The Unquiet Dead

Anarchism, Fascism, and Mythology

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

—Emily Dickinson

...it is all the potential of the signified that the
poetic sign tries to actualize, in the hope of at
last reaching something like the transcendent
quality of the thing, its natural (not human)
meaning. Hence the essentialist ambitions of
poetry, the conviction that it alone catches the
thing in itself... by fiercely refusing myth, poetry
surrenders to it hand and foot.

—Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

We have created our myth. The myth is a faith, a
passion. It is not necessary for it to be a reality.
It is a reality in the sense that it is a stimulus, is
hope, is faith, is courage. Our myth is the nation,
our myth is the greatness of the nation! And
to this myth, this greatness, which we want to
subordinate into a total reality, we subordinate
everything else.

—Mussolini, in a speech he gave on the
day he planned the March on Rome

Mythology is a complex series of narratives underlying all cultures, shifting as they interact. It is an important element of fascism; it is also, sometimes, a power source for struggles towards freedom. These oppositional mythologies are often absorbed and recuperated, justifying new layers of oppression as they become the mythology of the dominant culture. Some rationalists and materialists have tried to dismantle it entirely, citing mysticism and mythology's roles in oppression and domination; such efforts seem to falter quickly, or to become new mythologies. We use stories to understand the world, whether we want to or not.

There is a beautiful myth called *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*, written and published by Larry Mitchell from his gay commune in San Francisco in 1977. Excerpts appear throughout this section.

I. Myth made material

The Faggot Version

All the men could be faggots or their friends. They once were.

There still exists a faint memory of the past when the faggots and their friends were free. The memory lives in the faggots' bones. The memory appears at night when the bones are quietest. In darkness the faggots remember that once they lived in harmony with each other and their world. They adored the women who loved women and the women who loved women adored the faggots. Suddenly and strangely, some of the faggots began to show a dis-ease. First they cut down the trees which protected the other faggots from the wind and rain. Then they burned the earth which fed the other faggots. Then they killed the young animals and ate them themselves. Then they began to enslave the women—all the women. As the dis-ease advanced they stopped touching the other faggots and at that moment they became the men. They attacked the unsuspecting women who loved women. Bloodshed and devastation entered the bones of the faggots and began to drive the memory of harmony away. The women who love women and the faggots were the only ones who knew the cure for the men's dis-ease. But the men did not want to be cured. Their crimes against the others became more numerous and more demonic. More of the faggots became men and so more became implicated in self-loathing, a dis-ease of otherness. The men drove the healers away. And the healers went into invisibility to wait for the men to turn on each other.

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At night in their invisibility the faggots remember freedom. They exchange the magical cock fluid and stroke each other's tired bones in memoriam and defiance.

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—*The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*

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mystification and mythology

Karl Marx understood *mystification*, which he more frequently calls *abstraction*, as that which both allows and generates exploitation. He saw this mystification as the lubrication that serves to loosen workers' grip upon the means of production. This allows capitalists to generate excess labor value, nothing more than the blood, sweat, and tears of the worker; a commodity gains its profit margin solely through the extraction of life from those who produce it. This can occur because workers do not own the means of production or directly trade their product for those they need; they are alienated from their labor and its products, an alienation both material and metaphysical. Marx sees this abstraction—and the abstraction that means it is difficult to recognize—as the primary genesis of modern oppression. "A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor: because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor."

This is the basic idea of capitalist culture, in which people interact with things, or things interact with other things, rather than the producers of the various things interacting with each other. "…[T]he relations connecting the labor of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things." This is an economic characteristic that may have begun with capitalism: in the European Middle Ages (Marx's reference point, not of my choosing), "Personal dependence… characterizes the social relations of production just as much as it does the other spheres of life organized on the basis of that production. But for the very reason that personal dependence forms the ground-work of society, there is no necessity for labor and its products to assume a fantastic form different from their reality… Here the particular and the natural form of labor, and not, as in a society based in production of commodities, its general and abstract form is the immediate social form of labor." Mystical abstraction from our labor is not an age-old phenomenon, but a recent evil… which we can say only insofar as we begrudgingly accept notions of linear

time and periodization. We do not know when someone first traded objects for symbols, or worked for a song; but we can point out when the problem became systematic.

This may seem entirely disassociated from the mystical as an element of spiritual practice. But no—Marx argues that the mystification of commodity exchange flows forth from our society, and both generates and is necessitated by that society, in the same way religion does in non-capitalist societies. "The religious world is but the reflex of the real world," he says; he argues that nature spirituality occurs in societies who have not separated themselves from nature, and that Christianity would not be possible in a society that was not a great deal more abstracted. The mysticism of capitalist exchange is but a further sign of "progress", which by Marx's lights is the ladder towards communism, and by mine is a terrible lie, a stupid reliance on the linearity of time. Marx argues that mysticism will not disappear until direct production of goods by and for the workers who produce them takes place in an entirely transparent process. At that point, according to Marx's vision, we will live in an entirely rational, demystified world of direct exchange between each other and our surroundings, with neither religion nor capitalism.

While Marxist determinism replaced utopian or fuzzy ideas about the proletariat with materialist understanding of economic motives, it also produced a new layer of obscuring mythology. It is the process of proletarianization that produces revolutionary spirit, not the class itself; and in fact as generations of workers proceed from those who were first immiserated, revolutionary spirit wanes, at least along class lines. As the Duponts say in "Nihilist Communism",

> The structure of the world was built by the dead, they were paid in wages, and when the wages were spent and they were dead in the ground, what they had made continued to exist, these cities, roads and factories are their calcified bones. They had nothing but their wages to show for what they had done and after their deaths what they did and who they were has been cancelled out. But what they made has continued into our present, their burial and decay is our present... The class war begins in the desecration of our ancestors: millions of people going to their graves as failures, forever denied the experience of a full human existence, their being was simply cancelled out. The violence of the bourgeoisie's appropriation of the world of work becomes the structure that dominates our existence. As our parents die, we can say truly that their lives were for nothing, that the black earth that is thrown down onto them blacks out our sky.

Marx was writing in a time when the Western European Church held much more sway than it does now, but less than it had held for hundreds of years. Things have "progressed" much further since then; the worship of goods has become the worship of the spectacle produced alongside and around those goods, an even more abstracted process. While all forms of labor exist concurrently, they have become so segmented and exported that the suffering of traditional factory labor, sweatshops, home piecework, sex work, prison labor, and other traditional and blatant forms of capitalist exploitation are often invisible to those who have the privilege of existing within/creating society. Those cultural producers engage in their own, ever-more abstracted and intangible labor—the endless reproduction and sale of themselves and their "uniqueness" via social media, art, and lifestyles. There is an increasingly shared sense among this privileged class that alienation and abstraction are unsatisfying, and many people are turning back towards "earlier" forms of nature-based spirituality, philosophy, and direct-contact lifestyles— homesteaders, DIY "makers," the "paleo" diet, Crossfit aficionados, etc. While I do not want to deny people their comforts, and enjoy many of them myself, it is unclear to me what the implications of these return-to-the-past practices are, given that we are still surrounded by the modern world. If mysticism is a reflection of the world, what does it mean to play an old movie into that reflection? Can it be other than an additional layer of spectacle and mystification, a sort of role-playing? To what degree is authenticity possible today, and to what extent is it even valuable? Is this movement in any way an act of real resistance to oppressive power, or simply a retreat into what feels personally satisfying?

Mystification is closely tied to mythology, the narrativized form of mysticism. Roland Barthes defines mythology as "a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things." Yet that is precisely what mythology claims it has done. That claim is an exertion of power: "it transforms history into nature." Mythology asserts a mystified interpretation of the world as the perception of historical truth; and who holds the power to enact this truth (Foucault would say "veridiction") determines what sort of truth it is. When there is wide consensus about a truth-claim, it is because it is asserted and backed by those in power. When there is disagreement, it is because those in power disagree about what sort of myth is most useful; or because heterogenous societies are more stable, unable to reach enough agreement to take action, and it is in the interests of power to preserve this materially meaningless sense of plurality and democracy; or because those who have been historically powerless are taking up the power to assert their own claim. These conflicts are deeper than that of dominant interpretations

opposing subordinate or conflictual interpretations: the power of myth, Barthes says, "is to transform a meaning into a form." Barthes divides mythology into bourgeois, fascist, and Leftist varieties; all of these tend to suffer from essentialism.

In essentialist mythology, there are only natural truths—forms—and deviations from those forms. It is a small step to assert that those deviations must be bad, as they are unnatural, incorrect. Essentialist mythology is therefore the capture of varying realities by power under a unifying and flattening definition, one that is much more powerful because it works by emotional and spiritual appeal rather than the rational—even its appeals to rationality are themselves mystical appeals: the evocation of the myths of science, common sense, and objective intellect. People do not go to war because their *reason* tells them it would serve their best interests to do so; people kill each other in large numbers only because of an assembled sense that *it is right for them to do so.* This sense is filtered through emotion and their beliefs about the world, beliefs which are easily constructed and manipulated by compelling myths like patriotism, racism, survival, the recognition of oppression, and the dream of freedom. The subtle warfare of everyday microaggressions is equally fueled by these essentialist myths.

Though explicitly religious mysticism often makes a stronger truth-claim than mythology, both are a way of viewing the world through a distorted mirror—*on the slant*, as Dickinson says. Both mythology and mysticism rely either on natural or pseudo-historical claims: that is the power of their veridiction. They implicitly say: "Whether by God, by nature, or by what has already happened, we *know* these things are true about ourselves and others, about what has happened in the past and what will happen in the future." This way of thinking is not compatible with dialectical materialist or post-structuralist understandings of the world, which are something like: "This is what has happened from one perspective (and there are so many that to claim any as the sole truth is impossible); this is our present situation, in the most literal and physical of terms, which is informed by our past but not bound to it; here is what we can extrapolate about the future, but there are too many intersecting flows of power to be able to predict it." This does not mean materialists are able to resist the siren call of mysticism or mythology any better than others; Marx had far too much faith in the myth of the end of capitalism and the utopian success of the worker's revolution. He enabled Stalinist horrors by advocating the myth of progress-thinking, and failed to imagine that capitalism could find ever more terrains of expansion and means of control—failed to even show up to one of the greatest manifestations of

utopian communism in Europe at the time, the Paris Commune (the myth of which I happily embrace.) Demonstrating another pitfall, George Sorel, following Proudhon and Marx, deliberately evoked the myth of the General Strike as a motivating force and goal for the workers of the world, only to see fascism make a home within his elaborations on the abstract sublimity of violence, abandoning the liberatory foundation of his project. Revolutionary myth is not a tame lion. Barthes:

> At its worst, mythology is an exertion by power that violently empties complicated, multiple, real meaning and asserts an essential understanding that must be shared. What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if it goes back quite awhile, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality... The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences. A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. The function of myth is to empty reality; it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence.

One notices this absence most keenly when a myth one was accustomed to being supported by no longer fulfills one's emotional needs—when one rejects Christianity, or capitalism, or a subculture, only to take up paganism, radical activism, or a different subculture. That felt lack, however, is not the lack of that *particular* myth; when one's new myth fails to suffice one will feel disillusionment (literally, the evaporation of one's sustaining illusions) again. It is the lack of all myth to fully contain and account for all reality, and its tendency to suffocate or destroy those moments and impulses that dialectically contradict them. Barthes points out that ever-more specific toys tend to destroy the creativity of children: "...the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it; there are, prepared for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy." Myths can serve the same function for adults; we find ourselves playing parts whether or not they even hold interest for us, and feel unable to creatively disrupt them, make them our own, because we are instead molding ourselves to them. Sometimes they give us a feeling that reality is more meaningful than it is, and sometimes that motivates us to do great things; other times, we just spend six months playing Pokémon Go, or find ourselves the patriarchs of Christian households.

The solution to this, materialists would argue, is to reject all mythology and attempt to fully see/make reality as it is—an effort easier stated than performed. It is a self-defeating enterprise, because it asserts some possible rational objectivity; the materialist would have to inhabit a kind of God-like position outside of the myths of society. Most materialists therefore spend their time in simply deconstructing history and the present as they are able. There is some hope in this; Barthes observes: "...we know very well that work is 'natural' just as long as it is 'profitable', and that in modifying the inevitability of the profit, we shall perhaps one day modify the inevitability of labor. It is this entirely historified work which we should be told about, instead of an eternal aesthetics of laborious gestures." Sometimes things fall apart; the resistance succeeds, for a time, though, so far, never fully or permanently, and its collapse into politics is at least troubling. "Left-wing myth supervenes precisely at the moment when revolution changes itself into 'the Left', that is, when it accepts to wear a mask, to hide its name, to generate an innocent metalanguage and to distort itself into 'Nature'. This revolutionary ex-nomination may or may not be tactical, this is no place to discuss it." Has *The Hunger Games* produced any revolutions lately? Has Democracy Now? Could they? This is an open question. Unlike people who theoretically want liberation and are paid (whether tangibly or socially) to think about it, people acting for liberation in any particular moment, while always influenced by myth, are moved primarily by their real experiences of oppression, self-definition, and community. Those are somewhat mystical abstractions, but are frequently made very tangible and real. Think of the utter reality of the murder of Mike Brown for the people who protested and rioted in Ferguson, and how tangible the action of those myths was in their lives.

Barthes says that Leftist myth tends to fail to the extent that it is self-aware as Leftist, because

> *Left-wing myth is inessential...* everyday life is inaccessible to it in a bourgeois society.... Finally, and above all, this myth is *poverty-stricken*. It does not know how to proliferate; being produced on order and for a temporally limited prospect, it is invented with difficulty. It lacks a major faculty, that of fabulizing... This imperfection, if that is the word for it, comes from the nature of the 'Left': whatever the imprecision of the term, the Left always defines itself in relation to the oppressed, whether proletarian or colonized... The speech of the oppressed is real... it is quasi-unable to lie; lying is a richness, a lie presupposes property, truth

and forms to spare. This essential barrenness produces rare, thread-bare myths: either transient, or clumsily indiscreet; by their very being, they label themselves as myths, and point to their masks.... One can say that in a sense, Left-wing myth is always an artificial myth, a reconstituted myth: hence its clumsiness.

A large reason why the Left has never won—which victory would in part mean its own destruction—is that it cannot either completely reject myth in favor of the real and enact that reality fully, nor can it in good conscience fully embrace myth. This is because mythologies are, fundamentally, stories about who we are, or who someone else is. They serve to strengthen group identity, and often do so by acknowledging, and therefore creating, the Other: the one who is not like us, is not part of the human community. Once the Other is recognized, warfare seems inevitable. Fears, justified or not, emerge: fear of contamination, of losing resources, fear of the *essential strangeness* of the Other. This last fear, when solidified by an accumulated power structure, is called racism, or misogyny, or xenophobia, or ableism, or homophobia, or a million other particularized and empowered hatreds. Power is the most important element in these hatreds: second, I argue, is essentialism. It is impossible to generate essentialism without some form of mysticism and/or mythologies; it is impossible to sustain fascism without essential mythology. I will call these source mythologies "proto-fascist mythologies." This is perhaps a provocative stretch: most of these mythologies did not actually lead to fascism. Still, I think, they could. While I won't discuss it at length, bourgeois myth rounds out our list of fabulist enemies—see Barthes' *Mythologies* for a detailed analysis.

But not all mythologies generate hatred and destruction, in not all times and places. Some mythologies have not reified the construct of the Other; these were generated in times and places that did not know the Other, that welcomed strangers as possible friends. Their warfare was not based in hatred and fear, but in disagreement or competition for resources—just as deadly in the immediate sense, but less poisonous in the long run. It has been a long time since most people were allowed to live in such peace, however, and it is very hard, perhaps impossible, to generate fresh mythologies that deny the impulse towards constructing the Other in any level.

I will call these "peace mythologies." This is not an entirely positive designation: peace often does not allow for necessary movement, and peaceful actors are often slaughtered by those they refuse to see as enemies. Nor is it a negative designation: one can argue that the dignity of the open hand, even when it is

spat upon, is the only worthwhile gesture. However, while I would not deny them to those who grew up within their framework, I do not think it is useful for outsiders to adopt these peace mythologies as an ideological foundation in our present situation.

Lastly, there are "liberation mythologies." As a necessary precept, I will say that no liberation mythology has yet succeeded. It is an old truism that the liberation of one is made possible only by the liberation of all, which has not yet occurred. The liberation of one may make the liberation of all more possible—but very often the "liberated" one becomes the new boss, same as the old, or finds their liberation one of name only. So there is no such thing as a successful liberation mythology; but those that exist in the state of rebellion are, I think, are valuable.

There are a multitude of liberation mythologies generated by thousands of resistance cultures—music, oral histories, dances, stories, symbols. However, in an attempt to avoid aiding the process of legibility and recuperation, I will primarily discuss the liberation mythology of speculative fiction, a field which at least intends to be accessible to everyone. First, however, I will discuss the stories of our enemies.

> The faggots act out their fantasies without believing them to be real.
> The men act out their fantasies always proclaiming that they are real.
> The faggots' fantasies create play—dressing up and dressing down.
> The men's fantasies create responsibilities—going here and doing that.
> The faggots' fantasies are about love and sex and solidarity.
> The mens' fantasies are about control and domination and winning.
> The faggots move towards the limits of living in the body for they have known body ecstasy and want to live there with everyone always.
> The men move towards the limits of living among things for they have seen great collections and want to live there alone always.
>
> —*The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*

It seems to me beyond doubt that out of this transformation a new man will once again emerge in Europe, half from mutation and half from breeding: the German man... All the preconditions for his emergence are there: behind him a quarter-century of radical crisis, shattering upheavals, of being churned up as no other people in the world has experienced, and in the last decade a growing awareness of biological dangers, one which bears out the precept that a people which becomes conscious of the dangers facing it produces genius... I know that this people will become free and its great spirits will come with words which once more have meaning, will be valid for other peoples, and will bear fruit. In their syllables there will be everything which we have suffered, the celestial and the transient, the legacy of our philosophical suffering. I know they will come, not gods, and not fully human either, but fruit of the purity of a new people. Then they will make their judgment and rip up the beds of idleness, and knock down the walls which have been thinly whitewashed over and where sacrilege has been committed for a handful of barley and a morsel of bread—they alone will do this. I know they will come, and I am sure I can hear the reverberation of their footsteps. I am sure the victims they claim deserve their fate: I see them coming.

—Gottfried Benn, "The New Breed of German"

The mysticism of Fascism is the proof of its triumph. Reasoning does not communicate, emotion does. Reasoning convinces, it does not attract. Blood is stronger than syllogisms. Science claims to explain away miracles, but in the eyes of the crowd the miracle remains: it seduces and creates converts.

—an anonymous article published in a fascist magazine run by Italian expatriates, 1925

Some have described fascism as a fundamentally irrational force; this rings true to me, however rationalized its actions are by those who accept its irrational framework. This framework was consciously created out of mythology: again, the compelling emotional narrative that shapes identity, generates reality through the action it motivates, but is also a sufficient force within itself. By Gillete's analysis,

Sorel wrote in his work *Reflections on Violence* that we enjoy the liberty to act freely 'above all when we make an effort to create within us a new man with the purpose of transcending the historical frameworks that confine us.' This transformation is afforded through the use of myth. Sorel regarded myths as inexhaustible sources of regeneration. They enabled one to transcend a detested present and overcome material obstacles. Myths, to Sorel, need not be true, or come to pass. Their efficacy lay in their power to mobilize and energize the masses... the most powerful myths are dogmatic, simplistic, and imperative.

Sorel had in mind the myth of the General Strike, a Leftist conception of worker's liberation. Fascists did not share his goals, but were happy to adopt his tactics; mythology is not always loyal to the principles of its creators.

The fascist myth is both historical and utopian, futuristic and classical. "Futurism created a political mythology whose material was drawn from the world of the future and the human imagination... while the fascist establishment constructed a political mythology whose concepts were drawn from the history of imperial Rome..." While German fascists could never quite make peace with the Futurist rejection of the past, many Italian Futurists were closely allied with the Italian fascists, and were a sort of myth-production factory for the movement.

The Futurists created a series of myths, such as the "racing-car," the "new man," modern war," and "heroic technology." The racing-car as a symbol, and as the Italian futurists' expression of the challenge of modernity, was a new Pegasus—a living organism, full of mechanized vitality, reflecting technological vitality and the new heroic spirit. The racing-car symbolized for Marinetti the complete holism of man and machine. The "new man" of *Homo mechanicus* was integral to the modern-technological vision, which the futurists saw as a dynamic new structuring of the world via technology.

People no longer talk in such glorious future-of-the-past terms, but bear a strong nostalgia for it; it is no accident that the Space-X posters for their proposed reality show about colonizing Mars are "retro-futuristic" ones. There is little doubt that the Google engineers, TED presenters, and STEM education advocates of the world genuinely and passionately believe in such a technological salvation. Origin mythologists are also quite common today; while few may be interested in resurrecting the legacy of "Rome, the oldest civilization of Europe", plenty are interested in a return to earlier,

more "natural" forms of living, an exploration and enactment of their own ancestral legacy, if only the most enjoyable and ethically condoned portions of it. These two impulses, towards technological salvation and a return to basics, are often present in the same person, today the perfect bourgeois citizen, whose Google Calendar reminds them to go to the Farmer's Market. While this may seem contradictory, this marriage was a historic component of Italian fascist myth, the upside-down of bourgeois myth.

Barthes says about bourgeois myth, which dismisses the title "bourgeois" and prefers the illusory middle-class designation, "The flight from the name 'bourgeois' is not therefore an illusory, accidental, secondary, natural or insignificant phenomenon: it is the bourgeois ideology itself, the process by which the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature. And this image has a remarkable feature: it is upside down. The status of the bourgeoisie is particular, historical: man as represented by it is universal, eternal." Few people enjoy the privileges of the rich, but in modern social democracies, it has to be assumed that no one is extremely poor or extremely rich; as they say in Lake Wobegon, all of our children are above average. This myth of success is a particularly violent lie, one that makes the failure to succeed against the odds a personal and embarrassing one. Fascist myth, on the other hand, is based in failure. The perception of one's intrinsic superiority, and the discontinuity with one's actual lack of success, gernerates the back-and-forth evolution of injury and resentment that leads a fascist to conceive of their grand project of nation-state-individual correspondence, to feel themselves and their in-group capable of leading that project successfully, and to justify some of the most brutal acts in history. Since one cannot claim one is successful *now*, to be taken seriously one must assert they were successful in the *past* and will be in the *future*. I think it is no contradiction that the rise of the bourgeois myth of success as normalcy coincides with the rise of fascist myth; privileged children, promised everything, are often angry when they do not get it.

Richard Griffin asserts that all fascisms share the common mythic core of the concept of "rebirth", for which he has coined the term "palingenesis." "The mythic core that forms the basis of my ideal type of generic fascism is the vision of the (perceived) crisis of the nation as betokening the birthpangs of a new order. It crystallizes in the image of the national community, once purged and rejuvenated, rising phoenix-like from the ashes of a morally bankrupt state system and the decadent culture associated with it." This imagery is particularly appealing to young intellectuals who are disenchanted with the possibilities available to them in academia and culture, and to

returning veterans, often discarded by society, traumatized by their wartime experiences, and unsure if what they fought for was worth it. These are, arguably, the two most important constituents in the proto-fascists of pre-Nazi Germany, pre-regime Italy, and white supremacists in the U.S. Nationalism, whether populist or elitist in conception, is an easy go-to for both groups—whether or not it meets with success seems to be dependent on whether it is compatible with the general social mood (do others feel society is in crisis?), whether a charismatic leader arises to hold its banner, and whether some fusion of populism and elitism is possible in practice. This is distinct from the nationalist formations of people of color within white society—while the impulse towards nationalism can be destructive there as well, it is a resistance ideology; there is no fundamental sense of entitlement to success, or motivating sense of betrayal at its heart. One cannot feel *betrayed* by having nothing if one was always *told* you would have nothing. Even the storied past of one's culture can only do so much to deny one's daily reality.

The recent U.S.-based social movement Occupy could be seen as a proto-fascist movement, with its lack of diversity in most locations, its focus on the undeserving wealth-holding 1% that is reminiscent of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories against mysterious ursurers, its sense of disenfranchisement, and its occasional appeals to nationalism. Populism is a force that can be harnessed by the left and right alike. However, Occupy was saved from this drift by its occasional actual diversity; its Leftist tendencies, which kept explicitly racist rhetoric from the movement; certain anti-nationalist elements; and a near-total disorganization. It was directly democratic in the sense that anyone could do anything, but only if they could summon the social force necessary; too many chaotic interruptions occurred for any of these individuals to become leaders. I think Occupy escaped a drift towards fascism primarily, however, because it lacked this palingenetic call to rebirth; it was fundamentally a reformist movement, without revolutionary aims along either left or right lines.

The palingenetic myth is a definitionally essentialist one, as it relies upon the belief that there is an ethnic or historical core to particular peoples, an *essence* that can be reborn by shedding the false layers of contamination, self-defeat, and decadence that have accumulated upon it. Barthes called it "...this disease of thinking in essences, which is at the bottom of every bourgeois mythology of man (which is why we come across it so often.") If one, using a materialist perspective, chooses instead to view the people who inhabit a land and (more-or-less) share a culture as individuals without heritage, their only essential truth is what they define between themselves during their lifetimes;

that truth must also necessarily be multiple, as experiences seldom coincide exactly. This could be an alienating, disempowering, and atomizing approach, particularly when applied to people who have been unconsensually deprived of their ancestral history by forces such as slavery, colonization, and genocide. However, had some form of it won out in pre-war Italy and Germany, it may have prevented a fascist ideology from crystallizing that ultimately meant the death and suffering of millions. Figuring out this conundrum is vital to our time.

Mythology was deployed across the map by fascists. Gabriel D'Annunzio, aforementioned orator and occupier of Fiume, married religion, politics, and art in his speeches. He described the spirit of Fiume as the Holy Spirit, thus elevating his mission there and the occupants of the city to the holy realm familiar to Catholic Italians. The Futurists fused anarchist and socialist myths with evolving fascist myths. This synergy is what created the force behind Italian fascism, made it more than just a political ideology and instead something that felt noble and true, worth dying for. This combination of mythologies was described positively by the British fascist Oswald Mosely:

> ...on the one hand you find in Fascism, taken from Christianity, taken directly from the Christian conception, the immense vision of service, of self-abnegation, of self-sacrifice in the cause of others, in the cause of the world, in the casue of your country, not the elimination of the individual, so much as the fusion of the individual in something far greater than himself; and you have that basic doctrine of Fascism, service, self-surrender to what the Fascist must conceive to be the greatest cause an the greatest impulse in the world. On the other hand you find taken from Nietzschean thought the virility, the challenge to all existing things which impede the march of mankind, the absolute abnegation of the doctrine of surrender, the firm ability to grapple with and to overcome all obstructions. You have, in fact, the creation of a doctrine of men of vigor and of self-help which is the other outstanding characteristic of Fascism.

Because our reality is dialectical, dialectical mythology is the most effective. These seemingly contradictory sentiments inform and strengthen each other within the fascist enterprise. Fascist myth also served to elevate and justify of the bloody and boring in terms of holy struggle. Without such elevation, who would fight for these causes? Stephen Whittaker argues that the fascist myth was merely one in a long progression of dominant Italian self-defining myths, designed to get the population to make sacrifices for these struggles.

Before Sorel, the liberation myth of the Paris Commune took hold in the late 1800s among Italian communists, socialists, and anarchists. It replaced the nationalist myth of unified Italy generated in the *risorgimento*, and was only later replaced by the nationalist myth of fascism, as Sorel's mythic violence found more resonance than his myth of the General Strike. In the period after the defeat of fascism, history was revised by the myth of the Italian resistance; while both the resistance and the forces it fought against were real, prioritizing the remembrance and celebration of the resistance was a way to forget thousands of Italians' uncomfortable participation in or complicity with fascism. The war of resistance had now become the holy cause.

Joseph Goebbels' "Total War" speech is one of the most explicit examples of how Nazis drew upon a pre-existing, deepseated mythological framework to motivate Germans to new heights of active participation in fascism when such participation was needed most. In the speech, Goebbels sketches the outline of an international Jewish, Bolshevik, capitalist conspiracy that threatens the survival of the German people; he need not fill in this sketch, because it is traced upon the vivid picture painted by Volkische ideology, years of propaganda, and the sense of physical threat generated by the recent battle of Stalingrad, all of which he refers to glancingly. Moreover, he claimed that "two thousand years of European history" were threatened by Bolshevism; the war was not only one of personal survival, but of the existence of humanity (as it had been reductionarily defined by racist Eurocentrism.) He defined it as a war against terrorism; in an argument that finds much currency today, he argued that fighting terrorism justifies extreme measures that would not be justified in a civil framework. He even offers gender equality in return for fuller participation by women in the war economy: "We have no right any longer to speak of the weaker sex, for both sexes are displaying the same determination and spiritual strength." Throughout his speech, there is a rhythmic return to an appeal to passion, to dedication, to self-sacrifice, to proving the strength of the people—and, many times over, his speech was interrupted by cries of agreement and dedication from his audience.

"Total war" has come to mean not only the complete participation in warfare on every level by every person, but also attacks on civilians and on the means of subsistence (which perhaps crystallized with Sherman, but certainly existed less formally during various colonization processes), and on the psychological survival of one's opponents. This "scorched earth" approach has come to justify rape, economic devastation, and the murder of children—always a part of warfare, but one that previous myths sought to obscure rather than to justify. In this mythology, total commitment to one's cause has come to mean

the abandonment of all ethics and morality that hinder one's ability to utterly destroy one's enemy. Even if certain parties refuse this mentality, the fact that it is on the table, an option, a possible worldview, has the effect of rendering that formerly honorable refusal saccharine, bourgeois and contemptible to many. That is perhaps the most lasting legacy of fascist mythology: the murders it has justified extend far beyond those that took place within the Holocaust, Ethiopia, Spain, and the terrain of World War II.

Concentration camps continue to fascinate us as sites of dark fantasy, nightmares from Western mythology made real. It is often told how some U.S. congressmen refused to believe such a thing had really happened until they toured the camps after the war ended; then they vomited. Arendt observes,

> It is not so much the barbed wire as the skillfully manufactured unreality of those whom it fences in that provokes such enormous cruelties and ultimately makes extermination look like a perfectly normal measure. Everything that was done in the camps is known to us from the world of perverse, malignant fantasies. The difficult thing to understand is that, like such fantasies, these gruesome crimes took place in a phantom world, which, however, has materialized, as it were, into a world which is complete with all sensual data of reality but lacks that structure of consequence and responsibility without which reality remains for us a mass of incomprehensible data. The result is that a place has been established where men can be tortured and slaughtered, and yet neither the tormentors nor the tormented, and least of all the outsider, can be aware that what is happening is anything more than a cruel game or an absurd dream.

But the camps did not occur because we slipped sideways into an alternate reality: they were the inevitable evolution of Nazi mythology, which did not arise in a vacuum.

The mythology of modern conscious white supremacists, as in all subcultures who feel oppressed, both serves to sustain their values and to say on the slant what cannot be spoken openly. In example, the "Fourteen Words": "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children." This is a quote from modern U.S. white supremacist martyr David Lane, who died in prison in 2007. So famous are these words, and so coded their meaning, that many white supremacists have a tattoo of just the number 14. This coding is not only to hide affiliation from authorities, but is important in itself: secrecy is its own kind of status. The slogan itself, while racist, seems relatively

innocent, but speaks to the cultural memory among white supremacists of David Lane's membership in the Silent Brotherhood, which assassinated a Jewish radio host and robbed an armored car in pursuit of larger ambitions—a failed but "noble" cause to which they are also committed, a project to be resumed some day. These words evoke and generalize the repression David Lane experienced and other white supremacists feel, and confer the sense of bravely fighting a necessary and spiritually vital war for survival. By calling for a future for white children, the dictum further elevates and personalizes the fight; total war is justified by the sense of protectiveness parents feel for their children. For a subculture largely consisting of poor, single white men, who believe themselves marginalized and persecuted, that empathetic elevation is completely necessary for them to continue with their beliefs and occasional activity; they need not know or care for any actual children, who tend to complicate things.

II. Speculative fiction

> The faggots once called themselves the men who love men. But they discovered that they did not love men, they loved only other men who loved men which was not that many of the men. The men who hate others were false and death-inflicting and obsessed with being strangers. The men who hate others hate the men who love men. And this hatred is so strong that it turns the men who love men into faggots.

> —*The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*

A less practically menacing example of reactionary ideology emerged during the recent online battle over the Hugo Awards, a prestigious science fiction prize. Recently, female, queer, and/or people of color authors have begun to be nominated for the award, in keeping with the general cultural trend towards finally recognizing and celebrating the work of oppressed people. The Sad Puppies, an internet-based group primarily composed of white men, were angry about this, arguing that the Hugo Awards were catering to "social justice warriors" and identity politicians rather than judging works solely on their artistic merit. I think there is some truth to this, that awards are being given in a tokenizing and even exoticizing manner, out of lip service than a revolutionary re-appraisal of what kinds of work by whom are worth celebrating... but the Sad Puppies did not share my critique. Their reactionary motives and ideology were exemplified by their overwhelmingly conservative, white, straight male nominees. The Sad Puppies flooded the ballot boxes of the Hugo Awards; in the end, the award committee solved their dilemma by

giving no award in the categories dominated by the Sad Puppies. As Orson Scott Card, himself a reactionary fabulist, has taught us—the enemy's gate is *down*.

There have been conservative elements in science fiction since its beginning; Robert Heinlein, a libertarian, famously argued in his novel *Starship Troopers* that citizenship should be granted only to those who complete military or civil service. Barthes makes a case that the classic Jules Verne tale, *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*, is the story of bourgeois imperialist exploration. "Verne belongs to the progressive lineage of the bourgeoisie: his work proclaims that nothing can escape man, that the world, even its most distant part, is like an object in his hand, and that, all told, property is but a dialectical moment in the general enslavement of nature... The basic activity in Jules Verne, then, is unquestionably that of appropriation." Science fiction also often relies on the concept of a hostile Other, manufactured only to be murdered for the sake of a (usually white) human character's development. But, just as often, science fiction makes the case against xenophobia and for the celebration of difference. On the whole, the genre has been largely liberal, sometimes even radically so; it has been a safe haven and source of community for social misfits, and as such has derived an internal ethic of tolerance and plurality. Both its move towards critically questioning its white male dominance and the reaction from the right are battles to redefine this terrain; and, as nerds have risen to power in our world, this myth-war also reflects their battle to make their values and the bourgeois sphere mutually compatible.

While it may seem a petty dispute to outsiders, it is emotionally loaded because it is a battle not only over subcultural dominance but over mythology, a mythology that emotionally sustains its participants and shapes their dreams. Should that mythology be shaped by all sorts of dreams? What if some of those dreams mean the suffocation of others? Is the community's practical, day-to-day ethic of diversity something deeper, more fundamentally liberatory, or simply a biopolitically effective tool for management and extraction of creativity and authenticity? This is an open question currently being fought out, largely in abstracted online spaces. These spaces are traditionally a home for some of those who are marginalized in reality; but, even as SF and the internet have become popularized, we all have come to see ourselves as marginalized, whether or not material reality seems to agree. How can we use myth to reject the impulse towards creating or guarding safety, and turn instead towards more creative goals?

Myth as a tactic of liberation

Ursula K. Le Guin is a well-known anarcha-feminist science fiction and fantasy author. Her tale "The Ones Who Walked Away From Omelas" is a quite transparent allegory: the letters "Omelas" are the reverse of Salem, OR. She thought up the story while driving from Eugene to Portland, possibly reflecting on the liberal, quasi-Edenic, but bleached-white nature of her state… a "nature," like most, that has a blood-drenched material history, including the constitutional exclusion of black people from residence until 1926. Le Guin describes a utopic society that rests on a single wrong: the suffering of one innocent small child, locked alone in a dark room. Everyone in this society is brought to see the child when they reach the age of responsibility; most eventually make peace with fact that the suffering of another is key to their happiness, and remain productive, joyful citizens. But the story ends on the note of exception:

> At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

The strength of Le Guin's story lies in its brevity; she does not attempt to describe the outcome of the traveler's journey, nor detail the rupture that individual felt with their home society. She spends most of the story describing how perfectly harmonious that society is—how many problems have been solved, how joyous and ideal each day is. She even describes how the knowledge of the child's suffering serves to make the art and music of Omelas rich and complex in a way that perfect utopia could not. It is relatively easy in a world as flawed as ours to choose to reject society, but her argument

in this allegory is that even with the extension of every comfort and privilege, no one is free while even one is oppressed, even if all other comforts are contingent upon that oppression. In saying simply that some choose to walk away, Le Guin encourages the reader to form a profoundly revolutionary suggestion to themselves. I am reminded of this Baldwin passage, written about seeing a white liberal unconsciously betray herself:

> I was ashamed of myself for being in that room; but, I must say, too, that I was glad, glad to have been a witness, glad to have come far enough to have heard the evil speak. That woman gave me something, I will never forget her, and I walked away from the welcome table.
> Yet, hope—the hope that we, human beings, can be better than we are—dies hard; perhaps one can no longer live if one allows that hope to die. But it is also hard to see what one sees. One sees that most human beings are wretched, and, in one way or another, become wicked; because they are so wretched. And one's turning away, then, from what I have called the welcome table is dictated by some mysterious vow one scarcely knows one's taken—never to allow oneself to fall so low. Lower, perhaps, much lower, to the very dregs: but never there.

In her collection of short stories *Sister Emily's Lightship*, Jane Yolen takes a more traditional approach to the critique analogy: the subversive revision of standard male European fantasies. In her story "Lost Girls," a Peter Pan remake, a girl who arrives in Never Never Land finds her predecessors, the "Wendys," huddled in a kitchen; the girls have all been forced to mother the Lost Boys so the boys could stay children forever. When the Wendys recognize their oppression, organize and go on strike, they are sent off by the Lost Boys to fight the pirates. "There are always more Wendys where they came from," Peter tells the Lost Boys. To the delight of the Wendys, Captain Hook turns out to be a female pirate who specializes in rescuing the unwanted girls of the world. This story not only skewers the misogyny of the original tale, but answers the real problem of the lost boys of our world with that of the equally lost girls; one wishes there was indeed a feminist pirate such girls could turn to, rather than, as often happens, having only the opportunity to trade the old boss of their patriarchal families for the new boss of their patriarchal boyfriends, pimps, and bosses. The real stories of how some of these young women self-organize to fight for their liberation deserve recognition. Not only through her critical interventions, but also in her portrayals of unusual and sympathetic narratives of transcendent Othered strength, Yolen is a radical fabulist.

Yolen's story "Granny Rumple" is yet more pointed. It is a retelling of "Rumplestiltskin", one of the stories gathered by the Brothers Grimm in their search for quintessentially German folk tales that would reaffirm and celebrate German identity; this was part of the German Romantic trajectory that precede Volkische ideology, which itself set the stage for National Socialism. In Yolen's story, Rumplestiltskin and his strong wife—Yolen's ancestor—are protagonists, and Ukrainian Jews. As such, they are used to persecution; the pogrom that followed the misinterpretation of Rumplestilskin's plea to have his loan repaid was horribly ordinary. Yolen tells the story as if it was passed down within her family, but *on the slant*, a *détournement* tactic she purposely uses throughout this collection in homage to Emily Dickenson. The slant turns sharpest at her conclusion:

> But the story, you say, is too familiar for belief? *Belief!* Is it less difficult to believe that a man distributed food to thousands using only a few loaves and fishes? Is it less difficult to believe the Red Sea opened in the middle to let a tribe of wandering desert dwellers through? Is it less difficult to believe that Elvis is alive and well and shopping at Safeway?
> Look at the story you know. Who is the moral compass of it? Is it the miller who lies and his daughter who is complicitous in the lie? Is it the king who wants her for commercial purposes only? Or is it the dark, ugly little man with the unpronounceable name who promises to turn flax into gold—and does exactly what he promises?
> Stories are told one way, history another. But for the Jews—despite their long association with the Lord G-d—the endings have always been the same.

Yolen's revison of this tale to depict Jewish suffering at the hands of anti-Semitism not only exposes the anti-Semitic elements in the original tale, but the ways in which mythology is used to justify such suffering. Furthermore, her critical allegory is a subversive myth of its own. She describes her Granny Rumple, wife of the murdered Rumplestiltskin, as a strong, intelligent woman who fights as best she can for her family... and passes down the story of their oppression to her children. Even more poignantly, in another story she describes Lilith, first human rebel against God, as the Angel of Death, moved for the first time in centuries by the suffering of a child in the gas chamber of a concentration camp. Lilith wonders, "What are Jews that nations swat them like flies? That the Angel of Death picks their faded blooms? That I drink the blood, now bitter, now sweet, of their children?" Lilith defies God again to rescue one of these children. "Give me a mother's span with my child, and I will serve you again until the end of time... You could not be so cruel

a god as to part us now." This heartfelt depiction of defiance against God, one of the oldest and strongest counter-mythologies that exists, wrings the reader's heart with empathy for the speaker, subverting the patriarchal and oppressive thread in many religions that tells us defiance of God, no matter the provocation, is the worst sin possible.

There are many other radically deconstructive moments in this collection, but one is particularly notable in its self-awareness: Yolen breaks the fourth wall, explaining her intention as a writer through the mouth of her protagonist, and showing the positive potential for liberatory myth as a whole. In "The Traveler and the Tale," she describes a time-traveler sent to embed liberation myths in the past, trusting that the folk tale of mice overthrowing slavery would be more effective in defeating future enslavement that doing anything as meager as killing a future dictator. "History, like a scab, calcifies over each wound and beneath it the skin of human atrocity heals. Only through stories, it seems, can we really influence the history that is to come. Told to a willing ear, repeated by a willing mouth, by that process of mouth-to-ear resuscitation we change the world."

However, the critical analogy can fail on at least two fronts—while some might argue that Yolen and Le Guin's allegories are too preachy, or too sappy, the opposite fault is possible. George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* is acclaimed for its realism, its refusal to take refuge in the tropes of the fantasy genre. While there are still gauzy veils and knightly helms, beneath both are generally maggots and betrayal, and there is a good deal of humanity and warmth in what first appear to be monstrous enemies. Heroes die without warning, and those that survive are often reduced to using despicable tactics. This is a breath of fresh air for many fantasy readers. However, particularly in *Game of Thrones*, the television adaptation of the series, the critique has doubled back on itself. At what point does the sexual violence of the series stop being a critique of fantasy tropes, a realistic depiction of the violence of a misogynist society and the horrors of war, and become once again an enactment and celebration of that violence? Many would argue that the television adaptation has rounded that curve (although the book series contains many more sexual assaults than the television series—214 to 50 as of 2014, horrifically—viewers seem more affected by the violence than readers.)

This sad turn is possible because *Game of Thrones* is only partly a critical allegory: it is also a fantasy story, intended for escapist enjoyment. When one "enjoys" a rape scene, no matter how much that enjoyment is inflected by horror, it is neither a depoliticized nor a safely entertainment-only experience:

it is the full-circle recuperation of the critique the author may have meant to issue. The story of the characters trying to make sense and show each other warmth in a completely violent and chaotic world, of trying to enact their various myths of success, honor, loyalty, or rationality and often failing—this is also the story of the reader's experience in their own world. The same goes for the fundamental sense of alienation and fragmentation the story produces in the reader—it feels so real because it is what we are used to, but that reality is not desirable either.

the structurally deconstructive
The Neverending Story by Michael Ende is at once a myth, the story of a myth, and an attack upon the structure of story/narrative/myth itself. It tells of a young boy who reads a book about the destruction of a fantasy world by the Nothing. He becomes invested in the story as it unfolds, and near the final catastrophe realizes that the whole point of the story was for this investment to occur—the characters he has grown to love are now speaking directly to him, imploring him to speak them into being. Only by his deliberate engagement in their creation can the world survive. When he accepts this call, he is transported into the fantastical world, living and creating it at once. There he experiments with power, and is ultimately destroyed by his arrogance.

This is, of course, still allegory for the experience of writing fantasy. But the magical realism of the end of the reader's separation from the myth he consumes, ultimately becoming the sustainer of what sustains him, is an epic, revolutionary call to cross the barrier Barthes described between the real and the mythical, the barrier between those who create the world through action (the workers/the colonized) and those who create it through abstraction (the owners/the mythologists), the barrier Leftism cannot overcome as long as it is the Left. The Nothing that is the alternative to answering this call to arms is one of brutality, alienation, and despair. It is not the end of myth, but the proliferation of bourgeois and fascist myth. A conversation between two of the characters while the barrier between the real and the story still exists:

"...If humans believe Fantasia doesn't exist, they won't get the idea of visiting your country. And as long as they don't know you creatures of Fantasia as you really are, the Manipulators do what they like with them."

"What can they do?"

"Whatever they please. When it comes to controlling human behavior,

there's no better instrument than lies. Because, you see, humans live by beliefs. And beliefs can be manipulated. The power to manipulate beliefs is the only thing that counts. That's why I sided with the powerful and served them—because I wanted to share their power."

"I want no part in it!" Atreyu cried out.

"Take it easy, you little fool," the werewolf growled. "When your turn comes to jump into the Nothing, you too will be a nameless servant of power, with no will of your own. Who knows what use they will make of you? Maybe you'll help them persuade people to buy things they don't need, or hate things they know nothing about, or hold beliefs that make them easy to handle, or doubt the truths that might save them. Yes, you little Fantasian, big things will be done in the human world with your help, wars started, empires founded..."

I find Ende's book an intriguing proposal for an avenue towards anti-fascist liberatory struggle. Ende deserves to be taken seriously by anti-fascists; as a youth, Ende dodged the Nazi draft and, quite unusually among the Gentiles in his area, risked his life by joining an underground anti-fascist resistance group. Ende does not view the revolutionary project as an anti-mythical one; rather, he calls for us to instead bridge the gap between reality and myth, to enact the world we wish to see. While it would feel easiest to take up that challenge without asking further questions, Ende didn't, and neither should we, as his story indicates; his protagonist's misadventures and failures in using his narrative-creating/living power leave him a friendless tyrant. How can we answer Ende's challenge without coming to the same fate, becoming as much an enemy as those we currently oppose?

Many other authors have skillfully challenged narrative certainty through the use of precisely deconstructive language. I think most of Jorge Luis Borges's perfectly indescribable *Labyrinths* and *Fictions*—perfect because to describe is in part to capture. Jeanette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body* never describes the gender of the protagonist, who sleeps both with a man and a woman. By this absence, she *détourns* gendered expectations of romantic and sexual relationships. SF Grand Master and radical queer essayist Samuel Delany is also famous for this tactic. In his masterpiece *Dhalgren*, the protagonist wanders through a perpetually shifting dreamscape, where acts occur beyond the realm of morality or reason. There is little plot, and the protagonist feels unsure of his own path, history, and experience; there are many unresolved references to Greek mythology that may or may

not be significant. The protagonist reads and possibly writes portions of earlier chapters of *Dhalgren* in a notebook he finds; later portions of *Dhalgren* are composed of entries from the notebook. The final lines of the book end in a fragment resumed by the first lines of the book. The book, in short, is comprised of mirrors within mirrors, and narrative is offered only for long enough to be destablizing when it disappears.

There are frequent sexual encounters in *Dhalgren*, all intensely complicated microcosms of the conflicts between desire, power, gender, interest, and aesthetic; unexpectedly, they fall apart. While critics have concentrated on the revolutionarily discontinuous literary structure of the book, Delany seems to place more value on the feedback he received from readers about moments in the book like these encounters: "For these readers, the technical difficulties of the book, the eccentricity of structure, and the density of style went all but unmentioned. After all, if the book makes any social statement, it's that when society pulls the traditional supports out from under us, we all effectively become, not the proletariat, but the lumpen proletariat. It says that the complexity of culture functioning in a gang of delinquents led by some borderline mental case is no less and no more than that functioning at a middle-class dinner party." Others, he goes on to say, do not appreciate the destabilizing presence in his work of the idea that precarity can be, and is for many, normal. Delany's entire career has challenged norms and expectations, but he does not limit himself to such provocation or to a blind elevation of the oppressed; his tactics of deconstruction limit and destroy our understanding of the narrative as soon as it develops. This, I think, is his greatest contribution among many to the project of liberation mythology; and it is not a dry one. Delany cites Barthes in his evocation of *jouissance*, ecstatic sexual pleasure, felt during reading and rereading—the necessity and joy of willfully misreading, of challenging and destroying our initial impressions. Alan Moore also discusses this libidinal power: "[*Watchmen*] was the result of an almost sexual union... The sexuality of creativity—on that level, human interaction becomes less of an oppressive pyramid and more of a dance, an orgy, something that you can imagine being a bit of fun."

 Delany is an anti-essentialist writer in both form and content, and a conscious one, and a mythologist nonetheless. He is able to read against Le Guin's rather bland and essentialist utopic considerations,[a] but also to create his own myths... which do not find much resonance with most bourgeois readers, because of Barthes' problem of the Left mythologist; bourgeois society demands exactly the kind of emotionally satisfying and tidy narratives to

a   See Delany's essay "Reading 'The Dispossessed'" in his collection *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*.

which Delany is an antithesis, while they nonetheless are forced to respect his genius as it operates on their terrain. Delany's roles as a literary critic, social critic, and human being are not separate in any way from his work as a mythologist. As such, he exemplifies the best spirit of science fiction, while demonstrating that there is no such spirit unless we choose to make it, and helping us question if we ought to do so.

However, the tactic of deconstruction is not without its traps and faults, beyond the obvious possibility of navel-gazing inaction. On the more academic side of the fantastically deconstructive, we find a cautionary tale to this effect: *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, and *A Thousand Plateaus*, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The books, legendarily written via correspondence while on drugs, are extremely dense and obscure; while certain of their ideas, such as rhizomatic structure, deterritorialization, striated space, and assemblages have become popular enough in academia to warrant a close reading, it is always a struggle. I have heard a theory that Deleuze and Guattari deliberately wrote the books as traps for readers so that it would be unusable by academics, an unrecuperable nut impossible to crack. If that was in fact their intent, it failed. Both of these books are taught and discussed not only by gender theorists and post-structuralist philosophers, but also by officers in the Israeli Defense Force. The analyses Deleuze and Guattari intended to be useful to resistance movements are being used as a source for tactical inspiration to understand and destroy the Palestinian resistance movement. This has led to truly science-fictional moments occurring in reality. A Palestinian woman interviewed by a journalist for the *Palestine Monitor*, describes the experience of interacting with IDF soldiers using tactics inspired by their reading of Deleuze and Guattari:

> Imagine it – you're sitting in your living-room, which you know so well; this is the room where the family watches television together after the evening meal, and suddenly that wall disappears with a deafening roar, the room fills with dust and debris, and through the wall pours one soldier after the other, screaming orders. You have no idea if they're after you, if they've come to take over your home, or if your house just lies on their route to somewhere else. The children are screaming, panicking. Is it possible to even begin to imagine the horror experienced by a five-year-old child as four, six, eight, twelve soldiers, their faces painted black, sub-machine-guns pointed everywhere, antennas protruding from their backpacks, making them look like giant alien bugs, blast their way through that wall?

Deconstruction is a tool like any other, one that can be weaponized by the state and capitalism when they choose to destroy communities and lives that do not profit them.

reclamation & identity
I am struck between the similarity between these two passages: from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the journal entry the Fellowship finds in Moria, just before doom strikes,

> We cannot get out. We cannot get out. They have taken the bridge and Second Hall. Frár and Lóni and Náli fell there bravely... Óin's party went five days ago but today only four returned. The pool is up to the wall at West-gate. The Watcher in the Water took Óin—we cannot get out. The end comes soon. We hear drums, drums in the deep.

And from Ta-Nehisi Coates, reflecting on his youth,

> ...we would walk to the house of someone whose mother worked nights, play 'Fuck tha Police', and drink to our youth. We could not get out. The ground we walked was trip-wired. The air we breathed was toxic. The water stunted our growth. We could not get out.

I do not know if this mirroring was intentional, but it suggests Coates' early life in Baltimore as a kind of life in Moria—a place once full of hope for cross-racial unity, now a place of death and despair for those who find themselves there as evil forces arise, who can only be saved by luck and great sacrifice. Either way, Coates' writing is a mythologizing of survival more profound than Tolkien imagined.

Speculative fiction is a terrain almost uniquely suited for asserting the reality of experiences and humanity that do not fall within dominant narratives. While it has historically been a field for white men (and sometimes white women) to speculate about the Other—often leading to fearful or exotifying narratives[b]—some of those white men (and sometimes white women) have used it to assert the common personhood of those from different cultures, to paint the joy and beauty of consensual exchange, of the delight in difference. More recently, some of those placed by society as Others have used it not only to assert those same values, but also to explain and legitimize themselves.

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b   The work of H.P. Lovecraft is particularly notable in this regard—his incredible depictions of fantastically unsettling alien geometries cannot be unrelated to his intense, closely-held, racism.

The first published science fiction authors of color were necessarily doing so in a conflictual manner; Samuel Delany's novel *Nova* was originally rejected by a prominent publisher who claimed that audiences would not be able to identify with the book's black protagonist. This refusal to, fundamentally, consider black people as a possible audience for science fiction; to allow white audiences to be challenged; to support Delany in explicitly writing from his experience as a black person; and to comprehend the possibility that black people might want to read science fiction through the lens of a protagonist of their own color—let alone the possible interactions and contributions other people of color might want to have within the field— was a shameful and self-limiting moment, one that must have been echoed hundreds of times during the so-called Golden Age of science fiction, the age the "Sad Puppies" would like to see reborn. In her memoirs, Nichelle Nichols, a black actor who played Lt. Uhura on the classic *Star Trek* television and movie series, reflected on how hard she and the show's producer had to fight for not only the existence of her character but even for *each line of dialogue* her character was given. The massive outpouring of fan mail she received from black viewers, overjoyed to see a black woman in a non-servant role on television, was deliberately withheld from her; she received only a few letters a week of the hundreds she was sent. The racism of the network made her resolve to quit the show—until Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in a chance encounter at a cocktail party, convinced her to stay with the show so she could continue to inspire black youth. Whoopi Goldberg and several NASA astronauts, among others, credit their pursuit of their dreams to seeing Nichols play that role.

Her bravery, and the bravery of other early people of color working within the genre, succeeded. Not entirely; as I outlined earlier, the reactionary backlash from white men angry at the opening of the field continues explicitly and subtly, as youth of color are discouraged daily from pursuing in speculative fiction, the sciences, and other possible avenues towards freedom. However, many more science fiction authors of colors are being published, and many gatekeepers within the industry are belatedly recognizing the necessity of supporting those authors and their work. Explicit meta-reflections on the relationship between people of color and science fiction are being offered; I particularly felt *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz, which uses the tactic of magical realism to discuss science fiction, the history of the Dominican Republic, and the fictional stark life of one Dominican-American teenager.

The strong women told the faggots that there are two important things to remember about the coming revolutions. The first is that we will get our asses kicked. The second is that we will win.

The faggots knew the first. Faggot ass-kicking is a time-honored sport of the men. But the faggots did not know about the second. They had never thought about winning before. They did not even know what winning meant. So they asked the strong women and the strong women said that winning was like surviving, only better. As the strong women explained winning, the faggots were surprised and then excited. The faggots knew about surviving for they always had and this was going to be just plain better. That made ass-kicking different. Getting your ass kicked and then winning elevated the entire enterprise of making revolution.

—*The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*

This inclusiveness has led to the old problem of recuperation, enclosure, and identity formation. Building a place within a society from which you are forcibly excluded is a defiant and subversive act. When you "succeed" in this enterprise, power grants you only a small and confined patch of territory, and polices its boundaries. So long as you comply with those expectations, you are more than tolerated, you are exploited: yesterday's enemy is now a valuable member of society, an exotic producer of cultural gold, an innovator. I fear this is beginning to happen within science fiction. While I am completely opposed to the Sad Puppies and both the mythical and real worlds they seem to want, I too see a trend towards identifying authors based on their placement rather than their work—for the purposes of monetized exploitation. Characters and authors who are queer or of color may be excluded less, but they are being used in a tokenizing and appropriative fashion by an industry that is still dominated by straight white men.

It is hard to know how to escape these two terrible options, but Nnedi Okorafor and her work *Who Fears Death* gives me hope. The novel is set in a post-collapse Sudan; Okorafor herself is Nigerian-American, and while she primarily resides in the US, has spent much time in Nigeria. There are very few science fiction novels set anywhere in Africa, and very little science fiction from Africa in print;[c] the very terrain of the novel is of a different mythical

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c   Okorafor discusses the reasons for this phenomenon in her blog post "Is Africa Ready For Science Fiction?")

character than those set in white territory or imagined by white authors, and reads at odds with the desert-people trope well established in the genre. Her protagonist Onyesonwu is a rape revenger with magical powers, herself conceived by rape performed by a sorceror intent on genocide. Onyesonwu grows up isolated and hated, viewed as a monster, and experiments with assimilating into the society that does not want her (Okorafor handles the issue of female castration/female genital mutilation here in a particularly complex and deft manner.) As she finds herself and her difference, she finds her power, and goes to war, though never without complexity, trepidation, humanity and friendship. Onyesonwu is the hero I have been waiting for, and, judging from the awards the book has received, I am far from alone. Okorafor has created a complex, compelling myth not founded in white history, one that neither ignores the grim realities she and all of us grapple with, nor agrees to treat with them. While her work may be exploited by the white establishment, it refuses recuperation to the extent anything can.

Okorafor's success is so notable because it is almost singular. Strictly fictional Leftist hero mythologies are not common; the Left prefers to canonize real-world heroes, some of whom have become fully recuperated and integrated into bourgeois mythology.[d] The lack of these purely fictional liberatory heroes is for good reason: it is hard to imagine a hero that can realistically reject the corrupting power that comes from their victory. In both real life and fiction, they usually remain heroes because they die at the end of their stories.

The two most successful science fictions could both lay claim to some degree of liberatory or utopian potential; *Star Wars* on the one hand, *Star Trek* on the other. But *Star Wars* was the deliberate evocation of Western myth (Lucas studied Joseph Campbell to find the most compelling and widespread myths suitable for reworking into the trilogy), and rests more on the Oedipal notions of a young man finding his power and defeating his father than on the rebellion; may we be saved from our struggles becoming the mere backdrop of such tired psychological dramas. *Star Trek*, for its part, at first tried to depict a future in which humanity was at peace, money was abolished, and race and gender had been surpassed. This was too boring; monstrous alien Others and new forms of resource exploitation and colonization had to be devised to keep interest in the show afloat. It is, in fact, now a perfect reflection of one trajectory our future may arrive at, a dystopian sort of peace in which capitalism no longer requires actual money. Successful myths in a

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d   For an interesting exploration of this phenomenon and its justifications, see David Halperin's *Saint Foucault: Towards A Gay Hagiography*.

bourgeois world must be bourgeois on some level. For those that succeed less, but depend upon a hero, suffering and death are the best-case scenarios for those heroes, real or fictional; this is why *Rebel One* is a good movie, but a bad *Star Wars* movie. It is no wonder that these myths are hard for people to want to emulate, at least in a manner beyond the purely aesthetic.

Most science fiction and fantasy is generated for the purposes of escape, but at its best it is something more than that—a way of actually engaging with reality. Imagining yourself as a better, more powerful person, with clearly evil enemies you can slay, new worlds to explore, and the camaraderie of the best and brightest—with the joy of difference made more explicit than it ever is in real life—is not an end to itself, but it can be a means towards finding the strength to exist, or even to struggle, in your own world. The challenge is to make these myths *complicated*. I owe my survival and the values that drive my participation in social struggle to such myths. I know I am not alone.

self-generated myths: speculations about the once and future community

> Everyone told me a different story about how the slaves began to forget their past. Words like 'zombie', 'sorcerer', 'witch', 'succubus', and 'vampire' were whispered to explain it. In these stories, which circulated throughout West Africa, the particulars varied, but all of them ended the same—the slave loses mother.
>
> —Saidiya Hartman

Those of us who live adrift in modernity exist within multiple universes at once, never home in any, always nostalgic for that which we have never had. Multiverse theory, at least in its speculative aspect, is a helpful way of thinking how we all exist within multiple true realities without losing our minds. Robert Heinlein codified the idea of *Story As Myth*—in his continuity, any story believed in strongly enough becomes real, a place you can go to if you have the right technology. His characters visit Oz, Burroughs' Mars, and many other famous fantasy landscapes. While so far we only have books and movies to transport us, they serve to create *the open*—the space in which is becoming is possible, as theorized by Derrida, Agamben, and, no less importantly, Delany. By questioning everything, by treating all the stories we live by as optional, science fiction can serve, as Haraway calls for, an "exploration of different articulations less marked by our culture of alterity and natureculture." Here is a short example.

ענאָוועל
(*Levoneh,* moon)
A myth of the moon
by Eliui Meshunedik

Long, long ago, there rested the humble Earth and the powerful Sun. On the Earth lived the Moon, and on the Moon lived the *mayz* (mice) and other animals, who were allowed to roam free, and to mingle with the people of Earth. The Earth and the Moon had a powerful relationship: the Moon was always there for the Earth. It offered the Earth and its people great reflection and hope in times of darkness. And the Earth loved and adorned the Moon with praise of its wisdom and beauty through song and earthly art.

The Sun, seeing this, blazed with a blinding jealousy. It came down to the Earth proclaiming its own beauty, power, and importance, naming the dependency of every living creature in the system on the Sun. While this was true, the Sun's jealousy only reinforced the strong bond between the Moon and the Earth. The Sun scorched the Earth with its footsteps and spread lies about the Moon and all of its creatures. It told tales about how the *mayz* people controlled and held all of the Earth people from success; it claimed that within *mayz* people rests a valuable fortune of gold. Listening to the lies of the Sun, the Earth people grew violent against the Moon and all of its creatures. *Ketselekh* (kittens) were put in bags and thrown into rivers; *shof* (sheep) were crucified; *fresh* (frogs) were burned at the stake; the *mayz* people were chased and gutted for their gold, which was never found. The Moon wept with great sorrow, for the Moon knew that the Sun had spread these terrible rumours.

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The violence did not subside. The people of earth turned away from the Earth and the Moon and worshiped the Sun and all of its power. The power of the Sun was so great that it ripped the Moon and the Earth apart. Seeing this, all of the animals of the Moon wept and ran towards the Moon, and leapt and climbed upon the departing body. The mayz people ran, being pursued by the earth people, but were too late. In a moment of grief, as the Sun pulled the Moon further and further away, the Moon cast a spell on the *mayz* people, turning them into mice in hopes of aiding their survival.

To this day, the Moon and the Earth, having been torn from one another, plead with the Sun, but to no avail. And the Moon sings to the Earth pulling tides and blankets of sky apart to see all the beauty of the Earth and the scar of what they once had, and to look upon the lost *mayz* people. And to this day the *mayz* people sing songs of longing and sorrow to the Moon and, like two ships signaling at sea, the Moon responds, waxing and waning. Now, every year the distance between the Moon and the Earth grows greater and greater, for there is nothing more whole than a broken heart.

This is a myth about the separation of Jews from the human community. While the United States teaches its children about the Shoah as if it were an aberration, a momentary insanity, this myth is in fact a two thousand year old story, ritually reenacted in pogroms and expulsions for centuries. By reconceptualizing it as an explicit myth, the author gives it a distance which creates space for play. Perhaps *play* seems like too frivolous a word for its topic; but it is precisely this history-as-game, codified versions of age-old hatreds and murders, that can give us mental and emotional enough space to outwit our very real predicaments. This play can serve us as a tactic, as a methodology, and even as a worldview. This is Donna Haraway's explicit project, her reason for using science fiction in tandem with "real" science and philosophy—and it is an accessible project we can all take up.

In their evocation of the Moon and Moon peoples, Meshunedik also speaks to the alien status Jews have acquired in Western culture: the permanent wanderer and outcast, a people of the night, whose fate waxes and wanes with time. They here draw upon a science fiction tradition: Leonard Nimoy, a Jew, modified a gesture used by Jewish *Kohanim* to refer to the Name of God to create the Vulcan gesture that calls for long life and prosperity. Nimoy was cast in his famous role as Spock specifically because his appearance seemed

fundamentally alien to the Gentile producer—saturnine, wise, disciplined, but slightly beyond the reach of humanity. (He was originally supposed to have red skin, but that plan was abandoned because red skin looks black on black-and-white televisions—alien is one thing, black is another!) The tension between Spock and his human comrades, as they seek to know each other through their difference, forms one of the most compelling elements of *Star Trek*.

Self-generated myth can expand or redefine our knowledge of ourselves as revolutionary protagonists. For example, the French revolution of 1848 marked a shift for revolutionists from a simplistic populist rhetoric to a self-knowledge as the revolutionary subject, as the working class emerged on the Paris barricades. However, this impulse can quickly go astray. In his introduction to *Homage to Catalonia*, Lionel Trilling exemplifies Orwell as the virtuous man who refuses his station: a moment of hero formation around someone who refused heroism—*for that very reason*. Trilling is not wholly unaware of the irony, but it does not stop him.

These fictions are dangerous. If we view ourselves as the players of a carefree revolutionary game, we may be devastated by the very real consequences; if we become obsessed with stories we have outgrown, we may become our enemies. Destruction is sometimes called for, however, and a powerful myth is like a social wrecking ball. Alan Moore, an acclaimed mythologist, anarchist and magician who worships a semi-fictional ancient god:

> We forget what power these things originally had. The bardic tradition of magic, whereby if someone puts a curse on you, it may sour your milk for a month, or burn your house down... Someone puts a satire on you that will destroy you in the eyes of your friends, in the eyes of your family, if not your own eyes. If it's a particularly good satire that's well worded and funny and clever, then five hundred years after you are dead, people will still be laughing at what a shit you were. That is destroyed. That's not just making your cow sick. People understood that as a real power, which, of course, it is. There are books that have devastated continents, destroyed thousands. What war hasn't been a war of fiction? All the religious wars, certainly, or the fiction of communism versus the fiction of capitalism—ideas, fictions, shit that people make. They have made a vast impression on the real world. It is the real world. Are thoughts not real?
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> ...That is why magic is a broader map to me. It includes science. It's the

kind of map we need if we are to survive psychologically in the age that is to come, whatever that is. We need a bigger map because the old one is based on an old universe where not many of us live anymore. We have to understand what we are dealing with here, because it is dangerous. It kills people. Art kills.

Saidiya Hartman's evocative, beautiful, densely horrifying work *Lose Your Mother* is often a meditation on the mythologies of the past and how they affect her future. After meeting people in Ghana, the Sisala, whose mythology included the story of having cleverly escaped slavery, she reflects:

> The language of the triumphant was as different from the language of the conquered as that of the living from the dead. Although, like me, the Sisala were also the descendants of people who had been scattered, this event was not a source of pain but rather a source of pride. The past for them was a cause of hope, whereas I longed for a future that could be wrested from an irredeemable past. My present was the future that had been created by men and women in chains, by human commodities, by chattel persons. I tried often to envision a future in which this past had ended, and most often I failed.

But Hartman's bleak understanding of eternal slavery does not lead her to despair. Elsewhere, she wonders: "The narrative of the defeated never triumphs; like them, it ekes out an existence in the shadow of the victors. But must the story of the defeated always be a story of defeat? Is it too late to imagine that their lives might be redeemed or to fashion an antidote to oblivion? Is it too late to believe their struggles cast a shadow into a future in which they might finally win?"

Ultimately, she finds her true sense of affinity, family, and belonging in the shared desire for freedom, rather than any historical or ethnic unity. "...I didn't have faith in the serenity of dead slaves or trust that our offering could put an end to their sorrow. I envisioned the dead raging and dispirited, like us, waiting for a future in which all the slave marks would be gone. It was this mutual longing that bound our fate with theirs." As she considers the Sisala mythology in contrast to her own, she has a revelation: "Listening to the priest, I came to realize that it mattered whether the 'we' was called *we who become together* or *African people* or *slaves*, because those identities were tethered to conflicting narratives of *our* past, and, as well, those names conjured different futures." Hartman implicitly issues us a challenge: how can we write honest defeated narratives that nonetheless give us a means of attaining

future freedom? How can our myths represent the true pain and sorrow that is woven into every story of an oppressed people or person, and yet not reify it as the once and future truth?

Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward, both SF authors, led a workshop called "Writing the Other" at a 90s science fiction convention that proved so popular that their handout was privately circulated between writers for a decade; it has been recently published as a stand-alone text. Most obviously, they are attempting to provide writers *not* coded as Other a way to write about such others, rather than a) doing a bad, stereotyped job of such, or b) making the "more ethical" choice to not write about people outside of their own experiences. More deeply, they are offering practical tools for making myth that neither looks away from painful history nor makes the future a mirror of the past: an actually daring goal, close to the breathless excitement at difference and courage for change that lives at the heart of the best science fiction.

Shawl and Ward argue that we have racist, sexist, or otherwise fucked thoughts and impulses because our reptile brains have learned from society to distrust those marked as Other. These routinized thoughts, they say, are an evolutionarily sound means of survival. Ideally, our forebrain collaborates with our reptile brain, sorting and rationalizing its thoughts; but, "since routinized thinking permits shortcuts, it allows your conscious mind to be lazy... when the reptile brain sends prejudiced, erroneous information to a lazy forebrain, the lazy forebrain agrees with the reptile brain's assertion that, for example, all Muslims are terrorists." It is this reason that fascist, essentialist rhetoric can feel true—if it is directed against "those who are not like us," it appeals to our reptile brains. If it is the job of our forebrains to sort or dismiss these reptile brain impulses, fiction, by virtue of its multi-tiered appeal, may be a tool for rooting them out entirely by challenging our societal training and erasing the boundaries we have put up around "Other." Writing, the authors remind us, "is *considered* speech. It gives you the opportunity to write and revise. It gives you the opportunity to override the reptile brain and lazy forebrain" —and, perhaps, that of your audience.

Shawl and Ward ask us to consider what it means when we tend to write characters in "the unmarked state"—i.e., just like us, where "us" is constituted of those who have the social clout to have their work taken seriously, whose work reads as legitimate in the culture, which has historically meant those who are white, male, straight, and not poor. How identifiable even are "unmarked" characters whose center of normal is defined by white, capitalist, able-bodied, patriarchal society for any one in particular? How do they derange our sense

of our own normalcy, and take away our sense of agency—how do they prevent us from becoming heroes? To address these faults in mythmaking, these authors recommend the use of *parallax* and *congruence* as literary tactics for showing difference: the former, characters reflecting on or demonstrating their difference in relation to one another by virtue of their different centers of normalcy; and the latter, characters who seem other, who are marked, nevertheless demonstrating a relatable similarity to the probable audience or to another character with whom they are relating. It is also important, they say, for the relationships between marked and unmarked characters to be one of equals, such that "neither exists to prove anything about the other." In a separate essay, Shawl quotes advice for writers to write from their own knowledge—but to always strive to know more—and encourages authors to put themselves in situations in which they are minorities, because "alienation is an essential part of any science fiction writer's education." This works well with Haraway's project: if we ignore difference, or refuse to seek it out, we can never have true understanding or closeness.

Action: Fierce Against the Men

One warm and rainy night, the faggots and their friends were gathered in one of their favorite cellars dancing and stroking each other gently.

Suddenly, the men, armed with categories in their minds and guns in their hands, appeared at the door. The faggots, true to their training for survival, scrammed out the back windows, up the alley and out into the anonymous night. The queens, unable to scram in their gold lame and tired of just surviving, stayed. They waited until boldness and fear made them resourceful. Then, armed with their handbags and their high heels, they let out a collective shriek heard round the world and charged the men. The sound, one never heard before, unnerved the men long enough for the queens to get out onto the streets. And once on the streets, their turf, mayhem broke out. The word went out and, from all over the devastated city, queens moved onto the streets, armed, to shout and fight. The faggots, seeing smoke, cautiously came out of hiding and joyously could hardly believe what they saw. Elegant, fiery, exuberant queens were tearing up the street, building barricades, delivering insults, daring the men.

So they joined the queens and for three days and three nights the queens and their friends told the men, in every way they knew how, to fuck-off.

—*The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*

III. Dangers and possibilities facing liberatory myth

I know I'm not supposed to read too much into a movie like *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, but when you're living with a 6-year-old whose entire generation role-plays and reiterates each and every line, you tend to sit up and take exception when what comes out of those innocent little mouths suggests some not-very-subtle ethnic stereotypes of simpletons and shysters. Let's just take the movie's chief comic relief, the popeyed, brainless Jar Jar Binks, who is, apparently, a black man in frog face. Nothing wrong with that, says Lucasfilm; this is science fiction. Except he's a froggy alien who talks, yet says nothing.

—Patricia Williams, "Racial Ventriloquism"

I saw this Jedi costume, and I was so ecstatic I ran out of breath. At last I had an idea of who I was, how to carry myself, and I had a way of being. And I had a reason for being.

—Samuel L. Jackson, who played Mace Windu in *Star Wars: Episode I*

The danger of becoming proto-fascist mythology.
The primary way for mythologists to resist this possibility is to critically examine and question the tendency of their myths towards essentialism. This is maybe impossible in its truest sense, given how myth functions as an appeal to transcendent truth. But if mythologists can avoid appealing to the natural ("Our society/understanding of gender/nature is sick/malformed/afflicted by parasites; if we can return to the Athenian/wild/healthy ways of interacting, our social interactions will be the way they are supposed to be") and valorizing the past ("Before civilization/capitalism/patriarchy, things were better, and we can return…"), they will have done better than most. At the least, they must avoid the temptation to create the Other—the impulse to decide upon categories of people who are essentially evil and to be feared, or to be found exotically, provocatively interesting. Challenging misogyny and racism is a start; to challenge the concepts of race and gender, without ignoring the historical context we inhabit, is better. Liberatory mythology must be centered on the present, on the experiences and dreams of the people who generate that mythology, and not on the myths or history of the society it seeks to defeat.

Mythologists must also resist the urge to uncritically glorify or condemn violence. Revolutionaries have made an argument for supporting violence in self-defense, about the necessity of responding vigorously to great social violence; others have argued that violence is an inherently ugly thing that shapes even those acting to defend themselves into an image of their enemy. Whichever rings truer, one must often make compromises to live. It is the elevation of violence itself by mythology as an inherently worthwhile, purifying, liberatory force that turns it into a tool appropriate to the brutality of fascism, while the mythology of pacifism is cynically used by power as a self-policing mechanism among oppressed people.[e] From a materialist perspective, violence is a tool that can be used by anyone, whether in self-defense or aggression, to destroy power or to enact it, though it will always be used most, most effectively, and at least cost by those who already possess power. Neither the use of violence, nor the categorical avoidance of violence, deserve to be elevated through mythology. No matter who uses it, violence is a terrible thing to suffer or to commit; liberatory mythologists must not encourage those who have not experienced it to think it is of inherent value, nor give high praise to those who use pacifism to justify their complicity with larger violent forces.

To avoid a possible turn towards fascism, mythology must be sure it is not founded upon reactionary insecurity, on a sense of inferiority: that it is not just another form of character armor. This may seem a sentimental assertion, but I found these themes again and again in my readings of fascists and their mythology. I believe this sense is the result of legitimate suffering that cannot find resolution with who truly caused it, and therefore finds its targets closer to home. I think it is close to the heart of abusers, of committed racists, of those who commit acts of misogynist and homophobic violence; I think it is often within the hearts of those who bear power, who grow to find affinity with bullying, torture, and brutality. This rather pathetic emotion—I got hurt, and someone is going to pay!—has had very large consequences when abstracted by the cloak of mythology. Revolutionists should closely examine their hearts for such sentiments, and those of their friends—and, most especially, their mythologies. This is not to make a psychological problem out of the justified anger of the oppressed; it is rather to encourage the expression of that anger against the social structures that imprison them, rather than against other victims of the same structures. We are all, of course, assemblages of power and oppression, so this becomes a rather complicated interpersonal question, particular to each circumstance.

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e   For more on this, see *How Nonviolence Protects the State*, by Peter Gelderloos.

The danger of winning.

George Orwell, as we saw earlier, wrote about his personal experience fighting alongside Spanish anarchists and communists against fascists in *Homage to Catalonia*. While he maintained an affection for anarchists and remained a lifelong socialist, he formed a deep hatred of all Communists for their role in the purging and repression of other revolutionary forces during the war. Late in life, horribly, he gave the British government a list of people he suspected to be Communists—a betrayal that cannot be justified, no matter how just his grievance. Meanwhile, his novels have become cultural icons in America and the U.K.; when one refers to, for example, the type of government surveillance that gathers lists of names, one is quite likely to say "Big Brother," an Orwellian concept. There are many other obvious examples of recuperated Leftist myth I could refer to (the myths around the U.S. black civil rights struggle, for example, celebrated each February by a state that continues to violently oppress its black "citizens"), but this one is remarkably neat. Many of us read *1984* and *Animal Farm* as teenagers, assumed Orwell's contributions were liberatory, and moved on. But it has been pointed out[f] that Orwell's ideas must in fact serve power—otherwise they would not be so popular, taught in every high school in the United States. What purpose do they serve—to make us afraid of traditionally totalitarian power so we are less critical of other forms of power and more grateful for the scraps we get? Is it to prevent us from experimenting with forms of socialism, even ones of which the real Orwell would have approved?

Orwell was a complicated and somewhat contradictory person, which is to say that he was a person; *Homage to Catalonia* was a first-hand account, and is therefore equally complex, whereas *1984* and *Animal Farm* were works of mythic allegory, easily digestible by high-schoolers. He and his latter works have been flattened by history and power into a component of bourgeois mythology; he has been assimilated. This is the fate that awaits most, Barthes says: "…true, there are revolts against bourgeois ideology. This is what one generally calls the avant-garde. But these revolts are socially limited, they remain open to salvage [recuperation]… Whatever the violence of the provocation, the nature it finally endorses is that of 'derelict' man, not alienated man; and derelict man is still Eternal Man. There can be figures of derelict man which lack all order… This does not affect in any way the security of the Essences." We and our myths must walk the line between transmissible and indecipherable, between openness and illegibility; we must resist the urge to explain ourselves fully, except to those with whom we can really share.

f   *Benjamen Walker's Theory of Everything*: "The Bootlickers."

This conundrum is most clearly visible for those operating as cultural producers on the margins of society, struggling simultaneously to voice and explore their truths as those unwanted by our culture while *avoiding* becoming desirable to it. This goes beyond "selling out", the older, sovereign form of this relation—these days, they no longer necessarily buy you; instead, they let you sell yourself laboriously, painfully, which will make your work all the more beautiful. Simply explaining who you are to your enemy, to detail how they have hurt you and how you have survived, is useful to them as they go on to exploit and dominate others. But this is not to condemn the urge entirely: sharing your experiences and hard-won wisdom with those also in struggle is a gift. Resisting transparency and monetization—or even agreeing that resistance is the right tactic, that being paid for what you have survived is wrong—is a difficult and necessary tension. Jasbir Puar offers a few key insights about modern societies of control exploit theoretical and cultural workers within marginalized fields, ensnaring them within their apparatus:

> The U.S. is reproduced as the dominant site of feminist inquiry through the use of intersectionality as a heuristic to teach difference. Thus, the euro-american bias of women's studies and history of feminism is ironically reiterated via intersectionality, eliding the main intervention of transnational and postcolonial feminist scholars since the 1990s, which has been, in part, about destabilizing the nation-centered production of the category WOC.

> A final concern is that intersectionality functions as a problematic reinvestment in the subject, in particular, the subject X. Rey Chow has produced the most damning critique of what she calls "poststructuralist significatory incarceration", seriously questioning whether the marginalized subject is still a viable site from which to produce politics, much less whether the subject is a necessary precursor for politics. "Difference" produces new subjects of inquiry that then infinitely multiplies exclusion in order to promote inclusion. Difference now proceeds and defines identity. Part of her concern is that poststructuralist efforts to attend to the specificity of Others has become one, a universalizing project and two, always beholden to the self-referentiality of the "center", ironic given that intersectionality has now come to be deployed as a call for and a form of anti-essentialism. The poststructuralist fatigue Chow describes is simple: Subject X may be different in content, but shows up, time and again, the same in form. (We can see this in the entrance of both "trans" identity and "disability" into the intersectional fray.)

...identification is a process; identity is an encounter, an event, an accident, in fact. Identities are multi-causal, multi-directional, liminal; traces aren't always self-evident.

Puar herself is an academic theoretician, and she does not offer clear pathways towards speaking truth or generating mythology that avoid these traps. Critique is always easier than creation; I do not have a simple proposal either.

The glory and the danger of myth is its ability to move us beyond the reality of our circumstances, to speak to our core beliefs and underlying emotions, to somehow transcend the bleakness of our surroundings: to become more than the sum of our parts. We have discussed the dangers and terrible possibilities of using mythology—but what are its liberatory potentials?

Mythology can spread solidarity, empathy, and fight loneliness.

> Heavenly Blue worried all the time. He worried about the bills and the roof that needed repairing and the strange men who always watched the house and what the neighbors might do next and about Hollyhock's unhappiness. He worried most of all that he would go mad. His worrying got the bills paid and the roof fixed and drove the men away and calmed the neighbors down and helped Hollyhock be happier. And finally his worrying drove him mad. It was the madness of looking inward and being afraid. There had never been enough love and warmth around him and he thought he had gradually dried up inside. He wanted out but he did not know where out was.

> Lilac and Pinetree and Moonbeam and Loose Tomato and Hollyhock gathered. They held Heavenly Blue for days, they let him cry and stare and slobber and scream and be silent. They paid the bills and looked after the roof and watched the street for strange men and talked to the neighbors and Hollyhock kept himself happy. Their house filled up with comfort and routine and gladness until Heavenly Blue could no longer resist and became response-able again.
> —*The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*

When Nnedi Okorafor was a child, she read white-dominated fantasy, the only thing available to her. "When I looked back... I noticed that I migrated towards those books that did not have human characters, because I could relate to those characters more than the white characters. I didn't see

reflections of myself in what I was reading." The easiest takeaway from her experience—an experience I relate to—is that diversity in fiction is important, necessary to reflect a diverse audience. However, conversely: one can gain from the experience of relating to monsters and aliens the realization that, to dominant society, one is a monster, an alien. Not only can you identify and analyze a distorted reflection of yourself in the eyes of power, you can perhaps feel less alone and particular in your monstrosity—even bond with others over your exclusion, as well as what you have in common. This is a conflictual experience that is at least as important as the temporary comfort one can find in escapist fiction; which comfort, when one is marginalized, is also a radical experience... when society does not want you to survive. It is a tragedy that most people in our society do not have friends... but, like Oscar Wao, we can at least have books.

Mythology can advocate for disintegration.
There are many forces striving to hold our world together—the impulse to gain power and control over others, to have more resources than others, to have respect and admiration, to somehow feel happy within this fraught context. In the heat of this constant push of competition for success, it can be a liberatory gesture simply to refuse to try to succeed: to fall apart: to disintegrate. Furthermore, if you oppose huge social structures, your task can feel daunting—there is no way to force them to collapse. However, you can encourage them to disintegrate through a change in belief. To do nothing to challenge the future is to choose to support it. *Night Vision*:

> ...in Blade Runner's vision of multi-culturalized amerikkka—the Afrikan population has vanished. There are masses of Latins and europeans and asians, but no Afrikans except the occasional extra, the face in the crowd. In the film, even the slave race of replicants is white. The Color Black has been eliminated in fantasy, in 'innocently' imagining the future. Truths that cannot be told yet in public, that still must be denied, leak out in imagination, in art. ...one of the underlying truths in the movie's subtext is that capitalism does raise up whole new classes to meet its economic needs by making new races and genders. But also, when these classes become obsolete to its needs or too dangerous—threatening slave rebellions—capitalism is prepared not only to repress them, but to transform or even eliminate them in their millions. *This is the battleground of our time and place.* [my italics]

We forget that money is a mythology; this is why Marx is still useful, despite his dusty and continual references to bolts of linen. He reminds us that we have

all been forced to believe in it, and that it has real and deadly consequences for our lives—but it also depends on our joint belief. The USSR died because of huge economic and political factors and incompetent government, but also because not enough people believed in its myth for it to continue. There is an ideological war currently raging in the U.S. as patriots call upon the myth of America... through denigrating immigrants, the group of people who are mostly likely to be invested in it. If myths hold our whole world together, terrible parts and good, and if a lack of belief in them can threaten that cohesion, then we need to generate myths that give us strength while taking away strength from the things we oppose. To prevent the turn towards fascism, this revolutionary myth must also be a self-destructive one—a myth that does not believe it will carry on, a myth that will not just fade away some day but completely disintegrate when it is no longer conflictual, ethical, or able to sustain revolutionary dreams.

Mythology can envision another, better world.
To realistically evaluate your circumstances is often to feel doomed; we cannot imagine how to move beyond them. Mythology can break this paralysis. Unrealistic hope can betray people, and leave them feeling worse than before—but it can also give them the power to transcend their circumstances and make their dreams reality. Simply to say that there could be something better than all of this is a step. Even if no world we could currently dream could be free from some serious ill, even if we cannot take a series of practical steps towards it and then see its realization in our lifetime, it is useful to dream other dreams than the worthless ones we are permitted to have. We must simply avoid living only for the utopian future and turning a blind eye to the necessary struggles of the present.

Andy Merrifield argues for the creation of "spaces of slippage, a narrow trail of permanent subversion. A space of slippage is a zone where the state's control has weakened or degenerated. It's a liberated autonomous realm in which new communes can bloom, in which the realm of the possible— another possible world—might be glimpsed... We might name any new space of slippage the realm of the really lived, the kingdom of our Being-in-possibility; or, if we journey long enough, stretch it out far and wide enough, we might call it the magical wonderland of somewhere." He means this literally, in the sense of temporary autonomous zones, Zapatista resistance, and other forms of living in resistance; but he is simultaneously calling for an act of willful imagination, the marriage of the material and mythical: magic. "Magical Marxism... lodges somewhere within the interstices of a liberated time and liberated space, between the right to free time and the right to

free space, a space of self-affirmation and "self-unfolding," a space-time of autonomous activity, of intellectual, artistic, and practical endeavor." This call to enacting interstitial magic is a way to outwit the traps of reality that prevent utopia. Following Benjamin, Merrifield calls for a poetic politics, a "dialectical fairytale," for people to adopt a manner of living that is beautiful and an act of resistance at once. One might cynically remark that Marxists need this call more than most, but it is one at least as present in its geneaology (if in fits and starts) as boredom and work. More than anything, he says, we need "a new politics that has a touch of the magical, that brews up some new radical moonshine, a new potion for stirring up our critical concepts, for making us practically intoxicated, that dreams the unimaginable, that goes beyond merely what is, beyond all accepted rules and logic... a politics that has little to do with rationality or economic reason." It is easier to call for such creativity and magic than it is to produce it, but I agree with him. I only hope people can avoid adding the poison of essentialism to their mythological potions.

Mythology can generate and sustain resistance.
Saidiya Hartman:

> If after a year in Ghana I could still call myself an African American, it was because my Africa had its source in the commons created by fugitives and rebels, in the courage of suicidal girls aboard slave ships, and in the efforts, thwarted and realized, of revolutionaries intent upon stopping the clock and instituting a new order, even if it cost them their lives. For me, returning to the source didn't lead to the great courts and to the regalia of kings and queens. The legacy that I chose to claim was articulated in the ongoing struggle to escape, stand down, and defeat slavery in all its myriad forms. It was the fugitive's legacy. It didn't require me to wait on bended knee for a great emancipator. It wasn't the dream of a White House, even if it was in Harlem, but of a free territory. It was a dream of autonomy rather than nationhood. It was the dream of an elsewhere, with all its promises and dangers, where the stateless might, at last, thrive.

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Chapters, posters, and additional material may be found at unquietdead.tumblr.com