

Legending in a Minor Key

Notes on Angela Su's "Lauren O—The Greatest Levitator
in the Polyhedric Cosmos of Time"

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Lauren O—The Greatest Levitator in the Polyhedric Cosmos of Time, by Angela Su. 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. Curated by Freya Chou; co-organized by M+ and Hong Kong Arts Development Council. Cissy Pui-Lai Pao and Shinichiro Watari Galleries, Hong Kong. 9 June 2023-8 Oct. 2023.

IN "Mythology and Science Fiction," author Thomas Disch notes that "the structures of mythology" (21) are used to make sense of the new. To Disch, "myths are everywhere in literature, but especially in science fiction" (22). The convergence of the oldest form of storytelling with what has yet to come seems unlikely. However, Disch suggests that science fiction (SF), like "myths aim at maximizing meaning, at compressing truth to the highest density" (22). In this sense, the SF writer is a mythmaker who aims to humanise the technological near future. Myths in turn structure present imaginings of what is possible. Through a sustained contestation of Enlightenment Humanist myths of what it means to be human, Hong Kong artist Angela Su reveals their problematics by creating counter-myths of what the body can do.

The doubleness of the vulnerability and power of the body is central in Su's exhibition representing Hong Kong at the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. In "Lauren O—The Greatest Levitator in the Polyhedric

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Cosmos of Time,” Su offers a revisionist take on the iconography of superheroes in comics, considered as gods in modern mythology. Previously, Su worked with fantasies of the power of flight, as in the case of “The Afterlife of Rosy Leavers” (2017). In the video installation “The Magnificent Levitation Act of Lauren O,” Su takes up the role of a levitator floating in mid-air while in bondage, before gradually transforming into a disco ball diffracting shards of light. This reversed transformation of the human form into other matter harks back to the mythic origins of creating life in art, a notable example being ancient Roman poet Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*. Among the many memorable tales of human transformation into flora and fauna is Pygmalion, a sculptor who transforms stone into human flesh. He makes an ivory statue representing his ideal of womanhood and then falls in love with his own creation, which he names Galatea; the goddess Venus brings the statue to life in answer to his prayer.

The titular character Lauren O in Su’s exhibition references to the main character in *Parable of the Sower* (Butler 2023 [1993]) by African American author Octavia E. Butler. Considered as one of the defining texts of contemporary science fiction, Butler’s novel works within and at the same time subverts the conventions of the post-apocalyptic genre. Rather than depicting stock images of ravaged landscapes in Hollywood blockbusters, Butler presents a Los Angeles in 2024 plagued by climate crisis that exacerbates existing social inequalities. The author’s prescience notwithstanding, Butler’s choice to set the cautionary tale firmly in ongoing sociopolitical tensions in the States makes the novel even more timely and harrowing. The novel is a layered narrative interspersed by three texts: The diary of Lauren Oya Olamina, a 15-year old African American girl spanning 2024-2027, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, a religious text by Lauren for her newfound community, and Biblical allusions to “The Parable of the Sower” (Matthew 13:1-23), and to which the title of Butler’s book attributed.

As a work about the “end times,” Butler’s novel curiously opens with a recurring dream of Lauren Olamina where she learns to levitate and fly. It is a dream of contradictions: flight and entrapment, lightness (in terms of a blazing fire

and the sensation of weightlessness) and blanketing darkness, freedom and disorientation. It is telling that the dream about the crossing of the symbolic threshold reappears on the day when Lauren turns fifteen, an age associated with the growing pains of adolescence in the transition from innocence to experience. This process of change builds upon levitation as a trope of fantasy, which offers insight into a reconstituted, changed/changing self and environment.

The levitator is the subject or thing that floats without any attributable mechanical force, visible or physical energy source. The defiance of gravity evokes the ethereal quality of being unbounded, light and adrift. Similar to the opening dream sequence of *Parable of the Sower* where Lauren attains momentarily the power of staying afloat in the air while struggling to control her movements and pathways, this quality of lightness of flight connotes uncertainty and/as freedom. The act of levitation appears in the major world religions, with the narrative of the rising of the soul to join with God found in both textual and visual religious representations. This lifting of the mortal to the realm of immortality and eternity is commonly allegorised in pilgrimages, rituals and rites of passage up hills, steps and mountains and, ultimately, floating figures. In the secular realm of human society, levitation also represents the power relationship between the ruler and the ruled, an interesting parallel to the classic frontispiece image of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) featuring an outsized ruler hovering over his dominions. In pre-modern societies, animistic belief systems hold the shaman as levitator elect. In Medieval times, sovereignty and kingship are illustrated as floating messengers between heaven and earth. Today, the powerful levitators take the form and shape of superheroes in pop culture, "hovering just above the ground when speaking to mere mortals or those differently abled" (Curtis 220).

If science fiction is the offspring of mythology, then Su's persona of Lauren O presents us with a paradox of the levitator with no superpowers. It is also a poignant affirmation of human frailty and imperfection. Su makes complex the notion of our physical vulnerability by presenting a dissection of self-fashioning. The artist/individual/persona strives to remake themselves in the vein of

mythological deities, thereby unsettling the boundaries between man and god, human and the non-human (animal and object) by becoming hybrids of dichotomous categories. The human figure endowed with the power of flight, sometimes embodying the form of a bird, is a prominent figure in world mythology, most notably ancient Greek deities (from Athena to Hermes) and one of the sources of superheroes. In Su's Biennale exhibition, the bird is also a motif, from the naming of the underground resistance that Lauren O joins as "Laden Raven," to the imposing "hair embroidery" (Chou par. 5) of the contours of a fossilised bird with outstretched wings, its body a refuge for a curled up human foetus.

To Deleuze and Guattari, the majoritarian view of the scientist with the power to order material reality remains confined to the "Man of Reason" in the Enlightenment tradition of imbricated with historical developments of imperialism. Deleuze and Guattari's makes an important distinction between "Royal" and "minor" science:

In the field of interaction of the two sciences, the ambulant sciences confine themselves to inventing problems whose solution is tied to a whole set of collective, nonscientific activities but whose scientific solution depends, on the contrary, on royal science and the way it has transformed the problem by introducing it into its theorematized apparatus and its organization of work. (1987: 413)

Su's subversive taxonomies could be read through the lens of posthuman thought as a practice of "minor science," which is the deliberate adoption of major and at times problematic methods and concepts in knowledge production in order to dismantle them. In the process, imperceptible biases and agendas can be delineated and made visible for potential rectifications. Posthumanism critiques the definition of the human in the tradition of Enlightenment Humanism. The Humanist Man is characterized as a "rational animal?...inhabit[ing] a perfectly functional physical body, implicitly modelled upon ideals of white masculinity, normality, youth and health" (Braidotti 2013: 67-68). This universalist and Eurocentric figure doubles

as a limiting definition of what it means to be human, and from there, a citizen. Posthuman thought contests this by calling for the formation of a new subjectivity of hybridity that transgresses hierarchical categorical markers of difference. This way, we can address and redress injustices that emerges from systems of control in science and technology of modernity. Borrowing from Donna Haraway's cyborg figure that traces its genealogy to SF, we can understand the human body as "a cyborg [which] is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 150). As Rosi Braidotti further notes, "A hybrid, or body-machine, the cyborg... is a connection-making entity, a figure of interrelationality, receptivity and global communication that deliberately blurs categorical distinctions (human/machine; nature/culture; male/female; oedipal/non-oedipal)" (2006: 200). In Su's Biennale exhibition, the staging of fantastical multi-species hybridity "explodes the boundaries of humanism at skin level" (Braidotti 2012: 221).

Levitators with their gravity-defying power that renders them more-than-human "have often been marginalized, castigated or objectified" (Adey 321). In *Parable of the Sower*, this precarious status is reinforced by Lauren Olamina's awareness of her marginalised status in mainstream American society as a young African American female. At the same time, it is important to note the significance of Lauren as a Moses figure leading her Earthseed community to their utopian enclave, however temporary and fragile it is, in the context of Afrofuturism. Coined by Mark Dery in his seminal essay "Black to the Future" (1994) that examines the underrepresentation of African American culture and concerns in the predominantly White and male publishing world of the SF genre, Dery argues that SF is the form that enables African Americans to use the tropes of the genre, such as alien abduction, to come to terms with their traumatic history of slavery. The origins and aspirations of Afrofuturist SF are therefore inseparable from the ongoing struggles of African Americans against institutionalised racism in the States. "Not only does Afrofuturism posit that blacks will exist in the future, as opposed to being harbingers of social chaos and collapse, but in 'recovering the

histories of counter-futures' Afrofuturism insists that blacks fundamentally are the future and that Afrodiasporic cultural practices are vital to imagining the continuance of human society" (Morris 153). In this context, Afrofuturism is itself a struggle for social justice. Importantly, Dery asks, "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of history, imagine possible futures?" (180) and I would add especially futures represented by speculations about the impact of science and technology that may still be present fictions.

Angela Su's seminal science fiction project *Dark Fluid* (2017), a rarity in Hong Kong SF in terms of its celebration of minoritarian standpoints and internationalist outlook, traces one of its origins to *Octavia's Brood* (2015), a SF anthology and community writing initiative that revived critical and public interest in the legacy and significance of Octavia Butler. In a probing and revelatory reflection on her artistic practice, Butler situates her work firmly in the intersection of the futurity of the marginalised:

What good is any form of literature to Black people? What good is science fictions thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what "everyone" is saying, doing, thinking—whoever "everyone" happens to be this year. And what good is all this to Black people? (Butler 2005: 134-135)

In this sense, Butler is writing into being what Deleuze and Guattari term "the missing people" or "a people yet to come" (1994) with its "millennial aura" (Bogue 87) by imagining new structures of kinship and networks. As the Afrofuturist author Samuel R. Delaney reminds us, science fiction is "always at its most honest

and most effective when it operates - and claims to be operating - from the margins” (Dery 189). Suppressed and submerged voices of the multitude, both fictional and historical, pass through Su’s personas “caught in the act of legending” (Deleuze 1997: 125) in the admirable tradition of storytelling as praxis.

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