

Prairie Group, 2024. Lara Cowtan's Reponse to Paper by Kelly Asprooth-Jackson.

Session 2: In an age of harmful misinformation, how does speculative fiction contribute to our understandings of truth?

Key Questions:

- How does speculative fiction contribute to our understanding of truth in an age of misinformation?
- In what ways can speculative narratives help us discern fact from fiction and navigate the complexities of modern information ecosystems?
- How do speculative stories address themes of misinformation, disinformation, and the quest for truth?

Thank you, Prairie Group program people, for this invitation and opportunity to participate in our group in this way, to dive deep into this rich material and offer a response for your consideration to Kelly Weisman Asprooth-Jackson's paper.

I must admit, approaching this paper following the election last week has cast a very different perspective as I think about how speculative narratives help us to discern fact from fiction, or how misinformation impacts understanding of truth. The very real impact of harmful misinformation is more than distracting as I try to focus on the task at hand.

May our work together help to illuminate pathways forward to imagining and creating narratives that will shape a very different truths.

Kelly talks about the campaigns of misinformation leading up to the election, massive propaganda machines at work manipulating people, eroding trust and truth and essentially fabricating fictions indistinguishable from truths.

I appreciate Kelly's opening memoir format, offering an invitation to imagine with his future self points in our collective history from an even more distant perspective, and inviting the question, 'What do you think *should* have happened? What do you think should happen *now*?"

We can play at that question around the recent election ad nauseum, but that isn't today's assignment, nor, I imagine, do we have the interest or energy to go there.

I do find Kelly's historical review an intriguing entry into our theme, which largely draws from stories based in fictional futures, rather than in history. We can frame a similar question using speculative fiction narratives to inform our current actions, 'What do you think *will* happen? What do you think should happen *now*?"

And this is our question today, can speculative fiction inform our actions today for social justice? As Walidah Imarisha wrote in her introduction to Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements, "All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds... Visionary fiction encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always bending toward justice. We believe this space is vital for any process of decolonization, because decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms are born."

We need to look into a distant future or an alternate reality, a speculative fiction of what life could be, in order to understand the actions we need to take today either to achieve or avoid a possible truth, a potential outcome.

How do we discern the truth though?

Kelly explores the value of being able to explore truths while knowing it is embedded in fiction, saying , “Not being the truth frees the story to explore what could become true.”

So with science: Bit by bit, discoveries reconfigure our understanding of reality. This reality is revealed to us only in incremental fragments. The arc of justice that bends just beyond the horizon of our vision, and yet, we say as truth, that the arc does continue, we say this as fact though we can only imagine what lies beyond. The gift and challenge of speculative fiction is to free our mind from its constraints and imagine beyond our vision, things we deem impossible or implausible or utterly fantastical, in order to stretch the possibilities of truth, as if we were 18th century scientists posing a theory of dark matter or space flight.

In adrienne maree brown's story, *The River*, she imagines the Detroit River taking justice into its own watery hands. Might there be a truth to be found in the idea of Nature having her own agency and natural forces to act deliberately in her own self-interest, or even in vengeance. Is that really such a stretch of imagination?

In Octavia's Brood, the story *The Long Memory*, by Morrigan Phillips, illustrates the idea that history could be held by only a few, who in turn could be silenced or destroyed by those in power is absolutely terrifying, and yet, another plausible future truth.

And, as Octavia Butler reminds us, “The only lasting truth is change.” So any truth we arrive at is only another installment of incremental fragments of reality. So we continue, as Kelly asks in the middle pause of his paper, in this moment, the challenge of truth, of finding it, of knowing it, of holding it in common with others. If truth is constantly changing, where will we find common ground?

Of course, our imaginations are always somewhat limited to our own experience, and I have so appreciated the resources and reading list engaging us with Speculative Fiction created from the imaginations of people who have been historically marginalized and have experienced systemic oppression. While Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale*, cuts right to the heart of some current trends in dystopian fears, the author's personal experience, her own “truth” is a very different lens than that of the authors who come from generations of trauma.

The world of Panga in Becky Chambers' *Psalm for the Wild Built*, is a hopeful, soothing balm and juxtaposition to many of the dystopian speculative narratives. The question that Dex and Mosscap seek to understand "What do people need?" invites the reader to consider again how speculative fiction informs our understanding of truth, our quest for truth, and how this truth has evolved on the Panga as people's answer to that question evolved from a place of misinformation marked by greed and exploitation, towards a period of enlightenment, yet

continues to unfold as people understand themselves and their surroundings in new and different ways.

In the engaging book, *Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit & Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*, editor Joshua Whitehead explains how he arrived at a decision to collect utopian stories rather than dystopian. He writes in the forward (page 10), “ Originally, the project was designed to be geared toward the dystopic, and after careful conversations, we decided to queer it toward the utopian. This, in my opinion was an important political shift in thinking about the temporalities of Two-Spirited, queer, trans, and non-binary Indigenous ways of being. For, as we know, we have already survived the apocalypse – this, right here, right now, is a dystopian present. What better way to imagine survivability than to think about how we may flourish into being joyously animated rather than merely alive?”

Returning to Walida Imarisha in her introduction to *Octavia’s Brood*, “And for those of us from communities with historic collective trauma, we must understand that each of us is already science fiction walking around on two legs. Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us.” For Adrienne [Maree Brown] and myself, as two Black, we think of our ancestors in chains dreaming about a day when their children’s children’s children would be free. They had no reason to believe this was likely, but together they dreamed of freedom, and they brought us into being. We believe in that right [Octavia] Butler claimed for each of us - the right to dream as ourselves, individually and collectively. But we also think it is a responsibility she handed down: are we brave enough to imagine beyond the boundaries of ‘the real’ and then do the hard work of sculpting reality from our dreams?” (Walidah Imarisha in *Octavia’s Brood*, p. 3 - 5)

In other words, we are the dreamers and makers of the truth that will become, somewhere beyond the horizon of our own vision, we imagine what might be, what must be, and work to make it so.

In closing, I would like to circle back to the beginning, to the question posed by Kelly in his *Odyssey*, ‘What do you think *should* have happened? What do you think should happen *now*?’ and rephrase it for us to consider with one another as we look to possible future truths to inform our present ‘What do you think *will* happen? What do you think should happen *now*?’

Submitted gratefully and with apologies for the rough footnote-less typo-ridden state of it.