



Dispatch

Speculative Fictions for Decolonial Futures

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At the risk of sounding pessimistic, I would argue that it is easier to imagine landscapes of injustice than it is to imagine landscapes of repair. This is not because injustices are more catastrophic, grandiose, or visible (they are often none of these things) as compared to repairs which can be slow, costly, and difficult. I say that landscapes of repair are difficult to conceptualize and construct because repairs are vulnerable to appropriation and injustice. To put it more clearly: in conversation, our ideas of repair are often based on returning to (what we imagine as) a previous state of pristineness or functionality. To repair can refer to something small like sewing on a button; or it can refer to bigger practices like that of mending systemic practices that discriminate or exclude – both are acts of sustainability and restoration that begin with the acknowledgement of something being broken. However, repair can also come disguised as corporate developmental narratives that are based on principles of erosion, overconsumption and extraction that closely mimic colonial practices. Repair is reconstruction, is world-building, is important.

Repair is also linked with speculations of the future. Any talk of mending something, or righting the wrong, or building a better world, is based both in an acknowledgement of the wrongs of the past and a hopeful plunge into the future. The third talk of the series *Landscapes of Injustice, Landscapes of Repair* focused on repair through speculative fiction, future, and futurisms.¹ University of Oslo's Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay and Binghamton University's Jane Alberdeston spoke with moderators Hanna Musiol and Ysabel Munoz in a webinar titled "Speculative Fictions for Decolonial Futures," joined by over 100 people from 25 countries on four continents.² Chattopadhyay, leader of international research group CoFutures and a founder of the series, *Theory*

¹<https://sites.google.com/binghamton.edu/landscapes/recordings-resources?authuser=0>

²<https://binghamton.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=d16cf103-3c04-4562-b1fa-afce014af3d5>

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ISSN: 1911-4788



from the Margins, investigated what we mean when we speak of the future, particularly when we want to pursue politico-aesthetic designs of a decolonial future (or, futurisms). Alberdeston read a portion from her forthcoming speculative novel titled *Colony 51*, demonstrating the powerful role of storytelling in imagining more just futures. The Q&A moved to discuss the role of storytelling and speculative fiction in community-building and collaboration. A decolonial future can arrive through practices of repair; repairing is an act of future-building.

I would like to return to the title of the series to highlight another key word: landscapes (plural). If repair is future-building, landscapes of repair envision future spatially and in multiplicity. This is also one of the things that Chattopadhyay discussed. In relation to temporal imaginings of the future, he urged the audience to think about the future spatially and relationally. As opposed to the linear progression of time, landscapes and spaces allow us to visualize how places exist in relation to one another, which can further highlight the ways in which resources, consumption, and emissions shape the future. Plurality is important here, both of landscapes and of futures, because it rejects the premise of a single vision and incorporates multiplicities of scale and perspective. Chattopadhyay's portion of the talk was decidedly not about the trans-media representations of the future. Neither did it go into detail about his work on futurisms. Instead, he opened meanings, associations, and significance of the term "future" itself through three questions: What Future?, When Future?, and Whose Future?

CoFutures: Pathways to Possible Presents is an international research group working on academic scholarship, media, policy, virtual worlds (video games), and design of global futurisms.³ It has four major working units, namely, Futures and Futurisms (TraFic), Virtual Worlds (VirWorlds), Planetary Integrations (PlaNt), and Speculative Arts, Fiction, and Design (SpecArts). The group also does extensive research in the form of creating and maintaining an open access bibliography of scholarly and non-scholarly content on global and regional futurisms, a media library of talks and seminars, scholarly publications, and a book series.⁴ Chattopadhyay is the co-series editor along with Taryne Jade Taylor of the *Routledge Studies in Global Genre Fiction*, which includes books like *Science Fiction Cinema in the 21st Century* (Gómez-Muñoz, 2022), *The Making of the Wandering Earth* (Wang et al., 2022), *Holocaust in the Stars* (Gajewska, 2021), *Sultana's Sisters* (Qadeer et al., 2021), and *Indian Genre Fictions* (Chattopadhyay et al., 2020). *The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms* (Taylor et al.) is forthcoming in 2023. Chattopadhyay's talk at Binghamton forms a part of CoFuture's workshop series on futures and futurisms.

³ <https://cofutures.org>

⁴ <https://media.cofutures.org/media-library/>

In answering the “what, when, whose” questions, Chattopadhyay’s work challenges the future as a “historical artefact and legacy of colonialism” (2021, p. 8). Thus, in CoFutures, the future exists in multiplicity and with a “co” – in collaboration, community, and more. In any discussion of the future, it is important to consider *what* kind of futures we are referring to. Chattopadhyay (Chattopadhyay & Alberdeston, 2023) asks, are these futures technocratic? Technosolutionist? How come we turn to technology for the future, if technology seems to be the problem as well? When designing a future, it is imperative to define the kind of future one aspires to, and what constitutes it. For instance, for a decolonial future, one needs to take one of the “pathways to possible presents” and acknowledge that the materials available to us for building futures – images, narratives, and more – are colonized. The very nature of speculation of the future requires references, and if these references are colonized, one cannot build very different futures. Here, I point to one of the traps inherent in repair. Repair can often resort to furthering the same inadequacies that are available to us right now. Therefore, repair needs to be a careful process of first picturing landscapes of injustice.

Here an essential first step in imagining the future is to acknowledge that because the present is complex, the future can be no different. In fact, within the framework of the CoFutures philosophy, complexity is not something to tolerate or work through, but something to strive for. Chattopadhyay tells us that a desirable future should have complexity, coevalness, and compossibility – terms that I will soon define. Here, I would like to extend his claim of complexity not simply to the future, but also to practices of repair. Any speculation of the future or of the means required to build decolonial futures must also acknowledge the worlding restraints inherent in speculation. The biggest constraint we have in visualizing the future is that of imagination; we cannot anticipate what we do not know. Chasing simplicity in futuristic designs can easily become exclusionary and can run the risk of the spectacle of the future undermining the realities of the future, and even the present.

To avoid these fascist impulses of the futuristic spectacle, care is required in determining, when is the future? What we think looks or feels futuristic – images of shiny glass buildings, flying cars – are things that gain a sense of futurity through aesthetic practices. Building off Chattopadhyay’s work (Chattopadhyay & Alberdeston, 2023), it can be productive to think of the future as an aesthetic category which is constructed through networks of images, narratives, policy, political and economic actions. In turn, the aesthetic category determines our patterns of consumptive and affective relations (Ngai, 2012) that shape our present and bring our futures into being in material ways. Chattopadhyay refers to the future as a “historical artefact” in his “Manifestos of Futurisms” (2021), pointing to the ways in which what we think of as the future is historically constructed, thus creating temporal complications:

The future is not merely temporal; it comprises images given temporal values, images where time percolates: a flying car or a skyscraper is considered more

futuristic than a bullock cart or adobe hut. These values, based on developmental paradigms, have little basis in lived experience. There is nothing inherently futuristic about either. (Chattopadhyay, 2021, p. 10)

Developmental paradigms not only determine what we come to associate with the future, but also create spatial and geo-political inequalities. Chattopadhyay uses the term “coevalness,” a spatial term borrowed from anthropology, to emphasize the interconnectedness of space and time, especially in how we create value of time by privileging certain models of the future.

Speaking in a Norwegian context, Chattopadhyay pointed out that the 10 richest nations of the world also consume the most. Quoting Rasmus Reinvang and Glen Peters, authors of *Norwegian Consumption, Chinese Pollution* (2008), Chattopadhyay (Chattopadhyay & Alberdeston, 2023) highlighted the need to reinterpret existing problems of consumption and emission through space: “if every person on the planet is to consume as many natural resources as the average Norwegian does, we would need 3.4 earths.” What is 3.4 Earths if not a problem of space?

Figures of consumption compel us to think about the spatial distribution of futures, and problems of accessibility associated with it; that is, whose futures are we talking about? Chattopadhyay (Chattopadhyay & Alberdeston, 2023) points out that the parts of a phone that get manufactured in California are sourced from China. If the innovation in technology that comes out of California is considered futuristic, he asks, is China not considered part of the same future? Thus, the need to consider future spatially and relationally. The aesthetic category of the future is also inherently relational and, thus, political. A linear idea of time also disregards many histories and present-day situations in the quest for certain imagined futures. For instance, when considering a climate-apocalypse to come, Chattopadhyay pointed out, we ignore the many apocalyptic realities of the present. A lot of regions are living the futures that the West imagines are distant, yet to come.

Chattopadhyay’s concept of the coevalness of spaces – everything is equally here, now – also resonated in the pairing of his work with Alberdeston’s in the webinar. In Alberdeston’s forthcoming novel, *Colony 51*, which is a dystopia set in a fictional island called Perla, corporate crimes are recounted through stories of young women.⁵ Describing writing *Colony 51*, she noted how dystopia is often characterized as something far and distant, both spatially and temporally, which comes at the cost of overlooking the realities of the present day which inspired her book. Chattopadhyay, in “Manifestos of Futurisms,” echoes this idea:

The post-apocalyptic imaginary within sf [speculative fiction] and neo-colonial politics represents precisely this: the Global South and its conditions are the dystopia that awaits the Global North when the latter is increasingly subjected to the threefold pressures of climate, demographic and technological change. This is

⁵ <https://jadedibispres.com/product/colony-51-by-jane-alberdeston/>

the politics that drives the planning of futures built on reinvigorated nationalisms, border walls, and guards that resist the supposed dystopia raging outside, while police states destroy minorities with impunity within. (Chattopadhyay, 2021, p. 14)

In the webinar, Alberdeston recalled living in Puerto Rico through the 2017 Hurricane Maria – where, she noted, the aftermath of the hurricane was more devastating than the hurricane itself – and realizing that the stories told about her homeland are often “sterile” ones in which the island becomes a holiday space, a paradise – descriptions not congruent with its realities. Such sterile images reflect the ways in which spaces become part of a developmental paradigm. Especially in the case of Puerto Rico, a territory of the United States, it is essential to consider the harm of singular environmental narratives of large geo-political regions which often elide the particularities of places within those regions. Alberdeston’s novel, although not set in Puerto Rico, is informed by those local insights and contemporary events. I won’t quote from the novel because the work is forthcoming, but her reading had both Chattopadhyay and the audience enthralled, and the Q&A included lively exchanges about the synergy between speculative fiction and theorizing the future.

Chattopadhyay (Chattopadhyay & Alberdeston, 2023) argues that one of the biggest constraints to imagining the future can be that local knowledges often masquerade as global knowledges in developmental discourse; instead, the culmination of aesthetic, politics and social organization needs to be hyperlocal but also connected via webs of community and commonality. This points to the need to imagine many futures and many landscapes of repair. CoFutures operates on the principle that there is nothing inherently futuristic, because that would imply that there are also things which are inherently primitive. Paradigms of economic development conceal colonial ideas of backwardness and progress in the name of repair. Hence, the *compossibility* of futures, or the state of two things being possible together. It is not that one space is futuristic and the other backward; both exist in the same time right now, and both must be imagined together in the future. Here, Chattopadhyay’s scholarship turns to futurisms and speculative fiction to imagine decolonial futures, especially because speculative fiction plays with compossibility by putting different futures in the same space. Futurisms, on the other hand, act as a set of political and aesthetic demands for a certain social organization of the future. In Chattopadhyay’s words:

If the teloi of sf [speculative fiction] were forged in colonialism, the teloi of these futurisms take on board the lived experiences of these colonialisms from the margins, be it the experience of slavery, of linguistic hybridity, or attempts of cultural genocide. They target the *why* of things: why specific images are considered futuristic, or why things, in reality, are more muddled than simple developmental paradigms. Thus, they do not seek to decolonize sf [speculative

fiction] but decolonize the infrastructural foundations of the images associated with sf. (2021, pp. 10-11)

This passage highlights the two foundational principles of CoFutures: one, the need for a meta-critical investigation of how futures are constructed, and two, the need to make the future more flexible even outside the generic limitations of speculative fictions.

One of CoFutures leading research projects is the maintenance of an open-access bibliography which features materials categorized under Afro & African Futurisms, Arab & Gulf Futurisms, Asian Futurisms, Chinese Futurisms, Global SF, Indigenous Futurisms, LatinAm+Latinx Futurisms, and South Asian Futurisms.⁶ Each category features a range of scholarly and non-scholarly material, including journal articles, books, book chapters, graduate theses, web articles, blog posts, conference papers, newspaper articles and more. The CoFutures Bibliography is one of the biggest online resources on science fictions and futurisms and features both Anglophone and non-Anglophone literatures. Right now, there is a call for European futurisms such as Scandinavian, Polish, Romanian and Hungarian Futurisms. Chattopadhyay's publication, "Manifestos of Futurisms," consolidates much of the work done through futurism manifestos through a critical commentary on speculative fiction, futurisms, and manifestos as a genre. In the talk, Chattopadhyay's presentation itself acted like a manifesto in that it was a provocation to the audience about the ways in which they think and construct futures, guiding them towards the scholarship available on decolonial futures. By the end of his talk, Chattopadhyay had convinced Jane Alberdeston and a lot of us in the audience to sign up for the CoFutures reading list. What is a manifesto if not a bold and convincing pamphlet of a certain politico-aesthetic organization?

In "Manifestos of Futurisms," Chattopadhyay vividly demarcates his project on futurisms from the futurism that many Western scholars might know and associate with F. T. Marinetti (2021, p. 9). The latter Futurist movement was born out of Italy in a glorification of speed, machinery, violence, and fascism. Marinetti wrote and distributed *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* in 1909, declaring, "it is from Italy that we launch through the world this violently upsetting incendiary manifesto of ours" (n.p.). The 1909 Futurist manifesto became one of the earliest of its kind, deviating both from its political and literary counterparts like Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1991), Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* (2012), or even Oscar Wilde's Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1999). While all of these had a tremendous impact on the world, one which cannot be overstated, Marinetti's manifesto deviated from them in the way of a meta-critical consciousness and self-fashioning of being enraging, violent, upsetting, and incendiary. This

⁶ <https://biblio.cofutures.org>

manifesto did not just take on an antagonizing position but was among the first of what I call an “aesthetic manifesto.”

Funnily enough, the 1909 Futurist Manifesto did not contain the aesthetic ideals and principles it wanted to forward and was criticized for its lack of artistic vision. While Marinetti and the other Futurists corrected this error in the following versions of the manifesto, the genre of the manifesto became immensely popular with the avant-garde and consequently flourished in the 20th century. This short, often arrogant, pamphlet exists in a hierarchical relation with its audience, where its primary function is to act as the face of an entire movement through exposition and commands to the public on how to act and think. The art manifesto is a fluid and ambiguously defined genre, where prose usually morphs both in language and form to embody the aggressive and energetic content of an avant-garde movement. Marinetti’s manifesto typifies the genre as one of promise and revolution and is often the first manifesto people think of when thinking about the manifestos of the 20th century.

CoFutures does brilliant things with the manifesto. Although Chattopadhyay snarks that the futurisms he is concerned with are miles apart from the 1909 Futurist movement, “like opening a laundromat in a nudist colony” (2021, p. 9), it is helpful to think about the two together when examining how both CoFutures and Chattopadhyay’s own scholarship decolonize the aesthetic manifesto. First, within the framework of CoFutures’ philosophy on the plurality of futures that exist in complexity, coevalness and compossibility, the manifesto is instrumentalized to disrupt traditional knowledge systems and toxic narratives (borrowing from Marco Armiero in the first seminar in this series) by bringing to the center voices from the margin. Additionally, the manifesto becomes an alternative to the generic restrictions of speculative fiction:

The underlying difference turns the manifestos into critical frameworks that elide, move beyond, or reject sf studies altogether: the strength of the difference proportional to the distance from sf... As meta-theoretical texts, these manifestos and manifesto-like texts rupture the genre body to displace sf’s [speculative fiction’s] claims to the future. (Chattopadhyay, 2021, p. 10)

Another project Chattopadhyay founded, Theory from the Margins, is a collective that meets monthly, which “deep-reads current scholarship on postcolonial theory, the decolonial turn, and theory building from the Global South” (“What Is?” *Theory from the Margins*).⁷ In this way, the futurism project works to create spaces where a decolonial future can be both imagined and constructed, and the manifesto becomes an interesting genre. For Marinetti, the manifesto, although posing as revolutionary, tended to further state violence. In the CoFutures bibliography, the manifestos prove to be a critical genre in furthering voices from the margins and resisting and repairing

⁷ <https://theoryfromthemargins.com/whatis>

epistemological violence. Chattopadhyay is explicit about the non-teleological or prescriptive function of the manifestos in the bibliography:

For many futurisms, the positions advanced in these manifestos complement the political praxes of consolidating or supporting diverse communities, predominantly minority ones, within and outside the communities of creators of futurisms... these praxes and the aesthetic restructurings draw upon the experiences of the articulating communities and have (or can have) significant socio-political implications. (Chattopadhyay, 2021, p. 8)

The manifestos act as literary commentaries on a socio-political and aesthetic movement, and also provide strategies for reading policy, literature, design, and more. Referring to the CoFutures bibliography, one can see how the research group emphasizes voices from many different places and communities around the world, and privileges non-scholarly content as methods of knowledge-creation. In “Manifestos of Futurisms,” Chattopadhyay reads Camae Ayawa and Rasheedah Phillips’s *Black Quantum Futurism* (Phillips, 2015) for its approach to non-linear time and its Black traditional approach to consciousness and space. *Black Quantum Futurism* presents itself in opposition to reality, “Why BQF [Black Quantum Futurism] over the present state of reality?” (Phillips, 2015, p. 12). Chattopadhyay interprets this as fundamentally a statement about the future:

Thus their practice intersects with futures studies, specifically with community-oriented collective action, much as Indigenous Action seeks to do. These manifestos do not merely present fiction; instead, they begin to reshape and decolonize the infrastructures of which sf [speculative fiction] is a visible, albeit relatively small, part. (2021, p. 19)

Speculative fiction remains a complicated but integral part of the futurism project. This tussle begins with the acknowledgment of the colonial history of speculative fiction, in fact by assessing the ways in which speculative fiction itself has colonized any discussion of the future: “the twinned notions of the decolonial and anti-colonial, if invoked only for sf [speculative fiction], serve to legitimize the existence of a cadaverous generic ideal, which needs some form of expiation/exorcism in its afterlife” (Chattopadhyay, 2021, p. 8). Generic limitations, in addition to marketability, become some of the limitations which have constrained a decolonial future-building in speculative fiction so far; and allegories of race, nation, gender, and class have often been employed without critique in speculative fiction, thus furthering systemic ideological problems. However, as Chattopadhyay points out, speculative fiction also becomes a productive site for imagining compossibility.

On this note, Chattopadhyay’s portion of the talk ended in a short reflection on the CoFutures Bibliography and the Theory from the Margins reading collective, as he presented some contemporary examples of speculative fiction as further readings to the audience. These included *The Waste Tide* (2013) by Chen Quifan which is set in Silicon Isle, a fictional representation of Quifan’s

hometown Guiyu in the Guangdong province, which has been in the news for being the biggest dumpsite of electronic waste; *Ambiguity Machines & Other Stories* (2018) by Vandana Singh which is a collection of stories that play with time and space, as can be seen in the premise of one of Singh's stories, in which an ordinary woman gains the ability to look into the past, or another in which an 11th century poet becomes part of the artificial intelligence system on a starship; Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) which retells Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) in the context of the US invasion of Iraq; Prayaag Akbar's dystopian novel *Leila* (2017) which imagines a totalitarian regime in an environmentally degraded India (and has recently been adapted to a Netflix series); *Rosewater* (2016) by Tade Thompson, the first in a trilogy which characterizes psychic abilities through human-fungi interactions; and finally, *Solarpunk: Ecological and Fantastical Stories in a Sustainable World* (Lodi-Ribeiro, 2018), an anthology from Brazil which imagines futures through alternate versions of histories.

The showcasing of contemporary speculative fiction by Chattopadhyay was truly a noteworthy moment of sharing and collaboration in the talk, reflected in the excitement elicited in the audience. More interestingly, it pivoted the conversation to the importance of storytelling as a radical act of community-building and recentring marginalized voices amidst a larger conversation on media and futurism. In the Q&A, Jane Alberdeston and Hanna Musiol spoke at length about the need to read, write, preserve, and share stories as writers and scholars.

In conclusion, I want to echo Hanna Musiol's words and recognize that although futures are largely shaped by toxic ideological narratives, that should not mean that futures cannot become landscapes for imagining other worlds characterized by emancipation and agency. To enact just reparation, it is important to think about repair alongside practices of resistance, communing and solidarity. Repair is a continuous process of sustainable world-building, and it is imperative that we listen to stories through which landscapes of injustice and practices of repair become legible.

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