock and J. G. Ballard. Higgins has a clear strength in American studies, which is made obvious in his integration of American politics and events. This depth seems to be missing from his analysis of Moorcock and Ballard as he attempts to integrate brief mentions of British events (such as Brexit) in order to situate the differing experiences of colonization between American and British empires while still bringing the analysis to reflect on a US context. Thus, it is difficult to make out whether Higgins’s inclusion of British authors here is meant to pose a different national version of alt-victimhood, or whether he is considering the ways these authors are influential to American audiences.

Likewise, the examination of Samuel R. Delany’s *The Fall of the Towers* trilogy (1963–1965) in Chapter Five feels like an outlier because, as I emphasized above, Delany himself is an outlier. However, Higgins himself does not draw attention to the fact that Delany is the token minority in his list of canonical authors, thereby avoiding any discussion of racism in the discussion of alt-victimhood. Instead, he focuses purely on the post-truth ideas that emerge from Delany’s texts. The emphasis on text rather than author is a strange shift in methodology at this point, considering how Higgins included lengthy bionotes on the other authors under examination and, in some cases (like with PKD), dove into details on the author’s personal writings and thought processes.

Despite these shortcomings, *Reverse Colonization* covers a vast range of real-world examples, primary text analysis, and critical theory very quickly and efficiently. This might leave the casual reader feeling a sense of whiplash with the speed at which Higgins moves from thought to thought. At the same time, this pace allows Higgins to make thought-provoking connections and bring together a number of seemingly disparate ideas in order to challenge the reader to question their own modes of reading. It is not a text one would browse quickly, but, instead, one that is meant to be read, pondered, digested, and read again to consider new ideas, connections, or kernels of thought. It is certainly one that I look forward to reading again in the near future.

Biography: Charul (“Chuckie”) Palmer-Patel is founder and Co-Head-Editor of *Fantastika Journal*. Her first monograph, *The Shape of Fantasy* (Routledge, 2020), investigates the narrative structures of Epic Fantasy, incorporating ideas from science, philosophy, and literary theory. Her next monograph, *Negotiating Motherhood and Maternity in American Fantasy Fiction* (Edinburgh University Press), will analyze fantasy published by a range of American identities. You can follow C. Palmer-Patel at @docfantasy_ on Twitter.