



*Axon: Creative Explorations*, Vol 11, No 1, July 2021

## WRITING THE OTHERWORLD REVOLUTION

The transgressive imaginings of speculative poetics

Alyson Miller

*Following the conventions of speculative fiction, the poetry of Nin Andrews, Franny Choi, and Susan Slaverio imagines alternative realities which provoke challenging intersections of cyborg technologies, gender, sexuality, and identity. In doing so, their works destabilise the boundaries of language, ‘otherness’, and power, highlighting the inherently subversive nature of poetry by playing upon its marginality, its transformative possibilities, and its insistence upon difference. In its explication of poems by Andrews, Choi, and Slaverio via Darko Suvin’s theory of cognitive estrangement and Donna Haraway’s posthuman vision of the cyborg, this paper argues that speculative poetry works within a tension of the familiar and the strange to challenge the gendered and racial myths of hetero-patriarchy. By proposing alternate, abject, and often monstrous realities inhabited by winged boys and cyborg cephalopods, these speculative poets parodically scramble conventional binary systems and social codes. In doing so, their works ‘rejoice in the illegitimate’ (Haraway 1991: 176), embrace plurality and difference, and disrupt regulatory cultural narratives.*

*Keywords: speculative poetry; cognitive estrangement; cyborgs; gender; language*

---

In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970), Tzvetan Todorov argues that the self-reflexive nature of poetry, which is characterised by figurative interpretation and an absence of narrative, excludes it from the possibilities of the fantastic:

poetic reading constitutes a danger for the fantastic. If as we read a text we reject all representation, considering each sentence as a pure semantic combination, the fantastic *could not appear*. For the fantastic requires ... a reaction to events as they occur in the world evoked. For this reason, the fantastic can subsist only within fiction; poetry cannot be fantastic (59-60).

Ostensibly ‘non-representational’, poetry is dependent upon the metaphorical or the allegorical, while its structural devices, including metre, rhyme, and word play, emphasise that what is read is ‘*not* to be taken as describing the “real world” precisely; thus there is no opportunity for a fantastic “reversal” (Collings 2010: 45). Certainly, while speculative poetry does, despite Todorov’s assertion, indeed exist, it is often associated with uneasiness and ambiguity, resulting in part from the merging of two

distinct and arguably fringe genres defined by a focus on transformation and difference. Further, in its integration of two literary forms traditionally — and problematically — regarded in terms of their ‘lowbrow’ and ‘highbrow’ status, speculative poetry reveals an anxiety about readership. Nancy Johnston notes, for example, that since its emergence in the 1970s, irrespective of its increasing popularity, speculative poetry has occupied an ambivalent space, marked by concerns about its narrow appeal to more conventional science fiction audiences, and ‘the literary quality of genre poetry’ (2000: 38). As its worst, Robert Frazier suggests, it is too ‘wrapped up in splatter-effect horror, or general rehashings of stock SF ideas, or adolescent wish-fulfilment sword and sorcery’ (qu. Johnston, 38), while its hesitation between modes — science, fiction, fantasy, poetry — often renders it an unstable, unsteady, creature.

Yet it is also through such instability that speculative poetry arguably becomes so potently transgressive. It persistently evades strict definition, and so frequently returns to ideas about liminality, plurality, and polyphony, a poetics invested in revealing and overturning the familiar through the fantastic. Johnston observes how, for example, with its ‘doubly marginal status’, it is unsurprising that the genre has been taken up by a series of women poets interested in its capacity to contest cultural myths and archetypes; specifically, social narratives relating to gendered identity. Feminist science fiction, Johnston contends, has the ability ‘to question generic conventions in an historically masculinist popular genre and to blur the intersections between technology and the body, self and other, real and imaginary, human and alien’ (38). Marge Piercy, Ursula K Le Guin, Suzette Haden Elgin, Tracy K Smith and Jane Yolan, among others, have mobilised the form to ‘articulate female experience and to disrupt gender conventions mediated by patriarchal language’ (38). Contrary to Todorov, these feminist speculative poetics rely upon a ‘non-representational’ system of language codes in order to envision the fantastic; and in doing so, not only critique oppressive gendered and racial power structures, but also undermine their rules of engagement.

According to Sonya Taaffe, speculative poetry is thus a genre of re-transformations, a vehicle for illumination that inherently provokes disruption and change (Odasso, Stott & Taaffe 2014: n.p.). By seeking to complicate or dissolve existing categories, it also insists on a re-framing of the familiar to reveal the strangeness or non-naturalness of social realities. Extending on the Hegelian dialectic, Patricia Altenbernd Johnson argues all poetry is speculative in these terms, recognising that it ‘has a mirroring structure. There is a back and forth movement in which the image both is and is not the same as the subject matter ...imaged’ (1986-7: 19). The notion of being both ‘is and is not’ echoes Darko Suvin, who identifies the ‘main formal device’ of science fiction as ‘an imaginative framework alternate to the author’s empirical environment’ (1972: 375). By encouraging new ways to conceive of human society, the genre creates a space for those who are oppressed to resist their subjugation by confronting ‘a set normative system’ and critiquing its values and assumptions (374). Such contestations occur through ‘cognitive estrangement’, involving the presentation of a world which is ‘other’ to observed reality, but similar enough that it resembles a ‘possible future’ (378) — and, more importantly, enables the experience of ‘potentially revolutionary perspectives’ (Peel 2005: 579). As Suvin notes, within speculative fictions ‘the mirror is not only a reflecting one, it is also transforming’ (374). It is a process of denaturalisation significantly heightened when combined with poetry, a genre, as Simon Armitage has posited, that is both intrinsically and uniquely ‘oppositional’ (2011), and which Audre Lorde has described as the ‘most subversive because it is in the business of encouraging

change' (qu. Steif 1991: 33). Doubly marginal and doubly dissenting, speculative poetry works to dislocate 'conventional thought by bringing to bear new interpretations of lived experience' and as a result, expand the limitations of the 'social imaginary' (St Onge & Moore 2016: 337).

Deeply tied to the 'pushing, blurring' of boundaries, and to notions of the in-between (Odasso, Stott & Taaffe 2014: n.p.), speculative poetry is marked by its urge towards metamorphosis. Examining the poetic experimentations of Nin Andrews, Franny Choi, and Susan Slaviero, and drawing upon the posthuman arguments of Donna Haraway, this paper argues that the genre works within a tension of the familiar and the strange to challenge the gendered and racial myths of hetero-patriarchy, and destabilise the borderlines of language, 'otherness', and power. By proposing alternate, abject, and often monstrous realities inhabited by winged boys, cyborg cephalopods, and 'femmes fatales digitales' (Slaviero 2010: 12), these speculative poets parodically scramble conventional binary systems and social codes. In doing so, their works 'rejoice in the illegitimate' (Haraway 1991: 176), embrace plurality and difference, and disrupt regulatory cultural narratives.

### **'Because biology is destiny': Fantastic Inversions as 'Acting Back'**

By way of the fantastic, speculative poetry, then, offers a means of defying conventional forms and structures to present existing social and cultural systems as tenuous, and thus open to the possibilities of change. The mirroring effect described by Johnson is necessarily critical, functioning not only to reflect the 'real' but also to observe its fissures and failures. In these terms, speculative poetics align with James Scully's definition of 'a poetry of dissidence', a genre that 'does not respect boundaries' but 'talks back', 'act[ing] as part of the world, not simply a mirror of it' (qu. King-Smith 2012: 290). In *Why God Is a Woman* (2015), for example, Nin Andrews utilises a series of complex reversals and inversions to challenge gender hierarchies, offering a vision of culture-jamming that resists the purely aesthetic. Andrews' prose poems imagine an elaborate female utopia, an Island on which women — all of whom look like Angelina Jolie — 'rule. They run the country, control the wealth, and decide who will do what, why, and when' (11), are so 'fertile ... a single woman can populate an entire town' (29), and possess the remarkable talents of 'sexual aficionados' who can 'make love until every pore on their bodies opens and sends bliss into the horizon like an Island sunrise' (28). Alternatively, men — beautiful, winged creatures considered the last descendants of angels — are 'incomplete souls', dependents who, like 'their children, their dogs', respond only to simple instructions and occupations (11). Such inequality, 'of course, was not the men's fault. Men, my mother said, can't be blamed for their genetic defects and limited work ethic or abilities' (14). In the representation of women as inherently powerful — even as biologically dominant — Andrews offers a confronting vision of the logic of gender hierarchies, one which parodies cultural misogyny by exposing how narratives of difference function as insidious ideological mechanisms that seek to justify the oppressions of patriarchy.

Andrews' mirroring plays upon Judith Butler's theorisation of gendered identity as something which 'ought not be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (Butler 1990: 139). The inversions of *Why God Is a Woman* expose gender as a

performance that is both fluid and changeable, albeit not within the logic of the narrative itself. Extratextually, however, the effect works powerfully in sync with the mechanics of speculative fictions, which, as Joanna Russ observes, consist not ‘of what is on the page’, but in the relation between reality and ‘the reader’s knowledge of actuality’ (1995: 21). Although such a tension is ‘always shifting’ (21), it nonetheless produces a subversive discourse or dialectic that problematises gendered terms of reference otherwise regarded as stable and fixed. In a world in which ‘biology is destiny’ (Andrews 2015: 18) — a self-consciously parodic challenge to performance — the powerful women of the island entrench their control via systematic acts of othering, reducing men to sex slaves, assistants, housemaids, and stay-at-home fathers: ‘When bored or frustrated, the men quit their jobs without notice, and stay at home to watch soap operas and preen in front of bathroom mirrors. Even the best working men quit their jobs as soon as they have children of their own. Who better to raise the children...?’ (19). The reversals and conflicts presented function ironically to exclude men from power via the significations of a stereotypical femininity, creating a defamiliarising effect that emphasises how ‘a truly human society is incompatible with existing male values’, but moreover, how the ‘construction of a better society can only be accomplished through the complete elimination of patriarchy’ (Fitting 1987: 111-12).

The centrality of opposites in maintaining unequal power relations is a recurrent trope in Andrews’ prose poems, utilised as a strategic emphasis on the ways in which simple inversions merely replicate the patterns and norms of existing social structures, exchanging a castrated object for a castrating subject: ‘only women hold political office. During every election at least one angry man runs for mayor, governor, or even president ... He flaps his wings wildly, thrusts his fist in the air, and shouts demands for equal rights, pay, respect, and representation. Of course, nothing happens’ (Andrews 2015: 41). Jenny Wolmark argues that such speculations function to test the limits of dominant ideologies by proposing fictional landscapes in which ‘the reconstruction of gender can take place’ via imaginings that directly conflict with ‘existing social structures’ (1988: 56). The danger of reiterating prescriptive systems in *Why God Is a Woman* is mitigated via textual codes which signal parody, and through a self-referential, destabilising play on notions of fact and fiction, genre and gender. By mimicking the language of power, violence, and ‘otherness’, for example, Andrews exposes those cultural discourses which relegate women to the margins by insisting upon biological difference: male Islanders are ‘designed for domesticity’ (18), ‘lack in self-control’ (19), and are intrinsically ‘unstable. Men are like paper. They catch fire easily’ (41). It is a process through which Andrews poses a form of intervention, installing and then dislocating the hegemonies being contested so as to make ‘real’ those machinations which seek to determine the gendered subject. Further, it is a tactic which once more engages with the impetus of speculative poetry to ‘make strange’; as Janeen Webb notes, by envisioning scenarios in which the ‘other’ is positioned as ‘self’ within seemingly displaced worlds, the genre enables a challenging of cultural norms that transforms the ‘perceived to perceiver, passive to active, object to subject’ (1992: 186).

Importantly, Andrews’ parodic strategies are firmly located in material terms, frequently articulated via the narrative’s novum: Island men, the progeny of angels, are graced with wings which ‘unfold from their shoulder blades like sails’ (Andrews 2015: 32). Figured as an underclass of ‘giant butterflies’, these unreal beings are defined entirely in relation to the physical, mimicking pseudo-scientific arguments for the gendering of biological inferiority, but also positioning their bodies as abject and

unruly, requiring the surveillance of certified ‘man-trainers’ (41) under whose guidance an otherworldly beauty might become ‘an intelligent, obedient, and adoring human being’ (42). Susan Bordo observes how the body is both a medium and a text of culture, ‘a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments’ of a society are inscribed via the fabrication of aesthetic ideals (1995: 65). In addition to their oppressive schooling, for example, male Islanders are compelled to endure violent processes of self-modification: to wax until their skin is ‘as pink as a newborn’s’ (Andrews 2015: 55), to exercise until their bodies are ‘as sculpted and slender as a ballet dancer’ (53), and to undergo ‘phallic decoration’ to achieve the splendour of the ‘ornately tattooed penis’, which may result in ‘diminished sexual appetite, delayed orgasms, infection, and on rare occasions, death’ (35). In line with Bordo, these practices function to train (female coded) ‘bodies in the knowledge of their limits and possibilities’, a disciplining of the self — constructed as ‘normal’ — that ensures the docility of an ‘other’ understood in terms of the need for management, containment, and control. Significantly, the corporeal ‘otherness’ of Island men is contradictorily defined as a ‘space’ that is as monstrous as it is idealised, a means of ‘separating out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject’ (Creed 1993: 8):

both male and female children have mango-sized brains, but in adolescence the male brain expands, due to a sudden hormonal flood. The larger size is needed to accommodate the male’s biological needs: the stretching of his bones, muscles, and wings. Everyone can see the transformation as it occurs. First the head begins to swell, then the feet and hands. Soon the arms hang long and limp by the boy’s sides. He hunches his shoulders, looks down or away ... He twitches all day and night (47).

In the patriarchal order of the Island, the insistence on the degenerative nature of ‘maleness’ also ironically deconstructs a sustained cultural and religious tradition in which women’s bodies are vilified as the ‘unclean’ harbingers of sin. David Gilmore argues that the Manichean opposition between ‘man (spirit) and woman (flesh)’ is regarded as ‘God’s intention: unquestionable and immutable’ (2001: 85). The transcendental quality of masculinity thus ‘naturally’ situates men at the centre of power, as ‘divine right’ decrees the sanctity of the male body, and the impurity of female physicality. In Andrews’ female utopia, however, ‘only women are made in God’s own image and likeness’ (2015: 16), thereby parodying and rejecting the spiritual premise used to justify — indeed, sanctify — ideas about the naturalness of male superiority. Inversion here is not read as a solution, but rather, in Scully’s terms, as an ‘acting back’ (2012: 290) that seeks to contest the logic of a patriarchal system locked within a complex and exclusionary model of identity: ‘*Girls will be girls*, my father sighed. *Just like God will be God*, meaning that nothing I did or said could ever change these facts’ (Andrews 2015: 30).

### **‘This Madonna is under construction’: On Biotechnological Subversion**

Certainly, attention to the bodily is a critical feature of speculative narratives, providing an opportunity to explore the implications of gendered ideologies in ‘real’ terms. The focus on physicality, however, also offers the potential to further complicate more totalising humanist binaries in an effort to deconstruct the limitations of dominant systems of power. In the context of cyberpunk, Mary

Catherine Harper notes how an ‘emphasis on the visibility of the body, whether interpreted as a discursive mark or a material’, can result in the possibility of liberation from ‘the constraints of such oppositional categories as masculinity rationality and feminised “meat”’ (1995: 400). Following Andrews’ play upon ideas of monstrosity and difference via unearthly beings, the feminist cyborg emerges as a dissident figure of resistance, a liminal and ambiguous trope ‘made of technological body, cultural critique, and visionary mythic dreaming’ (Harper 1995: 406). The cyborg myth, as Donna Haraway describes (1991), is ‘about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities’ (154), a hybrid ‘creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction’ (149). The radicality of the cyborg stems from its persistent collapsing of borderlines, which seek less to erase distinctions entirely than to complicate, reposition, and confuse, revealing the potential of the provisional and the in-between. As Haraway contends, ‘there are ... great riches for feminists in explicitly embracing ... the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self. It is the simultaneity of breakdowns that cracks the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities’ (174). In its disordering of boundaries, the cyborg challenges those dualisms ‘systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals — in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task it is to mirror the self’ (177). Critically, in accordance with Suvin’s theorisation of cognitive estrangement, regardless of how alien or ‘othered’ the cyborg may appear, ‘the machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment’ for which ‘we are responsible’ (Haraway 1991: 180).

Significantly, Haraway’s biosocial vision of the cyborg does not represent individuals per se, but rather denotes ways of being in which ‘nature and culture are reworked’ through the collapsing of distinctions (151). Speculative poets such as Susan Slaviero and Franny Choi, however, have drawn upon the figure in relation to both the imaginings of traditional science fiction — via cyborgian cephalopods and alien automatons, for instance — as well as a broader conceptualisation of the feminist cyborg as an ideology of dissent. In *Cyborgia* (2010), Slaviero also employs parodic manipulations as a strategy to counter the rhetoric of misogyny, often by overturning ideas about female monstrosity to comment upon gendered violence and the machinations of heteronormative desire. In ‘Robosexual’, for example, there is an emphasis on the performative which reflects the narcissism of the male gaze, exposing the horrors of consumption rather than the deviance of the object being devoured: ‘You might be lulled / by the cut of her jaw, the unwinding / of her limbs. You might be hooked / on rubber dolls. You might be licking / your own reflection’ (11). Similarly, there is repeated reference to the material construction of the cyborg self, an eerie echo, perhaps, of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914), in which sequences of domestic items, routines, and discourses are stripped of usual meanings and contexts, and re-framed as a mimicry and subversion of patriarchal ontologies. In ‘Phenomena of Probability’, Slaviero describes how ‘there’s a way to create a ribcage from guitar strings, to / fashion jawbones from vintage bracelets’, forming a wife who is ‘thumblike’ and ‘lyrical’ but consists only of disparate parts: ‘titanium knitting needles, peppermint hips, / the ends of French cigarettes’ (8). Such a construction is only ‘a box of fragments’ to be owned or admired, both exotic and banal, but ultimately condemned as debris ‘cluttering your attic’ (8). In ‘A Modern Synthesis’, ‘something female’ is the ‘cobbled remains of old / calendars—corsets and prisms, a hunger / for apples’ (10), while in ‘The Mechanician’, a further allusion to patriarchal myths of origin and invention, ‘a woman’ is a series of abject byproducts, ‘milk and smoke, a dash / of

candlepower', domesticated and made real by possession: 'Once, she was feral. Once, she was ruins' (9).

As a fetishised material product, the cyborg is configured as a male fantasy, designed to fulfil both perverse sexual impulses and tedious household interests. In Choi's *Soft Science* (2019), such commodification is taken further by way of the merging of human/animal/machine in the form of a cyborgian cephalopod: a metamorphic creature that resists clarity or definition but is conceived in terms of the perceptions of others. In 'Acknowledgements', for example, this surreal 'other' is not only consumed by the crowds who scrutinise and feed upon her body, but also forced to perform according to the cultural scripts of femininity: 'still smiling, smiling' while 'a man snaps a photo' or 'the woman scrapes / a sample of my skin into her petri dish' (2019, 9). Exoticised and paraded as spectacle, the narrator is reduced to the synecdochic, denied totality or wholeness but considered, in fragments, as entertainment, curiosity, or object to control:

*I claim you I claim you, someone laughs and plants  
his nipple on my tongue like a flag, and I'm still lucky  
to be invited. An audience of smiles invites me,  
one mouthful at a time, a hundred tiny reverse T-shirt guns,  
everyone's a winner. It's a miracle, I think. I thought I was just  
one fish but look, everyone's got a full plate. All hail  
the fish king as they read out to scoop more* (9).

Positioned as prey, the protagonist is engulfed by the determining power of the gaze, which is framed as a constitutive force requiring repeated expressions of gratitude: 'I am thankful to be seen' (9). Similarly, in 'The Price of Rain', female sacrifice is figured as liberation, a way to obtain love whilst fulfilling a notion of religious devotion or biological destiny in which the 'other' might attain equality with the 'self': 'I thought, / if I lay my legs on the altar, I thought something / would come back to me. Mine, mine' (23). The result, however, is only loss and dispossession, the bodies of women regarded as 'common domain' to be taken no matter how well patriarchal social rites and behaviours are observed. In these terms, the narrator only exists through the sight of the dominant subject — who acts upon the docile object — and only within limited, and limiting, expressions of power: 'Look how free I am. Dowager Slut. Queen Regent' (23). Alternatively, in 'Shokushu for the Cyborg Soul' — a parody of the American self-help inspirational book series, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* — the speaker, a 'demon cephalopod' with 'pervy fingers', describes being 'both the woman holding the camera and the woman / being opened by it — nothing special about that' (28). While the image undoubtedly suggests a grotesque internalisation of gender expectations, and a regurgitation of restrictive norms, it is also powerfully destabilising, a simultaneous occupation of positions of self/other, human/animal, perpetrator/victim: 'I am only a cuttlefish lying open-jawed under the sand, / a squid flashing red as it pulls a fishgirl into its beak' (28).

The cephalopod forms imagined by Choi are explicitly abject and leaking, porous creatures who transgress the potential for containment and unity — an elision of borderlines central to the premise of cyborg dissidence. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines abjection as that which 'does not respect borders, positions, rules' but 'disturbs identity, system, order' (1982: 4), a dissemblance

which refuses to comply. It is a concept literalised via Choi's depiction of beings formed as amalgamations of human/animal/machine, but also ironised through repeated reference to the horror of such a figure, whose 'stink womb' (2019: 24), 'bad blood' (25), and 'mudhole' (26) suggests decay, corruption, and the non-human: 'I am only trying to slither back into my first skin' (29). Indeed, as both Slaviero and Choi highlight the material realities endured by the female body within hetero-patriarchal systems of exchange, images of the monstrous feminine are frequently utilised to contest the dynamics of oppression. In doing so, there is a potent sense of threat imbued within these cyborgian creations, reflecting the often-conservative anxieties of traditional science fictions, but also suggesting a programming glitch through which an alternate cultural narrative — one of resistance — might be installed. As Mary Russo argues of the female grotesque, these are bodies which are 'open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing ... identified with ... the carnivalesque, and with social transformation' (1994: 8). In Slaviero's 'Consider the Dangers of Reconstructing Your Wife as a Cyborg', for instance, a 'celluloid marionette' exploits a coding virus to assert a radical selfhood: 'I build myself a daughter of wire and potatoes, bits of broken toys ... You are superfluous ... In the twenty-six minutes since I've been resurrected I have devised about ten different ways to disassemble you' (2010: 37). As the poem suggests, the potential for the annihilation of men — symbolically, the discourses of patriarchy — is arguably most powerfully articulated not in relation to the capacity for female violence, but via the cyborg's disavowal of 'birth/death operations' (Harper 1995: 404). Haraway observes, for example, the imbrication of cyborgs with notions of regeneration. Suspicious of 'the reproductive matrix and of most birthing' (1991: 153), the cyborg is thus bestowed with an agency that renounces 'maternal bodies and paternalistic markings upon the biologic element of the Self' (Harper 1995: 405). Haraway notes:

The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognise the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. (1991: 151)

The ability of the cyborg to replicate via parthenogenesis echoes a range of feminist speculative narratives, which seek to reimagine pregnancy in order to free women from its physical burdens and responsibilities, as well as its manipulation by patriarchal ideology. It connects with the monstrous feminine by way of the archaic mother, the primeval 'black hole, the originating womb which gives birth to all life' (Creed 1993: 27). The feared danger of such a figure is envisioned in Slaviero's 'Gynoid Eve' as 'part daemon/part robot', a dystopic weapon capable of synthesising 'cherries into bullets, tobacco leaves into wristblades. / Don't ask me how I do it' (2010: 19), while 'Taxonomy :: Cyborg M/Others' exposes the abject horror emerging from the auto-fertilising, parthenogenic body: 'A dash of chora, a talent for mimesis. Something sharp-clawed and beautifully constructed. Cells ruptured by organelles evolving tentacles while she sleeps' (21). In *Soft Science*, self-replication is suggested by way of a taboo animal sexuality, positioned as an unsettling mix of autonomous pleasure and incestuous lust: 'Fun fact: all my children-arms want to fuck each other' (Choi 2019: 28). Yet the revision of ideas about origin also offers a critical form of deconstruction, particularly in terms of challenging religio-cultural hierarchies of power and control. As Haraway argues, existing outside of social fictions defined by Edenic mythologies not only resists humanist binaries, but also reveals the politics of the cyborg, which attend to 'building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, spaces, stories' (1991: 181). The result, Harper outlines, is a figure that has

‘self-reflexively transmogrified or evolved’ in order to fashion ‘and make fashionable the story of repudiation as well as the story of multiple assemblies and disassemblies’; indeed, the cyborg ‘celebrates and participates fully in a socially constructed body’ (1995: 405).

### ‘stick to your syntax’: Language, Identity, and Transformation

In ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’, Haraway dreams of a ‘powerful infidel heteroglossia’, a ‘feminist speaking in tongues’ that enables a move beyond dualisms and matrices of ‘complex dominations’ (1991: 181). In doing so, it is crucial to create a form of ‘cyborg writing’, in which it becomes possible to seize the ‘tools to mark the world that marked them as other’ (175). As suggested by the disavowal of phallogocentric and Judaeo-Christian myths of origin, the retelling of metanarratives is central to the ability of speculative poetry to recode ‘communication and intelligence’ and ‘subvert command and control’ (175). *Cyborgia*, for example, explicitly re-imagines fairy tales, myths, genre conventions, and canonical literature, constructing diverse intertexts that challenge modes of storytelling associated with heroic visions of masculinity: a bionic cowgirl vanquishes ‘a two-headed alien’ with a ‘samurai sword’, her ‘gunslinger arms rolling loose & inhuman’ (Slaverio 2010: 27), while a revision of Bluebeard makes clear the cyborgian nature of human women, embedded in gender scripts and threats of male violence: ‘A wife should be all gears / and timing ... / She is programmed / to prepare curries / on Sunday, to ignore the dead / bodies along the walls’ (41). Importantly, these re-tellings, in line with Andrews, are not simple inversions but complications of existing behavioural patterns in which the protagonists are both victim and perpetrator, hero and villain, a dissolution of clear boundaries which signifies the impossibility of escaping patriarchal ideology altogether. Moreover, the text is replete with a series of ‘bugs’, a play upon the seeming naturalness of stories fundamental to notions of self and ‘other’. Lissa Kiernan observes how through the use of ‘unconventionally placed brackets, parenthesis, double colons ... portmanteaux, and subdivision’, the speaker of the poems is rendered in multiple, plural terms, an ‘echo-remnant of a once-human consciousness’ (2011: n.p.). The effect, however, is arguably even more profound, functioning, per Haraway, to struggle against ‘perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism’ (Haraway 1991: 176). In ‘Pandora’s Robot’ (Slaverio 2010: 14), the constitutive powers of language are made clear, but via a sequence of fragments and interruptions, so too are its subversive possibilities:

opened the brass plate over her sternum  
and let out language.  
Let out codes  
Like *apocalypse, alchemy, calculus*.

((Still, there is a plum fluttering in her ribcage,  
a galaxy furled in her wire rigging.))

[...]

[?] How many milkdrowned homunculi

have called her [MOTHER] [?]

Similarly, in *Soft Science* (Choi 2019), disruptions to language offer strategic moments of parody and inversion, often realised via forms that corrupt syntax or challenge conventional modes of expression. Each section of the text begins with a poem titled ‘Turing Test’, mimicking an experiment which analyses how successfully a computer might simulate human speech. Based on an imitation party game, it is reliant on a shared culture between a judge and a human player, which the computer must attempt to emulate in order to pass as ‘real’, as exceeding the merely technological. It is a process linked by Choi to the programming of identity, to the formation of a ‘proper’ self that might integrate into the world via its mimicry of appropriate discourses: ‘i watched every mouth / duck duck roll / i learned to speak / from puppets & smoke / orange worms twisted / into the army’s alphabet...we stayed up / practising / *girl / girl / girl*, / until our gums softened’ (2). Proof of the automaton’s humanity is provided through its correct recitation of cultural narratives — always gendered but also racially coded — the artificiality of which is implied via the insistence on rote learning and the breaking or scrambling of syntactical formats: ‘yes / i can speak / your language / i broke that horse / myself’ (2). As suggested in ‘Turing Test\_Love’, the cyborg’s alien difference is one that must be eradicated or contained through assimilation, whilst treated as an exotic spectacle: ‘there are many programming languages / use whichever you prefer / but stick to your syntax / though it be muddled / mused / though it be machete / banana slug / slush puppie / o gorgeous slopbucket’ (69). More explicitly, ‘The Cyborg Wants to Make Sure She Heard You Right’ is comprised of a series of racist tweets directed at Choi, who is Korean-American, processed through Google Translate into multiple languages and then back into English. The result is a sequence of nonsense statements that nonetheless expresses the vitriol of anti-Asian racism, sexual violence, and misogyny:

I’m going to be all Asian woman is an object of sex.  
 I my eyes, slope of women when abolition her throat  
 bukkake down my cock, retain its symbol. LOL!  
 This bitch is a full stop (26).

Taaffe observes that speculative poetry is inherently concerned with an ‘untaming of language’ as a way to explore experience ‘outside of the conventional frame’ (2014: n.p.). By making strange that which is associated with dominant power — that is, white, Western, capitalist patriarchy — Choi exposes its toxic logic and obsession with maintaining the integrity of imagined borderlines. In ‘Turing Test\_Problem Solving’ (53), for example, when asked ‘// *if you don’t like it here why don’t you go somewhere else*’, initial evasions give way to a heartbreaking riff upon the phrase ‘my country’: ‘my body my organic / origin my error my harbour / outer shell my meat / house my olive my pit / my slick skein my stained / page my mother / land my mother / board my boardinghouse’ (54). As Lesley Wheeler suggests, while the ‘love-it-or-leave-it hostility of the italicised question cannot so much be answered as taken apart’, through ‘linguistic grooves and structural experiments’, Choi is able to undermine the pervasive binaries of identity, and, moreover, assert the right of ‘other’ both to speak and be heard (2019: n.p.). It is, of course, an imperfect strategy; as a product of the systems it attempts to critique, the cyborg is forever circling back upon the limitations of its cultural conditions. In ‘Making Of’, for instance, the narrator describes how ‘I ate both / my hands. Each digit, / a salty word whose meaning / furred my teeth. Well, okay, / that’s not quite true— / Someone made me / say it’

(4). Dana Alsamsam notes how ‘the speaker tries to make sense of her own body ... but only given the vocabulary that society allows, meaning comes out illegible, furry’ (2019: n.p.). Yet it is arguably through such linguistic and discursive ‘furriness’, realised as mimicries, dislocations, and code-mixing, that both Choi and Slaverio offer a hybrid, polyvocal vision of language, a dissident form of expression — or cyborg dialect — that insists on noise and advocates ‘pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine’ (Haraway 1991: 176).

### ‘monstrous couplings and recouplings’: Conclusion

Speculative poetry is a doubly subversive genre, able to denaturalise and reconfigure hegemonies of power via a politics of disruption and change. Its inversions and parodic displays enable the potential for collapsed boundaries and transgressive visions of the self, whilst engaging with the very conditions in which ‘otherness’ is produced. As Slaviero notes, ‘there can’t be game without a gun’ (2010: 31), suggesting both the pervasive dominance of phallogocentrism, and the violence frequently evoked to contest those cultural fictions which shape and define the self. The winged boys of the Island and the cyborgian identities imagined by Choi and Slaverio — femme fatale digitales or bionic cephalopods — remain the products of those systems in which they are ‘othered’ and oppressed. Yet as Haraway contends, ‘we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism’ (1991: 150). That is, ‘the machine is us ... we are they’ (180), an evocation of the possibilities (and, perhaps, responsibilities) of reinvention and renewal. In ‘Making Of’, Choi’s cyborg octopus emphasises the constructed nature of the social realities in which it is trapped, an ironic reminder of the capacity to disrupt, rewrite, and recode: ‘When a cyborg puts on a dress / it’s called drag. / When a cyborg gets down on her knees, it’s called / behaviour / ... when I say *cyborg*, / I mean what man made’ (2019: 4). By attending to the requirements of (gendered and racial) bodily performance, the speculative visions of Choi, Andrews and Slaviero estrange the familiar to expose it anew, but also to interrogate ‘women’s relationships to patriarchal institutions and the potential for cultural change’ (Johnston 2000: 38). In doing so, a poetics that is disorderly and threatening is created, a heteroglossic messiness that scrambles language, narrative, and identity to offer ‘boundary transgressions’, a prospective ‘way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves’ (Haraway 1991: 181).

#### Works cited:

Alsamsam, D 2019 ‘Review: *Soft Science* by Franny Choi’, 30 May, at <https://pankmagazine.com/2019/05/30/review-soft-science-franny-choi/> (accessed 6 April 2021)

Andrews, N 2015 *Why God Is a Woman*, Rochester: BOA Editions

Armitage, S 2011 Interview with John Harris (video), *The Guardian*, 7 November, at

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/john-harris-s-national-conversations/2011/nov/07/all> (accessed 11 May 2021)

Bordo, S 1995 *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press

Butler, J 1990 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, NY: Routledge

Choi, F 2019 *Soft Science*, Maine: Alice James Books

Collings, MR 2010 *Towards Other Worlds: Perspectives on John Milton, C.S. Lewis, Stephen King, Orson Scott Card, and Others*, Rockville: Wildside Press LLC

Creed, B 1993 *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Abingdon: Routledge

Fitting, P 1987 'For Men Only: A Guide to Reading Single-Sex Worlds', *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 14 (2), 101-117

Gilmore, D 2001 *Misogyny: The Male Malady*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press

Haraway, DJ 1991 *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London: Free Association Books

Harper, MC 1995 'Incurably Alien Other: A Case for Feminist Cyborg Writers', *Science Fiction Studies*, 22 (3), 399-420

Johnston, N 2000 "'I would have swallowed the kiss": Reflections on Feminist Speculative Poetry', *Femspec* 2 (1), 38

Johnson, PA 1986-87 'The Speculative Character of Poetry', *CEA Critic*, 49.2/4, 18-24

Kiernan, L 2011 'Review: *Cyborgia*, Susan Slaviero', *Arsenic Lobster: Poetry Journal*, 26, at <http://arseniclobster.magere.com/archive/issuetwentysix/1review.html> (accessed 6 April 2021)

King-Smith, S 2012 'Political Poetry: The Artistry of Dissent', *Scintillae 2012*, Bendigo: Bendigo TAFE, 280-294

Kristeva, J 1982 *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press

Odasso, AJ, Stott R and Taaffe, S 2014 'Defining Speculative Poetry: A Conversation and Three Manifestos', *Strange Horizons*, 24 February, at <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/articles/defining-speculative-poetry-a-conversation-and-three-manifestos/> (accessed 6 April 2021)

Peel, E 2005 'Review: Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition, and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia by Patrick Parrinder', *Modern Philology*, 102 (4), 578-581

Russo, M 1994 *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, Abingdon: Routledge

Russ, J 1995 *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*, Bloomington, IN:

Indiana University Press

Slaviero, S 2010 *Cyborgia*, Woodstock, NY: Mayapple Press

Steif, W 1991 'Interview with Audre Lorde', *The Progressive*, 55 (1), 32-33

St Onge, J and Moore, J 2016, 'Poetry as a Form of Dissent: John F. Kennedy, Amiri Baraka, and the Politics of Art in Rhetorical Democracy', *Rhetoric Review*, 35 (4), 335-347

Suvin, D 1972 'On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre', *College English* 34 (3), 372-82

Todorov, T 1970 *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard 1975, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

Webb, J 1992 'Feminism and Science Fiction', *Meanjin* 51 (1), 185-198

Wheeler, L 2019 'Review: *Soft Science* by Franny Choi', *Strange Horizons*, 21, at <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/soft-science-by-franny-choi/> (accessed 6 April 2021)

Wolmark, J 1988 'Alternate Futures? Science Fiction and Feminism', *Cultural Studies*, 2 (1), 48-56

---

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Alyson Miller

Alyson Miller is a prize-winning prose poet and academic who teaches writing and literature at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. Her critical and creative work, which focuses on a literature of extremities, has appeared in both national and international publications, and includes three books of prose poetry, *Dream Animals*, *Pika-Don* and *Strange Creatures* as well as a critical monograph, *Haunted by Words: Scandalous Texts*, and an edited collection, *The Unfinished Atomic Bomb: Shadows and Reflections*.

URL: <https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-vol-11-no-1-jul-2021/writing-otherworld-revolution>

[Privacy policy](#) [Copyright](#)

Published by  
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research  
University of Canberra  
Canberra, Australia  
ISSN: 1838-8973