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Space is Queer and Radical

E Whitney Buck

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I've had the same argument so many times that I can parrot what my opponent is going to say.

"Why are we spending money on space when we have problems like starvation and climate change here?"

"Only rich people are going to be able to go to space, so why should I care?"

"Space exploration is going to be just another avenue of colonialism."

Followed by a, "So, fuck that," from them, and a change of subject, with me significantly more disheartened than before. In going toe-to-toe with my fellow radical queers, it's hard not to feel like they're right. They're right in the way that nihilism seems right. Which is, right up until the very last point of it, when it's wrong. Because the conclusion of it amounts to nothing, nothingness. It's an empty meal, to dismiss space travel. There's no spark of joy, no impulse towards growth, or even life, in the thought that space belongs to the abhorrent capitalist colonizers *and that is that*.

I love space. It probably started early- my father would wake me and my brother up early when we were kids to go lay on a dew-drenched soccer field to look for shooting stars. I never saw any,

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but I the excitement of the astronomical expedition lingers. When I got to take a summer college course in high school, I took Astrobiology, and loved it. I learned about how virtually impossible the chances of multicellular life existing on this planet were, and how we measure the presence and size of different planets outside of our solar system by calculating the gravitational wobble of the stars they orbit. My dream date is an overnight to one of the local observatories. I have NASA Jet Propulsion Lab posters on my wall now, as a grown-up, proudly boasting to all guests that NASA made the stunning vintage-style travel posters to exoplanets to be released as high-resolution versions to the public *just to get people excited about space*.

Somewhere along that timeline, I also came out, married a woman, blurred my conception of my gender, and just overall amounted to a lot of kinds of queer, in some exuberant fashion or another. Being queer, I befriended other queers, and am so grateful to feel a part of a wide network of radical people. But this space thing, it just keeps coming up, and I couldn't compute why me and so many other radical queers are on such different pages about it.

When starting to research this article, I thought its target audience would be the primitivist-leaning queers that seem to pop up in my spaces. It makes sense that those who are opposed to the use and pursuit of technology oppose space exploration. But when I did a call for comments from my social media friendships, I received opinions from many people of a variety of political opinions who expressed hesitant, and mostly grounded, opposition to space exploration. Some were even genuinely heartbroken about it.

I want to both oppose the opposition to space exploration among the primitivist gays I keep encountering, and give queers of all inclinations some solid reasons for being excited about space. Because relinquishing space exploration to a few wealthy assholes is surrendering our future to them as well, and we're not done fighting for that.

Now, I definitely cannot argue that a few rich assholes don't currently have the monopoly on space, nor that those environments are welcoming of *teh gayz*, let alone radical ones. Trump nominated the now-confirmed Jim Bridenstine, a climate change denier who has spoken out against marriage equality, gay inclusion in the Boy Scouts, and equal treatment of transgender students, to head up NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. This was before 45 signed the Space Policy Directive 1, which called for NASA to work with private sector partners to return US astronauts to the surface of the moon, creating a waystation for exploration further afield. In August, 2018, Pence announced plans to form a new branch of the U.S. military called the Space Force, which asserts the view that space is a "warfighting domain". In the private sector, divisive capitalist Elon Musk, in a particularly excessive display, launched his own car into space. The message of all of this new space exploration is clear: space is the domain of the wealthy, the powerful, the violent. The whites, the men, the straights.

But does it have to be? Is space exploration but the manifest destiny of colonialism continuing in perpetuity, spiraling out into the cosmos? If that is the case, from whence will rise the concurrent legacy of revolution and upheaval as subversion of any and all attempted hegemonies in this new theatre beyond our atmosphere?

In the extraordinary play *Angels in America* (go watch the HBO miniseries, I'll wait. Plus I'm about to spoil a part for you), an Angel comes from on high to deliver a prophecy to the AIDS-stricken Prior Walter. He is to deliver in turn to his global contemporaries at the end of the millenium the following:

"STOP MOVING.

Forsake the Open Road;

Neither Mix Nor Intermarry: Let Deep Roots Grow:

If you do not MINGLE you will Cease to Progress:

*Seek Not to Fathom the World and its Delicate Particle
Logic:*

You cannot Understand, You can only Destroy”

This is the voice of heartless nihilism, a hopelessness in humanity, and where does it lead us? The decree stymies us from understanding our environment, from even attempting to understand, because in trying to understand something, through our own growth and exploration, we destroy it. Like imperial colonizers bringing smallpox wiping out entire indigenous populations, we run the risk of bringing destruction with us into space. It does make sense to advocate not exploring, then. Best to stay on our own planet.

And yet, who else advocates for people to stop this whole moving around thing? Those in favor of militarized borders, who oppose immigration, miscegenation, and gay stuff. Go back to where you came from. You destroyed your own country, so now you have to come to ours to do the same? You don't belong here. Speak English. Act like a girl. Boy. This is America.

My open-border politics believe in movement, and that extends beyond our planet. I support teeming, productive, creative life. I believe in queers finding and creating spaces that are safer, which come in thanks almost entirely to our ability and capacity to move, because not often, certainly not in Western societies, did those spaces exist before. We, and our transcestors, had to make them. I bless the transqueers caravanning across multiple countries to seek asylum in places where they may be safer, and support their right to do that. Space exploration—the moon, Mars, even ultimately extra-solar travel—presents entirely new opportunities for such growth, learning, engagement, community-making. Is it totally audacious to think that queers, some of the historically (and currently) most marginalized from every kind of capital in the System As We Know It on earth, especially when intersecting with race, class, ability, citizenship and more, will be a part of such an opportunity?

*been an artistic Renaissance. Ecosystems are flourishing,
no more plastic or pollution.*

I love this- the Earth shedding the rich like a bunch of fleas, leaving the rest of us to prosper.

These visions seem “right” to me too, in the opposite ways as the dystopias we imagine do. Having a vision in and of itself is a kind of fulfillment. I know I tread on dangerous ideological territory here, because we inherited a runaway train that just continues to accelerate towards climate change disaster. One cannot vision that reality away. But neither should one only descend into nihilism at the prospect. The problems, and their solutions, are simply going to be more complex than that. The climate, technology, and culture are going to keep being dynamic and interdependent. As queers, we are pushing the levels of complexity within culture, relationships, gender, and beyond. It is out of sync with the way we push boundaries of all kind to dismiss the many possibilities of space exploration out of hand. Can we queer it instead?

Of course. And don't we queers excel at audacity? Our very survival often requires it. Some of us do, and must, carry our differences quietly, the barest whispers inside ourselves as passing takes precedence. Others, given the chance to do so safely, or even, god bless them, without such a guarantee, display their otherness for all to see: leaning into it in clothing, hair, language, art, expression, and relationships that flaunt standards and expectations and anything that's ever come before. Queers are already made to be alien on our own planet by our genders and orientations- which is not to say that we should not belong here, but that we can also embrace the alien, unknown life that awaits humanity in space.

And that's the wind-up of the thing: humans are going to space. One way or another we will be attempting to expand ourselves further afield, endeavoring whole new ways of existing and facing impossible, inhospitable conditions with the only goal to survive and thrive. This is already the world we know- the dystopia of murdered trans women and sex workers and evangelical Christians exporting their homophobia and emboldened nazis and a president that reminds us of our alcoholic fathers that will oops us into nuclear war any day now. The world we struggle in. That struggle amounts to something- for us and the gaybies to come. I'm saying we can handle space, and we should.

I certainly can't advocate that we *all* abscond to Mars. I absolutely love Earth, and so many fights live here. But those who want to make anarcho-queer space communes should be supported as another facet of the may-headed radical movement, such as it is. This is as opposed to facing the shut-down-the-conversation critiques launched at “space” by the queers I referenced at the beginning: money, irrelevance, colonization. But space exploration doesn't have to be the playground for the evil super villains of the world, diverting needed resources, colonizing and thereby ruining currently untouched environments. Space exploration should instead be part and parcel with our vision for post-scarcity societies, as how in the utopian setting in Star Trek in which society's ills are

solved, allowing for exploratory humanitarian space missions. But if we're ever going to get there, "there" being both equity on Earth and space exploration, they will happen together, both inspiring the other.

These queer critiques of space exploration exhibit a crisis of imagination, wherein only the most disastrous outcome seems possible. I want to look, then to how such futures have been imagined successfully. The solarpunk visions, which exist almost entirely online at the moment, growing initially out of Brazil, is the future, solar-powered equivalent of steampunk, dieselpunk and the like. It presents a utopian wonderland where sustainability and harmony with the environment is achieved, but not through the austere aesthetic of cold, dark cities we see so in films. Instead, an appreciation for the sun that comes from having a solar-power-based society extends into abundant green spaces and community gardens. Accessibility is the norm rather than the exception, from public transport to public art. Solarpunk comes up in direct response to our cultural obsession in apocalypse which, of course, remains quite likely, whether through climate change or any other myriad risks. The significance of solarpunk is in providing a binding and optimistic vision for our future, one of a mosaic of possibilities that give us something to look forward to. And, space plays a role, as the Brazilian anthology first introduced: *"Now imagine large space sailboats driven by solar radiation, production of biofuels via nanotechnology, the advent of photosynthetic humans, and, as there is no perfect society, even terrorism against corrupt businesses and governments."* Terraforming Mars would be a solarpunk dream project- to build anew, using technology to give us life.

As another example, in Afrofuturist Octavia E. Butler's Parable Duology, a central tenet of the religion borne of their climate hellscape is that the *"Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars."* She continues:

"On new earths.

It is to become new beings

And to consider new questions.

It is to leap into the heavens

Again and again.

It is to explore the vastness

Of heaven.

It is to explore the vastness

Of ourselves."

Again about spoilers, but, Earthseed ultimately succeeds, or at least hint towards succeeding, more than anyone else. Earthseed does so by connecting their very religious essences to the study of science and a myopic vision of their destiny. They build schools training scientists and technological innovators and astronauts and visionaries. They face violent discrimination and occasionally get lucky. And they achieve what they set out to do. As far as I can tell, there is a movement online prosthetizing Earthseed as a modern religion, more power to them.

Perhaps neither vision moves you as it does me, if technology is something so repugnant to you that you cannot imagine any good to be associated with it. In that case, let me offer you a third vision, from tumblr:

Idea: Story that looks like it'll be typical white centric colonize Mars premise, with Earth "a lost cause" but surprise, it's a solarpunk story. Generations after the elite left Earth, the little blue planet is thriving. Mars society is stagnate + caste based. They all think Earth is "dead" but no, we're all living responsibly and holistically. Technology has drastically advanced and there's