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'It Is One Story': Writing a Global Alternate History in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt*

Chris Pak

Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002) depicts a world that might have developed had European civilisations been eradicated by the Black Death. Scenes set in the bardo, an intermediate state between death and rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism, introduce a narrative frame for reflecting on the language games relating to history that are portrayed in the text.¹ In this chapter, I examine the ways in which the alternate history is used to present history and the development of societies in the context of an absent Europe, and in the absence of the concept of Europe as historically constructed in our timeline. Analysing the use of textual strategies such as the narrative cohesion generated through the reincarnation of focal characters, I consider what it means to tell stories about history by investigating how the text represents several non-European civilisations, and by examining what these portrayals say about the relationship of history to the formation of stories about cultural identity and the future. These non-European civilisations include the Chinese and Arabic societies that are portrayed in the novel across a period of over six-hundred and eighty years.

This analysis will begin by considering a scholarly dispute over interpretations of the metaphysical significance of reincarnation for the cosmology of Robinson's alternate history in order to highlight the differences in various readers' orientation to the text. Emphasis on plausibility and representations of reincarnation and the bardo as evidence of

¹ In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein describes language games as a category encompassing multiple communicative utterances and/or actions, and he calls 'the whole [of natural language], consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the "language-game"' (5). Alternate histories engage in communicative acts specific to their form and their narratives' relationship to history, and call upon their readers to acknowledge potential realities alternative to our timeline. Such language games include allusions to the history of our timeline, extrapolation and speculation that make salient aspects of society, culture and history that might otherwise have remained unremarked, hidden or difficult to disentangle from the history or our timeline.

a “true” reality results in a different interpretation when compared to a treatment of the text according to what the historian Gavriel Rosenfeld describes in his 2002 article, ‘Why Do We Ask “What If?” Reflections on the Function of Alternate History,’ as a ‘document of memory,’ for which he argues the alternate history is well suited (90). Rosenfeld argues thus:

Ironically, alternate histories lend themselves very well to being studied as documents of memory for the same reason that historians have dismissed them as useless for the study of history – namely, their fundamental subjectivity. (Rosenfeld 93)

The fundamental subjectivity of alternate histories – the narrowing of perspective necessary to the presentation of a fictional account that is situated through one or multiple characters – allows these fictional texts to be analysed for the ways in which they present the memory of history. As Robinson’s narrative begins as an alternate history preoccupied with the past and ends as a science-fictional narrative that gestures toward a future of hope, in this chapter I likewise consider the importance of the relationship between the memory of the past and the imagination of the future for telling stories about civilisations. Ultimately, I show how *The Years of Rice and Salt* portrays the actors who make up the story of history, how this history is itself characterised and what repercussions these explorations have for reading the stories that make up the history of our timeline. If, as one of the characters suggests, individuals are ‘a thread in a tapestry that has unrolled for centuries before us, and will unroll for centuries after us,’ then, as I will show in this chapter, alternate histories help us to explore the multiple configurations of that loom and to assess the possibilities inherent in that fabric for an extension into the future (Robinson 663).

Unlike many of the alternate timelines that have occupied thought in alternate history, counterfactual history and science fiction (sf) scholarship, Robinson’s alternate history is based on demographic trends and not on war and its aftermath. This statistical basis sets the scene for a narrative that unfolds across a period of over six hundred and

eighty years, from the fifteenth to the late twenty-first centuries, where the story of the expansion of non-European civilisations and the concomitant shifts in science, religion, culture, geopolitics and social justice are played out. As Stephen Baxter explains in the Forward to this volume, Robinson draws on Jared Diamond's analysis of the factors that influence the development of societies in his popular environmental history, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, to imagine how a traumatic biological event that refigures the environments made available to Earth's remaining civilisations might lead to an alternative configuration of power and geopolitics. Plagues, and more specifically the Black Death, as the historian Geoffrey Hawthorn argues in 'Plague and Fertility in Modern Europe,' is one of the most significant aspects of a biological regime in Europe that 'marked the limit between the possible and the impossible' (39). Alternate histories engage in language games that interrogate that space between the imagination of the possible and impossible.

The Years of Rice and Salt is divided into ten books, each of which centres on a cast of characters living in different societies throughout this span of time. Readers are given a sense of these civilisations' development through the experiences of these characters, whose struggle with authority in various guises, are both a part of – and sometimes directly contributes to propel – the social changes depicted in each epoch. Both an alternate history and an epic narrative, Robinson transforms the epic's fascination with questions of historicity and the nation by portraying the inter-relationships of multiple national cultures to develop a global narrative of human history. Patrick Parrinder argues in 'Science Fiction as Truncated Epic' that sf is a form of "truncated epic" that is concerned with 'future or alternate history' and the fate of 'whole societies or of the human race, its collaterals or descendants' (93). Responding to the re-figurations of epic form throughout its history, Adeline Johns-Putra describes in *The History of the Epic* how epic undergoes 'an accumulation of definitions, a piling on, as it were, of different meanings from different points in the epic's history' that point to 'an intriguing moment in its development and, second, a reflection of that development; that is, a reflection of past moments' (10). Robinson's epic speaks to this history by transforming a range of epic tropes to reflect on past moments both in human history and in the development of the narratives that frame

those histories.

Paul Merchant writes in *The Epic* (1971) that it 'is a still developing and expanding form' (viii) characterised by 'the large scale of each work, and its all-inclusiveness' (71). This association of 'scale', 'mass', or 'weight' (4) is complemented by two features drawn from Mary McCarthy's definition of epic in 1968 as 'surpassing the dimensions of realism' and Ezra Pound's 1961 definition as 'a poem including history' (1). These two dimensions are poles, what Merchant calls '[t]he double relation of epic, to history on the one hand and to everyday reality on the other,' which highlight the social function of epic as chronicle and story (2). These two features in turn open lines of enquiry into '[t]he sophisticated relationship of the poet to his material, his awareness of historical perspective' (2). Robinson draws from the parallel projects of the epic and the alternate history as documents of memory, thus illustrating Johns-Putra's contention in *The History of the Epic* that the epic is 'a game of inter-textuality' (58).

In order to provide coherence across the vast span of time depicted in *The Years of Rice and Salt*, and to connect the macro-level portrayal of the growth of each society to the micro-level biographies of the characters, scenes set in the bardo establish reincarnation as a cosmological frame for connecting the lives of each set of characters. The device that Robinson adopts to signal this continuity to the reader – the use of the same initial for the name of each reincarnated individual – is an attempt to bridge the disconnection between each cast of characters. Thus, the literary critic Gib Prettyman explains in his 2011 article 'Critical Utopia as Critical History: Apocalypse and Enlightenment in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt*':

Character "B," Bold and his later selves, is the bodhisattva, typically emphasizing compassion and spiritual insight; character "K" is kinetic and impetuous, intent always on justice; character "I" is inductive and investigative, often a scientist; character "S" is self-indulgent, often in a position of power. (Prettyman 350)

These characters are destined to cross paths throughout their multiple lives by virtue of

their membership in a “jati,” a cohort of individuals who are reincarnated as a group. This use of reincarnation has received criticism from scholars such as Farah Mendlesohn, who argues that the scenes set in the bardo ‘do not belong in this book [...] because the structure of *The Years of Rice and Salt* is ostensibly polysemic, that being the baseline of all alternate histories, while the scenes in the bardo insist on the Truth’ (25). The capacity for alternate histories to promote multiple interpretations is based on its resistance to a deterministic historical truth that cannot entertain the alterity of difference.

The alternate history is thus a polysemic form that invites multiple meanings and historical interpretation. *The Years of Rice and Salt* compounds this formal polysemy with a cultural polysemy conveyed by direct representation. Religious explanations of time are one element of a culture’s narrative about their place in the world and in history, and are predicated – at least for Abrahamic traditions – on a teleological progression toward an apocalypse of a sort that presents itself as an exclusive truth. Thus, Mendlesohn explains, given that Christianity is excised from Robinson’s history, ‘the presentation of one of the remaining interpretations as a universal truth seems inappropriate and oddly evangelical’ (25). Yet Keith Brooke observes that at one point, ‘Robinson reminds us that there is a narrator to these tales, that this is an artifice, an act of storytelling’ and that ‘the “truth” of the extrapolation is relative and it’s embedded in the narrator’s world view, highlighting how blind we are to all the comparable assumptions made in more conventional western narratives’ (n.p.). An additional perspectival polysemy is thus joined to the other ways in which the text represents multiplicity. So, while Douglas Barbour points out that each of the books is, in his words, ‘narrated in a manner proper to its time and place,’ Prettyman explains that:

just as earlier the details of the bardo matched the cultural expectations of the souls who entered, when the inductive and anthropogenic expectation takes root the novel no longer gives us explicit glimpses of the bardo or of the gods at work. (Prettyman 352)

One of the strategies that Robinson uses in the text involves priming the reader to a

hypersensitivity to interpretation that, while offering the possibility of closure through this religious theme, ultimately renders it ambiguous and opens it up to alterity.

I present this dispute over interpretations of the metaphysical significance of reincarnation for the cosmology portrayed in *The Years of Rice and Salt* so as to highlight the differences in these readers' orientation to the text. Reading the scenes set in the bardo as encompassing the "true" metaphysical reality of the novel's world can result in overlooking the interpretative ambiguity of the text's portrayal of reincarnation and enlightenment. Documents of memory focus on the ways a text responds to the present, rather than to the past or the future: Rosenfeld argues that 'nearly all alternate histories explore the past instrumentally with an eye towards larger present-day agendas' (93). A good case can be made for an extension of this principle to sf. One aspect of the alternate history is its capacity to engage in language games that highlight classic science fictional operations, such as extrapolation, analogical thinking, estrangement and the tendency to refract or project the present into the past or future. Enlightenment, which Prettyman regards as a collective utopian break from history, is in many ways the obverse of the apocalypse. Following Fredric Jameson, Prettyman argues that enlightenment 'works on the level of subjectivity and the individual' (339) to represent an 'asymptotic approach of a decisive break with the familiar narratives of history and utopia that paradoxically helps to generate empowering historical perceptions and utopian representations' (346). The approach of this decisive utopian break is an ongoing process that itself becomes subject to being transformed into story, and which is capable of generating further narratives about history and the future. Arguably, as implied by its characterisation as asymptotic, the approach of this utopian break is always deferred; rather, its importance as a narrative subject and principle that provides foundations for the development of further narratives of empowerment and emancipation suggests that the imagination of the future is a utopian intervention.

One of the strategies for which Robinson uses the alternate history is to highlight aspects of world history that, while not unknown, certainly have little circulation in popular Anglo-American contexts and discourse. As the critic of utopia, Phillip E. Wegner,

argues in 'Learning to Live in History: Alternate Historicities and the 1990s in *The Years of Rice and Salt*':

perhaps the greatest achievement of the novel [...] is the way it works to teach its audience, in a true Brechtian fashion, to think and hence to live in history in new ways, to overcome the sense of paralysis and inaction that have been considered characteristic of postmodernism and to actively take control of our destiny once more. (Wegner 99)

Thus, this pedagogic element of the text begins with Book One, 'Awake to Emptiness,' and Bold's travels with the Mongol emperor Temur on his attempted conquest, not of China (as was the case in our timeline), but of the Franks and Magyars. This decision, one of the first bifurcations of history after the novel's portrayal of a European extinction caused by the Black Death, depends on the toss of a coin and leads the Khan to journey to the West and to the lands of those wiped out by the Plague. The contingency involved in his choice of target is duplicated shortly thereafter: Temur is struck by lightning before reaching his destination, in contrast to his death by illness on his way to China in our timeline. Bold's speculation that '[m]aybe China would have been worse' thus reinforces for the reader the implication that destiny imposes limits on historical alterity (Robinson 17).

This opening, however, allows the book to explore through Bold's capture and enslavement both the empty lands of the plague stricken Europe and the booming Indian Ocean Trade in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, along with the primarily East African slave trade that had existed there since the second century, itself conducted between cities and nations along the coast of the Indian Ocean. These trade routes, comparable to the Silk Road in terms of their significance for cultural exchange, were not accessible to Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The reader is introduced to the vast treasure ships of the Chinese mariner and diplomat Zheng He during one of his famous diplomatic and trade expeditions amongst the societies of Asia, Persia, Arabia and East Africa – although this narrative appears to conflate, as Mark Rosa notes, the third, fourth and fifth of Zheng He's seven voyages (2004).

Ma He, later renamed Zheng He, was a Muslim in the Mongol occupied Yunnan province who was taken as a boy after the Ming captured the region in 1381–1382. He was castrated and became a eunuch and favourite of the third Ming Emperor, Ming Taizhong (Supreme Ancestor), or the Yongle (Perpetual Happiness) Emperor as he is known by his era name. In one scene, Bold witnesses the reception of Zheng He's fleet into Calicut (or Kozhikode) in the Indian state of Kerala, and 'all those people in their colours waving their arms overhead in awe' (35). Zheng He's fleet comprised from a hundred to three hundred ships, compared to the three or four of Christopher Columbus' and Vasco da Gama's expeditions, fifty of which were treasure ships that were up to five times as large as other ships that had been constructed up until that time. The spectacle of these vast ships draws on the technological sublime and leads one character, Kyu, to insist that '[t]hese Chinese will conquer the whole world' (35).

Historian John Keay compares the incontrovertible evidence of China's technological and political superiority at this moment of history to the American space launch programme, and explains that these voyages 'seemed to herald a new age of commodious travel, bulk transport and unchallenged maritime security' (381). Indeed, the purpose of these expeditions, as Keay explains, was to 'promote and extend that vital cosmic harmony throughout "All under Heaven"' – a reference to the mandate of heaven that legitimised Imperial rule in China (22). When da Gama reached the Indian Ocean in 1498, Keay reports that his favourable reception was, according to one of da Gama's Portuguese companions, due to the positive legacy of contact with Chinese navigators and traders. This story helps to shape our understanding of trade and cultural contact during this period of our timeline. Yet China's Indian Ocean trade contracted, and Keay offers an account of the ramifications of this change to Chinese expansionist policy during this period:

[n]o permanent overseas representation or settlement had resulted from these contacts; rather than seek ways to make the voyages pay for themselves, the Ming emperors had discontinued them. Chinese empire would remain restricted to China and its immediate neighbours. A fifth

of the world's population would advance no claim to a fifth of the world's cultivable surface area. (Keay 23)

These depictions thus challenge preconceived notions of technological progress as linked to an unerring expansion of territory and power and underscore the cultural polyphony and the scope of intercultural exchanges in the Medieval and Early Modern world. Economic accumulation and geographic expansion is not an inevitable outcome of the growth to dominance of a civilisation. The contraction of the Chinese involvement in the Indian Ocean trade had little to do with a clash between civilisations, but with an internal political struggle that found expression in protest over the lavish state expenditure required to support the Chinese government's fleet.

As the narrative approaches our contemporary period and reaches beyond it, real world historical figures recede from the narrative while climatic and geological events remain. The alternate history as a document of memory helps to explain the persistent shadow of our contemporary history as a backdrop for the history of the narrative's civilisations. The text's focus on the development of science and social justice finds a correlative in the jati's long approach toward enlightenment, but it also speaks of a utopian desire for enlightenment in this world. Thus, Robinson's portrayal of scientific and technological development, as Mendlesohn has pointed out, implausibly recapitulates such developments in our timeline (25). On another level, the sixty-six year Long War between the Islamic Nations and China that begins in 1914 collapses WWI, WWII and the Cold War into a single event. It is as if Robinson needed to ensure a complementarity between the two timelines, which belies the difference one might expect of an alternate history that diverged from the historical in the fifteenth century. This suggests that the conditions for war in the twentieth century were laid before the fifteenth, and that it is somehow an inherent aspect of the way in which civilisations interact as a consequence of expansion. Notably, the political intransigence of the two sides and the absorption of each nation's economy in the war effort lead to an extended conflict that ultimately delays the development of nuclear weaponry. The Long War can be interpreted as a symbol that translates the experience of conflict in our timeline into an expression of the failure of the

project of enlightenment. Indeed, the characters we follow through the conflict begin to doubt their existence and imagine the interminable nightmare of war as the bardo itself. The severity and length of the war correlates with the cultural significance of the World Wars, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the shadow of the Cold War.

Book Nine, 'Nsara,' is set in what in our timeline would be modern day France. It takes place after the Long War in the eponymous Muslim city in Firanja, or what would be Europe in our timeline. At this late stage of the narrative, the Islamic Nations have lost the Long War to China and their allies (primarily Travancore, or India, the centre for the industrial revolution in this narrative). The loss of the war weighs heavily on this culture, but it is here that the project of emancipation set out in earlier periods of the narrative is taken up by feminist Muslim scholars and students. This echoes the earlier Muslim diaspora to al-Andulus (Spain in our timeline) in Book Two, 'The Haj in the Heart,' led by the Sultan Mawji Darya and the proto-feminist Sultana Katima. In one significant conversation, several of the characters engage in counterfactual speculation regarding the absent Europeans, who remain a shadow in the minds of those in the narrative's timeline – one character says that '[t]hey are our jinns' (Robinson 661). Budur, the main focal character and a student of history and archaeology, asks a historian of Frankish music whether he ever speculates about the absent Europeans. The historian's reply is indicative of how speculation about history is subject to ambiguity and resists deterministic interpretation:

“yes [...], All the time. I think they were just like us. They fought a lot. They had monasteries and madressas, and water-powered machinery. Their ships were small, but they could sail into the wind. They might have taken control of the seas before anyone else.”

“Not a chance,” said Tahar. “Compared to Chinese ships they were no more than dhows. Come now, Tristan, you know that.” (Robinson 660)

This discussion of counterfactual history highlights the assumptions that underlie the extrapolation of history: assumptions regarding technological capability and linguistic and

geo-political fragmentation. For instance, one character notes that '[t]hey [Europe] had ten or fifteen languages, thirty or forty principalities, isn't that right? [...] They were too fractured to conquer anyone else' (661). Cultural sophistication, too, is considered: in response to one character's view that the Europeans believed themselves to be God's chosen people, another responds that '[p]rimitives often think that,' leading Tristan to reiterate, '[a]s I say, they were just like us' (661). This scene overturns contemporary discourses in our timeline regarding the relative or absolute primitiveness of non-European cultures that informs orientalist discourse, and it also undermines assumptions that contemporary civilisation has discarded traits that they disavow as primitive.² These contemporary discourses are inherited from nineteenth century colonial-anthropological discourses that the critics Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explain 'presented non-European subjects and cultures as undeveloped versions of Europeans and their civilization: they were signs of primitiveness that represented stages on the road to European civilization' (126). One character refutes the implication that European cultures of the past were similar to their contemporary Nsaran culture, preferring instead a perspective that emphasises the differences between them. In many ways they were different but in other important ways there are similarities that are often elided. The difficulty of entertaining counterfactual histories, however, highlights the difficulties involved in disentangling these assumptions from demography:

"You can say anything you like about them, it doesn't matter. You can say they would have been enslaved like the Africans, or made slaves of the rest of us, or brought a golden age, or waged wars worse than the Long War..."

People shook their heads at all these impossibilities. (Robinson 661)

Several of the characters subscribe to race-based physiological arguments, ostensibly

² See Edward Said's *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979, and *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin, 2004. pp. 121–122, 125, and *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 126; and John Rieder's *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. p. 5.

supported by scientific examination, which reprises racist discourses so familiar in our timeline. As the scepticism of the characters makes clear, these impossibilities, so hard to entertain when thought of within the confines of another history, highlight for the reader the far broader scope of possibility that these counterfactual speculations offer for thought about the history of our timeline.

The continued European presence in the history of the text is for the Firanjas an opportunity to project their own stories about history that express their fears and desires regarding civilisation and social justice: '[t]hey're the blank on the map, the ruins underfoot, the empty mirror. The clouds in the sky that look like tigers' (Robinson 662). Conversely, these fictional civilisations and the stories of the characters who guide us through their worlds are cloud shaped tigers against which the desires, hopes, fears and guilt regarding our contemporary history can be projected. In this way, the text works as a document of history that tells us more about contemporary Anglo-American perspectives on history and culture. Robinson uses the alternate history in order to explore how these assumptions might be decoupled from counterfactual speculation. Nevertheless, as has been acknowledged above, Robinson fails to do this fully for some assumptions – with regard to science and the course of history, for example – while the representation of some cultures – those situated in the African continent, for example – remain neglected. Nevertheless, the fact that such a work raises debate over the specifics of historical influence and widens consideration of history to include cultures that have been marginalised is valuable for the way in which it encourages reflection on the stories that we accept as making up the history of our timeline.

During the conversation on counterfactual history that is discussed above, Kirana explains that 'we don't know if history is sensitive, and for want of a nail a civilization was lost, or if our mightiest acts are as petals on a flood, or something in between, or both at once' (Robinson 662). The question, central to the epic form, as to whether individual human agency is capable of having an effect on events – in accordance with popular conceptions of the butterfly effect – or whether destiny is in some senses fixed – as the death of Timur in Book One implies – is central to Kirana's complaint that the utility of

counterfactuals for speculation on history cannot be predicated on any capacity for definitively establishing any one story as factual.³ Adam Roberts describes these two competing explanations in terms of a stand-off between positivist conceptions of historical progress and models of historical progression based on chaos theory in his chapter, “Napoleon as Dynamite: Geoffroy’s *Napoléon Apocryphe* and Science Fiction as Alternate History.” Within the confines of the text, agency is clearly effective in helping to shape the course of history, although these achievements are only infrequently the result of individual choice. Book Four, ‘The Alchemist,’ and Book Five, ‘Warp and Weft,’ perhaps exemplify the exceptions, being the closest to “Great Men” histories in their focus on the contributions to a civilisation of specific male characters.⁴ Matt Hills argues that ‘Sf’s use of counterfactuals is hence one way in which it can destabilize ontological perspectives and compel readers to see the “real” historical world in different, perhaps more critical ways’ (437). Fundamentally, fictional alternate histories, in contrast to non-fictional counterfactual history, are constructed for different purposes, but both appeal to an individual’s curiosity: ‘people enjoyed contemplating the what might have been’ (Robinson 663). For the historian Kirana, however, she wonders whether ‘it would be better just to focus on the future [...] as a project to be enacted. Ever since the Travancori enlightenment we have had a sense of the future as something we make’ (Robinson 663). This utopian outlook toward the future is a sentiment that Robinson explores at length throughout his

³ The butterfly effect is a popular term that references the oftentimes unpredictable cascades that occur in non-linear dynamic feedback systems. The Lorenz attractor models the values toward which dynamic feedback systems trend. When visualised through digital means, it is described as resembling a Mobius strip, the logical sign for infinity or the two wings of a butterfly. The butterfly effect refers specifically to a popular narrative that describes a hypothetical butterfly whose flapping wings is able to affect dramatically scaled-up events, such as storms in distant parts of the Earth, thus reflecting the notion that dynamic feedback systems are highly sensitive to initial conditions.

⁴ ‘The Alchemist’ tells the story of Khalid in seventeenth-century Samarkand, who develops a scientific method involving systematic experimentation and the verification of received knowledge. ‘Warp and Weft’ tells the story of the arrival of a Japanese samurai to the New World after Japan is conquered by China. This protagonist, named “From West” by the Iroquois, helps to inspire the organisation of the North American tribes into the confederacy known as the Hodenosaunee League, and teaches them how to manufacture guns to resist future Chinese invasions.

oeuvre, and which he portrays in terms of a utopia of process toward which societies approach asymptotically. That the creation of the future is a structural process made up of the contributions of multiple agencies speaks to Robinson's preoccupation with environmentalism, sustainability and social justice, which likewise depend on processes oriented toward the construction of alternative futures.

This sense of the future as being malleable and open to being shaped by individual and collective agency becomes increasingly urgent throughout Books Nine and Ten. On the morning that Budur is asked to lead a group of blind soldiers to protest a military coup, she hears a cleric reciting a poem:

past and future all mixed together
Let those trapped birds out the window!
What then remains? The stories you no longer
Believe. You had better believe them.
While you live they carry the meaning
When you die they carry the meaning
To those who come after they carry the meaning
You had better believe in them.
In Rumi's story he saw all the worlds
As one, and that one, Love, he called to and knew,
Not Muslim or Jew or Hindu or Buddhist,
Only a Friend, a breath breathing human,
Telling his bodddhisatva story. The bardo
Waits for us to make it real. ([*sic*], Robinson 696)

The protest expands until Nsara is overwhelmed by a popular movement composed of women, the poor and the dispossessed, which successfully overturns the coup. This poem by the Nsaran poet Ghaleb, killed on the last day of the Long War, begins with reflections on death and the bardo. The past and the future are confused in this image of time as caged birds: they resemble one another insofar as the future simply repeals the past, as the

preceding discussion about Kirana's reflection on the absent Europeans exemplifies. When these categories no longer function as a rigid guide for action in the present, a space opens for stories to take shape and to shape the world. It is, however, the intermixture of the past and the future which provides the ground for the formation of these stories. Nevertheless, they have an agency of their own and are capable of transferring meaning between contemporaries and to future generations. It is by reflecting on the past and the future, but also by moving beyond these conceptions of time to create stories that do not simply reinscribe history onto the future, that individuals and collectives are able to make an impact on history and to the shaping of the future. The poem establishes a complementarity between the abstract and the multiple and the singular and specific; it reduces the many to one and positions exchange between individuals as symbolically embodying possibility through the image of Rumi's view of a multiplicity of worlds that reflect each other. Belief, too, occupies a complex relationship toward the past and future as it is a belief in stories, regardless of their veridical power or factual accuracy, which allows meaning to be invested in the images of the future that the characters in the narrative strive to realise or avoid.

The bardo according to this poet's conception re-orientates us toward the present and toward the poem, itself a text about the power of stories. The story of the bardo in *The Years of Rice and Salt* and the poet's exploration of the power of stories and the necessity of belief are themselves language games. Wegner argues that, '[w]hen it is most successful, the alternate history confronts us with the dizzying prospect that "what is" is in fact surrounded by an infinity of possible other worlds, other collective destinies whose lack of substantiality is simply a matter of accident' (100). The poem cited above provides a key to reading the scenes from the bardo as themselves stories that symbolise an iterative approach towards maximising rights and freedoms for all. In this view, *The Years of Rice and Salt* is a complex document of memory that outlines a vision of emancipation awaiting realisation. The poet's reflection on Rumi's notion of a multiplicity of worlds both alludes to the cultural multiplicity portrayed in the narrative, but more fundamentally to the multiplicity of historical narratives that the alternate history invites. These multiplicities are combined in the image of the bodhisattva's story, which collapses the religious and

philosophical concept of the “many” into the “one” as reflections of one another. This poem thus recalls the title of this article, ‘It Is One Story,’ and implies that world history and culture is a composite narrative constructed through an ongoing series of dialogues and language games.

The importance of stories for extending the individual’s sphere of influence beyond the limited timescale of a single lifespan is an important area of enquiry in the last of the books, aptly titled ‘The First Years’ to reflect the ongoing struggle to shape the future. Taking place in China, the protagonist of this story, Bao Xinhua, speculates on the nature of reincarnation and the future with his students and reflects that:

consciousness gets reincarnated another way, when the people of the future remember us, and use our language, and unconsciously model their lives on ours, living out some recombination of our values and habits. We live on in the way future people think and talk. (Robinson 751)

Thus, the behaviours, habits, values and languages that are inherited in the future are in part constitutive of that future, and are circulated and made meaningful by being told as epic stories. These narratives function as documents of memory that help to guide the development of societies in the future. In the face of one student’s frustration with this explanation of reincarnation, Bao suggests that ‘[r]eincarnation is a story we tell; then in the end it’s the story itself that is the reincarnation’ (Robinson 753).

The Years of Rice and Salt uses the alternate history to reflect on how the stories that are told about culture and society motivate social change. In doing so, it explores the ways in which history can be re-imagined to account for silences and omissions that result in the formation of a monologic version of history that marginalises many social and cultural groups. While novels such as John Jakes’ *Black in Time* (1970), S.M. Stirling’s *The Peshawar Lancers* (2003), and Bernardine Evaristo’s *Blonde Roots* (2009), engage in similar projects, this approach is unusual for alternate histories, which are more often concerned with the histories of European and American nations, particularly with alternate histories of World

War II and the American Civil War.⁵ By expanding the pool of available stories, Robinson challenges this approach to history and storytelling. The bardo as represented in the text is itself a symbol of a collective approach toward greater social justice, one that is reflexive and builds upon the activity of predecessors who have shaped the stories that future generations receive. Thus, the multiple stories that circulate throughout the long period of time depicted in the novel are parts of a single epic narrative insofar as they are retrospectively incorporated into an account of history which provides a basis for a vision of the future to strive toward. This view of the multiple stories throughout history as belonging to a single global narrative is itself a story advanced by the text that seeks to make meaningful the actions of individuals and collectives when working toward realising a vision of the future.

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⁵ In Jakes' *Black in Time*, the novel's protagonist attempts to preserve history from transformation by two antagonists who struggle to create a future dominated by white supremacists on the one hand, and the African Songhay Empire on the other. Stirling's *The Peshawar Lancers* features a devastating meteor shower that changes the course of world history in 1878. Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* speculates on a trans-Atlantic slave trade in which Europeans are enslaved by Africans.

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About the Author

Chris Pak is Lecturer in Contemporary Writing and Digital Cultures at Swansea University and the author of *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction* (Liverpool University Press, 2016). More information and links to articles can be found on his website at chrispak.wix.com/chrispak.