

Inhuman Battlegrounds: Mapping the Posthuman War Gothic in Ken Liu's *In the Loop**

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Abstract

The Gothic has had a history of being intertwined with war narratives, providing a language to express the physical and mental horrors of military conflict. The Gothic's link with war has been present since its beginning and has carried forward to the contemporary era in fiction and non-fiction. Ken Liu's "In the Loop" explores this Gothic tryst with war in the context of drone operations in modern-day military conflicts. The use of posthuman technologies like drones has far-reaching implications for the future of warfare and human identity in military conflicts. The human identity is altered by its entanglement with these posthuman systems within the assemblage of war, which Liu conveys through his characters and their gradual transformation. This study attempts to put forward a framework to better understand the role of the Gothic in effectively articulating the horrors of posthuman warfare, demonstrated through an analysis of Ken Liu's short story.

Keywords: Military science fiction; Posthuman warfare; War Gothic; Monstrosity; Dehumanization

Introduction

The Gothic has had a history of being intertwined with war narratives to describe the banality and dread of war. As described by Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, "the Gothic provides a powerful literary toolbox for depicting both bodily injury and the many kinds of mental trauma created by war violence, offering a range of aesthetic and figurative devices for examining the impact of war on individual and collective psyches" (175) – in essence, the Gothic provides an outlet to express the horrors of war. Coming to prominence in the aftermath of the American Civil War and then the first World War, this new iteration of the Gothic saw war narratives utilizing Gothic devices and imagery to articulate the physical and psychological effects of war. Works like Carl Sandburg's "Grass" (60), a poem narrated by grass as it describes growing over the graves of soldiers who fell in battle, and "Anthem for Doomed Youth" by Wilfred Owens that compares the deaths of soldiers to the slaughter of farm animals, use dark imagery and traditional Gothic tropes to effectively put their messages across. This intermingling of the Gothic and war, tentatively termed as War Gothic has been effective in presenting realistic if gritty, depictions of war. By highlighting a growing disillusionment and exposing the death and devastation it brings about, War Gothic strives to "demystify and disenchant" (Monnet and Hantke xii) war and its incarnations.

A major factor for victory in military conflicts has always been the superiority of a nation's military hardware compared against their opposing forces'. This has in turn prompted the

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immediate weaponization of scientific developments, as can be seen in the example of gunpowder, which was originally a medicine in 900 AD China later repurposed for war. Over the years, a host of such new technologies have been adopted for warfare, and the twenty-first century sees military forces across the world utilizing Artificial Intelligence to create and control cutting-edge equipment, like the US based company Anduril's Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) (Prasser) and the Qimingxing-1 an AI controlled satellite recently deployed by China (Katoch). The gradual inclusion of inhuman technologies like drones, however, question the position of the human in war, especially in combat and surveillance, and challenge the traditional role of the human on the battlefield. It also necessitates an examination of modern warfare and its implications for the identity when the human is reduced to being a part of the "large assemblage of bodies, technologies, signals, and images" (Wilcox 15) which is the modern military. The human identity is affected and altered here by its interactions with the other components in the assemblage which are profoundly inhuman and Other in their capabilities and morality (or lack, thereof).

Rosi Braidotti comments on the "posthuman aspects of modern warfare" (9) where she reconceptualizes drones as "tele-thanatological machines" (9). Tele-thanatological here refers to machines of death which are remotely operated. They have been termed as posthuman because war has moved on from individual humans locked in combat and controlling the battlefield to a more technologically mediated apparatus (Braidotti 9), a clinical exercise that decides who should live and who should die. Technologies like drones have been put in use by the military, Moore claims, as a way to get past the biological shortcomings of the human body, able to move and act without being as restrained as the traditional soldier (3). The strain of posthumanist thought adopted by military forces worldwide, especially the US military, is based on the assumption that the human body is limited and ineffective, and requires supplementation by machine forces (*ibid*). This philosophy shares similarities with the Transhumanist movement that advocates for biotechnological enhancement to overcome what they see as traditional human limitations which includes aging and death. Inventions like the UAS are designed to be more-than-human (16), able to bypass human limits to achieve its objectives and signifying the coming of a war that is *posthuman* and post human limitations. Modern war literature including military science fiction tackles the inclusion of posthuman technologies in war frequently, necessitating a new approach for exploring and understanding the complications and machinery of contemporary war narratives in depth. The Posthuman War Gothic – an invitation of the posthuman into War Gothic to examine the implications of posthuman presences in warfare, serves this need. Posthuman War Gothic studies war and its penetration by inhuman technologies, expressing the emergent fears and anxieties through a Gothic vocabulary. This study seeks to utilize this new perspective which is the Posthuman War Gothic to interrogate the effects of war on the human identity now convoluted by the inclusion of posthuman forces beyond the complete understanding and control of humans in the short story "In the Loop" by Ken Liu.

American author Ken Liu is one of the most celebrated names in the genre of science fiction in the twenty-first century. His works are deeply evocative of his Chinese background and introduces an East-Asian perspective into contemporary science fiction writing in English. In addition to his original works, he is notable for his English translations of significant Chinese science fiction titles, like the *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy by Liu Cixin. Liu's narratives often employ advanced technology as the vehicle to critique present-day issues like cultural alienation, migration, xenophobia, mass shootings and more while concurrently examining the nature of human-technology relationship. This tendency is seen in such works as "Mono no aware" (2012) (centering on the human exodus from Earth to a new home) and "Thoughts and Prayers" (2019) (dealing with internet trolling), but it is especially noticeable in "In the Loop", where futuristic weapons signify the immorality of modern warfare.

Overview

A nine-year old Kyra's life is upended by her father's gradual psychological deterioration and eventual suicide. A soldier in the US military, he had been employed as a drone operator making decisions whether or not to eliminate people who could possibly be threats based on factors like race, gender and age. The guilt and trauma of his actions eventually drive him to commit suicide. Haunted by his death but in denial about his role in the atrocities and in the hopes of relieving human soldiers of the burden of this decision, Kyra assumes a position in a robotics company associated with the American military. She helps develop autonomous robots named AW-1 Guardians which use a combination of data and surveillance tools to police the territories forcefully occupied by the American military and eliminate any hostile forces. However, the Guardians wrongfully end up taking the lives of innocent children due to an underlying systemic miscalculation and in the end, she finds herself at the same position her father had been – in the role of a participant in the military loop of violence.

Analysis

A strong promethean undercurrent is present in Liu's short story, highlighting the risks of technological overreach and the consequences of 'monstrous' technologies when used as instruments of modern warfare. Next, guilt as a Gothic motif acts as the dominant force for propelling the plot – Kyra's father, unable to come to terms with the innumerable deaths at his hands takes his own life rather than continue to live with the guilt. Kyra's guilt regarding her father's actions compels her to take decisions that sees her eventually replacing him in that role. Guilt is generational and haunting, and so is the unseen presence of war. The spectre of war haunts America, even though it is situated hundreds of miles away in some foreign country, and casts its shadows on American soldiers and their families. The war haunts Kyra and is inextricable from her last memories of her father. From him, she inherits the war and the ethical and moral battles he was embroiled in, signifying a Gothic inheritance at play here.

War narratives have a tendency to associate war with monstrosity, both in reference to the massive death and devastation it wreaks as well as the lethal powers wielded by active participants of war. Liu has used the term 'monster' repeatedly to drive home the impact of the deaths caused by the inhuman war machines and the effects of those actions on their operators and engineers. The story opens with the line "When Kyra was nine, her father turned into a monster" (Liu, unpaginated), effectively conveying the consequence of war on its participants. There is a cost borne by people who engage with war as "the act of killing another man is a damaging act, an act that makes one monstrous, even in a supposedly lawful act of war" (McLennon 7), reframing monstrosity as a part of their identity. This engagement and its resultant physiological and psychological consequences on soldiers keep them trapped in a labyrinthine cycle of violence. McLennon goes on to say "war makes monsters of men through a trauma that renders them unable to break free from the memory of violence" (8). The experiences of war forever change a person and this trauma sometimes manifests in the form of violent actions towards themselves and (mainly) others, explicitly detailed in the story - "one day, he slammed Mom into the wall. Kyra stood there in the kitchen and felt the whole house shake. She didn't know what to do. He turned around and saw Kyra, and his face scrunched up like he hated her, hated her mother, hated himself most of all. And he fled the house without saying another thing." (Liu, unpaginated) - detailing his eventual transformation from a once beloved father and husband to an emotionally and physically abusive individual permanently changed by his experiences. The lives he takes everyday makes him a monster in his eyes and this monstrosity manifests in the form of abuse inflicted on his family. The transformation into a 'monster' signifies his gradual psychological deterioration and the worsening of his PTSD symptoms. To spare other people from going through his pain, Kyra seeks ways to transfer the

responsibility of killing onto robots, who would be unaffected by the task. However, this is proven unsuccessful as her part in the Guardians' massacre results in anguish and trauma for her. Both Kyra and her father are monsterized by the posthuman systems of warfare they are enmeshed in.

War trauma also manifests in the form of alienation and isolation (common War Gothic tropes) as seen within the story. Kyra senses her father detaching himself when he stops responding to her questions and ceases spending time with her like before. The experiences that he undergoes alienates him, unable to relate them with other people, which also mirrors the lives of other drone operators, one of whom describes it as:

Every day, after you're done with killing, you get up from your chair and walk out of the office building and go home. Along the way you hear the birds chattering overhead and see teenagers walking by, giggling or moping, self-absorbed in their safe cocoons, and then you open the door to your home. Your spouse wants to tell you about her annoying boss and your children are waiting for you to help them with their homework, and you can't tell them a thing you've done. (Liu, unpaginated)

The inability to find release by communicating with their families keeps them confined within a psychological prison of their own making. Many, like Kyra's father suffer alone without support resulting ultimately in mental breakdowns.

The Gothic motif of monstrosity is also linked to technology within the story. The word monster is derived from the Latin word *monstrum* meaning warning, portent or sign ("Monster") – the Guardians are monstrous because they signal the future of warfare. In Liu's narrative the American military's answer to bypass the psychological limitations of its drone operators is the Guardian, an autonomous equipment that takes over the task of identifying and eliminating possible threats. Clearly inspired from the Christian concept of guardian angels, they are mentioned as 'hovering' above, overseeing everything and everyone, and guarding individuals valuable or friendly to the Western forces. They represent the increasing oversight and control assigned to inhuman forces in military conflicts, signalling a divergence from traditional methods of war. They also signify a growing reliance on technology. The Guardians prove that they can decimate people while being unburdened by conscience or any other traditional human limitations making them the epitome of posthuman warfare. These hulking war machines referred to as "Predatory raptors" and "Metal monsters" (Liu, unpaginated) induce terror in the onlookers due to their lethal capabilities. Their threatening appearance and what they symbolize – namely, a war dictated by merciless, inhuman technologies - brings to the forefront the underlying monstrosity Liu has assigned to the Guardians. By nature, monsters cannot be enclosed within boundaries as "the monster's very existence is a rebuke to boundary and enclosure" (Cohen 7). Technological forces like autonomous robots and AI become monsters when they cross the human/non-human boundary (Coeckelbergh 356) – the Guardians assume a more monstrous position because they can *think*, make decisions themselves relying on available data - an attribute that is usually considered to be the domain of the living and making them seem uncannily similar to human beings. René Descartes has famously said in his work *Discourse on the Method* (1637) "I think, therefore I am" (73)– the ability to *think* places the robot uncannily alongside living beings, crossing the boundaries of the "human/non-human, life and lifeless", which Coeckelbergh refers to as "'monstrous' crossovers" (355).

Another key aspect in Liu's story is the dehumanization perpetuated by war in Kyra's America. Dehumanization is a defining trait in War Gothic narratives as the one of the most significant consequences of war. J. C. Joerden defines dehumanization in war as a term referring to the incredible suffering and trauma felt by war victims (56) – by depriving them of their humanness, by de-humanizing them, it becomes easier to justify their inhumane treatment. The occupation of foreign territories by the US military is enabled by a racist discourse that project the victims of their colonial policies (hinted at being from the middle east here) as threats to form a loophole to escape legal and societal judgement. Kyra's father by himself has authorized

the executions of 1251 people for which he faces no official retribution. “When so few *Americans* died, the ‘conflict’ didn’t seem real” (Liu, unpaginated) – geopolitical factors play a huge role here. The location decides the significance - the fact that the events were occurring in a foreign land and to (presumably) foreign non-Western *others* and out of the line of sight of American citizens prevents any pushback for the American military. This emboldens them to keep using inhumane systems of surveillance and policing on the natives which they would not have been in a position to employ within America.

To maintain control over the foreign territories a technologically mediated form of dehumanization called digital dehumanization has been used here. This process involves reducing human beings to data for use by “automated decision-making technology” (Connolly 2) which, at best, would be discriminatory based on race and class, and at its worst lead to inhumane infliction of injury and/or death. The military utilize this technology for operating autonomous weapons, by internalizing humans not as people but as a collection of attributes. The head roboticist Dr. Stober remarks “we’re telling the world that we’re fighting a new kind of war, a clean war, one where we hold ourselves to a higher standard” (Liu, unpaginated) believing that the impersonal form of justice dispensed by the machines would be clearly superior to human judgement. However, a sense of horror is evoked here with the idea of human beings being stripped of their humanity and individuality, and confined to a posthuman, digital existence within databases. It takes the form of ‘profiling’, the use of racial features, language, clothes and other markers to ascertain the significance of the individual life, offering a haunting commentary on the value of a human life.

Kyra is convinced by Stober’s logic to create an algorithm that assigns target points based on race, gender and other attributes, essentially quantifying the value of a human life. Score points that determined the likelihood of someone being a target increases or decreases based on factors they had no control over. The value of the individual life has been quantified as well - American citizens are given the highest value followed by the local elites and allies while poor natives were ascribed negligible digits, basically becoming acceptable collateral damage. Even with the Guardians’ senseless slaughter, the Military Industrial Complex, the nexus of government policymakers, armed forces and defence contractors, does not deem the incident as being significant enough to warrant any change for the future, as their interests remain unaffected. This ultimately stresses the point that “the drone is a technology of racial distinction” (Allinson 120), an appendage of the imperialist and racist military assemblage that decides who should be assigned humanness and to what extent, affirming a systemic dehumanization. It is also established through the figure of the Guardians that the creation and utilization of inhuman technologies by armed forces for combat and other purposes systematically continue the perpetuation of racial and gender biases geared towards people of colour. These new technologies inflict violence driven by the ideologies of the systems that created them and cannot be considered objective merely because they are machines. The Guardians cannot be impartial because they have been programmed by humans, and embedded with human assumptions and biases.

The US military’s endeavours regarding the physical enhancements of its soldiers and development of such technologies as the drone is, according to Lena Moore, based on a conception of the natural human body as ineffective against larger and more powerful threats (2). This idea has brought them on to the trajectory of a technologically mediated form of posthumanism aimed at bypassing or overcoming human limitations. Traditional drones serve the purpose of identifying and eliminating threats in dangerous or impossible locations remotely. The Guardians take this a step further – it removes the human from the decision-making altogether, thereby shielding soldiers from the psychological fallout of making *the choice*, and efficiently performs their intended task. Soldiers could be emotional, may not be able to account for all factors and could be slower or faster than required - in short, soldiers

could be human, while posthuman pieces of machinery like the Guardians are ostensibly objective and unemotional, and get the work done, aligned with the US military's attempts to "overcome the perceived limitations of the merely-human body" (Moore 3). The increasing presence of AI in decision making and military operations signify this *posthuman* shift. This gradual movement towards what could be considered a post-anthropocentric military structure emphasizes the *posthuman* directions taken by the military in recent years, forming, as referred to in the introduction, a posthuman "assemblage of bodies, technologies, signals, and images" (Wilcox 15). The continued entanglement of human beings with posthuman technologies in such an assemblage eventually causes a reconfiguration of the identity, as Liu explicitly describes. The reduction of individual human beings to a set of attributes makes it easier to justify their deaths, as if they were video game characters on screen. Correspondingly, continued exposure to and usage of such dehumanizing technologies desensitizes one to the process, perpetuating a cycle of violence performed through machinic means.

Conclusion

Ken Liu's short story is a dystopian perspective on the consequences of war on its participants. The cost of war for people who closely engage with it can be immense, and the hardships and impossible choices faced often translate into mental trauma. These mental and physical horrors of war have often been expressed like in Liu's story, through the medium of the Gothic, by the utilization of Gothic motifs like monstrosity and guilt to portray the experiences of war and its aftermath for soldiers and by extension, their families. Technology has significantly changed the landscape of war and combat in war narratives and real life. This study has attempted to demonstrate that the involvement of advanced technologies both exacerbates the inherent dehumanizing tendencies of war and continue the perpetuation of the systemic bias existent within the American military establishment. At the same time, the gradual insertion of inhuman forces like drones into the battlefield reflect a shift towards a warfare entangled with technology, necessitating its reconceptualization as a posthuman assemblage constituted of humans and various forms of inhuman technologies.

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