**Post-National Futures in National Contexts: Reading ‘British’ Fictions of Artificial Intelligence**

Will Slocombe, University of Liverpool

1. A Very British Boom?

In 2003, the influential science fiction critic Andrew M. Butler published a piece for a special issue of *Science Fiction Studies*, one of the most influential international journals within the field of science fiction (hereafter ‘sf’), entitled “Thirteen Ways of Looking at the British Boom.” The special issue explored whether there was indeed a “boom” in ‘fantastic’ literature (thus including, tangentially, fantasy, horror, and fantastic children’s fiction alongside science fiction) in Britain, with Butler’s contribution offering various ways of conceptualising it. Summarising briefly, this “Boom” is argued to have occurred during from 1990s into the early 2000s, when British sf had something of an international renaissance in comparison to that other dominant Anglophone voice, American sf. This “Boom” was the product, as Istvan Csicsery-Ronay summarises in his editorial to the issue, “of a particular historical moment when British culture navigated between powerful opposing tides,” especially “Thatcherism and anti-establishment resistance, the American umbrella and the EU, the conservatism of literary culture and the rich mix of immigrant cultures, technoscientific imperialism and anti-hegemonism, latecoming and closeness to the cutting edge” (2003, 354).

Whilst this chapter does not interrogate the hypothesised “Boom” too deeply, neither does it accept it unconditionally. That is, what is explored is not whether said “Boom” existed (or continues to exist later in the 21st century), but what happens if we consider its socio-political contours, especially the ways in which it is structured with regards to nationhood. Considering the “British” nature of the Boom, for example, Butler notes the problem of establishing an author as ‘British’, asking whether “the British Boom should only include British writers, or be expanded to include long-time resident writers from the United States (Pat Cadigan, Tricia Sullivan, Molly Brown) and Canada (John Clute, Geoff Ryman)” (2003a, 376). In one of the more tongue-in-cheek sections, entitled “The ‘Can’t Do’ Spirit”, Butler further considers the extent to which British sf is informed by a sense of pessimism, situating Britain within “three different international structures” (2003a, 384):

[We] are the junior power in the special relationship with the United States; we are the often despised begetter of a Commonwealth of Nations (who delight in defeating us at cricket); and we are the odd one out in the European Union, resisting integration, clinging to our pounds and ounces decades after we agreed to go metric in the 1960s and to our decimalized pounds (while missing shillings). There is something in the British character that loves a loser—Scott, who did not get to the South Pole first, Eddie the Eagle, the world’s worst ski jumper, and numerous others. There are also the internal divisions—the distinct countries of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, each with its own north-south, east-west, or other divides. In a fractured country yet to relocate its role, pessimism is the only course. (2003a, 384)

Britain’s contexts, for Butler, create a national identity centred upon seeing problems not solutions. Aside from the obvious fact that more recent international events, such as Brexit, have further isolated Britain from its European context, Butler here simultaneously acknowledges, and then elides, one of the most important *internal* contexts to 21st-century British writing: devolution.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 Britain, whilst constitutionally still a ‘United Kingdom’, saw a fundamental shift in its political landscape in the late 1990s as a result of legislative powers formerly held by Parliament being devolved to regional assemblies: The Northern Ireland Assembly, the National Assembly of Wales, and the Scottish Parliament were all formed in 1998 as a result of various Acts and Agreements, after referenda on the topic. It is not too much of an oversimplification to assert that the Acts of Union that held ‘Britain’ together—and which had been the cause of anger for various independence movements within the regions—were at this point assumed to be weakening. Whilst not granting full independence to any of these regions, for large segments of the population devolution enhanced a sense of ‘national’ pride through the return of some of their historical powers and an acknowledgement of their distinct identities.

Seen in this light, aspects of Butler’s “*British* Boom” (my emphasis) become more problematic; the pessimism he finds within Britain’s *international* contexts might be counterbalanced by the optimism, however guarded, of the *national* contexts of particular regions. Similarly, Bould’s contribution to the special issue, “What Kind of Monster Are You?”, asserts that “British sf, like much of British culture, is peculiarly poised somewhere between the USA and Europe while trying to maintain indigenous identities and traditions” (2003, 395). Being somewhat unfair to both Butler and Bould, the attitudes espoused seem to reflect very *British* (dare I say *English*) approaches to devolution, seeing only the pessimism due to “fractured country,” or pointing to “indigenous identities and traditions” whilst still discussing British sf *en bloc*. Yet for many Scottish, Irish, and Welsh residents, the ‘British’ moniker is tantamount to a colonialist and imperialist attitude that denies their own nationhood, however legalistically accurate it is. For them, devolution was a step, however small, in the right direction. Whether sf writers from such regions share that attitude is a matter of personal politics, but just as the assumption that they might all be (regionally) ‘nationalistic’ (especially given the negative connotations of the term) is difficult to accept and argue, neither should Butler *et alia* assume they self-identify as ‘British’, rather than ‘Welsh’, ‘Irish’, ‘Scottish’, or ‘English.’

Furthermore, if Butler’s “(Partial) Census” of such writers, or his “Reading List” later in the special issue, is considered in relation to devolution, authors hailing from the regions encompassed by the newly-formed Assemblies were not necessarily well represented: the authors and texts on the lists are slanted towards ‘English,’ and there is an issue of diversity at play here (cf. Butler 2003a and b). Whether this is due to the actuality of the situation (that is, how much of published sf is written by authors representing particular national groups?) or due to a confirmation bias of Butler’s own context, which all critics must acknowledge, his (partial) census creates problems for conceptualising various aspects of the “British Boom” in sf production. This includes, moreover, an important distinction to be made not only within a gross sense of Anglophone sf (across, for example, American and British contexts, or English-language sf from other countries), but within British sf itself, where Anglophone sf specific regional sf written in Cymraeg (Welsh), Gàidhlig (Scottish Gaelic), and Gaeilge (Irish Gaelic), or variants thereof. Although there are notably fewer examples of sf written in these languages, the notion of a ‘national’ identity is of course partly predicated upon linguistic community as much as cultural heritage.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is not an attempt to disparage any of the contributors or the value of considering the “British Boom” in sf more broadly, however. Butler’s focus—and that of his fellow contributors—on British sf is, of course, historically specific (dealing primarily with the period of the 1990s to the early 2000s). Moreover, it is geographically and culturally attempting to unite a number of diffuse genres—and as has been seen national identities—under one distinct adjective that is defined *contra* the production and consumption of American and/or European sf, rather than internally.[[3]](#footnote-3) Clearly, the sense of the “Boom” within the special issue is a product of a particular (national, temporal, authorial) context and a particular critical impetus.

1. Science Fictions, National and Otherwise

Such a critical gesture towards defining fields, and the act of thinking about their categorisation, nevertheless remains important and relevant as we fast approach the second decade of the 21st century. If we accept that sf texts (however we define that category) reflect their contexts like any other kind of texts, then national context is as important as any other in working towards interpretations, even if it is sometimes slippery to define.[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet the majority of sf texts that deal with the far future (rather than those set more contemporaneously with ‘today’) tend towards ‘post-national’ futures. That is, the further ‘away’ texts are from the norms we assume today, the more they tend to be concerned with species- or planetary-level issues, rather than national ones, as if the act of looking into the future dissolves national boundaries (such as a setting assuming that such boundaries no longer exist, as we are all one species or one planet) or because the act of gazing widely across a species that exists across multiple planets or star systems means that a national focus must be lost.[[5]](#footnote-5) Furthermore, as an authorial context in terms of nationality can be difficult to discern, and is often reliant upon an author self-identifying as being of a particular nation, what does it mean to interpret such ‘post-national’ texts within ‘national’ contexts? Is there a particularly Scottish or Welsh or Irish view of the ‘post-national’, for example? The possible answers to these questions are more complex than is possible in a piece of this type, and without recourse to a far larger body of material than it is possible to bring to bear. As a result, this chapter adopts a series of necessary simplifications to illustrate some of the complexities of approaching sf in such a manner.

Firstly, the primary texts that will be considered in relation to the above issues are by authors that appear on Butler’s list, and who were still writing prominently later into the twenty-first century: Neal Asher (1961- ), Iain M. Banks (1954-2013), and Alastair Reynolds (1966- ). These authors reflect some of the national diversity already alluded to whilst they unfortunately reinforce a particular ‘white male’ notion of sf production. Asher is an English writer, born and currently resident in the south-east of England, and the author of around twenty sf novels, most famously those set in the Polity Universe. Banks is a Scottish writer, who at the point of his untimely death had written around thirteen sf novels (as Iain M. Banks) and fourteen others (as Iain Banks). Finally, Reynolds is a Welsh-born and -resident author of around seventeen novels, although he has spent a significant period of time living outside of Wales. It would be a gross overgeneralisation to say that these authors exemplify any particular national characteristic or tendency, even if we accept the existence of such characteristics, and neither do they represent the entirety of sf production within that nation. To provide an example from within the Scottish-born, Scottish-by-choice, and Scottish-by-residence context to sf, for example, there are as many differences between the fiction of Ken McLeod, Christopher Brookmyre, Peter Hamilton, and Charles Stross (who appear on Butler’s census), as there are between Alasdair Gray and Naomi Mitchison (pre-Boom writers, arguably), and Gavin Smith, Gary Gibson, and Hal Duncan (all of whom came to prominence after the census was compiled). To call Banks *the* exemplar of ‘Scottish sf’ is difficult not only because of its dependence on what is defined as ‘sf’ (and who as a ‘sf writer’), and what as ‘Scottish,’ but because he is far more ostentatiously ‘Scottish’ in his non-science fiction novels than he is in his Culture series.[[6]](#footnote-6) Obviously, a similar line of thought could be followed for Irish, Northern Irish, Welsh, and English sf writing. Thus, using these three authors is an attempt at a starting point, a gesture to merely ‘represent’ each of these regions whilst not assuming any particular representation can be ascribed to them.

Secondly, the texts chosen are those that say something interesting about sf, and specifically space opera, and the ways in which it responds to and reflects upon particular cultural tendencies that might, under a particular light, appear to be ‘national’ in focus.[[7]](#footnote-7) Furthermore, all were first published within a relatively narrow timeframe of the 21st century, and are neither especially recent nor are they especially old; they are in the ‘Goldilocks Zone’ of sf in terms of being old enough to achieve some significance, but not so old that they reveal little about what sf was looking like after the “British Boom” was identified. Thus, although other texts will be included by way of context, the primary texts discussed herein are Neal Asher’s *The Technician* (2010), Iain M. Banks’ *Matter* (2008), and Alastair Reynolds’ *House of Suns* (2008). These texts are not to be considered representative of any particular tendency of this period of writing within the genre—and perhaps not even of their author’s oeuvre to a certain extent—but facilitate a brief introduction to the ways in which sf novels handle similar concepts differently, and in so doing enable an initial foray into the ways in which such issues as national contexts might be invoked in relation to them.

Finally, the particular focus of the analysis, although other elements will be brought into the discussion, is on the representation of Artificial Intelligences within the novels. Of all technological devices dealt with by sf, AI is the one that is—at least theoretically—perhaps the most interesting in terms of the different contextual markers that are projected. That is, whilst an AI is, albeit tautologically and in its most general sense, an Artificial Intelligence (thus a ‘non-natural’ entity exhibiting a given degree of intelligence), its various incarnations and manifestations reveal the ways in which particular cultural outlooks are placed upon it (for example, the gendered and politicised body, networked versus embodied intelligence, the animal versus the mechanical).[[8]](#footnote-8) Moreover, in so doing, some contingent comparisons can be made between these as examples of ‘British’ sf and other types and kinds of sf writing: primarily, given the Anglophone nature of the present collection and the other regional sfs mentioned, ‘American’ and ‘European’ sf. Representing AI has something of a tradition behind it, and even such a small sample can reveal the variety—both historical and contemporary—of its representations.

1. Setting the Scene

As mentioned previously, the texts discussed herein are examples of what might be termed (New) Space Opera. Asher’s *The Technician*, set in his Polity universe, occurs in the 25th century (Asher provides the date of “circa 2444 CE” on his Polity Timeline). Reynolds’ *House of Suns* is even more distant, set approximately six million years in the future. As is usual in sf texts with such settings, the primacy of Earth (and thus of nations within Earth) is drastically reduced as the focus is more upon interstellar politics. Thus Asher’s *The Technician* and Reynolds’ *House of Suns* both situate their narrative action in a period after which humanity has started colonising the stars, but more often than not it is shown to have transplanted it diverse cultures with it (thus they focus on humanity, but it is not always a shared sense of humanity). The final text, Banks’ *Matter*, and one of his final Culture novels, is the exception to the assumed rule of space opera’s ‘far future’ settings. This is because, in the manner of *Star Wars*’ “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away…,” whilst the technological milieu of *Matter* is far in advance of humanity today, it is not actually a novel about humanity, but about an alien, pan-humanoid society known as the Culture. Through various intertextual references, not least of which is Banks’ own timeline from an earlier novel, the text is chronologically set—although this is irrelevant to the novel—sometime between the 19th and the 22nd centuries.[[9]](#footnote-9) So whilst it has a similarly wide-angle view of species and their interrelations, it would not be strictly accurate to describe the setting as ‘far future’ as it is not about ‘humanity’ as such.

Similarly, the locations of the novels’ narratives differ greatly, although none are set on Earth. For example, the majority of the action of Asher’s *The Technician* is located on an alien world known as Masada. Masada was a (planet-wide) Human religious theocracy that, years before the novel is set, was deposed through events described in other novels in the series, both external (alien attack) and internal (rebellion against the theocracy). Masada is not part of the larger Human society (humanity is always capitalised in Asher’s novels, to differentiate it as a species from the other, albeit seemingly extinct, aliens in the universe, the Jain, the Atheter, and the Csorians, although it does include the human-created AIs), which is called the Polity, but much of the narrative is concerned by this ‘independence’ from the larger political entity known as the Polity. Similarly, Banks’ *Matter* is set on a Shellworld (an artificial planet arranged with habitats for different species in concentric layers), and focuses upon the inhabitants of the Eighth level, the Sarl, their war against the Deldeyn from the Ninth level, and the larger galactic community who oversee the Shellworld. The narrative arc is concerned with the relationships between the older, more established civilizations—often those which give equal rights to AI and ‘natural’ lifeforms—of the galaxy and these new, less technologically-advanced civilizations. Finally, Reynolds’ *House of Suns* occurs mostly on spaceships or on a planet called Neume. The conceit of Reynolds’ novel, in contrast to his earlier Revelation Space series (which is more similar to those settings described by Asher and Banks), is that there are groups of non-physically identical clones that comprises “Houses” or “Lines.” Members of these Lines wander the galaxy, gathering information and experiences to share with each other every galactic cycle. The planets and species they meet are not alien, however, but vastly divergent forms of humanity (post-humanity), and it seems that the only other extant race in the galaxy are the Machine People, a civilization of self-evolved AIs. The plot here focuses on the attempt to destroy one of the Lines that appears to have discovered something that another group, the eponymous House of Suns, is trying to stop becoming known. Thus these texts share a concern with the renegotiation of contemporary conceptual boundaries, most overtly through the inclusion of AIs as members, if not leaders of, civilizations, and the ways in which smaller ‘nations’ (conceived of as such, in the sense that there is a shared community, with a shared heritage, that governs a particular territory) interact with more advanced ‘nations.’

1. Contextual Communities: Polities, Cultures, Lines

As is clear from these brief descriptions, each text retains a sense of identity emerging from, and pertaining to, a larger community. These might not be nations or nation states, as such concepts are understood today, and might operate on a species level, but they nonetheless continue to play an important role in explaining characters’ motivations: A community has a shared heritage, culture, and territory, all of which it must defend against those ‘other’ to the community. But the ‘level’ of community is, of course, distinctly different in sf and across these novels.

Within *House of Suns*, for example, the community perspective is on the elite Lines, those virtually immortal beings who travel the galaxy. During their travels, they have come to see and experience much, and in so doing can step outside the perspective of those bound by one geographical location (a planet or region of space). To demonstrate this, Reynolds provides a clear indication of this long view, as one of his Line members reflects:

In the long run, the best strategy for cultural longevity was either to sit tight in a single system, or become like the Lines, entirely unshackled from planetary life. Expansionism worked for a while, but was ultimately futile. Not that that had stopped new emergent from trying, even when they had six million years of sobering history to mull over. (Reynolds 2008, 15)

The other posthuman communities within the novel are perceived to more limited in their perspectives, more bound by planetary (and in the wider galactic picture, petty) concerns, than the Lines, described together as “the Commonality.” Yet this Commonality’s moral superiority is revealed to be inaccurate; the central revelation of the text is that the Lines committed an atrocity that wiped out an entire species (of AI no less) *accidentally*, because they had infected the First Machines with a viral killswitch—“a neural bomb”—that went off inadvertently. As a result of this, the Lines edited their own memories to remove all trace of the event and created the “House of Suns” to remove all evidence to the contrary (Reynolds 2008, 369-75). This demonstrates the dangers inherent to one community attempting to pre-emptively ‘protect’ themselves against another. As a trope, this ‘return of the oppressed’ is enacted within *House of Suns* in biological versus mechanical terms, but at its core is an articulation of the dangers of ‘protecting’ the Self from the Other, and what happens when the Other (and those of their ilk) discover this. Reading allegorically, it is easy to see this as an encoded reference to a ‘postcolonial’ Wales on one level, with those who have been colonised (by the English) seeking to uncover the history which has been edited out of the authorised version of events (we are all ‘British’), forgotten even by the instigators themselves. Whether the novel can sustain this reading is another matter, however, and is worth returning to later.

Another possible ‘national’ allegory at work in British sf, and extending this notion of ‘national’ or ‘civilizational’ hierarchies, is evident in Banks’ construction of his Culture universe. The Culture, on the whole, is a very loose organisation of peoples of different appearances, embodiments, and capabilities, and which includes the “Minds,” AI of vastly superior intellects, who manage that society. They are a member of the In-Play, or Involved—civilisations technologically advanced enough to help or hinder individual species within the galactic community and which, together with other such races, serve to supervise and monitor (and sometimes even steer) the development of less advanced civilisations. As one of the characters in *Matter* reveals, leaving his home on the Eight level of the Shellworld and meeting these other, more advanced cultures can be a disquieting experience:

He’d been in awe of the Oct’s casual familiarity with and easy control of this vessel […]. It seemed more real, more relevant and somehow more important and impressive than control of the infinitude of ungraspable space beyond the world itself. This, he’d thought, was power.

 Then he’d watched how the Oct and the Nariscene treated each other, and realised that the Nariscene were the masters here; they were the superiors, who merely indulged this strange species that to his people, the Sarl, had near-magical powers. How lowly the Sarl must be, to be mere cargo, simple primitives to the Oct, who themselves were treated like little more than children by their Nariscene mentors!

 Seeing, furthermore, how the Nariscene and the Morthanveld interacted was almost dismaying, because the Morthanveld in turn seemed to regard the Nariscene as something like children and treated them with amused indulgence. Another level, and another; all beyond his, above his people’s heads. (Banks 2008, 141)

In effect, the Sarl are ‘beneath’ the Oct, which are ‘beneath’ the Nariscene, which are in turn ‘beneath’ the Morthanveld. The Morthanveld—and their technological-equivalent civilisation, the Culture—thus occupy a dominant position in galactic affairs, and ‘look after’ a number of other species. These concentric circles of technological (and hence perceived ‘civilizational’) advancement, however, are not the straightforward equivalent of feudalism, federalism, and/or vassal states, but something approaching guardianship, as the same character is told by one of the Nariscene when he begs for their assistance:

It is not the duty or the right of the Nariscene to interfere in the affairs of our developing mentorees. We are here to provide an overall framework within which a species like that to which you belong may mature and progress according to their own developmental timetable; we are not here to dictate that timetable or hasten or delay any such advancement taking place along that timeline. (Banks 2008, 265)

Meeting later with a Morthanveld ambassador, with the same plea, again meets with the same negative response:

[My] species is supposed to mentor those who mentor those who mentor your people. I am layers and layers away from being jurisdictionally allowed to have any direct influence […]; a system which has evolved over the centieons to ensure that peoples less technologically advanced than others are able to progress as naturally as possible within a generally controlled galactic environment. (Banks 2008, 272).

To use a real-world analogy, *Matter* might thus be said to illustrate something akin to the United Nations (or, perhaps, the member states of the UN Security Council, given the power to intervene in others’ development) standing for the Galactic community, with individual member states (the Culture, the Morthanveld) supervising the development of regional states (the Nariscene) and so on down. However, this analogy has only limited applicability, given that technological development and species-distinctness is seen to determine a civilisation’s role. Still, the analogy serves as an obvious way into understanding something of the operation Banks describes, and demonstrates that both Reynolds’ and Banks’ texts are both concerned to some degree with the powers wielded by larger ‘civilizational’ structures in a given environment.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Bridging between Banks and Asher, finally, it is clear that a policy of non-interference in other cultures is also evident in Asher’s *The Technician*. There are references to “Separatists,” those that seek independence from Earth’s “Polity,” in his other works (such as *Gridlinked* [2001]); in *The Technician*, because the Polity stepped in to take charge of the situation in Masada, many of the rebels are still ‘rebels’ but now against the Polity rather than the Masadan regime. Complicating this is the fact that the remains of an ancient, now extinct race known as the Atheter are on the planet, and one of the issues the novel sets out to resolve is whether the Masadan Humans—who consider the planet theirs—will have to relocate:

Masada could cease to be classified as a Human colony but be classified as an alien Homeworld occupied by illegal Human squatters. A whole new set of AI rules start to apply then and we end up thoroughly shafted. We end up having little or no say about our future – population strictly controlled, travel through alien areas limited, all further construction put on hold. (Asher 2010, 155)

Seen in these terms, Asher’s narrative is split between three interwoven strands—the protection (and attempts on the life of) a former Theocracy official by rebels, who has knowledge about the true nature of the creature known as the Technician; the search for and discovery of the Technician’s origins; and whether or not the resident humans might be allowed to remain by the Polity depending upon the outcome of that. The politics of Asher’s text is concerned with aboriginal rights over those who come to occupy a territory later, but importantly those rights are enshrined in a “Polity” that not all of its citizens agree to be in the first place. Thus, whilst still operating at a ‘species-level’ of community, Asher’s novel reveals similar fractures within a civilization as those of Banks and Reynolds. Each novel is concerned, as its backdrop if not as its central narrative drive, with a given ‘national’ structure, with the levels in which that ‘nation’ operates (from meta-national entities to indigenous inhabitants), and each seems concerned with what happens when older, more advanced ‘nations’ impinge on developing ones.

1. Representing Artificial Intelligence

If this national allegory seems somewhat thin, it is worth remembering that it is a speculative approach to the novels, although it does seem to be borne out when we consider the ways in which AI are integrated within them. As is clear from that previous description of the implementation of the Alien Occupancy Policy, for example, Asher’s “Polity” is governed by AI. For many of the novels in the series, this provides one of the driving forces, as the AIs—which might be planetary governors (themselves ultimately governed by the AI, Earth Central), spaceships, or golems (humanoid AI)—are treated as any other character, but with the impetus always provided by knowledge that the AIs are seeking to acquire. In an argument about Polity control, within *The Technician*, one character asserts, “Every world that’s been pushed by Separatists to secede from the Polity has ended up a disaster zone” and a Separatist replies, “Polity intervention has brought great advances, but that does not make the AIs our friends” (Asher 2010, 157), asserting that “Chains are chains” (158). The rebuttal to this is telling:

So you think that without the Polity AIs running this place, by following the Separatist route, people will end up with greater freedom? You think *that*, despite the entirety of Human history refuting it? To paraphrase some ancient historical figure: Polity rule is not the best form of government, but it’s better than every other kind that has been tried. (158; emphasis in original)

Asher’s novel, and the Polity series more broadly, remains concerned with the power that AIs hold over Human civilization. A similar trope occurs in Banks’ Culture novels, and *Matter*, with various Minds (usually ships or war drones) essentially running Culture society. Although, as in Asher’s works, there is an ambivalence here about what the AIs then do with such control, *Matter* broadly depicts AI as at worst a necessary evil (and a better alternative than anything else) and at best a benign force, working for the ‘greatest good.’[[11]](#footnote-11) AIs are, however, very aware of their own ‘superiority:’

[The] Culture’s more self-congratulatingly clever Minds (not in itself an underpopulated category), patently with far too much time on their platters, had come up with a shiny new theory that the Culture was not just in itself completely spiffing and marvellous and a credit to all concerned, it somehow represented a sort of climatic stage for all civilisations, or at least for all those which chose to avoid heading straight for Sublimation as soon as technologically possible. […] Avoid self-destruction, recognise – and renounce – money for the impoverishing ration system it really was, become a bunch of interfering, do-gooding busybodies, resist the siren call of selfish self-promotion that was Subliming and free your conscious machines to do what they did best – essentially, running everything. (Banks 2008, 173-74)

Within Banks’ and Asher’s novels, AIs are not infallible and not always benign, but they are capable of governing society effectively, able to take the long view, and learn from their previous mistakes. Just as Asher has a character argue that “Polity rule is […] better than every other kind that has been tried,” and justifies this by having at least the majority of AI work to benefit Polity society ‘as a whole’ (with the problems such a phrasing implies), so too do Banks’ AIs seek at least some form of common accommodation with a galactic community, and attempt to steer the course of less Involved societies so that their emergence into the galactic community will not cause problems.

 If Banks and Asher foreground the assumption that AIs are more capable of managing societies more effectively than their organic fellow citizens, then Reynolds’ sense of AI, at least within *House of Suns*, is one that eventually agrees with that despite its initial set-up. For much of the novel, it appears as if organic and inorganic sentience must always be at odds, and Reynolds takes care to set this up as a seeming inevitability until the end of the novel. As much as the First Machines and the Machine People are AIs, and so stand categorically apart from the pan-human civilization of the Lines and the planetary post-humans, one of the First Machines who escaped the genocide takes the moral high road over both groups. This “glass man” tells one of the characters to “have some perspective” (Reynolds 2008, 497) and goes on to say that “You [nearly killed us all], and it was unforgivable. Nonetheless, we offer our forgiveness. What is the point in being a superior civilisation if you can’t do that once in a while?” (498). Thus, Reynolds undercuts the message that AI/human relationships must be inimical because “revenge was for biologicals. Machines did things differently” (501). Again, it is the long view that prevails as the wisest course of action and despite the Lines’ clinical immortality, they still have yet to truly gain the wisdom of the long view. Indeed, whilst most fictions of AI from the 20th century, such as Isaac Asimov’s Robot stories or Robert Heinlein’s *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966) tend towards a binary division between humans and AI (categorically, existentially, and morally), those of the 21st century, such as these novels by Asher, Banks, and Reynolds—and Daniel H. Wilson’s *Robopocalypse* and *Robogenesis* (2011, 2014), and Ann Leckie’s Ancillary trilogy (2013-2015)—are more concerned with interrogating the subject positions that emerge from the intersection of the seemingly opposed states. That is, two lessons might be learnt from these representations of AI, as indicative of a wider trend within fictions of AI in the 21st century: firstly, that AI are assumed to be better at governing societies in a fair and even-handed way (even if not everyone agrees) above a kind of partisan biological agenda and, secondly, that they are better at doing this because their sense of the ‘social’ can incorporate a vitally non-human (or ‘other-than-human’) perspective that emerges from a less possessive, more encompassing notion of what constitutes membership of a society, able to tolerate, if not celebrate, difference, once the initial organic/inorganic tensions have been resolved into a new kind of organisational synthesis.

1. Conclusion

If we accept this optimistic view of AI, however, to what extent might these sf texts—and their concomitant representations of AI—be said to reflect a ‘national’ perception of ‘post-national’ futures? One can see in Asher’s novel, and the Polity series as a whole, for example, that independence movements are a particularly human phenomenon (setting human “Separatists” against an AI Polity), and which are, at least on the evidence of Asher’s narratives, ultimately doomed to fail because they are too short-sighted and unable to take into account ‘the bigger picture.’ Reading allegorically, it is possible to assert that Asher’s ‘Englishness’ thus supports a mindset in which a sense of ‘regional identity’ (albeit expressed as a planetary identity) does not have any kind of future: the Polity is a utopia.[[12]](#footnote-12) Conversely, Reynolds’ *House of Suns*, when also interpreted allegorically, can initially be interpreted as an assumed nightmare of postcolonial vengeance blurring into a wider sense of forgiveness and acceptance, when read from a ‘Welsh’ perspective. Finally, reading Banks’ *Matter*, and the Culture novels, in ‘national’ terms might reveal a suspicion of larger forces that govern more individuated identities, and thus might serve as an allegory for a ‘Scottish’ position, rejecting those cultures that aggressively seek power.

But to what extent are these valid readings of these novels? To say that Asher endorses a colonialist ‘English’ perspective on such a basis would be a step too far. However, contradictions abound. He has expressed (potentially) contradictory statements about ‘Britishness,’ stating in a 2005 interview that “I rather dislike the idea of being diagnosed as infected with that very British disease which is plain envy” (Sutherland 2005), whilst asserting in 2008—before Brexit was even a possibility on the horizon—that to improve Britain he would,

Take a hatchet to thousands of stupid laws and pieces of legislation introduced in this country over the last fifty years, then use it on bureaucracy and the vast army of bureaucrats, use it to chop us away from the EU and the 55 billion we waft its way every year, then finally bury it in Gordon Brown’s head. That would be a good start anyway. (Edwards 2008)

If we take such statements as indicative reflections of an author’s sense of national identity, then Asher’s ‘Britishness’ has an assertive nationalistic flavour, valuing ‘independence’ and disliking a concern that Britain need be envious of other cultures, but not naturally identifying himself as ‘English.’

Similarly, Reynolds, when discussing two of his “post-9/11 books” identifies *House of Suns* as being “perhaps about the risk of what you might call the asymmetric response—the revenge that is worse than the original injury” whilst stating that “I’m also not a libertarian! I think governments, on the whole, are pretty useful things—but then I would say that, being left-leaning and Welsh” (Winter 2013). Reynolds thus situates *House of Suns* in relation to an international, somewhat anti-American, context whilst simultaneously asserting a Welsh identity. Finally, Banks, when discussing his novels in 1996, pointed out that humanity does not have to follow the Culture’s model—“The point is, humanity can find its own salvation. It doesn’t necessarily have to rely on machines”— and in the same interview states, “I’m Scottish and a writer so I’m a Scottish writer, but I don’t mix with Scottish writers very much” (Mitchell 1996). How much can we read into these representations of AI, and the cultures of which they are part, issues of national identity and nationalism?

Despite acknowledging the extent to which cultural contexts play a significant part in the type of sf that is produced, it superficially seems that national politics is not as important as other markers of diversity in terms of the imagined futures. This can, at least from the perspective of given senses of identity politics, prove problematic, because what does it mean for a writer from one culture to try to set it in another, how near or far in the future? When a writer such as Ian McDonald sets works such as *Brasyl* (2007), *The Dervish House* (2010), and *River of Gods* (2004) in non-Anglophone countries, much like American author Paulo Bacigalupi’s *The Wind-Up Girl* (2009), or when Alastair Reynolds sets the first novel of his Poseidon’s Children trilogy, *Blue Remembered Earth* (2012), in a world in which Africa, China, and India are the world’s leading technological innovators, is this appropriate? That is, given that debates about posthumanism allegedly encourage us to reconsider what we call ‘human’, through entities such as AIs and uplifted animals having the potential to be as sentient as the next human, sf in the 21st century is still in something of a representative bind, in terms of who is writing about what, and where, and how. There are, as there always have been, diverse voices within sf, but these are often not so recognised outside of the sf community; 20th-century sf writers such as Philip K. Dick or Isaac Asimov are far more well-known than Octavia Butler or Samuel Delaney, even within the US, much as today a British writer such as Richard Morgan or an American writer such as “James Corey” are more likely to get a Netflix adaptation (*Altered Carbon* and *The Expanse*, respectively) than Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, or Liu Cixin.

So as much as it is possible to balk, theoretically if not actually, at writers representing a particular kind of future that may be as Anglophone as the culture they are writing from, or writing about a culture that is ostensibly not theirs, it is important to recognise that the future belongs to those who can imagine it, and that a number of 21st-century sf Anglophone novels are at least not slavishly replicating the cultures that produced them to the extent that a large proportion of early-to-mid-20th-century sf did. The lesson that we learn from representations of AI is not necessarily that they reflect a dominant culture and have the potential to reflect its prejudices—because of course we must be wary of that—but that, in the far (posthuman) future, what is important is the long view, the ability to look beyond particular prejudices and biases. Elements of sf have always demonstrated the ability to do that, to varying degrees, but perhaps what can be learned from the 21st century proliferation of Anglophone sf, of which the “British Boom” was likely a part rather than the whole story, is that it might be Anglophone sf, but it need not be an Anglocentric future. When Bodhi Chattopadhyay offered in his final proposition of working out what a “non-Anglocentric” sf looks like—“It should be a liberating rather than a marginalising discourse, in which the sensitivity to local context determines, rather than undermines, the concreteness of our planetary imaginings” (2013)—the key is, of course, what we consider to be “local contexts.” For the “British Boom,” it was Britain in the world, between the US and Europe, but as such illustrative fictions of AI reveal, it is necessary to consider both wider and narrower contexts within our visions of the future. That is, the ‘national’ is merely a concept through which we determine what constitutes a shared identity, and in moving towards the ostensibly ‘post-national’ we need to be aware that it remains important to consider what ‘national’ aspects we query and retain as we move towards a new, hopefully broader ‘national’ context that encompasses divergent senses of being and identity without denigrating any in particular. This is not in and of itself a new thing to sf—I am reminded of a line from Olaf Stapledon’s lecture notes on *Last and First Men* in which he tells himself to “think cosmopolitanally”—but such “cosmopolitan” thinking is becoming increasingly important in the 21st century as we acknowledge different types and regional identities of, as well as within, sf production. What sf is placed to uniquely offer to the Anglophone novel, as its own sense of itself changes and grows, is that what is of importance is not only where it is being written *from* but where it is written *to*, and for whom. What fictions of AI tell us is that humanity itself might be a limiting perspective on our worldviews, and that short-termism is no longer enough to survive into the 22nd century.

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1. It is worth noting the distinction here between ‘devolution’ as political process of devolving powers to regional assemblies, and ‘devolution’ as it is more usually used within sf, as the degeneration of humanity to a lesser state. See, for example, the entry in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* on ‘devolution.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more, see, Jack Fennell’s *Irish Science Fiction* (2014) or his “A Short Guide to Irish Science Fiction” (2016) produced for Dublin’s 2019 Worldcon; Iwan Morus’ blog post, “Y Dydd Olaf (The Last Day),” discussing Owain Owain’s *Y Dydd Olaf* (1976) as part of the Unsettling Scientific Stories project; and Tim Armstrong’s *Air Cuan Dubh Drilseach* (2013), which is interestingly omitted from the National Library of Scotland’s “Science Fiction in Scotland” webpage. The Irish context is, of course, even more complicated due to the political distinctions between Ireland and Northern Ireland, and as a result this piece will not deal with the ‘Irish’ side of British sf in much detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The ‘American’ and ‘European’ adjectives also present difficulties: To what extent is it legitimate to assume that a text written by an African-American sf writer from Texas exhibits similar characteristics to that by an African-American sf writer from the Bronx, or that French and German sf can be collapsed into one category, let alone then be categorised as ‘European,’ without even beginning to consider intersectionality, identity politics, and individual differences? Note also that, as Stephen Baxter writes in his contribution to the special issue, “Baby Boomers,” “[What] influenced me in this process wasn’t other writers, who I hadn’t even known existed, but the culture of the time and the place” (2003, 482); the ‘culture’ that informs an author is not necessarily one that is contemporaneous with a text’s production but also from the writer’s personal experiences of ‘culture’ as they were growing up. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As Fredric Jameson writes, “[Sf narratives] go about their business with the full baggage and paraphernalia of a conventional realism, with this one difference: that the full ‘presence’ – the settings and actions to be ‘rendered’ – are the merely possible and conceivable ones of a near or far future” (1982, 151). That is, sf texts are products of the cultures that write them and reveal what that culture considers to be an imaginable future, but are otherwise as ‘realist’ as those texts that they are so often compared negatively against. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Whilst this might be said to link to the Anthropocene, and although sf’s engagement with the Anthropocene is clear through debated sub-genres such as ‘cli-fi’, it seems rather that such future visions are, as note 4 attests more often a product of a particular cultural perception on the future. Visions of diversity such as those seen in Afrofuturism are still, unfortunately, more often than not on the fringes of mainstream sf production. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For instance, Banks’ ‘literary fiction’ from *The Wasp Factory* onwards is often set in Scotland, and although some ‘Scottish’ sf writers have utilised this setting (notably Smith and Stross), Banks’ brand of sf is space opera and thus set in the wider universe. Of his literary fiction, perhaps the most overt link to a sense of ‘Scottish sf’ are *Walking on Glass* (1985) and *The Bridge* (1986), both of which clearly focus on ‘fantastic’ worlds as allegories and reflections of their protagonists and their contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Space Opera” might be loosely described as large-scale (epic) sf, set against the backdrop of vast swathes of time and/or vast reaches of space, spanning civilizations, and species. The texts studied here are perhaps more usefully and precisely situated as “New Space Opera.” For more, see *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*’s definition and Winter 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For some recent articles on key texts and tropes, see, for example, Gutiérrez-Jones 2014 on ‘kinship’ and Pavani 2018 on the ‘man-machine.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Banks’ *Consider Phlebas* (1987), which provides a timeline alongside its plot (the Culture-Idirian War) to draw corollaries with the periods of the Crusades. Other texts mention this war in terms of how long ago it was, and a rough periodisation in relation to the Common Era can be established. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Despite the policy of ‘non-intervention’ that the Morthanveld and Nariscene uphold, it is worth noting that Bank’s Culture novels—including *Matter*—are fundamentally concerned with interventions by the Culture. Within *Matter*, the book opens with one such intervention, and it is revealed that the Sarl have already been pushed in a particular direction by a Culture visitor (193). “Contact,” and its sub-group “Special Circumstances,” occupy a special place within Culture society, and see as their remit the necessity of intervention under given conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For more on Asher’s AI and its ‘steering’ of Human society, the most obvious texts are the first three Polity novels, the Agent Cormac series, running from *Gridlinked* (2001) to *Line War* (2008). For probably the most overt examples of AI steering society from Banks’ Culture series, see *Consider Phlebas* (1987) and *Excession* (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In relation to the Polity, Asher states in an interview with “DJ” (2017) that “all ills have been cured, life is potentially eternal, there is no lack of resources, space ships travel between worlds FTL through U-space while from world to world there are instantaneous transmission gates called runcibles. However, at the Polity border and beyond, things are not so utopian.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)