C21 LITERATURE
Journal of 21st-century Writings

Mortimer, Adrienne. 2024. "Hope and dread in the here and now: A review essay." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings* 111(1): pp. 1–10. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.18018

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Hope and dread in the here and now: A review essay

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Review: *THE FICTION OF DREAD: DYSTOPIA, MONSTROSITY, AND APOCALYPSE* by Robert T. Tally Jr., London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024. 170 pp., ISBN 978150375866, h/bk £65.00, p/bk £19.99, e-book £17.99.

Review: *HOPE AND KINSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION: MOODS AND MODES OF TEMPORALITY AND BELONGING* by Gero Bauer, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024. 272 pp., ISBN 97987651 04194, h/bk £90.00, e-book £81.00.

When I began the process of reading Robert T. Tally Jr's and Gero Bauer's new monographs for this review, I thought I would begin with dread and end with hope. I based this choice on my own assumption that dread and hope were polarised feelings – that dread paralyses the mind and that hope, as Rebecca Solnit (2016: 4) writes, 'calls for action'. With this cliché trajectory in mind, I read *The Fiction of Dread: Dystopia, Monstrosity, and Apocalypse* and *Hope and Kinship in Contemporary Fiction: Moods and Modes of Temporality and Belonging* only to have these assumptions engagingly rebuffed and challenged. What both studies make clear is that hope and dread are intimately entangled affects, borne symbiotically out of a contemporary moment riven with multiple and intersecting geopolitical, economic, and ecological crises. And, for both authors, hope and dread are affects of *possibility*. It is from this shared philosophical position that Bauer and Tally launch two distinct explorations of the roles of hope and dread in cultural critique.

The Fiction of Dread is a discursive theoretical treatise on the critical and imaginative affordances of dread. In it, Tally (2024: 3) argues dread is itself a 'form of hope' that '[empowers] the imagination' and makes it possible to '[posit] alternative futures'. He identifies (indeed, diagnoses) a rapid growth in 'dystopian themes, proliferating monsters, and apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic visions [...] in popular culture' (Tally 2024: 3). In a wily pun on Marx, Tally refers to this swell in dystopian sentiment and 'monstrous' figures in narrative fiction as a form of 'monstrous accumulation' (Tally 2024: 3). To examine this phenomenon, Tally's book is broken down into three overlapping conceptual categories: dystopia, monstrosity, and apocalypse. Chapters One and Two set the theoretical scene of the book, and the following six chapters offer a combination of further critical framing and some textual analyses of a small selection of new and old dystopian cultural texts.

In Chapter One, Tally revisits an argument made by China Miéville in 2013 for dread as a productive category of analysis. Dread, to Tally (2024: 13), is 'all about possibility', playing as it does on one's anticipatory fears about possible situations and outcomes. Chapter Two offers a series of compelling arguments for the rise of dystopia in our contemporary moment. Here Tally draws upon Fredric Jameson's notion of the hypothetical break required in the artificial process of periodisation to highlight the critical challenges of naming a cultural moment or of putting one's finger on the pulse of the contemporary. As he argues, 'it may be that part of the dread associated with contemporary dystopianism lies in the fact that it is so difficult to pin down a clearly identifiable moment of rupture, when everything changed' (Tally 2024: 23). He goes on to identify the increase in surveillance technologies and systems of meritocracy as constitutive factors underpinning contemporary dystopic feelings of dread, using two

canonical examples of dystopian fiction – Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949) – to illustrate his point.

In Chapter Three, Tally argues that Neil Gaiman's dystopic fantasy novel, *American Gods* (2001), 'dramatizes the dystopian atmosphere' of the US at the end of the twentieth century. *American Gods*, he suggests, 'is a fable of transgression' and, in its combination of the fantastical and of realism, foregrounds transgressivity as 'not only the state of things in the dystopian, end-of-the-millenium United States, but also the means by which to navigate the spaces of dystopia' (Tally 2024: 49). Chapter Four turns to explore the construction of self and subjectivity in an age of late capitalist anxiety – typified, as Tally has made clear up to this point – by ubiquitous technologies of surveillance and biopolitical control – in Charlie Brooker's web television series *Black Mirror*. Drawing on Foucault's work on mirrors as heterotopian spaces, Tally argues that selected episodes of *Black Mirror* (2011–) similarly foreground technological devices as 'black mirrors', or as 'unreal, virtual spaces' (Tally 2024: 66) which both absorb and reflect uncanny versions of oneself.

Chapters Five through to Eight advance a complexly worked out argument of the ways in which dystopian fiction and the horror genre, both broadly defined, can make seemingly incomprehensible world systems not only comprehensible, but navigable. In this, Tally rehearses Jameson's theory of cognitive mapping, whereby individual subjects are unable spatially to visualise or map the world (and our place in it) because it has become unmappably vast in the era of globalisation and mass connectivity. Dystopian and apocalyptic narratives, Tally argues, are themselves 'form[s] of cognitive mapping' in that they instantiate 'an aesthetic and political program aimed at giving form to the inchoate, protean, neoliberal world order' (2024: 125). They give form, that is, to the formlessness of dread. Such narratives are also forms of what he calls a 'fantastic, Marxist critique'. He draws here on Miéville's idea that the fantastic is a mode well suited to comprehending 'a system that masks the social relations of which it is constituted' (Tally 2024: 96), because it sets out to *unmask* those relations. Tally claims that the fantastic is itself a kind of Marxist ideology critique insofar as it investigates the conditions of the production of meaning. In particular, he foregrounds the figure of the monster as an agent of just such a mode of critique in dystopian and apocalyptic narratives. Drawing on Jack Halberstam's formulation that 'monsters are meaning machines' (Halberstam, cited in Tally 2024: 86), he claims that monsters, 'by embodying a sort of political unconscious' can 'become a means of demystifying and mapping the social world in an age of globalization' (Tally 2024: 104).

Tally rounds off *The Fiction of Dread* with an elaboration on what he calls a 'heterotopian enclave'. He assembles a theoretical tapestry that draws on Jorge Luis

Borges' story 'On Exactitude in Science'; Baudrillard's use of Borges' fable; Marc Augé's notion of non places; Siobhan Caroll's of atopia; Heidegger's idea of homelessness as 'the symptom of the oblivion of being' (Heidegger, cited in Tally 2024:144), and Jameson's reading of Heidegger. From this theoretical assemblage, Tally suggests that heterotopian enclaves can be spaces that are both 'part of the world and [have] some sort of privileged vantage from which to envision it' (2024: 150). It is from such spaces that the 'artistic, creative mapping project' of *immanent critique* can take place. In this claim, Tally foregrounds *The Fiction of Dread* as itself a kind of creative mapping project. It is the responsibility of the critic, Tally believes, to 'maintain the uneasy and dreadful project of making sense of the world in our time' and, in so doing, imagine 'a space that is not only inhabitable, but worth living in' (2024: 97; 166).

However, as with any work, there are some caveats and limitations to *The Fiction of Dread* that are worth noting.[1] Tally's previous published work on utopia and on Jameson is well-known, and so it is no surprise that, throughout, he pitches the book firmly at an audience well versed in the Marxist critical theory of Jameson. Much of his framing of dread and dystopia, throughout, rehearses some well-trodden arguments of Jameson's on these topics and assumes this knowledge of its readers. This is not necessarily a disadvantage, but it would limit the accessibility of the text to, for example, undergraduate readers. As a work, Tally's book is also much more a theoretical treatise on the role of criticism in making sense of contemporary moments than it is a dedicated work of literary or cultural criticism itself. With the exception of the chapters on *American Gods* and *Black Mirror*, close textual analysis of contemporary cultural texts in the book is truncated (readings of Roland Emmerich's disaster movie *2012* (2009) and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008), for example, are intriguing but abrupt).

It is also striking that, for a book about contemporary dystopian narratives, Tally's only extended textual analyses tended to focus on canonical twentieth- and even nineteenth-century literary texts (see his analyses of Orwell and Huxley in Chapter Two, and of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* in Chapter Five). Throughout, Tally variously lists a huge range of lesser studied contemporary cultural texts; his book would have perhaps benefited from a concerted focus on such texts. Finally, Tally does not acknowledge the US-centrism and Anglophone focus of his book; the theoretical tradition on which he draws is also notably Euro-centric. In a time when many academies in the Global North

[1] There are a series of unfortunate editorial errors that occur too frequently throughout the book to ignore. I noted several repetitions of passages verbatim from within the book itself (see, for example, phrasing on pages 85, 104, and 110). This, at times, had the effect of muddling or confusing Tally's otherwise well-worked out argument. The error, here, should surely lie with the editors and proofreaders of *The Fiction of Dread*, and I note these errors now because they should have no place in a scholarly work published with a major academic publishing house.

are calling for a greater awareness of decoloniality in our research, this is a conspicuous omission. When Tally therefore argues for the power of dystopian fiction to help make mappable seemingly incomprehensible world systems, one wonders precisely *whose* world he is referring to?

Notwithstanding this, *The Fiction of Dread* is a largely well-reasoned defence of the role of criticism in disorienting times that has wide applicability to those working in the Humanities today. Fittingly enough, Tally concludes his book by claiming that dread is an eminently hopeful affect. 'Like dread', hope 'is less a way of dreaming about the future than a means of dealing with the present, its threats as well as its promises' (Tally 2024: 165). Bauer (2024: 2) would undoubtedly agree: as he argues persuasively in *Hope and Kinship*, 'the possibility of hope' is realised in radical acknowledgement of 'the loss of the future' in favour of 'the here and now'. More precisely, he argues for uncoupling hope from dominant discourses of futurity and naïve optimism. In so arguing, he reframes hope as a multivalent affect with both negative and reparative energies.

Bauer (2024: 34) identifies the entanglement of hope and kinship as a clear theme in recent films, novels, and television series, spotlighting 'a tendency in fiction since the turn of the millennium to process and negotiate contemporary crisis discourse in terms of temporality and belonging'. To understand this phenomenon, he offers a theoretically ambitious project that sustains a lucid, original, and pedantically worked-out methodology throughout its six chapters. He carefully establishes a dense yet distinctive epistemological nexus between hope, kinship, temporality, and belonging. His conjecture is that hope is critically tied to the exigencies of the present moment insofar as it is a *relational* affect. Bauer (2024: 231) aligns hope with 'a performative notion of kinship in the sense of spontaneous, improvised, and contingent acts of care and concern' that are enacted in an 'extended present'. Far from being attached to notions of futurity, hope has a temporal disposition towards the present moment. Indeed, in what is perhaps his most significant claim of the book, Bauer suggests that it is possible to invest – critically, politically, emotionally – in the utopian spirit of hope *without* looking towards an often arbitrarily and passively defined better future that exists elsewhere. Rather, he locates hope in non-normative structures of belonging that decentre many of the social frames in which dominant iterations of futurity – such as teleology, linearity, generation, and reproduction – have traditionally taken hold (i.e., the heteronormative nuclear family unit). Poignantly, Bauer (2024: 42) asks his readers, 'what can it mean to turn sideways (to one another in the present) instead of looking behind or ahead (to the past or future)?'. In so asking, he conjures an image of individual bodies turning towards one another in unison, perfectly encapsulating how Bauer sees hope, kinship, temporality and belonging as intersecting concerns.

The thesis of *Hope and Kinship* is a compelling if complicated one. Bauer is working with four critical terminologies – hope; kinship; temporality; belonging – that each require theoretical support. He is meticulous in this and demonstrates an extraordinary breadth of scholarship.[2] Yet the complexity of his idea sometimes means that his explanation of it, particularly in the Introduction, becomes slightly packed with citation. Nevertheless, he makes several notable critical interventions, particularly in the fields of queer theory and the emergent area of postcritique. He astutely identifies unresolved tensions which have come to characterise these critical fields, namely polarised debates between anti-futural negativity vs. queer utopianism in queer theory, and paranoid vs. reparative reading in contemporary literary studies. His formulation of hope and kinship, and temporality and belonging, is a clever attempt to find points of complementarity between and within these critical conflicts. He fluently rehearses the well-known schism between Lee Edelman's polemic against reproductive futurism and José Esteban Muñoz's argument for a 'queer reclaiming of the future' (Bauer 2024: 11). Evoking Edelman's zeal for an anti-social queerness and Muñoz's valorisation of queer community making, Bauer (2024: 12) puts his own spin on the debate by arguing, paradoxically, that 'the hope and commitment to the idea of community which queerness entails can emerge from the very negativity and anti-futurism Muñoz and other queer utopianists argue against'. Fleshing this claim out, Bauer utilises a range of queer scholarship on kinship, temporality, and optimism, including Lauren Berlant, Michael Snediker, and Alexis Lothian's respective positions on 'cruel' and 'queer' optimisms. From this scholarly backdrop, Bauer rehabilitates queer negativity (and its association with affects of pain and loss) as a site of kin-making potential brewed in the here and now.

Bauer aligns this conflict between queer negativity and utopia to contemporary debates about reparative and paranoid reading. He returns to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's canonical essay on the topic. 'Sedgwick,' he writes, 'foregrounds paranoid and reparative modalities of reading and knowing in terms of their different relations to temporality and belonging' (Bauer 2024: 24). He argues that she does *not* position paranoia and the reparative as oppositional but rather as 'critical modalities' that can co-exist in the same text. This is in much the same way that, to Bauer, queer negativity and anti-futurity can co-exist alongside utopic desires. Following Sedgwick, Bauer aligns

[2] To define hope, Bauer draws on seminal works by Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Laurent Berlant. He articulates an idea of 'kinship' through Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman's concept of *kincoherence*; Judith Butler's work on kinship; Marshall Salins' idea of kinship as a 'mutuality of being'; Daniel Heath Justice's work on indigenous American communities and kinship; Russell West Pavlov's idea of planetary kinship; and Donna Haraway's iconoclastic call to 'Make Kin, Not Babies' (Haraway, cited in Bauer 2024: 21).

hope as a reparative positionality in tune with the dynamics of the present moment. This is a perspective that, he suggests, postcriticism also helps bring into focus. To Bauer, postcriticism (as it has been spearheaded by scholars such as Rita Felski and Christopher Castiglia) champions an ethics of relationality, affect, and immanence that is born specifically out of a close attendance to 'the text'. Bauer (2024: 27) suggests that the postcritical turn in recent contemporary theory makes possible a kind of 'hopeful reading' that is rooted implicitly in the affordances of close reading. He makes a case for close reading as reparative inasmuch as it compels the critical reader to slow down and 'look both hard and askance at the norm' (Freeman, cited in Bauer 2024: 30), opening space for reinterpretation.

Across its six chapters, *Hope and Kinship* is a paean to the rewards of patient close reading. Bauer (2024: 36) selects for study a range of cultural texts, arguing that 'any analysis of contemporary storytelling [...] should [...] include narrative in different medial forms in order to properly appreciate the extent to which these forms share a cultural function as imaginative spaces in which fictional narration is realized' (36). The book breaks down into three parts: temporality and belonging in post-apocalyptic fictions; queer hope and globalised kinship in contemporary speculative fiction; and hysterical pessimism in selected works by Hanya Yanagihara. Excepting of the final part on Yanagihara, Bauer structures each section with one chapter on a novel and its film adaptation, and a second chapter on a television series.

Part One foregrounds examples in post-apocalyptic fiction of alternative forms of belonging and kinship which challenge the future-oriented logics of social structures like the heteronormative nuclear family unit. In Chapter One, Bauer analyses Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), reframing the character of the boy as a force of reparative hope that subverts the novel's otherwise paranoid investment in teleologically determined futures. Here, he is also attempting to rescue the overdetermined symbolic figure of 'the Child' from '[having] to stand in for the future'. He suggests instead that the boy in McCarthy's novel instantiates 'a radical stance of solidarity in the here and now' (Bauer 2024: 75) by striking a sense of kinship with all 'surviving creatures' (Bauer 2024: 69). Likewise, in his reading of AMC's popular television series, *The Walking Dead* (2010–22), Bauer (2024: 101) foregrounds the young and doomed son of the show's protagonist, Rick Grimes, as a 'renitent' figure who 'questions, contradicts, and offers ways out of' so-called 'paranoid commitments to patriarchal, heterosexual, and reproductive structures'. Unlike his father, who is out to protect only his own clan, Carl Grimes seeks solidarity across the arbitrary divisions of 'us' and 'them'. To Bauer, the respective storylines of Carl and other socially marginalised figures in *The Walking Dead* – from the show's queer, black, and Asian characters to its nameless zombies

– reveal and trouble the boundaries between who does and does not count as kin in the hypothetical context of post-apocalypse.

Part Two focuses on speculative fiction and its capacity to imagine 'community and hope on a global scale' (Bauer 2024: 104). For this, Bauer analyses David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and its film adaptation by the Wachowskis, and Netflix's web television series *Sense8* (2015–8) (also co-created by the Wachowskis) to consider the kinds of pressure hope, kinship, and belonging come under in the contexts of globalisation, universal humanism, and cosmopolitanism. Both texts, he argues, '[portray] a vision of global humanism and a celebration of diversity that overcomes geographical, social, and political divisions' (Bauer 2024: 139). However, for him, *Cloud Atlas* ultimately endorses a 'conservative notion of humanism' that 'relocates hope in a narrative of heterosexual romance and reproductive survival' (Bauer 2024: 115). And he argues that the makers of *Sense8* capitulate (unwillingly) to the 'progressive neoliberal' politics of Netflix, as a media corporation seeking to appease a global target audience, thus diluting the power of the show's radical vision of hope, kinship, and empathy.

Part Three is a structural outlier for Bauer's book (somewhat disrupting the established flow of the other chapters). Unlike the previous sections, both chapters focus on two novels by a single author – Hawaiian American writer Hanya Yanagihara. And where in Parts One and Two Bauer explored cultural texts in adjacent generic fields (post-apocalyptic and speculative fiction), in Part Three he frames Yanagihara's *The People in the Trees* (2013) and *A Little Life* (2015) as 'hysterical novels' (after James Woods' zeitgeist coinage of 'hysterical realism'). This formulation is less a genre than it is a formal style of exaggeration and excess. Bauer (2024: 173) coins his own designation – 'hysterical pessimism' – to argue that Yanagihara's 'tendency to exaggerate in terms of affective and emotional register [...] enables, in [her] fiction, a literary mode that pits a pessimistic ethics against the possibilities and potentialities of connection and belonging'. Bauer (2024: 171) mobilises pessimism as a philosophical category that, when 'understood as an acceptance of the limitations of human subjectivity and agency in the world', opens up reparative creative potential in the present. He offers *The People in the Trees* as an example of the dire consequences that unfold when notions of kin and belonging are falsely founded on hierarchical power structures between human and non-human, and between coloniser and colonised. *A Little Life* (a novel infamous for its unrelentingly bleak narrative of male sexual abuse and trauma) offers a vision of hope as 'the acknowledgment that reparation might lie in accepting that kinship cannot heal all wounds' (Bauer 2024: 233). 'Sometimes it is enough,' Bauer (2024: 233) contends, 'to attend to those who, in the end, might have no future'.

Hope and Kinship covers an impressive range of subjects and material. Anyone seeking new critical interpretations on the cultural texts included in the book will find in Bauer's analyses many useful and provocative insights. As with any monograph, there are overlooked areas that called for inclusion in his chapters: Bauer himself acknowledges the lack of postcolonial perspectives in his book, yet his comments on the hegemonic use of the English language in *Sense8*, for example, could have easily incorporated (and would have benefitted from) postcolonial scholarship on the topic (see Chow 2014; Gilmour 2020; and Walkowitz 2015). And a book as packed with theoretical promise as this will, inevitably, end up dropping some of its many theoretical threads: key scholarship Bauer cites in the Introduction (notably the scholarship on kinship and new materialism) does not make much appearance again in the chapters. Nevertheless, Bauer's reimagining of queer theories of time and reparative reading are the pillars of this thesis, and attention to these is upheld through the book.

If ever one finds oneself lost for hope, or filled with dread, I recommend turning to Bauer and Tally's monographs. In both, one finds impassioned celebrations of hope and of dread as modes of critique which orient us towards immanent futures laden with possibility.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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