

Research Blog 2 (4/19/19)

Source: *To Love the Coming End* by Leanne Dunic (2017, Chin Music Press)

After my last blog and conversation with Drew during class, my thinking towards my research has shifted. I started out this research with the thought process of examining the genre of fantasy, learning its history, and reading works in the genre to understand it, which hopefully creates more possibilities for my writing. I imagined myself switching and flowing between genres, and letting conventions help me rather than limit me. Then Drew pointed out that knowing a lot about a genre doesn't mean you can write it well. He challenged me to consider that I could *be* fantasy, existing within its disclosive space.

Right after this discussion, I attended the AWP conference where I went to a few panels on speculative fiction (fantasy, sci fi, horror, etc) and related topics where I encountered several writers who described that they chose to write in speculative fiction because they felt that writing within speculative genres allowed them to express their experiences more accurately and with more depth than realism. Hearing from these writers made what Drew said click in my head. These writers were existing in the possibility of speculative genres. Their stories could not be told in another way; genre wasn't a choice, but a given. Their experience, the stories, and genre were all tangled together in a way that made them inseparable from one another.

DK: all of the associated phenomena, which requires time and space to unfold into full expression, are all networked together. They only look tangled from a pov that is coming from outside the network(s).

LK: How would you recommend unfolding them? Because sometimes it feels like there is too much to unpack.

DK: Dwell within the network until who you are *comes* from it: mastery. Make sure we discuss this in class.

IE: I love that old adage: *necessity is the mother of invention*.

Wanting to explore this new path that opened up for me, I purchased a book written by one of the panelist, *To Love the Coming End* by Leanne Dunic, a speaker from the Asian Ghosts panel. At the conference, many of the writers I heard from used the term Fabulism to describe their work, so I began reading a couple of dissertations on the subject, *A Second Ribcage: Fiction and an Article on New Wave Fabulism, Trauma, and the Environment* by Emily Capettini (2014) and *American Magic: Authorship And Politics In The New American Literary Genre Fiction* by Katlyn E. Williams (2018). I haven't finished them, but I hope they will help inform my reading of *To Love the Coming End*.

*To Love the Coming End* is a novel told in lyrical prose-poetry. The narrator is a writer who weaves together moments and memories from Singapore, Japan, and British Columbia, revolving around the loved one she lost during the 2011 Tsunami that hit Japan. I had to read the novel twice because after the first time, I wasn't sure what to write about. At first glance, I would not classify Dunic's novel as fantasy, or even speculative fiction in general. It could potentially fall under Fabulism, which Capettini defines as being "rooted in folk tale, religious belief, magic, surrealism, and superstition. Fabulist writing blends literary tropes with fantastic conceits, and in the process frees fiction from the limitations of realism" (Capettini 1). The novel does incorporate ghosts, religion, and Japanese superstition, but, none of those elements are the focus. They appear in a handful of poems and none of them are positioned as anymore "real" than as how they would be regarded in everyday life. For example, the narrator talks to their dead lover in dreams and feels a ghost in their apartment, but both experiences are subjective.

JD: So I think I'm getting the gist of what "fabulism" is, but because I rarely ever read fantasy, I'm wondering if you could speak a little on what makes "fabulism" different from other subgenres of fantasy?

LK: So there's a lot of overlap between subgenres and there's always works that contradict the definition. So traditional fantasy (portal/intrusive/immersive) constructs a separate world where the laws of nature are different. Even in fantasies that take place on our earth, like Harry Potter, the magical world has some distance from ours, like how the wizarding world is kept to isolated pockets. Then there is magical realism, which some consider fabulism to be a subgenre of that subgenre, where magic is part of our world and incorporated into an everyday or realistic setting. It takes our laws of nature and messes with them, but does not construct new ones. Now magical realism is heavily associated with Latin and South America. Some limit magical realism to authors from that culture. Fabulism is sometimes used as an alternative to express that idea, but includes writers outside of Latin and South America. Others consider fabulism its own thing because it specifically deals with works influenced by myth, folklore, religion, fairytales and superstition. There is still that "magic is part of the everyday" feel, but fabulism also includes retellings/twisted/modernized fairy tales. So in some ways, fabulism mixes magical realism and traditional fantasy. Basically, everything is complicated and it more depends on how the writer/publisher markets it than clear set conventions. Does that clarify Jackie?

DK: and living in a world that over-values epistemological objectivity, so-called subjective experience is disregarded as "unreal" because it cannot submit to third person verification. Nonetheless, subjective experience exists *as* ontological subjectivity.

LK: Thanks for the language to articulate those concepts. I have having a hard time describing them.

IE: Would this mean all religious, ancient and modern day spiritual writings could also fall under the category of fabulism?

LK: I am unsure Isha. I've mostly heard "fabulism" in reference to fictional works specifically. It's about or draws from spirituality/religion in a narrative, but is not spirituality/religion itself. I would not want to imply that anyone's spiritual writings, whether ancient and modern, are untrue in anyway. But I also see your perspective because fabulist writings can sincerely express someone's beliefs and culture like in Dunic's novel. Of course, your question leads me to ask, "How do we determine truth in any written work?" Maybe this is just my "epistemological objectivity" lens that Drew mentioned talking needing to verify reality, but is there a difference in truth between a fictional work that uses fabulist elements like Dunic's novel and a nonfiction work that uses similar elements, like a memoir or writing about someone's spiritual journey?

Especially given the poetic form, I was unsure how literal or metaphorical to take these elements in the context of the narrative.

DK: I wonder what sorts of schemes and tropes operate within the work, and in what patterns. What effect or effects are the patterns of schemes and tropes on the narrative audience?

LK: Two that I think are pervasive throughout the whole novel are personification and apostrophe. There is a lot of subtle personification through the verbs and adjectives the author choose, like "Even while in Japan, my missing doesn't thin. Maples and pines root my muscles, call me back to the land" (10) and "a palmate leaf released a distressed molecule of oxygen" (30). Diction like "thin," "call," and "distressed" draw attention to how alive the land and environment is. The culminating effect is haunting. There is still something inhuman about the environment that remains, like "maples and pines root my muscles," that feels alien. The juxtaposition of inhuman and human creates tension and unease, at least in me.

Additionally, the entire book is an apostrophe to the narrator's lover. Frequently there are phrases like, "I studied you, no longer the root. I gave you soil. You said the conditions weren't right. *That's reality*, you said. Reality was a synonym for misfortune" (24). The apostrophe serves to emphasize or embody the curse of 11. The narrator is speaking to a ghost who cannot answer; the author is writing to an imaginary audience that cannot answer. As a reader, I cannot answer the narrator or the author. I can't say, "no I didn't say that." We're on the same journey, this book, but at physical different places and times. I think it has a paradoxical effect of bringing the reader closer to the narrator, while drawing attention to the distance at the same time.

Also in that last quote, there's distinction, which here gets the reader to consider the question of what reality is and echoes how the novel is bringing our definitions of reality in question.

And the novel incorporates so much more than just the superstitions. There are several poems about the landscape of Singapore and Japan. Dunic incorporates references to samurai codes of honor, the science of tectonic plates, World War II, a tsunami that hit British Columbia before European settlement. While nuanced, beautiful, and tragic, I struggled to find where this fit in my research.

I didn't want to dismiss the novel as useless to my topic because there is something to be gained from every text. So before my second reading, I moved away from the novel to let it churn in my subconscious for bit. I began reading the aforementioned dissertations and reviewed my notes from Dunic's panel.

JD: It sounds like you might've had an interesting experience with close reading or "listening for." Do you think you were projecting more when reading the novel the first time through, listening for ways it could inform your research? Or do you think you were reading it more freely the first time through and "listening for" or projecting more on the second run-through?

LK: That's hard to say. The first time I was definitely resistant and projecting what I thought fantasy was onto the text. The second time I submitted to the text, which would make me think I was projecting less; however, I was still very much looking for those strange/supernatural moments and my analysis focused on those more.

Ready to wander in the darkness, I got cozy and read through *To Love the Coming End* for the second time. Still unsure of exactly what I would get out this novel, I decided to be attentive for any clues about what kind of ideal narrative audience Dunic was calling her readers to be. I found my answer in this passage:

I need to sleep. My presentation is tomorrow, and tomorrow, reality will become spectacle. It will be its own kind of kamikaze. All I want to talk about is Asian predisposition to superstitions. The audience will understand. Fate, curses, numbers, death, ghosts--this is what it means to be Asian. Honor, sacrifice, revenge, filial piety.

Levi-Strauss: *Every custom or belief, however irrational, is part of a system whose internal balance has been established over the course of centuries. . . teaches us one can't eliminate an element from the whole without risking destruction of the rest.* (65-66)

Dunic is calling her audience to be like the one her narrator is presenting in front of, an audience who understands that there is no separation between the "Fate, curses, numbers, death, ghosts" and the "Honor, sacrifice, revenge, filial piety." To be the ideal narrative audience, I have to

forgo my western lens that Dunic's narrative *isn't* filled with extraordinary elements and wander into the disclosive space where curses and ghosts are reality, not metaphors or literary elements. This seems like a no-brainer for a lover of fantasy (I am very familiar with suspension of disbelief), but I think I had my own assumptions about the genre--that the fantastical elements had to be the focus or a major crux of the narrative. As Williams discusses in her paper even when critiques defend genre works, they do so under the "assumption that realism is the baseline for artistic excellence" (Williams 5). I was approaching Dunic's work with a similar assumption, that fantasy is defined in opposition to realism, also assuming realism *is* the closest representation of reality. However, I think the novel is a challenge to that assumption. As she writes, "Reality is unreality. I have no references to validate my existence. Mornings and nights I pray to other gods, talk to you, think of new superstitions" (Dunic 28). To be the ideal narrative audience, I have to put aside my notions of real vs fantasy, and exist in a disclosive space where reality and superstition are one in the same. I am not suspending my disbelief, but truly believing.

IE: "Reality is unreality." From a quantum physics perspective, this is easy to understand. We accept from a scientific perspective that there is no solid reality--how many of us experience that directly? Maybe in addition to scientific disclosures of new realities, fabulism can disclose reality in a way no other genre can, or as you said *truly believing*.

LK: I had no idea that line related to quantum physics. As we've discussed in our group many times, I am fascinated that seemingly distant subjects are related at their core.

I also got clued into what kind of authorial audience Dunic was calling for through her quoting of Levi-Strauss, an anthropologist who brought attention to the theory of structuralism, which after [a quick youtube video](#) I learned is the concept that any part of a culture can only be understood in relation to its other parts that form a larger system or structure. So as I read, I made notes of how the speculative elements interact with the other elements Dunic uses.

DK: Structuralism *was* a whole field of study that emerged from several sources, but most notably, de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, wherein a "second language" was developed to help examine language and individual speech acts. Each instance of speech, even individual words, exist within an infinite network of meaning called "language." This is analogous to how we have discussed genre, where a particular instance calls into being a general (generic) and universal structure that gives us access to understanding the particular, as the particular is always a fragment of the structure we project in such a way that we always and already understand the particular as an instance of a given genre. So too, when we encounter a spoken or written utterance, we cannot help but project (always and already) the background context (language) that allows us to understand that particular utterance.

Claude Levi-Strauss cross-appropriated Saussure's semiotics into anthropology (and many others followed this move into many other disciplines), and revealed the power of this method to explain a given phenomena or practice through examining the wider network of artifacts, their variety of meanings, and their relationships to other artifacts and meanings. The chief operation included mapping out antitheses that are often suppressed. For instance, to privilege the cooking of meat before eating requires an understanding of its value in relation to the dangers of "raw" meat, etc.

Post-structuralism (Derrida, Foucault, etc.) provides a reconfigurative critique of structuralism as a totalitarian drive to subordinate all phenomena to a privileged schema of truth and knowledge that sought to permanently colonize, displace, and master everything that does not immediately fit into a given system (language, genre, etc.). Following Post-structuralism are a multitude of other methods of "listening for," including post-colonialism, eco-criticism, queer theory, post-marxist theory, etc.

Thank you for more context regarding structuralism. I was thinking of it applied to how the author is portraying her culture, in all of these fragmented bits, but it didn't occur to me that genre can be analyzed through a similar lense. Does this structuralism view of genre expand to articulate one genre in comparison to another? For example, earlier in my blog I discussed my projection of defining fantasy as being opposed to realism. As I explained, I did issues when I projected that understanding on to this book so I can see how I experienced the limits of structuralism without realizing it. I am curious what post-structuralist theories have been applied to genre.

So onto what is actually in the book. A motif that appears multiple time throughout the narrative is the curse of 11, "Slender ones paired with their likeness. Posed together and apart, forever parallel. Is one the loneliest number, or is it eleven? Only you and I can see this significance, the curse of 11" (Dunic 3). As the number 11 comes up again and again, the full extent of the curse becomes clear. 11/11 is the day the narrator meets their lover, the same day as Remembrance Day for WWII. There's 9/11, the day of the terrorist attack in New York in 2001 and the coup of 1973 in Chile. And of course, 3/11/11, the day of tsunami in Japan and the day the narrator loses their love. 11 means death.

11 means their lover. After their loss, the narrator says, "I'm sorry I suffer the loss of one when, at every moment, a breath is another's last. Memory is the only relationship we can have with the dead. *I'm sorry*" (58). And even in the memories of their loved one, they are surrounded by death and ghosts. In a pretend movie the narrator hopes to make, they remembers their date at a cemetery: "*Scene at graveyard. Shot implies the possibility of death, the chance of supernatural to come*" (Dunic 18). The supernatural does come, in dreams where the ghost of the narrator's

love appears to them. The narrator is one half of an 11, forever parallel and separate from their lover, able to see them in memories and dreams but never touch them. That is the curse of 11.

DK: just a hunch, but, what if the addressee of the extended apostrophe at work here is the ghost? And if the actual audience can “leap” into the role of the addressed audience, they in essence become “the ghost” being invoked with the apostrophe. Called up from the dead. Undead.

LK:I agree! I got into that idea above, in response to your comment about possible tropes and schemes. They address the reader as “You” quite frequently in ways that imply that the reader is the ghost of their lover. The use of apostrophe of a ghost, parallels the the reader/author and the narrator/ghost relationship (the curse of 11 to be sharing one experience but separately). I also think it extends the narrator’s portrayal of ghosts into the structure of the work. Ghosts are spirits, but memories, landscapes, words, and even other people. What does it mean to be a ghost? I’m not sure if Dunic gives the reader a definite answer about that, but perhaps the ghost is the impression left on the person, or as we discuss in class, the discourses that shape our lives and self, left by other people and experiences. Sort of like how an example is not the thing itself. A ghost is not the thing it is a ghost of, but an impression of the actual thing.

But as I said before, I read to see connections between the supernatural and the other elements in the novel. One of the first I noticed was the use of time. The book is a jumble of images, scenes, and dreams from various times and places in the narrator’s life. The book opens on the narrator arriving at Singapore, implied to be some time after the tsunami and the lost of their lover. The story also jumps to their relationship before the tsunami in Japan and the immediate aftermath of the disaster. The non chronological telling combined with the curse of 11 creates this cyclical feeling. Even when I am unsure of when or where a scene takes place, it does not matter because everything is repeating itself, not just in the narrator’s story, but in the historical events and figures they reference. Even the way the narrator describes Singapore, “Year round, the sun rises and sets at nearly the same time every day. The seasons unchanging...Every station plays the same song by Rihanna...No matter how many [beers] I drink I am not cooled in the this heat” (4). Singapore feels like hell, burning and unchanging. The narrator is trapped by this curse.

Along with the curse, death and ghosts are interwoven with the landscape and people. When the narrator describes the tsunami with tectonic and geographical imagery, the passage ends with “Ghosts swarm a floating world” (Dunic 23). Similar imagery appears when the narrator describes their grief, “Within me a gaping crevice...Today is unstable, easy for people and land to split” (Dunic 22). The earthquake is part of the curse, so is the narrator. They are one in the same in many ways. And not all of the ghosts are outright mentioned. In one passage, the narrator discusses the Fukushima 50, a group of older men who volunteered to help stabilize the reactors to spare their younger coworkers, who had more life to live, from the radiation. The

Fukushima 50 are living ghosts in a way. We do not know their names or where they are, but we know they could potentially die or have already died from what they did. All of the elements in Dunic's novel are interwoven like this. I could probably write another five pages trying to capture all of the parallels and connections in the 93 pages of poetry. All very much feel like a million cross-appropriations at first, but also feel too interwoven to be using terminology from different disclosive spaces. Or to go back to Dunic's own reference to structuralism, all of these different cultural elements are not out of place, because they are read together as an interrelated system.

Before moving onto how Dunic will influence my research, I did want to touch on that the book finds closure, the end of the curse. There is a turn in the novel where the narrator visits Haw Par Villa, a theme park in Singapore filled with strange and fantastical life sized statues, like fish people and a snail girl and armored monkeys. After the narrator walks through the Ten Courts of Hell, a very Inferno-esque depiction of the bloody punishments in hell, they sit in park, in the middle of a sudden rainstorm: "Lighting strikes nearby, blinding the landscape. In that moment, light passes through the material, the sculpted gods and spirits behind a shimmering curtain of rain and wonder again what world I'm in" (76). In this moment, the narrator realizes that this world and the other world are not an 11, or two disclosive spaces, but are one. In the last passage, the narrator articulates this epiphany:

Without you. The landscape has changed but it is clear that you were--are--a part of it. I tell myself that no love is wasted, that love I'm unable to share directly finds a way to target. It spreads through terrains, typhoons. It's ingested and teared by another love one, and you wipe that tear with your fingertip, and then, my love has found its home. If not this, then there is nothing. I hold on. There's nothing else to do. (92)

I've tried to articulate this sentiment into a set of controlling values, but I much prefer Dunic's words.

Controlling Value	Opposing Value
Purpose: To think of ourselves and everything as connected through love and life creates relationships that are unbreakable and will never be forgotten, giving us comfort and the power to continue.	Purpose: To accept that we only will have ourselves for our entire lives protects us from the harsh world.
Context: To think of ourselves, others, and environment as separate beings creates relationships that are fragile, destined to break and be lost forever, leaving us alone.	Context: To connect ourselves to others and the world means we are cursed to inevitably be separated from those we love.

How all this affects my research:

Dunic's work has opened me up to wandering further away from what I would typically call fantasy. There's more to fantasy and speculative genres than simply having one of their conventions or features as the main crux to a story. With that definition swiped from my hands, I am curious if any work could be deemed speculative when read a certain way.

DK: the context, that is, your "reading for," is decisive. For everything.

LK: Are you saying that my definition of a genre is the context/reading for that I have at the moment? So the context/"reading for" is the recurring situation that calls forth a specific answer, being that genre.

DK: Perhaps. Again, let's discuss in class. Make sure we do.

For now, I am going to continue my reading into Fabulism. I am drawn to how it challenges conceptions of fantasy, like in Dunic's novel. Already, I've seen connections between the dissertations I'm reading and Dunic's work. For example, Williams discusses one author who chose to tell a story of a breast cancer patient as a fairytale: "Goss chooses a fairy tale to put some distance between the trauma and the telling...free[ing] the narrative from the confines or expectations of a story about illness. However, it is hard to forget the trauma that is the undercurrent of the story" (Williams 9). In Dunic's case, I do not think the speculative elements distance the trauma, but bring it closer; however, I do see how writing her novel this way has freed "the narrative from the confines or expectations of a story" about grief, allowing her to play with form, time, and reality. So while this source has not clarified any definitions of "fantasy," but only muddied them, I do believe Dunic has brought be closer to answering the question of "Why fantasy?" (or other speculative genre). I am now interested in exploring what fantasy brings to a story that other genres can't. What makes speculative genres the only way to tell *that specific* story?

IE: So interesting Laura! I wonder if you've ever heard of the collection of stories by Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes called *Seeing in the Dark*? I doubt she would describe them as fantasy, but based on the description you've outlined throughout, maybe any writing based on the spiritual or unconscious or whatever word that points to the subjective experience could fall under this category. Rereading the description of the book through fabulist eyes was really interesting:

*Buried within all of us is what Dr. Clarissa Pinkola EstÉs refers to as "the one who knows"-our instinctive, intuitive nature. This, she teaches, is the source of creativity and understanding that lies out of sight in darkness, often called the unconscious. On Seeing*

*in the Dark, listeners join the esteemed Jungian psychoanalyst and bestselling author to learn how to perceive "through the eyes of soul as well as through the eyes of the ego." This dual way of seeing, being, and acting, Dr. Estes explains, is the most direct way to reclaim the gifts and the "healing apothecary" set into each soul at birth.*

LK: Thank you for the recommendation! I also really liked how you worded, "Rereading the description of the book through fabulist eyes." I've been grappling with genre and how to articulate categories, but I like the idea that genre is just the lens you view a work through. I think that allows a work to be multiple genres at once depending on the angle. A work can be realist and spiritual and realist all at once. I will have to check this work out. I'm curious, because I have no previous conception of this book, what is different for you when reading the description through a fabulist lens?

IE: I guess what I mean is that the lens we bring can heavily influence what we look at. For example, I've looked at work like *Seeing in the Dark* as healing genres (is that a thing? Not sure!), text that gives me access to the information that is *real* and possible to actualize. Thinking about through a fabulist lens showed me another aspect that could be articulated as the "fantasy" aspect of it. The way you describe fabulism in this blog seems to situate many of the genres I consider "Real" as fabulist, which of course, has me thinking a lot about what we consider fact and fiction, which navigates us back to the Campbell article at the beginning of the semester. Maybe that's part of what Dr. Kopp is nudging you toward? Writing what's *real* for you, gaining access to fantasy in a way that is potent and fresh? I don't know...just a thought.

LK: Thank you for the thought! This book has brought up many of the questions you mentioned for me. I think I'm definitely going to revisit the Campbell piece.