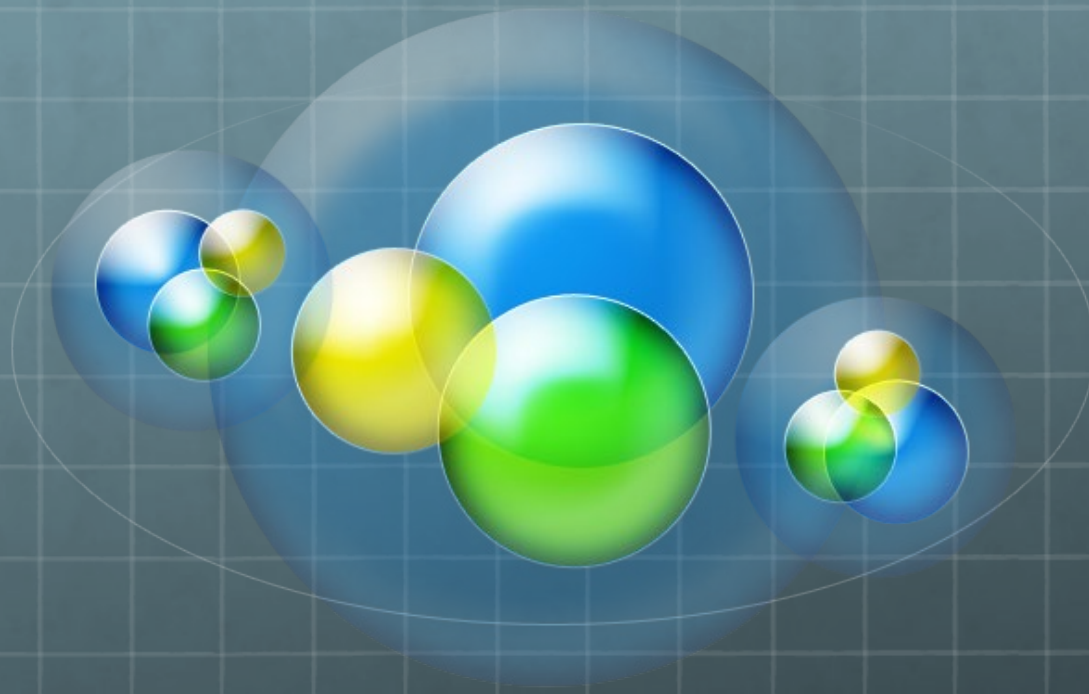


# Acknowledgement of Country.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which I currently am, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I pay my respects to the Elders past and present, and to any Aboriginal people here today.









# Worlds Beyond Gender

Contemporary Postgender Speculative Fiction

**I eliminated gender to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human.**



**— Ursula K. Le Guin, ‘Is Gender Necessary? Redux.’**

# Structure of presentation.




-  An introduction to my research project.
-  What is postgenderism?
-  What is postgender literature?
-  Primary texts.
-  Critical theories, particularly queer theory and posthumanism.
-  Q&A.





# Introduction.

-  My manuscript will analyse five recent works of speculative fiction that feature postgender worlds, that is, worlds in which binary gender is not the norm.
-  The manuscript will conduct an intersectional exploration of how postgender worldbuilding is accomplished in fiction, and how the primary texts attempt to disentangle binary gender from the various aspects of society with which it is entangled—be they social, economic, reproductive or technological.

# What is postgenderism?

-  Postgenderism is a cultural movement which argues that 'gender is an arbitrary and unnecessary limitation on human potential' (Dvorsky and Hughes 2008, 1).
-  Postgenderism aims to dismantle the gender binary, which postgenderists see as tyrannical and harmful, so that humanity can exist free of enforced gender roles.
-  Postgenderists seek to accomplish this liberation through the use of technology, including genetic engineering and 'liberatory reproductive technology' (Dvorsky and Hughes 2008, 10), which will theoretically give people the option of having the biological sex of their choice, some mixture of biological reproductive traits, or no such traits at all.

# What is postgenderism?

-  ‘Postgenderists do not call for the end of all gender traits, or universal androgyny, but rather that those traits become a matter of choice. Bodies and personalities in our postgender future will no longer be constrained and circumscribed by gendered traits, but enriched by their use in the palette of diverse self-expression.’ (Dvorsky and Hughes 2008, 1)
-  As such, postgenderism is ‘a radical interpretation of the feminist critique of patriarchy and gender, and the genderqueer critique of the way that binary gender constrains individual potential and our capacity to communicate with and understand other people’ (Dvorsky and Hughes 2008, 13).





# The origin of postgenderism.

- 🌐 'Postgenderism' was first coined in: Dvorsky, George and James Hughes. 2008. 'Postgenderism: Beyond the Gender Binary.' Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies.  
<https://ieet.org/archive/IEET-03-PostGender.pdf>.
- 🌐 Dvorsky and Hughes are therefore technically postgenderism's founders, although the term is revisioned somewhat in my manuscript in accordance with the posthumanism of Donna Haraway, which I will go into later in this presentation.



# What is postgender literature?

-  Postgender literature espouses this same philosophy of rebellion against binary gender, and postgender speculative fiction speculates as to the existence or emergence of worlds with non-binary gender models—that is, of worlds with no genders, multiple genders, or an amalgam of genders.
-  My manuscript will study the literary devices and world-building techniques used by five primary texts in the construction of postgender worlds. Such worlds offer queer alternatives to the ubiquitous, heteronormative worlds of mainstream speculative fiction that reinforce and perpetuate the ‘absolute despot duality’ (Anzaldúa 1987, 41) of the gender binary.

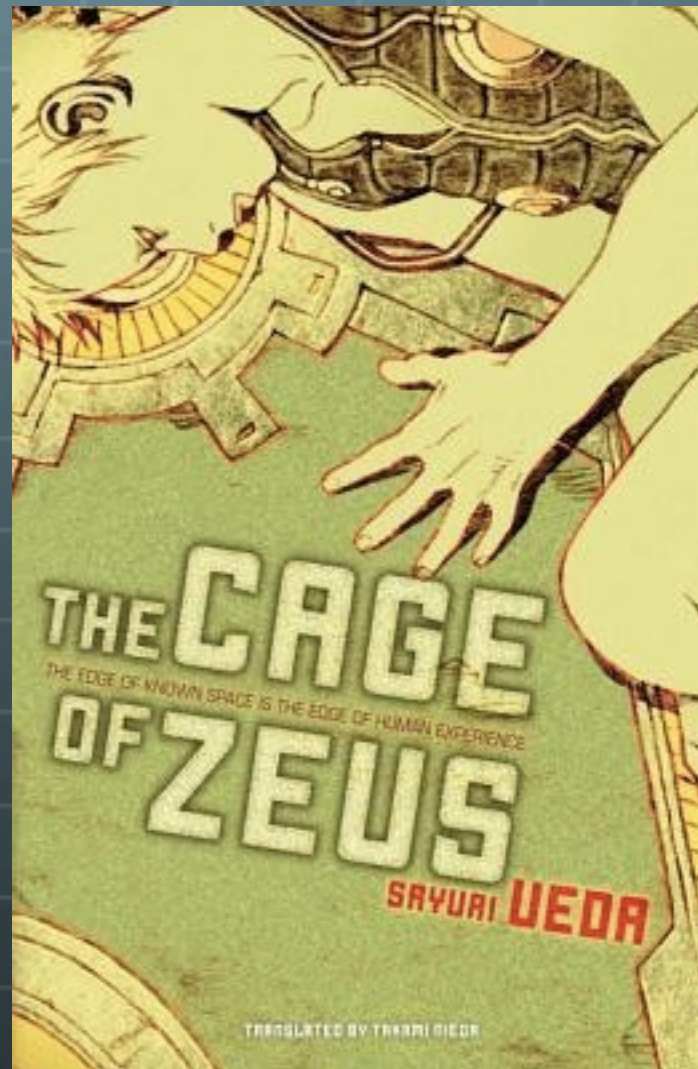
# Primary texts.

The primary texts the manuscript will study are:

- 🌐 Sayuri Ueda's *The Cage of Zeus* (2011)
- 🌐 Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* series (2012-2017)
- 🌐 Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312* (2012)
- 🌐 Kameron Hurley's *Worldbreaker Saga* (2014-2015)
- 🌐 J. Y. Yang's *Tensorate* series (2017-2018)



All of the above authors have won major awards, such as the Hugo Award, the Nebula Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Japan SF Award. I will now briefly describe each text, one by one.

# The Cage of Zeus.





# The Cage of Zeus.

-  Sayuri Ueda's *The Cage of Zeus* (2011) is a science fiction novel in which the government attempts to create an ideal postgender society without gender, by genetically engineering intersex humans to populate new space colonies. The government sees space exploration as humanity's chance to start afresh in space, as a non-binary species liberated from the inequalities of binary gender.
-  However, the prejudices that these new humans, known as "Rounds," are subjected to by non-Rounds are depicted as mainstream society's reactionary rejection of this new, postgender human template.



# The Cage of Zeus.

Rounds were created '[t]o resolve the issues raised by gender differences. Our society has not been able to overcome gender discrimination with our laws and ethics alone. We're incapable of eliminating the conflicts stemming from the differences in sexes. And that's only natural. Our physiology is different. So are our hormonal cycles. There's no way to understand the other completely. That's fine, I suppose. You might say that such issues are what make humanity so fascinating and profound. But now as we've left the tiny confines of the solar system and are attempting to embark on a journey into the dark expanse, we can't afford to quibble over such trifling matters. Which is why we should dispense with the problems that can be resolved by reinventing the body. A society where we are equals, where only individual differences exist. That was the ideal [... ].' (Ueda 2011, loc. 834–840)

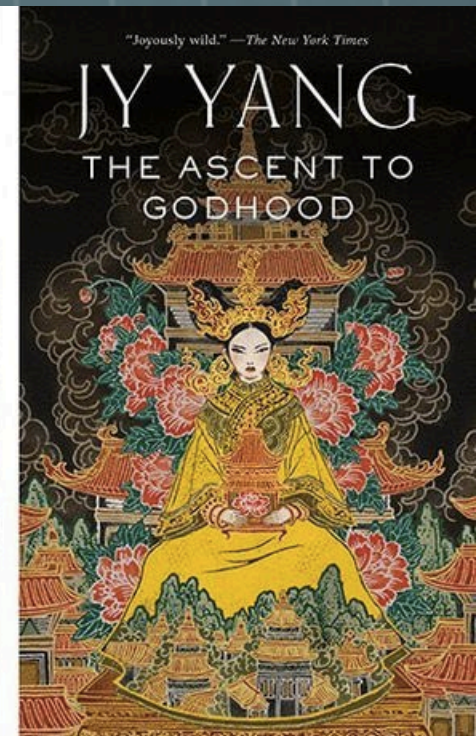
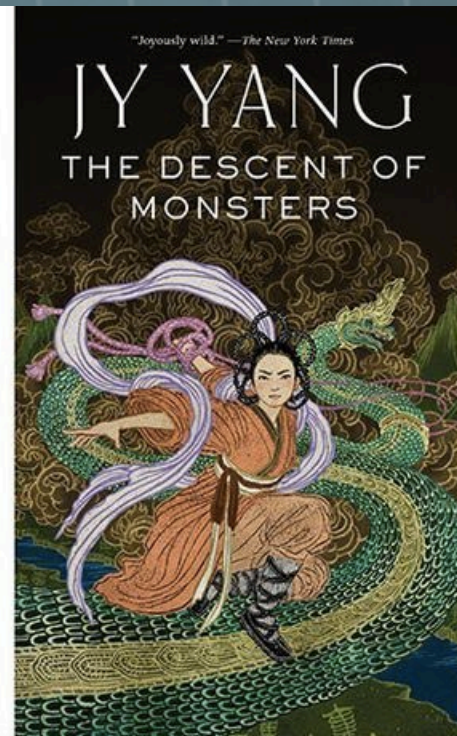
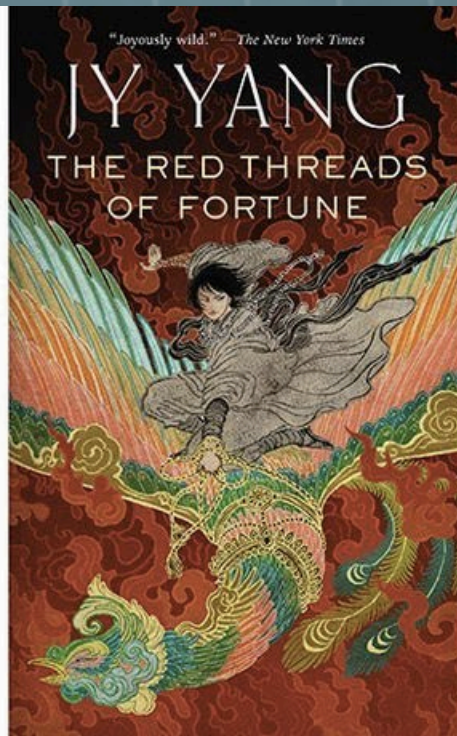
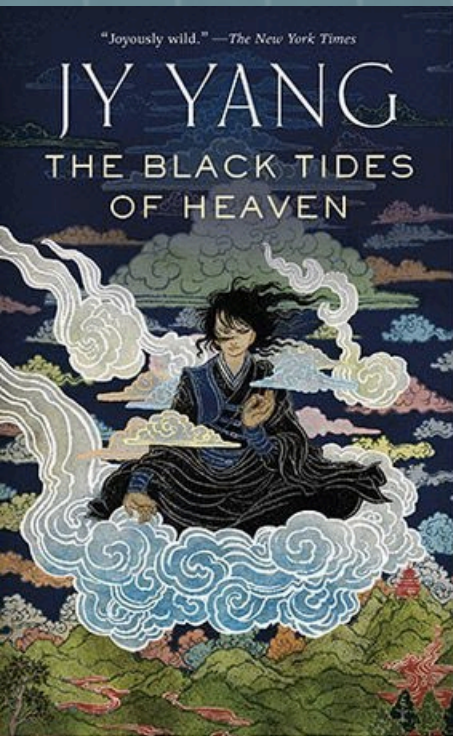
# The Cage of Zeus.

## Problematic elements in *The Cage of Zeus*:

- 🌐 Still equates biological sex with gender identity, which can be seen as transphobic/queerphobic.
- 🌐 Assumes that the new intersex humans will not end up differentiating their own gender identities based on other factors, appearances or behaviours.
- 🌐 Ironically, the government's move towards non-binary postgenderism is rooted in binary thinking, i.e. the conviction that as long as two distinct biological sexes remain, conflict is inevitable between the two.



# The Tensorate Series.







# The Tensorate Series.

- 🌐 Yang's *Tensorate* series depicts an apparently ideal postgender society where individuals are able to choose their own gender. However, the world of these novels is also controlled by a stifling monarchy. Thus, while a person's right to choose their gender is considered sacred and inviolable, free will in the broader spectrum is not.
- 🌐 Yang's silkpunk narrative borrows from East Asian cultures and from the author's own Singaporean heritage and experiences of censorship.
- 🌐 The *Tensorate* Series presents a non-Western postgender world that is utopian in its depiction of gender but dystopian in its depiction of the evils of unchecked power, corruption and the political justifications for violence.



# The Tensorate Series.

-  The *Tensorate Series* shares the trans-positive trope of ‘gender confirmation’ with James Gardner’s earlier novel, *Commitment Hour* (1998), although it, too, posits a ‘deadline’ on gender commitment after a childhood spent in a relatively amorphous state and/or body. This trope of gender ‘setting’ like concrete has heteronormative implications, but the agency of the characters in choosing their gender outcome is of paramount importance, and the queerness of that agency ultimately triumphs.
-  Within the novel, themes of postcolonialism and slavery overlap with sociolinguistic issues such as non-binary pronouns in an intersectional exploration of how binary gender constructs co-create and participate in injustice and tyranny, and how such constructs build systems of power designed to privilege the few above the many.

# The Tensorate Series.

Quote #1: Nobody jumped from undeclared gender straight to confirmation. They'd take a couple of years to be sure. Unless they were Sonami, and Akeha wasn't Sonami.

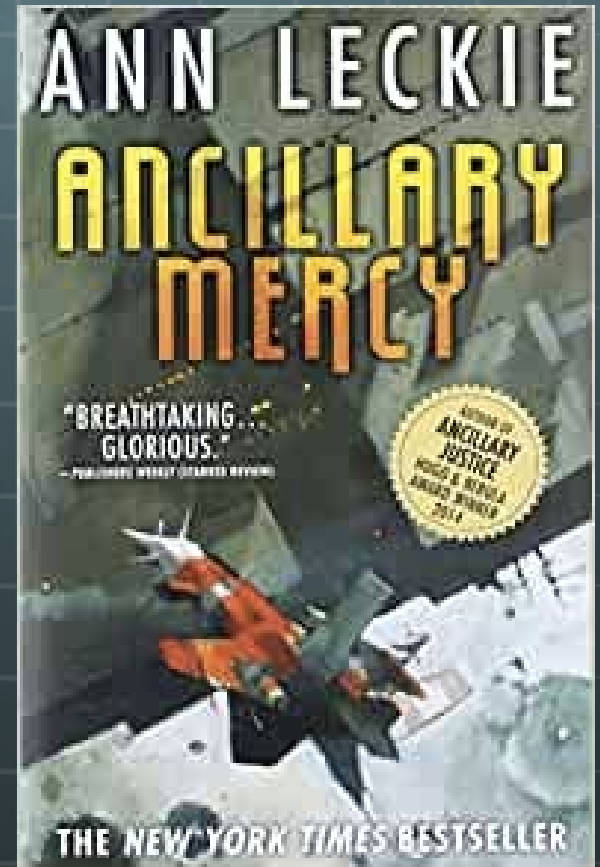
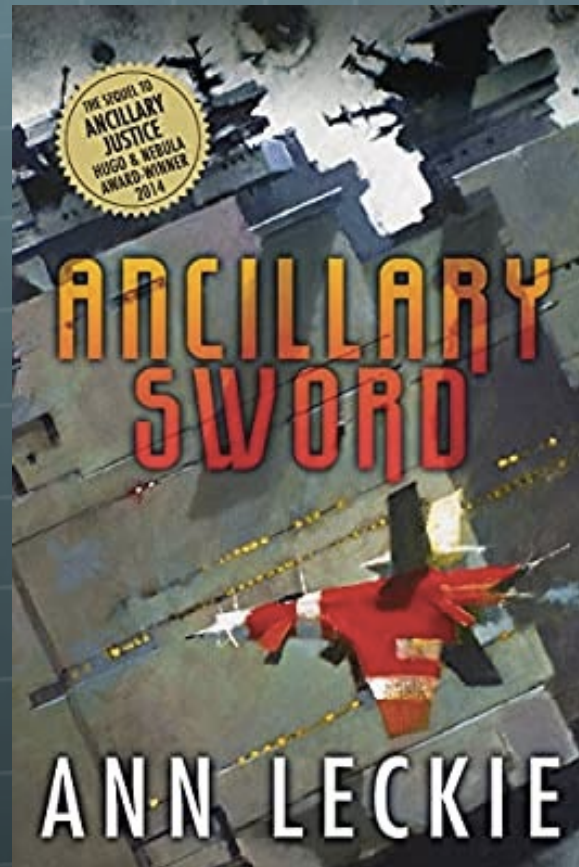
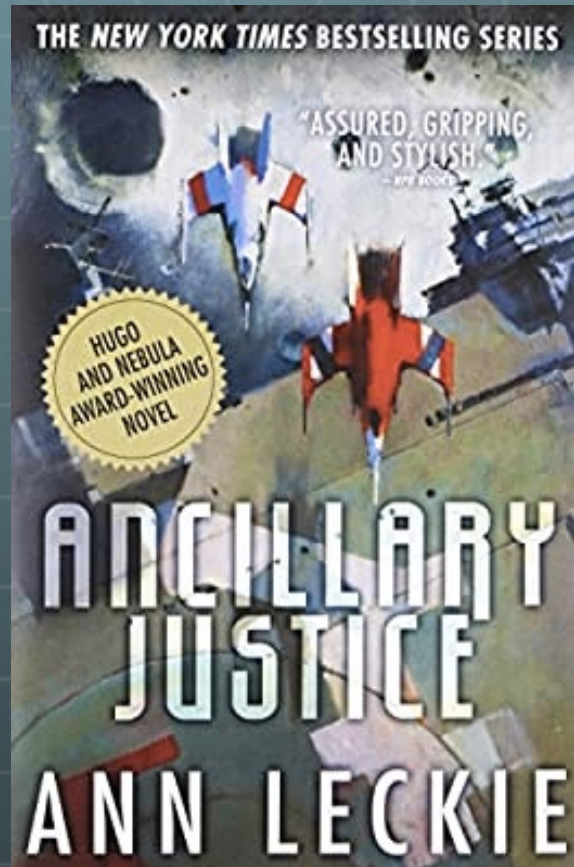
Quote #2: "Akeha said, "So how come you decided to be a woman?" Mokoya's puzzled frown revealed everything they thought about this question. "I didn't decide anything. I've always felt like one. A girl."

Quote #3: Until a young person confirmed their gender, the masters of forest-nature kept the markers of adulthood at bay. It frightened them to think that this was not true for Mokoya. A fundamental chasm had opened between them...




— Yang, J. Y. *The Black Tides of Heaven: 1* (Tensorate Series).



# The Imperial Radch Series.



# The Imperial Radch Series.

-  In Leckie's Radch empire, the technology of artificial intelligence has led to the deconstruction of gender. An AI-run society sees no worth in gender models at all. However, this democratisation and equalisation of all gender identities is arguably also a *flattening* of those identities, particularly in occupied cultures that seek the freedom to identify differently.
-  Technology as a tool of colonialism and of cultural assimilation makes it an ambivalent device for the seeming liberation of (and from) gender.
-  'She' is, interestingly, the universal pronoun.



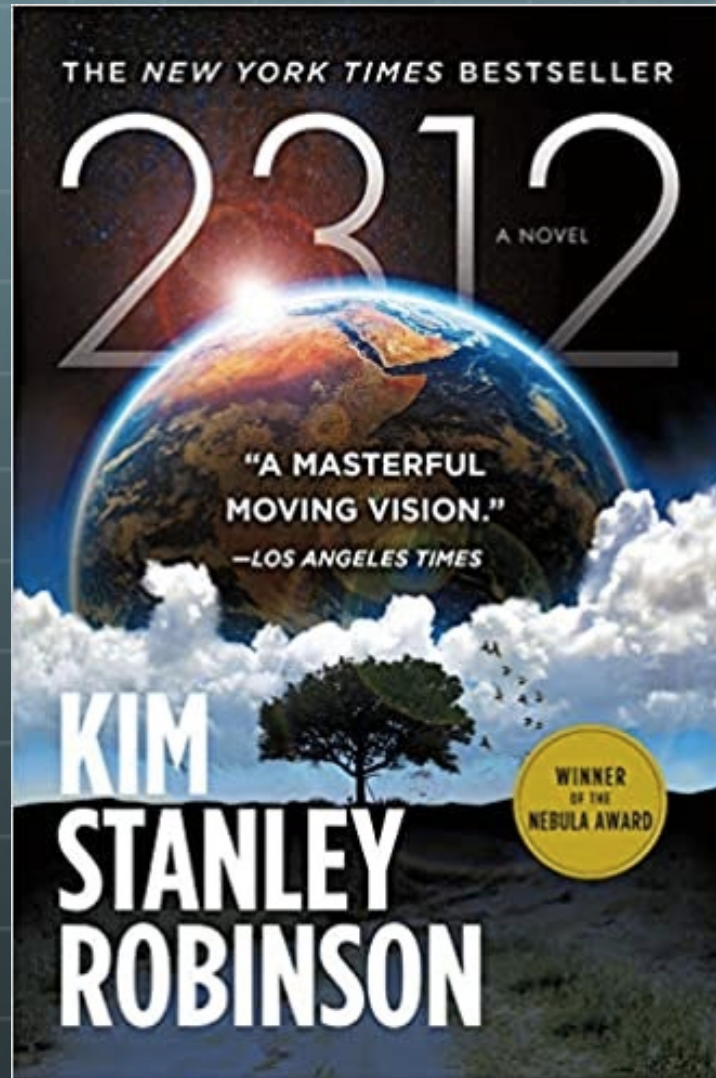
# The Imperial Radch Series.

Behind me one of the patrons chuckled and said, voice mocking, “Aren’t you a tough little girl.”

I turned to look at her, to study her face. [...] She out-bulked me, but I was taller, and I was also considerably stronger than I looked. She didn’t realize what she was playing with. She was probably male, to judge from the angular mazelike patterns quilting her shirt. I wasn’t entirely certain. It wouldn’t have mattered, if I had been in Radch space. Radchaai don’t care much about gender, and the language they speak—my own first language—doesn’t mark gender in any way. This language we were speaking now did, and I could make trouble for myself if I used the wrong forms. It didn’t help that cues meant to distinguish gender changed from place to place, sometimes radically, and rarely made much sense to me.




— Leckie, Ann. *Ancillary Justice*: 1 (Imperial Radch) (pp. 2-3). Little, Brown Book Group. Kindle Edition.

2312.





# 2312.

-  Kim Stanley Robinson's 2312 presents a utopian postgender world where 'hermaphroditism or androgyny is transformed from a problem that must be surgically corrected into a possible solution to the problem of difference between men and women' (Larbalestier 2002, 92), like *The Cage of Zeus*.
-  2312 features a planned economy, which has shifted away from capitalism and towards a humanist Mondragon-inspired economy maintained and regulated by a set of qubes, or quantum computers of immense intelligence.
-  The technology-enabled socioeconomic utopia depicted by the novel has a direct impact on the proliferation of non-binary gender identities in this postgender world, where gender diversity is approached with the same rational humanism that the economy is.

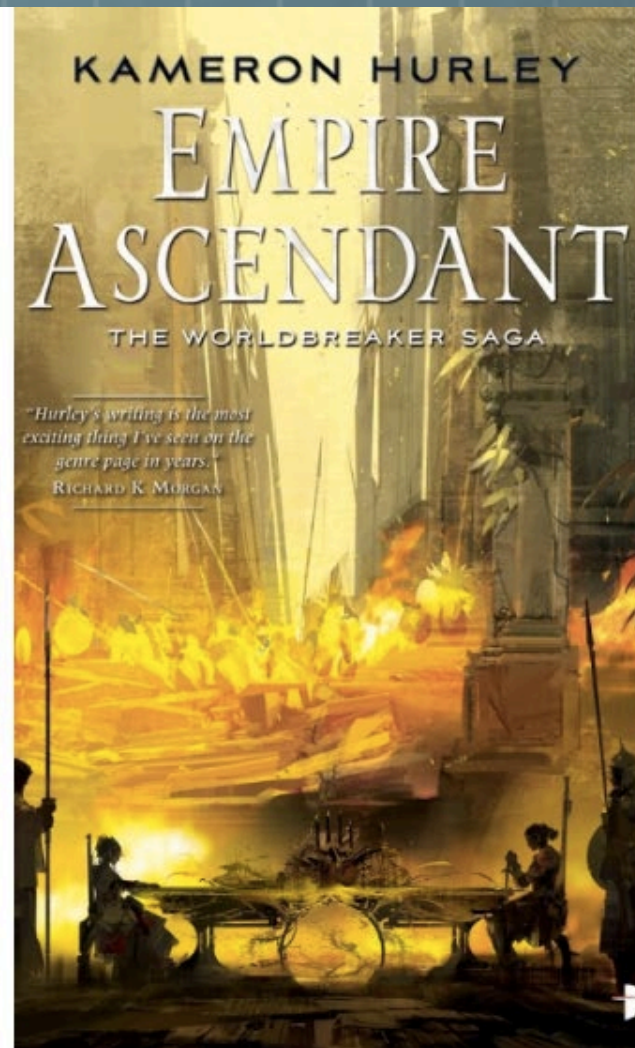
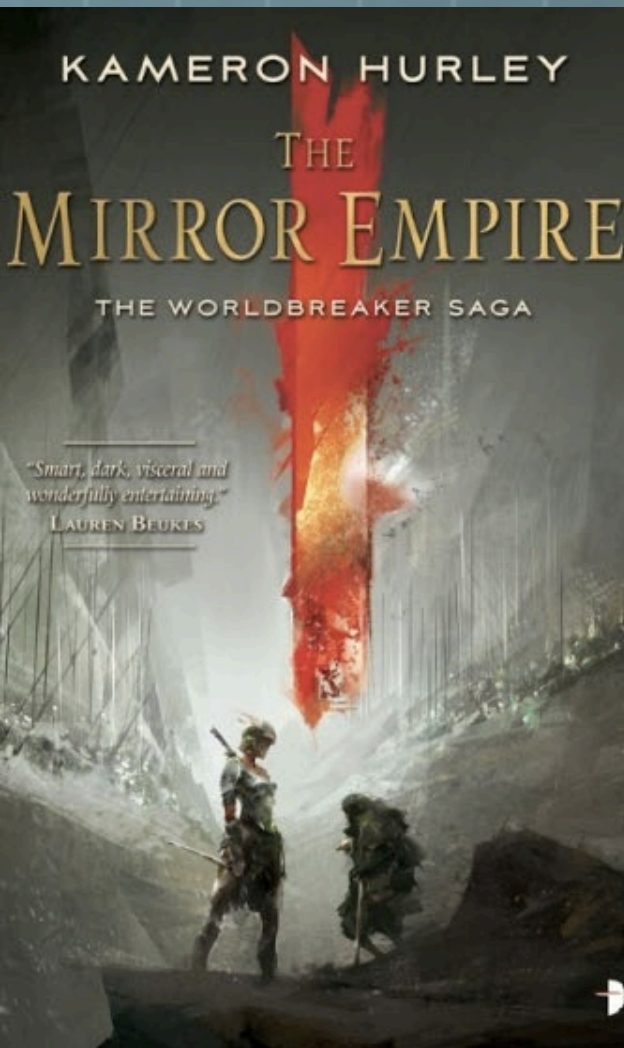
# 2312.

In 2312, the ‘principal categories of self-image for gender include feminine, masculine, androgynous, gynandromorphous, hermaphroditic, ambisexual, bisexual, intersex, neuter, eunuch, nonsexual, undifferentiated, gay, lesbian, queer, invert, homosexual, polymorphous, poly, labile, berdache, hijra, two-spirit,’ and ‘cultures deemphasizing gender are sometimes referred to as ursuline cultures, origin of term unknown, perhaps referring to the difficulty there can be in determining the gender of bears.’



— Robinson, Kim Stanley. 2312. Little, Brown Book Group. Kindle Edition. Robinson, Kim Stanley. 2312 (p. 205). Little, Brown Book Group. Kindle Edition.



# Worldbreaker Saga.



# Worldbreaker Saga.

-  Kameron Hurley's *Worldbreaker Saga* presents three different societies (Dhai, Saiduan and Dorinah) with three distinct gender models: 1) five genders, 3) three genders and 3) two genders.
-  For example, Dhai's five socially accepted genders are: female-assertive, female-passive, male-assertive, male-passive and ungendered, and people can choose how to identify. Saiduan has three genders: male, female and "ataisa" or intersex, but they cannot choose how to identify. Finally, Dorinah has two genders, male and female, where females dominate over males and there is no choice about which gender one belongs to.





# Worldbreaker Saga.

Two green-robed orderlies were helping Luna dress. They pulled Luna's soiled robe off, revealing his small breasts. Roh was used to Dhai, where everyone chose what gender they went by. He wondered, for the first time, who had decided Luna was not 'he' or 'she' but 'ze'... But that, it turned out, was a terrible train of thought, because then he had to acknowledge that every single person he'd met in Saiduan had had a gender decided for them. They had no choice in it at all. (Hurley 2014, chap. 41, para. 1)

— Hurley, Kameron. 2014. *The Mirror Empire*. Worldbreaker Saga. Nottingham: Angry Robot.



# Queer theory.

-  Queer theorist Jack Halberstam argues that ‘[q]ueer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to the logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death’ (Halberstam 2005, 2).
-  Dvorsky and Hughes at last point to a future in which the ‘paradigmatic markers’ of heteronormativity are accessible to the non-straight and the non-cis. As biological sex and gender identity become matters of choice rather than involuntary evolutionary and social coding, and as technology moves to assist us in that choice, reproduction, too, becomes freed from heteronormative restrictions.

# Queer theory.



- 🌐 José Esteban Muñoz is a queer theorist who argues that ‘queerness is not yet here but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality’ (Muñoz 2009, 185), and that queer ‘potentialities,’ unlike mere possibilities, ‘have a temporality that is not in the present but, more nearly, in the horizon’ (Muñoz 2009, 99).
- 🌐 Postgenderism one such potentiality; it is, as Dvorsky and Hughes say, not here yet, but it is inexorably approaching.

# Queer theory.

- 🌐 ‘We must vacate the here and now for a then and there. Individual transports are insufficient. We need to engage in a collective temporal distortion. We need to step out of the rigid conceptualisation that is a straight present.’ (Muñoz 2009, 185)
- 🌐 In essence, the five authors I am studying who engage in postgender world-building are creating a ‘collective temporal distortion,’ a conceptual wormhole between a straight present and a queer potentiality.





# Posthumanism.

-  It can be argued that postgenderism is a type of posthumanism, particularly a cultural and technological posthumanism. Donna Haraway's essay, 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (Haraway 2016, 5-90), forever changed the intellectual landscape of posthumanism in regards to gender.
-  The system of binary gender, which Dvorsky and Hughes claim is injurious and 'detrimental' (Dvorsky and Hughes 2008, 1), is to Haraway a system of terrible injury, too; as she says, 'We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender' (Haraway 2016, 67).

# Posthumanism.

- 🌐 '[C]ertain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals—in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self. Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man.' (Haraway 2016, 59-60)
- 🌐 My manuscript delves deeply into these various facets of oppressive binary thought as deconstructed by the primary texts, all of which take intersectional approaches to postgender world-building that confront the socioeconomic, postcolonial, technological, philosophical, ethical and/or medical ramifications of binary social structures including and beyond gender.

# Posthumanism.

-  Postgender worlds undergo fundamental changes in the perception and enactment of gender. Once binary gender becomes obsolete, the non-binary—the monstrous—becomes the status quo.
-  As it is no longer a matter of gender, monstrosity then becomes a matter of other injustices, other oppressive binary oppositions that yet remain to be dismantled. Any polarity, such as the ‘dualism’ of ‘civilized/primitive’ or ‘maker/made,’ then becomes the source of societal conflict and of new models of monstrosity versus normalcy. In the *Imperial Radch* series, for example, the binary opposition of AI/human holds sway and is a source of conflict.



# Posthumanism.

- Thus, it is the shift in focus from the gender binary to other binaries that is truly postgender. Gender, in the ideal postgender world, is no longer a major contributing factor to social injustice and inequality, and as such does not prompt much discourse.
- It is the moving on from gender to other posthuman challenges, such as the technological struggle with/against Artificial Intelligence, that is the true marker of a postgender world. While the primary texts do engage in a postgenderism that is 'not just literary deconstruction but liminal transformation' (Haraway 2016, 58), it is a transformation not only of gender, but of the many binary systems that interplay with and surpass gender.

# Q&A.

-  Ask away!
-  If you wish to contact me separately about anything at all, kindly do so at [pjmittal@gmail.com](mailto:pjmittal@gmail.com).