

Introduction: Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction

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Speculative fiction encompasses various types of exploratory genres and media, including science-fiction, fantastic artworks, utopian and dystopian writing, weird fiction and film, as well as post-apocalyptic narratives in literature, on screen, and in video and online games. Depending on their research interests, scholars of speculative fiction across different media have outlined a variety of histories of the genre. Many of the literary texts evoked in these histories combine imaginaries of social and political organization with explorations of gender and issues of violence. For example, Thomas More's *Utopia* (Lat. 1516, Engl. 1551) imagines a more egalitarian society that nonetheless remains strictly patriarchal. It also imagines a perfect government that ensures prosperity and peace by fighting preventive wars, encouraging (assisted) suicide, administering the death penalty to adulterers, and promoting corporal punishment for unruly women and children. Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World* (1666), a text in which women leaders bring about a utopian society through armed invasion, anticipates late 19th-century feminist utopian visions such as Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora: A Prophecy* (1880-81), where women's liberation is achieved through a state-driven biopolitical project of selective reproduction that eradicates both men and racial others. Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) famously examines the gendered implications of creativity, science, and reproduction, but it can also be read as a commentary on different types of gendered violence and how they are perpetuated by formal and informal social institutions such as universities or the nuclear family. In H.

G. Well's science fiction classic *The Time Machine* (1895), to give a final example, human beings have evolved into two separate but co-dependent species: the predatory Morlocks breed and slaughter the gentle Eloi, who no longer present recognizable gender differences, because, as Well's narrator notes, they are kept in a pre-social and pre-political state of abundance in which competition and interpersonal violence is almost nonexistent, a fact that has made a "specialization of the sexes" obsolete.

Twentieth-century speculative literature and media, too, have frequently addressed issues of gender, violence, and the state. In the Jules Verne inspired silent movie *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902), often considered one of the first, if not the first, SF movie, for instance, a group of sages/state-officials travels to the moon, presumably to study and conquer it. Defeated by the moon people, who wear headdresses reminiscent of traditional African masks, the explorers/invaders return to Earth with one of the moon warriors, who is subsequently paraded in a triumphal procession, in which male soldiers and female dancers represent the gendered dimensions of nationalist and imperialist practices of citizenship. During the 1930s and 40s, superheroes such as Superman and Captain America appeared in US comics, protecting the United States and the world from the attacks of fictional aliens and less-than-fictional Nazis. These hypermasculine supersoldiers were soon joined by Wonder Woman and Supergirl, who represented different variations of an idealized yet violent (American) femininity. With the rise in Britain and the US of New Wave SF during the 1960s, feminist science fiction during the 1970s and 80s, and dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction from the 1980s onward, authors such as J. G. Ballard, Ursula Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Joana Russ, Samuel R. Delany, and Gerald Vizenor explored connections between (state) violence, capitalism, and its alternatives, technological and scientific progress, and the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Explorations of similar topics together with their ethical implications can also be found (with varying complexity) in SFF blockbusters such as *Mad Max* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Water World* (1995), and *Independence Day* (1998), as well as in speculative TV, such as in the different *Star Trek* series or series such as *Babylon 5* (1993-1998), *The X Files* (1993-2018) or *Stargate SG-1* (1997-2007).

Whether as literary texts, film, TV series, comics, or other forms of cultural expression, contemporary speculative fiction continues to discuss (state-)violence and the gendered nature of socio-political relations. It shows how certain gender roles, certain kinds of gender expressions, and certain forms of desire are normalized by the state and its formal and informal institutions, while others are punished and

obscured, whether through direct, structural, or cultural violence. Speculative fiction evokes the successes and failures of familiar as well as unfamiliar political systems together with the various communities and interpersonal relationships that these systems produce. It also imagines what happens to social relations in the absence of a state or traditional forms of organized government. In doing so, it invites reflection on the limitations and potentialities of the modern nation-state in the early twenty-first century, as well as on the various threats to democracy that characterize our current moment. It also invites a more sustained critical examination of how gendered violence is intertwined with different political systems and social formations, of the kinds of violence that these systems legitimize and delegitimize, and of the ways in which issues of gender inform these processes of de-/legitimization. Finally, it allows for imagining alternative political structures and social formations that might do without, or at least less violence, whether physical or psychological, direct or indirect, structural or cultural.

This special issue of *Gender Forum* is part of a two-issue series dedicated to analyzing representations of gender, state, and violence in contemporary speculative fiction. We have been as open with the definition of the word “contemporary” as our contributors suggested that we be through their choices of primary materials. As a result, half of the contributions in the two issues focus on 21st-century works, while the other half deal with works released or published before the turn of the Millennium. The selected essays present a variety of theoretical approaches to a diverse selection of primary sources from the Anglophone world. This exclusive focus on Anglophone texts and visual media was not intended but is doubtlessly a result of our own disciplinary location in (North) American Studies, which brings with it certain interests and networks, but also certain lacunae. Still, we hope that the contributions collected in this issue will also be useful for scholars of speculative works in languages other than English as much as for scholars of gender studies, queer studies, and cultural violence studies who would otherwise not turn to speculative genres and media. After all, the essays that we received in response to our call for submissions touch on many issues that are pertinent for literary and cultural studies at large, including debates about social and environmental injustice, the limits of human agency and control, the tension between resistance and complicity, and the cultural, social, and political conditions necessary not only for individual survival but for collective well-being.

All four essays featured in the present issue reveal the need to reconsider and revise traditional SF tropes and narrative models associated with imagined worlds, sometimes by following the critical revisions of these tropes and models in the chosen works and sometimes

by reading the works against the grain. Melodie Anne Roschman, in her essay "Religious Nationalism, Embodied Violence, and Feminist Subversion in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*," argues persuasively that Alderman's novel uses the political language of American evangelicalism to disguise gendered oppression as a matriarchal rule, a rhetorical move that is revealed through the ways in which gender variance and queerness are treated in the text. Stefan Schubert's "Playing as/against Violent Women: Imagining Gender in the Postapocalyptic Landscape of *The Last of Us Part II*" examines the various types of violence committed by and against the female characters featured in the popular game to discuss the narrative and ludic strategies employed both to justify physical and symbolic violence in the story world and to call into question such justifications. Like the post-apocalyptic world of *The Last of US*, the future world discussed in Linda Hess's and Ina Batzke's text "Gender and Violence in Pandemic Futures in Larissa Lai's *Tiger Flu*" is one in which the (nation-)state as we know it has been replaced by a different kind of political organization, here a corporate one. Lai's novel, Hess and Batzke argue, portrays the various dimensions of gendered, classed, and racialized violence that result from the exploitation and commodification of queer, non-white female bodies in the wake of a global pandemic while also questioning the utopian potential of the all-female communities that have emerged in its aftermath. Finally, Sascha Klein's "Outlaw Territories: Negotiations of Gender and Race on the American Inner-City Frontier in U.S. Urban Crime and Sci-Fi Gang Films of the 1970s and 80s" takes a broader historical view of the developments of a violent, masculinized, and racialized film genre. His discussion of SF films and their precursors illustrates the ways in which the vigilante script has traditionally been used to legitimate state power in the service of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, while certain revisions of this script, for example, in Blaxploitation and speculative cinema, may have the potential to challenge these ideologies along with the institutions upholding them. Finally, in their review of Ryan Lee Cartwright's *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of Rural Nonconformity* (2020), G Angel discusses a study that continues the issue's theme of deconstructing U.S.-American cultural narratives, albeit in a different context: they suggest that the monograph under review provides an alternative history of the anti-idyll in American culture that "challenges the reader to consider the complex interconnections and interdependencies of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability in rural spaces in an effective and accessible manner."

As the first part of our double issue goes online and as we are working to prepare the second part, which will feature another set of essays discussing cultural representations of gender, violence, and the state in speculative fiction and film, we would like to thank our reviewers for their

willingness to dedicate their time to improving other scholars' work and our contributors for their willingness to engage with the blind peer reviews as well as our own suggestions for revisions of their submissions. We would also like to thank the small team of student research assistants and interns who have been supporting our work as (guest) editors for this issue of *Gender Forum*. Thank you, Julia Hahn-Klose for creating a wonderful new design for the journal and taking care of much of the formatting of this issue, Tensae Desta for the diligent proofreading and providing additional feedback to contributors, and Izel Ercanoglu for designing the cover and helping with the formatting and the website. We couldn't have done this without you.

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