

Mark Jerng, *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction*. New York: Fordham UP, 2017. 272pp. US\$30.00 (pbk).

Sean Guynes

Though its resonances echo well beyond sf and reach through the larger field of popular fiction, Mark Jerng's *Racial Worldmaking* will become a classic in sf studies of race, no doubt to be measured alongside texts like De Witt Douglas Kilgore's *Astrofuturism* (2005), John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008) and Isiah Lavender III's *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011). This is not only due to the new way of thinking sf that it authorises but also because Jerng's readings are truly innovative. Casting a broad net over popular fiction, Jerng looks at specific articulations of genre within the nineteenth- and twentieth-century mass culture genre system in the US, offering multiple chapters each on yellow peril fiction, the plantation romance, sword-and-sorcery and alternate history. Jerng's approach is to view genre as a worldmaking practice, and he pays particular attention to the title concept, 'racial worldmaking', or 'narrative and interpretive strategies that shape how readers notice race so as to build, anticipate, and organize the world' (1–2). As such, as Jerng reads it, racial worldmaking is a way of writing fiction, of reading it, and of interacting with the world outside of fiction on the basis of the knowledges that an encounter with fiction makes possible. Jerng emphasises race as an always-being-constructed system of knowledge and thus sees popular fiction – and, we can easily extrapolate, all popular media – as central to circulating ideas about race and power that affect how people interact with the world. A complex book that interweaves new directions in critical race theory with inventive readings of popular fiction as well as cultural structures (such as the legal rhetoric of 'counterfactuals' in the American courtroom), Jerng's central argument can nonetheless be easily summarised: in their encounter, genre (as worldmaking practice, as a modal imagination, as mass culture market form) and race (as a form of knowledge, as a speculative technology, as a hierarchy of difference) produce one another, creating both racist narratives and liberatory ones, but more than that, genre teaches how race gets seen. Genre makes race 'salient'.

Jerng's dense argument spans eight chapters divided into four sections, with two chapters per section, framed by an introduction and conclusion. The introduction provides an overview of the conceptual terrain that comprises 'racial worldmaking' in the mass culture genres, drawing on a complex mixture of Derridean, Bourdieusian and Marxist understandings of genre and the market in which popular fiction circulates, and offers a glimpse at

the histories of 'scientific' and other modes of racialisation. Jerng teaches us not to look for race or racism in popular fiction, per se, but to instead track how the text instructs us to *notice* race and, thereby, what knowledges the text shares with us about the function of race in the text's world and in our own. Each section that follows deals with one of the four genres – subgenres, really, of sf, historical fiction and the romance – noted above. For the most part, the first chapter of each section does the introductory footwork necessary to historicise and contextualise the stakes of the genre discussed, typically turning toward a reading of a text that offers paradigmatic evidence of the ways in which that genre, in conversation with particular historical moments for race in the US, made race visible or 'salient', triggering and helping to shape certain popular understandings of the meanings of blackness, whiteness and Asianness (particularly Japaneseness). The second chapter of each section by and large deepens and problematises the readings of the first, complicating the genre's structuring of knowledge about race and also demonstrating how the genre is analogous to other key structures in American political, economic, legal and social orders that also craft knowledge about race and subsequently make that knowledge salient for participants in (or victims of) structures of power.

While each section is exemplary, the section on sword-and-sorcery provides a clear example of the sort of unique, multiform arguments about little-studied genres written in limpid prose that make Jerng's *Racial Worldmaking* both a boon to contemporary genre studies and a joy to read – a feat accomplished by too little scholarship. This section focuses predictably on Robert E. Howard's Conan stories of the 1930s. Jerng also provides a counterreading of the genre that explores Samuel R. Delany's Nevèrÿon series (1979–87). While much has been written about Howard, little of it is intellectually substantial, and Jerng shies away from the sort of fannish readings that ground themselves almost entirely in secondary sources written by Howard himself or by his protégés and admirers. Jerng also avoids the typical pitfall of literary criticism of race, acknowledging early on that, yes, there are many racist depictions of nonwhite characters in the Conan storyworld, but that this is hardly surprising. Instead, in the section's opening chapter, he looks to the ways in which Howard creates an 'atmosphere' of racialisation throughout his stories. Where others have noticed a heavy reliance on the word 'black' and various synonyms as a mainstay of Howard's style, Jerng delves deeper to argue that 'Howard's stories consistently appeal to blackness. But racial meanings are not merely there in the form of racist imagery, stereotypes and connotations that associate certain peoples and populations with racist ideologies' – he

also uses ‘narrative strategies [that] displace racial meanings from one order (the order of stereotype, classification) into another order (atmosphere, narrative causality, integration of story)’ (123). As Jerng reads Howard, the much-admired writer made significant attempts to negate usual anthropological racial classifications but at the same time provided other ‘routes of reference’ for race that seeped into the very fabric of his prose and constitute a more invisible form of racial worldmaking (123).

The second chapter of the section accomplishes two things. First, Jerng shows how reprints of the Conan stories in the 1950s–70s edited by de Camp ‘reissued, repackaged, and rewrote Conan’ for an audience experiencing ‘the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and worldwide attention to the decolonization movement’, reducing and changing the racial language of the texts but ultimately leaving untouched the alternative ‘routes’ of racialisation (129). Second, he introduces Delany’s sword-and-sorcery as an intertext with the racial worldmaking of Conan, arguing that Delany makes clear that economics – specifically, the racial marketplace of racial capitalism – is the base of the genre. Here, he makes the compelling claim that the period spanning de Camp’s edits of Howard to Delany’s sword-and-sorcery fictions are ‘part of a larger landscape of interpretive strategies that emerged at the same time “intentional” or “de jure” discrimination was being delegitimized through the political activism and international critique of the civil rights movement’ (130). With these chapters, as with his others, Jerng reads innovatively and opens a space for future scholarship to develop. Perhaps the only lacuna in the sword-and-sorcery section is that there is no dialogue with black sf writer Charles Saunders’s Imaro, a clear and purposeful Afrofantastic remix of Conan in the 1980s. But as his capacity to read anew authors so well-covered in sf studies and to bring relatively untouched authors into the fold of contemporary literary concerns with race and genre demonstrate, Jerng is an important voice in sf studies. Even the discussion of Philip K. Dick, easily among the most critiqued sf writers, whose alternate history *The Man in the High Castle* ranks in his three or four most popular novels, will please and surprise sf studies Dickheads.

At this point, reader, you might be wondering what Jerng’s excellent book has to do with sf in film and on television, particularly given that Jerng deemphasises the ‘visual epistemology’ of race and instead looks at textual practices of racialisation or the ‘salience of race’ – that is, the ways in which we are ‘taught when, where, and how race is something to notice’ in fiction (2). (Though, admittedly, he leaves aside the increasingly blurred boundaries between prose fiction, comics, televisual narratives and video games.) But

precisely because so much of the work done on sf film and television is moving more and more across media, particular with the rise of transmedia studies and sf's clear centrality to those discussions, and precisely because so much remains to be explored with regard to race in sf media (as evidenced by the sustained and expanding emphasis on Afrofuturism and other ethnofuturisms), Jerng's claim that we look beyond race-as-such (which has historically meant the visible signifier of race: the black and brown body) to the ways in which texts create and trigger certain ways of seeing race, of making racial and other forms of difference know, makes *Racial Worldmaking* a necessary tool as we confront new modes of sf mediation and look to producing more just histories of sf film, television and their transmedial migrations during the past century and more.

Jerng's crucial intervention in studies of both race and genre is to uncouple the former from 'bodies and subjects' alone and to see how race is equally powerfully wedded to the 'modal imagination' of genre (26). That is, how 'Race is actualized via our speculative modes of thought, precisely our "capacity to envision what is possible in addition to what is actual" and our anticipatory conjoining of a present moment with a future one' (26). *Racial Worldmaking* shows that race is 'not reducible to the visual body, individual, or group' but persists in 'multiple regimes of racial perception and attribution'. Just as sf shapes ideas about what might be possible in the future, so too, Jerng argues, does the knowledge-form of race shape 'the conditions for what potentially can happen' (27). While much of the popular fiction Mark Jerng surveys offers what we might call racist imaginations of non-whiteness, through complex and counterreadings of texts as diverse as M.P. Shiel's yellow peril stories and Civil War alternate histories, Jerng proposes a powerful new way of reading genre and race together, of tracing through fiction how race is made to be seen, how knowledges of difference (and, by turns, of belonging) are produced through the modal imagination of genre.

Jerng offers a way to rethink race in sf and popular fiction. His theory of racial worldmaking goes beyond pinpointing examples of racism across a range of texts or declaring this or that text to be a 'reflection' of already known racial history. Instead, Jerng shows that race is both constituted in and constitutive of the stuff of popular fiction. As Jerng argues in the conclusion, mass-market genres such as sf are a key field for the production of the 'world', which W.E.B. Du Bois understood explicitly as 'a category of racial meaning' (208). For those interested in the utopian thinking genre makes possible for marginalised peoples, Jerng's intervention in race, genre and popular fiction studies offers a foundation for decades of work to come. *Racial Worldmaking* is thus nothing

short of a utopian call to critique, a radical new direction for popular fiction and sf studies, and an impetus toward the creation of new worlds of fiction so that we might learn to inhabit the world of race differently.



Sarah Juliet Lauro, ed., *Zombie Theory: A Reader*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2017. 504pp. 58 b&w illustrations. US\$30.00 (pbk).

Gillian Andrews

Our voracious appetite for zombie media seems only to have increased over the past decade, as evidenced by the continued success of media like *The Walking Dead* (US 2010–) along with its graphic novel source material and seemingly endless collection of spin-offs, talk shows and video games. And the zombie isn't just shuffling forward through each new product; it's evolving and being reimagined to address new cultural anxieties and narratives, such as the subgenre of zombie media which features zombies as conscious protagonists in popular television shows like *iZombie* (US 2015–19) and Netflix's *Santa Clarita Diet* (US 2017–19). With each new iteration of the zombie mythos comes an accompanying stream of articles, monographs and edited collections tackling questions new and old about what the undead can teach us about being alive. Parsing the ever-proliferating field of zombie studies is becoming an increasingly difficult and overwhelming task, and in *Zombie Theory: A Reader* Sarah Juliet Lauro aims to provide a solution.

Drawing on Lauro's own experiences as a graduate student and scholar trying to tackle this unending stream of new publications for the first time, *Zombie Theory* is designed to act as a 'guidebook' (xxii) to assist in navigating these zombie-infested waters. While no one book could ever exhaustively cover all the scholarly approaches to the zombie metaphor, Lauro provides an accessible introduction to the field by collecting in one volume 23 previously published essays which have had particular importance in zombie studies. These essays hold broad scholarly appeal as they don't seek to simply interpret zombie texts, but to explore the value of the liminal figure of the zombie as a theoretical tool which can help us, 'to think through other concepts or issues, presenting the zombie not merely as a monster but as a mode for theoretical work itself' (xx). Lauro separates the collection into five sections, organised thematically around theoretical concepts: Part 1: 'Old Schools: Classic Zombies' collects essays which form an effective introduction to classic scholarship in zombie studies, focusing primarily on the figure's development in US cinema but without losing