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OLD FUTURES: SPECULATIVE FICTION AND QUEER POSSIBILITY (2018) BY ALEXIS LOTHIAN

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Lothian, Alexis. *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*. New York University Press, 2018. 333pp.

Alexis Lothian's *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* (2018) returns to an archive of utopian, dystopian, and speculative artefacts to reflect on the resurgence of 'futures' in the contemporary mediascape. Asserting the predominance of certain gendered, racialised, and reproductive visions of the future, Lothian looks closely at the uneven distribution of futures in the past and present. She argues that returning to "old futures" created in the past may enable her readers to navigate alternative futurities in the present to deepen their imaginative capabilities of the future. For Lothian, such notions look especially queer and resist the tantalising investments of neoliberalism, financial speculation, and capitalism's foreclosures of risks yet to come.

The book is divided into three parts: 1) feminism, eugenics, and reproductive imaginaries; 2) queerness and pleasure in black Science Fiction; and 3) queer speculations on media time. The book demonstrates a deep understanding of the flows of time, and its social, cultural, and economic asynchronies. It provides critical engagement with contemporary cultural studies by scrutinising the trends of futurity, no-future, utopia, and dystopia in queer studies since the 1990s. Additionally, the book provides a thoughtful and provocative intervention by pressing on the intersections of racial dynamics that are threaded through the urgencies of queer temporal critiques, citing concerns about the racialised present in the United States and its legacy in the texts it examines. The book carefully weaves together old futures to elicit the "common sense" sensations of Elizabeth Freeman's "chrononormativity" while extending an incisive vision of how to employ past futures to disavow the seemingly calcifying dystopias depicted in popular mass media.

Lothian begins with a critique of Lee Edelman's polemic *No Future* (2004). She contends that, on the one hand, the centrality of the child in mainstream American politics has served the reproduction of particular hetero-normative and state-sanctioned visions of future that, as Edelman attests, are difficult to resist in the name of queer politics. On the other hand, Lothian pushes back against Edelman's vision of "no future" by locating how reproductive futurity functions for queer and racialised bodies. To shirk the future as a political arena, she attests, opposes the "(re)generation" of heterosexual society but it "ignores the bodies from which queer and other subjects literally emerge" (35). It risks "participating in racialised and classed dynamics that elide the question of

who disproportionately carries out reproductive labor" (35). Lothian returns to past visions of the future to explore how such reproductive labour, through non-normative, gendered, racialised, and queer bodies, might conspire with and scramble the wavelenghts of possible futures that end in the popular image of the child.

In part one, Lothian returns to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to examine feminist utopias and dystopias. Her concern, here, is how feminist writers employ logics of reproduction and eugenics to populate feminist non/futures. Looking at Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), for example, Lothian points out how conceptions of empire and eugenics manifest in white femininities arguably "central to the achievement of [a women governed] utopia" (44). She wonders how Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia* (1889) shapes the "future" of reproductive power as the narrative's women "breed" an "imperial logic" by which no less-able, racialised, or malformed bodies are permitted to enter into a new society (54-55). Turning to Charlotte Haldane's *Man's World* (1926), Lothian situates how feminist dystopias enact a "post-national world" in which "bodies of color appear exclusively as part of the material on which scientific experimentation is carried out" (66-67). In Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), she scrutinises how marital heterosexuality is mandated in order to "guarantee a future for an all-powerful state" and industrialises motherhood to imagine the extremes of patriarchal dominance and its potential grasp of the world order (74). In both these utopian and dystopian "impulses," Lothian argues, feminist futures have the potential to imagine worlds without *and* in abundance of patriarchal dominance. They simultaneously ground their future-visions in imperialism, racism, and eugenics, featuring the (re)-population of white, middle-class society as the limit(ation) of the ideal future, which Edelman describes as "no future" (34).

In part two, Lothian widens the scope from white futurities to look at how Afrofuturist writers have resisted white-dominated futures by speculating about pleasure. The "frameworks of futurity" composed within black Science Fiction are "sites of unpredictability and risk within capitalist markets" which deny racialised and colonised bodies access to normative frameworks (103). She is interested, for example, in how "queers reproduce our cultures and identities by recruiting," here in the form of Octavia E. Butler's queer vampire (116). In *Fledgling* (2005), the main character is a parasitic vampire that exchanges addiction for intense sexual pleasure. She creates a queer connection between the (white) human body who sustains her and the (black) queer body that derives powerful pleasure from *enlivening* bloodsucking. In Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991), the queer-and-racialised vampire "bites back as she 'turns the structures of racism, sexism, homophobia, and antisemitism in classical vampire narratives against themselves'" (120). She derives power and pleasure from the return of oppression, literally by returning the vampirical favour. Spending a fascinating chapter on Samuel R. Delany, Lothian illuminates how queer worlds are designed and read in Delany's futuristic fictions. She unpacks Delany's resistance to normative modes of sex and desire through world-building societies in *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* (1984), where sexual, gendered, and racialised encounters emerge as an afterthought, following intensive acts of desire. In general, Lothian argues that these writers provide speculative practices where other futures and societal configurations become possible through the *pleasurable* imaginaries of gendered, racialised, and

sexualised bodies. These bodies resist, or ignore, the dominant modes of hetero-reproductive progress. They open up futures which contain politics of the present *and* creative worlds that are habitable, and desirable, for non-normative subjects.

In part three, Lothian turns her attention to queer speculations and futures in contemporary media. Shifting from print media to visual cultures, Lothian sets out to understand how futures are shaped by the markets of the moving image, and how technological possibility and imagined disaster is shaped in speculative film (178-179). Derek Jarman's film *Jubilee* (1978), she writes, "responds to the depressing present, oppressive past, and unpromising future of the Queens' Jubilee by charting a devastatingly negative tomorrow, completing the exclusionary work of empire by eliding the presence of the colonised even as it leaves open a small radical space for the potentiality of art" (198). Equally compelling, Lothian looks at Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), which targets the "limitations of leftist movements that default to straight masculinity" and "insists that a revolution achieved by single-issue class struggle can look like oppressive stasis when it is approached through an emerging collective consciousness led by queer women of colour" (198-199). Both employ forms of violence, which threaten the coherence of the hetero-reproductive future through the destruction of the hetero-coupled end in *Jubilee* and the explosion of the broadcast transmitters in *Born in Flames*. Interestingly, Lothian's reflection on these queer speculative films centres on the relevance, and the chronicity, of "old futures," particularly clear in an example of her students who viewed *Born in Flames'* explosion atop the New York Twin Towers in a post-9/11 context. These close-to-present futures do not create other futures in the world-making style of Delaney's fantastic futures, but importantly, they provide "raw material in the form of images, sounds, and icons that have been easy for viewers to take up, translate, and transform into other alchemical possibilities, other imagined futures" (213).

Old Futures is more than an attempt to reflect upon failed utopian ideations or speculative realisms in literature and visual media. Indeed, what is most provocative about Lothian's book is her capacity to incorporate creative practice into her discovery and analysis of these old futures. Having learned about the gendered, racialised, sexualised, and other oppressions of futures past, Lothian employs her own tactics in a final section on "vidding" (creating music videos from the footage of one or more visual media sources) narratives to bring out alternative voices, life-worlds, and queer experiences submerged in mainstream media. For Lothian, vidding draws out "the queer and perverse pleasures hidden in plain sight within mainstream media. Exchanging these technologies among networks on- and offline has been a form of queer world-making that does more than make visual unspoken media narratives of same sex romance" (223). She argues that vidding is a queer methodology that allows certain themes about race, gender, and sexuality to take priority over the dominant frames of mainstream media because they elaborate upon the undercurrents of desire, pleasure, and futurity that emerge for subjects and viewers who experience (and are often displaced by) the normative messages of media cultures (250). In this way, returning to old futures, through the re-mixing and re-making of futures in video editing, might have the capacity to (re)imagine the limitations and foreground the possibilities of other social and cultural experiences of desire and pleasure in the present.

Readers interested in queer theory, Science Fiction studies, future studies, and feminist theory will find this book no less compelling. Lothian's academic voice is rigorous and full of life, lending a familiar *queer* inclination to her investments in future-imagining projects. Her illuminating vision will excite readers of futures, past, and present, with its lures of desire.

BIONOTE

Chase Ledin is a PhD researcher at the University of Edinburgh, UK. His research explores the intersections of biomedicine, queer theory, and speculative futures in HIV/AIDS archives. He is also interested in speculative praxis, hauntology, and queer world-making in Science Fiction and the graphic novel.