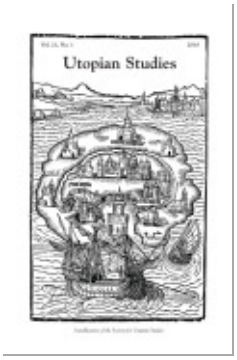
Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction (review)



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In *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, Rieder has productively brought two critical fields into dialogue through theoretically sensitive readings of many familiar fantastic fictions. Equally he situates these authors and texts within the material and intellectual contexts of their creation, thereby historicizing the relationship between imperial expansion and the birth pangs of science fiction as a literary genre. But Rieder's analysis also stresses the dynamic relation that existed between colonialism and science fiction, in which neither was eternally subservient to the other; these discourses proved to be effective and enduring in their mutual information. This text, then, is a valuable addition to the resources of postcolonial literary studies, at once expanding its remit but at the same time pointing to the continuing limitations of a field that is always in need of supplementation.

Endnote

1. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 128.

Sherryl Vint. *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. 304 pp. Cloth, £32. ISBN: 9780802090522.

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With the recent rise of biological, chemical, and cybernetic emendations to the image of what it is to be human, workers and thinkers in several fields see that image as ripe for a major overhaul. To stages known to cultural criticism as postmodern, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and late (not yet post-) capitalist, they add the possibility if not probability of the posthuman. The traditional integrity of both body and mind is under attack, in practice not just philosophical speculation, and prophets and critics predictably forecast both utopian and dystopian consequences. Since the creation of artificial life and intelligence, as well as nonhuman creatures of biological, exobiological, and synthetic origin, is perennially a province of fiction, it should be no surprise that serious science fiction writers engage them in novels and stories.

In *Bodies of Tomorrow*, Sherryl Vint examines connections among factual, speculative, and overtly fictional treatments of the posthuman as

continuing and expanding problematic effects of the Cartesian privileging of representations of the mind, expanded by Liberal Humanism into universal abstractions and a profound disassociation from nature. It is an earnest book and a serious work of criticism, written in a lucid style for general academic readers and equipped with exemplary notes, bibliography, and index. Not simply playing with these ideas, though it does that as well, it takes seriously the role of science fiction as an arena for thought experiments, bringing both realities and consequences to life. Less concerned with aesthetic than social matters, it uses examples of that fiction as documents, however artfully presented, to illuminate risks involved in the discourse of the posthuman.

The typical language of such discussions, Vint points out, denigrates the body in favor of the mind and at least implies an increase in arbitrary inequality. Often discarded with the body (considered "natural") are those whose class, race, and gender deny them equivalence to the favored arena of the mind (centered on white, middle-class males). Oversimplifying the unstable boundaries of mind and body idealizes the former, ignoring its dialectic with the latter, which is as much a product of cultural representation as of biological evolution. Unless posthumanism fully takes embodiment, identity, and discourse into account, dystopian results will diminish rather than augment human beings in their next stage of development.

Six chapters explore these issues in recent novels and a few short stories by respected science fiction writers of diverse backgrounds (including three women, two British, and one African American author), interweaving discussions of relevant nonfiction. In some stories, intelligent extraterrestrials, who vary from us, mix with us, and even manipulate us biologically, act as stand-ins for possible posthuman identity. In others, interaction with artificial intelligence and/or technology points up other avenues for posthuman development. The chapter sequence more or less brings the road not yet taken progressively closer to more easily accessible possibilities, biological, cybernetic, and individual.

Vint's introduction uses stories by Greg Egan that explore questions of identity and authenticity in situations where surgical or chemical modifications give characters power to consciously choose mood and behavior. The advent of choice and control privileges consciousness over largely unpredictable emotions, but also challenges characters' traditional sense of idiosyncratic and self-consistent identity, raising questions of who or what is in control.

As what seems "natural" becomes progressively more obsolete, the need for balance is acutely felt and the characters' traditional sense of their humanity is rendered problematic.

Gwyneth Jones's Aleutian Trilogy (1991–98) confronts humanity with distinctively different but not always superior aliens. One variance concerns social constructions of individual and community identities, where nature and culture intersect. In a long period of trade relations, profound cultural misunderstandings stem in part from the human propensity to exclusive definitions of categories, including our sense of bodily and psychological selfhood. Two half-caste individuals, variations of cultural and biological miscegenation, serve as test cases for our misunderstandings, in which cultural differences largely trump biological ones. To the Aleutians, by contrast, body chemistry largely overcomes individuality. "Wanderers," semi-sentient cells they exchange, provide means by which they communicate with each other (misread by humans as telepathy) and adhere to communities with a long genealogy. With their inherited body chemistry more or less immortal, biology matters, not gender, race, or politics, and death is usually a foreign concept, although they do have weapons that target body chemistry only and eliminate everyone in a certain strain. While they live in what seems utopian harmony and in some ways exceed human technological capacities, they do not have the answer to humans' problems.

Most critics view stories by the late Octavia Butler through racial (not postracial) lenses, but Vint foregrounds the biological speculation in her Xenogenesis trilogy (1987–89). Aliens resurrect a remnant of humanity after a nuclear war, in their never-ending quest to exchange genes with other races, a trade that is their reason for existence. Lilith, one of the reborn, seeks compromise between the Oonkali and her own people, many of whom reject the aliens, insisting instead on traditional male-dominated cultural values. Although doomed in the aliens' eyes by their combination of hierarchy and intelligence, they are resettled on Mars, while Lilith and others more or less integrate with the Oonkali. Although Lilith bears a half-caste child, via the complicated contributions of five individuals, she is not as open as she might be, exhibiting homophobia and romanticizing the human feminine. Like the Aleutians, the Oonkali emphasize body over mind, to the point of genetic determinism, making our cultural constructions seem distinctly arbitrary. Neither set of aliens is infallible; like us, they make mistakes. Though neither

Aleutian nor Oonkali variations are available to us, they provide perspective on genetic screening and biological manipulation in twenty-first-century culture. Increasingly feasible and affordable, they divide populations along cultural and economic lines.

The first three "Culture" novels of Iain Banks (1987–91) are populated by an expansive human race in what the author treats in both fiction and nonfiction as an explicitly utopian thought experiment. An interstellar human civilization virtually without want and inequality, overseen by Artificial Intelligences, the Culture is a model of Liberal Humanism, valuing reason and science, and culture above all. While the body is still important, distinctions are drawn via cultural categories rather than appendages. Bodily form is not subject to censure, and people use many technological aids and implants, even changing gender with impunity. Individual choice is paramount, and the Culture abjures compulsion, with results that are largely homogeneous because some "mistakes" have actually been "erased" or at least denied admission to the community of worlds. Banks posits this state of affairs as inevitably resulting from spacefaring culture, though in each book outsiders challenge its tenets. Their questioning of the limits of freedom, the plausibility of equality, and the risks of AI administration goes unanswered.

Closer to home, the short-lived cyberpunk movement, now largely incorporated into the main body of science fiction, is widely recognized outside the field for vivifying the mental and electronic world of the Internet. Though often misunderstood as a paean to cybernetic mind over matter, it provides many social warnings against the dangers of becoming too dependent on machines. In its most famous example, William Gibson's Neuromancer (1984), the antihero Case can operate effectively only in cyberspace. His parallel to real-life computer nerds (usually adolescent males) seeking escape from the body is counterpointed by the novel's female "action hero," Molly, in a rare case of reverse sexism. Although online avatars in fiction are often visualized as perfect, Dixie, an "uploaded" presence, would prefer to end his online-only existence (Vint ignores the Internet-generated personalities, Neuromancer and Wintermute, whose epic struggle powers machinations in the book and its two sequels). A contrasting novel, *Synners* (1991), by Pat Cadigan, offers interrelated stories in which characters' cyberdependency varies, with embodied community winning out over isolation. Citing real contemporary workplace roles involving overdependence on computers,

including a well-known and pernicious tendency of users to limit themselves to computer-based thinking and perceiving, Vint sees Cadigan offering a more positive image of Donna Haraway's "living with technology," rather than withdrawing from the body.

Explicitly dystopian, Raphael Carter's *The Fortunate Fall* (1996) uses the tropes of posthuman cybertechnology without naïveté. Its tightly authoritarian society belies utopian dreams of cybercommunity, inducing instead a much narrowed vision of humanity. Not an avenue to freedom, information technology is locked down and used to enforce hierarchical and conservative values by punishment and torture, some of it in a notorious American death camp, which the viewpoint character is researching. A "camera," altered by prosthetics and nanotechnology to provide live media feeds without intervening judgment or feelings, Maya even has a chip installed to suppress all sensations of body relations. Her "screener," who filters her reporting for broadcast, is even more detached from "normal" humanity, an "uploaded" virtual presence who was once Maya's lover before both were "liberated" from their lesbian desires. Despite her denials, both Maya and the narrator see her disembodied being as having lost her "soul," in other words, her embodied humanity; Maya herself, after her chip is disabled, will not allow herself to touch her memories of their illicit love. Although virtually extensions of machines, they manage a revolt of sorts, destabilizing authority by promulgating the story of Maya's de-suppression. Carter's novel reflects how in real life suppressing discourse affects subjectivity (pointedly including sense of gender), and Vint finds disassociation from the body relatively common in "nonfiction" social projections of the posthuman.

One means of discourse, the technology of writing, is a focal point in two novels dealing with how reading and writing shape girls' subjectivity. In Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* (1995), Nell learns to exercise control over herself and her environment, aided by an interactive book, which is her tool for survival. Enacting a single fairy tale, it adapts to her circumstances and leads her to solve her own problems. While two other girls with copies of the book use it in more conforming ways, Nell learns to resist conditioning, question others' representations, transcend her class, and even use social engineering. She produces many more copies of the book for a "tribe" of refugee Asian girls, enabling her to lead them toward fuller participation in society.

In Robert Womack's *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* (1993), the similarly marginal Lola, falling out of a technologically enhanced middle-class culture, adapts to a violent youth subculture. Experience teaches her to distrust media representations as reality and to grasp, if not fully accept, lines of color, class, and gender (loving other girls, she refuses their condemnation, but has to be secretive about her preference to gain acceptance). Before joining the gang, and even though she knows it won't dent the system, she kills in rage the employer who has laid off her father. Chronicling her experiences in a diary she names Anne, she ultimately abandons it because it is unable to interact. Like Stephenson, Womack suggests that reading and writing have potential to rewrite the self and generate other changes, but that process is incomplete, Vint points out, without interpretive support from a community of readers.

In her conclusion, Vint seeks an ethical posthumanism, for which science fiction can only suggest starting points. Vernor Vinge forecasts in nonfiction (and fiction which Vint does not mention) a near-future "Singularity" when AI (Artificial Intelligence) and/or IA (Intelligence Amplification, via human–computer interface) force another inevitable divide between haves and have-nots. That may be mitigated, Vint argues, if we seize an opportunity to modify not only human capacity and morphology, but also socially constructed models of human nature. In *Schismatrix* (1985), Bruce Sterling, also an erstwhile promoter of cyberpunk and student of information technology, provides a context for humanity as a temporary category, continually evolving. Sterling's inclusive sense of "posthuman," in which humans interface with each other as well as with alien and artificial intelligences, is at variance with fatally flawed utopian models in self-proclaimed nonfiction.

Remaking ourselves cosmetically, medically, prosthetically, and cybernetically is already a big business in the modernized world, but additional changes may be on the way. One group of utopians preparing to make the leap to posthumanity is the science fiction–influenced Extropians, whose detailed vision continues and expands the Cartesian dichotomy; a kind of Liberal Humanism with computers, their plan privileges the cybercombinative mind, if not the extreme of "uploading" promoted by the single-minded roboticist Hans Moravec. In response to these unmistakable masculinist imperatives, it seems no accident that the writers, protagonists, and prominent critics she discusses are predominantly female. Less shortsighted about

and more sensitized to injustices favoring male-oriented preferences for the mind over the body, women should consciously favor "embodied posthumanism." With N. Katherine Hayles, Vint dismisses fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality and challenges ethics based on the body that ignore ideology (Gail Weiss) and other species (Vicky Kirby), as well as any conception of a "Universal" body. Though sympathetic to Haraway's view of a cyborg existence as a way out of dualism, she questions, with Vivian Sobchack, the seduction of prosthetic replacements (or additions) as transcending rather than supplementing the body.

Typically, these abstract positions downplay the messiness of reality. Recognizing that no one's holistic position is innocent or neutral, Vint favors Haraway's phrase "situated knowledge." With Haraway, she values science fiction as a testing ground for boundary conditions between selves and others, both human and nonhuman, and recognizes the social constructions of our old and new human images. Rather than technological, she contends, the struggle will be political, and heavily influenced by the discourse we employ.

Science fiction often pokes holes in utopian thinking, and the critique of posthumanism implicit in these books is worth attending. As an analysis of such texts and an argument for their value, moreover, *Bodies of Tomorrow* is an excellent example of its kind. I can only hope that in the space available I have been as faithful to this book as it is to the texts it analyzes. Vint is not the first, of course, to notice that promotion of posthumanism is often blinkered, but her book is a worthwhile addition to the shelf. In part this stems from an awareness of science fiction's potential to make palpable both the promise and the threat, at least for those exposed to it. The speculative and literary nature of these works makes more concrete and human her points about society by focusing on individual characters, leavening the social elements in her study, albeit those are accessibly presented with a minimum of the inevitable sociological jargon.

In a book that seeks to go beyond literary analysis, however, some real-world questions are unresolved. Speculation about posthuman considerations seems limited to a small portion of the world we know, in other words, those comfortably enough off to benefit from them and those whose exploitation will make that possible. Inequality figures prominently in Vint's analyses, most notably in connection with class-based discrimination in reproductive choice and cybernetic connectivity in the West and aspiring underdeveloped

nations. The vast majority of people in the world do not seem likely to be either enabled or enslaved by proposed changes, nor do the works Vint analyzes address any context of global catastrophe that might render them moot. Speculative works of fiction need not be encyclopedic, of course, and their focus on their own issues is appropriate in trying to bring them to life. In her attempt to connect them to the real world in other respects, however, she might have at least waved at larger issues.

Furthermore, Vint's prescriptions for embodied and ethical posthumanism may make perfectly good sense for readers who are committed to the rights of women, gays, the "differently abled," and those who think consciously about social construction, verbal formulae, and literary representation. Engineers, scientists, and entrepreneurs, however, who are pushing the technological envelope for anticipated benefits for society (and themselves) may be less congenial, if they are an audience at all. Statistically they may be more reachable by science fiction than readers in the former camp, but reading for escape need not include serious examples of the genre. Although the audience for science fiction as a whole is greater than ever, only a small percentage of that audience will be directly affected by the stories Vint analyzes, much less by her own book. Like the Extropians, moreover, and other people who misread Gibson and Haraway, their single-mindedness may blind them to what she and her authors want them to see.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that writers and readers of our ilk tend to wear our own blinders. The human image has always been under attack, even before various kinds of engineering made it more amenable to literal shapeshifting. Skin color, eye shape, hair color, deformities, acts of cruelty, clothing and building styles, forms of art and religion, primary and secondary sexual characteristics, and even sexual preference are just some of the excuses people have used to deny each other's humanity. Relatively speaking, test-tube babies, wearers of prosthetics, and people with transplanted organs have borne less opprobrium. However alien in shape or approach to our reality the characters of science fiction may seem, moreover, Vint recognizes that they always reveal and illuminate the values of our period in time. Whatever changes to our image we face in the future, I suspect we will eventually recognize them as human within then-normal patterns, in contrast to our benighted forebears. Instructive in that regard is another, considerably older science fiction story, "Day Million" (1966) by Frederik Pohl, about

two future individuals in shapes hardly recognizable to us, for whom love is arranged and artificial in form, isolated and distant in application, and never physically consummated between them, but who are nonetheless permanent and distinctly "human."

Damian F. White. *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal*. London: Pluto Press, 2008. xvii + 236 pp. Paperback, $24.95.

Reviewed by Michael E. Gardiner, University of Western Ontario

In a career spanning nearly a half-century, the U.S. writer and activist Murray Bookchin (1921–2006) fashioned a distinctive and highly ambitious social theory. Dubbing it "social ecology" (not to be confused with the "social ecology" pioneered by the Chicago school of urban sociology in the 1920s and 1930s), Bookchin aimed to synthesize elements of classical philosophy (especially Aristotle), humanistic Marxism, anarchism, natural science, and radical ecology. His goal was a holistic theory that would allow for a systematic analysis of our deeply problematic relationship with the nonhuman world and provide the necessary political and ethical guidelines so as to reconcile humanity and nature in the context of an imagined "good society." But there can be no such reconciliation until humanity itself is liberated in the form of free, self-governing, and cooperative communities, because, in Bookchin's reasoning, the domination of humankind through coercive and hierarchically structured societies both precedes historically and functions to legitimate the domination of nature. The roots of the contemporary environmental crisis can therefore be traced to what Bookchin calls an "underlying mentality of domination," one that projects the natural world as an unyielding and vindictive "realm of necessity," which must be conquered by a combination of brute force and ceaseless technological innovation. In this cosmic drama, humanity pulls itself out of the primordial slime by its own bootstraps so that it can enter the promised land of material abundance and "civilized" values, but at the supposedly unavoidable cost of social repression and ideologies of command and control. Such master narratives have encouraged our profound alienation from, and fear of, the natural world.

But while it is imperative to overcome this alienation, the goal should not be to "dissolve" humanity into an abstract, monistic Nature, as "deep" or