

THE AMERICAN ALIEN: IMMIGRANTS, EXPATRIATES
AND EXTRATERRESTRIALS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY U.S. FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This project argues that such widely differing figures in twentieth-century American literature as the immigrant and the expatriate, the colonizer and the colonized, whether human or extraterrestrial, can all be described under the same rubric: that of the alien. Aliens in science fiction often serve as stand-ins for aliens in terms of nationality, allowing SF authors to discuss immigration issues more freely than would otherwise be possible. At the same time, the description of extraterrestrial aliens in SF also exerts an influence on the treatment of immigrants in “realistic” fiction, and even in legislation related to immigration. Consequently, this project applies postcolonial theory, diasporic and globalization studies to analyze colonial discourse in representations of aliens in science fiction and immigrant fiction, while also seeking a less theoretical, more practical way to open up the subversive potential of SF.

Seeing the cultural encounter in terms of a meeting between differently-aculturated aliens, who are mutually strange to one another, presents a way to reimagine the troubled, alternately constructive and destructive, multiplicity of voices which is an unavoidable result of the meeting of different cultures. To that end, this project employs both SF and “realistic” novels about immigrants with attention to the insights gained from multiculturalism and postcolonial theory, tracing the historical development of conceptions of immigrant labor, reproduction, and trauma and including well-known novels by pre-WW II novelists such as Upton Sinclair, Willa Cather and Ernest Hemingway, as well as more recent “realistic” fiction by Arthur Phillips and Jessica Hagedorn.