

# Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility



Kristen Koopman

Alexis Lothian. *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*. New York UP, 2018. Paperback. 352 pp. \$30.00. ISBN 9781479825851.

IT would be easy for *Old Futures* to feel scattered, covering as it does a century's worth of source material, three different forms of media, and theory ranging from traditional SF criticism to fan studies. Yet somehow Lothian not only pulls it off, but makes it seem effortless.

Lothian's framing argument is that futures in science fiction have historically written out queerness in favor of timelines depending on implicit heterosexual reproduction, and that queer counterfuturisms instead nurture visions of new possibilities for science, technology, gender, and race. This argument is broken down into a series of roughly chronological case studies, following an introduction that covers the theoretical basis of the book: a chapter on eugenics and reproduction in feminist utopias, a chapter on gender's relationship with violence and fascism in dystopias written between the two World Wars, a chapter on Afrofuturistic writings in response to eugenics, a chapter linking speculative pleasures to modes of estrangement, a chapter on the (sadly few) queer SF films that create new ways of engaging with the world, and a chapter on fanvidding and remix culture as responses to visions of the future. These chapters are interspersed with three shorter digressions that show how the theories and insights of the previous chapters may be applied to other works.

While *Old Futures* of course draws upon traditional SF criticism (including the obligatory explanation of why the author chose to use "speculative fiction," its associated critiques, an expression of hope that the work won't get pigeonholed into genre-studies, and so on), the breadth of its engagements is truly impressive, as is its depth. Each chapter provides precisely the background needed to understand the particular case studies without becoming repetitive, and so each chapter could easily stand alone. Nevertheless, the chronological organization and consistent throughline of queer futurity keeps the book as a whole from feeling disjointed.

The standout chapters are the first, "Utopian Interventions to the Reproduction of Empire," and the last, "How to Remix the Future." The first chapter deftly unpacks the implicit reliance of most futurisms on heterosexual reproduction, noting that visions of futures are frequently visions of worlds for future children. Although the utopias studied in the chapter are feminist, Lothian points out that feminism at the time was deeply tied to other political

projects: definitions of scientific and technological progress with undercurrents of eugenics, colonial visions of European futures, and the relationship between the rhetoric of futurity and contemplation of the present. These themes set up a status quo that is then critiqued in the third chapter, although both chapters stand alone well. “Utopian Interventions to the Reproduction of Empire” may be of particular interest to scholars in the medical humanities or science studies, due to its careful illustration of the eugenic values embedded in its cases.

The sixth chapter, “How to Remix the Future,” discusses the role of remix culture in refashioning narratives in mass media to present alternative visions of queer futures and to critique implicitly regressive creative decisions by makers of media. Lothian suggests that fan remix practices (such as the case study of fanvidding) may constitute (or at least contribute to) *critical fandom*, which counters the view of fandom as unquestioning consumption of media in favor of resistive readings and refiguring narratives. Lothian's case study of the Firefly fanvid “How Much Is that Geisha in the Window?” is a particularly well-done analysis that is a welcome addition to fan studies.

Yet Lothian takes this engagement with fan studies a step further and describes her own process taking up the practice of fanvidding in order to make critical contributions to fandom (in this case, *Battlestar Galactica*). This not only shows that Lothian takes fandom seriously as a means of critically engaging with media, but hopefully marks a path for other scholars to follow in her footsteps. As Lothian notes, fan remix practices such as vidding may provide avenues for scholars to better articulate theories and criticism of media, particularly for marginalized people; this can be seen both in the critiques of gender and heteronormative desire that Lothian describes in her own work and the racial critique of Firefly that she analyzes.

*Old Futures* is not without its weaknesses. The introduction, by doing much of the theoretical work of the entire text, is dense and abstract compared to seeing the theory in practice in the following chapters. The good news is that in sequestering it all in one place, it frees the other chapters to read much more easily; however, when reading the whole book through, it may be disproportionately slow going. Many of the concepts highlighted in the introduction also simply make more sense when utilized in more concrete analysis later on, which may be an artifact of the book seemingly being the author's dissertation adapted into a monograph.

Additionally, the chapter on SF film lacks the thematic cohesion of previous chapters. This may be because the films, in Lothian's analysis, are more focused on futurity, speculation, and politics than the traditional tropes of science fiction. While I have no objection to an expansive definition of SF, it is telling that Lothian's analysis largely hinges on the depictions of the future in its two case studies (*Jubilee* and *Born in Flames*). The analysis is insightful in

unpacking the futures depicted on-screen, but the tools of SF criticism that have been used in previous chapters are absent here, and I remain unconvinced that this analysis looks at these films *as SF*. Lothian does note that there is not exactly an abundance of queer SF film, but nevertheless, this is likely to be the chapter that is least useful to those looking for SF criticism.

Overall, Lothian has constructed an admirable volume that I have already begun recommending to colleagues. This is her first book, and it bodes well; I look forward to seeing what Lothian does next.