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Ace Pilots and Queer Mecha

For most, the future no doubt looks like something out of science fiction—giant robots with laser swords, spaceships capable of traversing the galaxy in hours, an apocalyptic wasteland, a vibrant green and blue Mars. These futures are imagined to be at least somewhat inclusive of race, sexuality, disability, and other non-normative bodies, though this is typically implied rather than explored. This is in part because the future is, first and foremost, what the individual dreamer desires technology, society, and culture to be like. Even in the disastrous scenarios of works like *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Akira*, and *Metal Gear*, the aspects of humanity that are disparaged and the consequences of our actions are contrasted against “what really matters” and present potential failures of humanity as a way of correcting the present moment. But these perspectives rely upon the individual telling the story. Two of these perspectives—the indie visual novels *Heaven Will Be Mine* by Worst Girl Games and *Extreme Meatpunks Forever*¹ by Heather “Flowers” Robertson—estrangle the hopes and fears of living in marked bodies through the Japanese mecha genre to envisage a queer future and the future of being queer.

¹ At the time of writing, *Extreme Meatpunks Forever* has one completed season, “Fueled by Blood,” and a second season, “Bound by Ash,” in development.

For the record, my focus is exclusively on *Heaven Will Be Mine* and *Extreme Meatpunks Forever* and how they relate to and combat against the mainstream mecha genre specifically and science fiction in general. In the US, much is said about the works of Asimov, Orwell, Huxley, Philip K. Dick, Gibson, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and many other works created by or for a presumed audience of straight white men to such an extent that the genre is associated with normative white masculinity. There are many, however, who use science fiction to explore other, more diverse futures. Ursula K. Le Guin's novels such as *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Octavia Butler's cultivation of the Afrofuturism genre, the Wachowski sisters' *The Matrix*, and Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* are just a few of the multitudes of voices murmuring off-stage, so discontent with waiting for their time in the spotlight that they made their own theaters. The Internet provides room for these locales, and as more people become aware of these alternative future-visions, those that would have otherwise stayed silent are emboldened to dream of their own and share them.

I will also be approaching these science-fiction works through a queer feminist perspective. Gayatri Gopinath's definition of queer in *Impossible Desires* is useful in this context as it refers to "a range of dissident and non-heteronormative practices and desires that may very well be incommensurate with the identity categories of 'gay' and 'lesbian,'" as there are many ways to practice queerness beyond sexuality (11). Although the two works I'll be analyzing feature people with alternative sexualities, they explore a range of human experiences beyond the normative of "straight time," the "straight and narrow paths toward the future laid out for the reproductive family, the law-abiding citizen, the believer in markets" (Lothian 3). José Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*, proclaims that queer perspectives see more than the here and now: "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond

the quagmire of the present. ...Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing” (1). To be queer is to envision possibilities beyond “the various regimes of colonialism, nationalism, racial and religious absolutism” as they actively “contest the logic and dominance of these regimes” (Gopinath 28). By including the intersection of queer studies and feminist studies, I hope to illuminate not only the masculine, heteronormative values within the mecha genre but also the ways *Heaven* and *Meatpunks* counter and supplant them.

While my framing of mecha as a form of science fiction should surprise few, the manner that I relate to science fiction is more nuanced than it appears. Science fiction grants an inherently queer perspective to the reader even if the events within these stories are ordinary to their denizens. Seo-Young Chu’s *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* posits that science fiction is “a mimetic discourse whose objects of representation are nonimaginary yet cognitively estranging” (3). Science fiction regularly describes extra-terrestrial environments, non-human entities, and technologies that have yet to be developed, but the works can produce a sense of cognitive estrangement or a sense of wonder in the reader, for the things described might exist in our reality but in a more mundane form (Chu 5). Our basis for these alien concepts lies within our understanding of the world we still live in. Science fiction, then, is less a genre and more a method of encoding our lives through fiction to invoke new perspectives on what is normal, or rather normative, and to insist “on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world,” one that is “fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter” (Muñoz 1, 189).

Although we may not be piloting giant robots in space any time soon, the mecha genre is itself over half a century old. An offshoot of the “jumbo latex suit genre” that shows like *Ultraman* and the *Godzilla* films helped popularize in mid-20th century Japan, mecha has since

proliferated across the globe. Past interpretations of media based in Japanese-born genres have a habit of defaulting to a Japan-centered interpretation. Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano notes in the article “Global and Local Materialities of Anime” that “the reference has often been to the same monumental, national events, such as World War II, as if Japan was caught in the never-ending cycle of victimhood and traumatic recovery,” ignoring the global audience that anime has accrued in the decades since said events and the other possible readings provided at a local level elsewhere (244). A common example of this can be seen in the *Godzilla* film series, which is widely regarded as a discourse on the destruction of the atomic bomb so long as one forgets about every other movie in the series beyond the first and the massive merchandising power the brand wields (Wada-Marciano, 244). A genre may have roots in one region of the world, but it is not limited to that point on the globe. By opening readings of Japanese genres beyond the confines of global or historical events, one can find resonances within their own localities.

Approaching the mecha genre from this perspective, one finds a near-universal joy in mecha. Christopher Bolton in *Interpreting Anime* summarizes it thus: “In the simplest version of the mecha formula, these human-shaped robots with human operators inside them represent a transparent fantasy of bodily augmentation, in which the machines’ youthful pilots magnify the power of their own small bodies in order to save the world” (62). These massive machines “mirror and magnify the human body,” allowing humanity to discard its limitations and ascend to greater heights (Bolton 62). Yet, this simple “mecha formula” already accentuates who this fantasy is for: the young masculine pilot. Mecha prominently features young male heroes as both pilots and main characters, while female pilots are typically relegated to a supporting role. Part of this is due to marketing, as series like *Gundam* have an exorbitant amount of merchandise released with every new season; while not a new idea to American audiences who have been

exposed to innumerable television shows designed for merchandise tie-ins, one can be forgiven for forgetting that similar techniques are practiced elsewhere (Wada-Marciano 244). But the prevalence of young male mecha pilots is also due to gendered expectations of who is to be the hero (almost always male) and who is to be on the sidelines cheering them on (almost always female). Frenchy Lunning in “Between the Child and the Mecha” remarks that even the presentation of mecha is phallogocentric: “heavily decked out in idealized weaponry, with each giant muscle of the male form exaggerated and abstracted into sculptural plates of metal that are streamlined into a dynamic composition of hypostatized masculinity” (268). Mecha are envisioned as tools of hyper-violence, the evolution of warfare, and the domain of men. To imagine any other possibility apart from this is sacrilege.

As illustrated in *Heaven Will Be Mine* and *Extreme Meatpunks Forever*, queer authors don’t mind setting fire to standards. Both games feature casts that wildly differ from mainstream mecha. *Heaven* features three polyamorous, female-identifying lesbians—the renegade hacker Saturn; Pluto, the leader of the rebel group Cradle’s Graces; and the veteran turncoat Luna-Terra—on opposing sides of a burgeoning war in space. While they pilot massive Ship-Selves to combat one another and achieve their personal goals, the battles between them have an erotic quality to them; as pain is sharp and brief and the Ship-Selves put themselves back together after every fight with no lasting damage, their fights resemble a mix of courtship-dance, academic debate, and BDSM. In contrast, *Extreme Meatpunks Forever* is a tongue-in-cheek post-apocalyptic nightmare-dream of flesh, desert, and punching neo-Nazis off cliffs. The *Sundown Meatpunks* the story follows parody the selectively multi-cultural teams of 1990s American television (exemplified in shows like *Power Rangers* and *Captain Planet*) by focusing on a gay black man (Sam), a trans-male of color (Brad), a disabled Jewish lesbian (Lianna), and their

gender-neutral leader (Cass). The “meat” in “Meatpunk” comes from the meatsuits, amalgams of cloned human parts constructed for war and labor that have become just as common as cars. After a scuffle with the fascist son of Sundown’s chief of police, the Meatpunks flee into the desert and fight for survival in hostile lands while coming to terms with their own hang-ups and baggage.

If the rejection of dominant hegemony within both works wasn’t clear enough, *Extreme Meatpunks Forever* is quite overt in who the enemies punched off the cliffs represent: actual fascists that routinely call for the removal of anything non-normative and non-masculine from daily life by any means necessary and that have become an increasingly prominent political force around the world. Robertson makes no attempts to hide her contempt for them, as the fash enemies in *Meatpunks* range from buffoons who regularly boast about their own intelligence to self-righteous hero-terrorists. In her “Meatpunk Manifesto,” Robertson writes, “if you’re going to say something then say it loud and say it clear. there [sic] are times for clever metaphors and there are times when you gotta punch a fash’s lights out and we live in the second time” (para. 2). This lack of subtlety might seem counter-intuitive to the aims of science-fiction, as one-to-one relation of queer characteristics and real violence suggests a level of realism that eschews cognitive estrangement for representation. Yet, that is the point, for the denizens of *Meatpunks* are people who live and breathe and are silent and loud and proud and scared right now in this world we live in. No amount of technobabble and mysticism will erase the existence of queer lives, so Robertson instead uses the estranging power of science fiction on something more material: her lived experience of “growing up queer in the void between the South and the Midwest, feeling at odds with my own body, trying to cope with the fact that it seems like, every single year, the world gets worse” (Sledge 11). She opens the game with an author’s note, “This

is a story about a world very much like our own. The people there are like the ones here: they're weird, they're messy, they're trying their best in a broken world" (Ch.1). There may be robots made of meat and fueled by blood, a sky that can be turned from bright to dark at will, and a cult that believes that the Sun is a trickster god that will return once more, but these wondrous objects cannot be removed from the context in which they were created, a fact that Robertson frequently reminds the reader.

Robertson's in-your-face approach to a possible future is contrasted by *Heaven Will Be Mine's* excavation of a could-have-been past. The Cold War was fought not by the United States and the USSR but by humanity against the Existential Threat: "a nth-dimensional shadow cast by the gravitational impression of human culture in spacetime," something fought not through efficient warfare but through the expansion of the Native Sphere's (Earth's) cultural gravity via the newly established Memorial Foundation. The global organization's two goals were "protecting humans from other humans through peace on Earth, and protecting humans from everything else through war in heaven." As Europa, the Chief Officer of the Existential Safety division and Luna-Terra's mentor, records in a journal entry, the plan was doubly flawed:

The first is that to do better in heaven is meaningless if it cannot be exported to Earth. The space program was never rejected by the surface. It simply did not have enough relevance to sustain interest.

The second error is the intrinsic error of Memorial Foundation: the Existential Threat is intrinsic to humanity. You can fight it, but you cannot cut it out. The designation of alien is required by humans. We cannot trick an Existential Threat into a convenient manifestation. As it has always been, only humans can fulfill the criteria to be alien. ("July 29, 1958")

The first flaw is quite like the historical course of space programs in the past half-century, as funding was constantly slashed to fuel other political aims. The second flaw—"the Existential Threat is intrinsic to humanity"—elaborates that the "nth-dimensional shadows" cast into the

darkness of space are merely a reflection of not just ourselves but everything we could be². Here, the failure of the space program is not that there was nothing to be found—a thriving colony was established on the planet Ares (Mars), space travel was made efficient enough to travel between celestial bodies in a matter of days, and the Existential Threat *does* pose a real danger—but that “the Existential Threat can never be as powerful as we are. Humans will always pose a greater threat to other humans than the Existential Threats will. It will always be easier for humanity to eliminate the threat by killing their own than by fighting the threat directly” (“Pilot Program Progress”). And the same holds true for those who do not wish to return to Earth; it’s easier for humanity to destroy itself than to acknowledge its flaws and the wills of others.

Thus far, the works have shown no qualms with approaching the darker, more frightening aspects of the human psyche and the parts of us that want to quash the fear of change and the autonomy of others through force. The villains of both games—Iapetus, the leader of the Celestial Mechanics faction in *Heaven Will Be Mine* and, in *Extreme Meatpunks Forever*, the “white devil”³ in bright white armor—seek unity through the destruction of queer possibility. For the “white devil,” this is accomplished through the destruction of the city of Hopeville and the installation of a police state, “finally bringing order to this chaos” (*Meatpunks*, Ch. 6). He spent years waiting for the “thunder,” the signal that the old world had toppled; when the Sun left the sky, when the Midwest turned into desert, and yet some remnant of the “chaos” remained, he jumps at the chance to be the envoy of the end himself. Again, Robertson is quite clear what the “white devil’s” motivations are: to make a world where the strong rule the weak, where no

² SATURN: “They don’t name it because naming it gives it power, but not naming it gives it more. ... But a trick like this will not work: in the euphemism is a hollow void that can hold all fears and all possibilities” (“January 30, 1981”).

³ The character is unnamed but is described by one character as “tall, broad-shouldered. White, early fifties. Armor seems makeshift, out of metal. Wearing a welding mask” while his mech has “some kind of white horns” not unlike those of a devil (Ch. 5).

questions are asked, and where a fifty-something doomsday prepper in a giant meat-suit can be a hero. Similarly, Iapetus wants to establish a new order under something he calls Unified Culture Theory (also called Tyrant Theory by its detractors). Unified Culture Theory “would remove alternate quantum states until finding a solution that would incorporate perfectly in line with [itself]”; in other words, it is “the complete removal of human variance” (*Heaven*, “White Void”)⁴. To accelerate this theory, Iapetus seeks to make the Existential Threat (and the remaining humans in space) into something alien and unknowable, something that humanity could fight and kill instead of itself. Together their message is effectively the same: conform to our way of thinking or die and be discarded.

The antagonists’ goal is a reaction to a perceived “chaos” or “threat” that seeks to destabilize the world and render it incalculable. Many with queer or minority identities have heard how they are “ruining this country” or “threatening the sanctity of the children” simply by existing and trying to live a full life. About the conservative push against gay marriage in the US, Tim Dean in “An Impossible Embrace” finds a “virtually camp quality” in the “melodramatic exaggeration of the dangers posed to the most powerful nation on earth by an act of sodomy” (125). Yet it is not the act of being queer or black or disabled or [insert non-normative body here] that frightens such parties but how queerness “fissures the norm from within” and “unfolds incalculable futures” (Dean 128). But to combat this fear, one must engage with it. In “On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” Karen Barad questions why we do not engage with our “inhumanity, that is, our actions lacking compassion... Perhaps it takes facing the inhuman within us before com-*passion*—suffering together with, participating with, feeling with,

⁴ Compare Unified Culture Theory to discussions of “straight time;” the latter is described by Alexis Lothian as “a colonizing global modernity in which alternative modes of being will have been wiped out” and by Muñoz as “a self-naturalizing temporality” where “the queer can only fail” (Lothian 12; Muñoz 25, 173).

being moved by—can be lived” (216). Iapetus and the “white devil” refuse “com-compassion” in favor of branding an Other to be destroyed.

In comparison, the protagonists of *Heaven Will Be Mine* and *Extreme Meatpunks Forever* work through their inhumanness and the ways in which they have hurt one another. One way this is done is through the trope of the rival. There are many instances of male/male rivalries within mecha, such as Simon and Viral in *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann* (2007) and Shinji and Kaworu in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995). Rivalries in mecha often take one of two forms: the clash of ideas (represented here with Simon and Viral) and displaced desire (Shinji/Kaworu). The clash of ideas acts as a microcosm of larger conflicts within the narrative space while also providing space for productive violence. Where the violence imposed by Iapetus and the “white devil” seeks destruction, the productive violence of rivalry aims to fracture both participants to find new ways of fitting together. An excellent example of this is Brad and Lianna’s brawl in Chapter 4 of *Meatpunks*. After only a few days of traveling through the desert and battling dozens of fascist assailants, Brad grows particularly sensitive to Lianna’s calling him “kid”: “i [*sic*] know i look young cause i’m trans but i’m a goddamn adult ok...i spent a long fuckin’ time getting to this point and i sure as shit didn’t do it to get patronized constantly by a person i barely even know.” While the reader is given a choice to be nice or overreact, Lianna snaps back:

LIANNA: This is the third fucking time in my life I’ve had to give everything up! And it never gets easier! Not to mention I’m the one who put this group together and you all treat me like a fucking joke!... How DARE I, out of the KINDNESS of my own heart, try and take you under my wing! So forgive me if I’m distracted, and forget ONE LITTLE THING!

BRAD: it’s not “one little thing,” it’s MY FUCKING LIFE!!!!!! i worked hard to get to this point, and i’m not just gonna let you act like you’re the ONLY ONE hurting here!!! (*Meatpunks*, Ch. 3)

Tensions escalate until Brad challenges Lianna to a duel, with the loser leaving the group forever (common stakes in the rivalry trope). As Lianna preps her mech, Cass calls her out, “instead [*sic*] of learning why your friend’s been hurt by your actions...you’re going to fight him risking both your lives in the process.” To which Lianna responds, “YES! OBVIOUSLY!” (Ch. 4). Both Brad and Lianna are “full of anger and hurt, ready to do anything to break the pain,” even if that means tearing into each other. Yet their combat ends not in expulsion but forgiveness and acknowledgment. Brad and Lianna can express through their mecha that which their human skin cannot relate, reflecting what Lunning calls “an essence of the self/identity in its visual/textual manifestation” (275). They realize parts of themselves with the act of entering the meatsuits and parts of each other through witnessing their mutual determination to not let the pain they feel (emotionally and physically) stop them from losing what little they have left. They leave the fight battered and bruised but understanding one another a bit better for it.

The second kind of rivalry—that of displaced desire—is quite typical of a number of media, not just the mecha genre. Eve Sedgwick, channeling Rene Girard in *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire*, notes that “the bonds of ‘rivalry’ and ‘love,’ differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent” (21). Sedgwick’s exploration of the love triangle, where two men vie over a female, finds that “it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men,” or, put another way, homosexual desire is displaced through a third (female) over which the two make “graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification” through rivalry (25-26, 27). There are too many examples of this kind of rivalry to count here. On the other hand, there are far too few examples of homosexual desire flourishing in mecha. In *Evangelion*, Shinji is forced to kill Kaworu or let humanity die; moments later, Shinji

confesses that he loved him, mirroring Kaworu's own confession to him (ep. 24). Even more recent shows like *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (2016) suffer from this, as Shiro's partner is killed off-screen shortly after Shiro himself was revealed to be gay after seven seasons. These examples show how little progress has been made in mainstream mecha when it comes to queer representation. Contrast this to *Heaven Will Be Mine's* "love triangle." Saturn, Pluto, and Luna-Terra don't war over one another's affections or hide their feelings for each other. Though on opposite sides of an intergalactic conflict, they are each on the verge of switching sides just to be with one another. While *Heaven* has multiple endings⁵, there is no "true ending" that ends all the fighting (dismantling centuries of heteronormative, patriarchal hegemony is far too complex an act for giant robots to solve), but there is equally no ending in which the three split apart. The relationship they have built through their many duels has deepened their love, and their rivalry is shown to be less a "play of desire and identification" and more an exploration of possible futures together.

The possible futures that *Extreme Meatpunks Forever* and *Heaven Will Be Mine* envision are not without peril. *Meatpunks* ends with the city of Hopeville destroyed by a column of fire summoned by the "white devil" and the Sundown Meatpunks vowing to make up for their failure⁶. *Heaven's* endings each have a drawback that cannot be overlooked: Saturn's finds the three transmogrified into something "more human" but are so far removed from what we know that we cannot know them⁷, Pluto's prevents the Earth from fighting to conquer them but locks

⁵ There is one ending associated with each of the three factions and a fourth that allows the reader to choose from those three. In this fourth "ending," the three women debate over the finality of an "ending," with Pluto defiantly stating, "We don't need a true ending. Whatever it is, we'll make it the true ending."

⁶ CASS: "we're gonna figure out who's behind all this. we're gonna make sure it never happens again. we're gonna steal the motherfucking sun" (Ch.6).

⁷ "They are so far away they cannot even be our enemies. But they will break our hearts" ("Celestial Mechanic's ending").

them into an eternal play-war with humanity⁸, and Luna-Terra shifts the “center of gravity” away from Earth enough to let those humans left in space remain on the Moon but still complies with humanity’s wishes to be grounded⁹. These endings cease our encounters with the story, but they imply that there is still work to be done, a future to be working toward, and a queer utopia that “imagine[s] a space outside of heteronormativity...by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*” (Muñoz 35, original emphasis). Perhaps that future also includes even more nuanced explorations of the intersections of mecha and queerness.

⁸ “Humanity will have to fight us again, on our terms this time. Fight us like children fight, again, with bodies of plastic, pretend” (“Cradle’s Graces ending”).

⁹ LUNA-TERRA: “I think we move the center of gravity between the Earth and the Moon. We pull a little. Then we pull a lot. We pull until our bodies fall apart... and bring a little bit of what we made here back home” (“Memorial Foundation’s ending”).

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