In the Hard Times (and the Good): Solidarities Beyond Race and Gender in Critical Utopian and Dystopian Women’s Science Fiction

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As global inequality increases, solidarities are put to the test. With global dissent expressed through the election of a populist president by 53 percent of American white women and 29 percent of Latino Americans, the anti-racist and feminist movements must find new ways to usher in support. Critical utopian and dystopian science fiction written by women from the late 1960s onwards point to how productive solidarities can be forged that go beyond “shared” race and gender. Joanna Russ’ 1975 feminist critical utopia The Female Man explores how four versions of one woman, living in four interplanetary moments, must not only reconcile themselves with one another’s differences, but use them to create a stronger resistance to patriarchy. Thirty-nine years later, Jennifer Marie Brissett’s Elysium (2014) employs a similar layering and blurring of characterisation to forge unexpected solidarities between its non-white characters, but this time it is a broken, post-apocalyptic computer code that creates its own connections in the newly composite script. These novels discard the idea that women and people of colour automatically see eye-to-eye, and instead move parallel to feminist and/or anti-racist theories of their day to point to how harder, more inclusive, and more successful communities of solidarity and resistance can be forged in times of acute global insecurity.

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In the hard times, solidarity is put to the test. Or as Euripides put it, “real friendship is shown in times of trouble; prosperity is full of friends” (qtd. in Arrowsmith 1959, 488-93). It is easy to get along in Utopia, but how do we forge solidarities in dystopic times? This was also the question behind the sixteenth Polish Sociological Congress held in Gdansk in 2016, which centred around the theme “Solidarity in times of distrust”. Pawel Adamowicz, mayor of Gdansk, noted that “we need a new model of cooperation and public debate in the times of growing social tensions and rapid development of communication technologies” (2016, n.p.). Growing social tensions indeed; following the regressive results of more than one global democratic process in 2016, the neoliberal segment of the feminist and anti-racist struggle has realised, to its distress, that not all women and not all people of colour are standing behind the same political banner. Emotions ran high between women during Hilary Clinton’s campaign and Donald Trump’s subsequent election, coming to a climax with Republican news show host Liz Wheeler claiming that the message spread by celebrity democrats like TV comedienne Tina Fey and actress, director and millennial spokesperson Lena Dunham, was that she “wasn’t a real woman unless she voted for Hilary Clinton” (Wheeler 2017, n.p.). The relationship between a person’s race or gender and their political persuasion was once again a hot topic when Omarosa Manigault, now a white House political aide, and Lynne Patton, vice president of the Eric Trump Foundation, both African-American, joined the club of Black Republicans who have, for many years, been vilified as “race traitors”.

While Omarosa and Patton are still in the minority – only 8 percent of the Black population opted for a Republican vote – Trump won a much larger percentage of the Latino vote, attracting 29 percent of this vastly diverse slice of the electorate, who, of course, did not all vote in solidarity with the Mexicans that Trump called “rapists” and “killers”. The failure of Clinton’s campaign gave way to another grim reality; 53 percent of white women preferred to elect a pussy-grabbing misogynist as their leader. Feminists and anti-racist activists have had to conclude, somewhat bleakly, that feminist and anti-racist friendships cannot be taken for granted. Women and non-white people will not vote for one another just because they are told to by the liberal democracy. Instead, different kinds of solidarities across greatly differing political and social positions must be forged. The pursuit of these unexpected solidarities hopes to heal the tension that has been created in the US by the election’s reality check that people of the same sex, or that experience similar racial persecution, want different things when they enter the voting booth. Overlooking this simple fact has divided and directed the anti-racist and feminist cause away from shared ambitions of peace, recognition and equal opportunity. My question is: how do we reach across the isle and forge solidarities in times of crisis?

Science fiction utopias written by women have provided models for cooperating with people we might not normally want to cooperate with since the late 1960s, when the relationship between utopia and science fiction – as well as notions of “gender”, “race” and “equality” – began to come under greater scrutiny. In 1972, Darko Suvin proposed that “The importance of science fiction (SF) in our time is on the increase” (Suvin 1972, 372), later noting that the works of SF that emerged during the late 1960s and 1970s demonstrated a reaffirmed “close kinship between SF and utopia” (1988, xiii). In the USA, women writers of science fiction during the 1970s channelled the utopian imagination into a new phase of development: Lyman Tower Sargent (1977) has suggested that Joanna Russ’ The Female Man, and the collections Women of
Wonder (1974) and More Women of Wonder (1976) edited by Pamela Sargent, as well as the Aurora: Beyond Equality (1976) anthology compiled by Vonda N. McIntyre and Susan Anderson, were exemplary of women’s science fiction which “strongly present[ed] the case for an entire re-thinking of the position of women in society” (Sargent 1977, 46-7). This was, in particular, achieved by the women who participated in the New Wave movement of SF: British women writers of New Wave SF during the 1960s, who were subsequently joined by American women writers during the 1970s, merged an investigation of possible new directions for feminism with an experimentation within the genre of science fiction itself. American writer Judith Merril’s anthology England Swings SF (1968) compiled talented British New Wave women writers like Josephine Saxton, Daphne R. Castell and Hilary Bailey with American women writers including Pamela Zoline, Vonda McIntyre, and Sonya Dorman Hess. These writers applied a New Wave deconstruction of genre and the scientific principles of the universe to issues of sex, race, gender, and class, which were simultaneously being addressed by the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s on both sides of the Atlantic.

By the mid-1970s, many new women writers gained visibility in the genre, some of whom were producing works of feminist science fiction that emerged in what Joanna Russ has termed “parallel evolution” (Russ 1995, 133) with contemporary feminist theory of the period. Women’s SF was maturing into a complex and self-reflexive form that sought to abandon the blueprints of paradise in favour of the discovery of less easily mappable solutions to problems of gender prejudice and racial hatred. The “critical utopia”, as coined by Tom Moylan in 1986, describes the doubly “critical” nature of some of these texts, at once “critical” in the sense of drawing reflexively to the subject of utopia, and ‘critical’ as in possessing the potential explosiveness of ‘critical mass’. This Nietzschean dynamism, visible in many of these works (notably Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed: an ambiguous Utopia, 1974; Joanna Russ’ The Female Man; and Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time, 1976) offered new paths towards feminist solidarity between women who might not come together otherwise.

For Darko Suvin, many of these women writers, including Ursula Le Guin and Joanna Russ, were part of a “New Left” of SF authors, whose Leftism had “more [to do] with sensibility and world view than political affiliation” (Suvin 1975, 273). These supra-political affinities were reflected in the kinds of collectivities that emerged in their novels. While Suvin validates Ursula Le Guin’s brand of “clear and firm but richly and truthfully ambiguous Leftism” above the “flashy and abrasive” forms proposed by other “New Left” writers, such as John Brunner, Samuel R. Delany, Joanna Russ or Norman Spinrad, he also notes that their “common denominator is a radical disbelief in the individualist ideology – i.e., that a stable and humane system can be built upon a sum of individual” (Suvin 1975, 273). While commenting that the “SF anticipation began as part and parcel of the French Enlightenment’s confidence in cognitive progress” (Suvin 1974, 257), these works move towards a “collective humanism” that overrides the self-contained agency of the Enlightenment subject. From the inclusive narrative “we” of Le Guin’s New Atlantis (1975) to Russ’ quadruplet of female protagonists in The Female Man, these works of SF that emerged during the 1970s demonstrate the utopian energy at the heart of the creation of new feminist assemblages in the science fictional future. These are solidarities based not in political persuasion, but instead in a utopian hope for a less divisive future.
While collective agency was an emerging topic in women’s science fiction of the period in North America, feminist assemblies were also being actively created within the science fiction community during the 1970s, where productive solidarities were forged between women writers of SF, fans and literary critics. This is evidenced by a number of publications and events that took place during the mid to late 1970s: 1975 saw the publication of the *Khatru 3 & 4. Symposium: Women in Science Fiction*, which offered a complex and sustained conversation among prominent women writers of science fiction; a later reprint in 1993 edited by Jeanne Gomoll also offers additional material (see Gomoll 1993); also in 1975, the popular fanzine *Janus* was launched by Gomoll and Janice Bogstad and was subsequently nominated for three Hugo Awards between 1978 and 1980; in 1976, the amateur press association *A Women’s APA* was founded; the 34th World Science Fiction Convention “MidAmeriCon” of the same year held its first “Women and Science Fiction” panel; and in 1978, the Westcon regional science fiction and fantasy convention in Vancouver offered a space in which women SF writers and fans could meet for discussion, an accomplishment orchestrated by the Canadian SF writer and literary critic Susan Wood. Joanna Russ has noted that the emergence of all-women panels and discussion groups at conventions in the late 1970s allowed women the space to speak without interference from members of the SF community who belittled the attempts made to create a community of women SF writers. These physical spaces of solidarity, subsequently known within the women’s SF community as a kind of Woolfian “room of our own” (Merrick 2010, 55), complemented the feminist fanzines and other written communication between women writers and fans. The collectivities forged by these exchanges of ideas moved the feminist conversation in SF along from what Russ has referred to as “those damned usual arguments about baboons and dishwashing” (Gomoll 1993, 87–8) to a deeper understanding of how the lives of women are embroiled in systems of class, racial and patriarchal oppression.

These conversations also brought to light a willingness to build solidarities across even conflictual feminist opinions and methods. In Helen Merrick’s (2010) account of Joanna Russ’ engagement with feminist fanzines in the 1970s, she highlights the way in which one such (dis)harmonic conversation between women writers of SF exposes Russ’ interest in the issue of solidarity among women: the correspondence between Russ and Marion Zimmer Bradley in *Watch* between 1975 and 1976. Russ, who critiques Bradley’s 1972 novel *Darkover Landfall* for “assuming that high gravity will have no effect on men, and no other effects on anyone”, concludes that “to drag Anatomy-is-Destiny out of three-thousand-year-old mothballs in order to do so, is not an answer” (Merrick 2010, 18). Towards the end of their correspondence, however, Russ admits that she had been “heartless” towards Bradley’s difference of opinion about the role of women writers in SF, acknowledging her fellow author’s “hard work, her grit, her honesty, and her bravery” (Merrick 2010, 9). Merrick views Russ’ retreat “from strident critique of Bradley’s work” as marking a turn in her attitude towards a “gentler” negotiation of issues and acceptance of the political validity of differing personal experiences” (Merrick 2010, 60).

By accepting the situatedness of each other’s feminist method, Russ and Bradley’s constructive dialogue enables respectful community to be built on, rather than despite of, difference. Indeed, Merrick concludes that: “What becomes much clearer through these feminist fan conversations is the importance to Russ of emphasising solidarity, communication, and ‘sisterhood’ between women even while they may disagree on the
theoretical nuances of feminisms” (Merrick 2010, 61). It is within the context of Russ’ emphasis on solidarity through continuous, though obviously fractious conversation, and despite feelings of frustration at other women’s feminist methods, that I will analyse her 1975 classic feminist critical utopia *The Female Man*. The novel’s emphasis on both the difficulties and the triumphs at stake when bringing a collection of disparate women together in what I will argue is “solidarity, communication, and ‘sisterhood’”, is also – true to Moylan’s definition of the critical utopia – a reflexion on and problematisation of utopia itself. As in Russ’ engagement with Bradley, the novel emphasises the necessity of conversation among women who differ in opinion, in order to build solidarity based in an intersectional and historicised understanding of systems of patriarchal oppression.

*The Female Man* demonstrates the creation of solidarity in difference by offering four versions of the same woman, Joanna, Jeannine, Janet and Jael, who are scattered across space and time so that they are located in four divergent interplanetary positions. Russ’ commitment to specifying the situatedness of these women in the culture, geography and sociopolitical structures of their time and space also means that her characters’ opinions on the status and role of women are framed within an attitude of non-judgement. With the reasons for their difference of opinion described in full, the reader is positioned to accept the way in which various socio-historical factors have influenced the way each character comes to judgement. Jeannine, for example, who is the youngest of the four, is stuck in a protracted Great Depression that was never brought to a close by the Second World War, because Hitler was assassinated in 1936. As a woman during this time, she:

- dresses for the man
- smiles for the Man
- lives for the Man. (Russ 2000, 29)

“Poor” Jeannine (212) lives in a dystopia that is all-too familiar to many women across the world today. It is clear to her that she must be a married child-bearer to be validated. Janet, our second copy-with-a-difference of Jael, lives in a post-apocalyptic world where men have been eradicated completely, and is seriously unimpressed with naive, “listless” Jeannine (109). The last of the four J’s, Joanna, who is arguably Joanna Russ’ mouthpiece, vents her anger and frustration at the belittling of womankind in a place and time that resembles Earth in the 1970s. With rather different personalities and contexts, it transpires that Janet, Joanna and Jeannine do not actually like each other very much. They have few common interests; Janet is a gay inter-dimensional explorer who says it like it is and does as she pleases, while Jeannine is endlessly caught up in what she is told to do, in particular that she must marry a lacklustre reporter with Napoleon complex before her uterus dries up. Janet wants to ensure the land is good and the crops survive, Jeannine just wants to disappear. But Jeannine and Janet have a greater purpose. Through the physical act of coming together and witnessing each other’s lives, an imperfect, yet sound, “sisterhood” is created between the four women, who are ultimately well-informed of the challenges faced by each of its members. This is a solidarity based not on a biological certainty that demarcates women as a universalised category, but on the divisions and differentiations created by culture, history, politics and the workings of capitalism. When Jael transgresses time and space for the last time to unite her other selves on Womanland, a planet where a
40-year high-tech battle-of-the-sexes is underway, she offers Jeannine, Janet and Joanna a glimpse of possibilities for the future – from gender-exclusion to gender-bending. It becomes clear that a future within which a second generation of Jael’s can be in possession of an omniscient view of other possible realities, may only be arrived at through the collaboration of the four J’s. If they are not willing to come together, to learn from each other, they will forever be stuck with the small slivers of perspective offered by their particular position.

As they finish a last supper together on Janet’s planet, Whileaway, in the now extinct New York restaurant chain Schrafft’s, they “got up and paid [the] quintuple bill; then we went out into the street. I said goodbye and went off with Laur, I, Janet; I also watched them go, I, Joanna; moreover I went off to show Jael the city, I Jeannine, I Jael, I myself” (Russ 2000, 212). Russ’ confusing party of five interchangeable pronouns (the last addition being Janet’s lover Laur) is uncomfortable, it is awkward and contradictory. The friction between the “I” of Jeannine, Janet, Jael and Joanna – whose subjectivities are anchored in a specific spatio-temporal moment – and the “we” of collective resistance into which they are gathered, anticipates the feminist criticism of the following decade that would explore the complexity of the place of individual consciousness within feminist assembly. Adrienne Rich’s 1984 essay “Notes toward a Politics of Location” in particular warned against the use of the generalised category of “women” to universalise experience. Noting that attempts to unify women through stated “truths” about that category often only create further schisms, Rich asks: “[…] isn’t there a difficulty of saying ‘we’? You cannot speak for me. I cannot speak for us. Two thoughts: there is no liberation that only knows how to say ‘I’; there is no collective movement that speaks for each of us all the way through” (Rich 1986, 224). For the sake of the solidarity forged between the quadruplet of J’s, the point is not for them to “speak for” one another, but to know each other intimately, to be at once unified and unique, situated in their own realities, with their own concerns and hopes for how feminism plots out. The hermeneutic offered by such a cyclical movement between the part that is the situated subjectivity of the “I” and the whole of the collective “we” generates a literary hermeneutic that allows the four J’s return to their moments in time and space with a nuanced and historicised conception of the workings of systems of oppression.

Rich emphasises that “there is no liberation that only knows how to say ‘I’”. Freedom depends on a simultaneous consideration of “I” and “we”, evidenced by the words of The Female Man’s narrative voice, who, as Jeannine, Janet, Jael and Joanna gather in the New York restaurant, predicts that “[in] a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we will all be free” (Russ 2000, 206). The freedom afforded by science fictional solidarities which take into account the needs of both the ‘I’ and the “we” can be helpfully explored through the feminist criticism of Russ’ contemporaries, in particular the essays and non-fictional writings of Ursula K. Le Guin during the late 1980s. Russ’ positioning of freedom as something that is dependent on the solidarity of women writers is perhaps best summarised in Le Guin’s contribution to the article “What I Do When I Write…” (1989), published in The Women’s Review of Books, a collection of testimonies from authors including Marge Piercy and Audre Lorde. Le Guin claims that the freedom which is required to write is deeply imbricated with the “we” of the feminist SF community who had fought for a voice:
“To write as a woman” – “in a woman’s voice” – Well, what those phrases mean to me, really, is freedom. Not a freedom I was born with. A freedom earned for me and given to me, shared with me, by other women – especially the feminist theorists and critics who have been defining and arguing over such terms since the seventies. (Le Guin 1989, 27)

The critical value of simultaneously “defining and arguing” their terms is made explicit by Le Guin, for whom freedom is dependent on the dialectic at the heart of feminist conversation. In one breath, she de-essentialises freedom by positioning it as a product of feminist labour rather than a natural human privilege. This is what Jael asks of Janet, Joanna and Jeannine, and what Russ asks of her reader: to pursue unexpected, and often initially abrasive solidarities that offer a more comprehensive exposure to the variety of ways in which women experience oppression and defiance. In our world, the utopia of liberal feminism is built within a mirrored wall: its defence relies on the reflection of its own liberal feminist ideas back onto itself. We need to move across the isle and direct our energy toward building richer, more inclusive solidarities which encourage their members to retain opinions and methods that do not necessarily fall into single file.

Thirty-nine years after the publication of The Female Man, Jennifer Marie Brissett’s critical dystopia Elysium (2014) uses a narrative created by an unreliable computer code to illustrate how healthy solidarities can be forged among people who live, think and suffer differently at the same moment of planetary catastrophe. Elysium is part of the next generation of critical dystopias written by women, whose predecessors emerged from the 1990s onwards and substituted the radical utopias of the 60s and 70s. In these dystopian worlds, both grim and invigorating, the struggle for survival meets a re-imagining of racial and gender identities. Raffaella Baccolini argues that “this turn to dystopia recovered utopia” (Baccolini 2000, 165), and indeed, while the novel is a darkly dystopian tale of an oppressive alien ideology that looks to wipe out the human race, its pages also harbour utopian resistance. This comes in the form of the narrative itself, a computer program embedded in the Earth’s atmosphere which has recorded the lives of humans during the final stages of apocalypse. Brissett’s computer program engages with the way in which twenty-first century digitisation has the potential to piece together the social fabric differently, undermining the organisation of hegemonic formations of gender and race and creating unexpected solidarities between users.

Following damage wrought on the script during the alien attack, the reader encounters the story as incomplete, fragmented and modified, replete with error codes that signify either an incorrect recall or complete loss of information in the memory drive. Brissett, who holds a Bachelor’s in Interdisciplinary Engineering from Boston University and has worked as a web developer, writes these system failures onto the page as they would appear on-screen. The broken narrative of one character thus becomes indistinguishable from other personal narratives, forming new modes of digitally produced solidarity and interconnectivity between the uploaded stories. While cultural and media critics such as Taina Bucher have warned of the political and ethical implications of data processing, asking how databases encode and represent gender and ethnicity in ways that can be manipulated by the state and used for citizen surveillance (see Bucher 2016, 490), theorists in fields ranging from women’s studies to media studies have also argued that the digital age offers new modes of positive
exchange and interconnection. Elizabeth Grosz has explored the feminist implications of digitisation as a dual process of decomposition and experimentation that might transform sexual and gender identities “beyond even our own control” (Grosz 2001, 144), while media theorist Lev Manovich positions the database as a series of encounters, selections and recombinations (Manovich 2003). I will explore feminist and anti-racial potentialities of unexpected encounters within a digitised world, to argue that these encounters can forge new, diverse and positive solidarities.

In *Elysium*, following the damage wrought on the script during an alien attack, the reader encounters the story as incomplete, both fragmented and modified, and replete with error codes that signify an incorrect recall or complete loss of information in the memory drive. In an interesting temporal play, the corrupt code is presented to a reader who is both positioned in the past of the narrative’s apocalyptic future, and, in the future of that apocalyptic future, given that we are reading the remainders of a salvaged computer script embedded in the Earth’s wreckage. In this sense, and as Steven Shaviro has argued, the novel “actually recounts a virtual reenactment, within a computer, of events from the distant past” (Shaviro 2015, n.p.). Retrospectively constructed, this newly composite script cuts and pastes the characters and their stories together, creating its own connections between the half-remembered bodies of the protagonists. When terminally ill Antoine, who has been infected by the poisoned dust, confronts his partner Adrian about the significance of Adrian’s other relationship with Helen, a trans woman, a system failure in the narrative script turns dying Antoine into healthy Antoinette. But the interruption caused by the character change is quickly overcome by the system’s need to tell its story, and the script is subsequently rebooted, edited back together, and, following a pause, resumes the argument where it left off:

> “Does he know that?” Antoine met Adrian’s eyes. “He’s only waiting for me to die so he can finally have you.”
> “Don’t say that!”
> The air sucked out of Adrian’s lungs. All sound disappeared. The room floated around and around, spinning and spinning.
> **CORE INTERRUPT**
> DETECTED MAJOR FAULT @ SECTOR: 10110001
> SYSTEM RE-ROUTE IN PROGRESS
> *
> *
> “Don’t ever say that!”
> “It’s true,” Antoinette said. “You know it’s true. Promise me that you won’t choose her after I’m gone”. (2014, 56)

Though the characters unconsciously merge into one another – Antoine becomes Antoinette, who is in a relationship with Adrian, who morphs into Adrienne, who is also sleeping with Helen, who at moments becomes Hector – they do not lose their grounding in a particular and localised point of subjectivity. Each time the corrupt code reaches a system error and is rebooted, so that the very form forces the remaining narrative to merge the lives of the characters, the characters’ individual gender, race and sexuality are often definitely marked and materially experienced. Thus, while the code partly forgets who is who and who did what, the moments of flux that unite and recombine friendships and romances do not come at the expense of the situatedness of
the lives of its protagonists. Nevertheless, Adrian/ne and Antoine/tte’s persisting desire and friendship for one another, regardless of the configuration of their coupling, surpasses the boundaries of gender, race and sexuality and forges connectivity and solidarity based in an extra-categorical affinity.

Recent feminist activism has also taken hold of digital media to create solidarities based in political affinities between diverse internet users. Twitter hashtags, in particular, have been used to make feminism more intersectional: #SayHerName, which brought attention to the murdered African American women that had been overlooked within the #BlackLivesMatter campaign’s focus on the deaths of African American men at the hands of the police; the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag highlights the racialization of feminist solidarity into a domain of whiteness, and through its use, has created openings for diverse and intersectional solidarities; and the #SafetyTipsForLadies hashtag, created by Hilary Bowman-Smart in March 2013, created a widespread and diverse Twitter “storm” after the Melbourne-based student took to the social media platform to express her distaste at the way in which the media was inundating women with misdirected advice about how to avoid getting raped. Bowman-Smart’s hashtag gained international popularity and rerouted the media focus on women’s bodies and behaviours towards a parodic re-evaluation of who is responsible for the act of rape. In this sense, the use of the digital hashtag as a “media hijack” (Rentschler 2015, 354) can also be understood in terms of what the Letterist International collective of the 1950s termed détournement, a rerouting or hijacking of old cultural spheres to produce a text in radical opposition to the status quo. Bowman-Smart’s incitement to produce parodied advice to women, grounded in an oppositional politic, subsequently forged a mutual anger at media body-shaming based in a situated explanation of personal experience. Like the fragmentation of Elysium’s narrative, Twitter proved its potential as a digital medium that could, by collecting fragments of 140 character testimonies (though this limit has since been increased to 280 characters as of September 2017), build intersectional communities of political resistance.

The fragmentation of the digital narrative of feminist resistance is echoed within Elysium’s structure and unorthodox mode of characterisation, which approaches the complexity of the narratives put forward by dissident communities in the real world. The somewhat coarse blend of the characters’ sometimes conflictual lived experience validates the individual within the “mixture” of the cause, which appears as a multi-layering of lives and a heterogeneity of voices. Political activism relies on the interdependency of those who clamour for change alongside unknown others who, in different tones, share their own demands for a better world. As Elysium demonstrates and exaggerates, political cohabitation demands that individuals take on responsibility for those other lives that stand, sit or march alongside them. For Judith Butler, to accept the fact that many of our comrades will be strangers who are potentially very different from us, and yet might have access to an intimate insight into our lives, is the requirement for a well-grounded community:

> for the most part, when we arrive [at a political protest or coalition meeting], we do not know who else is arriving, which means we accept a kind of unchosen dimension to our solidarity with others [...] I want to suggest that solidarity emerges from this rather than deliberate agreements we enter into knowingly. (2015, 152)
Too often do we only want to club together with friends and familiares, with those who not only share with us one particular political agenda, but all our political agendas, while also agreeing with us on matters of gender and faith or lack of, and are ideally part of our particular social or ethnic strata. Instead, Butler outlines the importance of entering into political and social friendships with strangers with whom we might have very little in common outside of the particular concern that unites us with them at any particular march or sit-in. The confusing displacement of characters in *Elysium* demonstrates the often uncomfortable necessity of entering sometimes unwittingly into political solidarities with strangers, handing over part of the call for change to someone who might imagine the appearance of that change very differently than we do. When seen as intimate political friendships, the overlapping characterisations of *Elysium* offer a helpful enquiry into what is necessary for these solidarities to function properly: that gender, race and ability are not used as the basis for compatibility and friendship. The code still offers up Antoinette to take the place of Antoine, regardless of the fact that this also necessitates a change of sexuality in her relationship with Adrian. When the script fails and Antoine cannot continue as himself, the code is rebooted in such a way that allows Antoinette to take over where Antoine left off, allowing his/her tale to reach its just end.

Significantly for an author who focuses much of her fiction on issues of race and gender, the unexpected affinities created by the broken computer code purposefully bypass race and gender as a basis for political solidarity. Though all the protagonists are described as having brown or black skin, and we know that Helen is Latino, race is never at the forefront of the novel. Instead, the novel centres on the implications of the deeply felt relationships described, that survive even as one character becomes another, echoing anti-racial philosopher Paul Gilroy’s hope that solidarities should extend beyond the colour line to be based in “will, inclination, mood, and affinity” (Gilroy 2000, 133). As Gilroy also attests, these measures of compatibility and political friendship do not overlook the specificity of racial and gender oppression in the novel: the characters all demonstrate racial, gender and sexual particularity. But when Antoine morphs into Antoinette or Hector into Helen, it is not shared race and gender that makes them eligible to pick up another character’s storyline and keep going, to experience life in the shoes of that other. Their compatibility extends beyond the boundaries of cultural capital, as the cut and rebooted narratives transform black skin into brown, straight relationships into queer ones, and healthy bodies into bedridden ones battling with dust poisoning. Each time the narrative breaks, the characters must, regardless of their new sexual preference or bodily strength, fight the fight of another, live, breathe and inhabit that life – and all in the name of defeating the aliens (after all, this is science fiction).

The opportunity, each time one character morphs into another, to constantly reconfigure the terms by which solidarity is created, proves to be the very condition by which the defeat of the common enemy is made possible: every time the narrative cuts occur and characters move from one body to another very different one, the story becomes more complete, the solidarities witnessed prove both increasingly malleable and hardy, and the fight to survive seems more readily won. In this sense, the ruptures in the narrative are not breaks but ties that unite the characters and make survival possible. They can also be read in terms of Karen Barad’s formulation of “agential realism”, in which “agential cuts” do not divide but cut “together-apart” in an “iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling” (Barad 2014, 168). Indeed,
the solidarities forged in *Elysium* both bind and break, distinguishing individuals while entwining them with others, allowing for new characterisations and solidarities while moving away from previous characterisations and plot lines. These tiebreaks enact Judith Butler’s assertion that humankind can build solidarities based on the growing structural inequalities that leave many lives broken and disregarded. These shared, though widely variant, conditions of precarity and precariousness, can create cohesion as much as fragmentation.

For Butler, while all human lives are by nature precarious, as easily expunged as created, precarity is a “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler 2009, 25). Whether vulnerable to poverty, racial abuse or gender violence, Butler suggests that when coupled with the mere fact of human precarity, the conditions of precarity, by which people are exposed to a much greater degree of vulnerability, can be the condition on which communities transform into powerful collectives. This drawing together of oppressed groups does not deny the specificity and individuality of oppression; for Butler, precarity can be shared but is never equal. Indeed, while *Elysium’s* protagonists risk erasure from both the planet and the script at a more heightened pitch than the average pre-apocalyptic human, death and emotional and physical agony don a different guise before each of them. While Adrianne is forced to give up her home and flee from humans that, when transformed into bloodthirsty reptiles, scavenge for food in the deserted city, Helen, a brown-skinned trans woman, is being taken advantage of by doctors who have used the chaos of the alien attacks as an excuse to put her in a mental hospital. Though the conditions of their oppression vary, for Helen as for Adrianne, vulnerability becomes a source of continual regeneration, as the dozens of variations of rebooted computer script narrative also bring about equally numerous versions of their stories, each with a chance at survival. We wonder, is it Adrianne who sprouts wings and hides from the reptiles in a deserted skyscraper, or was it Adrian, who is transformed into Adrianne and back over the course of the novel? Like Jael’s other-dimension selves in *The Female Man*, these fragmented, disjointed versions of the story come together to create a compelling and complex narrative based on compatibility across difference. Solidarity in imperfect times relies on this kind of creation of more than one narrative of resistance, that reflect both the situatedness of each life that has been abandoned to precarity, and the importance of a heterogenous layering of these voices. Used in this way, solidarity can form a more complete view of the ways in which, for example, women and people of colour feel is the best way to fight for various conceptions of equality.

**Conclusion**

A community that is powerful enough to make change must welcome a diversity of politics and opinion, of genders, ethnicities and sexual orientations – and indeed, of attitudes about these topically divisive issues. Moving in parallel to theoretical and social developments in feminist and anti-racist movements of the day, critical utopian and dystopian science fiction demonstrates how the success of supra-political affinities depends on a respect for historicised and localised narratives. Whether through *Elysium’s* broken script, which pulls together overlapping strands of events and characters in its attempt to offer the reader the story of a decaying world, or *The Female Man’s* division of one woman’s story into four different spatio-temporal
moments, we are told that change is not born from uniformity, but multiplicity. We discover unity in dark corners: in the fragmentation of single humans into multiple others, some gay like Janet, some homophobic like Jeannine, who all encounter moments of despair and situations of global peril and social precarity. Where the 1970s feminist critical utopia emerged parallel to the creation of new solidarities within the SF community, which came together to advance the conversation on women’s writing, the critical dystopias of today can, as Elysium has proved, reflect the collectives made possible by the rapid increase in digitisation within the past decade. Critical media theory, combined with contemporary theories of assembly and collective forms of humanism, identifies the feminist and anti-racist potential of these solidarities. As we call on Utopia to cast off the prevailing dystopia of our current global climate, science fiction urges us to befriend the stranger, and with them, to encounter solidarity differently.

Works Cited


**Links**

