Essay

404 Utopia Not Found: Cyberpunk Avatars in Samanta Schweblin's *Kentukis*

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When Alina goes to purchase her kentuki, she is caught choosing between a dragon and a crow. She finds herself without direction after moving from Argentina to Mexico to accompany her partner, Sven, who is an artist beginning a new residency. She hopes that the purchase of the kentuki, in addition to boosting her mood, will bring positive change to her life, although she seems unsure of what exactly she wants to change (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 24). The product in question—the kentuki—is a stuffed animal equipped with wheels and a camera. Alina will not be able to do anything with it herself; the product will sit inert in her home until it connects to a wireless network. That network facilitates a permanent, random match with another user who has purchased a code. It is this unknown person who can actually use the kentuki that Alina owns; using their phone or tablet, they can remotely pilot the kentuki around Alina's home at will. Although all kentukis work the same way, they are available for purchase in the form of different animals. Alina chooses the crow. But it is only after she carries the crow to the counter and the cashier tells her that kentukis are "fantásticos" ("fantastic") that she questions her choice. The author writes, "Esa palabra usó, 'fantásticos.' Y por primera vez ella dudó, no de la compra, sino de haber elegido el cuervo" ("he used that word, 'fantastic.' And for the first time, she doubted, not the purchase, but having chosen the crow"; 23).[1]

To understand Alina's moment of buyer's remorse in Samanta Schweblin's novel *Kentukis* (published in 2018 and translated as *Little Eyes* in 2020 by Megan McDowell), we must first unfold the double entendre embedded in the word *fantastic*. The cashier,

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enthusiastic about Alina's purchase, uses the word *fantastic* to communicate that kentukis are an exciting new commodity. Alina, however, interprets the word as a marker of genre. It causes her to doubt her choice of the crow, a less "sophisticated" animal that comes from real life, over the dragon, a creature that is seized from a fantasy novel and might better fit the promised "fantastic" user experience, might, indeed, be more capable of generating change, carrying her to a fantastic world on its wings. The interaction between the cashier and Alina showcases a social exchange misapprehended at the point of sale, the missed message of which exemplifies a crossed understanding of genre.

Interactions like the one between Alina and the cashier are emblematic of this author's approach to the intersection between the fantastic and the real. The critic Lia Cristina Ceron has situated Schweblin's work within the Argentine fantastic (209–10), a literary tradition that includes authors like Julio Cortázar, Silvina Ocampo, and Jorge Luis Borges (García 569). The fantastic tradition also overlaps with the Argentine science fiction canon; Borges's "Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," for example, is often considered a touchstone in the genre's history (Ginway and Brown 1). Like her forerunners' work, Schweblin's embraces irrealism while moving across genres: her short story collection *Pájaros en la boca* (published in 2008 and translated as *Mouthful of Birds* in 2019 by McDowell) has been described as both gothic and fantastic literature, while her novel *Distancia de rescate* (published in 2014 and translated as *Fever Dream* in 2017 by McDowell) has led reviewers and academics to debate whether its genre is fantastic, horror, or realist literature.[2]

Kentukis has sparked similar debate.[3] José Fernando Salva, for example, reads *Kentukis* as part of the post-science-fiction subgenre, suggesting the novel's science fictional overtones are an aesthetic lens through which Schweblin's speculations on the technologized present become visible (136). Maximiliano Brina and Yael Natalia Tejero Yosovitch, by contrast, explore the novel as a work of digital literature primarily concerned with networks (15). Both of these approaches foreground the ways in which *Kentukis* makes contact with different literary genres to potent critical ends. However, as I argue here, this recognition of the novel's generic indeterminacy stems from its engagement with two key components of the science fiction tradition: slipstream and utopia.

The use of these two terms in science fiction criticism developed in connection. The mid–twentieth century saw an increase in academic criticism of science fiction and, with it, efforts to legitimate the genre. Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* famously contributed to this effort by drawing strict boundaries around science fiction as "the literature of cognitive estrangement" while casting aside other forms of irrealism, like fantasy, as unreflexive (4).[4] As Gerry Canavan summarizes in his introduction to *Metamorphoses*, Suvin's work forged a lasting connection between science fiction and utopia in the sense that it "positioned [science fiction] studies as a site where scholars interrogate notions of futurity and difference, and explore the possibility of radical historical change" (xiv–xv). This definition sees utopia as not necessarily a "good" outcome but rather an impetus toward change that embraces both eutopian (positive) and dystopian (negative) imagination (Suvin, "On Communism" 147–48; see also Jameson 416). Those in Suvin's school of thought contended that fidelity to genre boundaries allowed science fiction to realize these utopian critiques (Suvin, *Metamorphoses* 67; Freedman 18; see also Williams 617).

But maintaining strict genre boundaries became increasingly difficult, especially given that some works by writers as foundational as Ray Bradbury escaped them (Frełik 23). The term *slipstream*, therefore, became a way to talk about texts that did not fit within the category of science fiction but that shared similarities with the genre (21).[5] In the Latin American tradition, this term has proved particularly helpful, as the region's science fiction writing is traditionally hybridized with other genres (Haywood Ferreira 217). M. Elizabeth Ginway and J. Andrew Brown used the term to recast the genre's hybrid status as the "slipstream phenomenon," which they define as the process by which science fiction becomes incorporated "into new forms of writing in Latin America" (7).

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The embrace of slipstream has been accompanied by a reconceptualization of the concept of genre. In recent years, as Pawel Frełik cogently recognizes, "for a growing number of critics and scholars, genres are never, as frequently assumed, objects that already exist in the world and are subsequently studied by genre critics but rather are fluid and tenuous constructions generated by the interaction of various claims and practices" (22). In other words, recent scholarship has come to recognize genre as a moving object that flows across place and time. This renewed understanding of genre offers a new perspective when taken in tandem with the aeronautical origins of the word *slipstream*: a moving object creates a space behind itself wherein a second object can travel at least as fast while exerting less energy, perhaps fast enough to overtake the former. In both the anglophone and Latin American traditions, the word is used to describe one genre traveling in the wake of another, appropriating preexisting tropes and themes and, at times, becoming a dominant form of writing.

However, as I demonstrate through an analysis of *Kentukis*, the continued presence of slipstream in the Latin American science fiction tradition extends beyond a strategy for mixing genres; it is, I suggest, a strategy for breaking preexisting models of utopia. In *Kentukis*, Schweblin uses slipstream to transform the otherwise realist bodies of her characters and the spaces they inhabit into classic science fictional figures by bringing them into contact with the kentuki network. In so doing, she uses their search for fulfillment through the network's "fantastic" user experience to critique several science fictional utopian horizons, beginning with classic cyberpunk imaginaries and ending with the dominant utopian imaginary under neoliberalism: the idea of the market as a potentially utopian space.

In Latin American science fiction, the genre's growth has often been associated with the development of capitalism in the region. In the mid–twentieth century, industrial development and Cold War tensions spurred the science fiction genre to a golden age as authors like Hugo Correa and Elena Aldunate grappled with these capitalist horizons (Bell and Molina-Gavilán 7; Bell 302). The onset of the neoliberal era, likewise, is connected to the development of the cyberpunk subgenre in both the anglophone and the Latin American traditions in the 1980s and 1990s (Ginway 385; Rorato Londero 134).

The ongoing effects of neoliberal capitalism, I suggest, have continued to mark the development of Latin American cyberpunk's legacies. Following David Harvey, I define the neoliberal period as beginning in the mid-1970s, concurrent with the return of the influential Chilean economists known as the Chicago Boys to Latin America (8). Their influence, coupled with what Mike Davis calls the "poisoned chalice" of funding from the International Monetary Fund—"devaluation, privatization, removal of import controls and food subsidies, enforced cost-recovery in health and education, and ruthless downsizing of the public sector"—ushered in a new era for capitalism in the region (18). In response, a generation of Latin American writers produced a unique iteration of cyberpunk literature that "privileges the physical body over fantasies of disembodiment in cyberspace often popularized in North American cyberpunk" while expressing suspicion of projects of neoliberal growth (Ginway 385).

However, I argue that in more recent years, a sequence of economic crises in Latin America has led to a shift in the production of the region's science fiction. In the case of Argentina, reverberating effects from the "tequila crisis" (originating in Mexico but resulting in financial disturbance in Argentina) and the country's 2001 financial crash generated periods of significant economic instability (Harvey 104–05). Although the Argentine economy recovered, it faced another "major economic crisis" in 2018 when drought affected soy exports, which "subsequently forced a reduction in public spending, and along with high inflation, led the value of the Argentine peso to fall, losing half of its value against the dollar," leading to widespread fears of economic collapse and what Yovanna Pineda refers to as a sense of "losing hope" (159–60).

Responding to fluctuations in hope is the currency of science fiction's utopian imagination, and

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in keeping with the genre's tradition, authors like Schweblin grapple with the resulting changes to employment and wages and the devastating impacts of expanding industries like commercial farming on vulnerable populations throughout each of these crises (Jiménez Barrera 88; De Leone 64, 69). However, I argue that this generation of writers questions not only whether the content of their writing offers an outlet toward utopia, but also the ability of science fiction as a literary form to do so. In the case of *Kentukis*, I demonstrate how the novel becomes a tool by which Schweblin, using slipstream, breaks down several utopian horizons associated with neoliberal capitalism by exploring its ill effects on the body.

Although *Kentukis* is Schweblin's first science fiction novel, her corpus has historically been preoccupied with the effects of capitalist development on the bodies of local populations. Her previous novel, *Distancia de rescate*, uses irrealist forms and gothic tropes to discuss the public health crisis faced by rural Argentine families, resulting from pesticide use in the soy industry (De Leone 64, 69). However, unlike *Distancia de rescate*, which showcases unequal labor relations flowing north–south, from the United States to Argentina, *Kentukis* grounds itself in an intercontinental discourse and has been called Schweblin's first "global novel" (Rollenhagen). Its setting spans Argentina, China, Germany, Croatia, Brazil, Mexico, and Norway, among other countries, and its plot showcases labor relations flowing in a web throughout the world. By giving the kentuki network touchpoints around the globe, the novel departs from Schweblin's past focus on a single population, instead taking aim at the heart of neoliberal logic: the idea that, as Harvey summarizes, "the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions" such that neoliberal logic "seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (3). Likewise, the global scope of *Kentukis* showcases a network-based product that has maximized its reach and frequency of use, demonstrated chapter by chapter as an increasing array of social relations become contained within (and deformed by) it.

Host in the Machine

The plot of *Kentukis* depicts the experiences of individuals around the world who have chosen to engage with the kentuki network, the one that Alina becomes part of when she purchases her crow. As in Alina's case, each kentuki brings two parties into contact with each other: the person who purchases the kentuki and the person who purchases the code. Schweblin calls them "amos" and "seres" respectively (25), which Megan McDowell translates as "keepers" and "dwellers" (18). Keepers, like Alina, purchase the physical kentuki device. They are unable to do anything with the kentuki until it is matched with a dweller, the person who purchases a code. The dweller is the one who controls the kentuki's movements; they do so remotely from their computer or tablet. Although the novel focuses on individual stories of the relationships between dwellers and keepers, the kentuki technology as a whole depends on a central server that makes the match between each code and kentuki device, pairing a dweller with its keeper. As Brina and Tejero have observed, this network of individual matches, managed by the server, is "el sistema sobre el cual se construye la novela, compuesta por retazos remixados de distintos arcos narrativos" ("the system on which the novel is constructed, composed of remixed fragments of different narrative arcs"; 18). Although *Kentukis* is an episodic novel, often referred to in the science fiction tradition as a "fixup," its episodes paint a picture of the impact of a digital network on the global population.

This fictional network of dwellers and keepers seems plausible in the technologized present, and the technology's "too-closeness," as one author puts it (Brindisi),[6] is precisely what leads critics to question the genre identity of *Kentukis*. The critique that a novel's use of technology feels "too close" to be science fictional yet not close enough to be realism has its roots in the genealogy of cyberpunk. The preface to the US author Bruce Sterling's 1986 anthology *Mirrorshades* is often cited as the cyberpunk movement's "manifesto," and it places cyberpunk in direct tension with what Sterling calls "the traditional power structure" and "the traditional

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institutions," which he contends "have lost control of the pace of change" (x). Although Sterling does not single out specific institutions, his emphasis on technology and the timing of his publication point toward shifts accompanying the neoliberal turn: he writes at a time when US financial and governmental institutions were actively implementing neoliberal economic policy while, at the same time, enacting "neoliberalism's intense interest in and pursuit of information technologies" (Harvey 3).

But, as Sherryl Vint argues, the revolutionary ethos Sterling attached to the genre "has not been supported by many critical assessments" (*Bodies* 102). On the contrary, this form of cyberpunk, she suggests, "offers only individual transcendence of, not social solutions to, the problems it diagnoses" (103). In addition to these critiques, increased attention to science fiction from regions beyond the United States has brought to light how Sterling's perspective on cyberpunk is limited to North American, and especially to US, expressions of the genre. Latin American cyberpunk, by contrast, takes a warier approach to digital spaces and, by extension, to economic shifts by troubling the genre's attitude toward the body. The Latin American tradition "generally [privileges] the physical body over fantasies of disembodiment in cyberspace" (Ginway 385). This tradition also views cyberspace suspiciously, as a sphere often aligned with hegemonic structures of power (Miranda Huereca 142).

Kentukis, I argue, begins by addressing the utopian horizon common to US and Latin American cyberpunk of the 1980s and 1990s: the possibilities of cybernetic space.[7] Schweblin borrows from both traditions by riffing on a plotline endemic to first-wave US cyberpunk, in which a character "uploads" themselves into cybernetic space, yet still maintains the Latin American tradition's focus on embodiment and exploitation. Specifically, she examines the extent to which cyber networks can function as pay-to-play utopias wherein users purchase freedom from limitations associated with the physical body. She does this by deploying slipstream in the following way: at face value, the novel's many protagonists are average people around the globe who like to socialize through the Internet, not unlike many of Schweblin's readers. However, when characters encounter the kentuki network, they find themselves confronted by ideas central to the cyberpunk genre and—in some cases—recast as cyberpunk figures themselves.

By weaving components of both the US and Latin American traditions into the novel, *Kentukis* embarks on a nuanced exploration of cyberpunk's utopian horizons. As in first-wave US cyberpunk, dwellers are, in a nonliteral sense, divorced from their physical bodies and uploaded into a network. But the network in *Kentukis* is an intermediary space, not a destination; it facilitates dwellers' nonliteral download into their kentuki device, effectively tying them to a body. Grounded "inside" the body of their kentuki, dwellers are able to move freely about the keeper's space using controls on their computer and to see through camera eyes. Usually, this type of embodiment would preclude the formation of the classic cyberpunk imaginary of the network as a utopian space that allows users to escape corporeal and, by extension, geographic boundaries. Instead, in *Kentukis*, the network's global scope and "one kentuki, one code" match system leave this utopian possibility intact: in the novel, a user from Guatemala "wakes up" as a kentuki in Norway (165), while another, from Peru, finds her code assigned to a kentuki in Germany (128). As Joaquín Lucas Jiménez Barrera recognizes, this structure "ofrece una aparente posibilidad de desterritorialización" ("offers an apparent possibility of deterritorialization"; 95). The result is that the network, though embodied, maintains its capacity to trouble national boundaries and international divisions of labor. However, Schweblin uses her characters' pay-to-play relationship to the network to ultimately foreclose on this utopian horizon.

This is the case for Marvin, a boy from Antigua, Guatemala. His story line is marked by isolation following the death of his mother, with whom he had a close relationship. Marvin confines himself mostly to his room, and his interactions with his father appear limited to reminders to finish homework and eat dinner. He does, however, find a small savings account left behind by his mother, which he uses to purchase a kentuki code as a way to avoid his studies. However, once Marvin makes contact

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with the network, an invocation of slipstream, his attitude shifts. When he discovers that his kentuki-body has "woken up" in Norway, where it snows, the network becomes his means to fulfill his late mother's promise to take him to touch snow. In this sense, Marvin inadvertently purchases his way to a utopian horizon: the barriers to fulfilling his mother's promise, such as his minor status, his home in a warm climate, and his access to travel funds, appear to instantaneously melt away. The network allows his human body to remain in Guatemala while his kentuki body appears free from the limitations of childhood (30–31).

Marvin's response when he comes into contact with the kentuki network illustrates the reverberating effects of slipstream as a device for narrative innovation: he finds himself transformed into a classic cyberpunk cowboy complete with an "attitude of contempt for the meat" (the physical body) and a consuming desire to adventure in cyberspace (Vint, *Bodies* 112). Marvin rushes home from school every day, forgoing his homework and finding himself irresistibly drawn to the kentuki world as an escape from his isolation. Ironically, even his kentuki body initially "wakes up" confined to a glass display case in a store, though he is ultimately set free by a vigilante named Jesper, placing Marvin in the unique situation of a "liberated" kentuki not beholden to a keeper (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 127). Marvin's user experience leads him to construct fantasies of contempt for the physical body. He dreams of being able to take "largas excursiones por un mundo en el que se podía vivir sin bajar ni una sola vez a cenar" ("long excursions in a world where he could live without ever going down even once for dinner") and adds that "de hecho, podría vivir sin comer en absoluto" ("in fact, he could live without eating at all"; Schweblin, *Kentukis* 134; McDowell 143). This is not possible, since dwellers need to care for their physical body as much as they ordinarily would. In fact, they must care for two bodies, for it is the responsibility of the dweller to roll onto a charger before disconnecting. The impossibility of Marvin's fantasy foreshadows the ultimate collapse in *Kentukis* of the utopian vision of first-wave US cyberpunk.

But perhaps the most important aspect of Marvin's metamorphosis into a cyber-cowboy is how it shapes his mission to fulfill his mother's promise. In death, Marvin's mother has cast off her physical body. By purchasing entry into the kentuki network, Marvin, in a way, draws near to her by constructing a fantasy about doing the same. Paradoxically, however, while Marvin dreams of never having to eat and never growing cold by throwing off the human body, he also believes that he can achieve his mission without leaving Guatemala because the kentuki body is, to him, as real as his human body (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 63). Once connected to the kentuki network, Marvin, in his own estimation, "ya no era un chico que tenía un dragón, sino que era un dragón que llevaba dentro a un chico" ("was no longer a boy with a dragon; he was a dragon with a boy inside him"; Schweblin, *Kentukis* 91; McDowell 94). In an earlier conversation, Marvin's friends challenge his view, informing him that as a kentuki, "la nieve ni siquiera podía tocarse" ("he couldn't even touch the snow, so who cared"; 63; 62). But Marvin disagrees, suggesting instead that "si lograbas encontrar nieve, y empujabas lo suficiente tu kentuki contra un montículo bien blanco y espumoso, podías dejar tu marca. Y eso era como tocar con tus propios dedos la otra punta del mundo" ("if you managed to get out into the snow, and if you pushed your kentuki hard enough against a bank that was nice and white and fluffy, you could leave your mark. And that was just like touching the other end of the world with your own fingertips"; 63; 62). In order to sustain his fantasy, Marvin must view the network as a simultaneously disembodying and embodying force.

Both of Marvin's bodies—human and kentuki—will repeatedly pose challenges to his mission, ultimately highlighting the fact that this network's fragile utopian possibilities are predicated on purchasing power. In theory, once users make a one-time purchase of a code, they are privy to the network's "fantastic" user experience, participants in a kind of first-wave, throw-off-the-meat utopian imaginary. But after inadvertently buying his way out of the physical and financial limitations of childhood,

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Marvin repeatedly encounters corporeal barriers to achieving his mission, even once freed from the display case. As commodities, kentukis are meant to be charged daily and used indoors or in yards, not to venture for days outside in varied, wet terrain as kentuki Marvin, who has renamed himself SnowDragon (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 129), must do in order to reach the snow that has accumulated in the mountains several miles away (92). His response to these limitations is illustrative: Marvin again turns to the market to buy his way to utopia, this time by purchasing upgrades from a private seller. In bits and pieces, Marvin spends the remainder of his mother's small savings to equip his kentuki body for the rough terrain by purchasing an alarm (131) and battery extension (133).

The upgrades, which effectively reduce the caution with which Marvin must care for his kentuki body, once again spur him to fantasize about life unbound by corporeal care. He tells himself:

> Podía comer y dormir en Antigua atendiendo cada tanto su cuerpo, mientras en Noruega los días pasarían tranquilamente, cargándose de base en base, sin añorar ni un pedazo de chocolate, ni una manta para pasar la noche. No necesitar nada de eso para vivir tenía algo de superhéroe, y si al fin lograba encontrar la nieve, podía vivir el resto de su vida en ella sin que siquiera le diera un poquito de frío.
> (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 157–58)

> He could eat and sleep in Antigua, tending to his body every so often, while in Norway the days would pass calmly as he went from one charger to another, never longing for a piece of chocolate or for a blanket to get him through the night. Needing nothing to survive had something of the superhero about it, and if he finally managed to find the snow, he could live the rest of his life in it without ever feeling the slightest bit cold.
> (McDowell 169)

Here, then, *Kentukis* predicates the sustainability of the cyber-cowboy utopia—throwing off the meat to live in a digital world where nobody has to eat and nobody gets cold—on access to a market. Marvin's story line reveals how the network is unable to realize this utopian horizon by itself; it needs users with constant purchasing power.

The close of Marvin's story brings the tension between body and commodity to a head, ultimately collapsing his fantasy. As SnowDragon inches toward the snow, a father and his children find him. The distinction between how Marvin and the family experience the encounter illustrates the tension in the kentuki's function as both body and commodity: to Marvin the experience feels like a kidnapping—he is terrified, activates a personal alarm, tries to flee, and struggles for release. The children, in contrast, fight over the kentuki as a toy until the father deposits the device into the truck bed. That Marvin's kentuki body is jostled beside boxes of apples, presumably being taken to market, is a further reminder that the kentuki is an object that pertains to a larger network of commodities (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 192). Up to this point, Marvin's story line was marked by the classic cyber-cowboy's resistance to both his physical body in Guatemala and, to an extent, his new kentuki body, whose weaknesses in agility, durability, and battery power he repeatedly attempts to compensate for through the secondary market with Jesper's homemade alarm (131) and battery extension (133). But his encounter with the family reinforces Marvin's relationship to the market in another way; as a kentuki he is, in their eyes, not embodied enough to be perceived as anything other than a commodity, a strange device.

In the final scene, the exhaustion of Marvin's funds and destruction of his kentuki body make it impossible for him to draw near to his mother's memory through the kentuki network. Thrown from the truck by a pothole, Marvin's kentuki body tumbles down a hill while, back in Guatemala, Marvin's father ascends the stairs with his son's report card, showing that Marvin has failed his classes. In recounting the fall from the truck, the narrator reinforces the connection between Marvin's human and kentuki bodies, noting that Marvin "felt," rather than saw, "el vacío bajo sus ruedas" ("the emptiness under his wheels"; Schweblin, *Kentukis* 194; McDowell 209). The narrator continues, "¿Cómo le explicaría [a su padre] que en

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realidad estaba golpeado, que estaba roto, y que seguía rodando, sin ningún control, hacia abajo?" ("How would he explain [to his father] that in reality he was beaten up, he was broken, and he was still rolling, out of control, down a hill?"; 194; 210). This scene draws together the literal fall of Marvin's kentuki body and the emotional fallout he experiences after his mother's death.

Ultimately, damage to his kentuki body permanently severs the connection to the network (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 194). The result is a reversal of his cyber-cowboy transformation and a return to his original state of emotional and physical isolation as his father leads him down the stairs to discuss his failing grades. This final scene with Marvin marks the novel's rejection of the possibility that the kentuki network, as a pay-to-play utopia, can make possible an existence in a cybernetic world free from the limitations of the physical world. However, even as the novel forecloses on the utopian possibilities of the cyber-cowboy endemic to the first-wave US cyberpunk of the 1980s and 1990s, *Kentukis* continues to rely on narrative slipstream to critique the ways in which similarly fraught utopian imaginaries persist into the present day.

The Asocial Network

Like Marvin, who perceived the network as a pay-to-play utopia, the characters Grigor and Nikolina view the network as a space where they can generate profit by facilitating play. In order to relieve their families' economic precarity, they purchase kentuki codes, activate them, and take notes on each kentuki's keeper before reselling the code, profiting by removing the element of chance for the code's new owner (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 60). But they, too, find that what initially appears to be a panacean opportunity dissolves into violence. While gathering data about one of their connections, Nikolina accidentally encounters a child victim of human trafficking. Although her kentuki body stands feet away from the child, neither she nor Grigor is aware of the country that the kentuki body is in (180). Once they learn of their kentuki's whereabouts and contact the police, the girl is returned to her home. However, Grigor's last moments on the kentuki connection lead him to discover that the girl's own father sold her and will likely sell her again (200). In horror and without informing Nikolina, he resolves to close the entire business so that he will never again have to move someone, like the trafficked child, "de un infierno a otro" ("from one inferno to another"; Schweblin, *Kentukis* 201; McDowell 217).

Grigor and Nikolina's business draws to the forefront two overlapping forms of violence present in the novel. Their encounter with human trafficking points toward exploitative practices all too common in the global market. At the same time, their struggle against the limitations of the kentuki network highlights another, less apparent form of violence: the restrictions on communication placed on both dwellers and keepers that prevent the former from speaking and the latter from seeing the human face behind their kentuki. In the case of Grigor and Nikolina, the fact that their kentuki body cannot ask questions of the girl threatens to make their rescue mission impossible (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 181). At other times in the novel, a dweller's ability to hide behind a kentuki body creates space for violence, as in the case of the high school student Robin, who finds herself blackmailed by her kentuki after its dweller uses it to secretly record explicit videos of Robin and her family (13–14).

The forms of violence embedded in the market and those embedded in the kentuki network not only overlap but are part and parcel of each other. The novel creates this interconnection by making use of the relationship between science fictional diegeses and the real world. As Mark Bould explains, "because [science fiction] requires the writer to structure plausible worlds and futures, the innovations which she integrates into a model of social totality impact against material reality" (4). When that material reality exists within a capitalist totality, like that which envelops much of the world today, it follows that science fictional diegeses are "often primarily, if unwittingly, bound by the structures, potentials, and limits of capital" (4). This is to say that because science fiction must showcase plausible

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worlds, writers must be attentive to the material realities shaping the environment in which they live, and, often, those realities are reproduced within the science fiction.

Science fiction, in other words, often contains *estranged* versions of real-world structures that preserve the mechanics of the latter but create an artificial critical distance for the reader.[8] Latin American cyberpunk, for example, commonly uses cyber networks to create estranged representations of unequal international divisions of labor (Ginway 385). *Kentukis* uses slipstream to borrow this effect. The kentuki network, I suggest, functions in the novel as an estranged version of the market under neoliberal capitalism—more specifically, a market whose growth is in some ways predicated on what Davis refers to as "the retreat of the state" in the 1980s and 1990s (19). However, because the diegesis of *Kentukis* is otherwise realist, the network does not replace the market, as it might in a more traditional science fiction text. Instead, the two operate simultaneously, intertwined with each other. The result allows Schweblin to test various market-based utopian horizons commonly held under neoliberal capitalism.

Schweblin builds market logic into the kentuki network by structuring it as a social space that is simultaneously possessed of what Salva calls a "carácter concreto y mercantil" ("concrete and mercantile character"; 173). The perhaps more apparent facet is that of the social: throughout the novel, various characters purchase kentukis or decide to "be" kentukis as a solution to their loneliness. One woman who purchases a preestablished connection from Grigor explains her desire to be a kentuki in a home with children: "será lo más parecido a tener una hija" ("it will be the next best thing to having a daughter of my own"), she tells him, adding, "se lo agradeceré el resto de mi vida" ("I'll be grateful to you for the rest of my life"; Schweblin, *Kentukis* 96; McDowell 101). In other cases, the kentuki network functions as a workaround for broken or unrealized social relationships: in one vignette, a woman named Emilia receives a kentuki code as a gift from her son and becomes a dweller (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 16). Later, the son decides to become a keeper (122). Ironically, the keeper of Emilia's kentuki body becomes like a daughter to her (89), while the dweller in her son's kentuki becomes a mother figure to him (123).

Even these affective relations, however, are not divorced from market logic. In fact, the connection to the market is embedded in the name *kentuki* itself, which shares a semantic closeness with the name of the US state of Kentucky and its eponymous fried chicken brand. This relationship is further evidenced by the name Alina gives to her crow: Colonel Sanders, the name of Kentucky Fried Chicken's mascot (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 49). In this sense, the word *kentuki* gestures to the novel's concern with the global impacts of neoliberal capitalism by establishing an aural association with a fast-food commodity available in 145 countries, semantically presenting itself as embedded in a fast-spreading market with a global reach.

Beyond this, Salva posits that affective relationships between dwellers and keepers capitalize on subjectivity, treating it as a commercial trade (183). I would take this approach a step further to suggest that these relationships depend on the kentuki network's function as a system of human exports: people are effectively shipped around the globe in that they "wake up" inside kentukis in other countries. Amid this digital redistribution of bodies, class divisions become clear among Grigor and Nikolina's customers. In their business, the market value of each code is determined by the desirability of the kentuki's geographic location and class position (199).

Even kentukis in "humble" homes, Grigor notes, attract "europeos de clase alta dispuestos a circular sus instintos filantrópicos por países demasiado incómodos para ser visitados al estilo tradicional" ("upper-class Europeans who wanted to circulate their philanthropic instincts around areas of the world too uncomfortable to be visited in the traditional ways"; Schweblin, *Kentukis* 199; McDowell 216). These digital vacationers can be understood as modern-day equivalents of "affluent nineteenth-century 'adventurers' in the UK [who] would leave their safe, comfortable elite spaces to explore underprivileged urban districts" (Dürr and

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Jaffe 114). In other words, this portion of Grigor and Nikolina's business highlights how the kentuki network, including the secondary markets that crop up around it, remains embedded in class hierarchy.

By contrast, working-class subjects use the export function of the kentuki network to labor across borders. In one case, a dweller works as a cashier at a corner store in a different country, their kentuki body outfitted by their keeper with a tray into which the customers can deposit change (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 138). In another, a kentuki works at the reception desk at a hotel in India (117). The effect is that individuals are now able to sell their labor power on the market by exporting not their entire bodies, but rather only their labor power. The novel further underscores the export function of the kentuki network when a "liberated" kentuki exports their kentuki body across national boundaries by boarding a boat (154).

This network of exports is an example of the structural similarities between the kentuki network and the market, a relationship that becomes increasingly defined as *Kentukis* unfolds. One of the aspects of the market that *Kentukis* brings to light is the way in which the commodity relation forces "the definite social relation between men" to take on "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 177). This tendency that Karl Marx describes in *Capital* has only intensified as the market has absorbed increasing populations following the rapid urbanization of large parts of Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s (Davis 9). *Kentukis* uses the limitations inherent to the kentuki network to address the effects of this aspect of the market on populations subsumed by capital. Once characters come into contact with the kentuki network, their relationships begin to model relationships of asocial sociality characteristic of neoliberal capitalism.

Asocial sociality is a term coined by Ernst Lohoff to refer to the unique market phenomenon whereby the commodity form forces social relations to take on an asocial character. "The historical advance of the commodity," he writes, "has as its logical horizon the world market and hence the fusion of production and consumption into one planetary, interconnected whole. Individual producers and commodity subjects act as the (mutually and fully interdependent) members of a gigantic social unit" (155). By this he contends that the market is, to a degree, a highly social network in that it necessitates constant exchange and contact in the spheres of both production and circulation. At the same time, Lohoff asserts through Marx that because the market forces relations between people to assume the "fantastic form of a relation between things," this apparently social market is at the same time a deeply asocial space (Lohoff 155).

Similarly, the kentuki network appears, to use Lohoff's term, as a "gigantic social unit" (155) in the sense that people are effectively exported all over the world into social relationships with strangers, many of these relationships involving some form of labor. At the same time, however, limitations placed on these relations throw the asocial aspect of this network into relief. Beyond the visual and auditory limitations that prevent dwellers and keepers from communicating freely, social relations between the two are further limited in the sense that neither keeper nor dweller appears to the other as human. Rather, each quite literally encounters the other as a thing. The dweller, embodied within the kentuki device, appears to the keeper as a toy rather than a person (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 12, 152, 186, 219). The keeper appears to the dweller as if the space of the home were a map and the keeper a character in a video game (17), a fusion of cyberspace and game space emblematic of cyberpunk (Vint, "Cyberwar" 256). These questions of limited communication and gamification result from the way in which contact with the kentuki network symbolically transforms the bodies of the dweller and keeper into stuffed animal and video game, respectively. The effect is a network that appears extremely social even as it takes on the *appearance* of a relation between things: a stuffed animal and a video game meeting each other in a sort of market.

Utopian Imagination in Science Fiction

Limitations on communication between dwellers and keepers persist network-wide and reshape physical spaces wherein multiple kentuki connections circulate

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at once. In these spaces, the network's structural similarities to the market allow Schweblin to once again put slipstream to use: like the individuals who come into contact with the kentuki network and find themselves transformed by science fictional impulses, institutions that make contact with the network are similarly affected. In particular, I suggest that two institutions, a kentuki club run by Jesper and an exhibit created by Sven, become spaces in which *Kentukis* explores the question endemic to science fiction: What does it mean to imagine utopia today?

Schweblin first tests and then collapses a performatively anticapitalist utopia staged by Jesper, a "hacker, DJ y bailarín" ("hacker, DJ, and dancer") who runs a kentuki-freeing ring called the "Club de liberación" ("Liberation Club"; Schweblin, *Kentukis* 131; McDowell 139), the group joined by Marvin in kentuki form, as SnowDragon. Jesper is a transformed version of the cyberpunk hacker, imbued with what Emily Maguire terms the "edgy lawlessness" associated with early US iterations of cyberpunk (357). This time, though, the hacker functions as an analog vigilante who runs a secondary market—the one frequented by SnowDragon—that physically and digitally equips kentukis with upgrades, like all-terrain wheels, for a fee (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 133). The club, too, is equipped for kentukis: Jesper renovates a dance hall to include chargers and doggy doors that facilitate entry and exit. The club is staged as a performative appropriation of a revolutionary headquarters, permeated by the grammar of revolution: kentukis are "liberated" (137), their dance hall and surrounding area is a "safe zone" (139), and kentukis in Jesper's care see themselves as "freed" (138) from a series of exploitations stated in a digitally published manifesto, including, as in Marvin's case, sequestration in a display case (139). As a site of revolutionary struggle against the exploitation of kentukis, Jesper's space is doubly staged as a kentuki utopia, both in the eutopian sense—Jesper even offhandedly refers to the space as "heaven," using the English term—and in the sense that it claims to imagine radical social change (96).

The utopian thrust of Jesper's "safe zone" is inseparable from its performative anticapitalism. His philosophy seems underpinned by an anticapitalist impulse, as his efforts to "liberate" the kentukis he encounters effectively mirror the process of seizing the means of production. That is, the kentuki's body, purchased by its keeper, is the thing into which the labor of the dweller goes. The dweller effectively animates the commodity, the kentuki body, with their labor power. Jesper also imagines a kentuki-sized new world order for the "liberated," including public services like maps of the city identifying hidden chargers, which allow the kentukis to meet their daily needs without being beholden to a keeper. But Jesper's model of revolution rings hollow, because it operates in service of his own enrichment. As Lucía Feuillet notes, "la pretensión rebelde no interviene sobre las relaciones dominantes en el capitalismo" ("the rebellious pretense does not intervene in the dominant relations of capitalism"; 329). Jesper is the only one who can provide the "liberated" kentukis with the services they need, like access to gadgets that they use to modify their kentuki bodies.

Similarly, the chat software that he installs for the "liberated" kentukis ameliorates to some degree the asocial aspect of the network, since it allows members of the club to communicate among themselves. But the "liberated" kentukis remain unable to chat with non-kentukis other than Jesper, a reality that mimics the dweller-keeper relationships of nonliberated kentukis, whose built-in translator only works on the voice of the keeper (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 121). In this sense, the chat functionality, instead of disrupting the asocial sociality of the kentuki network and, by extension, allowing the novel to imagine a utopian space not beholden to the structures of the neoliberal market, simply reorients the network to revolve around Jesper's sole authority. Like first-wave US cyberpunk, wherein the often white, often male protagonists could be read as revolutionaries only insofar as the reader was willing to ignore their relationship to broader intersections of race and gender, Jesper's club is revolutionary insofar as the reader ignores Jesper's position of power over the kentuki members. *Kentukis* offers a vision of the cyberpunk hacker—and the particular brand of anticapitalist solidarity he peddles—as a

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performance of revolution with no real teeth. As a result, *Kentukis* presents a bleak image of cyberpunk's ability to imagine an anticapitalist utopia, characterizing the cyberpunk genre instead as disingenuous performance before turning toward a differently structured utopian space.

This space appears in the novel's final vignette, which returns to Alina, the young woman caught between the choice of a crow and a dragon at the beginning of the novel. At the text's close, she enters an art exhibit created by her partner, Sven, that consists of two rooms. The first room is full of kentukis, which form part of the exhibit, and attendees who are not necessarily kentuki keepers themselves. The exhibit is a distinct break from Sven's usual monochromatic prints, which, in Alina's estimation, represented his fear to "sacudir el mercado" ("shake up the market"; Schweblin, *Kentukis* 115; McDowell 121). This new installation, however, appears to shake up not only the art market but also the market underpinning the kentuki network. This sequence marks a break in the way that *Kentukis* represents both space and communication:

> El piso estaba cubierto de círculos de plástico violetas y cada círculo contenía una palabra: "tócame," "sígueme," "quiéreme," "me gusta." Y también "dona," "foto," "basta," "sí," "no," "nunca," "otra vez," "compartir." [Alina] se dio cuenta de que estaba parada sobre un "acércate" y el kentuki que la miraba estaba en un "llámame."
>
> (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 215)

> The floor was covered in violet plastic circles, and each circle contained words: *touch me, follow me, love me, like me*. And also *donate, photo, enough, yes, no, never, again, share*. [Alina] realized she was standing on a *come closer* and the kentuki that was looking at her was on a *call me*.
>
> (McDowell 234)

With its built-in communicative network, the first room of the gallery appears to completely resolve the problems of communication that marked the kentuki network as a space of asocial sociality. Kentuki dwellers and keepers, as well as other human-bodied visitors to the gallery, communicate with one another without interruption, and many kentukis wear notes that dictate requests (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 215). At the same time, this seemingly panacean physical infrastructure is limited to the space within the gallery's walls, making this physical space distinct from all others previously represented in the novel.

Kentukis interrogates the utopian possibilities of this space by once again using slipstream as method, this time setting it in reverse. Up to this point, characters and institutions that come into contact with Schweblin's interpolated science fictional apparatus have been transformed by estrangement. Here, however, Schweblin reverses the process, remolding the kentuki network from an estranged, science fictional representation of the neoliberal market into a space actively subsumed by that market. This type of reversal has precedent in other science fiction. Writing on the recasting of "generic expectations" in Brian Aldiss's *Starship*, for example, Fredric Jameson theorizes that "the ultimate inability of the writer to create a genuinely alternative universe only returns us the more surely to this one" (256). The effect, he argues, is that "the structural inability of such material to stay buried . . . generically transforms the novel into that political fable which was latent in it all along" (66). In other words, the intentional collapse of the built world in *Starship* causes a shift in genre. Similarly, I argue that in the space of the gallery, Schweblin uses slipstream to slowly dismantle her own science fictional world. To put this another way, the object traveling behind, in the slipstream, gains enough speed to overtake the one in front. In using slipstream this way, Schweblin questions the ability of science fiction to imagine utopia at all.

In the gallery sequence, this moment of slipstream occurs as the kentuki network is actively subsumed by the market. Although the circles on the ground in the first room invite any type of social interaction, the discussions that occur between kentukis and visitors deal only with market-related preoccupations. Kentukis circulate with signs taped to their chests that read things like "Soy Norma y busco trabajo" ("*I'm Norma and I'm looking for a job*") or "Somos una asociación sin fines de lucro,

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donándonos solo un euro . . ." ("*We're a nonprofit organization, and by giving just €1 . . .*"; Schweblin, *Kentukis* 215; McDowell 235). The social apparatus constructed in the gallery does not make the relations between people, which appear as though between things, transform once again into relations between people, offering a utopian space free from market logic. Rather, it allows the kentuki network to become a space that functions wholly in service of the purchase and sale of labor power.

Still, the narrative is left to grapple with the gallery-cum-market's utopian vision, which seems to ask whether an infrastructure could be created that stops the drive toward asocial sociality, disrupting the problems of communication inherent to the neoliberal market. But far from a new utopian vision that imagines a future in which the self-destructive drives of capital are resolved, this infrastructure is actually a nostalgic vision that points toward the labor market under an earlier form of capitalism. The social apparatus constructed in the gallery mimics the mechanics of the state, which acts "as a counterweight to the free play of market forces" and, as such, functions as a "provisional resolution" to the drives of asocial sociality (Lohoff 151, 160). The state accomplishes this, Lohoff suggests, by providing "certain directly social relationships" that ultimately make possible the functioning of capitalism, at least for a time (155). In this sense, Lohoff argues that while market radicalism may drive more profit in the short term, the role of increased state intervention still operates in service to capital's growth and survival (175). The first room of the gallery, then, imagines the reversal of "the retreat of the state" that occurred in the 1990s (Davis 19), positing instead a state that once again wraps itself around the market. The effect is that of an anti-utopia;[9] not a radical social change, but a more effectively functioning capitalist labor market with easier communication between those who are buying and selling labor power, facilitating the long unfurling of more of the same.

The second room of the gallery asks if there could be a version of utopia under capitalism that does not reach back to some nostalgic Fordian past. But the future it finds, perhaps paradoxically, is the resurgence of asocial sociality, this time with a clearer vision of the violence inherent therein. This final exhibit showcases deactivated kentukis on pedestals flanked by video screens, one showing prerecorded footage of the dweller's human body as the dweller pilots their kentuki through a computer or tablet, and the other showing the dweller in their kentuki body interacting with the keeper in the space of the home (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 217). Salva appropriately reads this as an attempt to "producir . . . una experiencia que contenga el relato completo de estas dos caras y pueda desautomatizar la naturalización de estas relaciones, dejando ver la realidad off-line de la otra parte" ("produce . . . an experience that could contain the complete story of these two faces and could deautomatize the naturalization of these relations, allowing the off-line reality of the other party to be seen"; 198).

Alina's kentuki, too, is displayed on one of the pedestals. When Alina purchases the kentuki at the beginning of her story line, the cashier suggests that this commodity offers the user an experience that is "fantástico" ("fantastic"), a term that I have connected to Schweblin's use of slipstream in the novel. In Alina's case, contact with the network launches her into her own, imagined science fiction in which an unknown man uses an Internet-connected technology to sexually assault her by driving the kentuki into her breast (Schweblin, *Kentukis* 109). She seeks violent retribution through a series of increasingly sadistic acts that she commits against the kentuki, which she believes to be a libidinous old man, including forcing it to watch disturbing pornography (110), plucking its fur to emblazon it with a swastika (148), and stabbing out its camera eyes (219). On seeing the screens in the gallery, however, Alina realizes that the kentuki is a child who presumably slipped on the controls. Within the gallery, Alina is faced with the harsh light of realism: her imagined revenge against a man is exhibited as a series of abuses against a child. Alina's newfound clarity dramatizes, through the lens of what would under normal circumstances have been a social relationship, how structures based in asocial sociality can so easily dissolve into violence.

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In this sense, the god's-eye view offered by this room in the gallery underscores the ways in which this network has forced relations between people into a series of appallingly violent acts. If Sven's gallery effectively functions as a capitalist utopia, one that hearkens back to an earlier model of state intervention, the revelation of the violence embedded in these social relations underscores that social life under neoliberal capitalism is to a frightening degree a violent series of relational encounters between people reduced in appearance to encounters between things. In effect, the novel eclipses the possibility of imagining a utopian space constructed under the logic of capitalism.

Alina's response is to imagine running away. In reality, she remains frozen in place in the middle of the room. As the novel ends, Alina asks herself, "[C]on un miedo que casi podría quebrarla, si estaba de pie sobre un mundo que realmente se pudiera escapar" ("[W]ith a fear that threatened to break her, whether she was standing on a world that it was ever possible to escape"; Schweblin, *Kentukis* 221; McDowell 240). Even in her imagination, which sees her boarding a taxi, Alina is unable to picture a refuge, visualizing instead a sort of burial, an end to her consciousness. In this sense, *Kentukis* ends with a meditation on the impossibilities of imagining a utopia not complicit in the logic of neoliberal capitalism, but also on the capacity of science fiction itself to test the limits of utopian imagination.

The novel presses against the long-held narrative that science fiction best practices its utopian imagination when it stays strictly faithful to the boundaries of genre, but also that it brings new dimension to approaches more prone to downplay the importance of genre boundaries.[10] Instead of dismantling genre boundaries, *Kentukis* uses slipstream to methodically move between genres, and in so doing the novel tests some of science fiction's long-standing utopian horizons. The novel critiques the ability of cyberpunk to imagine utopia through figures like the network, the hacker, and the cowboy before finally, in the gallery sequence, striking at the heart of the science fiction genre, challenging the capacity of estrangement itself to open windows onto utopian thought. If, as Jameson argues, the "deepest vocation" of science fiction is to interrogate the limits of the utopian imagination of the present (288–89), *Kentukis* demonstrates how, in the Latin American science fiction tradition, the rupture of the traditional science fictional apparatus is the realization of science fictional vocation. The utopian horizon of the novel can be found not in its content but in its insistence in seeking new conventions of form. The narrative mechanics in *Kentukis* suggest that slipstream has more to offer than its function in bringing coherence to a canon of Latin American science fiction. It is precisely through the slippage between genres that these texts capture the heart of science fiction imaginations, in the breaking apart not only of diegetic worlds but also of the formal apparatuses that hold them together.

Notes

I thank Ericka Beckman for her comments on an earlier version of this project and Bret Benjamin for first introducing me to Lohoff's work.

1. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

2. Forttes Zalaquett has analyzed *Pájaros en la boca* through the conventions of the gothic, while Ceron views the collection as fantastic literature. In *Distancia de rescate*, De Leone identifies "un componente a la narración que filiaría, sutilmente, zonas de esta novela con el fantástico y el terror" ("a narrative component that would subtly affiliate zones of this novel with the fantastic and horror"; 69; see also González Dinamarca 95).

3. In a review of *Kentukis*, José María Brindisi writes, "Aunque de vez en cuando coqueteara con lo fantástico, por lo general [Schweblin] se mantenía de 'este lado' de la realidad" ("Even though she sometimes would flirt with the fantastic, in general [Schweblin] kept herself on 'this side' of reality").

4. For a definition of the much-debated term *cognitive estrangement*, see Canavan's introduction to *Metamorphoses* (xviii).

5. Dillon also traces a trajectory of slipstream in her discussion of Indigenous futurisms in *Walking the Clouds*.

6. Brindisi writes that Schweblin "decidió proyectar esa misma realidad, imaginando un universo inquietante y a la vez posible, demasiado cercano" ("decided to project this same reality, imagining a universe that is disturbing and at the same time possible, too close").

7. Feuillet briefly describes the resonance of *Kentukis* with Carlos Gamerro's *Las islas*, which she identifies as "ligada al *cyberpunk*" ("linked to cyberpunk"; 320). While I agree with this connection, I disagree with her conclusion that faithful

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implementation of science fiction form, and more specifically cognitive estrangement, allows Schweblin to critique neoliberal capitalism (319). Instead, I contend that *infidelity* to science fiction form, articulated through slipstream, powers the critical axis of the novel.

8. See Jameson's argument that "one of the supreme functions of [science fiction] as a genre" is "the 'estrangement,' in the Brechtian sense, of our culture and institutions" (255).

9. Suvin maintains that anti-utopia is "the return to capitalism" ("On Communism" 140).

10. Suvin (*Metamorphoses* 67) and Freedman (18) see science fiction as following the former narrative, Miéville (232) the latter.

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Abstract: Science fiction criticism has long attended the relationship between form and utopian thought. However, increased study of Latin American narratives has allowed for a return to foundational science fiction theories with renewed perspective. While critics have recognized the tendency of Latin American science fiction to slip between genres, a trend termed the "slipstream phenomenon," there has been little analysis of its impact on utopian imagination. As a result, we miss one of the region's most unique contributions to broader science fiction traditions. In response, this article locates Samanta Schweblin's *Kentukis* (2018) within the legacies of cyberpunk and argues that the novel uses slipstream to establish and dismantle a series of classic utopian horizons by shifting its genre identity. In doing so, this work identifies a turn in recent Latin American science fiction that metacritically questions the ability of science fiction form itself to imagine a utopian horizon beyond global capitalism.

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