What Can Double Estrangement Reveal about Speculative Fiction?

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In my book *Diverse Futures: Science Fiction and Authors of Color*, I use the phrase "double estrangement" to describe science fiction texts that add a layer of racial self-consciousness to the estrangement of science fictional settings. This term juxtaposes the ideas of cognitive estrangement expressed by science fiction critic Darko Suvin with W.E.B. DuBois's writings on racial double consciousness. At the time I was writing *Diverse Futures*, I was unaware that science fiction scholar Ian Campbell had also decided on this term for his 2018 book *Arabic Science Fiction* to describe Arabic science fiction's use of estrangement as subtle political critique under dangerous social situations and also to address the ways that Arabic science fiction authors estrange references to Western technologies. And it turns out that the term "double estrangement" has been used in fantasy studies to discuss the ways that immersive fantasy worlds often shield readers from any implication that the created fantasy world is not real (Mendlesohn 59). While these definitions of "double estrangement" are inherently different and were created for different purposes, I want to take a minute to think through what double estrangement can add to the study of speculative fiction.

What each of these definitions of double estrangement demonstrates is an awareness that speculative fictions work to place readers in a liminal position: between the "real" world and the world of the speculative text, or between a fantasy world and its "rational" alternative. I am using quotation marks around the terms "real" and "rational" here because these terms come from a Eurocentric perspective. European colonizers believed that their sciences and technologies were superior to those of the peoples they colonized, and therefore the only rational option, a fact that John Rieder documents thoroughly in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. The rational vs. irrational binary is one of the cornerstones of definitions of speculative

fiction and also serves as a boundary denoting the difference between the genres of science fiction and fantasy.

And yet, in many countries and cultures, what is considered real and rational differs widely. Colson Whitehead explains in an interview about his zombie apocalypse novel *Zone One* that "My conception of what makes a zombie horrible and terrifying is realizing the truth of the world, which you've always suspected" (Colbert). Many other authors and scholars discuss the experience, as Greg Tate describes, of "[living] the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine" (qtd. in Dery 212). Africanfuturist and Indigenous futurist authors frequently discuss the experience of already living in dystopic or post-apocalyptic worlds. Non-Eurocentric science fiction authors may be living in regimes that do not allow for outright social critique or may have a complex relationship to Western science and technology, as evidenced in Campbell's discussion of the multiple estrangements in Arabic science fiction. Authors writing speculative fiction from a perspective outside of the dominant or Eurocentric model, authors already living an estranged existence, are therefore frequently writing works that contain multiple layers of estrangement.

The acknowledgement of multiple levels of estrangement in speculative works pushes authors and scholars to think beyond Suvin's scientific and political novums and reconsider the assumption that everyone can recognize "the real world." Theories of double estrangement highlight the social and economic estrangement that constitutes the lived experiences of many marginalized groups. As African speculative author Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki notes in his nonfiction essay, "Too Dystopian for Whom?," one person's dystopia is another person's lived experience. And while for years, science fiction argued that after the apocalypse, humans would find a way to forget their differences and work together, current events like the COVID-19 pandemic seem to indicate that disaster only serves to widen economic gaps and create more intense social and political divisions.

Ling Ma's *Severance* is a good example of a science fiction novel that utilizes double estrangement to take on the trope of the multicultural survivor group found in popular post-apocalyptic series like *The Walking Dead*. In *Severance*, the Asian female narrator, Candace, joins a group of survivors after deciding to leave New York City, which has become ravaged by a fungal infection that turns people into zombie-like creatures. Ma shifts from the typical zombie apocalypse narrative where danger comes from the zombie and creates a narrative that allows Candice to empathize with the non-violent former-humans. She also uses Candace's internal monologue to add a layer of racialized and gendered precarity to her narrative. Candice is consistently aware of her expendable position in the survivor group and is forced to utilize Asian female stereotypes to escape being imprisoned by a white man after it is revealed that she is pregnant. Ma's references to the narrator as the child of immigrants, who is reluctant to leave her corporate office after a pandemic decimates the city, offers a commentary on the illusion of the model minority and the price that women of color pay in a world where failure is not an option. The fact that she is imprisoned to "protect" her child links to narratives of women of color as unfit mothers. Readers feel every level of estrangement that the narrator experiences as the novel uncovers multiple tensions: the tensions between the pre- and post-pandemic worlds, between the narrator and the

survivor group she joins, and between the narrator and her heritage, which is revealed through flashbacks and a vision the narrator has of her dead mother. Ma's near-future dystopia is almost indistinguishable from the present, and yet the levels of estrangement the narrator faces and the racial/ethnic self-consciousness revealed make *Severance* a prime example of how writing science fiction from a marginalized perspective can add additional levels of estrangement to a genre defined by cognitive estrangement.

But what does the concept of double estrangement bring to other speculative genres, like fantasy? If double estrangement in fantasy is the act of shielding the reader from any speculation that an immersive fantasy world is not real, then a work like R. F. Kuang's *Babel* offers an important example of how non-Eurocentric fantasy can use alternate perspectives and realities to play with the borders of reality in a fantasy text. Kuang's novel tells the story of a young Chinese boy, Robin, who is brought to England after the death of his mother and trained by his benefactor and unacknowledged father, Professor Lovell, to become a translator for Babel – a powerful institution that creates the magic bars that are the basis of colonial wealth and power in this fantasy setting. *Babel* employs conversations about the morality of supporting a corrupt, colonizing empire in order to create an added level of estrangement in the narrative. Within Kuang's European fantasy setting, her characters of color are never fully accepted and are constantly questioning their choice to participate in the colonial machine. The fact that non-European languages are the key to the continuing dominance of England's magic also comments on issues of translation and reception for authors like Kuang who want to write fantasy that differs from or critiques the Oxford school tradition of fantasy.

Although the double estrangement of the world of *Babel* is maintained – the existence of Babel and magic in the novel is never truly questioned – Kuang plays with the idea of fantasy and reality to critique the Eurocentrism of fantasy literature:

> Of all the marvels of Oxford, Babel seemed the most impossible – a tower out of time, a vision from a dream…it all seemed to have been pulled straight from the painting in Professor Lovell's dining room and dropped whole onto this drab grey street. An illumination in a medieval manuscript; a door to fairy land. (Kuang 72)

Kuang connects her narrator's amazement to fantasy and fantastic creations; her references to "medieval manuscripts" and "fairy land" take the most expected aspects of Eurocentric fantasy worldbuilding and use them to express the alienation of her Chinese protagonist. Throughout *Babel*, Robin is forced to abandon his dead mother, change his name, and accept the fact that his white father will never acknowledge him. The professor even beats him in a graphic scene while making references to colonial stereotypes of Chinese laziness. Robin eventually kills Professor Lovel and spends the rest of the novel trying to survive in an England that wants to imprison and torture him. Like Candance and many other marginalized people of color, Robin is both invisible and hyper-visible, and his survival depends on his awareness that he will never be able to fully integrate into a white-dominated colonial culture. Double estrangement in fantasy can be an important lens for authors and scholars to begin

conversations about how non-Eurocentric fantasy can utilize fantasy structures, Eurocentric or otherwise, as colonial critique.

I hope that my brief discussion of the concept of double estrangement in non-Eurocentric speculative literature helps to acknowledge the important contributions that authors who write outside of white, male, heteronormative identities are making within this genre. Authors who choose to write non-Eurocentric speculative fiction utilize the estrangement possible in speculative worlds to draw attention to the ways that marginalized peoples already live an estranged existence. Those of us who study speculative fiction need to consider how double estrangement highlights the ways that non-Eurocentric speculative works critique the history of Eurocentric dominance in speculative genres and, ultimately, create new ways of thinking about who is actually estranged in speculative fiction.

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