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White Womanhood and/as American Empire in *Arrival* and *Annihilation*

Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

Joint Doctoral Program in the Study of Religion, University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology, Denver, CO 80210, USA; meghan.johnstonaelabouni@du.edu

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Abstract: American science fiction stories, such as U.S. historical narratives, often give central place to white, Western male subjects as noble explorers, benevolent colonizers, and border-guarding patriots. This constructed subjectivity renders colonized or cultural others as potentially threatening aliens, and it works alongside the parallel construction of white womanhood as a signifier for the territory to be possessed and protected by American empire—or as a sign of empire itself. Popular cultural narratives, whether in the world of U.S. imperialism or the speculative worlds of science fiction, may serve a religious function by helping to shape world-making: the envisioning and enacting of imagined communities. This paper argues that the world-making of American science fiction can participate in the construction and maintenance of American empire; yet, such speculative world-making may also subvert and critique imperialist ideologies. Analyzing the recent films *Arrival* (2016) and *Annihilation* (2018) through the lenses of postcolonial and feminist critique and theories of religion and popular culture, I argue that these films function as parables about human migration, diversity, and hybrid identities with ambiguous implications. Contact with the alien other can be read as bringing threat, loss, and tragedy or promise, birth, and possibility.

Keywords: world-making; hybridity; futurism; imagined community; popular culture; audience; science fiction; speculative fiction; religion and film; post-coloniality

1. Introduction

Impact. Invasion. Infection. These words could easily serve as the tag line of a movie poster for the latest “alien contact” film. In the fall of 2018, U.S. mass media coverage of migrants traveling from Central America through Mexico toward the southern U.S. border also employed the terms *impact*, *invasion*, and *infection*. Popular television series *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* and *Saturday Night Live* both recognized echoes of science fiction in news coverage about the caravan: *The Daily Show* cut together footage of a FOX News report on the caravan to resemble a horror movie trailer,¹ and *Saturday Night Live* parodied a FOX News segment by presenting scenes from the 2013 zombie film *World War Z* as “actual footage” of a migrant caravan.² This comedic political satire echoes the unironic anti-immigrant rhetoric (such as “Build the Wall”) that has permeated U.S. public discourse under the Trump administration. Not limited to Trump rallies or cable news broadcasts, this discourse has also relied on false facts and images shared among users on social media that depict would-be asylees and immigrants as violent or as carriers of infectious diseases—in short, as an “alien invasion”.³

¹ (Moran 2018).

² (Saturday Night Live 2018).

³ (Roose 2018).

Histories of colonialism (including U.S. American variations on colonialism, both abroad and “at home”) and stories of alien contact have traditionally been written from hegemonic cultural perspectives: that of the white colonizer, on the one hand, and the human explorer of outer space (also likely to be white) on the other. The positioning of the white, Western male subject as noble explorer, benevolent colonizer, and border-guarding patriot renders colonized or cultural others as potentially threatening aliens, even those who are indigenous to places later claimed by colonizers. It also works alongside the parallel construction of white womanhood as a signifier for the territory to be possessed and protected by American empire—or as a sign for empire itself.

Post-colonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon, José Martí, and Gayatri Spivak, writing from the embodied positionality of colonized “subalterns”, have questioned the assumed objectivity of the Euro-centric (or Euro-American) male subject and his authorship of history. Post-colonial scholars have challenged constructed narratives that (1) framed contact as between civilized and “savage” peoples, (2) characterized any resulting conflict as an irrational reaction of ungrateful “natives” who failed to see their good fortune in being chosen for a project of Euro-Christian “cultivation”, and (3) guarded against “invasion” and “infection” by establishing white enclaves to keep wealth (and white women) protected, while infecting indigenous populations with disease and dismantling indigenous economies, languages, and cultures. Inspired by Fanon, Martí, and Spivak, we might therefore ask of historical colonial narratives and of popular contact fiction: who is infected and invaded, and who infects and invades? Who is civilized, and who is savage? Who is “at home”, and who is alien?

If science fiction narratives are dismissed as mere entertainment, as a type of escapism disconnected from the “real world”, this comparison of contact fiction to colonialism could be read as facile, as a minimization of the experience of colonized bodies or as an insinuation that de-colonizing theories are themselves a type of science fiction or fantasy. This paper takes the opposite view, one that proceeds from the intersections of religion, media, and cultural studies to argue that popular culture, similar to religion, is frequently a site for the production of real-world cultural attitudes, ethics, and—to borrow the political concept of Benedict Anderson—“imagined communities” of the future.⁴ The popular cultural worlds of television, film, and literature function as imagined communities with aesthetic, narrative, and ethical components. In other words, these imagined worlds have a deliberate look and feel, a collection of formative myths and recognizable symbols, and a set of societal norms and values—all of which both reflect and shape communal identity, whether the nationalism that Anderson examines or the speculative worlds of science fiction.

These worlds, and the interpretive communities that gather around them, participate in a kind of conceptual, relational, and aesthetic world-making that resembles Robert Orsi’s definition of religion as “a network of relationships” in which “men, women, and children *together* make religious worlds in relationships with special beings and with each other”.⁵ For Orsi, this occurs in part through “the multiplicity of stories told and stories attended to” in the worlds of religion.⁶ S. Brent Plate explicitly connects religious world-making to film, noting the tendency of films to “create worlds”, as in the common filmic introduction: “In a world where . . . ”.⁷ I define religious world-making as a communal, narrative, and performative activity that both envisions and enacts worlds. While Orsi limits his definition to the making of worlds that recognize gods or other special beings, I argue that religious world-making may also be found in ostensibly secular contexts. Following Colleen McDannell’s notion of a “scrambling” of sacred and profane in American culture, I argue that world-making contains religious dimensions insofar as it engages questions of ultimate significance—such as questions about who belongs, and who is “other”, in worlds shaped by colonialism.⁸

⁴ (Anderson and O’Gorman 2006, p. 24).

⁵ (Orsi 2005, p. 2).

⁶ (Orsi 2005, p. 204).

⁷ (Plate 2017, p. 1).

⁸ (McDannell, Colleen 1995, p. 8).

I assert that the narrative and aesthetic worlds of popular American science fiction, with their frequent focus on imagined futures and on contact between an “us” and an alien “them”, often function to construct and maintain ideologies of American empire. At the same time, the speculative nature of the world-making of science fiction also contains space (pun intended) for the potential to subvert and critique such hegemonic ideologies. I analyze the recent films *Arrival* (2016) and *Annihilation* (2018), and their white female protagonists, through the theoretical lenses of Fanon and Spivak, Roland Barthes, and scholars of American popular culture, such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bernadette Calafell, to argue that these films about contact between the human race and alien others can be read as a parable about human migration and racial and cultural diversity, particularly the hybridity birthed from intimate contact between white women’s bodies and cultural others. Films such as these not only suggest, but fully signify (in Barthes’s terms) an existential crisis in which white womanhood both embodies the American empire to be saved and becomes its sacrificial savior. In other words, I ask: when white American women “save the world”, whose world, exactly, is being saved, and how? I conclude that hybridity can be read as threat, loss, and tragedy or as promise, birth, and possibility and that the films in question allow for both kinds of readings, highlighting the active role audiences play in interpreting and determining meaning within popular culture.

2. “There Is No Way to Do First Contact Right”: Science Fiction and/as Colonialism

Anthropologist David Samuels argues that the academic field of ethnography and the literary genre of science fiction both arise within the context of European colonialism in the 19th and early 20th centuries, because “each evokes alien worlds of experience”, and “[as] both genres encounter the problematic of cultural translation ... both genres exist, in part, in order to explore just that problematic”.⁹ Not incidentally, the modern study of religion likewise arose within this time frame and these circumstances. As Talal Asad, Tomoko Masuzawa, and David Chidester have all noted, Western Christian encounters with cultural difference through colonialism, coupled with modern trends of scientific study and classification, prompted the development of what would become the field of religious studies, and “in the practices of comparison and containment, the very categories of ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ were produced and reproduced as instruments of both knowledge and power in specific colonial situations ...”.¹⁰

Following the waning influence of European colonialism abroad and the rise of the United States as empire through the seizure of large tracts of land and an active military role in the two World Wars, W. Scott Poole situates the popular American science fiction films of the 1950s within the “age of anxiety” prompted by the Cold War and the development of “creature feature” narratives that:

proffered parables of American righteousness and power [and] ended, not with world apocalypse, but with a full restoration of a secure, consumer-oriented status quo. Invaders in flying saucers, radioactive mutations, and giant creatures born of the atomic age wreaked havoc but were soon destroyed by brainy teams of civilian scientists in cooperation with the American military.¹¹

The correlation of contact fiction and ethnography also finds more recent examples. In discussing her Arthur C. Clarke Award-winning 1996 novel, *The Sparrow*, author Mary Doria Russell—a former professor of biological anthropology—ties the novel’s conception to the 500th anniversary of the Columbian expedition. Russell aimed to

put modern, intelligent, well-meaning, well-educated people into that same state of radical ignorance that the early explorers and missionaries experienced here in the Americas, and

⁹ (Samuels 1996).

¹⁰ (Chidester 2014, pp. x–xi). See also (Asad 2003; Masuzawa 2005).

¹¹ (Poole 2011, p. 113).

let's just see how well we'd do! I thought it would be almost inherently tragic. There is no way to do First Contact right ...¹²

Contact fiction thus can turn a speculative lens on both the colonialism of the past and the ongoing colonial and post-colonial contexts of the present. Such narratives can be optimistic or utopian in nature—the various *Star Trek* television and film iterations, for example—or tragic, as in *The Sparrow*, in which Russell's sympathetic and well-meaning human crew ventures to a newly-discovered planet not to conquer the alien inhabitants but simply to meet them—a mission that nevertheless ends in disaster, death, and irreparable change to the indigenous population.

Frantz Fanon wrote of colonialism as a project with just this kind of irrevocable result: the permanent alteration of the subjectivities of both colonized and colonizer, such that “all colonized people” become “people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave ...”.¹³ Fanon diagnoses this inferiority not as an essentialized trait among colonized people of color but rather as a complex created and imposed by the white colonizer: “Inferiorization is the native correlative to the European's feeling of superiority. Let us have the courage to say: *It is the racist who creates the inferiorized*”.¹⁴ This occurs first through the material/economic conditions forced upon colonized people and secondly through an internalized psychological process.¹⁵

As the colonized person of color is forced in this new matrix of subjectivity to wear a “white mask”, to perform through language, education, and manner an approximation of whiteness in order to be recognized by white culture as human, the colonizer is also changed, forced to wear a similar white mask of superiority in order to displace guilt and to justify occupying the role of occupier.¹⁶ The impact is a kind of invasion and infection of subjectivity for black and white—colonized and colonizer—alike. Yet, the culpability belongs to the colonizer, and colonized bodies and minds bear the brunt of the resulting trauma. Fanon further recognizes that the performative role prescribed for colonized people of color, including in a post-slavery U.S. context, is constructed in large part through popular culture: the “grinning stereotype *Y a bon Banania*” of American films¹⁷ or the “Uncle Remus stories” and other novels of white American authors.¹⁸

French theorist Roland Barthes, a contemporary of Fanon, spoke to this interpellation of popular culture and ideology in his theory of the construction of mythologies through a process of signification in the mass media and everyday practices of popular culture. As Barthes argues, “myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something, and it imposes on us”.¹⁹ In order for signification to work and myth to function, the message signified by the signifier must be recognizable to the audience; “the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be *appropriated*”,²⁰ and “however paradoxical it may seem, *myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear”.²¹ Barthes takes as one of his illustrative examples a myth of French colonialism, signified by a magazine cover:

On the cover, a young Negro in French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor (French flag) ... [and] I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve

¹² (Gevers 2018).

¹³ (Fanon 2008, pp. 2–3).

¹⁴ (Fanon 2008, p. 73).

¹⁵ (Fanon 2008, pp. xiv–xv).

¹⁶ (Fanon 2008, p. 129).

¹⁷ (Fanon 2008, p. 17).

¹⁸ (Fanon 2008, p. 131).

¹⁹ (Barthes 2012, p. 226).

²⁰ (Barthes 2012, p. 229).

²¹ (Barthes 2012, p. 231).

under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.²²

Barthes further analyzes this example to explain how such myths are received and read, concluding that “if I focus on the mythical signifier as on an inextricable whole made of meaning and form . . . the saluting Negro is no longer an example or symbol, still less an alibi: he is the very *presence* of French imperialism”.²³ As Barthes applies his theory of signification and the deciphering of myth to what he terms “an ideological critique of the language of so-called mass culture”,²⁴ his critique clearly includes the imperialist-colonialist ideologies of the France of his day, and his argument supports the thesis of this paper that the mythologies of popular culture in fact function to constitute and maintain such colonialist ideologies.

Drawing from Barthes in the context of a different century and cultural context—the 21st-century United States as empire-at-home, threatened by alien arrivals on the screen and “alien” arrivals across borders—I will now turn to a discussion of white womanhood and white women’s bodies as a signification of this empire.

3. Liberty, Destiny, Fraternity: White Woman’s Bodies and/as American Empire

Common to science fiction narratives is the central position of the body: the monstrous body of the alien, the vulnerable bodies of its victims, and the powerful bodies of its victors. With Fanon and Barthes in mind, I assert that in colonial and post-colonial constructions of identity, women’s bodies always *signify*. In particular, as Anne McClintock has shown in *Imperial Leather*, the body—especially the *female body*—acts as a central site of signification in constructions of American empire.²⁵ Women often signify empire by embodying the land itself, the material site of colonization and natural resources (so-called “virgin” land), which is claimed, named, or renamed; penetrated; and fertilized through male imperial and colonial expansion; and like the silent land itself, women are often denied voice and agency—particularly colonized women. While white women held a different position in the Euro/American colonial project than white men, McClintock argues, nevertheless white women “were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting”.²⁶

Gayatri Spivak’s rhetorical construction, “White men are saving brown women from brown men”, illustrates the logic by which European colonizers (or American imperialists) could grant “honorary whiteness” to colonized women as a theoretical pretext for conquest or for the legislation of colonized bodies of all genders.²⁷ The particular subjectivity that is referenced or cited in bestowing this dubious honor is, of course, white womanhood: the brown woman becomes an honorary white woman. If honorary whiteness makes a woman worthy of “saving”, what does this suggest about the signification of white womanhood and white women’s bodies?

I propose that in the history of European and Euro-American colonialism, including U.S. imperialism, white womanhood has symbolized a racial purity meant to be preserved and perpetuated; thus, the body of the white woman signifies the motivations, the justifications, and the culmination of American empire. Consider Anne McClintock’s example of Jan van der Straet’s 1575 portrayal of the “discovery of America” as an erotic encounter between the fully-clothed, armored, and respectable Amerigo Vespucci and the naked, beckoning figure of “America”;²⁸ John Gast’s 1872 painting *American Progress*, featuring Progress as a white woman with a “Star of Empire” on her shoulder, hovering

²² (Barthes 2012, p. 225).

²³ (Barthes 2012, p. 239).

²⁴ (Barthes 2012, p. ix).

²⁵ (McClintock 1995).

²⁶ (McClintock 1995, p. 6).

²⁷ (Morris and Spivak 2010, p. 49).

²⁸ (McClintock 1995, pp. 25–26).

celestially over a scene of westward expansion;²⁹ or even the Statue of Liberty, whose French-Roman constructed body personifies the imperialistic charge of her given name: “Liberty Enlightening the World”. It can of course be argued that Lady Liberty is not actually white but is, in fact, green; yet, the color green also symbolizes verdant fields and pastures, American currency, the “green light” of unilateral freedom, and other things that signify the cultural power of whiteness and American empire—rendering Lady Liberty “white”.

As mythical white women were thus constructed as iconic symbols of American imperialism, real white women—no less idealized—were invoked as the embodiment of “hearth and home” to be preserved from contaminating contact with cultural others through the corporate threat of invasion or the individual threat of miscegenation, leading to hybridity. Chicana performance scholar Bernadette Calafell has analyzed white womanhood as a performative identity, “the role of innocent victim who must be protected from Otherness”,³⁰ because the reproductive capacity of whiteness lies within the constructed white woman’s body. Lynchings of black men and boys during and after slavery, Calafell points out, were often precipitated by perceived or wholly fabricated sexual threats to white women’s bodies.³¹

Within this matrix of significations, then, the white woman is Liberty, Manifest Destiny, and the embodied site of “pure” white American culture’s past, present, and future: the white woman as empire. Fanon came to similar conclusions in his meditation on the colonized black man’s desire to be recognized as white through the sexual embrace of white womanhood: “I want to be recognized not as *Black*, but as *White*. But . . . who better than the white woman to bring this about? . . . Between these white breasts that my wandering hands fondle, white civilization and worthiness become mine”.³² Fanon’s narrator clearly seeks not only to grasp white womanhood as such, but in doing so, to grasp empire itself. José Martí, Cuban philosopher and literary critic, also wrote white women as empire—in this case, as the seductress of American imperialist modernity, an “uglifying freedom” to be rejected by the Latino male subject in favor of the “enchanted dependence of our [Latina] women”, a femininity that likely signaled for Martí the alternative “Latin” modernity he advocated.³³

This signification of white womanhood as empire extends to a 21st-century iteration: the white woman as active agent and soldier of American empire. This is the role constructed by two recent American science fiction films, *Arrival* (2016) and *Annihilation* (2018). Both films offer “first contact” narratives that ring with echoes of colonialism, as versions of militarized American empire respond to the presence of alien Others. *Arrival*’s linguist, Louise, and *Annihilation*’s biologist, Lena, signify white womanhood not merely as a cultural object of white male protection, but as the front line of defense for (white) humanity.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, theorist of monstrosity and culture, argues that speculative fiction narratives have long served as sites of identity construction through the portrayal of monstrous cultural Others who define the borders that separate “us” from “them” and delineate the boundaries within which normative identities live and move. An alien is a type of monster, and Cohen’s monster theory offers a framework in which to consider how alien contact fiction signifies identity construction in the context of white American culture as empire.

Within the empire-at-home, the alien on our screens prompts us to ask who is alien among us in our communities. Cohen posits that “the monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us . . . [and] for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual”.³⁴ Susana Loza, in an analysis of the early 2000s films *Avatar* and *District 9*, draws from Cohen’s monster

²⁹ (Gast 1872).

³⁰ (Calafell 2015, p. 25).

³¹ (Calafell 2015, p. 27).

³² (Fanon 2008, p. 45).

³³ Quoted in (Lomas 2008, p. 247).

³⁴ (Cohen 1996, p. 7).

theory to argue that such films “utilize the figure of the alien to express and manage white fears of invasion, contamination, segregation, miscegenation, degeneration, and conquest”.³⁵ The arrival of beings from different worlds or cultures evokes fear that a “we”—a collective identity defined over and against the identity of the alien Other—may be invaded and that our identities may be changed. This is precisely what happens to the white female bodies of *Annihilation* and *Arrival*.

4. Arrival, Annihilation, and Hybridity: White Women as Sacrificial Saviors of Empire?

The 2016 film *Arrival* begins at the story’s end, although this fact will only be revealed later in the film. In a voiceover, Louise says, “I used to think this was the beginning of your story”. In a montage of short clips, we see Louise (Amy Adams) being handed her newborn daughter Hannah for the first time, cooing to the infant, “Come back to me”. Hannah grows, plays next to a lake, whispers “I love you” at bedtime, and shouts “I hate you!” as a teen. Then comes a doctor’s office, a diagnosis, and death—Louise pleading to Hannah’s body in a hospital bed, “Come back to me”. Louise walks down the hospital hallway, defeated. The screen fades out, then opens on Louise, trodding up the stairs into a university building. Her voiceover resumes: “But now I’m not so sure I believe in beginnings and endings. There are days that define your story beyond your life: like the day they arrived”. An audience accustomed to chronological storytelling is led to assume that the film’s opening sequence is a flashback that provides Louise’s backstory as a grieving mother.

As the film continues, Louise, an American professor of linguistics, learns along with the rest of the world that twelve alien objects have appeared in locations across the globe, hovering silently above the ground. Louise is tapped by the U.S. army as an interpreter, joining a small team in nearby Montana at one of the alien vessels, called “the shell”. Louise and her team venture at regular intervals into the shell to interact with the aliens (dubbed “heptapods”). Louise discovers that all previous attempts to identify a source and reason for the alien presence have failed. In a cyclical plot that incidentally echoes the center/periphery nature of colonialist relations, Louise and her colleagues conduct a series of expeditions to the alien vessel. Each expedition is followed by a return to army headquarters, where Louise records and analyzes the data from these encounters and communicates with similar research teams in Russia, China, Australia, Sudan, and other locations where the heptapods’ ships have landed. This setup becomes integral to the plot, as international tensions rise over the sharing of data between the twelve sites. It also clearly characterizes the heptapods not as partners in the production of knowledge but as specimens under examination; despite their evident advanced intelligence, they are treated as objects, not subjects.

Louise makes slow progress in learning the dynamic pictorial language of the heptapods, created by squirting an ink-like substance into the air that forms circular blots, images that convey meaning in past, present, and future tense. Eventually, just as relations between the human teams around the globe fray almost to the breaking point, Louise learns from the heptapods that they have come because this human conflict threatens to destroy the earth, and in another three thousand years, the heptapods will need the humans’ help.

In this case, the aliens have arrived to prevent—not to cause—human annihilation, and Louise becomes the human vessel for this alien aid. Physical contact with the heptapods and their language bestows on Louise (or infects her) with the ability to see past, present, and future at once. This embodied asynchrony enables Louise to single-handedly resolve the international crisis: a series of “flash-forwards” guides Louise to call the Chinese general on his private number with a secret message, information that she only learns from the general later in time, after her efforts have secured global peace. Yet, this new temporal “gift” also proves a curse for Louise: she experiences what the audience assumes are flashbacks to the life and death of her beloved daughter Hannah, only to discover that Hannah is yet to be born. Furthermore, Ian Connelly (Jeremy Renner), her partner on the mission, will

³⁵ (Loza 2017, p. 25).

become her husband, and he will leave Louise when she eventually confesses her foreknowledge of Hannah's illness and death.

Arrival illustrates Cohen's argument that "the monster *arrives* in the present . . . to recount a lesson in the complexity of temporality. History is a tangle, full of loops and doublings-back. Linear chronologies are a lie".³⁶ In this case, the complexity of temporality takes residence in the body and mind of Louise; her newfound temporal hybridity both singularly enables Louise (on behalf of the U.S. Army) to "save the world" and holds within it the seeds of tragedy: the destruction of her marriage and death of her child. At the close of the film, Louise chooses the future she has already seen, in full knowledge of the grief that awaits her. This can be read as a self-sacrificial choice, made not only for the sake of humanity, but also for the sake of the child to be born, as precarious and painful as this child's life will be.

The 2018 film *Annihilation* also echoes themes of sacrifice, with an equally ambiguous ending that evades narrative resolution. In the closing scene, two battered survivors embrace: Lena (Natalie Portman), a white woman of shoulder-length light hair, wearing white medical scrubs, and Kane (Oscar Isaac), her husband, a light-skinned man with a southern U.S. accent.³⁷ Lena, a biologist, and Kane, a soldier, have both escaped "the shimmer", a phenomenon of unknown alien origin that has been steadily engulfing the Florida coast. Born from a meteoric object that crashed into a lighthouse, the shimmer is likened to a prism that refracts light, sound waves, time, and most disturbingly, DNA. Within its translucent, bubble-like borders, the shimmer produces fantastical mutations of flora and fauna; our protagonists encounter hybrids of human, plant, and animal life that prove both beautiful and deadly. Of the numerous military and scientific expeditions sent into the shimmer, only Lena and Kane have returned.

If Lena and Kane suggest Adam and Eve staggering out of Eden, the shimmer is nonetheless an anti-paradise. In this space of creation through annihilation, Lena and Kane have witnessed and endured horrors they can barely describe. Rather than being chased from the safety of the garden by angelic figures with flaming swords, both have fled for their lives, returning to the scientific-military unit that first sent them into the shimmer, and with a flaming phosphorous grenade, Lena has set fire to the shimmer's source and destroyed it at the root. Notably, however, the civilization to which Lena and Kane return now quarantines them, interrogating them through biohazard masks. Neither have they survived unchanged: as they embrace, the camera focuses on their eyes, revealing pupils that glow with the same shimmer.

Near the beginning of the film, Lena volunteers for the seemingly doomed mission into the shimmer in a move that could be read as a self-sacrificial act. Her motivation to join the team is later revealed as penance for cheating on her husband Kane (with a black male colleague). Notably, of the five women on the mission, two—a white European and a Latina, implied to have been lovers in the past—are brutally murdered; a third, a black physicist, begins to sprout flowering branches from her arms and wanders away, choosing to be absorbed by the shimmer. The last two remaining are both white American women: Lena and Dr. Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh). Ventress, previously in charge of selecting and sending teams into the shimmer—white woman as mission command—finds the source of the shimmer, a white opening leading to a womblike obsidian cave. As Lena finds her, Ventress is split apart by light and reconstituted as an alien being, who begins to mirror and then to resemble Lena.

Lena survives and apparently defeats her alien double; this is reminiscent of the horror trope of the Final Girl, the female protagonist who is the primary target and sole survivor of the monster. As Sarah Trencansky argues, the privileged perspective of the Final Girl is an invitation to the viewer:

³⁶ (Cohen 2013, p. 451).

³⁷ It is worth noting that the actors Natalie Portman and Oscar Isaac may both be considered "other" than white American in the U.S. cultural context; Portman is Jewish and Israeli-born, and Isaac is Latinx, born in Guatemala. That these characters, both presented as white U.S. service members, are portrayed by light-skinned immigrants of color could also be read as subverting the norms of whiteness the film otherwise seems to uphold.

“she knows what we know, and the Final Girl becomes an ‘I’ for the audience to identify with”.³⁸ Thus, a mission planned and led by white womanhood to defend humanity (through the American military-scientific industrial complex) is completed by a white woman, while the bodies of queer women and/or women of color become collateral damage. The white woman’s “I”, the subjectivity of white womanhood, represents the “I” of the audience.

Yet, the shimmer in Lena’s eye (or in Lena’s “I”) reveals that she has been infected by the alien DNA. Already corrupted, perhaps, by her extramarital sexual relationship with a black man, Lena is no longer the same pure (white) human subject, but is now an incubator for a dangerous alien hybridity. This ambiguous victory and unresolved ending make Lena an atypical Final Girl. Lena harbors something of the alien inside her; embracing her husband, who is also no longer entirely human, Lena also signifies the potential to reproduce this hybridity through offspring. This ambiguous ending evokes Cohen’s second thesis, “The monster always escapes”:

The monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again. These epistemological spaces between the monster’s bones are Derrida’s familiar chasm of *différance*: a genetic uncertainty principle, the essence of the monster’s vitality, the reason it always rises from the dissection table as its secrets are about to be revealed and vanishes into the night.³⁹

Lena and Louise, through their contact with alien races, act to save humanity; yet both women’s bodies are irrevocably changed by this contact. Is this impact tragic or triumphant?

Conclusions and Codas: The Both/And of Annihilation and Arrival

“In a world where” all of the elements of film—from cinematography and editing to costuming and score—are deliberately chosen, assembled, and framed within a rectangle of light on screen, even the most rapt audiences are unlikely to forget that what they are viewing is not strictly real. Unlike the legendary story of panicked 19th-century audiences fleeing theaters during viewings of Louis Lumière’s short film, *Arrival of the Train*, 21st-century audiences generally have enough experience with cinema to remain aware of the separation of the filmic world from their own.⁴⁰ In a world where the fictional nature of films such as *Annihilation* and *Arrival* is self-evident, what is the ultimate purpose of determining the meaning of these films, or any films?

S. Brent Plate argues that the power of cinema—and of religion—lies in its ability to make and maintain worlds, such that filmgoing is not only recreation, but re-creation: “taking a step back from the world to see how it is put together, if only to figure out how it can be rearranged”.⁴¹ Through narrative myths and symbols, the conceptual and the aesthetic, the world-making of film—like the world-making of religion—helps to shape our perceptions and worldviews, forming and reforming the imagined communities, which we then enact in the “real” world. The worlds posited by film and religion can, and often do, function hegemonically to affirm and reinforce the social norms of the status quo. However, particularly within the speculative worlds of science fiction, this world-making can also make visible the seams of the “real” world’s construction, troubling the “givenness” of the status

³⁸ (Trencansky 2001, p. 64).

³⁹ (Cohen 1996, p. 4).

⁴⁰ In point of fact, media scholar Martin Loiperdinger argues that there is insufficient historical evidence for the “founding myth” of the stampeding audiences of Lumière’s *Arrival*; more likely, the affective responses of audiences at seeing the approaching train on screen was due to their recognition of its lifelikeness, rather than a confusion of reality: “Paradoxical as it may appear today, the audience’s interest in the projected *documentary* images of the Cinématographe Lumière was of a primarily fantastic nature. Spectators did not want to see reality on the screen, but rather images of reality, which were different from reality”. See (Loiperdinger and Elzer 2004).

⁴¹ (Plate 2017, p. 9).

quo and inviting alternative possibilities. Real social change often begins in this way: with a critical recognition of the world as it is and a critical imagination of the world as it could be.

What of the worlds of *Arrival* and *Annihilation*? One possible reading of Louise and Lena's voluntary crossing of borders and their willingness to assume the impact, invasion, and infection of the alien within their own bodies is the construction of these white women as sacrificial saviors of American empire. In this reading, the resulting alien hybridity of their bodies might represent tragedy or failure.

There is, after all, evidence that white anxiety about cultural hybridity is expressed materially through white women's bodies in the "real" world: the majority of white American women voted to elect Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in 2016 on promises to preserve and restore an American greatness that was, and still is, racially coded as white.⁴² If, as Roland Barthes has argued, the mythologies of popular culture go beyond entertainment to signify, and thereby to construct and maintain, cultural ideologies, both *Arrival* and *Annihilation* can be read as cautionary tales that ultimately reinforce hegemonic ideals of white American empire.

Even if this is the case, however, cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and bell hooks have argued that audiences do not always passively receive the ideologies coded—deliberately or not—within popular culture. Audiences may conduct "resistant readings", to use Hall's phrase,⁴³ or they may "look back" with an "oppositional gaze", as hooks finds that so many black female spectators must do to contend critically with films constructed through a white male gaze.⁴⁴

One example of this in the science fiction genre generally is noted by performance scholar Bernadette Calafell, who notes that Chicana feminist and de-colonial scholar Gloria Anzaldúa often spoke and wrote of a feeling of kinship with the alien from *Alien* (1979), as in the following reflection:

In the film, it seemed like they were taking all the things they fear and hate about themselves and projecting them onto the monster. Just like we did with blacks and like people do with queers—all the evils get projected. My sympathies were not with the people at all; they were with the alien.⁴⁵

Calafell contextualizes Anzaldúa's remarks thusly: "It is important to note that in drawing upon the trope of the alien [Anzaldúa] signals back to dominant framings of Chicana/os and Mexicans in popular culture as alien invaders".⁴⁶ In this case, sympathy for the alien is not sympathy for the devil; it is sympathy for the cultural others who are constructed as alien or as monstrous by the hegemonic world-making of empire. For Anzaldúa, it is not just sympathy but empathy, rooted in a shared experience of queer and monstrous otherness. Nevertheless, Anzaldúa's resistant or oppositional reading of *Alien* demonstrates that the meaning of a narrative ultimately lies with the audience as much as with the creator; audiences may choose to resist hegemonic ideologies by identifying with and rooting for those constructed as enemy others.

Furthermore, an anti-hegemonic interpretation of *Arrival* and *Annihilation* does not only rely on a resistant or a critical oppositional reading of these films. A number of elements of these films themselves argue against a reading of the films as straightforward endorsements of imperialist tropes such as American exceptionalism and manifest destiny. For example, in both films the leaders of the military/scientific missions in both films are kept at a narrative distance. Neither Lena and Louise, nor their partners Kane and Ian, are members of the inner circle or top decision-makers; they are brought

⁴² According to a Pew Research Center report on verified 2016 voters, released August 9, 2018, 47% of white women voted for Trump, as opposed to 45% for Clinton, and white women as a demographic group represented a 41% share of the total electorate, higher than white men (at 33%) and just over double the combined total share represented by Black and Hispanic voters of both genders (20%). See <https://www.people-press.org/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters/>.

⁴³ (Hall 1980, p. 9).

⁴⁴ (Hooks 2015, p. 181).

⁴⁵ (Calafell 2015, p. 3).

⁴⁶ (Calafell 2015, p. 60).

into these missions from the outside and deployed by the state as on-the-ground consultants and combatants. They are treated as skilled but not as authoritative; they are valuable, but expendable. Meanwhile, the audience is not privy to the inner lives of the characters in charge, other than what these characters reveal to the audience through their interaction with the protagonists.

The military characters in *Arrival* and the scientists running missions to the shimmer in *Annihilation* are thus constructed not as sympathetic, transparent, or trustworthy but as disconnected, opaque, and occasionally menacing. For example, just as Louise and Ian are close to fully understanding the heptapods' message and mission, an ambiguous word that could mean "weapon" (but ultimately does not) triggers the impulses of one military character toward extermination; he detonates an explosive device inside the heptapods' vessel and kills one of the two aliens. Moreover, the crisis Louise averts is not, in the end, caused by aliens; it is the human threat of self-annihilation as a result of geopolitical posturing. That the heptapods view time as a holistic whole, rather than a linear progression with a hidden ending, means that the decision to arrive on Earth is taken with knowledge of the death to come—thus suggesting that it is not only Louise, but also the aliens themselves, who act self-sacrificially to save humanity.

Likewise, the treatment of Lena and Kane in *Annihilation*, along with their fellow soldiers and scientists, suggests a critique of militarized American imperialism. Lena's fellow scientists openly acknowledge that given that none of the previous teams have returned, they are embarking on a suicide mission, and Ventress, the only person with administrative authority to join a mission herself, is revealed to have incurable cancer, making her willingness to put her life on the line a fatalistic choice rather than a heroic one. Kane's sudden and inexplicable return home after his deployment and disappearance, the flat and unresponsive affect he presents to a bewildered Lena, and his physical breakdown are all explained in the film as byproducts of his takeover by the refracted DNA of the shimmer, but they are also posited as connected to the desperate and violent actions Kane takes inside the shimmer to survive and defeat the enemy. A clear metaphorical implication may be drawn from this characterization: that soldiers' military deployment as defenders of an imperialist state that treats its soldiers as expendable, and the acts of war resulting from orders to annihilate the other who is designated as enemy, can change soldiers so deeply that they return as strangers to those who knew them.

The other element of the films that resists a hegemonic reading is the ambiguity of their conclusions. At first blush, both films appear to resolve the conflicts presented by alien encounters through a triumphant victory for the planetary (and American) "home team". Lena destroys the shimmer; Louise brings about world peace (and publishes a book, and perhaps gets tenure.) Yet, each film concludes with a narrative "twist"—Lena's shimmering eye, Louise's turning toward a future of love and grief—that acts a kind of coda.

A filmic coda can serve as an epilogue after the story appears concluded and resolved. The screen fades to black, only to flare into life again for a scene that unsettles the certainty of its ending (or, depending on box office returns, sets the stage for a sequel). In monster films, the coda often demonstrates—as Cohen argues—that "the monster always escapes . . . rises from the dissection table as its secrets are about to be revealed, and vanishes into the night."⁴⁷ Cohen finds this conclusion less a monstrous threat than a promise—for the monster as a cultural body ultimately represents not evil, but subversive resistance, through the destabilization of categories of hegemonic power.

The shimmer in Lena's eyes at the end of *Annihilation* and Louise's embrace of her future in *Arrival*, like a coda, signal to audiences that these films' endings are not the end of the story. These women have been forever changed by their encounters—the alien is now a part of them. However, this hybridity does not only represent death or loss: it is also a new kind of life, a new becoming. Louise gains life-giving knowledge and power through her connection with the heptapods; Lena's eye reflects the beauty of the new forms of life—the new creation—that the shimmer brings to Earth. The films can

⁴⁷ (Cohen 1996, p. 4).

also be read, then, not only as stories of the *annihilation* of one world, the world of white American empire, but perhaps also the birth and becoming—the *arrival*—of a new world of hybrid possibility. In this world and in these times, it matters which world we choose to see and make.

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