LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Critical Worldbuilding: Toward a Geographical Engagement with Imagined Worlds

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Introduction

Worldbuilding, or the construction of imaginary worlds, has long been a staple of speculative fiction. Although all stories require a degree of worldbuilding – setting, along with plot and character, make for key elements of storytelling – the creation of alternate universes plays a crucial and often starring role in science fiction and fantasy. 'Storyworlds,' often presenting coherent histories, ecologies, technologies, and cultures, provide 'contextual rule-sets' and a sense of an immersive reality beyond what is directly experienced by the audience (von Stackelberg and McDowell 2015: 25-26). Across literature, film, gaming, and other forms of media, these constructed worlds range from alternate Earths (Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and its 2019 HBO reboot, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy and forthcoming Hulu adaptation) to the alien, fantastical, and bizarre (N.K. Jemisin's *Inheritance* trilogy, Ursula Le Guin's Hainish universe, James Cameron's *Avatar*). Worldbuilding has only grown in sophistication and cultural import since the early 2000s alongside the increasing relevance and mainstreaming of 'geek culture,' with speculative worlds a thriving contributor to big business media empires and a potentially valuable object of study and critical intervention.

The cultural, artistic, and literary analysis of imagined worlds is nothing new. Speculative media has long been deployed as a lens through which to view the world as it was, is, or could be. Built worlds are commonly used to think through contemporary social

questions, both by academics in the humanities and social sciences as well as cultural critics in the popular media: for example, interpreting *Godzilla* as the embodiment of anxiety over nuclear war (Ansfield 1995; Rafferty 2004; Cho 2019), or zombies as stand-in for myriad fears including racial politics, political change, and environmental degradation (Drezner 2014; Crockett and Zarracina 2016; Wonser and Boyns 2016; Dawdy 2019). More recently, the emergence of 'cli-fi,' or climate change fiction set in near-future Anthropocene worlds (Tuhus-Dubrow 2013; Svoboda 2016; Leyda 2018), gestures to the continuing role of speculative media as a form of cultural engagement with possible worlds and potential futures.

Although there is growing recognition of imagined worlds as valid objects for critical scholarship, much of the analysis and critique focuses on these texts as cultural objects of consumption (see Wolf 2012; Ekman and Taylor 2016). In contrast, we contend that the humanities and social sciences, and geography in particular, have much to add to the interrogation of speculative worlds as such, the processes of their production, as well as the relationships between imagined and lived worlds – including emergent political struggles over speculative media. Following insights from political ecology (Robbins 2012), which posit that environmental phenomena are inevitably embedded within and formed through political landscapes, we argue that speculative worlds invariably enact a politics, even if implicitly. The production, circulation, and consumption of imagined worlds does not occur in a social vacuum; rather, these practices inform and are informed by our histories and political present. Worldbuilding is therefore both a fundamentally geographical exercise and an unavoidably political act: ideas, concerns, and controversies in our lived worlds are embedded within and reproduced through imagined ones.

We propose *critical worldbuilding* as a framework for grappling with the processes of producing, circulating, and consuming imagined worlds. We extend Ekman and Taylor's use of 'critical worldbuilding' (2016) to refer not only to critical engagement with imagined worlds (distinguished from authorial and readerly worldbuilding), but also to a concern with the production and struggle over these worlds. In this themed section, we argue that worldbuilding acts as both a site of struggle and a terrain for experimentation with real world possibilities. In the case of the cli-fi genre, for instance, this process involves imagining alternative environments and counterfactual human-environment relations in a warming world. In this way, worldbuilding acts as a *dialectic*: our lived realities are defined and shaped by representations of speculative futures, even as acts of worldbuilding (re)produce situated, socio-culturally contingent understandings and framings of lived worlds. (We wish to highlight, following critiques from the Anthropocene debates, that we must be careful not to impose a singular, objective, and homogenous "real world" as one end of this worldbuilding dialectic. Rather, a critical worldbuilding approach views the real world as itself composed of many overlapping and interconnected worlds [Blaser 2013; Law 2015; Escobar 2016]). A critical worldbuilding approach thus takes seriously the premise that fictional worlds produced through various media can have material consequences.

This special section of *Literary Geographies* emerges from a series of three sessions on critical worldbuilding held in Boston at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers. Over the course of these panels, a series of interrelated

questions emerged: how might critical social science broadly, and geographic analysis specifically, help us to understand and engage with speculative worlds? How, in turn, might a critical worldbuilding approach contribute to geographic theory and method? What insights might be garnered from speculative worldbuilding practices for real world challenges and futures? How might worldbuilding (re)produce colonial and capitalist legacies – or, conversely, be used to imagine post-colonial and anti-capitalist futures? Finally, how might we both analyze and deploy the dialectic between the 'what ifs' presented through speculative worldbuilding on the one hand, and the political and practical potentials that worldbuilding opens up and/or forecloses on the other? By bringing papers together from a diverse set of conceptual orientations and empirical case studies, we seek to contribute to an emerging conversation within the social sciences and humanities about imagined worlds as political artifacts, while presenting them as an increasingly important terrain for geographical intervention and critical insight.

Critical Worldbuilding: Exploring Transformative Alternatives

For our purposes here, 'worldbuilding' refers to processes of constructing 'imaginary worlds with coherent geographic, social, cultural, and other features,' generally associated with speculative fiction across media, including novels, film, television, and games (von Stackelberg and McDowell 2015: 25). These 'storyworlds' or 'secondary worlds,' to use Tolkien's formulation (Tolkien 1983), may be similar to our own or drastically different. Stories may be focused at the level of a town or region, or at the scale of an entire universe or multiverse. Worldbuilding's antecedents can be seen in folklore and mythology (including Fairyland or the fictional islands in Homer's *Odyssey*), in early speculations like Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), or in the 'scientific romances' of the 19th century, including the work of Jules Verne. Notable modern examples can be found in Tolkien's Middle Earth, Herbert's Arrakis, and Lucas' Star Wars galaxy.[2] (We do wish to acknowledge the Eurocentricity of the examples cited here. So-called "classic" texts have been codified as such through socio-historically contingent landscapes of power which continue to privilege the voices of white, cis-gender, heterosexual men throughout the publishing process. As a result, such voices have had a profoundly disproportionate influence on the framing and use of worldbuilding in popular forms of fantasy, science fiction, and other speculative media.)

Worldbuilding has become increasingly prominent in our era, illustrated by the popularity of genre fiction in commercial and critical domains: multi-million dollar blockbuster films (and the growing trend of expanded universes), global MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games), and the increasing popularity and inclusiveness of tabletop games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. Over the past decade there has been a renaissance in speculative fiction and geek culture, with critical recognition of formerly stigmatized genres and an appreciation of the art and science that goes into these fictional worlds. The expansion of cross-media empires like *World of Warcraft*, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and *Game of Thrones* involves the invention of species and ecosystems, cultures and social histories, magic systems, technologies, mythologies, cartographies, and constructed languages ('con-langs') (e.g. Peterson 2015; Lewis-Jones 2018). Concurrently,

codification and community organization explicitly centered around worldbuilding continues to grow, with increasing numbers of self-published books, 'homebrew' worlds, online communities, and software tools -- products created, promoted, and consumed by amateur worldbuilders to facilitate communication and social learning (e.g. Silverstein 2012; Hickson 2019).

What we term 'critical worldbuilding' then refers to the critical analysis of and engagement with worlds produced for and through these media. A critical worldbuilding approach recognizes the always and unavoidably political quality of speculative worlds, and the socio-historically embedded contexts of their production (cf. Robbins 2012). Such a conceptualization draws on long traditions of cultural criticism and analysis, engaging media on its own terms and in relation to the situatedness of its authorship. This sort of critique might draw attention to the immersiveness of a particular world for the reader (often based on internal consistency as key to effective suspension of disbelief), as well as to the relation between the tropes and themes of the storyworld and the circumstances of its creation (e.g. Tolkien's work reflecting his experiences in World War I, or Herbert's exploration of ecological issues in the *Dune* series amid the rise of the American environmental movement). Yet the impetus for a critical worldbuilding analytic relies on the assessment that these worlds *matter* beyond the media in which they occur.

Storyworlds have broader social effects via the dialectical interplay between imagined and lived worlds, thus highlighting the material and political stakes of critical intervention. Speculative worlds have become venues for social struggle and debate as diverse social groups wage battles over questions of representation in media (and, by extension, civil society), or the perpetuation of problematic tropes (Mortensen 2016; Nishime 2017; D'Agostino 2019). With this special section, we hope to initiate a set of conversations between critical scholarship and the worlds built in and through speculative media, with *geography* as a valuable launching point for such cross-disciplinary considerations. Geographers have much to offer to a critical worldbuilding approach, including theoretical insights regarding scale and the production of space; socio-historical and relational analyses of human-environment relations; and the integration of black, queer, and feminist geographies alongside interdisciplinary subfields such as science and technology studies or political ecology. Such conversations build on efforts to think about story/telling in the social sciences, including the roles of narrative, metaphor, myth, visualization, and other forms of communication (Heinen and Sommer 2009; Herman 2009; Essebo 2019). We also propose that there is value in dialogue between worldbuilding practices in speculative fiction and the literature around 'worlding' and 'world-making' through both the ontological turn and more-than-human approaches (Goodman 1978; Blaser 2013; Law 2015; Escobar 2016).

Special Section Overview

The three papers of this special section highlight diverse facets of our proposed critical worldbuilding approach, gesturing toward the range of possibility and potential for future geographical engagement. Their analyses are situated along a spectrum, exploring the dialectical relationship between imagined and lived worlds from different perspectives and

with differing foci. Although each of the included papers focuses on examples from science fiction, the themes and interventions of a critical worldbuilding approach remain relevant across other speculative genres and media. Each author illustrates in their own way what it means to take seriously the production and consumption of imagined places, as well as the utility of a specifically geographic engagement.

In his paper 'Does Wall•E Dream of Electric Kale? The California Dream as Post-Scarcity Nightmare,' Tarr (2020) illustrates how imagined worlds reproduce particular and situated understandings of our lived worlds and potential futures in both problematic and progressive ways. His analysis of the Pixar film *Wall•E* grounds its 'peculiar dystopia' (26) in California's particular ideological context, drawing attention to the constraints and contradictions inherent in efforts to critique neoliberal industrial capitalism from within that same paradigm. Tarr shows how the future envisioned in the film remains consistent with a green techno-optimism firmly situated within the Silicon Valley culture which Pixar draws on and operates in. This analysis shows how our storyworlds are produced not just through social and political relations, but also with and through particular places and times. Through the example of *Wall•E*, Tarr illustrates how, at least for Pixar, it might be easier to imagine the total destruction of the world as we know it than to envision a workable alternative to capitalism – yet also demonstrates the value of imperfect starting points for unpacking political logics, tensions, and, with the titular robot, sprouts of possibility amid the rubble.

In contrast to Tarr's focus on how lived worlds shape and constrain the potential futures presented through speculative media, Gunderman examines how imagined worlds might also shape the lived worlds in which they are consumed. In her paper 'Geographies of Science Fiction, Peace, and Cosmopolitanism: Conceptualizing Critical Worldbuilding through a Lens of Doctor Who', Gunderman (2020) explores the potential to make the world a more peaceful and empathetic place through artistic interventions. She argues that the television program *Doctor Who*, a long-running series with an episodic multiverse of worlds, has a history of exploring and speaking to issues of the day, including mental health, slavery, colonialism, capitalism, and animal cruelty. Using three episodes illustrating the production of violence through processes of othering, Gunderman examines how the show envisions alternative, more peaceful realities of coexistence, and considers whether producing empathy at the micro-scale of individual viewership might reverberate out to create a more compassionate and progressive lived reality. In this way, *Doctor Who* and other speculative media serve not only as escapism, but as sites of experimentation, exploring social issues and envisioning more peaceful futures, which in turn hold out the possibility of building our lived worlds differently.

In the third and final paper of the special section, Harris critically examines the relationship between science communication and science fiction. Like Gunderman, he explores worldbuilding as a means of envisioning and experimenting with counterfactual human-environment relations. Harris' (2020) paper 'Expanding Climate Science: Using Science Fiction's Worldbuilding to Imagine a Climate Changed Southwestern U.S.,' asks how climate scientists and storytellers might use science fiction to complicate and improve narratives around climate change futures. Harris situates his analysis at the liminal space between the imagined and lived extremes of the speculative/real dialectic, arguing that the

act of telling stories actively creates present and future possibilities. From this premise, Harris critiques doomsday climate change narratives, arguing that 'apocalypticism begets apocalypse' (60), and that climate change scholarship is itself a distinct genre of speculative text. Drawing on cli-fi stories set in future American Southwests, Harris posits the value of leaning into ambiguity and exploring lived possibilities amid dystopia. In this, he also hearkens back to the early utopian inclinations of the science fiction genre as a means to consider and co-produce more just, livable futures.

Conclusion: Building Better Worlds

Worldbuilding is an essential practice across speculative media, facilitating a suspension of disbelief that allows the audience to immerse themselves in a universe not their own. This is not mere escapism, as Gunderman's analysis of *Doctor Who* argues: imagined worlds allow for the exploration of key social issues, albeit at a distance. Such thought experiments draw on the value of narrative for deeper engagement and consideration of counterfactuals and worlds otherwise (von Steckelberg and McDowell 2015; Roin 2016; cf. Brugger et al. 2019). Zaidi writes that 'because narratives are processed differently than other forms of information, leveraging storytelling and worldbuilding may allow us to challenge societal values without antagonizing protected values' (2019: 18). Similarly, von Stackelberg and McDowell note that fiction, metaphor, and fable provide 'ways in which deeper meaning is conveyed and the unfamiliar is contextualized' (2015: 28).

In this way, storytelling and worldbuilding allow for the '[application of] creative imagination to real conditions and then extrapolating forward and outward' (von Stackelberg and McDowell 2015: 42), or what Zigon (2017) terms 'agnostic experimentation with an otherwise.' These qualities arguably make worldbuilding and speculative genres a 'strategic tool' in design and planning efforts (Zaidi 2019: 15) – a position posited in Harris' study of cli-fi and science communication. Yet imagined worlds are also by no means uniformly progressive or emancipatory. Speculative media are contextually situated, reflecting the politics, ideologies, and histories of their place and time. Unexamined, these can reproduce reactionary ideologies that, following Tarr's examination of *Wall•E*, can and should be critiqued.

As each paper in this special section illustrates, speculative media is a potent political tool. A critical worldbuilding approach thus asks: how do our implicit understandings and politics influence the framings, narratives, and stories that get told? What political possibilities – and, alternatively, what limitations – do these speculative worlds produce? And finally, what material impacts do representations of alternative worlds incite in our lived worlds? As these questions indicate, acts of worldbuilding have palpable significance for real people and concerns. Imagined worlds do not simply reflect contemporary politics, but actively perform new possibilities. Such worlds enable us to scrutinize our pasts, even as we propose, consider, and experiment with alternatives for future lived worlds. In these ways, a critical worldbuilding engagement might contribute to ongoing efforts to challenge the limited and historically-sedimented visions of what science fiction and fantasy can and should be, who is represented and whose stories are shared and valorized (Delaney 2000; Bradford 2017; LaPensée 2017).

While speculative media presents alternative ideas and potential futures, worldbuilding focuses specifically on the *places* where such possibilities play out. We view our contribution, and the contribution of the papers in this special issue, as highlighting the importance of geography as a key site of worldbuilding theorization. Due to its close attention to the relationships between people, place, and space, geography is uniquely situated as a disciplinary lens for critical worldbuilding, and there are meaningful interventions to be made by critical geographers to the broader cultural critique of speculative worlds and to their creation. Further, while geography occupies a distinct disciplinary niche, it is also a site of deep theoretical and disciplinary plurality, spanning physical, social, and humanistic inquiry and engaging a broad range of epistemological approaches. As von Stackelberg and McDowell write, 'Worldbuilding can and should be a multi-threaded, cross-disciplinary, collaborative process' (2015: 42), and geography's diversity of thought and method makes it a uniquely effective site for exploring, experimenting, and promoting alternative futures (Braun 2015; Zigon 2017).

By collecting these papers together, we encourage critical scholars of all stripes – and geographers in particular – to consider how a critical worldbuilding approach might contribute not just to a deeper reading of speculative texts, but as an act of disruption and engagement within our current and future lived worlds. Following Robbins' (2012) call to move beyond the 'hatchet' of critique to also plant 'seeds' of transformation, we argue that producing more equitable and just imagined worlds constitutes a necessary, normative intervention not only for telling better stories, but for building better worlds.

Notes

[1] Authors contributed equally to this work and are listed alphabetically.

[2] A full genealogy of worldbuilding is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of our intervention here. References to 'world-building' from 1800s earth sciences describe landscape formation (Merriam-Webster n.d.), while more recently others have used it as an argument for world (re-)making political intervention (Zigon 2017). Within fiction, some have drawn distinctions between fairytale-esque escapism (in which the world exists to hold up a theme) and the creation of worlds with their own logic and cohesion beyond the story (with Tolkien often cited as the ur-example).

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