

Imagining Alternatives

A Graduate Symposium on Speculative Fictions

October 18-19, 2013

University of Illinois at
Urbana-Champaign





About the Symposium

Imagining Alternatives brings together graduate students whose academic and creative work explores imagined alternatives in genres under the umbrella of speculative fiction: fantasy, science fiction, horror, the weird, alternate history, the utopian and the dystopian, in literature, film, television, and video games. Such fictions give us not only alternative worlds, but alternative views of our own pasts, presents, and possible futures. They reflect our hopes and fears; they offer alternative narratives of race, gender, sexuality, and nation; they suggest the magic and the horror embedded in our own realities. In her 1973 essay “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie,” noted fantasy and science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin writes that fantasy is “a game played for very high stakes....It is a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence....[it is] superrealistic, a heightening of reality.” The symposium explores and interrogates the alternative possibilities imagined in the heightened realities of speculative fictions, promoting dialogue among graduate students working on these dynamic texts.

Schedule at a Glance

Friday, 10/18

Illini Union Room 209

8:30 AM: Registration Opens, Continental Breakfast Served

9-10:30 AM: Panel 1: Gaming and Game Culture

11 AM-12:30 PM: Panel 2: Race and Bodies

12:30-2:30 PM: Lunch on your own

2:30-4 PM: Panel 3: Alternate Pasts and Presents

Levis Faculty Center

5 PM: Doors Open

5:30 PM: Keynote address and Question and Answer Session with Dr. Alexis Lothian.

Saturday 10/19

Illini Union Room 209

8:30 AM: Continental Breakfast

9-10:30 AM: Panel 4: Gender and Activism

11 AM-12:30 PM: Panel 5: Utopias

12:30-1:30 PM: Lunch and Publication

Roundtable with Dr. Stephanie Foote and Dr. Melissa Littlefield

2:00-3:30 PM: Panel 6: Metatextuality

Armory Building Room 148

6 PM: Film Screening: *Ghosts with Shit Jobs*



Tweeting Imagining Alternatives?
#ImagineAlt



Panel Descriptions

Friday, October 18

All panels are in Illini Union Room 209

9:00 – 10:30 AM

Panel 1: Gaming and Game Culture

Moderator: Shawn Gilmore

Exploring a Galaxy of Potential Partners: A Study of the Implications of Player Choice in Romance Selection in the Mass Effect Series

Kathleen Dobruse, Michigan State University

The array of available alien partners in Mass Effect ranges from the almost-human to the truly alien. While human partners are available, the amount of fan work featuring alien love interests suggests that players have no problem exploring sexual relationships with non-human sentients. These relationships are particularly worth studying because they ask the player to evaluate what they truly value in a relationship. Did the player choose the “safest” option of a fellow human, the “exotic” option of an alien that is still conventionally attractive, or did the player choose a relationship that asks them to reevaluate their romantic priorities?

“People Just Don’t Know Their Place Anymore”: Utopia and Xenophobia in *Bioshock Infinite*

Elizabeth Maffetone, Indiana University

Bioshock Infinite’s portrayal of overtly xenophobic content places it in conversation with modern anxieties about racial and religious otherness. While *Infinite* initially seems to subvert these assertions by approaching issues of racial and religious otherness as “relics of the past,” it instead exposes modern concerns about the “threat” diversity poses to white privilege. Just as the residents of Columbia flee from an increasingly equal and diverse world, so too does such a “utopia” find resonance with an increasingly vocal and discontent modern minority, advocating white privilege at the expense of inclusion and diversity.

Short Film: Maps of Pedagogic Realities

Daniella Pavlić, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This short film investigates the space where pedagogy intersects with contemporary art and is defined through the efforts of artists and players developing strategies and rules of engagement with their social and economic environments. It explores the space where socially engaged art and virtual games address issues of power and national identity. The film uses multiple lenses to view hegemonic realities in relation to dominant and subversive players. *Tropico*, a virtual game developed by PopTop Software, is designed to map out sovereign states through colonial ideology. This game in relation to other pedagogic strategies evokes questions of authenticity and actualities.



Panel Descriptions

Friday, October 18

All panels are in Illini Union Room 209

11:00 AM – 12:30 PM

Panel 2: Race and Bodies

Moderator: Ezra Claverie

Chatoyance: Re-imagining Race in Kathy Acker's Empire of the Senseless
Philip Ernstmeier, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Set after an Algerian revolution that abolishes white racial hierarchy in 1980s Paris, Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* imagines racial formations without reference to whiteness as an anchoring discursive term. Cutting up texts such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Black Jacobins*, and Madonna's "White Heat," Acker constructs a racial body that shimmers within a quicksilver spectrum of racial identities and intersecting classes, genders, and sexualities. The body, *Empire* suggests, is not the locus of race. Race is a symbolic arrangement: a chain of signifiers, purloined stories, and sundry material that can be infinitely ordered, reordered, and modified into alternative mythologies.

Aztlán Undone: Speculative Fiction, Space, and Latino/a Identity in Nancy Farmer's The House of the Scorpion
Jennifer Lozano Jost, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

My paper analyzes the idea of space—textual and national—and Chicano/a and Latino/a identity, as it is re-imagined in Nancy Farmer's border sci-fi novel, *The House of the Scorpion*. Although writers of Chicano/a and Latino/a literature have had little critical traction in the genres of fantasy and science fiction, I argue that Farmer makes use of these genres in ways that both extend and trouble earlier civil rights movement engagements with land, space, and representation. By manipulating national borders and myths, as well as processes of racialization, Farmer prompts readers to radically question what it means to identify—racially, sexually, and socioeconomically—in the border of two "nations" caught in the global web of capital.

Woman and/or Worm? The Lair of the White Worm, (d)Evolutionary Geology, and Imaginative Reading
Michelle M. Martinez, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This paper proposes that the lingering preoccupation with subterranean space in the Victorian *fin de siècle* and early 20th century literalizes the anxieties—deviant sexualities, degeneration, devolution—that scholars agree color the literature of this time. Using Bram Stoker's *The Lair of the White Worm*, which features a villainess who is both woman and highly evolved worm pitted against a man seemingly genetically predisposed with the powers of mesmerism, I argue that both hypnosis and subterranean spaces (and the creatures who dwell within them) allow us, like the theories of evolution and degeneration, to imagine future and past times and spaces in the present moment.



Panel Descriptions

Friday, October 18

All panels are in Illini Union Room 209

2:30 – 4:00 PM

Panel 3: Alternate Pasts and Presents

Moderator: Rob Barrett

Mo Yan's Dystopic Liquorland: The Mystery of *The Republic of Wine*
Lily Li, Indiana University (Bloomington)

Mo Yan in his novel *Jiuguo* (1992, *The Republic of Wine*) crafts a devastatingly satirical dystopic picture of Chinese officialdom, a world called "Liquorland" in which the practices of cannibal banqueting, abusive (as opposed to addictive) alcoholism, and horrific systemizing of these abuses form the socio-political foundation upon which rests the Chinese Communist Party's power and its hold upon the Chinese people. I will examine the significance of the two villain characters in order to solve the mystery of Liquorland. I will argue that Mo Yan has indeed created an alternative vision, a fantasy of horror, which exposes and decries the cannibal viciousness of the Chinese state, such that he is best understood as a modern Jonathan Swift.

Reimagining the Present: T.H. White's Transformative Anachronism
Coral Lumbley, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This paper evaluates T.H. White's modification of reality in his best-known novel, *The Once and Future King*. For T.H. White, modern life was not merely one side of a premodern/modern binary but a reiteration of a fantastic medieval past. I suggest that we can discuss T.H. White's mingling of the medieval and the modern by using the term "transformative anachronism." This pervasive use of anachronism seeks to forge an affective link between the medieval and the modern and thereby allows White to reimagine modern issues, specifically World War II, as the reincarnation of medieval—and perhaps even universal—issues.

Wonder in the Land of Faerie: George MacDonald and the Mythopoeic Imagination
Brett H. Speakman, Wheaton College

The Victorian author George MacDonald believed that the imagination was a universal characteristic that must be engaged in order to properly understand the deeper intellectual, social, and spiritual truths concerning the world around us. Through the exploration of the unique characteristics found within the mythopoeic imagination, this paper will argue that MacDonald wrote his fairy stories for two specific purposes: to awaken within the reader an understanding of the deficiencies of the world in which we live and then to provide a hopeful answer that would stretch the limits of the imagination and fill the wonders of the human heart.



Keynote Address

Dr. Alexis Lothian

Friday Evening, October 18

5:30 – 7:30 PM Levis Faculty Center, 3rd Floor

Catered Reception to Follow

“Living in the Future: Speculative Fiction and Queer Time“

Queer times break with the straight and narrow paths of reproductive futurism: lingering or refusing, flashing up in moments of ephemeral utopia or doubling back to reanimate the pleasurable and/or painful past. But where does the speculative narrative act of imagining the future -- frequently embodied in the genre of science fiction -- fit within this frame? This talk will draw from a larger project on speculative fiction and queer time that explores how science fictions by feminists, queers, and people of color engage in temporal critique by working through rather than against the normative temporalities that queer scholars including Lee Edelman, José Muñoz, and Elizabeth Freeman have identified. The practice and performance of affective world making has been central to queer temporal studies; I link it with the idea of world building, or concretely planning a fictional world, that is important in science fiction theory and criticism in both academic and fan cultures. Science fiction's world building creates utopian visions, dystopian fears, and futuristic projections that can seem to uncritically reproduce normative life narratives and chronologies of technological progression. Drawing on fiction and theory by Samuel R. Delany as well as on science fiction fan cultures' practices of digital remix as knowledge production, my talk will explore new temporal frames that emerge from the uses to which science fiction's futures have been put. What practices make it possible to live inside such futures as they refract into the present?

Alexis Lothian (queergeektheory.org) researches and teaches at the intersections of cultural studies, digital media, speculative fiction, and queer theory. Her book manuscript, *Deviant Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Time*, explores alternative futures dreamed up by feminists, queers, and people of color in 20th- and 21st-century Britain and America—from feminist utopians to video remixers—in order to inquire into historical and political narratives that the seemingly transparent terminology of “the future” has obscured. She also works on new artistic forms that are emerging from fan communities, particularly digital remix video (vidding), especially as these forms engage critical readings of media texts and are used to participate in social justice activism. She is the editor of an upcoming special issue of *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* on feminist science fiction, coeditor of a *Social Text* *Periscope* dossier on *Speculative Life*, and a founding member of the editorial team for the journal *Transformative Works and Cultures*.



Panel Descriptions

Saturday, October 19

All panels are in Illini Union Room 209

9:00 – 10:30 AM

Panel 3: Gender and Activism

Moderator: Mel Stanfill

Utopia and the Gothic Design: *Twilight's* Heteronormative Liquidation of Excess
Kelly Rose Budruweit, University of Iowa

This presentation focuses on the way that the *Twilight* series neuters the Gothic potential for subversion. Recent interpretations of the Gothic, most notably in queer theory, have drawn attention to its progressive potential through the discourse of the monstrous. In this context, *Twilight's* appropriation of the monstrous creates a progressive façade which obfuscates its deeper purpose: to remove monstrosity (and alterity) from the vampire. Instead, the series portrays the human female body as truly monstrous and haunting—and in need of exorcism through heterosexual marriage and reproduction.

Paranoid About Paranoia: Restrictions on Speculation at the 1966 Science Fiction Writers of America Roundtable
Anthony Carlton Cooke, Emory University

During the 1966 Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) Conference, Joanna Russ, James Blish, and Alexei Panshin held a roundtable discussion on paranoia in science fiction. Russ sides with speculative literature as a haven for imaginative liberty, while Panshin claims that readers are negatively influenced by representations of madness. Considering speculative literature's foundation in pushing the boundaries of realities, it is important to inquire as to what was at stake for the genre at this time to cause such contestations over "acceptable" and "pathological" realities.

"The one who can be many places at once": *Dune's* Kwisatz Haderach and the Logic of Postindustrial Capital
Josh Pearson, University of California, Riverside

Frank Herbert's *Dune* stands at the pivot towards postindustrialism, both historically and thematically. In this context, the novel posits in Paul Atreides an alternative masculinity in which authoritarian and counter-cultural aspirations mingle promiscuously. This paper argues that while Herbert's model of holistic awareness and action-in-complexity critiques colonialist, extractive-industrial capitalism and Fordist positivisms, it elegantly maps emergent postindustrial logics of speculative finance and flexible production as well.



Panel Descriptions

Saturday, October 19

All panels are in Illini Union Room 209

11:00 AM – 12:30 PM

Panel 4: Utopias

Moderator: Patrick Fadely

Margaret Cavendish's Singular Utopia: An Imagined Community at the Crossroads of the New Science and Feminism

Inhye Ha, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This paper argues the imagined reality of Margaret Cavendish's utopia manifested in *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666) materializes alternative social relations of women in early modern England. Cavendish—both the author and narrator that share the same name—contests and thereby expands the trajectory of gendered public sphere in the late seventeenth century through her engagements with contemporary scientific, religious, and political discourses.

Bitterblue, Utopianism, and the Dangers of Imagined Alternatives

Andrea Whitacre, Indiana University, Bloomington

Kristin Cashore's 2012 young adult novel *Bitterblue*, the final installment of the popular *Graceling* trilogy, raises questions about the value of imagined alternatives in revolutionary political upheaval. Drawing on the history of twentieth-century political revolution as well as utopian thought, this paper will argue that *Bitterblue* complicates the formula of dystopian fiction by showing the ways in which the revolutionary can become a new oppressor. *Bitterblue* pushes beyond the binary of heroic revolutionary and evil establishment to consider the forces that turn imagined utopias into real dystopias, and would-be saviors into cruel tyrants.

At War with *Glass Bees*: Tactics for a Progressive Stalemate from Ernst Jünger's Radical Right"

RL Erica Zhang, University of Wisconsin-Madison

High-tech automatons in *The Glass Bees* by Ernst Jünger anticipate the proliferation of unmanned aircrafts or drones half a century prior to their only recent shift from speculative fiction to reality. My paper considers the German soldier and philosopher to venture into no man's land, conceiving an alternative notion of progress and the "progressive" that is not, as it has been almost exclusively since the end of WWII, ideologically rooted in the Left. In the war against violently mechanized modernity, Jünger schemes human survival through a radical, cold reconciliation of man and machine.

12:30 – 1:30 PM: Lunch Roundtable on Publication and Professionalization

Presenters: Dr. Stephanie Foote, editor of the journal *Configurations*

Dr. Melissa Littlefield, editor of *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*.



Panel Descriptions

Saturday, October 19

All panels are in Illini Union Room 209

2:00 – 3:30 PM

Panel 5: Metextuality

Moderator: Rob Rushing

Plotting Alternatives: Metafiction as Revisionist Strategy in Feminist Fantasy
Cassandra Bausman, University of Iowa

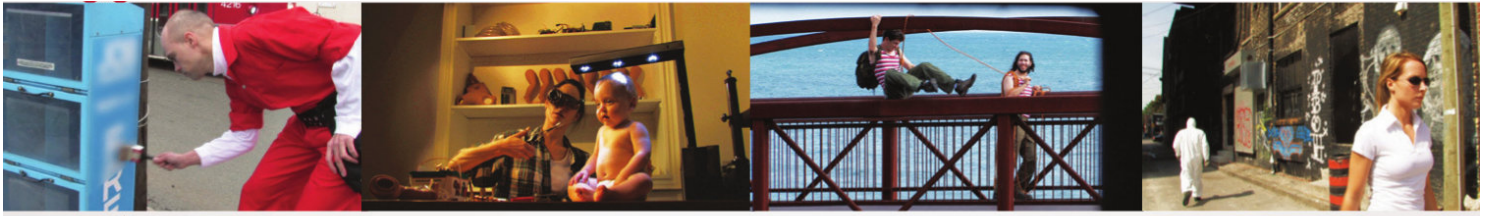
My paper will examine the compelling frequency of self-conscious textual moments that emerged within fantasy novels of the '80's and '90's as a deliberate and significant writing strategy challenging assumptions of more formulaic fantasy texts, especially regarding expectations for women. Such a wealth of significant but critically ignored examples demonstrates how metafiction has emerged as a clear strategy used to enact criticism and imagine alternatives.

“Come See the Violence Inherent in the System”: Joe Abercrombie’s First Law Trilogy and “Realism” in Fantasy
Jacob Jedidiah Horn, University of Iowa

This paper explores Joe Abercrombie’s fantasy trilogy, collectively called *The First Law Trilogy*, as a set of texts roughly parallel to the *Bas-Lag* novels produced by China Miéville. I argue that Abercrombie creates the fantasy world in his texts by beginning with a set of assumptions about the nature of the fantasy and “real” worlds, melding them together much like Miéville does in his inclusion of class politics and Marxist theory in the *Bas-Lag* books. While Abercrombie’s assumptions regarding power, privilege, and human nature are quite different from those of Miéville, the similarity of their commitment to the “real” marks a fascinating trend in contemporary fantasy.

“Spinning a Yarn” to Fabricate New Worlds: Autopoiesis and Metafiction in *The Stone Gods* and *Cloud Atlas*
Valerie O’Brien, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Using the concept of “yarned tales,” or mariners’ narratives, my paper explores the interweaving of storytelling and the promise of discovering new worlds in Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* and David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*. I argue that storytelling in the novels facilitates the material fabrication of new worlds, patterned after Nietzsche’s myth of eternal recurrence. These eternally recurring worlds exemplify Luhmannian autopoiesis, or the continuous auto-reconstitution of autonomous, closed systems. The material reinvention of weary planets through storytelling in these novels, I argue, emphasizes the intertwining of autopoiesis and poetry, concepts linked by their common root for “creation” or “fabrication.”



Film Screening
Saturday Evening, October 19
Armory Building Room 148

Ghosts With Shit Jobs



By 2040, the economy has flipped and North Americans are a cheap labour pool for wealthy Asian markets. A Chinese documentary show focuses on the “ghosts” (Cantonese slang for white people) unlucky enough to have been born into the slums of Toronto in a special report that translates as 'Ghosts With Shit Jobs'." Those jobs include digital janitor, human spammer, robot-baby technician, and giant-spider-silk appropriator (thief).

“It's lo-fi sci-fi. We've seen too many blockbusters where the writing is in service to the spectacle, and we'd like to invert that equation. B movies are fine, but we like to try a little harder: B+, maybe. We still like to keep the fun in and the pretension out. We squeeze the most we can out of the new wave of cheap and accessible production and distribution technology, and in this case our total budget to date is still under \$5000.” – **Jim Munroe, filmmaker**

“Ingenious...A gripping movie that uses cleverness, not CGI, to paint a vivid and satirical picture.”
– **Cory Doctorow**

"Brilliant... will leave you emotionally shaken, your brain teeming with weird new ideas..."
- **io9**

www.ghostswithshitjobs.com



Presenters

Cassandra Bausman is a PhD candidate at the University of Iowa where she teaches literature and composition and serves as tutor and administrator coordinator in the university's writing center. She is currently writing her dissertation, which deals with intersections between feminist revisionism and metafiction in a consideration of fantasy literature and its heroines. She was the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts' 2013 graduate student award recipient and her literary criticism can be found in the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, and the anthology *Heroines: Images of Women in Popular Culture*.

Kelly Budruweit is a doctoral student in English at the University of Iowa. She has an M.A. in English from Western Illinois University and is currently pursuing research in feminist media studies.

Anthony Carlton Cooke is a PhD candidate in English at Emory University. His research focuses on Postwar and Contemporary American Literature, Popular Culture, Cinema and Media, and Psychoanalysis, with an emphasis on paranoia and psychosis. He has presented on these topics at conferences for the South American Modern Language Association and the Society for Science and Literature in the Arts. He has published in *Journal of Black Studies* as well as *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Society*, and has an article forthcoming in *JML: Journal of Modern Literature*. His current project explores representations of psychosis in postwar American horror literature and cinema.

Kathleen Dobruse is a Master's student in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing at Michigan State University. This semester she expects to complete her Certificate in Serious Games. She has worked in trade publishing, marketing, and academic publishing, both as an intern and as a freelancer. After these work experiences, she made it her goal to learn how to do new things in new ways, not just old things in new ways. Currently on her seventh playthrough of the Mass Effect series, Kathleen is fascinated by the divergent narrative opportunities afforded by interactive digital media. She tweets as @dobrusek.

Phillip Ernstmeyer is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His dissertation examines the influence and formation of anarchism in cut-up literature.

Inhye Ha (Ph.d. candidate, Department of English, UIUC) is writing a dissertation on the material culture of eighteenth-century Britain. In this project, she examines how British identity and epistemology are shaped in response to the expansion of global trade networks in the long eighteenth century. With a particular focus on the social relations redefined by the mobility of putatively agential "things"—goods, animals, slaves, and even diseases, she explores the way a more flexible model of British subjectivity is forged as porous and diffuse.



Presenters

Jacob Jedidiah Horn wishes he had more time for fantasy and science fiction in his classes. He is currently completing his dissertation, “Tracking the Great Detective: An Exploration of the Possibility and Value of Contemporary Sherlock Holmes Narratives,” at the University of Iowa.

Jennifer Lozano Jost is a fourth year PhD candidate in English literature at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She studies late 20th and early 21st century Latino/a literature and culture, the rise of “Latina/o” identity in global times and how narrative practices, publishing infrastructures, and the use of digital media have shaped and responded to these changes.

Lily Li is a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at Indiana University (Bloomington), with a PhD minor in English and a PhD minor in Chinese. She is currently writing her dissertation on Chinese writers in diaspora. Her other research interests include modern Chinese literature, transnational literature, exile literature, literary translation, and Asian American literature.

Coral Lumbley holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Arts at the University of Texas at San Antonio, where she also completed a Master’s thesis entitled “The Nostalgia of Twentieth-Century Medievalisms.” She is currently pursuing a Doctorate of English with a Concentration in Medieval Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her interests include Middle English romance, gender studies, and fantasy literature.

Elizabeth Maffetone is a second-year MA/PhD student at Indiana University. Her main interests are in gender, narrative, and transgression in the Middle Ages, though her interests also extend to video games as a modern narrative form. She can be reached by email at: emaffeto@indiana.edu.

Michelle M. Martinez is currently a PhD student in the English department at UIUC. Her interests include *fin de siècle* literature, the “weird” sciences of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, issues of embeddedness and embodiment, and invasion fiction.

Valerie O’Brien is a PhD candidate in English Literature at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She studies transatlantic twentieth-century women writers and is interested in works of fiction and poetry that foreground storytelling as a political response to personal or cultural trauma.

Daniella Pavlič is an interdisciplinary artist, educator, curator, and designer. She is currently a Master of Fine Art candidate at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where she is a Graduate College Fellow. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from Eastern Washington University, where she began her research and human rights-based art. She works predominantly in the medium of sculpture and new media, although her background includes political and economic research of the 36-year genocide in Guatemala. Her current research is focused on idigeneity, transnationalism, and identity through the perspective of sports and games.



Presenters

Josh Pearson is a graduate student in English at the University of California, Riverside, and a founding editor of *The Eaton Journal of Archival Research in Science Fiction*. His research focuses on the intersections of technology, class, and gender in 20th century American SF and Fantasy.

Brett H. Speakman graduated from Wheaton College (IL) in May 2013 with an MA in History of Christianity. Currently, he is seeking a second MA from Wheaton College in Theology, where he is pursuing his major research interest concerning the interface between theology and the imagination. In addition to his studies, Brett is a graduate research assistant at the Marion E. Wade Center of Wheaton College, which is a major research collection of materials by and about seven British authors, including G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and George MacDonald.

Andrea Whitacre is an MA/PhD student at Indiana University Bloomington, with a specialization in medieval literature. She studies Old English poetry and Old Norse saga literature, and is currently interested in post-humanist conceptions of the body, especially relating to shape-shifters, monsters, witches, and human-animal hybrids in mythical literature. She is also an avid science fiction and fantasy reader who enjoys finding connections between some of the oldest recorded genres and some of the newest, and she takes any excuse to read a good young adult novel.

RL Erica Zhang is a Literary Studies doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She comes to the Midwest via Los Angeles (B.A. Art and English, UCLA), agricultural Northern California, and the capitals of Australia and China. Her interests lie in the intersection of affect, ideology, and postcolonial theories, in imagining a future after globalization and pluralism.



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