

Atwood's "Wonder Tale": Old Boundaries and New Encounters

Science fiction (SF) and globalization theories as an interdisciplinary intersection must be clearly defined to expand both literary studies and the globalization debate. Both terms embody ambiguity and are possibility dependent upon factors such as individual thinkers and texts, historical impacts, publication expectations, and reader perceptions. Examining Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake*, in conjunction with her concept of the wonder tale, this paper will interrogate the intersection of SF and globalization theory as it impacts literature and culture.

As a genre, SF has come to ambiguously represent diverse classifications and distinctions including, but not limited to, scientifiction, science fiction, speculative fiction, hard science fiction, alternate histories, space operas, pulps, new wave, and cross-over into fantasy. James Gunn in "Towards a Definition of Science Fiction" puts forth definitive requirements:

Some significant element of the situation is different from the world with which we are familiar, and the characters cannot respond to the situation in customary ways, that is, without recognising that a changed situation requires analysis and a different response. Or if the characters attempt to respond traditionally, without recognizing the need for a different response, they fail, or they fail for the rest of us, the human species (7).

In this way, not only are the characters estranged from the familiar and traditional but so too are the readers; ultimately both are forced to reconsider a new framework and approach through what Darko Suvin calls "cognition," whereby the unfamiliar provides a mirror that "is not only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one" (26, 25). This mirroring process is encouraged throughout the genre as normative assumptions are challenged and made Other. As the boundaries of the genre become increasingly hazy and expansive SF gains more relevance as an

abstractive tool, more so than mimetic fiction. The strength of SF is in the conceptual ideas that challenge thinking beyond the narrative. In Atwood's work, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, she explains that "bendiness of terminology, literary gene-swapping, and inter-genre visiting has been going on in the SF world — loosely defined — for some time" (7). Interdisciplinarity inherent within the genre enables a vast exploration of "those imagined other worlds located somewhere apart from our everyday one: in another time, in another dimension, through a doorway into the spirit world, or on the other side of the threshold that divides the known from the unknown" and "all of them might be placed under the same large 'wonder tale' umbrella" (Other Worlds 8). The "bendiness of terminology" and overarching "wonder tale" aside, Atwood categorizes her own work as speculative fiction not science fiction. She defends this division by asserting that science fiction descends from H.G. Well's *The War of the Worlds* and can include Martians and elements that "could not possibly happen" (Other Worlds 6). Alternatively, she believes speculative fiction descends from the work of Jules Verne and the understanding that such "things really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books" (Other Worlds 6). Atwood draws and defends these distinctions for her own works, primarily *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Maddaddam Trilogy*, while still acknowledging the hazy borderlines for the genre describing them as "increasingly undefended" (Other Worlds 7). In this paper, SF will recognise both Atwood's preferred labelling of speculative fiction, and the interdisciplinary potentialities of SF as a whole utilizing it as an overarching term to highlight both the metamorphic and ambiguous definitions of the genre.

The term globalization similarly warrants unpacking to allow the connections between SF and globalization as literacies to become clearer. In Manfred B. Steger's *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* and *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the*

Globalization Debate, he summarizes, "Globalization refers to the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-time and world-space" (15). More specifically, outlining the fourth quality, he explains, "globalization processes do not occur merely on an objective, material level but also involve the subjective plane of human consciousness. The compression of the world into a single *place* increasingly makes global the frame of reference for human thought and action" (15; emphasis added). The concept of one global world has its merits and demerits in the globalization debate regarding the compression (or sometimes eradication) of culture and people while the idea of a consciousness supports the intersection between the marketplace, the scientific world, and the imagination. As such, Steger's fourth quality can be read as having multiple aspects, both positive and negative.

McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton in *The Global Transformations Reader* explain how, "globalization can be thought of as a process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions — assessed in terms of their extension, intensity, velocity and impact - generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power" (68). Theorists across disciplines often criticize the popularity of the term as being intrinsically linked to ignorance of the history of global capitalism and global flows. SF theorist Carl Freedman reminds readers,

though the popularity of the term 'globalization' is recent, the thing itself is not. Its origins lie in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, when the unspeakably violent primitive accumulation of capital on every continent...enabled the 'takeoff' of generalized commodity production in the European metropolis. (379)

Steger asserts that this attests to the "dynamic nature of the phenomenon" and the history of capitalism, industrialization, and technological innovation as roots of globalization (17). Robert

O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. discuss globalism as a phenomenon with ancient roots, they explain, "the issue is not how old globalism is, but rather how 'thin' or 'thick' it is at any given time...Globalization is the process by which globalism becomes increasingly thick" (77). Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. reflects on the various views of globalization and imagines new boundaries for its applications in an interdisciplinary context:

Every map of globalization and global culture is a cognitive-aesthetic artifact — a “cognitive map,” if you will, of a territory that is mutating and even passing away at the moment the map is drawn. Because globalization has no classical spatial or temporal boundaries, it requires new cartographies and geographies. (488)

New cartographies do away with old boundaries and encourage encounters that stimulate new ways of knowing, doing, and understanding. Csicsery-Ronay Jr. cautions against unilateral static views and the "one world" dynamic within the globalization debate and their accompanying cultural productions. Carl Freedman reasons, "few, if any, forms of cultural production have been more profoundly shaped by globalization than sf" (379). Csicsery-Ronay Jr. states that SF will be "acknowledged as the art that has been most concerned with constructing ways of imagining this technoscientifically constructed — and deconstructed — 'world'" (489). Steve Shaviro in "Towards an Alternative Globalization" reiterates the importance of the SF global dialogue as the only means by which to interpret our current conditions:

And yet, the conditions of capitalist globalization insinuate themselves so completely into our everyday existence, that we find ourselves taking them for granted. As Slavoj Žižek, Frederic Jameson, and Mark Fisher have all suggested, we find it easier to imagine the end of the world altogether than we do to imagine the end of capitalism. And this is why science fiction is urgently necessary. We live in a world that is, itself, so cognitively and

affectively estranging, so science-fictional and hyperreal, that traditional (realist or 'mimetic') fiction is not capable of representing it. (384)

Shaviro echoes Csicsery-Ronay Jr.'s opinion, calling for Jameson's practices of "cognitive mapping" to gain a better understanding for both our own position and that of "nonhuman entities," highlighting the inextricability of human, animal, and ecological nature (384). Shaviro asserts the power of SF narratives to fulfill this demand as they "can track the processes of globalization, all the way to their most dreadful and apocalyptic consequences" (384). He encourages that SF narratives can also "provide counter-narratives, visions of an alternative globalization, precisely at the time when such imagining has become so difficult for us" (384). David M. Higgins agrees that "globalization impacts literature" but he also highlights that "literature does not passively reflect globalizing conditions" rather it "contributes to, reflects upon, and/or challenges global regimes of economic, social, and political power" (370). SF studies in conjunction with globalization theory expound the interdisciplinarity within and beyond the SF genre.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood envisions our world, as we think we know it, as another world; two states in the progressive future. Atwood engages her wonder tale ideal to serve as a critical location wherein experimental socio-political dream work¹ can be hypothesized as it relates to the environment, science, and technology. *Oryx and Crake* confronts the consequences of increased corporatization in a globalized market addressing issues of genetic modification, decreased biodiversity, and global economy. The characters of Crake and Jimmy represent two approaches to understanding their world: the sciences and the humanities. The character of

¹ David M Higgins discusses "imperial dream work" in relation to SF literature and its role in understanding empire in his article "Toward a Cosmopolitan Science Fiction". I extend the conceptualization of "dream work" in relation to globalization studies rather than SF empire building.

Snowman, previously Jimmy, considers matters of narrative archive and immortality through flashback analysis from his new position in a post-apocalyptic United States.

Atwood's proposed near future of environmental degradation and corporate control is filled with bioengineering and genetic modification that would eventually lead to Crake's plan for apocalyptic posthumanist conclusions and the humanoid world of the "Crakers." Jimmy's reflections describe a time when, "the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the mid-continental plains region went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes, and meat became harder to come by" (*OC* 24). Atwood takes the environmental dialogue even further through the perspective of God's Gardeners in rest of the trilogy. This narrative setting of near future climate catastrophe has recently been referred to by some as part of a new sub-genre movement in SF writing: climate fiction (cli-fi). In an article published in *The Guardian*, "Global warning: the rise of the 'cli-fi,'" Rodge Glass describes how the term cli-fi (arguably coined by Dan Bloom in 2007) has gained attention from National Public Radio (NPR) and *Christian Science Monitor* (n.p.). Glass cites Atwood as one of the most high-profile cli-fi writers and lists *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* as prime examples (Global warning n.p.). Atwood herself tweeted a link to Glass's article on May 31, 2013. Glass describes the merits of fiction over news media. He argues that it explores imagined futures which can "often seem difficult in our 24-hour news-on-loop society where the consequences of climate change may appear to be everywhere, but intelligent discussion of it often seems to be nowhere" (Global warning n.p.). He continues, "There is an opportunity here. Whenever a literary term gains traction it is a chance to examine not only what it says about the writers who explore the new ground but also the readers who buy it, read it, discuss it. And that discussion is only going to get louder" (Global warning n.p.). Cli-

fi as a sub-genre operates at a specifically relevant intersection within global science fiction and as a discourse could serve to agitate current lethargy surrounding climate debates. Gerry Canavan reasons that Atwood's dystopian vision serves as a disruption and assertion of both the possibility and necessity for change (139). He explains, "to say that the present has no future is not to say there *is* no future — it is only to say that things cannot continue to go on as they have" (155). Cli-fi attempts to follow the environment and human's impact on the environment as a dialogue with logical and perhaps extreme conclusions. Crake represents the logical mindset to the extreme: "You could have an objective conversation with him, a conversation in which events and hypotheses were followed through to their logical conclusions" (*OC* 69). Crake's plan for immortality via the BlissPlus Pill — part birth control, part libido increase, part disease protection, and part youthful longevity — serves as the disguised utopian solution by which Crake conspires to disseminate the JUVE virus to eliminate the human population. Crake's final "Paradise" plan aims to demonstrate "the art of the possible" in the world of the novel (*OC* 305).

Snowman's ensuing contemplation of humanity provides hope against the darkness of Crake's "initial mayhem" or "the chaos" (*OC* 340). Snowman confronts his own beliefs about human, posthuman, and animal nature against the new backdrop of possibly being the only one of his species left on earth. In this new reality, he holds onto symbols of his old life as he contemplates what it means to be human. The passing of time and the symbol of his watch often guide his thoughts: "He wears it now [his dead watch] as his only talisman. A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is" (*OC* 3). Snowman's attempts at rallying meaning and constructing memory as a castaway create hope as he cares for the Crakers but he recollects, "even a castaway assumes a future reader, someone who'll come along later and find his bones

and his ledger, and learn his fate. Snowman can make no such assumptions; he'll have no future reader, because the Crakers can't read. Any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past" (*OC* 41). When Snowman discovers other humans at the novel's end he thinks, "zero hour...time to go" (*OC* 374). Atwood is asserting that our world is also at an impasse, a zero hour, and a time for analyzing the possibilities of the future. Jameson explains the need for SF at this time in history to "defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization" wherein the "all-too-familiar...becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits" (286, 289). The limits of "the familiar" are largely exposed through the use of media in the novel, and its connections to Jimmy and Crake's relationships with Oryx.

Oryx represents the fluid movement of people, goods, and information over transnational boundaries and the interconnectedness of environment, agriculture, poverty, and human trafficking. In contrast, J. Brooks Bouson suggests that Snowman serves as a representative of the local and personal narrative set against the global (143). In this juxtaposition of the local and the global, Oryx gives a face, both literally and metaphorically, to the sex trade and the perpetuation of violence against women, "There was a close-up of her, of her beautiful cat's face, her delicate smile. Jimmy thought he recognized her. He froze her image, then unpacked his old printout, the one from when he was fourteen...out of sight but never discarded" (*OC* 255). Oryx's story breaks down the surface interface of websites or news stories and exposes the monetization of largely underprivileged, sexualized, and racialized people, particularly young women. The news story of the girl found in the garage in San Francisco, whom Jimmy believes to be Oryx, provides a dismal narrative of the flourishing news media stream centered on sex scandal that propagates the sex trade as other, distant, or unreal:

These girls themselves told other stories, not all of them credible. They'd been drugged, said some. They'd been made to perform obscene contortions in unlikely venues, such as pet shops. They'd been rowed across the Pacific Ocean on rubber rafts, they'd been smuggled in container ships, hidden in mounds of soy products...It was true they weren't paid or couldn't go out anywhere, but there was nothing different or surprising to them about that. (*OC* 254)

Oryx represents a multitude of stories and the possibilities (or lack thereof) facing underprivileged families in a global world and marketplace. The intentional mention of the soy monoculture reminds readers of the role global corporations play in agricultural control at the expense of local subsistence economies. References to genetically engineered foods and monoculture food sources are mentioned throughout the novel to provide a subtle commentary on the industrial nature of agriculture without info-dumping on the reader. For example, young Jimmy and Glenn casually grabbing "giant soy-sausage dogs" and "coconut-style layer cake" (*OC* 72). Anthony Giddens in "The Globalizing of Modernity" explains, "The diffusion of industrialism has created 'one-world' in a more negative and threatening sense...a world in which there are actual or potential ecological changes of a harmful sort that affect everyone on the planet" (65). Oryx provides an example of how agriculture, environment, and debt inequality restructure the world order. Csicsery-Ronay Jr. cautions, "the movement toward one world inevitably involves the violation of the diversity within it, so that cultural identities must be viewed as temporary, easily changed, and tactical" (480). He goes on to explain the links between the movement toward one world and the overarching values of global hyper-capitalism where "volatility means profitable crisis: the infinite potential to increase commodification and to consolidate economic power" (480). Atwood's two visions of dystopian futures, encircled by

utopian goals gone astray, specifically address the interconnections inherent in global phenomenon.

The boundaries of SF as a genre and globalization as a debate must be continually negotiated. *Oryx and Crake* as a novel, paired with global SF discourse, can serve as an example to stimulate both dialogue and action. The negotiation of themes such as technology, science, human nature, and environment are reconstituted and thrust to extremes. SF and its intersecting applications through globalization theory represent a breaking down of constituted barriers and a revelation of new cartographies of knowing, understanding, and enacting possibilities.

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