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## Reading Speculative Futures in a Post-Truth World

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RACHEL WEBB JEKANOWSKI

## *Reading Speculative Futures in a Post-Truth World*

**W**hen the television adaption of *The Handmaid's Tale* hit screens in April (requiring those of us in Canada without access to Hulu to find various ways round), comparisons between Margaret Atwood's novel-turned-show and current events in the United States and other Western democracies flooded the popular media. Conversations online and amongst friends over coffee swirled around the multiple horrors of this feminist rendering of a dystopian future: a future in which American women are enslaved as fertility vessels forbidden from reading, maintaining a bank account, or possessing their own bodies (as property cannot own property); constitutional rights have been suspended in the name of national defence against terrorism; and a right-wing Christian theocracy has seized power. To what extent did *The Handmaid's Tale* intend to offer parallels to Donald Trump's America, we debated—what with the rolling back of federal funding for climate science and women's reproductive healthcare, not to mention the droves of immigrant families fleeing the United States for Canada. Were we merely reading the show's flashbacks to "our" present before the coup as speculative foreshadowing of America's future because of our own personal politics?

The power of *The Handmaid's Tale* is not only its timely reminder of our fragile gains in the struggle for gender equality and the disassembly of structural racism in North America (even as we still have so far to go); it also asserts speculative fiction's power to communicate social and political truths in an era increasingly shaped by scandals over "fake news" and populist and far-right governments' use of falsehoods to maintain power. Politicians' waning relationship to veracity—summed up in today's "post-truth politics"—forms another plank in attempts to thwart challenges to late capitalism, neo-colonialism, and accelerated resource consumption by those who benefit from these interdependent systems of extraction and power. What better way to curtail resistance than to assault the scientific research, funding of higher education, and free press that make fact-based critiques possible?

The ability to name and counter political un-truths and the purposes they serve is made harder still by science's own histories of sexism and racism, cultural bias, and imperialism. Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes that research is a dirty word for Indigenous peoples, and the empiricism of Western science does not represent the interests or epistemological perspectives of non-Western cultures (1). Both colonialism—as a realization of "the imperial imagination" (Smith 23)—and Western scientific research have functioned as forms of worlding, of shaping relations between peoples and environments (and knowledge about them).

With current assaults on environmental sciences and social justice by wielders of “alternative facts” added to Western science’s own imperialist baggage, perhaps the elusive nature of truth—of things which are “indisputably the case”—can no longer be housed only by facts. Science and fact haven’t been the only purveyors of truth; fabulations, speculative fictions, and storytelling offer another twisty path for truth-telling. Faced with post-truth politics, I suggest that the best way to glean, scrutinize, and communicate truth is to paradoxically embrace fiction in all its destabilizing potential. In fact, to *inhabit* fact we should turn to speculative futures—those future-orientated and speculative texts that re-present the world, its structures, and lived realities through narrative, “true” and fictional alike.

Future-orientated forms of SF—science fiction and speculative fictions, to which Donna Haraway also adds “string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far” (2)—emerge in literature, visual media, and even documentary and science writing. Creating and imagining speculative futures offers a means of mapping the ways in which humans, animals, machines, and environments inhabit worlds, and the potential implications of these entanglements on future times and yet-to-be relations. In other words, speculative futures are grounded in realities of the present and “facts on the ground,” but seek to extrapolate these conditions to future times or alternative places. They make strange these relations through different temporalities and geographies, to *re-present* them as fodder for cultivating more resilient, collaborative, and radically equal futures. In this sense, speculative futures is not a genre; it’s a theoretical and political practice of imagining into being. This SF, like Larissa Lai’s description of the “insurgent possibilities of speculative fiction” (n.p.), breathes life into worlds that may yet be possible—dystopian or otherwise.

In her introduction to the short story anthology *So Long Been Dreaming*, Nalo Hopkinson asserts that the fictitious nature of SF—particularly its defining “memes” like “that of going to foreign countries and colonizing the natives”—is governed by a reader’s perspective rather than empirical fact. She writes: “for many of us, that’s not a thrilling adventure story; it’s non-fiction, and we are on the wrong side of the strange-looking ship that appears out of nowhere” (Hopkinson 7). In *these* SF stories, like other feminist and anti-colonial interventions into the imperial and racialized legacies of the science fiction genre, speculative storytelling is used to relate people’s lived realities. Here, SF becomes a vehicle for formulating the shape of the real not in spite of, but through, generic convention (Delany 32).

Another proposition: the act of reading speculative fictions is not the only way of inhabiting truth in a post-truth world. We can also enact speculative fictions as researchers, artists, and educators through our pedagogical practice, and incorporate speculative stories, SF theories, and diverse cosmologies into our work. In a recent conference presentation in Montreal, Kyle Powys Whyte (Associate Professor of Philosophy and Community Sustainability at Michigan State University) did precisely this in his work on Indigenous peoples’ experiences of surviving climate change—in the present and in previous forced relocations under settler colonialism. As those on the wrong side of the ship, First Nations have already experienced the violent and destabilizing social, environmental, and cultural impacts of inhabiting new climates. From this perspective, the apocalypse does not await us; for some communities, it has already passed.

The process of envisioning ecological, de-colonized, feminist, and Indigenous futures offers artists, authors, and academics a tool for inquiry through storytelling within and beyond the environmental humanities. As thought experiments and political projects, speculative futures create spaces to imagine forms of collaboration and solidarity. As texts, even commercial ones like Hulu's adaption of *The Handmaid's Tale*, they also offer common ground for sparking conversations across social and political divisions about the types of futures we wish to inhabit. It's through future imaginaries, in other words, that we can begin to challenge political falsehoods and forge the conditions for collective survival in the present.

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