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Superceding Cyberpunk: Review of Graham J.
Murphy and Sherryl Vint's *Beyond Cyberpunk: New
Critical Perspectives*

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Sustainability” excerpts Hopkinson, Hairston, Archie Weller, and Vizenor’s *Bearheart* (1978; rev. 1990).

Visualizing “Native Apocalypses” provides a powerful means of facing a genocidal past and envisioning an alternate future, as seen in contributions by Alexie, William Sanders, Zainab Amadahy, and Misha. Dillon concludes on the Anishinaabemowin concept of “Biskaabiiyang,” a “return to ourselves” paradoxically allowed by the estrangement effect of sf, not only for indigenous peoples, but also for descendants of colonizers. While the stories in this section may be dystopian (e.g., Eden Robinson’s “Terminal Avenue”) or utopian (e.g., Maori writer Robert Sullivan’s “Star Waka”), they all, like the anthology itself, “encourage[e] native writers to write about Native conditions in Native-centered worlds liberated by the imagination” (11).

But *Walking the Clouds* is not just a book by Natives for Natives; while Dillon may be seen as an activist promoting Indigenous sf, she also seeks to share it. Precisely because this anthology “confronts the structures of racism and colonialism *and* sf’s own complicity in them” (10-11; emphasis in original), this is a book that *all* of the sf community should read. Conversely, *Walking the Clouds* can also teach those in Native literatures about the potential of science fiction; the book’s approach—including excerpts as well as self-contained stories, along with a scholarly, but not inaccessibly jargon-filled, apparatus—makes it a perfect course text. While not all readers will find this challenging writing a walk in the clouds, it is nonetheless a necessary walk for us to take.—**Amy Ransom, Central Michigan University**

Superseding Cyberpunk. Graham J. Murphy and Sherryl Vint, eds. *Beyond Cyberpunk: New Critical Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2010. xviii + 263 pp. \$125 hc; \$39.95 pbk.

What was cyberpunk? We seem to have reached a critical moment where it can be safely declared that cyberpunk is a thing of the past, a historical subgenre (aesthetic? form? movement?) and not a living one. Of course, many of its writers are still alive and writing, and its specific tricks and tropes live on in various successors such as steampunk, atompunk, dieselpunk, biopunk, and (most vexingly) something called “postcyberpunk”—but nonetheless it seems as though some imperceptible threshold has been finally crossed, some bit flipped from 1 to 0. In “The Gernsback Continuum” (1981), William Gibson famously wrote of the glittering unrealized techno-utopia that haunted his dingier, dustier present. That future—spaceships, hovercars, robot butlers, food pills—never happened (alas). But in 2007 interviews promoting his novel *Spook Country*, he frequently noted that the opposite had happened to cyberpunk: it was superseded by events. Somehow, instead of preempting the cyberpunk future, we had overtaken it, raced right past it; Gibson said he had given up trying to predict the future at all and was instead resigning himself to trying to predict “the year before last.” In a Facebook, drone-war world in which everyday life has been so utterly transformed, networked, and virtualized by information technology, that loose collection of texts once called “cyberpunk” seems at once totally

triumphant and utterly superfluous—simultaneously the realism of our time and the literary equivalent of phlogiston, predicting everything and nothing.

Graham J. Murphy and Sherryl Vint take up this dialectic between ascendancy and obsolescence in their recent edited collection *Beyond Cyberpunk: New Critical Perspectives*. Cyberpunk, they and their authors repeatedly find, was *always* dead—the announcement of its obituary more or less coinciding with the moment of the genre's first emergence. The collection begins by unpacking this very paradox, framing it (as the “-punk” of “cyberpunk” might suggest) as yet another instance of a marginal movement quickly being captured, commercialized, and banalized by the mainstream. Their introduction even finds the cyberpunks eulogizing themselves in precisely this fashion; Lewis Shiner in his 1991 “Confessions of an Ex-Cyberpunk” finds the second wave of cyberpunk authors formulaic, while Bruce Sterling, in his 1998 essay “Cyberpunk in the Nineties,” mournfully declares that the cyberpunks are an erstwhile Bohemian underground undone by their own increasing respectability. The punks sold out, in other words, and the movement's vitality was quickly sapped. Indeed, in his contribution to the collection, Rob Latham persuasively identifies this asserted rise-cooptation-and-fall as the dominant Ur-narrative of all sf historiography: sf critics repeatedly cast the genre as a “recurring cycle of messianic avant-gardism and old-school intransigence,” simply substituting each new movement in each position in turn (30).

Alongside the white elephant of respectability, Murphy and Vint find a second explanation for the passing of cyberpunk that is somewhat more specific to its cultural and historical context—its basic thematic indistinguishability from globalization. “Perhaps one of the reasons cyberpunk seems both so dated and yet paradoxically so relevant,” they offer, “is that the ideological assumptions of neoliberalism have become so ubiquitous as information technology” (xvii). Cyberpunk, they suggest, no longer feels vital precisely because its cognitive mapping of global capitalism has become so universal and inescapable. I can track the iPad I bought on Amazon on my iPhone as it leaves its factory in Shenzhen to arrive via FedEx on my doorstep in Milwaukee, before the charge has even shown up on my online account at citicards.com—so what good is *Neuromancer* to me? We all know damn well we are in the Matrix, and we seem to like it just fine. Indeed, as multiple contributors to the collection note, debates over cyberpunk have long judged the form to be far too comfortable with the world it depicts, typically locating its spirit of utopian *jouissance* not in *resistance* to informationalized capitalism but rather in programmatic, celebratory mastery of it. After a decade of surveillance-state nightmares, economic disasters, and environmental catastrophes, perhaps we are hungry for a bit less “cyber-” and a bit more “-punk.”

Going further, there is a third “death of cyberpunk” focalized by Murphy, Vint, and their contributors, and this is the sheer prevalence of *literal* death—and its posthuman transcendence—within and across cyberpunk fictions. Reorganizing the subgenre with the benefit of retrospection, Murphy and Vint make visible a preoccupation with death and dying that becomes in this telling

cyberpunk's overarching but unacknowledged central theme. We see this from the collection's first essay (Brian McHale's analysis of biopunk's zombies) onwards, but the argument receives its clearest articulation in Andrew M. Butler's reading of Jeff Noon, "Journeys Beyond Being," in which cyberspace becomes not only an "escape from the body, from the meat" but also an underworld visit to "the realm of the dead" (77). The very next essay, Tom Moylan's on the post-*Neuromancer* writing of William Gibson, goes further still, suggesting that cyberpunk originates precisely from a perception of global threat realized in the various disasters of the 1970s:

we now face a more fragile natural world and social environment, an unstable world economy (despite the extensive restructuring), a weakened national government (unwilling to exercise its own capacity for popular service), an increasingly subordinated population of women and people of color (facing increasing official and popular terrorism), a declining middle class (seen more clearly in the current recession as managers as well as skilled workers are laid off), a reduced and impoverished work force (deprived of the power of its own organizations), and a growing number of dispossessed who have been denied benefits of meaningful work and nurturing social services. (82)

My own recent interest in the ecological science fiction of the 1970s has left me similarly convinced that cyberpunk emerges primarily in response to the twin disillusionments that destroyed the fantasy of a happy *Jetsons* future, à la "The Gernsback Continuum": the realization that the space program was a bust and there is nothing for us out there, and the realization that "progress" in technology was not perfecting human civilization but instead actively destroying the planet. Trapped, then, on a murdered Earth, we fantasize about escaping into the computer, the last place where we can still have all the untold riches of the Golden Age once seemed to promise. And this is of course precisely the imaginative space in which cyberpunk themes remain most vital and alive in the present moment—the fantasy of the Singularity, as popularized by Vernor Vinge and Ray Kurzweil, the so-called "rapture of the nerds" that has convinced so many of our students that as long as they can make it to 2040 or so they'll get to live forever. Perhaps cyberpunk is always already "dead" because it is the neurosis of a dying civilization that cannot think about anything else.

The web comic *Pictures for Sad Children* once characterized the Singularity, and its fantasy of immortalized privilege, as "the nerd way of saying 'in the future being rich and white will be even more awesome.'" The essays at the end of *Beyond Cyberpunk* take up this very question of the richness and whiteness of cyberpunk sf, adding maleness and straightness for good measure. Another kind of death hangs over cyberpunk, after all, a metaphorical death related to but distinct from the other "deaths" associated with economic postmodernism: the death of certain kinds of privilege historically associated with the social dominance of rich, straight, white males. Much as aesthetic postmodernism became culturally important precisely in the moment when the canon began to become more diverse—thereby returning its predominantly white, male practitioners to the unchallenged position of literary and artistic supremacy they had briefly risked losing—and much as the abstruse view-from-nowhere of

“Theory” emerged as the overriding concern in the academy precisely at the moment of a revolutionary demand for racial and sexual equality, cyberpunk itself can be read against the grain as an unconscious and ultimately doomed attempt to preserve white, male hegemony in the face of sf’s increasingly diverse authorship and fandom. Karen Cadora makes this case most forcefully in her contribution to the collection, “Feminist Cyberpunk,” which notes first the masculinist tendencies of much early cyberpunk writing and then asks, sardonically, why it is that cyberpunk itself is declared dead “just at the moment when women writers begin to explore the connections between race, gender, sexuality, and cyberspace?” (172). Murphy’s essay finds cyberpunk in Harlem; still others find it in Japan, China, and beyond. In its exploration of cyberpunk’s critique of embodiment, the final third of *Beyond Cyberpunk* suggests that the long-awaited death of cyberpunk may yet have to wait—that what has happened is not death but democratization, that the hacking of our various consensual hallucinations has only just begun.—Gerry Canavan, Marquette University

The Evolutionary Imagination. Michael R. Page. *The Literary Imagination from Erasmus Darwin to H.G. Wells: Science, Evolution, and Ecology*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012. viii + 224 pp. \$99.95 hc.

In the Advertisement to *The Loves of the Plants* (1789), the poet Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles, described his project as one of “enlisting the imagination under the banner of science.” Difficult though it is to sum up Michael R. Page’s invigorating book, we might say that in him science has found its latest literary recruiting agent. Erudite and well-informed, irrepressibly opinionated, and, frankly, often repetitious, Page offers a bracing mixture of literary history, textual analysis, and world-saving polemic. Surveying nineteenth-century British literature from *The Loves of the Plants* to H.G. Wells, he sets out to bring together sf scholarship and the strain of contemporary ecocriticism known as “green Romanticism.” This book, therefore, begins with science fiction’s emergence from the “conversation of literature and science” that Page finds in the Romantic poets (9), and ends by presenting the genre as a necessary source for the “visionary and forward-looking thinking that will determine the survival of the human species” (197). The result is a much more embattled study than the rather bland title suggests. While Page openly lets fly at the literary-critical establishment, which, he says, continues to denigrate sf, other groups more actively threatening to human survival—creationists, climate-change deniers, and the like—are surely within his sights.

The most influential statement of the claim that sf’s origins lie in Romanticism and, specifically, in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) comes in Brian Aldiss’s history of the genre, *Billion Year Spree* (1973; rev., with David Wingrove, as *Trillion Year Spree*, 1988). Aldiss, accordingly, is one of the chorus of sf critics (including I.F. Clarke, Darko Suvin, W. Warren Wagar, and any number of regular contributors to *SFS*) whom Page tends to cite at every opportunity in support of his own argument. *The Literary Imagination* is as notable for its orchestration of the existing body of sf and Romantic-period scholarship as it is for setting out an original point of view. That such