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“Always as Though for the First Time”:  
Embodiment, Mediation, and Speculation in Contemporary Transnational Narratives

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

by

Regina Yung Lee

December 2013

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The Dissertation of Regina Yung Lee is approved:

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Always as Though for the First Time”:  
Embodiment, Mediation, and Speculation in Contemporary Transnational Narratives

by

Regina Yung Lee

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Comparative Literature  
University of California, Riverside, December 2013  
Dr. Margherita Long, Chairperson

This project asks how a feminist subject can exist in the world without either being annihilated by its givens, or persisting in an obsessively reactive state. What would norms look like in a set of relations not build on singularity as exclusion? I posit that philosopher Luce Irigaray’s concept of sexual difference joined to the concepts of speculation and the novum can provide a way out of this relentless binarization. My five chapters are experimental sites designed to explore and adapt this speculative model, using the relations of body to body, especially in mediatory and affiliated relations, to infer something about this difference. Each chapter is a speculative engagement with that text’s struggle for control of feminine embodiment as it relates to linguistic access and agential futurity.

The chapters of my dissertation converge upon the woman’s bodily mediation of communication and conveyance of information, as the ground of becoming from which difference can but does not always emerge. Reading these texts through the lenses of feminist theory provides a clear rendition of the stakes for women as the focal points for these technocentric exchanges. The concept of the feminine body as a medium appears in theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari, specifically in the becoming-girl as the becoming through which all others must pass. Feminist theorists and philosophers engage intensely

with the becoming-girl, seeking other readings of and alternatives to the vanishing of the woman's body out of agential action into mediation. I analyze the face on the screen, the unseen translator, and the laboring fan in terms of that vanishing, even as the labor of these women remains visible but intangible. Luce Irigaray discusses this vanishing as symptomatic of a larger suppression and invisibility of women's bodies from within language and social discourse. Through centering on a theory of speculation as opening a way toward newness, I develop readings of my transnational texts to posit ways to avoid hysterical reactivity in favor of genuinely innovative feminist response.



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## 0. Introduction: Experimental Sites.

This project asks how a feminist subject can exist in the world without either being obliterated or annihilated by its givens, a set of conditions into which it comes into existence, or persisting in an obsessively reactive state. To accomplish this, I require a method for relation across difference, in which at least two subjects may thrive, which does not reject one for another, or present one only in terms of another. Building a world in which newness and difference come into being and persist without mental and physical grief ought not to be an unimaginable vapor dream. But it remains one. Thus, I offer speculation as a methodological tool for locating or imagining ethical relations across differences, an initial step toward bringing them about.

A speculative mode reads text and event through the subjunctive *what if*, instead of the indicative *what is*. Using this idea of speculation, I read my texts for events, relations, or occurrences which engender or facilitate bifurcations between expectation and wonder, leading to unsuspected but generative outcomes. My chapters record the processes of searching out, finding, and contextualizing these outcomes, and discuss what is at stake in their unexpectedness as well as in the outcomes themselves. Thus, instead of reflecting back what has already been said, thought, or done, the speculative method I propose allows consideration of events and circumstances in terms of what might be: possible, emergent, not yet known.

My dissertation sets the grounds for difference within ethical relation firmly within the realm of the speculative, not because of its impossibility, but because of its importance as a primary site for the exploration of the amazing or astounding, of the wondrous. The resulting document is perhaps more anthology than book; however, my chapters connect through their central concerns with speculation, futurity, and embodiment. These speculations radiate out like the spokes of a wheel: each does not necessarily touch the others, yet all are interconnected with each other through the central hub or node.

In this endeavor I am supported by several seemingly disparate concepts, which track onto the disparate but connected subjects of this dissertation. There is the turbulent link between affective and material presences, especially as presented through maternal and other affiliative lines. The links echo those of linguistic and subjective presences, which provide another approach to articulating something deeply felt but not yet knowable. These intuitive presences circumvent the ties between linguistic entry and maternal corporeality through reformulating the approach between affiliated subjects as not a return, but a discovery of each other.

A critical necessity for speculation as I use it here is found in the science fictional notion of the subjunctive as the mode of speculation. Samuel Delany's early nonfictional text, "About 5750 Words," indexes the subjunctive mood as inherent to the speculative mode, necessary for the creation of any alternate within textuality itself. Novelist Ursula Le Guin provides a further gloss on the subjunctive's relation to speculation when she

calls the subjunctive “the narrative connection” (44), pointing to its powers of indexicality and delineation within profoundly contingent circumstances. That is, the subjunctive indicates what might or could be, as well as what never was. In so doing, it necessarily invokes an explanation, a narrative characterization of how to get there from here. In the speculative mode, I posit, the move toward ethical relations occur when realities touch and conflict; the speculative narrative is the location of their mutual existence. Thus, the speculative narrative tracks the contingent places around the *what is*, which Delany sought to capture through strict categorization, but which I have chosen to index through a set or series of non-normative relations between others, relations which point toward the new worlds they will create, only partially imaginable from here.

Those irreducible desires require a kind or form of realization in which they can coexist without immediately collapsing into each other: a space in which they may interact and interfere, but not destroy each other. In this wavering space between potential and actual materialization, perhaps something which contains these varying impulses with integrity can emerge; it manifests within that space of becoming. But that wavering presence is required to keep this world and its prior claims from infringing on whatever comes next, whether better or worse. The maintenance and observation of these spaces of wavering contingency, the recognition and promulgation of their multiple potentials, also form part of my speculative mode or approach.

What becomes clear upon considering the speculative mode through the ethics of difference is that forcing a singular imperative or conclusion also forces the subsumption

or disintegration of any amounts of possibility-space or virtual presence to collapse into the impoverished present indicative. At the level of discourse, ethical difference manifests as a collective impulse, a concatenation of many individual encounters irreducible to the desires or expectations of a few. Without the multiple events and occurrences, that evasive waver would stabilize itself, and the opening up into unconsidered possibilities would cease. This impoverished collapse can be alleviated by the resumption of or accounting for the presence of “noise,” ranging from ideological tensions into overt contradictions, as a preliminary stage to the presence of ethical relation, perhaps as one of its diagnostic characteristics. The noise is not an end goal, but instead indicates the presence of varying trials and experiments, attempts and approaches from different directions. Therefore, I have made no attempt to stifle my own project’s resultant cacophony; I consider my chapters to be producing together their own wavering space, an opening within which they can collectively speak something new into the world.

My analyses have sought these encounters, moments of contact between two or more agents during which some new creative term or possibility opens up from absence or impossibility into something visible, perhaps even emergent, but just out of reach. Writer Ursula Le Guin ties the kind of creativity I am seeking to describe to her consideration of thought experiments (narratives, ideas, events) as a form of exploration into worlds for which we do not yet have words. As she puts it,

They are questions, not answers; process, not stasis. One of the essential functions of science fiction, I think, is precisely this kind of question-

asking: reversals of a habitual way of thinking, metaphors for what our language has no words for as yet, experiments in imagination. (9)

The presence of speculation, its lack of actual representationality, its utter contingency, is identifiable through that wavering, but also through the wonder or access to creative newness which it produces. Some of my analyses have located this speculative presence within an absence, ambiguity, or nonlinguistic emergence within a text, as with Neal Stephenson's novel, or Jia Zhangke's film. Other analyses have located it within the text itself, as an event from outside culture which manifests as widespread transformation, as in Lois McMaster Bujold's duology; there, the speculative encounter plays itself out for the reader, visible instead of implied. In Nancy Huston's novella, the wavering presence of Maya's brilliant musical future superposes itself on her mother Lara's breakdown, yet evades this final destruction through a dual open ending, in which Maya begins to narrate using metaphors only she and her mother might understand, and in which the final narration brings Maya's life to its chronological beginning, underlining the speculative contingency of all which has passed before. The singular linguistic remnant of their contingent life together is the new word Maya leaves with her mother, and its occurrence in Lara's narration at the novella's end can be read as the entry into a life beyond anything she could had imagined. The wavering contingency of my speculative readings presents itself through my project in two major forms: the mediating presence and the maternal relation, which together form accounts of encounters between difference which may or may not lead toward emergent newness.

That wavering is a difficult ontological position to describe, but its presence indicates for me Le Guin's "process," the approach toward or advent of some new and unexpected other. I have found throughout my analyses that cogent metaphors or descriptions for this wavering at the event have included forms of mediation, shared presence in the passage of information between subjects and the strange things which happen to agency within that passage. Several of my examples are technological; there is the affectively enriched translation across screens and languages, in the fan communities of Korean drama, and the instrumentalization of sexuality for the transmissions of nanites, as in Neal Stephenson's novel *The Diamond Age*. However, these technological mediations are often grounded in biological models, and Stephenson's novel is a strong example of this. For example, Michelle Kendrick's article on *The Diamond Age* briefly mentions a parallel to the AIDS virus' destructive presence in the nanite-generated spontaneous combustion of the female Drummer. I also see an allusion to Richard Dawkins' selfish gene in Stephenson's nanites, as ideological constructs prioritizing their own physical transmission, and presenting the human agent as a medium only for their own proliferation. Interestingly, this instrumentalization of the sexual agential body echoes the virus' hijacking of the cell's reproductive apparatus, rendering the gene and the nanite more in terms of viral than genetic spread, and lending credence to Kendrick's analysis. Not only a common subject for speculative literatures, the intricate interrelations between technological and biological mechanisms, and how they can change or alter our



thoughts on unitary or fragmentary selves, have proved a powerful way to think through agency, subjectivity, and difference.

There is also a way of thinking through these ideas which centers around maternity, a dynamic relation between subjects which begins in their mediated interrelation. In the physical rendition, they exist as at least two beings entwined within each other's bodies; the maternal placenta both enacts this separation between their bodies and mediates their metabolic, hormonal, and sometimes genetic materials back and forth across itself. I do not see this maternity as necessarily divorced from the ideas of mediation and speculation which I have already described. Instead, the inhabited interrelations of both metaphors fragment or interrupt the idealized or absolute singular individual, without shattering or violating the differences between each other, and thus demonstrate the critical importance of genuine newness to my speculative venture, perhaps akin to the way a child is neither answer nor solution, but arrival.

This complex metaphor for mediation and transmission between irreducibly separate beings who are nonetheless deeply implicated within each other is a concern I share with the work of philosopher Luce Irigaray, whose own exploratory methodologies underpin the experimental nature of my project. Beyond the powerful metaphors of the maternal body, one of the ties between my speculative methodology and her work is the importance of collective thought or movement determining a social or collective emergence. In Irigaray's speculations on what sexual difference in social or civil contexts might be like, she stresses the importance of myriad accountings for myriad needs and

unknowable results which might come about. This principle, the refusal to take on proscriptive power, both subtly allows her ideas to accommodate and be accommodated by the various needs of differences within the feminist movements themselves, while dispensing with the requirement of singularity or singular authorial power.

Irigaray's position is formulated on the clear necessity for ethical relations becoming other than they currently are. As she puts it, "il faut au moins faire retour à cette passion première selon Descartes : l'*admiration*. Cette passion qui n'a ni contraire ni contradictoire, et qui est toujours pour une première fois" (*Éthique* 19).<sup>1</sup> The maternal, material, and corporeal metaphors Irigaray uses are thought experiments, forays into what this kind of life would look like. These metaphors carry the shape of what her conceptualization of ethics and thought might resemble in a world where difference was not only accepted or allowed, but deliberately cultivated or (another metaphor) embedded into the base or substratum of personal thought, cultural production, and social interaction. As such, they are experimental trials, attempts to engage with the givens of another kind of life together: to envision, or to reinvent, "what is" into "as if it were." In this regard, Irigaray's work can be read as a speculative venture – not the Lacanian specular mirroring or echoing back of the sameness of the same, but attempts to find, incite, and sustain a polarization-disrupting philosophical or metaphysical event.

It is this kind of wonder, the admiration which occurs as an initial or initializing event, which I have sought out and tracked throughout my project, hunting them down as

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<sup>1</sup> "we must at least return to what is for Descartes the first passion: *wonder*. This passion has no opposite or contradiction and exists always as though for the first time." Trans. C. Burke and G. C. Gill.

possible worlds in which difference can not only endure but thrive. These five chapters are experimental sites which explore and adapt my idea of speculation, using the texts under study to infer something about the difference which may or may not be there. The analyses have produced findings which do not manifest elsewhere in the literature, or are at best consist of partially-obscured gestures toward some minor point in the text. As I will discuss, all the texts in this dissertation are speculative in that way.

In my first chapter, on Lois McMaster Bujold's duology *Cordelia's Honor*, I envision a successful feminist speculation: the creation of conditions under which difference can emerge and, to some extent, thrive, by someone from outside of Barrayar who sees value in her fellow social outcasts and allies with them to create a world in which she can live. Seen through the lens of speculation, Cordelia's arrival on Barrayar constitutes a genuine event, the occurrence or emergence of a new subjective agent embodying a subjunctive intervention into the extant military patriarchy. My analysis of the novels tracks the vast changes in relation which she precipitates, the proliferating forms of new subjective agents which these changed relations engender, and the permanent widespread ideological changes which result. I end the chapter with a meditation on the uterine replicator as the primary speculative interpolation into the two novels, and briefly discuss what this placement means for both the critical literature and the novels themselves.

My second chapter moves through media theory to address the multiple methods of reconfiguring personal subjectivity and agency within gendered hierarchies in Neal

Stephenson's novel *The Diamond Age*. What my analysis tracks is the difficulty (perhaps the impossibility) of separating agential decision from pre-existing social relation, especially in the novel's protagonist, who has been programmed as a social agent of change. This chapter helps to highlight the importance of Cordelia's alienness to her successful alterations to Barrayaran futurities, if only in noting that no similar event occurs in *The Diamond Age*: the Feed and the Seed are linked in their reliance on gendered sexual violence for propagation. The Primer's methods of programming Nell form the basis of my analyses of mediumship and mediation as a gendered expression of instrumentalized relation, even between kin. Nell's desire to find her virtual mother, Miranda, is the most clearly agential move she makes, and I analyze their meeting in terms of its potential to transform their relation into other forms of kinship beyond or outside of their current nanotechnological regime. I also discuss the novel's ambiguous end in terms of textual support for that tremulous potential, made visible in the wavering water-barrier through which they cross together, even as I recognize its unlikely refiguring of mother-daughter relations outside nanotechnological or Primer-based means.

My third chapter discusses Jia Zhangke's film *The World* as based almost entirely on speculations about the world outside the boundaries of an artificially-created PRC in order to demonstrate that the World Park is indeed a critique of the One China policy, from its officially-sanctioned silencing of all dialect-inflected speech to the artificiality and controllability of its to-scale replicas and models of other countries' recognizable

monuments. The reduction of other nations to these tiny monuments with their filmic reenactments (see the *Roman Holiday* reenactment with the Mouth of Truth) become sinister when seen in light of the film's plays on perspective and control, enacted *ad nauseam* in the photos taken with the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Escape from the dreary sameness imposed by the World Park requires drastic, often disastrous action; the power of the film's social commentary is fueled by its recognition that an unimaginable gulf stands between the subject circumscribed by its ideological monorail, and the unimaginable world outside of that monotonous ideology's reach.

My fourth chapter, on the anglophone Korean drama online fan community Dramabeans.com, demonstrates how fan labor harnesses the power of affective relation to transform a cultural product into communal experience, building up a community where none previously existed. The recappers build textual responses which accommodate the decentralized presence of many fellow responders, and mediate kinds or echoes of cultural and linguistic fluency across various media. My analysis traces complicated interactions between linguistic fluency and evasion, between precise summary and communal response. Within the recap itself, the text, the screen, and the affective engagement of the readers and recappers merge to form relations not captured by any of these separate entities, but existing at the confluence of them all.

My fifth chapter, on Nancy Huston's text *Prodige polyphonie*, establishes the narrative of the text as entirely speculative, an angle of approach rarely taken with the work. In doing so, the narrations of Lara at Maya's incubator become evident as forms of

speculative interpolation into an unknowable future, which grow into the best future Lara can imagine: one in which she successfully creates a linguistic/musical prodigy, but whose success devolves on her own personal destruction. Maya's final interpolation into the text reveals the possible emergence of a genuine newness, evinced in her use of language Lara does not know, but which she repeats in a moment of lucid dreaming as the doctor releases her and Maya from the hospital. This analysis most clearly bears out the methods and purposes of my speculative approach to these texts.

The diffuse and contingent temporality of the subjunctive links the characteristic of speculation to its deployment, a mode or method of being open to the presence of what might initially be called uncertainty. I speculate with my texts about the hope and uncertainty of the ethical relations between differences within them; I hope for an arrival, or several simultaneous arrivals, and gamble on the possibility of their actual existence. All this work takes place in the subjunctive mood. As Ursula Le Guin puts it,

In recent centuries we speakers of this lovely language have reduced the English verb almost entirely to the indicative mood. But beneath that specious and arrogant assumption of certainty all the ancient, cloudy, moody, powers and options of the subjunctive remain in force. The indicative points its bony finger at primary experiences, at the Things; but it is the subjunctive that joins them, with the bonds of analogy, possibility, probability, contingency, contiguity, memory, desire, fear, and hope: the narrative connection. (44)

Suppose it were possible to convey this in words: an ethical relation across irreducible difference. What would that mean? How would it take place? These five chapters mark my speculative attempts to fathom, find, or imagine something like an ethical relation, something like an irreducible difference, a mode of being not ontologically dependent on another, or in which ontological dependence did not reduce to debased or absent subjective presence or agential power. Each chapter probes its text for these moments in which the certainty of repetition yields to something else, some unexpected event or relation across difference which cannot be accounted for without breaking new ground. Taken together, they do not point to a single conclusion, but map out strange constellations in a sky no longer familiar. The lack of conclusion may be frustrating, in that there is no single road forward. But the sometimes-conflicted relations between these chapters might also mark out a wavering, the beginnings of relations across their differences, their collective voices a polyphonous request for the maintenance of an open space into which something new may emerge. Within that polyphony might lie the fugitive beginnings of an actual arrival, each voice and striving pushing the entire whole into some newer pitch of reason or yearning, a multivocal event presaging the emergence of an actual difference in relations between us all.

Chapter 1. Legitimacy and Legibility: Rereading Civil Discourse Through Feminist Figurations in Lois McMaster Bujold's *Cordelia's Honor*.<sup>2</sup>

“So what are you, offworlder not-a-lady?”

“I was an astrocartographer. Then a Survey captain. Then a soldier, then a POW, then a refugee. And then I was a wife, and then I was a mother. I don't know what I'm going to be next.”

*Cordelia's Honor* (442)

This chapter considers the two-volume prologue to the Vorkosigan Series through the lens of Luce Irigaray's philosophical formulations of sexual difference in the context of legitimate civil life. I trace Cordelia Naismith Vorkosigan's various interactions with Barrayaran private and civil codes, and argue that she is a catalyst for civil and ontological change: her arrival marks the irreparable entry of agential subjectivity in a woman's body on-planet. Her subsequent actions decenter the able-bodied aristocratic military male as the singular legitimated and legitimating position in Barrayaran civil life.

I argue that Cordelia's transformative power lies in her feminine agential subjectivity, entwined with her alien origins and mechanized womb, as demonstrated through her ability to enact lasting changes to civil practice while female and pregnant. These changes eventually ratify women's participation in reproductive methods, and allow the four children Cordelia considers Barrayar's futures to pursue their own forms of thriving life as subject-agents. I end with a consideration of Darko Suvin's concept of the novum as the diagnostic characteristic of the speculative narrative, and argue for the uterine replicator as the series' novum, not as a diagnostic of genre, but a diagnostic of the series' central question. I argue that positing the uterine replicator as the series' novum places questions of women's reproductive rights and participation in civil life at the center of the series itself, and therefore at the forefront of the reader's engagement as well.

In this paper I read the uterine replicator as the major technological innovation of Lois McMaster Bujold's Vorkosigan novels, specifically as discussed in the two-part duology which forms the series' chronological beginning. Tracking the uterine replicators

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2 A previous version of this chapter was published in *Lois McMaster Bujold: Essays on a Modern Master of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Ed. Janet Brennan Croft. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2013. 27-49.



into Barrayaran society provides a clear view of its ideas around personhood, womanhood, patriarchy, and civil process for persons considered deviant from the aristocratic male “norm.”

The colonized galaxy in the series consists of a larger, technologically-advanced group, which has conquered faster than light (FTL) technology and wormhole use through the deployment of cyborg pilots, and a less-technologically-adept planet which has recently rejoined the galaxy. While several of these technologies – wormholes, zero-grav, and cryogenics, to name a few – are crucial to the text, the uterine replicator is the one which structures the series. The replicator is a mechanical womb, entirely outside the woman’s body, which gestates fetuses from shortly after conception to full-term birth. Although its diegetic history lies hidden beneath the narrative action, the series records a set of covert but eventually vast set of social shifts, as the replicators slowly but surely become widely adopted as a reproductive norm, spreading outward beyond the Vor caste to produce permanent changes in the definitions of women and other mutants as agential persons in civil life.

This chapter investigates the plethora of increasing differences in current Barrayaran histories, which I posit is traceable back to a single alien woman whose actions as an agent within and outside of civil law brings about and legitimates new forms of action within civil structures, inciting difference through new ontological relation. She does so through bloody civil action, executing the Pretender so that he cannot force continuation of the singular legitimations. But by reordering civil life to

permit entry to difference, Cordelia makes possible the increasing differentiations which we see carried out in the rest of the series.

In the epigraph above, the crucial space of speculation in Cordelia's answer reveals her articulation of a placeholder for as-yet unimaginable futures. However, the world Cordelia requests is not one Aral can imagine; that is, the future she requires from Aral is one only she can see. When Aral is made Regent, she requires that he "[r]emake this world into one Miles can survive in. And Elena. And Ivan. And Gregor" (567). This stringent directive, the coeval survival of the mutant, the woman, the scion, and the emperor, necessitates an insurrection in the operations of legitimacy on the planet. For philosopher Judith Butler,<sup>3</sup> new civic participation cannot simply reverse a former exclusion; the system itself is structurally incapable of encompassing such difference. Instead, these legitimating structures must be questioned until they crack: "It is not a matter of a simply entry of the excluded into an established ontology, but an insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, What is Real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?" (Butler 31). Because only Cordelia can imagine this kind of remaking, it must be Cordelia who transforms legitimation, establishing a chance for life in, through, and for herself, opening the way for many unimaginable others. The narrative's subsequent arc encompasses nothing less than a pervasive

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<sup>3</sup> I must stress that I make little claim in this paper toward reconciling Irigaray and Butler's larger bodies of work, since there is considerable disagreement between them on the meaning and validity of sexual difference, especially in the public sphere.

technologically-mediated resistance to the embedded systems of legitimation which Cordelia struggles to subvert.

#### Mutants and Cannibals: A Brief History of Barrayar

Lois McMaster Bujold's speculative fiction output, comprising three major series and various shorter writings, has won her five Hugo Awards (1990 ("The Mountains of Mourning"), 1991 (*The Vor Game*), 1992 (*Barrayar*), 1995 (*Mirror Dance*), and 2004 (*Paladin of Souls*)), three Nebula Awards (1989 (*Falling Free*), 1989 ("The Mountains of Mourning"), 2005 (*Paladin of Souls*)), and the Mythopoetic Prize (for *The Curse of Chalion* in 2002),<sup>4</sup> among many other literary distinctions. Bujold is an active convention participant, interacts with her fans on various social media platforms, and has openly discussed her early forays in Star Trek fan fiction as a point on the line to her writing career. There are several overlapping fan communities dedicated to her work; the Vorkosigan Series in particular has an active fan fiction community, as well as its other listservs, bolstered by social media networks like [www.Dendarii.com](http://www.Dendarii.com), a long-running fan-maintained informational site on Bujold's work, a more recent Facebook page, and the author's own erratically-updated blog.

The Vorkosigan Series interrogates a historic androcentrism through a slew of competent characters whose bodies play with science-fictional conventions. It deals in what looks at first like a set of typical space opera plots: a young hero with dual identities

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<sup>4</sup> These awards lists were compiled from a variety of sources and then checked against the Hugo and Nebula online award archives, as well as the Mythopoetic Award online archive.

and beautiful, interesting companions battles various villains in games of wit and war, for the glory of his foster-brother the Emperor, dangerous new missions, and munificent cash prizes. However, this description elides Bujold's play with altered embodiment throughout the Vorkosigan series. Her novels address how those somatic alterations transform, mirror or distort the fabric of the worlds she builds: these altered material humanities demonstrate an interesting experimental protocol, signalling the body's importance in defining agential power in Bujold's universe.

Of particular interest from this perspective is Bujold's two-novel prologue to the Vorkosigan series, *Shards of Honor* (1986) and the Hugo award-winning *Barrayar* (1991), reissued by Baen as *Cordelia's Honor* in 1999. The duology depicts the meeting and courtship of Betan Survey Captain Cordelia Naismith and Barrayaran Lord Aral Vorkosigan, Cordelia's harried introductions to the legitimating structures of Barrayaran patriarchy, and her desperate attempt to rescue her unborn son from being murdered as a pawn in the upheaval surrounding Vordarian's Pretendership, and ends with the birth of series protagonist Miles Naismith Vorkosigan. Cordelia's arrival on Barrayar marks the advent of a difference; because of her previous experiences, she can engage with Barrayar's univocal constructs knowing that its construction of the legitimate civil subject as able-bodied and male is artificial.

At the beginning of *Shards of Honor*, Barrayaran society is nearing the end of several important transitions, originating in the abrupt introduction of Barrayar into galactic society eighty years ago, as well as the first Cetagandan invasion, which brought

galactic weapons technology to the planet. The tense political situation on Barrayar, with its secret military police and dying Emperor, mix with these exceedingly unstable social mores to form tense overlapping sets of cultural stigmas, which link legal status to perfection, with normative physical and cultural breeding defined by the bodies of aristocratic military men. In the wake of a poison-gas attack on Aral and Cordelia, their unborn child must be transferred from her uterus to a uterine replicator as the poison eats through his bones; the child will be born fragile and stunted, a teratogenic mutant in a society that hates visible difference above all else.

It is possible to read the series as belonging to Marleen S. Barr calls feminist fabulations, “fiction that enlarges patriarchal myths in order to facilitate scrutinizing these myths” (4). The critical literature on the Vorkosigan Series usually attempts to posit its protagonist, Miles Naismith Vorkosigan, as the primary agent of social change. As Sylvia Kelso astutely points out, Bujold puts her major characters into bodies and situations that read as feminised, “females in disguise” – that is, something the dominant military patriarchy does not recognize as powerful (Kelso, “Feminism and ‘The Gernsback Continuum’”). Sylvia Kelso has made some perceptive analyses of Miles as a decidedly non-standard military hero, revisioning his narratives of disability as deprivileging his physiological prowess in favor of a more formidable series of successes based on strategy, manipulation, and evasion of pure brawn as a default solution. Kelso reads these forms of engagement as forms of cryptically embodied femininity, which she terms “coded” after Robin Roberts’ use of the phrase (Kelso “Loud Achievements”). Her

readings of Miles and Mark in terms of their femininity reveal a transformative ideological commitment embedded into their very beings. According to Kelso,

Miles appears as physically weaker, more fragile than his opponents; and he prevails by intelligence as well as audacity, by manipulation and psychic judo as well as forward momentum. In a further judo turn, female readers accustomed to taking on male identification find themselves identifying with a man who really is one of them. (“Loud Achievements.”)

While Kelso’s designation of Miles as “one of them” (one of us?) is problematic, it does point out one of Miles’ major strengths for feminist analysis: his mother’s crucial role and example. Bujold’s narratives demonstrate how all these supposedly impotent characters achieve their goals in the midst of the dominant patriarchy, through traits and strengths it finds alien or irrelevant.

Although it is not clearly outlined, the revisionist project has a clear shape: Bujold renegotiates the parameters of sf heroism by redesigning the text beneath her characters’ feet, decentralising the default-masculine position and experience still prevalent within the genre. These adjustments to character design, arc and development read as slantwise underminings of a military-male norm on Barrayar. Thus, reading the Vorkosigan series through the advent of Miles’ double birth does indeed provide a basis for the divergence from the previous world order. However, this divergence is not entirely to his credit; although he constitutes a significant part of its outworkings within the series. That Miles exists at all is a continuing testament to his mother’s courage, and a

rebuttal to his grandfather's inability to imagine a world in which he could successfully thrive; that he does both must, therefore, mean that something crucial has changed.

On Barrayar, woman and mutant and disabled are near-interchangeable terms, code words for less-viable alternatives to the able-bodied masculine aristocrat; these bodies are nonstandard texts, illegible and invisible within extant readings of subjectivity. In this ideological system, any kind of unrecognizable body reads as impure and unnatural – that is, as monstrous. Barrayaran belief in blood purity and physical perfection fuels a deep cultural revulsion against visible mutation. In “a society that loathes and fears the mutations that have been its deepest agony” (583), Miles would inevitably be killed, for as a mutant, he is deprived of the legal status of legitimate personhood. In a sense, Miles cannot be born into this world, for his birth would not secure personhood, legitimacy, or legibility; he could exist, but not strive or even live for very long.<sup>5</sup> For Miles to thrive, a whole new form of life must emerge. As she fights to clear a path for her son's survival, Cordelia's unexpected revolutionary gift to her adopted planet will be the slow dissolution of these perilous limits to personhood and life itself.

Cordelia is not an unbiased observer in the imminent derangement of her life. Instead of impinging on or occluding her observational status, I consider her various implications in Barrayaran life a necessary precursor to her precipitation of its eventual transformation. Cordelia's stance is what feminist science studies scholar Donna

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5 One of Miles' first cases as an Imperial officer is the prosecution of an infanticide in a rural Dendarii mountain community, as chronicled in “The Mountains of Mourning.” Count Vorkosigan deliberately sends his son Miles into the rural Dendarii mountain ranges to personally illustrate the tangible changes concerning killability and inalienable legitimate personhood, since the infant girl had been murdered for bearing a visible mutation.

Haraway calls non-innocent or un-Edenic, remaining painfully aware of her implication within the regimes she critiques, as she tries to be a good wife and mother in a society where the categories of wife, mother, and woman are all inimical to personhood. Instead of remaining remote, unencumbered, passing judgment on Barrayar from some objective god's-eye view, Cordelia finds herself tied to and surrounded by the complex outworkings of conflicts between her attitudes toward personhood, reproduction, and Barrayaran law. It is these troublesome insinuations which define her formative encounters with Barrayaran bodies, and which guarantee her truthfulness: she cannot retain the psychic comfort and protection of dispassionate observation. In Haraway's terms, Cordelia's witness remains *modest*, "not simply oppositional. Rather, s/he is suspicious, implicated, knowing, ignorant, worried, and hopeful" (*Modest\_Witness* 3) – that is, Cordelia's deep implication, once acknowledged, creates a clear observation of these social structures, her view sharpened as much by love as by fury.

Cordelia's modest witness focuses on the closed caste of the Vor; her social implication as a Vor wife on Barrayar allows her to get close to its most secret places, its backcountry caves and Imperial sewers, passages beneath otherwise impassable difficulties. Piotr Vorkosigan's resistance fighters used the Dendarii Range's caves as part of their strategic manoeuvres, taking advantage of the caves' seeming openness to lure the Cetagandan invaders down into an impermeable underground system. Cordelia's strategic subterfuge at the caves re-enacts the Dendarii resistance, but rewrites it as part of Miles' maternal history. Using her social illegibility as strategic cover and a form of



witness, Cordelia's subterranean resistance, foreshadowed through her deceptive use of the Dendarii caves, gains power from juxtaposing the tactical marginality of domestic spaces onto the Imperial Residence's innermost rooms.

#### Redefining Legitimacy:

To be legitimate is to be lawfully-begotten, literally born into the law. In the Barrayaran context, only the aristocratic Vor have the privilege of non-ambiguous relationships to the law and inalienable access to personhood: the Vor scion holds innate significance, with access to agential action and legal recourse in cases of personal injury. The Oxford English Dictionary specifies that legitimate status is granted by another in possession of the law; thus, it rests outside of the object, action, or person itself: “[e]tymologically, the word expresses a status which has been conferred or ratified by some authority.” Related adjectival uses rest on a lack of ambiguity before the law. In the Barrayaran context, only the aristocratic Vor have the privilege of non-ambiguous relationships to the law and inalienable access to personhood, with its concomitant political and social acceptance. Their bodies hold innate significance, with access to agential action and legal recourse. And since the Vor are legitimated through their names, products of long genetic obsessions, the Vor Lord's living body is the standard for legitimacy in the public realm. His body is thus a metonym of the law, connecting legibility to legitimation.

The power of definition is necessarily exclusive; thus, the legitimate Vor body also constructs the marginal status of women, bastards, cyborgs, and mutants on Barrayar.<sup>6</sup> For these very ambiguous and therefore illegitimate persons, the concept of legitimacy is closely linked to what Judith Butler would call “precarious life,” in which personhood remains destabilized both legally and socially because that personhood is alienable, removable by the word of another legitimate body. Thus, these persons’ rights to legitimate personhood rest uneasily in the category of the alienable, or as the OED puts it, “[c]apable of being alienated, or transferred to the ownership of another.” Thus, if something requires legitimation, it is also alienable; for the people who fall outside of unambiguous relation to society before the law, their personhood is pervaded with this alienation.

Barrayaran patriarchy requires clear inheritance lines; thus, discourses of legal suitability has a stranglehold on its societal norms, rendering any deviance “unsuitable” – that is, unusable. Barrayar’s too-sudden reintroduction to galactic life fostered a permanent militarization. Since another invasion could happen at any moment, Barrayaran bodies held little intrinsic value beyond their strategic and tactical

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<sup>6</sup> The tense state of race relations on Barrayar is somewhat apparent throughout the Vorkosigan series, foregrounded most clearly through examples including the language hierarchies (Russian > French > Greek), relations between Barrayar and its colonized worlds, and references to the impoverished inhabitants of the Dendarii backcountry. Earlier examples include the young ensigns of Greek origin who are so badly used by General Metzov in *The Warrior’s Apprentice*. The series’ most well-developed exploration of race and postcolonial conditions is the complex case of Duv Galeni, the son of a Komarran rebel who joins Barrayaran ImpSec after finishing a PhD on Barrayaran military history; he joins up immediately following the Military Academy’s becoming open to Komarrans. To make tensions even higher, Galeni is also the nephew of a Komarran Councillor killed during the Solstice Massacre, the war crime which gave Aral Vorkosigan the name of Butcher, although the actual massacre was ordered by Aral’s political officer. Galeni’s violent confrontation with his father forms one of the most important narrative arcs of *Brothers in Arms*.

importance. This weaponization of Barrayaran bodies under cooption by state military necessities dominates civil life at every scale throughout the duology. A constant state of emergency combines with a cultural horror of physical mutation to produce an obsessive focus on inalienably legitimate bodies. As Aral euphemistically puts it, “[i]t’s our society. It tends to be . . . rather hard on anyone who can’t keep up” (281), where keeping up is recognizable only in specific forms of use. This exclusivity of recognition, the alienable reading of personhood, authorizes perpetual violence and inequality towards those construed as non-persons, illegitimate alien others such as women, children, mutants, madmen, bastards, and cyborgs, all defined negatively as lacking personhood because they lack legibility under the law.

Cordelia’s commitment to inalienable legitimacy only intensifies in the wake of her pregnancy, specifically once it is clear that her son will be born with visible deformities. Out of both prejudice and political expediency, Aral’s father first requests, then attempts to incite, then demands that they abort the “[t]hat thing in the can” which Cordelia calls her son (*Cordelia’s Honor* 418). In a fury over the destruction of his hopes for an unambiguous heir, Aral’s father Count Piotr withdraws his name from Miles, destroying the unbroken lineage of the Vorkosigans as a sign of his deep disgust:

“You’re so set on change, here’s a change for you. I don’t want my name on that thing. I can deny you that, if nothing else.”

. . .

“Call him Miles Naismith Vorkosigan, then,” said Cordelia, feigning calm over a sick and trembling belly. “My father will not begrudge it.”

*(Cordelia’s Honor 418-419)*

In Barrayaran naming conventions, the male heir carries both his grandfathers’ first names; Miles should have been Piotr Miles Vorkosigan, and Piotr’s denial signals his refusal to accept the child as a member of the house. The transfer of naming conventions from Piotr to Cordelia<sup>7</sup> attests to a larger movement, a metonym which places the entire category of Barrayaran personhood at stake in the ensuing action. By withdrawing his name, Piotr condemns Miles to a form of public bastardy, indelibly marked by the absence of patriarchal legitimation.

Seen in this context, Cordelia’s act of name-granting is an alternate legitimation paradigm, an entry into civil life through maternal inheritance, eluding Piotr’s Barrayaran patriarchy through its matriarchal and alien origins. Cordelia’s action in this moment takes a deeply private familial matter and refigures it into a true civic alteration. When Miles Naismith Vorkosigan is born, a part of his heritage will manifest itself solely and thoroughly in his mother’s name; he *is* Miles Naismith for a significant portion of his life. He also inherits her name’s word in his own body, establishing a paradigm for the conferral of personhood that encompasses difference through the matriline, legitimating

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<sup>7</sup> I find it interesting to note that throughout this confrontation Cordelia is wearing her Betan Astronomical Survey trousers with a Barrayaran flowered smock (see page 411), a clear indication of her mixed allegiances and alien origins.

him not as a link in an unbroken chain of physically perfect male successors, but as the emergence of an alternate paradigm in both private and civil life.

Both Judith Butler and Donna Haraway discuss human value formation according to this attribution of personhood, which is defined by the ethical characterization of its destruction: the other is rendered non-person when its ‘murder’ is downgraded to ‘slaughter’ or ‘killing,’ when its death is not grievable, and when its look is not returned. The status of difference on Barrayar includes two possibilities: invisibility, a kind of social death, or true death, a kind of mere killing – for only fully legitimate people have access to the law’s protection, and may therefore be murdered, a crime whose every occurrence is a horrific tragedy.<sup>8</sup> On Barrayar within the law there is no true difference possible: all bodies are variously closer to or farther from the one legitimate heir, the body for whom the law is perfectly legible, without question or delay. This “fantasy of mastery” (Butler 29), expressed in the simultaneous disavowal of vulnerability and paranoid attempts to neutralize the perceived threat of the alien, forms the terms which grant personhood on Barrayar: healthy sons form strong armies for a state of permanent emergency, an arrangement Cordelia thinks of as breeding lambs for slaughter (*Cordelia’s Honor* 69). These ways in which certain lives have been rendered “more

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8 Within this strictly bounded moment, Judith Butler’s work on the murderable versus the merely killable exists in congruence with the larger project of establishing an Irigarayan sexual difference as the first among many differences on Barrayar. However, I must stress again that there is considerable disagreement between these two philosophers, who have been locked in orbit for some time, engaging with each other, failing of resolution, yet creative and productive within their strongly conflicted intellectual commitments.

grievable than others” (Butler 30) frame the terms of Aral and Cordelia’s first conflict, over whether the brain-damaged Ensign Dubauer should live:

“My combat knife is quite sharp. Used quickly, it would cut his throat almost painlessly. Or should you feel it is your duty as his commander, I’ll lend you the knife and you may use it.”

...

She stood and looked at him very steadily. “It must be like living among cannibals, to be a Barrayaran.” (*Cordelia’s Honor* 13)

In an image which returns several times, Cordelia terms Barrayar’s profligacy with the life of its citizens a kind of cannibalism, with especial reference to the young men its wars so rapaciously consume.<sup>9</sup> The intrusive presence of the brain-damaged Lieutenant Dubauer interrupts Aral’s smooth elision between functional life, determined by use, and a kind of innate value for life, which Cordelia treats as Dubauer’s by right. This claim is one she forcibly guarantees with her parole, staking her name’s word as a pledge of her conviction; this is a legal action in Barrayaran terms, reserved for a legitimate name-bearer. Thus, when first given, Cordelia’s name’s word asserts personhood for the deviant

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9 Cordelia’s use of the word in this exchange places emphasis on its connotations of barbaric savagery, which she, a citizen of supposedly more-enlightened Beta Colony, implies is a Barrayaran relic, with no place in the modern galaxy. This reading of Beta Colony as a bastion of enlightenment requires unblinking acceptance of Beta’s own subtly invasive formations of its citizens. Beyond Beta Colony’s intense regulation of procreation, a process not without danger to the civil status of women, Cordelia’s experience of Betan psychotherapy after the Escobaran invasion is particularly chilling. However, a reading of Beta Colony’s complex social structures, and the implications of Cordelia’s “reversion” to Barrayaran interrogation techniques in order to escape it, would occupy its own chapter. Suffice to say that this initial dichotomy between Beta and Barrayar swiftly disintegrates as Cordelia and Aral’s relationship develops.

– both herself and Dubauer – creating both of their legitimate personhoods from within the parole she offers. This is a trade she continues to make for others as long as her word remains recognized, her word for their lives.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, she takes on the authority and position of someone with a name to give as her word. Aral acknowledges this ability of hers but does not create it. It is Cordelia’s insistence on giving her parole which opens a way for all that follows.

Cordelia’s position as a privileged alien woman on Barrayar is notable, but not, in fact, unprecedented. The enigmatic presence of Aral Vorkosigan’s Betan maternal grandmother hovers just beneath the surface of his unusual receptiveness to Cordelia.<sup>11</sup> Little is known of her, except that she was in the Betan Department of Interstellar Trade, and that she married into the Vorbarra family through Prince Xav. She seems to have left no traces in public history; the novels retain a curious silence on her political and personal lives, although the lingering stigma concerning degenerate, brilliant Beta Colony may be considered her cultural legacy. But her earlier advent may provide an important correlational precedent. The maternal inheritance of her galactic presence, and her arrival immediately after Barrayar’s Time of Isolation, may have established a clear synchronicity (but not a causative one) between the Betan woman’s arrival and the

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10 That is, until even her own illegible word empties out into unilateral unsanctioned action, which manifests as Vordarian’s trial and execution, in which their two forms of speculation on the nature of personhood come into direct competition. This scene can also be read as a response to the duel with the two swords, in which a matter of personal honor is settled with tactical advantage; it is the obverse form of the name’s word, and one which Cordelia again appropriates through her own name, given to Bothari in that moment of execution.

11 Aral’s other reason for finding Cordelia immediately attractive is his strong sexual attraction to members of the military. His disastrous early relationship with Ges Vorrutyer powers a significant amount of their antagonism in *Shards of Honor*.

widespread destruction of previously-held social tenets. However, this insinuation into Vorkosigan family and political histories is nearly pure speculation on my part.

#### Rewriting Legibility: Three Othered Women

The tensions between civil legitimacy and individual physical presence escalate into open conflict in the lives of Droushnakovi, Alys Vorpatril, and the beleaguered Princess Kareen. On Barrayar, the only legitimate form of womanhood is publicly mute, and figured as a function of her dependencies. Biologically necessitated, yet politically invisible, or else too visible to be effective as a measure of social transformation, she exists only in reaction or as liaison between the men in her life. But what viable form could her rebellion take? Wholesale rejection of these social constructs do not result in the sudden recognition of her agential subjectivity. Instead, as with Droushnakovi, it results in her social exclusion, as the subject becomes obscured through the union of, for example, physical strength and feminine body. Her definition in non-reproductive or ornamental terms renders her politically and socially “illegible” or incomprehensible, remanding her again to the margins of civil discourse. Thus, each woman’s legibility, fixed through external forces, delegitimizes any attempt to unfix or change her status: she cannot alter her frameworks without rendering herself illegible to society, stifling the changes she attempts to make. These three othered women provide examples of how to work within, rebel against, and hide away from that constrictive legibility: Lady Alys Vorpatril through her social leverage, which she deploys to both subvert expectations of



feminine activity and support nonaristocratic worth, Cordelia's bodyguard Droushnakovi through her indeterminate status as both soldier and servant, which renders her socially illegible at nearly every turn, and Princess Kareen through her cryptic conformity, which disguises her murderous agency almost to the last.

Initially lightly bound through ties of social position and familial proximity, Alys and Kareen become tightly linked to Cordelia through increasing spirals of political manoeuvres, culminating in assassination, murder, and motherhood. Alys and Kareen's stories intertwine with one another, at once an expression of the various ways a Vor woman may hold and wield power, and a demonstration of the ways the Vor woman's powers fail, how they must be subverted in order to create a world in which her children may one day thrive without (or sometimes live without) her. Whereas Droushnakovi is so far outside the legitimating structure she has no recognizable influence on her status, Alys and Kareen can observe, understand, judge, and mourn, but they cannot change the terms of that legitimation. Their power comes from the social structures into which they have been interpellated; to dismantle those is paradoxically to disarm themselves, delimit their narrow margins then cut them off.

As a socially-adept and well-respected noblewoman, Alys Vorpatril's legitimacy depends on her social legibility; she wields considerable power, but it comes from others' understanding of her high position within established parameters for high Vor actions. Alys' own extreme social legibility compels others' mimicry within the social sphere; her influence lies in her excessive visibility, and the performances of social manoeuvres it

can guarantee. Master of all the forms of courtly fashion, taste, and manner, she is an arbiter whose approval can change a small nonaristocratic wedding into an enthusiastically Vor-approved social event. But her taste and brilliance are untrammelled by naïveté; she is an expert at deploying societal stratagems in high Vor contexts in order to gain her own ends, as precise and astute as any ImpSec officer or member of the Council of Counts.<sup>12</sup> Cordelia almost immediately recognizes that Alys’ “social enthusiasms concea[1] an acid judgment” (330).

However, the source of Alys’ considerable power in Vor society rests on her remaining eminently – even aggressively – legible within its established forms of legitimation. *Cordelia’s Honor* thus opens a series with considerable Shakespearian intertexts by highlighting the problematization of language and social legitimacy presented in *King Lear*.<sup>13</sup> Just as Regan, Goneril, and the early Gloucester ensconce

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12 Some thirty years after the events of the duology, the depths of Alys’ strategic and tactical gifts are revealed during Miles Vorkosigan’s campaign to have Dono Vorrutyer and Rene Vorbretten voted into the Council of Counts. Alys’ pivotal letter instigates a significant amount of political action in *A Civil Campaign*, providing methods to secure valuable votes and guarantee strategic absences where needed. Her role within ImpSec, an arrangement seemingly of long standing, is also revealed toward the end of that book

13 There are a number of possible literary antecedents for a redhead named Cordelia. However, besides L.M. Montgomery’s fanciful orphan (a triumphant example of a transplant who transforms her environment into one where she can thrive) there is the youngest daughter in William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. This Cordelia holds a nuanced understanding of the ways political manipulation can grant or withhold meaning from words, as evinced in the play’s opening scene, when her silent noncompliance is the only gift she can give her father, after the depredations against meaning and language undertaken by her sisters Regan and Goneril. The blurring between Cordelia and the Fool throughout the play only further strengthens their dual hold on speaking transformative uncivil truths into Lear’s unwilling ears, driving him to madness and despair, yet reclaiming language as meaningful in the collapse of civil legitimations during the aftermaths of Lear’s death. Literary critic Frank Kermode calls this transformation “a monstrously difficult birth” (1302), tying Cordelia’s refusal to participate in current regimes of language, her transfigurations of truthfulness and civility, her generation of intrinsic worth without reference to the state, as embodied in Lear, and her ultimate part in the renewal of meaning (“Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say”) at the end of the play (*Lear* V, iii, 325).

themselves in an overly rigid subjectivity by making themselves legible in socially-determined prescriptions, the institutions which grant Alys her immense social clout also underwrite it, and their destruction would result in the loss of her ability to compel. She must remain of perfect breeding, in unerring good taste, with impeccable manners, else risk losing all of her credibility in high Vor society, the locus of her existing power. Alys can promote or defend a new idea, give it entry into that privileged women's space, but cannot overwrite those markers of legitimation without losing all of her own. Although Alys can and does underwrite the clean uptake of a social revolution through her calm acceptance and promotion into the societal courtesies she helped form, she cannot be its instigator, else she risks the collapse of the structures which grant her the power to compel.

In direct contrast to Alys, Droushnakovi is a social outlier so significant she invalidates social constructs simply by existing. Her physical capabilities and placement within Imperial Security make her a direct address of the constructedness of Barrayaran women's roles, yet she has neither leverage nor influence to translate her power into lasting social change. Droushnakovi was trained by Impsec's fearsome Captain Negri to act as the last physical barrier between Kareen, Gregor, and any attacker. She comes to Cordelia prepared to learn how to be part of a new generation of female soldiers and, while stymied by Cordelia's disavowal of the soldier state, continues nevertheless to confound the binaries between woman and physical prowess. Droushnakovi's tactical skills make her the focus of social backlash against women daring to take on the agential

actions of military might. Her daily relationship to modes of legitimacy and power, especially as shadowed by the cyborg Koudelka and queered by the monstrous Bothari, are formed like theirs in modes of extreme visibility and maximum transgression. However, because Droushnakovi weathers an inordinate amount of social backlash, it is difficult to read her outside of the pre-polarized dichotomies which are the condition of her service.

Droushnakovi's presence thus demonstrates the artificiality of Barrayaran femininity, and links its power to its pervasive normativity. Her collapse of gendered binaries render her public activity and private love-life a fraught and difficult series of stutter-steps and mediated progressions. Because her body is read against and not within these terms, against the class and military hierarchies which structure her service, Droushnakovi's actions are always already illegible. She renders these conflicts open to view, yet must rely on the legitimating structures of her orders and commanders to continue to occupy her very visibly interstitial position. Her excessive transgressiveness and concomitant lack of legibility require that she still be legitimated through others; her own word remains, for now, illegible.

The Princess Kareen is the *ne plus ultra* in legitimate social bodies. While Alys' actions constitute a social/discursive body made legitimate through her excessive legibility and Droushnakovi's actions are awkwardly legitimized by practical necessity while being radically disapproved of for their social illegibility, Kareen is rendered legitimate and legible by her genetic purity and aristocratic bloodline, guaranteed as the

wife of Crown Prince Serg. However, her actual worth is subjugated to others' recognition, becoming a position which she can neither create nor claim for herself. This legitimating factor requires and compels that others sacrifice everything to protect her procreative abilities, yet render her paradoxically both murderable (as a valuable procreator) and killable (since she has no intrinsic value) in one blow. Kareen perfectly embodies the precarious placement of the legitimated woman in Barrayaran society, accepting her personal erosions of agency and subjectivity in order to protect her son. Her integration into the legitimating structures grants her a highly conditional and tenuous prominence, an importance without agency.

This erasure of woman's value stems from the Barrayaran elision of the female body and her function as biological and social mediator. The current Emperor, the politically astute and critically ill Ezar, has no faith in Kareen's ability to protect herself or her son after his death. Kareen is not even present at the meeting which decides Aral's Regency; her positioning within the straitened confines of motherhood trumps any other political identifiers. Kareen's most important function is to act as a physical medium of transmission for the genetic material between royal generations; her body warrants its validity by providing a legitimate Vorbarra son. Once she has done so, Kareen's power shifts; her position compels protection by others, but is neither caused nor guaranteed by her personhood. It is Kareen who provides Cordelia the key to understanding her position within the Vor, when she speaks for herself, out of her long experience as consort and wife, but never as visible agential person:

“I’m having trouble understanding this...venereal transmission of power.

Do you have some claim to the Imperium in your own right, or not?”

“That would be for the military to decide,” she [Kareen] shrugged. Her voice lowered. “It is like a disease, isn’t it? I’m too close, I’m touched, infected... Gregor is my hope of survival. And my prison.”

“Don’t you want a life of your own?”

“No. I just want to live.” (*Cordelia’s Honor* 335-336)

Kareen’s response demonstrates the severity of her implication in the forms of power she wields, all focused through her Imperial motherhood. Her refusal to take up political power provocatively frames her ambivalence *as* political acumen: as Princess, and therefore pure incarnation of Barrayaran womanhood, she must be politically visible but negligibly agential, her personhood rendered entirely through the ultimate necessity of her protection. Cloaked in the expectations of an entire planet, her power to compel is limited to protection, but encompasses it fully: her Imperial status mandates the devotion of others. But beneath her cryptic camouflage roils a complex set of desires, indicting her thorough embeddedness in Vor metrics of survival, yet indicating the prize of her dreadful silence: she vanishes. Through a determined campaign of apolitical intent, Kareen renders her Imperial legitimacy an unreadable political defense, thereby maintaining a slender armored space between her role and her self, occupied by her own body.

For these three othered women, born into Barrayaran society and deeply internalizing an agency that is of the state and thereby impotent to overturn it, any actual rebellion is instantly recognized in its illegibility and met with harsh discipline. It takes Cordelia, a woman whose commitment to the inherent legitimacy of others compels her to operate outside the rigidity of the hegemonic legitimating structures, to bring about change, to speak difference into being. For Droushnakovi, Alys, and Kareen, their positioning grants values and powers which cannot themselves overturn the systems which legitimate or reject them wholesale. However, as with her Shakespearian namesake, Cordelia wields both illegibility and illegitimacy to transform the structures legitimate personhood themselves, preparing the way for a world in which people are legitimated by their mere presence, their very existence.

#### Refiguring Civil Disobedience: Trial and Execution

As we have seen with these three othered women, to exist completely contra to or completely within the set of legible, legitimating positions does not automatically grant the power to overturn them. Some other way must be found, some way taken which leads to what philosopher Elizabeth Grosz terms “[a] difference capable of being understood outside the dominance or regime of the One, the self-same, the imaginary play of mirrors and doubles, the structure of binary pairs in which what is different can be understood only as a variation or negation of identity” (“A Thousand Tiny Sexes” 170). This difference, unthinkable within the current regimes, must take form on Barra - yar in order

for Cordelia's desired futures to begin. But in order to open a way toward difference, the current "regime of the One" must cease. When Vordarian's forces seize her gestating son, still housed in his uterine replicator, Cordelia must engage Barrayar's brutal strategies for changing the rule of law, and endorse a killing to engender the new law.

When Cordelia moves to retake Miles' replicator, mobilizing against all orders and in defiance of the law, she makes her name's word into an action, a word engendering a difference in kind in the definitions of personhood on Barrayar. What the cyborg birth between woman and uterine replicator create together is the necessary first difference, first in a sequence from which all other differences proliferate. To deform philosopher Gilles Deleuze's *enculage* of his various subjects,<sup>14</sup> Cordelia takes legitimation from below, and makes it her own – not for her own sake, not only for herself, but for the sake of her fellow monstrous regiment, and all the different futures she has seen and named.

Cordelia must transgress all legitimacies and leave legibility behind to save her son Miles, for whom the law has no place, before or after his replicator birth. Having attempted to speak for Miles' life and been denied his rescue by her husband Aral, Cordelia chooses to enact her required legitimation through the subterranean conduits of her alien tactics. Her civil disobedience, as she takes up the law in her own name, must come about because civility is already shattered, its center lost. It is only in the margins that she finds the potential for creating the world she absolutely requires, the one in

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14 This alteration in the method of meaning-making, shifting between a casual violent dominance and a kind of generous transfiguration, is appropriate, given Deleuze's own readings of philosophers from Spinoza to Bergson.



which Miles might live because his death would be a grievable murder rather than an expedient killing. Cordelia's lawful action begins at the radical split between herself and Aral, whose tactical military commitments hold him from condoning Cordelia's proposed rescue mission.

In the aftermath of Piotr's vicious reinforcement of Aral's killing denial, Cordelia turns to the thoroughly illegible Droushnakovi, agreeing to a desperate deal: one mutant child for one disposed Princess, one final attempt to rescue both Miles and Karen. Abandoned by the law, Cordelia extends her parole, transmuting her name's word into action as she plans her desperate dual-rescue. Without a second thought, Cordelia calls on the mad soldier Bothari, a true illegitimate son of Barrayar; a brutal psychopath and Cordelia's Barrayaran alter-id, she calls on his hands to enforce her will: "She and Bothari were twins, right enough, two personalities separately but equally crippled by an overdose of Barrayar" (497). This close parallel shadows their later psychic overlaps, even as it indicates the gulf between them. Their trauma-filled relationship has enacted Cordelia's deepest fears about Barrayar, yet Bothari holds himself ready at her word, revoking all other names except hers. When the group kidnaps the cybernetic Lieutenant Koudelka on their way out of Tanery Base, their band of monsters is complete: soldier woman, alien mother, mad bastard killer, cyborg. Working together at Cordelia's instigation, her monstrous regiment sets out to invade the capital, their every move something unimaginable till now.

This invasion of the capital precipitates a union of socially rejected things, leaving all the bastards to save one another, and thereby themselves. In the company of her fellow monsters, Cordelia charts a course toward rooms hung with green silk, where expediency and desire meet in the contested body of the legitimate heir to the Imperial throne. With her honor guard of fellow illegibles, Cordelia sets out through the disregarded sewers and back doors, striving to bring her mutant son to term, guaranteeing his life through blood and fire. From these ashes she will create a new world. Cordelia's team functions in the liminal spaces of society, setting traps in the deep crevasses, traveling underground to her contested destinations. This mode of operation, a covert attack from the least expected place, mirrors the larger investments of Cordelia's actions. In the caves and sewers, the inaccessible mountain passes, in the covert operations and sequestered rooms she carries her plans to fruition. In centralizing these abject spaces, which Julia Kristeva considers the inescapable fate of women, Cordelia wields the power of the margin to rewrite the letter of the law.

The monsters come face to face with the generator of their illegitimacy when Cordelia, Bothari, and Droushnakovi are captured by Vordarian, inside the Imperial Residence. This conflict extends beyond its principals to cradle the future of the Imperium, as its two speculations finally, spectacularly, collide:

“What have you done with my son, Vordarian?”

Vordarian said through his teeth, “An outworlder frill will never gain power on Barrayar by scheming to give a mutant the Imperium. That, I guarantee.”

*(Cordelia’s Honor 549)*

In a haunting echo of her private conversation with the Vorkosigans, Cordelia asks Vordarian twice for her son, but is refused: once on the grounds of her being a “frill,” and again on the grounds that he will “protect and preserve the real Barrayar” (549). In one sentence Vordarian unites all the fears of the Barrayaran patriarchy into one dismissive threat, laminating the Imperial succession to his schema of truth. His words form a powerful mantra, equating mutant, alien, and woman (“frill,” with all its echoes of ornamental inconsequentiality) with the idea of widespread civic misrule. But when Cordelia directs the same question to Kareen, she answers honestly. The ritual nature of the question and answer, with Kareen’s response a tiebreaking third, suggest a verbal mirror dance; these are public declarations with political effects. Cordelia understands that by showing Kareen that her son is considered killable rather than grievable, Kareen will abandon her silent, invisible paragon status and come back to life again. This process is opaque to Vordarian, clear demonstration of the incomprehensibility of both Cordelia’s strategy and Kareen’s response in terms of Vordarian’s “real Barrayar.” That Vordarian turns aside to consult a military leader only drives home the finality of his incomprehension. Kareen’s final action is a declaration of utter loathing, an emphatic rejection of any Barrayar Vordarian could ever imagine:

Cordelia read the murderous undertones ringing like a bell; Vordarian, apparently, only heard the breathiness of some girlish grief. He glanced at the shoe, not grasping its message, and shook his head as if to clear it of static. “You’ll bear another son someday,” he promised her kindly. “Our son.”

*Wait, wait, wait*, Cordelia screamed inside.

“Never,” whispered Kareen. She stepped back beside the guard in the doorway, snatched his nerve disruptor from his open holster, aimed it point blank at Vordarian, and fired.

*(Cordelia’s Honor 550)*

These competing futures play out within the text: where Cordelia hears a death knell, Vordarian hears only static. His casual assertion that Kareen can act only as a king-bearer is a threat, not a reassurance, carrying the weight of all Vordarian’s speculative futures: the perpetuation of his Imperial lineage, and its metonymic example as the future of all Barrayar, a singular line devoid of any difference. Vordarian’s fatal, total incomprehension of Kareen’s desire is reemphasized in his pure repetition: he will exchange one son for another and declare it acceptable to her, a casual, forcible reinscription of his continued legitimacy. It is Kareen with her point-blank refusal who abruptly and irrevocably rejects what she once epitomized.

Kareen’s last act, performed in her own voice in full view of others, constitutes a conviction, a public demand for Vordarian’s death. Brilliant but mistimed, Kareen’s action falls short of her goal: one guard skews her aim, another kills her. But the speed

and strength of her final rejection signal both her long suppression by the current regime, and her burning desire to destroy it. Her agency as political entity renders her declaration a civil act. Striving toward that other world, Cordelia has Bothari use Koudelka's swordstick, in the presence of Droushnakovi and the incubating Miles:

“Now that Kareen is dead, how long will you keep fighting?”

“Forever, he snarled whitely. “I will avenge her – avenge them all –”

*Wrong answer*, Cordelia thought, with a curious light-hearted sadness. “Bothari.”

He was at her side instantly. “Pick up that sword.” He did so. She set the replicator on the floor and laid her hand briefly atop his, wrapped around the hilt.

“Bothari, execute this man for me, please,” Her tone sounded weirdly serene in her own ears, as if she'd just asked Bothari to pass the butter. Murder didn't really require hysterics. (*Cordelia's Honor* 554)

The execution scene is the second time Cordelia has deliberately appropriated Barrayaran violence for her own purposes. But unlike her waterboarding interrogation of her Betan psychologist, Dr. Mehta, this appropriation has clear judicial and civil overtones. The hysterical narratives of motherhood twist as Cordelia's wandering womb leads her to the very heart of violent civil discourse, a knot she untangles at a single stroke.

By rejecting Cordelia's offer, choosing instead a perpetual war, Vordarian shows himself truly inimical to the future of difference on Barrayar. But even as she commits the traditional execution which ushers in a new age, Cordelia introduces difference, warping even triumph and the rule of law as her execution of Vordarian becomes

something inimical to Vordarian and his “true Barrayar.” Cordelia’s vicious satisfaction that “Kareen encompasses you at last, you bastard” (563), their doubled presences around Vordarian’s severed head, marks a true complication of what feminization comes to mean on Barrayar, even as Cordelia’s proxy-bloodied hands implicate her into its violent methodologies. The uterine replicator is metonymic for that paradigm shift, even as the swordstick clearly implicates Cordelia into the bloody annals of Barrayaran history.

In her Afterword, Bujold shapes this seemingly climactic moment purely in terms of ultimate sacrifice for the sake of the unborn child, calling her novel “a book about the price of becoming a parent, particularly but not exclusively a mother” (595). But if murder no longer requires hysterics, then this execution also marks an ending to the stakes of Vordarian’s legitimacy. Cordelia’s civil disobedience for the sake of her mutant child refigures itself as legitimate within the widened meaning of that desirable future. She walks the same arc as those previous heroes, freeing citizens from a restrictive regime, yet carries a speculative presence whose futurities widen beyond the comprehension of current Barrayaran histories. The uterine replicator represents all of these possible futures, the ones outside of Vordarian’s dismissals, to which he is deaf, on which he turns his back, and which eventually kill him. The replicator, present at Cordelia’s other hand throughout Vordarian’s execution, forms a protective shell around her refigurations of legitimacy, civil discourse, and motherhood, in which altered versions of genealogy can take root, grow strangely, and eventually be birthed into a world in which they can strive and grow. The uterine replicator’s left-handed presence is thus a

very small metonym for these very large changes in civil discourse, which splits when Cordelia so radically amputates the single-stream futurity of Vordarian's patriarchal speculations.

(N)ovum: Notes on the Uterine Replicator

“A speculum,” says philosopher Donna Haraway, “can be any instrument for rendering a part accessible to observation” (*Modest\_Witness* 197). In her analysis, the digital image of the fetus visualizes the terms of origin, embodiment, technoscience, and control as sites of contestation and control in the public and political realms. In *Cordelia's Honor*, the speculum moves beyond the fetus to its housing: not to the placenta or the uterus, but to the uterine replicator, which exposes and explodes the functionalization of women's bodies. The uterine replicator is a speculative, spectacular machine, a pathbreakingly important technological innovation which births change into the entire Imperium by revealing its delegitimation of personhood at the most intimate level. The replicator's construction and function within the series allows a kind of kinship with one of Haraway's most famous constructs: the cyborg, dangerous illegitimate child that she is. With her uterus across the room and her swordstick at the ready, the cyborg figures as an appropriate experimental site for ontological war machines and ideological time bombs: in allowing machine intervention into otherwise biological processes, the technology destabilizes the 'naturalness' of functionalizing women, revealing the process as an ideological construct, hardened into social strictures.

As infiltrating technology at the service of a speculative futurity, the uterine replicator can be understood as both ovum, the mechanized shell that re-births reproduction, and as novum, literary scholar Darko Suvin's word for a new logical entity which bends the entire narrative around itself. Although his stringent categorization requires that all works of science fiction center on the novum, this concept is valuable here not as a genre-establishing argument, but as an accurate name for the metonymic and causal relationships that place the uterine replicator at the center of the novel's speculations. According to Suvin, "SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance of a fictional novelty (*novum*, innovation) validated both by being continuous with a body of already existing cognitions and by being a 'mental experiment' based on cognitive logic." Besides a clear reliance on the scientific method, with its complex relations to purity, objectivity, and witness, what Suvin's definition points out is the centrality of the novum to the overall narrative arc. Despite a lack of detail on the functioning technologies of the uterine replicator, with which Suvin would certainly take issue, the duology's latter half is structured by the replicator, not only as an ideological carrier, but as a technological speculum, allowing a vision of a society in which women's bodies are not reduced to a mutely functional state of production. This initial speculation opens the way toward many more, a prelude to rewriting legitimate personhood through multitudes, myriad differences proliferating into time.

The revolution Cordelia brings seems small at first: seventeen uterine replicators carrying the bastard children of the Barrayaran military, a galactic attempt to hold



Barrayar responsible for its war crimes in the abortive Escobaran invasion. Darko Suvin's concept of the *novum*, which he defines as *un nouveauté étrange* (*Pour une poétique* 12), and as "novelty, innovation validated by cognitive logic" (*Metamorphoses* 63), is the one he uses to define the genre of science fiction. These attempts at genre definition inevitably lead to disagreement, which is why it's interesting that my research demonstrated (incidentally – I wasn't aiming for this) that when considered through the *novum*, the uterine replicator defines the Vorkosigan series as a set of actions taking place within societies variously defined through their relationships with technologically mediated reproduction. As Suvin says in his introductory chapter, in *Pour une poétique de la science-fiction* in 1977:

Les étrangers – utopiens, monstres ou simplement êtres différents – sont des miroirs de l'homme, tout comme le pays inconnu est le miroir de son monde; c'est une matrice vierge et un dynamo alchimique. Le miroir est un creuset. (13)<sup>15</sup>

And again, in his 1979 chapter on the *novum* in SF, from *Metamorphoses of SF*:

A *novum* of cognitive innovation is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality. . . . its *novum* is "totalizing" in the sense that it entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects

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15 "Strangers – utopians, monsters or simply different beings – are mirrors of man, just as the unknown country is the mirror of its world; it is a virgin matrix and an alchemical dynamo. The mirror is a crucible." (Translation is my own.)

thereof (and that it is therefore a means by which the whole tale can be analytically grasped). As a consequence, the essential tension of SF is one between the readers, representing a certain number of types of Man of our times, and the encompassing and at least equipollent Unknown or Other introduced by the novum. This tension in turn estranges the empirical norm of the implied reader. . . . (Suvin 64)

Reading the replicators through Suvin's novum provides a clear depiction of the stakes in their arrival on Barrayar. The uterine replicator's unfolding narrative demonstrates the surprising power and seeming simplicity of a parable, a small allegorical demonstration given only for those with eyes to see. The machine wombs reveal that on Barrayar, the mother's body is as much an ideological function as a biological entity, bounded by social recognition or repudiation. Within this abstract schema, the woman is little more than a blood-and-bone uterus, and the uncanny frisson caused by the uterine replicator remains its literal externalization of her truncated personhood. This automation of women's work can only overwhelm woman's position, deleteriously affecting her worth, if she was already constructed, like the factory workers during the industrial revolution, as a form of automated work. If this machine womb is to avoid the reinstitutionalization of the pregnant body into the extant structures of legitimacy and legibility, it must be made to figure and mean differently. Yet, inside the imposed illegibility of childbirth, from which the legitimating structure that regulates futurity averts its gaze, the uterine replicator is

freed to work the subtle yet crucial changes that will slowly reconfigure Barrayaran society in the wake of Cordelia's more overt revolution.

Feminist critics of speculative fiction are divided on the generative possibilities of technologically-assisted reproduction. Sherryl Vint, in *Bodies of Tomorrow*, returns repeatedly to the links between genetic and technological manipulation, which suggests an embodied correlate to the technological focus of sff speculation. Marleen Barr has repeatedly discussed the dystopic outcomes of these technological advances, and considers the removal of reproduction from the woman's physical body a loss of her control over the process. Gwyneth Jones is more equivocal, arguing in *Deconstructing the Starships* that the speculative narrative contains an thought experiment, that this also applies to things like poststructuralism and feminist theory, and that the "oppressive medium of words" (31) is not yet able to tell the stories of a genuinely postfeminist world. Jones considers feminist narratives speculative (specular?), echoing the writing of feminist theorist Donna Haraway, whose philosophical work has a long-held affinity for speculative narratives as a temporary home for the stories we want but cannot yet articulate. In the Vorkosigan series, it is the uterine replicator which encloses this speculative space, the not-yet but-becoming of what Barrayar has never seen. The Vorkosigan series' replicators suture both bodies and machines together beneath their featureless surfaces; for example, the novels reference the necessity of removing the mother's placenta along with the fetus. Thus, I also consider the replicator a *novum*,

literary scholar Darko Suvin's word for a new logical entity which so disturbs its contextual reality that it bends the entire narrative around itself.

I rephrase Suvin's assertion in the context of the series as follows: the persistence and centrality of the uterine replicators in the series are visible evidence of their crucial role in social definition, both at the level of the individual relation within each society, and at the level of interaction between individuals across cultural boundaries. The replicators permit or perhaps bring about a world in which the woman, the emperor, the bastard, the cyborg, and the mutant all have a legitimate chance to not just survive, but flourish, by forcibly replacing one emperor with another, molded by Cordelia's galactic mores: . The series records the results of this speculative insinuation. Its vividness, the vastness of its characters' thriving, points out to its readers the extent to which they remain alienated from their own chances for life. Bujold puts it this way: "One future technology, three societies [Cetaganda, Athos, Jackson's Whole], three results: more to come, as my time and ingenuity permit." (Afterword, *Miles, Mystery, and Mayhem*) Note that her authorial comment, written well after the writing of all three texts, juxtaposes Suvin's two statements nicely – that the technological intervention's effects are directly to her powers of speculative narration. More, Suvin's requirement for the novum – that it function as a crucible for the transmutation of a mirror image into strangeness – is fully met as the replicators' introduction into Barrayan society transforms its structures entirely.

Tracking the uterine replicators into Barrayaran society provides a clear view of its ideas around personhood, womanhood, patriarchy, and civil process for persons considered deviant from the aristocratic male “norm.” No one yet knows what Barrayar’s women might become when no longer relegated to medium of transmission between legitimate heirs. In the wake of the uterine replicator’s dual displacements—the deconstruction of hidden ideology and the literal replacement of the female body in the reproduction cycle—Barrayaran female ontology must necessarily move into a new register. The de-dehumanization of women is not itself humanization: women must progress into the unknown, speculate on their own visions of what they could become. Three decades after the events of *Cordelia’s Honor*, Cordelia discusses the central importance of the replicators on Barrayar with her second son Mark:

“The whole Vor system is founded on the women’s game, underneath. The old men in government councils spend their lives arguing against or scheming to find this or that bit of off-planet military hardware. Meanwhile, the uterine replicator is creeping in past their guard, and they aren’t even conscious that the debate that will fundamentally alter Barrayar’s future is being carried on right now among their wives and daughters... The Vor system is about to change on its blindest side, the side that looks to – or fails to look to – its foundation. Another half generation from now, it’s not going to know what hit it.”

Mark almost swore her calm academic voice concealed a savagely vengeful satisfaction. But her expression was as detached as ever.

*(Mirror Dance 296-97)*

Cordelia's discussion here is the clearest explanation of the uterine replicator's crucial role in the development of Barrayaran futurities; speculation, in genetic futurities, trades on the virtual presence of a not-yet-actual new world order, bringing about the future Cordelia had envisioned three decades ago. The uterine replicator on Barrayar has thus brought about a catastrophic but slow-growing crossing of a sociocultural event horizon: through its presence, women have learned that they were but no longer remain slaves to biological reproduction; their children will consider the replicators a norm. This revolution from within, at the tiniest, most disregarded levels, indicates the mixed success of Cordelia's speculative project within her lifetime, yet points to an eventual, inevitably successful refiguration of all possible futures, just becoming visible from here. Within less than two generations, the mechanical womb will gain traction planetwide, not through the lingeringly patriarchal channels of state, but through the uterine replicators' widespread uptake into Barrayaran cultures, at the levels of daily life as well as long-term social engineering. Cordelia's version of this revolution situates itself in the cracks and gutters of extant social power structures, in the liminal space shared by both outlaws and pioneers. She brings the machine to the planet, and in doing so, makes these open options a kind of blossoming, instead of another layer of ontological control. The machine

wombs are ideological war machines: the children born of these replicators will themselves birth a new Barrayar into being.

## Conclusion

Readers of the series know how things work out: frail Miles grows up to change history both within and outside of the Barrayaran Imperium, often to the detriment of someone else's philosophies on his personhood and right to civic participation, and sometimes at considerable cost to his own. And, some thirty-odd years after the events surrounding Vordarian's Pretendship, Miles will move into his grandfather's old rooms at Vorkosigan House.<sup>16</sup> This reclamation of a place previously "jammed with military memorabilia, thick with the formidable scent of old books, old leather, and the old man" (*Memory* 422), while tied to a far more recent storyline, still provides a quiet rebuttal to Piotr's thundering denouncements of his heir and line.

Cordelia seeks to legitimate people like her son, whose legal and social claims to full personhood on Barrayar remain in doubt. She does not wish to claim their legitimacy through herself, but to release it to their own innate claim; in doing so, she would transfer the category of personhood from legitimation, requiring an outside warrant, authorization, justification, or guarantee, into an inalienable innate value. In

contravention of the adjectival form, Cordelia seeks to legitimate the non-person, those

<sup>16</sup> See *Memory* 422-423, in which Miles' colonization of Piotr's old rooms is part of the immediate aftermath of Miles' own extensive personal refigurations. Cordelia takes the move in stride; without narrative access to her interiority, the reader has no way of knowing whether her humming has anything to do with Miles' decision to take Piotr's rooms and make them his own, or whether she's thinking of something else entirely.

whom Barrayar would deem only killable – not murderable, since they are not persons. What she accomplishes through her confrontations with legitimacy will alter its meaning for those whose value was alienable, rendering these questionable persons' illegibilities a test of the law's ability to grant legitimacy.

With her self-possession, her band of monsters, and her machine womb, it is Cordelia who ends Vordarian's Pretendship with her mediated hands, hands which then guide the young Emperor's as he lights the last remembrance for Barrayar's diseased past. Cordelia and her monsters, together with her mutant son, demonstrate the current legitimating structure's complete inability to account for them as people. In effect, through her multiplied angles of vision, gained in the caustic intimacy of her personal experience, Cordelia legitimates these others through her comprehensive, recognizant gaze. It is her gift and she excels at it, which Aral claims and cannot deny, even when her active legitimation results in direct contravention not only of his word, but of all words, rendering them illegible against her own legitimating word. Along the way, social genius Alys Vorpatril solidifies the redefinitions of bravery, expanding them from the military soldier to include the blood and betrayal of giving birth, while Droushnakovi moves from woman soldier to non-Vor social icon as her daughters infiltrate and disperse through rough terrain. And Kareen: the Princess, whose cryptic camouflage has hidden everything about her, finally reveals that her singular desire is for self-possession, and that she will kill to have it.



Although Cordelia's position within the series is not central, her influence is pervasive: through her eyes, the transparency of Barrayar's alienating structures of legitimate personhood vanishes, thereby losing its insidious power. Cordelia will unfurl her illegitimate subjectivity through an insurrection on both public and private scales, to create a world in which her children can survive. In the midst of her reclamations she alters the parameters of legitimate personhood on her adoptive planet, disrupting its tacit strictures through her creation of dual articulate subjective stances, their speculative futures made visible through the fetus gestating in the machine womb. In doing so they open a way toward new forms of legitimacy, written in civil codes which can account for difference without denigration.

## Chapter 2. Wavering Presences: Mediumship, Embodiment, and the Becoming-Woman in Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*.

My discussion of Neal Stephenson's 1995 novel *The Diamond Age* directly addresses the stakes of a mediatory positioning for girls and women, in terms of their ability to also continue being and/or become subjects with agential bodily control. I read the novel's supposed nanotechnological innovation, the Seed, as subterraneously linked to its predecessor, the Feed, through their common reliance on the instrumentalized bodies of women and girls. When is the programmable girl's decision a causal event, and when is it a fulfillment of her training? Karen Beckman's analysis of the female medium in the birth of media studies guides my readings of the novel's instrumentalizing actions. I argue that the narrative itself presents the outcomes of instrumentalizing women's bodies by considering Miranda's compliance and immolation as the conditions for technological innovation, closing off its access to actual innovation. However, I suggest the possibility that Nell's recovery of Miranda in the flesh, an act whose functionalization is at best diluted, might open the way toward some unthinkable new world.

### Introduction:

In this chapter I argue that the flows of information and cultural change in Neal Stephenson's 1995 novel *The Diamond Age*, mainly but not exclusively represented through nanotechnology and its methods of delivery, are mediated by women's and girls' functionalized bodies, leading to their perpetual instrumentalization. Despite *The Diamond Age*'s intense focus on nanotechnological possibilities, it presents a future in which technological advances depend on the sexualized immolation of women, and social change requires the mass co-option of girls' bodies for others' ideological purposes. As a consequence, women's and girls' bodies are ambiguously present, vanishing and wavering, in the words of media theorist Karen Beckman, between absence and agency.

Such a vision of female embodiment seems at odds with the novel's primary dyad of materialization, the Seed and the Feed. Both are methods of propagation which create or compile information and material goods out of undifferentiated matter, sourced in the abilities of nanotechnology to manipulate the world at the atomic level. The apocalypse-

inducing Seed would release creative production to the masses, supposedly decoupling wealth and worth, while the Feed exists as a top-down hierarchy of replication based on net economic power. However, the Seed and the Feed are deeply related, and not just through their dual reliance on a specifically New Atlantan technological superiority: the Feed rests on stratified hierarchies of economic access and scarcity and will develop only through New Atlantis, which requires the girls with their Primers to become successful social hackers (or hacks). Likewise, the Seed's development first reduces sexual bodies to containers for recombinant nanites, then immolates a female body to precipitate the next round of recombination. Thus, the appropriated or destroyed bodies of girls and women are indispensable to the reign of the Feed and the age of the Seed.

Previous readings of *The Diamond Age* focus on these two technologies, or else its refashioning of cyberpunk tropes, both of which matter to interpretation of the novel's impact on both genre and social imaginaries of nanotechnological possibility. These analyses rightly focus on the Seed and the Feed as a fundamental struggle underlying the novel's narrative arc. However, metaphors of venereal disease notwithstanding, analyses of the novel in nanotechnological terms rarely focus on the necessity of female bodies to the spread and development of the Seed, a necessity which joins the Seed and the Feed at a substratum below affiliations of phyle. Michelle Kendrick's article on *Snow Crash* and *The Diamond Age* finds a distinct link between technological advancement, passive transmission, and the boundaries between subject and object in relation to the female body. Kendrick argues for the superposition of geographic imperialism and its attendant

personal, physical violence onto the women's and girls' bodies strewn throughout the novels; as she puts it, "[t]echnology allows connection. . . but technology also breaks down the physical barriers of the body – the female body" (71). However, Kendrick also touches on one other stunning pronouncement: that in Stephenson's novel, "ultimately it is the naturalized, maternal woman who is asserted against the forces of homogenization" (72). This chapter is an attempt to account for the sexed and gendered occurrences of that bodily destruction, and to see if the maternal woman can indeed be asserted as an avatar of difference in *The Diamond Age*.

I propose that the Primers, the Feed and the Seed, and the nanotechnology which fuels them all are related through one hidden requirement: the bodies of women and girls fuel the spread and development of the nanotechnology leading to the Seed. These female bodies must be first infected, then consumed, a sexualized destruction which haunts the novel as a whole, and which forms the ground for its various technologies of social reformation, binding the present to the future and thus removing the power of speculation from the Seed. I argue that the novel's technological futurities must bury that destruction in order to declare the Seed different from the Feed. Analyzing Nell's body finds a record of incredible hostilities throughout the entire novel, supporting the necessity of gendered violence as the precondition for the Seed's development. Miranda's body, nanotechnologically altered to enhance her flickering in and out of virtual and actual presence, allows her to channel not only the Primer, with its loaded words, but also a hidden key: her love for Nell, with its bare hint of an ethical relation, even if it too is

mediated by the Primer. Connecting Nell and Miranda through their nanite infections requires redefining their relation entirely in terms of the Primer and the Drummers (as well as Seed). However, the Primer also prefigures the only uncontrollable part of their relationship, namely, that they attempt to find each other in embodied form – and succeed.

Neither the past technologies of the Feed nor the possibilities of the Seed seem to open the narratives' present tenses into novel futures. The reader's ability to determine difference and initiative from one end of the novel to the other is hampered by the Primer's profound shaping of Nell's "subversive" responses through Miranda's affect-charged but scripted voice. However, the abrupt ending both allows and resists such a clear closing off of those possible worlds, leaving a space of silence to mark the place in which those emergences might have occurred.

#### Brief Background: Nanotechnology and *The Diamond Age*

Neal Stephenson published *The Diamond Age* in 1995, as the possibilities for nanotechnological work were proliferating out of the biotech companies. Stephenson's novels often concern alternate world histories by speculating on the changes which nanotechnological capabilities would have brought about in early-1900s British-occupied Shanghai (*The Diamond Age*), and the effects of genuine connections between linguistic and computational codes across web-based platforms (*Snow Crash*). Both *The Cryptonomicon* and the novels of The Baroque Cycle point to an enduring fascination

with persistence and recurrence within alternate-history war narratives, often traceable through dissemination of encrypted financial information, while *Anthem*, a sprawling homage to Jules Verne and Western metaphysics, expands alternate history to a multiworld variant in which mathematics, particle physics, and the 10,000 Year Clock fuse into an interdimensional quest narrative.

In the chronology of Stephenson's novels, *The Diamond Age* seems to be set several decades after *Snow Crash*,<sup>17</sup> in a future Shanghai comprising a series of economic zones based on phyles, sociocultural groupings which interact according to relative economic clout. The New Atlantans, a phyle whose steampunk Victorian technology merges with a nonaesthetic colonial imperialism, and the Han of the Celestial Kingdom, neo-Confucian separatists, hold considerable influence in Shanghai; the phyleless thetes exist at the borders of society, constrained to the bare minimum of Feed use. The predatory economics manifest as levels of access to the Feed, whose sources (a series of interconnected branching rhizomes funnelling undifferentiated matter) fuel the compilation of everything from land to food, by means of ubiquitous nanotechnological intervention into production and sustenance. Source Victoria fuels the Feed for all of Shanghai/Pudong, monopolizing both technological and economic power in the area, and supposedly changing the nature of scarcity.<sup>18</sup> However, the phyles remain deeply

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17 Whether or not the two novels are in the same timeline depends on whether elderly Miss Matheson, head teacher at Nell's New Atlantis school, is indeed the skateboard courier Y.T. from *Snow Crash*. This is heavily implied in her reminiscences of early life as a thrasher (see *The Diamond Age* 290-291 and *Snow Crash* 27, for the Chiseled Spam ad).

18 The novel's title comes from a proposed name for the new age of nanotechnology, and refers to the ease of creating any material whatsoever from the Matter Compilers. In this age, creating huge slabs of solid diamond would be more an issue of managing heat loss and density rather than rarity and value.

stratified, with artisanal craft becomes once again the province of only the wealthiest of patrons. Handmade writing paper, for example, remains a costly specialty item, not only for its uniqueness, but because uniqueness is so perverse in a world made and run by matter compilers.

The novel posits that a new technological delivery pattern for matter compilation, based in deracinated systems of compilers, must arise to decouple the tight links between the Victorian phyle and unlimited access to the Feed. Thus, several phyles are simultaneously attempting to develop their nanotechnologies into the Seed, a nanite which would enable a distributed model of matter creation allowing multiple access points and unregulated flow, outside of the Feed's regimented economic hierarchies. Unsurprisingly, New Atlantis and the Celestial Kingdom are the primary backers in this developmental race, and a complex weave of sabotage, duplicity, surveillance, and what seems like coincidence power its gradual unfolding in the narrative.

When New Atlantan artifex John Percival Hackworth loses his unauthorized copy of the Primer, a powerful piece of nanotechnological social engineering disguised as a children's book, it ends up in the hands of Nell, a small thete girl. The novel's first half traces Hackworth's various attempts to retrieve the Primer, interspersed with Nell's growing abilities to use it, and the cryptic interventions of a Celestial Kingdom nanite expert known only as Dr. X, who is slowly collecting a vast amount of biopower in the form of abandoned baby girls. He raises them in orderly creches, while sending

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Hackworth's earliest appearance in the novel occurs aboard an airship with a floor made of solid diamond (*The Diamond Age* 10-12).

Hackworth into exile with the Drummers, a phyle whose members are infected with nanites which propel them toward indiscriminate sexual activity, using the Drummers' combined bodies to recombine nanites into the Seed. Dr. X's strategy becomes clear when Hackworth's dreamlike interactions with the Drummers produce a singular threat to New Atlantis: the Alchemist, "a wizardly artifex who is conspiring with Dr. X" to evolve the Seed ahead of the New Atlantan phyle (307).

Within the covers of Hackworth's Primer is a transformational technology: a reactive book, one which responds to its user in ways which further her training, but toward its designer's specific ends. It was created specifically to mold young girls into radical social engineers, providing training in nanotechnological manipulation, computer coding, limited survival skills in hostile situations, and critical analysis through mythological insinuations of lived events into a pre-set narrated structure. Hackworth will eventually create two versions of this world-changing book: the Primers, for Nell, Elizabeth, and Fiona, and the Jade Books, created to educate the army of little ethnically Chinese girls Dr. X had collected – the Mouse Army, whom Nell meets during the fall of Shanghai, and with whom she will form "a new ethnic group of sorts" (Stephenson 446) as Shanghai endures another Boxer Rebellion, and as the Celestial Kingdom reclaims it in order to find the Seed.

Nell's social apotheosis is supposedly guided by the Equity Lord behind the Primer's creation, and the artifex whose rogue copy she acquires; however, her life and training actually progress through the sustained history of interactions between herself



and the woman reading the Primer's text, a ractor named only Miranda. Miranda channels all her considerable talent into racting with Nell's Primer; "[i]n Nell's case, virtually all the racting was done by the same person" (333), leading to a singular bond between them. When Miranda decides to find her virtual daughter, she goes to the Drummers, picking up where Hackworth left off – but not as designer. Miranda becomes the next vessel for the Seed's eventual compilation.

What becomes very clear as the narratives progress is that its visions of futurity all depend on and are built through the subordinated mediumship of the female body. The new regime of the Seed requires the sacrifice of women Drummers: each woman first becomes the site of a compilation of nanite development through multiple inseminations while unconscious, then she catches fire, her body combusting in the alchemical fires of the nanites' transfigurations. Her liquefied ashes are imbibed by the Drummers to start the next round of nanite recombinations. This devolution of medium into message, in a far too literal sense, simultaneously denies the woman her intrinsic personhood while reducing her to a conduit, a passageway between one generation and the next. Thus, before futurity (or subsumed within it), lies the mediumship and concomitant destruction of the female body, or perhaps a reduction of her into her body, then from her body to her reproductive organs. This does not seem like a future so much as a literalization of a well-trodden epistemological path, as yet another woman is rendered into ash for the sake of some future she will never enter. This hardly seems like a desirable outcome, yet the development of the Seed remains a primary narrative goal.

## The Primer and the Seed: Undifferentiation and Appropriated Bodies

The Primers were created by a New Atlantan Equity Lord for “the systematic encouragement of subversiveness” (*The Diamond Age* 331), attempting to induce subversive tendencies into a phyle grown dangerously complacent. Creativity and integrity together in the service of the phyle would be the hallmark of Lord Alexander Chung-Sik Finkle-McGraw’s success in this Victorian transformation. Throughout the novel, the Primer functions as a technological tool to shape young girls into sociological seed-bombs: it calls forth, shapes, and tests its reader with the avowed purpose of rendering her into a mediation between Seedborne desires and social utopias. The strong relationship between the girls and their Primers brings about a minutely engineered mutual implication as the Primer re-reads each girl’s reality back to her as origin myths and adventure quests, recreating her lived experience through its own preset terms. The Primer functions as a technological tool to shape young girls into sociological seed-bombs: it calls forth, shapes, and tests its reader with the avowed purpose of rendering her into a mediation between Seedborne desires and social utopias. But of course, those utopias form without any input from those girls.

The Primers’ colonial aspects become apparent through their deployment as a deliberate sociological experiment. In her supple analysis of *The Diamond Age*, literary scholar Sherryl Vint emphasizes the aspects of social formation and deliberate programming which form the Primer’s ideological core. For Vint, Nell’s Primer must form her as a subject within the Victorian phyle before she can become anything else. To

do so, it must detach her from her these influences, notably her brother, Harv, and embed her within New Atlantan mores and language, prompting a bifurcation in Nell's social capacities, and preparing the way for her eventual acceptance into Miss Matheson's Academy. As Vint puts it, "[t]he primary role of the *Primer* is thus not to instil the knowledge of cultural archetypes into the young girl who reads it, but to shape her subjectivity along the lines of the values embodied in the neo-Victorian response to those archetypes which is embedded in its programming" (142). Lord Finkle-McGraw's desire for social engineers thus results in a total takeover of Nell's futures for the sake of what I can only call his scientific curiosity; he studies Nell's progress as if she were an exciting variant on his control, otherwise known as his granddaughter Elizabeth. I cannot but note that Nell's probable futures all improve considerably with her removal from an abusive home with no maternal protection. But the world into which she enters is hardly safe; the training at Miss Matheson's school includes severe indoctrinations, while her new home life remains permeated with violence, even if none of it is currently directed at her. Nell's life may have drastically improved, but her futures now all revolve around New Atlantis and its eventual role in Shanghai/Pudong.

Also, Lord Finkle-McGraw's knowledge of the *Primer* as experimental tool is incomplete. There exists a whole other set of copies, created by John Hackworth for Dr. X under duress, and given to him for the education of the abandoned baby girls he raised in huge identical creches, and for whom he wishes to secure the training and genius inherent in Hackworth's great design. Dr. X names these girls, numbering a quarter-

million, his “little mice” (*The Diamond Age* 152), and having intervened to save them from starvation and exposure, seeks to educate them as Hackworth-level engineers for the purposes of the Celestial Kingdom. But when Hackworth creates these altered Jade Books, he includes a time-delayed trick, a hack which places the users at the service of an unknown Queen:

At this point, John Percival Hackworth, almost without thinking about it and without appreciating the ramifications of what he was doing, devised a trick and slipped it in under the radar of the Judge and Dr. X and all those other people in the theatre, who were better at noticing tricks than most other people in the world. “While I’m at it, if it please the court, I can also,” Hackworth said, most obsequiously, “make changes in the content so that it will be more suitable for the unique cultural requirements of the Han readership. But it will take some time.” (162)

Hackworth’s trick, simply put, connects the two books in an uneven relation of power. By linking the Jade Books to the ending of Nell’s Primer, Hackworth has placed the Mouse Army at the service of the girl using the Primer. Nell first encounters the Mouse Army as footprints within the pages of the Primer, and calls them to her during the siege of Shanghai using a sigil of crossed keys and a seed, an image culled from the Primer itself. The Mouse Army and its Jade Books embody a strange tension between the ideologies of liberatory alterity (a mass movement of powerful, tech-enhanced girls) and the restrictive forces used to achieve those alterities. Each little mouse’s initial salvation by Dr. X seems

a mercy, yet her futures are restored with one hand and taken away with another. Instead of being raised to find their own agential alterities, the Mouse Army is taught to take its component parts (a unit of one little girl) and meld them, like the nanites' rod logic components, into functional operational groups (a base unit of five), who work together like a machine, expressing the dual visions Dr. X and John Hackworth have for them. Whatever autonomy these girls might have had is removed from them through their upbringing, in parallel with their initial abandonment. The dual training provided by the Jade Books gives them life but also renders them as incarnations of someone else's coded convictions.

Greta Ayu Niu's article on *The Diamond Age* focuses on the imperialist aspects of the fusion between Chinese girl and Hackworth-hacked Primer in the novel. Her analysis explicitly indexes the orientalist and dehumanizing parallels between tiny mechanical knowledge vectors and tiny indoctrinated Chinese girls, raised in hivelike ships. As Niu describes them, "These girls are unindividuated cyborgs whose value lies primarily in their immense numbers, their reverence for authority, and their fanatical devotion to their primers (suggesting a cheeky reference to Mao's Little Red Book)" (Niu 18). The cyborg, as Donna Haraway has said several times, is both non-innocent (of dubious multiple provenances and implicated within them all) and a war machine, with the full weight of interpellation within nationalist and militarized systems shadowing her every armor-powered move. The cyborg's dual origins render her monstrous, illegitimate, illegible – and, importantly for Dr. X, manufacturable through control of at least one of her points of

origin. The Mouse Army's massed but artificial adoration, Hackworth's little trick, fuels Nell's permanent establishment at the head of a new phyle, "a new ethnic group of sorts" (*The Diamond Age* 446). Mouse Army and Barbarian Queen both acknowledge their dual heritages, synthetically yet organically linked through their involvement with the Primer, the machine birth. But even Niu's astute reading does not entirely account for the vanishing body, whose compliance to others' necessities has been programmed into her from the beginning of her life.

The possibilities of nanotechnology dwindle to scarcity and sameness in the Feed. Its primary technological expression, the Matter Compiler or MC, demonstrates the total functionalization of all bodies within the *The Diamond Age*. The Feed values bodies for their compositional content, a rapacious futurity tinged a faint soylent green. While this stance is never quite elucidated in the novel, it is implied every time the MCs' function is explained. In seeming contrast, Dr. X introduces the Seed as the dream of a new era, a representation of epistemological difference from the productivity and repetition of the Feed. In his article on the novel, John Johnston considers these two models of influence and interaction – the top-down hierarchies of the Feed, and the creative distribution of the Seed – to be the major conflict driving the novel, as well as the source of disruption at its ending. As he puts it, "Stephenson brings *The Diamond Age* to a close just this side of the cataclysmic changes augured by the collective movement she has so meticulously detailed. In so doing, he allows the thematic oppositions between Nell's individualistic western perspective and the 'hive mind' culture of the Net, between the highly centralized

hierarchical culture of the west and the distributed collective mode of existence exemplified by the Chinese, to remain unresolved” (234). Johnson’s insinuation of the Seed-Feed dichotomy into the extant tensions between phyles within Shanghai is both cogent and crucial. However, both versions of the novel’s speculative futures depend on the appropriation of female subject-bodies into impersonal structures of knowledge transmission, pre-empting the autonomous determination of experience from the woman as ractor-function and denying the girl authorship of her own experience. Johnson’s astute analysis of the warring colonial dynamics at work within the narrative parallels the novel’s own gradual resolution of all its myriad voices, leaving off at the moment Nell rescues Miranda.

The ability to effectuate wholesale changes in distributions of wealth, tied to a network of productive centers instead of a single main line, seem to promise an equitable redistribution of wealth. This is the promise of the Seed. The Seed is endlessly fetishized throughout the novel, its representation as desirable nanotech-mediated futurity anchored through its sexualization, as Hackworth discovers:

Images of a nanotechnological system, something admirably compact and elegant, were flashing over his mind’s eye. . . . The detailed images of atoms and bonds had been replaced, in his mind’s eye, by a fat brown seed hanging in space, like something in a Magritte painting. A lush bifurcated curve on one end, like buttocks, converging to a nipplike point on the other. (Stephenson 305)

The sexualization is no mistake, since the tribes of Drummers who are Hackworth's biomediated compilers use sexual contact to ensure as much recombinant activity as possible among nanite populations worldwide. This fetishization requires the continued wavering presence of specific bodies, whose importance lies in their ability to transmit without impediment, their ability to mediate knowledge. Within this fetishized gaze, even the Primer becomes subservient to the sexualized Seed.

This sexualization links the Seed's development to its nanotechnological underpinnings. As part of a larger consideration of nanotechnology and its implications in historical, theoretical, and narrative-building senses, theorist Colin Milburn takes Stephenson's novel as a parable of posthumanist body-alchemy, to be vigorously encouraged and simultaneously minutely controlled. Milburn's analyses of speculative narratives concerned with nanotechnology focus on its reinventions of corporeality, while holding onto variants of subjective experience from which to encounter, enter, and shape these new embodiments. Nanotechnological narratives reveal human bodies as sites of controlled, willed transfigurations through destabilized skin boundaries. However, Milburn's analysis of the posthumanist possibilities of ambiguous bodies rests on their putative exaltation, as well as their undifferentiated corporeal interrelation. For Milburn, not only these nanonarrativized bodies but the subjects within them have become unbounded, "putting [their] surfaces and interiors into constant flux. Posthuman bodies conditioned by nanovision are therefore always individuated experiences of embodiment in an endless array of possible bodily conformations, where all skins and membranes are



fair game” (51).<sup>19</sup> Milburn also discusses nanotechnology’s destructive capabilities in the same vein, surface and interior melded into mist or slime, the rendering-down of all bodies into an undifferentiated mass of organic matter as the tiny machines disrupt cell membranes.

This nanotechnological symbiogenesis seems initially desirable in its powers for self-healing and the transformation of self into a distinct other. However, that transformation (or transcendence) seems to either require or at least result in perpetration of those transformations upon an unwilling or unaware other body. That is, nanonarratives are a dream of cellular-level agential control over bodily activity, and its transcendental ecstasies occur in the minuteness of this control. But even extant models of these relations do not posit such agential control over proliferations in body ecologies. For example, the non-nanotechnological human body already contains subsets of microbial complexity; whether it be intestinal flora or mitochondria, or even (as biologist Lynn Margulis provocatively states) the flu virus, the embodied subject remains unaware of her or his many corporeal ecologies, even as s/he may be deeply affected by their presence in his or her body.<sup>20</sup> Milburn’s proposal reveals a body presented as total and invisible control, valuable in its raw matter. With its reversals and erasures of age, sex,

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19 This mediatory flux between surface and interior is replicated in Karen Beckman’s analysis of the spiritual medium’s expulsion of ectoplasm, a substance apparently approximating human skin (see Beckman 85-86). Beckman links the medium’s expulsion to the flickering presence and thin membranes required for the advent of film, claiming an odd horizontal inheritance between the pellicular film and the uncanny ectoplasmic skin, both “issu[ing] from the deep interiors of the female body” (Beckman 86).

20 Recent research into human gut microbiomes (intestinal flora) detects potential microbial influence in everything from the expected metabolic and digestive areas to more provocative claims involving emotional well-being. I think the research is not yet well-developed enough to make important claims.

race, face, these atomic undifferentiations may be a part of what fuels nanotechnology's persistence in speculative narratives.

Vanishing into Mediumship:

Many bodies are sacrificed in *The Diamond Age*, to war and conquest, to time and imprisonment, to work and death. But only specific bodies form passageways between desire, action, and result, carrying another person's force and impetus in their own bodies like a bowl carries water. The echoes of *Cryptonomicon*'s encrypted data and submarine fiber optics lines appear in Nell's relationship to her mother, Miranda, whose voice animates the Primer. Miranda channels her talent into Nell through these readings, which increasingly form the bulk of her professional and personal life; she eventually loses her voice and body to the Drummers, searching for Nell.

Miranda is the novel's clearest iteration of mediumship: as a governess, she implanted the dictates of New Atlantis into her reluctant charges, passing on information from some nebulous respectable ether. As a professional ractor, her body and face are filled with nanosites, which allow her considerable artistic and empathic talents range and freedom – within the confines of her scripts. In her excellent discussion of the *The Diamond Age*, literary scholar Michelle Kendrick points out that

The nanotechnology [Miranda installs] creates another 'bodily system' which interlaces with those of the natural body. In this manner, Miranda's body is both invaded and enhanced, thus creating the uneasy balance

between being a subject and – through the technology – creating and projecting a subject out from the natural body.” (Kendrick 69)

This separation between Miranda’s so-called natural or physical body and the nanosite overlay she has installed both invites discussion on the naturalization of the maternal body and indexes a schism between subjectivity and its technological enhancement. As a parallel example, consider Nell’s biological father, Bud, who opens the novel by getting a powerful artillery implant in his head. That scene might find echoes in Miranda’s nanosite implants. However, whereas Bud’s implant is entirely concerned with bolstering his individual militarization, Miranda’s implants waver ambiguously between her customers’ expectations, her own creative artistic expression, the Primer’s shadowy social agendas, and Nell’s subjectivity-building education. This wavering characterizes Miranda’s presence in the novel, and foreshadows her tactical deployment in the nanite arms race for the Seed.

This mediation, the channelling of flows, mirrors the mediation and channelling Karen Beckman discusses throughout her analyses of spiritualism, mediumship, and the “still-birth of film” (61), which she refers to in terms of “vanishing,” her term for the volatile presence of the agential subject within the possessed body of the medium. Beckman’s analysis of this wavering or flickering forms a useful set of frames through which to regard Miranda Redpath’s narrative arc, not least in her self-sacrificial stances with regard to Nell. Working within and through the constraints set for her, her presence

subsumed into the Primer itself, Miranda nevertheless fuels the latter third of the novel. The term of her embodied but wavering persistence is mediumship.

Beckman's vanishing women and Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-woman intersect at two key points: the vanishing/becoming as the precursor to another work, and the specificity of femininity or its perception as a necessary component to the work of vanishing or becoming. These incidences of partiality which carry or channel others from one state to another perform kinds of spectacular transmission which nonetheless privilege the functionality of the carrier, abrogating any right or access to a separate in-itselfness or for-its-ownness on the part of the partial subject. It is in this sense that I consider the connection between Beckman's analysis and Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical apparatus to be a shared apprehension of mediumship: the vanishing woman's volatile bodily spectacle the becoming-intense of a realization of her necessary shunting aside, acknowledgment of her relegation to a channel or tract, even as she refuses to entirely disappear. Far from being benign or irrelevant, both the vanishing woman and the becoming-woman display a dangerous partiality: as Beckman puts it, "[v]anishing will always be haunted by the specter of death" (190).

The Victorian era marked the advent of machine transmission of knowledge and middle-class women's fascination with spiritualism. Technological advances, occurring in the public sphere and based in military or industry, coincided with uncanny forms of spiritualist access to the results of British imperialist ventures (like the Franklin expedition) as well as to the afterlives of the dead. In her introduction to *Vanishing*

*Women*, an examination of the woman's body in Victorian stage magic, spiritualism, photography, and early film, Beckman posits that the beginning of media studies lies in the spectacle of the woman's body in the process of disappearance: "*Vanishing Women* grows out of stage magic's complicated relationship with the spectacular body of illusion, one that hovers somewhere between the real and the imagined body, a body that the medium of film inherits from its magical forefathers" (8). The British woman's body, tied to simultaneous vanishing and excess, spectacularly recreates a fantastic incorporation of violent vanishing, only to reverse it through her unharmed reappearance. For Beckman, the woman's reappearance allows speculative considerations of the violence of her disappearance, but must be considered through the pleasure taken in her vanishings. Juxtaposed against this backdrop is the rise of feminized spiritualist work, both in terms of spiritual travel and communication with the dead. The bodily eradications of women through these spectacles shadows their psychic surplus in late Victorian state imaginaries; the "sites of ontological anxiety" of film and photography, spirit media both, only allow visions of vanishing to become widely perpetrated across the state (14). Beckman's text seeks to "expose these elisions [between vanishings], rendering partially visible not only the moments when violent eradications take place in the name of vanishing but the mechanisms by means of which these instances of violence try to render themselves invisible" (9).

Beckman is careful to construct her major theoretical term, vanishing or wavering, as an in-process reversability: the medium's female body and feminized presence

disappear and reappear with worrying unpredictability and inexplicability, penetrating a bodily and spiritual elsewhere inaccessible to her viewers and keepers. Her evanescent presence-absence demonstrates for Beckman a kind of volatile agential *absence*, whose sexuality is alien (ectoplasm as vaginal secretions, for example) and therefore hostile (the vanishing bodies of colonialism can be denied through the woman's spectacular reappearance on stage). Beckman argues that these female mediums, almost always young and under the control of a male mesmerist or, later, male doctor, signalled the advent of media studies through their uncannily malleable bodies, their ectoplasmic extrusions, and their oracular visions. Beckman's analysis links Victorian census data, which placed women at a slight numerical advantage over men in England, the colonial uprisings in India, the beginnings of department store mannequins, the emergence of cinema, and *L'escamotage d'une dame en personne vivante* (the vanishing lady magic trick) through what she argues is their central preoccupation: the inexplicable, often male-dominated vanishing and return of a woman or girl's physical form and/or conscious self. As Beckman puts it, "Only in magic do the hidden connections between surplus women, imperial expansion, and the fantasy of disappearance become clear" (21).

Mediumship – the vehicle for the transmission of knowledge – drives the history and origination of technological development in British modernities. Beyond the intersubjective mediations which occupy current new media theorists, Beckman's text inserts the specter of the vanishing woman into the machine itself – a necessary hardware component, even as she vanishes into her transmissions. The spiritualists of the late 19th

century afford Beckman a valuable insight into this larger process of feminization, embodiment, and mediation: to perform their mediumship, they must vanish from themselves, leaving their bodies as empty conduits for the expression of spectral matter, and travelling as disembodied spirits toward otherwise-unreachable imperialist geographies. The objectified woman's ambivalent presence-absence becomes a location of potential resistance through her wavering, her transitional status a continuing refutation of her objectification, even as she demonstrates a profound ontological instability. In Beckman's word, she is vanishing, neither present nor yet entirely gone.

The specters of Beckman's source materials haunt *The Diamond Age*, hidden until sought, but prolific throughout the novel once envisioned, although difficult to draw out: like Beckman's evanescent subjects, "the vanishing lady can never be exposed because she is never fully present" (Beckman 69). Miranda's ractor-status is symptomatic of the pervasive transmission of information through bodily tracts, blood, and orifices throughout *The Diamond Age*, closely tied to the immolation of the woman sacrificed in the fire of Hackworth's alchimerical Seed. In contrast, Lawrence Waterhouse, the cryptanalyst from Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon* whose mastery of code is a physical exaltation linked directly to sex, is described first through his equally physical mastery of sound production. Unlike Waterhouse, Nell's experiences with the Primer contain the traces of forcible invasions, her linguistic reduction to passageway apparent at every level, even as she supposedly learns to program like an artifex. Instead of Waterhouse's explosive ejaculation or even Hackworth's "dream of unsustainable pleasure" (293), Nell

uses the Primer's nanotechnological engineering lessons to escape her body during her imprisonment and rape. It is difficult not to read Nell's determined engineering descriptions – "the gears meshed and the bearings spun" (430) – as an alchemized transmutation of her rapists' grotesque abuse of her body.

According to Beckman, the exploitative sexual turn was already present in the medium's cultural formation. Together with the medicalized scrutiny of the medium's bodily orifices before, after, and during her performances, the medium's wavering presence took on a distinctly sexual, spectacular edge. It is in the context of Beckman's analyses that I discuss the becoming-woman of Deleuze and Guattari, to analyze both Nell's gradual apparition as a product of Hackworth's Primer, and Miranda's role as the medium for both Nell and for the Alchemist's final transmutation. If Nell is the avatar of the Seed itself, she is also the girl, who loses her body to society before all others, and whose loss leads the way for all other becomings through her functionalization. The sexualized presexuality of her body, its mutability and its removal from her, are crucial to the analysis of Nell's peculiar mediumship throughout the novel.

In the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the contingent subject constellates, then escapes, rejecting any singularity or teleology in a series of flights or escapes. As they put it in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "[t]o become is not to progress or regress along a series. . . . Becoming produces nothing other than itself" (238), a proliferation of unpredictable changes. And the becoming-woman is the choke-point or first becoming for all others: this initial flow, the passing into a non-totalizing minoritarian stance, mediates



all other forms of becoming, which must first pass through its primal, malleable post-ontological stance. “It is becoming itself that is a girl,” say Deleuze and Guattari, and if this is the case, then the becoming-woman of *The Diamond Age* is not just linked to the vanishing woman of mediation through their shared wavering presence-absence within their own functionalized bodies.

The girl’s attractiveness to the theorist is in her newness. Deleuze and Guattari theorize this newness as always present in the girl’s invisibility and disembodiment, her existence bounded by the schism between inhabiting her body and her body’s being taken away from her. Girls’ bodies are prized for their ability to become, as Deleuze and Guattari phrase it, and can thus conveniently embody changeable ideologies: “Sexuality, any sexuality, is a becoming-woman, in other words, a girl” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 277). When Deleuze and Guattari link sexuality to the becoming-woman, they do so through the girl, a move which relates her sexuality, her duration, and her body to her minoritization, through the loss of her body to society. Feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti, a careful analyst of Deleuze’s thought, nonetheless skewers this formation by pointing out that “one cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never controlled” (117). Braidotti relies on philosopher Luce Irigaray’s analysis of the body without organs to note a conflation of this deconstructive position with an historic erasure of women’s embodied subjectivities: “the notions of loss of self, dispersion, and fluidity are all too familiar to women” (Braidotti 116), not least because they occur as the obverse of the indubitably

present masculinized humanist subject Deleuze is attempting to evade through the becoming-girl.

By way of comparison, Beckman's analysis of the vanishing woman's agential presence, in the midst of her vanishing, uncovers its central tension: instead of the absent girl, this woman persistently refuses to entirely disappear. Instead, she has a partial agency expressed through the tension between her vanishing and reappearing body, her wavering voice, and the inherent tension between these expressions of presence and mediating absences. Beckman's analysis is precise and subtle; however, the implications of her argument might occur in the continued but derelicted presence of the maternal body and the sexualized girl in the context of *The Diamond Age*. Could vanishing ever be a viable indefinite process? If there is no possible reappearance, the woman will eventually disappear; if the reappearance requires another woman, these women's bodies must be interchangeable. If the medium's vanishing is meant instead to index the impossibility of her persistence against an array of social and personal agents, then Beckman is outlining something much more ambiguous than a political stance.

However, if we consider the becoming-girl and becoming-woman in light of Beckman's vanishing and Braidotti's concerns, we find (quixotically) a useful analytic tool: the presence of a becoming-woman constructed and/or perceived in this way indexes her functionalization as well. Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic subject, "conceived in terms of a multiplicity of impersonal forces" (Braidotti 112), is here constrained away from the proliferation of differences and multiplicities which ought to

result from becoming, engineered toward a goal set by the Equity Lords of New Atlantis and the inscrutable mandarins<sup>21</sup> of the Celestial Kingdom. When applied to the understanding of agentially compromised people, the becoming-woman can build a way toward questioning the necessity of their functionalization. This double-indexing of the impossibility of escaping functionalization allows analysis of its instantiation in both Nell and Miranda's bodies. That all becomings pass through this initial becoming recognizes its functionality, index and indictment in a single gesture. This move, the indication of function occupying the place of a specifiable self, no matter how subject to preextant forces and exertion of other flows, spectacularly displays the high stakes of this position. Its ineluctable primacy also brackets the becoming-woman as function, necessary to all other becomings, yet not ever an agent in its own right. Thus, the necessity and the primacy of the becoming-woman double-index it as a function, rendering its [impossible status] non-transparent. It is in this sense that I consider the becoming-woman a recognition of these difficult, partially involuntary positionings on the part of minoritized subjects by Deleuze and Guattari. The construction of their apparatus forces a recognition of use, even as the apparatus is deployed.

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21 The inscrutability and incomprehensibility of Dr. X and the Celestial Kingdom, as a phyle, are exaggerated by a deliberate neo-Confucian turn that is marked to the point of satire. Since the Seed, which Dr. X claims is the only correct course for the Celestial Kingdom, is demonstrably linked to the Feed, symbol of New Atlantan superiority, I am inclined to interpret the Confucianism as a deliberately backhanded joke about the ways in which the two phyles really are similarly motivated and constructed, in the face of the characters' politely vehement assertions. In this context, Dr. X's raising of the Mouse Army acquires even more dubious weight, as their filial devotion to him is eventually overset by Hackworth's "little trick" in the Jade Books. This trick, of course, binds them all to a blonde queen, who acknowledges her place as their leader: "One moment her life had been a meaningless abortion, and the next it all made glorious sense" (Stephenson 436-7). That Nell's leadership is acquired through their shared mediation within the Primer is something all the girls acknowledge with their bows, "not . . . a Chinese bow or a Victorian one but something they'd come up with that was in between" (436).

From Stephenson's novel, I would argue that when viewed as analytical tools for the double-indexing of sexualized functionalization, the woman's sacrificed body is the necessary precursor of any true creative alterity, and the vanishing woman and the becoming-woman become not only useful but valuable in themselves, the violences against ontological value and bodily integrity rendered glaringly non-transparent. Instead of attempting to twist these positions into potential escapes from the domination and objectification of women's bodies, joining the becoming-woman to the concept of mediumship through the flickering of self-presence and the channelling of a dominant other allows an understanding of the becoming-woman as a functionalization of the girl. Applying this analysis to the novel reveals the Drummers' ritual as a form of becoming-intense predicated on the conflation between the becoming-woman and the becoming-use-object of the woman, and through her, re-rendering the world. The transmission of nanites through repeated sexual usage renders all the bodies so affected through sexualized function; as well, for all the nanites to combine, the final components for the transmutation must be collected into the woman's vaginal tract.<sup>22</sup> An understanding of the becoming-woman as an indictment of women's destabilized process from agential subject to object of use allows us to read the various forms of nanite transmission and the sexualized compilation of the Seed as of a kind with the violence directed at Nell and Miranda. As for the Drummers, each specific body exists for its nanites, channelling the

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22 There is theoretically the possibility of rectal transmission for this final recombination or compiling into the next nanite generation, which begins with the ritual ingestion of the immolated Drummer's remains. However, neither one of the Drummers' rituals described use men as this final receptacle. The repetition of sexualized functionality proposes a deliberate specificity which the text does not allow us to ignore.

various desires of their unknowable others even as they seemingly flicker on and off in relation to each other, in pursuit of their commonality, a kind of transhumanist collective coopted to the Alchemist's hidden, intimate directives.

The becoming-woman is a contentious point, one to which Deleuze and Guattari return again and again, looping in and out as they trace lines of flight, attempting to use their proposed analytic structure while not inhibiting the actual becomings of unknown subjects. They are only partially successful in this flight. Feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti characterizes the becoming-woman and the BwO as redundant in light of the feminized body's delimitation, in parts, as the opening of a way toward an unknowable other, a medium subject to analysis with no reciprocity. Several feminist scholars have proposed that the Body without Organs is actually nothing other than the historical condition of women's bodies (Braidotti 116), and further pointed out that not only is this placement of the becoming-woman as the ground of all others potentially a reappropriation of the woman as the ground of philosophical thought, but also that the becoming-woman of woman may not even be a viable prospect. After all, "one cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never controlled" (NS 117). While Braidotti's summation of Deleuze and Guattari's theory may be somewhat overstated here, her contention remains valid: if the becoming-woman is valuable because of her extreme malleability, then how does this stance differ from the continuing subjection of women to forces outside her body, which she must continually regiment in order to control?

## O Brave New World: Breaking the Surface, Twice Over

When Nell saves Miranda, the novel ends.

Miranda's final immolation is a pyre Nell averts through that savage, book-ending kiss, giving her the counter-nanosite designed to restore her to her own body, outside of the Drummers' group trance. This "wet net" or tranced relation allows venereal transmission of the nanites across all members of the group, with the eventual recombined nanites all collected in the body of the sacrificed woman, who must first be impregnated with all the data, then turned to ash and reingested by the other Drummers in order to propagate the new information outward through the group for the next round of development and recompiling. This ending is juxtaposed against the beginning of Nell's life outside of the Primer's reach, and Nell's first desire outside of its narrative is expressed through her transgressive kiss: "not a soft brush of the lips but a savage kiss with open mouth, and she bit down hard as she did it, biting through her own lips and Miranda's so that their blood mingled" (455). The transfer of nanites propagated through their shared blood mimics the sexual transmission of previous nanites; this event proffers a nanotech vision of genetic inheritance, an interruption passed (of course) from daughter to mother.

However, this reverse nanite inheritance is the culmination of Nell's physical dereliction since her passage from child to woman. The potentially liberatory nanite flow is required to save Miranda from a very literal physical combustion, the result of her being the matrix and apex of compilation for the Seed. The adult bodies immolated at the

apex of the Drummers' ritual are both women, specifically because of the mechanical necessities of compilation (penetration, ejaculation, the vaginal tract), which give rise to the phoenix-like birth of technological process from the ashes of her immolated body. Also, Nell's host of nanite antibodies to the Drummers' mass intoxicated infection are a result of Nell's rape during her sojourn as a prisoner of the Fists; Nell was able to reverse-engineer the necessary antibodies only because of her previous forced exposures. Significantly, the novel only depicts women in those roles: the female body must die for the Seed's story to really begin, her presence vanishing into "the smooth muscles of the tract in question executing their spinal algorithm" (293). The pattern of nanite spread, already venereal and sexualized, is thus also revealed as propagated through gendered violence. These terrible antecedents to all imagined futurities must be obscured in the narrative so that a new phyle, half-New Atlantan and half-Celestial Kingdom, can carry the future into something resembling newness. In this reading, the advent of all possible utopias occurs not in spite of but through women's vanishing bodies; therefore, these vanishings constitute the grounds of any possible becoming. Reading the novel's ending through these lenses renders all futurities in instrumentalized terms, in which the woman's body has the same flickering presence-absence then as it does now.

I propose another, less certain way to read the novel's ending: as a sudden silence before the unknowable future, one in which the mother and daughter meet and protect each other, in the body, for the first time. In this alternate reading, when Nell and Miranda first touch the novel bifurcates: Nell pulling her mother up toward the surface, leading to

a rebirth from the sea into the world, can be inventively read as a reimagination of mother-daughter relations in the novel.

The first reading, in which they break the surface and find nothing changed, returns the reader to the bells as a reiteration of the novel's beginning, remanding the woman to her function as mediating receptacle between now and the future. This reading privileges the technological birthing of the new nanotechnologies as an involuntary physiological mechanism, before all other actions, and possibly taking over the functions of speech and maternal relation.

The other, more difficult interpretation, rests on the blankness and speed of that ending: Nell saves Miranda, then drags her half-conscious body up toward the surface, kicking toward the watery light on the shores opposite Shanghai. A thousand little sisters guide their passage, opening the way before them; the narration leaves them before they can break the surface. This second interpretation argues that they cannot break the surface without emerging into an utterly changed world. Beckman's wavering oscillations of agency and mediation, patterns of functionalization interrupted by flashes of the vital self, become apparent in the girls' and women's grasping hands: who saves whom? Considered in light of this oscillation, the abruptness of the ending makes a kind of structural or even speculative sense. The new world opens at the moment the bodies break through the surface tension, the salty water transformed from the Primer's mythical origin to the birth of a corporeal relation, between Nell and Miranda, and Nell and all her little sisters. Therefore, the novel *must* end before she breaks the surface, becoming



birthed into a world she has never before seen, not only beyond the Primer, but beyond her earliest memories of life itself.

It is, with some difficulty, possible to argue that Nell wrests back control of Miranda's body and her own at the culmination of their dual sacrifices. Clarity in this argument depends on reading Nell's desires and motivations clearly, which the narratives of nanotechnology render impossible: by the end of the novel, the social forces regulating her actions flow quite literally through her veins. However, a less-stringent, yet no less intriguing waver occurs between Nell's first sighting of the lights beneath the seas and her burdened re-emergence from the Drummers' lair. It is instructive to consider the ambiguity or muddiness not as a mixture or fleshy emulsion (that organic mush toward which some nanotech narratives lead), but instead as a kind of oscillation, very quick, between or across several states. A kind of wavering, a fading in and out, with all the force of Karen Beckman's analysis of the vanishing woman's persistent presence behind the term. Within this tension lies the seed of a beginning, the opening up (and closing away) of new possible relations between affiliated bodies, a change of states beginning when their bodies break the surface of the sea.

But what kind of certainty could precipitate this oscillation's collapse? Tracing the corporeal and affective links generates an inflection, an unclear signal, tied in with the maternal mouth and body, but also reveals the extent of Miranda's incorporation: she cannot speak her own words to the child Nell, but must rely on inflection, "[selling] the line with every scrap of talent and technique she had" (184). This is a significant blow to

the possible opening up of alternate worlds from Nell's recovery of Miranda. However much Miranda's functionalized maternal longing for Nell troubles the commodity-based relations of her actor status, her maternal relation with Nell still takes place entirely in the realm of language – specifically, in a script written and developed by and for others. Perhaps Miranda and Nell's affiliation has always already taken place in terms of the symbolic logic which denies them bodily relation except on patriarchal terms. After all, Miranda's devotion to the Primer expresses itself in her perfect, scripted readings of someone else's words, as she channels the will and purpose of both the artifex who created it and the Equity Lord who commissioned it. In this reading, the ending of the novel circles back to the start: “up on the mountain they could hear the bells of the cathedral ringing” (455), in clear relation to the bells “ringing changes up on the mountain” (1) as Nell's father Bud, unaware of his newborn daughter's existence, moves toward his capital crime.

Through a quixotic deployment of its nanite narratives, *The Diamond Age* subtly participates in the contradictions of vertical inheritance by widening the ways in which material knowledge transfer may occur. By having Nell save Miranda through an exchange of blood, the novel privileges a kind of horizontal transfer over vertical models of inheritance, and deliberately demonstrates the agential decisions accompanying devoted affiliation. When Deleuze and Guattari state that “If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation” (238), they could be describing

the process of building both the new phyle of Nell and the Mouse Army, and consolidating the reversal of a paternalistic inheritance mechanism held in place by the Seed and the Feed. But where Deleuze and Guattari's requirement of a mediated third to effectuate the symbiosis between two unrelated terms leaves the terms of the mediation unspecified, Miranda and Nell are themselves the mediators of their regard for each other. In this case the dissociation between agency and purpose, the vanishing of the body into functionality, indicate a rare opening in the competing phyles' crossed plans – one which should be filled by the desires of these controlling phyles, but which is instead coopted and traversed for the sake of the artificial kinships thus engendered. Read this way, Miranda's loving presence is the key to Nell's own desires, the one key even King Coyote cannot bequeath to her.

#### Conclusion:

Nell and Miranda have been trained toward specific activities, in a power struggle between transformative social forces, yet their longing for each other becomes the main factor determining the final pages. The novel's concern with the disposition of the female body splits along axes of woman and child, but while the girl holds the potential for enormous social transformation, the woman is overdetermined by her body's use in the building of new and old technological structures. A clear if tired sexualization of the adult female body is in no way undermined by the Drummers' supposedly transformational "wet net" gestalt.

Yet the ethical valences of this asymptotic approach can be disordered by a subject who willingly relinquishes her claim to totality, who decides instead to let others process through her toward some other, barely perceptible purpose. From within the midst of other forces, desires, and long-held colonial or dominion-based plans, both Nell and Miranda emerge as having loved each other back from the brink of death, to go on together toward some unimaginable other life. Since the early part of the novel, Nell has been carrying the seed of the Primer's philosophy and teaching within her, unexpressed to the world outside her housing; the abuse and the training combined rush through Miranda and emerge as a revelation: it is time to leave. Since the earliest chapters Miranda has chosen the roles of ractor, the role of reader, the role of mother – with all the pre-extant power of the forces moving her into a position of mediation, a channel between others. Yet the outcome of Miranda's mediumship is Nell searching for her mother with the Drummers under the sea, calling to her until she is found. In the midst of all the intensities and flows moving through and around them, Miranda's earlier act of mediation has resulted in a daughter whose first act, after the end of the Primer, is to save her mother's life: a final, perhaps even unforeseen transformation of her previous programming, despite King Coyote's approving confirmation. Without negating the dissolution and abnegation of their functionalization, without subsuming Miranda's own consumption within her maternal desire or Nell's slow indoctrination into a specifically desirable social mutagen, still they move toward each other through their dual mediumships, without hesitation, once they have found the way.

### Chapter 3. No Place Like Home: Minor Transnationalisms in Jia Zhangke's *The World* (世界).<sup>23</sup>

This chapter addresses *The World*, a film by PRC sixth generation auteur Jia Zhangke. My analysis focuses on the strategic deployment of dialects of Mandarin to index a lack of cohesion between The World Park's ideological stances and its workers' social conditions, and posits that it overlaps the concerns of Shu-mei Shih's reformulation of Chinese Studies along lines of minority, dispersal, and dialect, which she terms "Sinophonality." The World Park's use of *putonghua* proclaims both social equality within China, and the primacy of that Chinese reality over all national others through its to-scale renderings of worldwide landmarks as visible markers of state control. The digital encounters between the workers and The World Park render the workers as participants in this fantastic nationalism. The imposition of The World Park's ideological stance is troubled by two relations within the film: the schism between visual representation and actuality, figured in counterfeit goods and to-scale models, and the affective link between workers Anna and Xiao Tao, who do not share a common language yet are clearly communicating a shared desolation. This critique is embodied through Tao's halting relationship with Anna, contrasted with Taisheng's manufactured relationship with Qun, and sharply underlined by the film's ambiguous end. In a gesture elaborated in his subsequent works, Jia's film conflates documentary and auteur techniques to address the synthetic creation of utopic realities, and the suffering required to enact them. My analysis concludes with a close reading of the film's ambiguous ending, which suggests that the only way to escape such all-encompassing national boundaries, as signalled by The World Park's circular monorail, may in fact be death.

The power of language is made most concrete through the complications of the spoken word in Jia Zhangke's 2004 film *The World*, where *putonghua* vies with *Shanxi* dialect. In *The World*, this sense of nostalgic monoethnicity manifests itself in the commonplace assumptions of *putonghua*—Normal Speech or Standardized Mandarin—as default language, not a dialect or even a conscious choice. However, the linguistically unified ideological nation demonstrates a self-evident artificiality, which emphasizes in turn the constructed nature of national identity and mother tongue. Jia's film

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23 This chapter was previously published as "No Place Like Home: Minor Transnationalism and Sinophone Centers in Jia Zhangke's *The World*." Eds. Flannery Wilson and Jane Ramey Correia. *Intermingled Fascinations: Migration, Displacement and Translation in World Cinema*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. 71-93. It is published here with the permission of Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

demonstrates a subtle understanding of the ways in which China's seemingly monolithic construction fractures when reconsidered through linguistic, temporal, or cultural frames.

World Park Beijing (北京世界公园) is a theme park located on the outskirts of the city, which includes replicas of the world's best-known monuments and identifiable locations. The World Park's tagline, "See the world without leaving Beijing," scrolls across the screen right before the film's own title appears; the contradictions inherent in that single line form a part of the film's significant tensions. Through its judicious uses of *putonghua*, as well as its general critique of The World Park's ideological projection of a unified China, *The World* brings Chineseness itself into question, opening up a way to read or render "Sinophonicity"—Shu-mei Shih's language-based, regionally-inflected designation—within mainland texts. In this way, Shih's powerful mode of redefining peripheries can also account for the contingency and destabilization of Chineseness from within its putative borders by linking minor transnationalisms through linguistic difference to point out alienation from an increasingly fabricated and retrenched center. Reading Sinophonicity within *The World* renders the film's fascination with linguistic separation and surface construction as ironic critiques of the mainland's unity, as expressed in the film's deployment of *putonghua* as a policing of borders (use between strangers) or as official policy (work-related interactions, recorded instructions). The film shows that "Sinophonicity", as an idea, does not have to be decentralized from its own origins. Jia's film problematizes definitions of Chineseness, deepens discussions of geopolitically-based belonging, and complicates linguistic identification. Yet the film also

cannot be read in simple allegorical terms. It avoids the clichéd visual codes that so often tend to link arthouse films with a recognizable auteur.

A consideration of the relationship between Tao and Anna (two workers at the World Park) will show that words themselves are not the crucial component of their comprehension; rather, it is their shared participation in the brutal economies of The World Park that forms the basis of their mutual understanding. Political allegories couched in language recede within the relationships at The World Park, as uncanny space and bodily destruction combine within the compass of Jia's technical mastery.

This chapter seeks to examine the theme of “dialect as access” within the film, while showing that the film complicates its own reading through the moments of non-linguistic understanding between the women characters. The chapter also discusses Jia's filmic techniques, which govern vision and environment in *The World*. In order to demonstrate the contrived nature of linguistic purity, the fundamental artificiality attending the creation of The World Park's closed system is underscored. The consistent auditory juxtaposition of conversations in dialect and the mechanical recorded instructions in *putonghua* demonstrate this strange half-awareness of artifice as surely as the caravan of security guards, laughingly carrying water bottles across a replica of the Pyramids. Outside of the layered complexity of Sinophonality, Tao and Anna share a deep, linguistically-noncompliant comprehension. This comprehension leads to Tao's shattering understanding of the desperate measures that Anna must go to in order to leave. The doubled language barrier (Anna speaks Russian) is demolished by their shared

experience of profound exploitation and entrapment. Taken together, the film is a series of intimate analyses of individual narratives. The film allows for potentially allegorical readings while simultaneously refuting their limitations through a masterful appropriation and deployment of arthouse filmic techniques.

Jia Zhangke released *The World* in 2004 within the Chinese Film Board's official regulations, and under the auspices of its support. Jia's earlier works, already recipients of considerable critical acclaim outside of China, had till then been available within China only through clandestine means: the brown paper bags, the certain video shops. According to Michael Berry, "[f]or most Chinese audiences, these bootleg VCDs in the little brown paper bags sold at shady video stores throughout China's cities were the only way they could see the films of Jia Zhangke" (7). The titillation of illegitimacy proved a selling point outside of the PRC, but Jia's own rationale for first embracing and then abandoning his "underground" status reflects a prosaic acknowledgment of his then working conditions. In her article on the Chinese underground film movement, Valerie Jaffee writes that "[i]n many ways, the story of Chinese underground cinema has for a long time been a myth ripe for dismantling," a welcome acknowledgment of the polarized designations and easy descriptions still prevalent within marketing campaigns for many of the "Sixth Generation" directors' films. Jaffee presents the designation "Banned in China" in terms of orientalist self-satisfaction: by viewing a film banned by a country perceived to be oppressive and anti-egalitarian, the viewer validates "an updated



version of Orientalism that treasures the idea of Chinese intellectuals as oppressed fighters for whom every act of representation is political.”

This rarefied auteur-activist role finds both traction and friction in Jia’s film. Jia’s stated desire to have his work seen in theaters by members of the Chinese public seems like a desire for legitimation, but despite its official sanction, *The World* is hardly an encomium on the People’s Republic. The film’s demonstration of *putonghua*’s positionality at the centre of an artificial monolinguality—against a backdrop of to-scale replicas—creates a provocative commentary on official policies of linguistic and cultural unity. All of this is wrapped in the superficial glow and dislocated dreamscape of *The World Park*. Jia’s next films overtly address aspects of digital representation, expanding his films’ distinctive meldings of arthouse and documentary techniques to trace the passages between political and personal invention, as well as documentary and fictionalized narrative.

#### Revisioning China, Reinventing the Camera-Eye

The techniques of auteur film form a subtle reiteration of *The World*’s larger critique: just as Shanxi’s presence destabilizes the flattening homogenization of *putonghua*, so does the work of Jia and his cinematographer and sometime associate producer, Yu Likwai. The visual language or “dialect” of the New Wave acts as a form of warning, a guarded but actualized reminder to see beyond the artificial boundaries of the national allegory that are in place within the film. One of these techniques is the

presence and importance of the “deep field” as filmic technique within *The World*. Jia’s camera deliberately refuses the flat screen, imparting depth and dimension to its frames. Right from the beginning, the moving camera records Tao’s loud search for a bandage through the backstage chaos preceding the nightly show, while the deep field behind her moving figure reveals the blank dingy corridors filled with props and costumed dancers.

The film opens as Tao, one of the performers at The World Park, is looking for a bandage. Her near-ritualistic, repetitive request akes the camera from room to room, full of chattering young performers gearing up for the night’s show, their multicultural finery and thick makeup looking very overdone under the yellowing fluorescents. Tao heads around the corner to be greeted with the scene in Fig. 3-1, ersatz costumes and all. Tao’s opening challenge – “Does anyone have a bandage?” – is finally met, and Tao goes around a set of mirrors to find three other women dressed for the show, in Korean hanbok, Chinese qipao, and something Eastern European. Along with Tao’s Indian princess outfit, the women’s easy conversation combined with their stereotypical clothing, form an early taste of The World Park’s peculiar and exploitative synthetics. The women stream out onto the dance floor, and the cool pulse of the Show Soundtrack can be heard as the ambient camera moves through the dancers’ ranks, their glitter and gleam already stripped through the camera’s previous uncovering of backstage life. Each night’s show is like this. It is no accident that the opening scene is about the covering of small, repetitive wounds.



Fig. 3-1. Tao finally locates her bandage. Note the costuming on the women in the shot. All screen captures were taken by me.

Jia has chosen a relentlessly mundane opening, one which reveals both the number of performers and their dilapidated surroundings, bathed in those fluorescents, an acidity which gradually shades into prominence as the film progresses. The acidity of the light and the mundanity of Tao's passage are made more prominent by the distant smiles and closeup- perfect staging of the performance scene: as Tao finally applies her long-sought bandage, Lim Giong's musical score for the nightly performance begins its haunting echo. Meanwhile, the aural atmosphere – always a critical part of Jia's films – is filled with far too many voices to follow. As the lights come up on a pre-2001 New York skyline ("Our Twin Towers are still standing," Taisheng will later note), the ambient-electro score drowns out the performers' cheerful backstage chatter as they stream onto the stage and the lights shift from yellow to gold. The instrumental score, beautiful at first, becomes increasingly hollow with each repetition of the stage show,

looping over and eventually silencing the complicated outworkings of each performer's personal pain. The camera cuts from Tao's exit to the now-empty backstage corridors as Lim's score continues to play; the unglamorous exposed piping and silent artifacts of performance are as much a part of the show as anything happening onstage.

The diptych of Band-Aid and nightly performance passes through Tao's monorail trip, from which the camera seems to digress in order to follow a caravan of chattering guards carrying water pitchers. The camera also records The World Park's slogan, appearing as the caravan crosses the to-scale replicas of the pyramids. The caravan gives way to the title shot's long take: in the foreground, a worker dressed in nondescript clothes carries a huge pack of what seems to be recyclables while the Eiffel Tower replica looms behind him, pasted against the Beijing skyline. He turns to look into the camera, then trudges on, as a recorded voice speaking *putonghua* indistinctly welcomes visitors to The World Park. Meanwhile, the film's title fades out of the sky. The shot is distinctly reminiscent of the landscape paintings of Classical antiquity, even as smog fills the sky, the monorail moves in its endless circle, and the worker trudges out of the shot. The monorail's restless movement provides a disruption of the still camera. The worker's weary movement toward the camera finally puts the Eiffel Tower replica into perspective.

The camera is still throughout the long take, centering the Eiffel Tower replica against the city in what is certainly a gesture toward the French New Wave. But the shot also throws into question both the postivist conception of national belonging as

well as the individual cost of sustaining authenticity. The worker in the foreground is separated from both the Eiffel Tower and The World Park monorail, moving along his entirely flat, foregrounded plane. If there is an intersection or collision, it will not occur in this scene. In contrast with Truffaut's exhilarating and fast-moving cuts, the still camera here relegates the Eiffel Tower to the background. It is not necessarily ironic: the dispossessed citizens of Beijing cannot reach even the illusory glory of pretend-travel which The World Park provides, their passports are not nascent or stolen, but – as visualized in this opening juxtaposition – simply unimaginable. Taken together, these opening scenes function as a brief introduction to the film's major themes: the mass presence of counterfeits, and moreover, the costly individual passages within them.

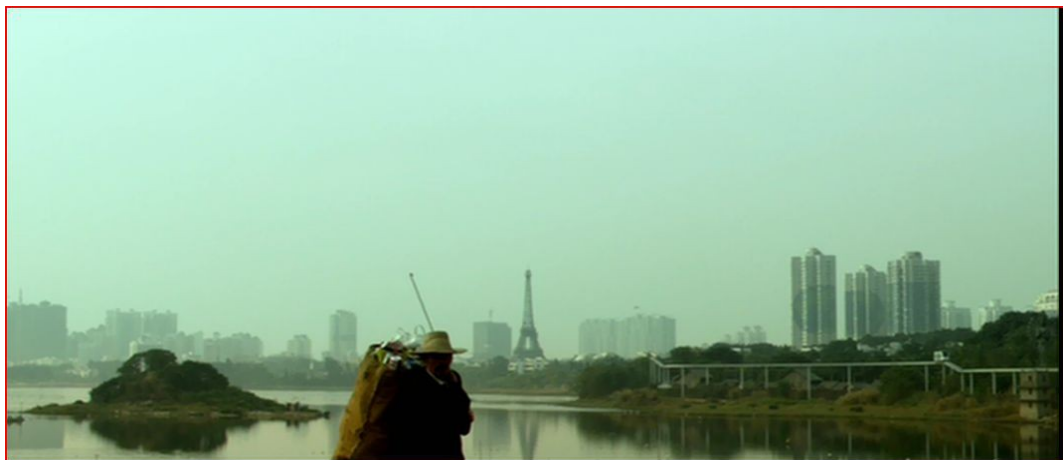


Fig. 3-2. Title Shot. Note the Eiffel Tower replica centered against the smoggy backdrop of Beijing, and the monorail track at the far right.

The filmic techniques used to capture and frame the narratives are themselves worthy of note. Jia Zhangke and Yu Likwai have developed between them a set of methodologies notable for their melding of both amateur and auteur with the documentary. While they

make full use of the middle-distance shots and digital medium of what might be termed an indie aesthetic, Jia's films also contain the sustained deep field, minutes-long takes, and deliberately engineered tonal palettes which lend arthouse films their technical burnish. These are not merely the weary "checklist of 'East Asian art film attributes'", which Shelly Kraicer appends to his critique of foreign film fest programmers, but also another methodology for meaning-making: not just the output of an auteur, but also a narrative and thematic depth which disallows mere shallow readings. In Jia's case, the documentary lens is co-opted for the purposes of arthouse films, rendering the distinction of artificial and actual narratives in the same tones, with the same methods. Thus, Jia levies his own substantial critique of the viewer's expectations of documentary film, requiring an opening up (and, perhaps, a gathering in) of the concept of *vérité* itself.<sup>24</sup>

The tendency to read Chinese films through national allegory has yet to subside, at least in English-language review. This desire to read these films as a commentary on recent historical change is underlined by Jia's avowed close attention to historical significance and social change as a director. Jia's later films have tended closely toward a hybridization of documentary and the dramatic, often to unsettling

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24 Jia's more recent films deliberately confound this differentiation, especially in *24 City*, which intersperses actual workers with well-known actors across a series of often-wrenching interviews. *24 City* sustained critique for this method of presentation from reviewers who considered its melding of acting with interviews to be at best disingenuous. Others praised Jia's provocative restructuring of audience expectation and trust with regard to documentary film, and more fundamentally, with regard to the camera-eye itself. However, it is also possible to read this particular aspect of *24 City* as yet another facet of Jia's fascination with the reconstruction of nostalgic memory, with its dedication to reproduction and performance, and the concomitant impossibility of its perfect capture.

effect. However, seen from another angle, the melding of story and documentary into a single narrative event *emphasizes* the constructed nature of national allegory. The extreme artifactuality<sup>25</sup> of Jia's films, while self-evidently a commentary on China's modernization and urban development, also point out their constructed and agential dimensions, enlarging the nation out of an allegorical and singular state.

This second layer of meaning resides in the deep field of the film's interpretive mesh. We read the film outside of the framework of national allegory by taking the politicized representational power of language performances, technologized interpellation, and globalized simulacra as mediated by the lens itself. The camera's methodologies provide simultaneous reinterpretations through the visual techniques spread by the French and Italian films of the New Wave and Neorealism. Yet beyond the immediate spot-the-reference moments, the film remains insistent that it can and must be taken on its own merit, not as national allegory, but as an arthouse masterpiece.

The documentary techniques perform the same function as the long still take in *The World*: a sense of many lives spilling out through the story, discontinuous with each other, raucous, blaring. The auteuresque cinematic gestures evident throughout Jia's work become a method of requiring complex readings, requiring analysis and commentary, just as poststructuralist theory's specific methodologies required careful attention to the strategic deployment of each new word. The elaborate mise-en-scène for the stage scenes carry the viewer through the initial *éblouissement* in the close

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25 A term I coined by way of Deleuze, originating from a combination of these words: artifact, artifice, fact, artificial.

camerawork to the dreariness of overexposure, the forced smiles and harsh makeup lines, the increasingly claustrophobic close camera, the meaningless dazzle of motion and sound. The most entertainment-focused part of the film is the most choreographed, the least interesting – and the most revealing.

“I think that in Chinese society today there are a lot of moments where what’s going on could be called a show,” Jia says in an interview with Valerie Jaffee. Jaffee notes that Jia uses the English word “show,” a brief, meaningful interpellation of the spectacle’s successful Anglophonization in the 21st century, tied to the United States’ emergence as a globalized cultural producer. The concept of performing one’s way through life is hardly new. Yet seen within the compass of the performative aspects of dialect and compassion, the employees of The World Park demonstrate that it is not just the centrality of the text, but also the sacrifices of their bodies within the Park’s economies of scale. More, the ubiquity of Sinophone<sup>26</sup> plurality in their interrelations, the seemingly-automatic movement between the dialects belied by the need to convincingly render a nostalgic home, both embody and perform its continuation and presence through the lapses into dialect. To reinterpret, perhaps what Jia’s film has arranged is not a show, but a *shewing*, an aestheticized, ecstatic revelation of artifactuality framed within the lives and bodies so intricately inserted in its construction and continuation in The World Park.

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26 I note here that capitalizing “Sinophonality” decouples it from its sister formation, tied to Françoise Lionnet’s deconstruction of the francophone. However, in the interests of consistency, I follow Shu-mei Shih’s example in capitalizing all related terms throughout this paper.



## Rethinking Sinophonicity: Minor Transnationalisms in Major Centers

According to Shu-Mei Shih, a term that is neither “Chinese” nor “diaspora” is necessary to describe the categorization she is calling the Sinophone because despite the great efforts of many, the word “Chinese” has little to no actual meaning as a unifying descriptor. For Shih, Chineseness presupposes and privileges a kind of national fantasy based on a putative geographic unity, as the primary measure of presence, identity, and awareness. In the introduction to *Visuality and Identity*, Shih argues that beyond the dearth of meaning in “Chinese” as an ethnic signifier, the historical meaning of that term is profoundly Han-centric, serving to conceal the great preponderance of ethnic diversity within China itself:

The Chinese language, as it is generally assumed and understood, is nothing but the standardized language imposed by the state, that is, the language of the Han, the Hanyu; the Chinese, as we know them, are largely limited to the Han, and Chinese culture refers mainly to the culture of the Han. The term “ethnic Chinese” is therefore a serious misnomer, since Chineseness is not an ethnicity but many ethnicities. (24)

This call for the interrogation of Chineseness as a designator of identity, ethnicity, and belonging profoundly de-ranges its power, both within and outside of the academy. In her introduction to her edited collection, *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies: Reimagining a Field*, Rey Chow points to the definition’s ideological

foundations in what she considers both insular and exclusionary terms, from within the sinological academic circles, and from within the national project itself. In a move reminiscent of her work in *The Protestant Ethnic*— in which she also discusses the confessional ethnic subject's implications for pedagogy and critique — Chow discusses the ethnic supplement of Chineseness, appended to a series of literary and theoretical concerns, as a response invested in maintaining geopolitical stability and peripheries. She considers these responses in terms that she guardedly but repeatedly considers racist, “a type of representational copulation forced at the juncture between literature and ethnicity” (*The Protestant Ethnic* 15). Chow's critique of the nationalist allegory as a facile reading of contemporary Chinese film relies on the intricate construction of implication and expectation which result from that reading's interpellation within a kind of Chineseness, “part and parcel of the fraught dynamic of coercive mimeticism” (116).

Shih picks up the argument here, demanding that Chineseness be considered in terms of its nation-building project. Like Rey Chow, Shih argues that Chineseness is an artifact of nationalist desire, a fetish with an alarmingly quick uptake in both scholarly and political fields. She also points out the (myriad) ways in which Chineseness is not an accurate descriptor of a language or an ethnicity, especially emphasizing its inconsistency in designating groups, which contain either the language or the ethnicity as “Chinese” enough. Shih also considers the elision between “Chinese” and “Han” at length, which is only a surprise to those not aware of the massive diversity and uneven power differentials of ethnic groupings situated within East Asia. She relies on the power of these linguistic

differentiations and visual imageries as ways to escape the rigidity of the classification, and focuses on areas peripheral to the mainland in order to make her point. In the allergic movement of Chow and Shih away from the monolithic China constructed in Anglophone sinology there is a subtle accusation of both the object-construction from the academic fields and the Han-centric construction of Chineseness from within China itself. This helps explain the prominence of Taiwan, Hong Kong—and to a lesser extent, Korea and Japan—in Shih’s discussion.

Instead of castigating the academy for its misuse of Chineseness as an imposition and proscription upon those who might be called Chinese, Shih proposes doing away with Chineseness almost entirely. Through a series of specific examples demonstrating the clash of linguistic, ethnic, and geographic descriptors, Shih argues that Chineseness should only exist as a designation of nationality. Thus, she renders its instrumentality within linguistic and ethnic contexts very clear, substantiating Chow’s position by changing the objectionable parameters of imposed definition. Shih also clearly delineates the Sinophone as a temporary and changeable parameter, based on the work done by those within the Sinophone, as opposed to those who study it:

The Sinophone is a place-based, everyday practice and experience, and thus it is a historical formation that constantly undergoes transformation reflecting local needs and conditions. It can be a site of both a longing for and a rejection of various constructions of Chineseness; it can be a site of

both nationalism of the long-distance kind, anti-China politics, or even nonrelation with China, whether real or imaginary. (*Visuality* 30)

Shih envisions the Sinophone as a less-fraught and more accurate designation of linguistically-based commonality. While this is attractive, it runs headlong into the problems set up from within the community she calls *Zhong-Gang-Tai*: that of ethnicity-related class-based accents, mutual unintelligibility, and the continual pressure upon the periphery from their national governments. While her terminology does go some way toward addressing the issues that Chow raises, I contend that it cannot be used to address the nationalist consolidation of identities—mediated through forms of linguistic purity and mandated by various governmental bodies— from within the Sinophone countries themselves. The logic of the wound, which Chow elucidates, is not entirely countered by the periphery and mutuality of Shih’s formulation.

Specifically, in not addressing Mainland China, Shih’s terminology puts a spotlight on the peripheral communities she most wishes to address. However, Shih has also provided the first steps toward a response to the increasingly important issue of how to discuss Chineseness in less reductive ways. Similarly, Chow’s edited volume can be considered her response to those in the Anglophone academy whose construction of Chineseness have tended to remand it to the form of an ethnic supplement. In both cases, Shih and Chow struggle to reimagine not just a field, but the terminology of the humanities, in ways that are both frustratingly imperfect and very productive – and absolutely necessary to the work of reconfiguration of the individual ethnic subject.

Shih's sharply argued statement for the creation of the Sinophone (as a categorization to replace the Chinese or the Mandarin-speaking) does not come solely from the fluid flow of related linguistic markers within the geographic region designated East Asia. Instead of arguing for the prevalence of a single Chineseness, Shih contends that the languages which make up Sinophonicity, or the state of speaking Chinese, are not singular, or singularizable, and that China and its diasporas can be re-cognized instead as populations that shift in relation with each other—not that of center to periphery, because no center exists. The Sinophone designation deliberately flattens some historical aspects in order to cut off the speculative fiction of “trueness” or authenticity, substituting linguistic presence and accent-based diversity instead.

Shih's linguistically-focused discussion brings attention to the rich cultural production of various Sinophonicities, but remains largely silent on the linguistic fractures and variances within the mainland itself. Yet, the supposition that China itself is made up of various Sinophonicities forms a far harsher critique of the mainland's own antihistorical urges than any analysis of “diasporic literatures” could dream of enacting. Michael Berry's seemingly innocuous discussion of Jia's production team is interesting in this regard:

With a partnership formed just on the eve of the historic 1997 handover of Hong Kong, the relationship between Jia and his HK partners would foreshadow the rapid integration of the HK and PRC film industries in the post-handover years. At the same time, this particular trans-China

cinematic collaboration would go on to produce some of the most exciting and visionary cinematic works of contemporary Chinese cinema.

(Berry 23)

That Berry can use the term “trans-China” here and mean it, simply and unambiguously, suggests that the Sinophonicity of media culture has spread within the East Asian sphere, while managing to include the so-called centre as another form of the marginalized. Instead of relying on China’s monolithic self-imaginary and artificially-maintained linguistic imperialism, Berry’s offhand characterization of Jia Zhangke’s PRC- HK artistic production team as “trans-China” encapsulates the wideness needed to open up the term of Sinophonicity to include the minor transnationalisms Shih is so interested in elsewhere. It would seem, then, that denying a similarly minor key to Jia’s work—itsself filmed in polyglot versions of Chinese—would constitute a matter of strict ideological commitment based only on the desire to break free from the PRC as a monolingual and monocultural entity. As Lu Tonglin puts it, “Despite the recent surge of Chinese nationalism, the picture of contemporary Chinese society is much more fragmentary and complicated than this ambiguous expression ‘China’ may convey” (166).

Shih’s deliberate move away from the mainland toward Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and other Sinophone communities on the so-called periphery of China, while commendable in certain respects, is also too stringent: there ought to be a way in which her powerful articulation of the Sinophone is able to approach the work of a mainland director like Jia Zhangke, who is performing a critique very much in line with Shih’s. In

fact, Shih's Sinophonicity, that "precarious and problematic relation to China" (30), comes to the fore in Jia's film. In *The World*, Jia demonstrates a precisely articulated awareness of fractured Sinophone voices within a specific, urban fantastic space through his use of a specific provincial dialect (*Shanxi*) placed at odds with the Northern dialect (*putonghua*) in use throughout the alienated urban other-space. The idea of a mono-ethnic, linguistically-unified China is quickly demonstrated to be as artificial as any of the other replicas on display in *The World Park*: *putonghua* exists between Jia's characters only because they cannot otherwise communicate with each other, and at best, it conveys a collapsing and sometimes overtly damaging concept of home or belonging.

#### The Politics of *putonghua* in *The World Park*

Although China seeks modernity, pursuing it with near-relentless focus and drive, *The World* questions the ability of the vast majority of China's peoples to access that supposedly West-facing openness. The film's title shot perfectly encompasses the genuine incomprehension of the workers faced with the alienating intrusion of *The World Park*; from the opening scenes, Jia's doubt about the viability of *The World Park*'s ideological project is clear. *The World Park* melds several layers of fiction, belief and desire through its meticulous to-scale replicas, assertions of unification and control narrated in *putonghua* to both attendees and workers alike. Sheldon Lu calls this aspect of the film "a mockery of globalization," underscoring its nationalist tinge (Lu 5). Lu points out the constructed falsity and the intertwined ideological positioning of the national

dialect and *The World Park*: “set in 21st-century Beijing, the film uses language in a way that connotes more than a provincial dialect; it intervenes in the mixed premodern, modern, and postmodern condition of China at large” (5, emphasis added). Unfortunately, Lu’s use of the word “ordinary viewer” unwittingly cements the centrality of putonghua outside of China itself, even as he deliberately points out that “[t]he film uses Shanxi dialect, spoken by Tao, Taisheng, and the people from their native city of Fenyang. The local dialect spoken by these characters clashes with the anonymous, universal putonghua blaring from the park’s loudspeakers” (7).

What Lu calls “great disparity and non-synchronicity” (7) is also representable in terms of the pluralizing or fracture of the subject; it speaks in tongues as a matter of course. While dialect and dialogues form integral parts of the film, the patterns of imitations and fabrications laced throughout appropriately reflect the inability of the spoken word to hold the entirety of meaning the speakers wish to convey. Anna and Tao’s final meeting in the club bathroom reiterates their sympathy, expressed through their hands and voices, while Taisheng’s expression of grief outside Little Sister’s hospital room mirrors Tao’s when faced with Qun’s treacherous text: silence. Like their spectacular costumes and military-influenced uniforms, Tao and Taisheng perform identities affirmed and applauded by the tourists and directors who supervise and watch their work, not comprehending the magnitude of the deceptions involved. Lu’s description of the Shanxi dialect as “defamiliarizing, alienating and distancing” positions the “ordinary viewer” as someone who only speaks putonghua and therefore stands



outside most of the cultural groups in the People's Republic. This defamiliarization reveals the depth of the parallels Jia's film draws between performance and speech act, speech and genuine communion. As Dennis Lim puts it, "The World emphasizes that the illusion of interconnectedness does not equal (or even enable) the experience of mobility."

Although I do not necessarily find Lu's imputation of deliberate "mockery" (7) as convincing as Lim's analysis of Jia's artistic statement, the determined flattening of affect and difference between provinces and the city through *putonghua* deserves further consideration. Its existence reflects a facet of the ideological constructs built into and constructed within *The World Park*: according to the Park, not only is there one language in China, China is itself large enough to contain the world. Why should one desire, or be able, to travel beyond its borders? There is nothing real outside of them, after all. But this repressive stance is overturned by a far more fragmented and removed physical representation; no meticulous one-third scale model, just a childhood song and a worn photograph: a husband, standing in front of a restaurant in Belleville, a neighborhood in Paris--one which contains a Chinatown, another small-scale replica of an irremediably distant space. Like Anna's sister, whom the viewer only knows through her song, Qun's husband stands outside of the construct proof that something exists beyond the borders of China.

There is a strong break between the vagaries and inconsistencies of the spoken word and the solidity of the written word throughout the film. Tao and Taisheng's

relationship is defined through declarations of need and insufficiency, but breaks when Tao discovers Qun's text message, solid evidence of a betrayal. In the same way, Han Sanming's promise to look after Little Sister<sup>27</sup> is not only crushed with his body, but revealed as unnecessary through Little Sister's orderly, final list of debts; that small slip of paper demonstrates both self-sufficiency and awareness of his rapidly oncoming death. But even as the reduction of lives into texts is made manifestly concrete, it is also bypassed (and therefore questioned) through the near-wordless relationship between Anna and Tao. The women share few words in common, but both understand the longing for the world outside The World Park, that world for which Ulan Bator and Paris become metonymic. The entire World Park, with its investments in replication and simulation, can only construct scale models, but it can never hope to construct "the real". The park remains in stasis, a herd of chattering water-carrying guards, the closest its Egypt will ever get to the caravans of the Sahara. *Putonghua* in *The World* functions to erase difference, even as the Shanxi dialect works against that disappearance, sharply indicting its most basic assumption: that all Chinese speak the same Chinese, and that there is only one China. More – that only one China actually exists, and that it speaks *putonghua*.

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27 Er Guniang's designation is not a name; it is a marker of estrangement. Earlier, he requests that Tao refer to him strictly by that nickname. It is a link back to his childhood, but also a reinforcement of the namelessness of migrant workers in the capital, as well as a quiet alignment with the exploitative situations of women in the film.

But while dialect is the site of Jia's politicized rejection of similitude, it is also the location of specific artistic construct, the *artifactuality* of the spoken word. In an article on the specific permutations of dialect in Jia's films, film scholar Jin Liu is careful to point out the ways in which Jia has transmuted or reshaped approaches to local dialect and home ground into narratives of their own, constructing them from his actors' own dialects and experiences. "Note that the actors are allowed to speak their native dialects, which are not necessarily the dialects their characters would have spoken," says Liu, referring to both *Xiao Wu* and *Platform*, two parts of Jia's earlier Hometown Trilogy: "On the one hand, this is at odds with the director's desire for cinematic verisimilitude. . . . On the other hand, the disregard [for] the appropriate and realistic use of dialects may indicate, to some degree, that the use of local languages is aimed more at creating an atmosphere than at conveying a particular message or speech" (168). Liu's acute sensitivity to differences in dialect allow this careful parsing of intonations; identifying persistent local difference must lead to a consideration of the persistence as well as the difference. It is deceptive to say that the dialects are at odds with one another; they are constructed in this manner to open the way for the viewer to account for authenticity beyond what is normally deemed realistic, hallucinating a One China of his or her own.

Strikingly, the film's linguistically-rendered uncertainties, redundancies and insufficiencies are undermined by the genuine empathy shared by Anna and Tao. Instead of relying on the febleness and uncertainty of spoken communication, the two

women demonstrate a profound communion instead, delineated through shared circumstance and high empathy, touched only lightly with words. In this reading, the unimaginability of Ulan Bator becomes the possibility of both genuine connection and escape from their hyperreal surroundings, reachable only through the tenuous human link of a shared song. The way the music bleeds over from the stage to the scene, from the small table to the nighttime ride across the park, seems to reinforce such a reading of the spillage from artifice to empathy. In contrast to the oblivious Taisheng, Anna and Tao are aware of their limited comprehension of each other's realities; their lack of a common functional language unmasks the breadth of the distance between them. For Taisheng, this reality is obscured by the *putonghua* he uses to communicate with Qun; their locationless speech foreshadows their directionless nonpermanence, a small metonym for the kinds of relationships extant within the conceptual reach of The World Park. However, Anna and Tao forge their profound connection outside of language, only referencing that dream of commonality in passing – and find that they do not require it to comprehend each other after all.

The music of The World Park is particularly notable, not just for its beauty, but for its inter- and intradiegetic commentary. The song that Anna and Zhao Tao sing to each other (“Ulan Bator,” with all its intimations of departure for a better life, a fantastically real place away from The World Park) joins the electronic soundscape surrounding the action with barely a hitch as Tao rides the monorail to her next destination. The fantasy of easy communication and effortless travel reveal themselves

in that dreamy smile, recalling the animated magic carpet and its wistful desire for tangible commonality. The movement from that unaccompanied duet, wavering through the dingy air, to the pitch-perfect instrumental paired with Zhao Tao's nighttime ride on the ever-present monorail, illustrates the gulf between this song and the lush, despairing music of the nightly dances, which only becomes more haunting with each weary repetition.

#### One Size Fits All: Space, Counterfeits, and Replicas in The World Park

For Naoki Sakai, identity is a spatial and structural construct, rendered political by boundaries, capable of polarizing issues of travel and communication across languages and racial boundaries. Sakai considers the problematic construction of national identity in terms of a nationalist figure that requires the positionality and fixedness of an Otherland to which the nation can assign its invasive Others: “An individual is able to feel fully embraced in a nation only as long as he is confident that he is distinct from those who are unable to belong there,” he says. “Yet, the definition of those who are unable to belong there is historically fluid and almost contingent. Discrimination against foreigners or those of ‘alien origins’ is, therefore, a prerequisite for the sense of certainty in national belonging” (251). But within the designated borders themselves lies the desire for a mythic singularity, a point of origin which can be called up when commonality is in need. In “Nation and the Mother Tongue,” Sakai draws the link from this desired “originary singularity” to the establishment of a potentially exclusionary sameness.

The linguistic aspects of Sakai's "co-figurative model"<sup>28</sup> arise in terms of the differences in spoken dialect within The World Park. Shanxi, the dialect of Tao and Taisheng's hometown, is the most prominent spoken language in the film. Evading the erasure of difference within the subtitles, the Shanxi dialect signifies the presence of someone else who remembers a shared home or past. In this sense, the dialect participates in the nostalgic construct of that home. The Beijing dialect, the *putonghua* mandated by the Chinese government, also appears as the lingua franca of The World Park, a rendition of China in microcosm within the communities of workers. The construction site's use of standardized Mandarin demonstrates an awareness of its necessity—"otherwise nobody can understand anyone," the worker tells Taisheng as Little Sister looks around the park in wonder. Just as the Shanxi dialect constructs the provincial workers' uncomprehending response to The World Park, the *putonghua* dialect—official and constructed as universally transparent—functions as a regulatory embodiment of the official party line: there is only this one China, which is also the World. Not even written words can break through its borders, as Tao demonstrates when she hands her ex-boyfriend's passport back to him with a self-deprecating smile, saying, "I can't read [understand] it."

The other main source of *putonghua* is the anonymous Park announcer, whose voice blandly advises safety precautions and offers details on the Eiffel Tower replica. Coming from everywhere and nowhere on the screen, these announcements destroy

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28 Sakai's "co-figurative model" takes the exclusion of the Other as foundational to the construction of nationalist identity.

directionality and blur distance, reducing the sharp apparatus of vision to the bland stillness of aurality. *The World* deals specifically in dialects, using *putonghua* to mark the distance between people who cannot touch or understand each other at home, in their own dialects. This sets up another binary, temporal, between urbanized and not. The title shot—a peasant in traditional clothing wearing a bedding roll, looking at the Eiffel Tower replica in seeming incomprehension—supports the film’s central preoccupation with the inability of communication. It also serves as a continuous marker of linguistic similarity with accented differences, the same type of Sinophone articulations that Shih describes, but from within the most central of China’s areas: Beijing.

But even the city cannot replace ersatz with “the real”, and Qun the counterfeiter quickly and completely understands the depth and compulsion of The World Park’s encompassing deceptions. Taisheng invites Qun to return with him to The World Park in case her visa application is unsuccessful, claiming that his Park has the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, “... all that French stuff,” he says, gesturing expansively. Qun cuts him short with a sharp look and a brief reminder of the transparent insufficiency of his proffered scale model. The World Park, all he can offer, is nowhere close to the world itself; it contains neither Belleville nor her husband. In this moment of clarity, Belleville becomes the location of conflicting impositions, desire and nostalgia clashing along its every seam. The World Park is once again clearly connoted in terms of what it does not have and cannot ever be. Aspiring to all things, it becomes nowhere in particular when faced with Qun’s specific knowledge and eventual access; through her passport, she has

literally realized the difference between The World and the world. Like the dream of unity embedded in *putonghua*, The World Park is thus revealed as an elaborate performance, a known fabrication ringed by transportation going nowhere that can only perform if left uncontested.

Throughout the film, characters use *putonghua* in one circumstance: when in the company of those from other linguistic subgroups, with those who do not speak like “home.” This is the dialect of displacement, of homelessness. The only other place it is heard is in the sterile announcements that periodically sound across The World Park’s series of replicas, spoken to no one in particular. The performers and the work gang that constructs buildings beside The World Park speak to each other only in *putonghua*—no other communication is possible, since the workers come from linguistic areas all over China. *Shanxi* then becomes the dialect of intimacy, signaling the presence of some kind of community. Significantly, in Taisheng and Tao’s relationship they speak *Shanxi*, but when Taisheng has another relationship with Qun, they speak in *putonghua*. But Qun, a gifted maker of counterfeit designer materials, also recognizes both The World Park and her relationship with Taisheng for what they are: replicas to scale, both interesting in their own ways, but having little in common with Paris, where Qun's husband is waiting for her. Why should she go see a replica of the Eiffel Tower? Qun turns down Taisheng's invitation with a quiet, but clearly dismissive question: “Why should I go see it? My husband’s not there.” With this simple observation, she undoes the ability of The World Park to do more than imitate reality. Likewise, she undoes the ability of her relationship



with Taisheng to be more than a sham. Soon, neither will hold meaning for her, as her passport takes her somewhere Taisheng literally cannot imagine.

#### No Predictions, No Ending: Snow Falls on Beijing

In Jia Zhangke's assessment of the power in Sixth Generation film, he provides a roundabout defense against both artistic stagnation and bureaucratic stiflement in the continuing vitality and productivity of creative filmmaking, aligning himself with the Sixth Generation even as he acknowledges that movements can end. He concludes with a poem, but adds a single line: "I do not believe you can predict our future" ("Speaking"). This sweeping statement is echoed in *The World's* profoundly enigmatic ending.

The gas accident is preceded by a subtle reiteration of migratory homelessness: Taisheng, having finally located Tao, meets her in Wei's old apartment. The camera moves from the ironic double happiness icon on the door to the uncomfortable stillness between the couple. Their inconclusive discussion is followed by gas poisoning; the neighbors who find them in the morning surround their still bodies with comments on inattentive landlords creating such dangerous living conditions. The mourning white of snow, finally fallen on Beijing, slowly covers their shrouded bodies, almost certainly indicating a kind of death. But the voiceover, coming after the tense fade to black, troubles the definition of any *FINE*, refusing the bodily rejection of, say, Michelangelo Antonioni's eclipse, for some kind of story that carries on past the body's end.



Fig. 3-3. Tao and Taisheng under the first snow. They hover between life and death; the shot lingers on their stillness, allowing their suspension between states, refusing to decide between one and the other.

The last scene of the film is both harrowing and mundane: after their silent and unresolved meeting, Tao and Taisheng are discovered the next morning by the landlord of Wei's apartment, where Tao has fled while Wei is on her honeymoon with Niu. The double-happiness symbol on Wei's door becomes doubly ironic as both couples fall to some kind of self-immolation; Niu's attempted burning echoes his ersatz self-worth, while the roiling kettle in the tense scene between Tao and Taisheng not only focuses their turmoil and unrest, but sources it in the ultimately damaging energy of the gas burner. There has been gas poisoning during the night; a result, perhaps, of the attempt to stay warm as snow falls on Beijing at last. Anonymous sets of hands and feet bring Tao and Taisheng down the steps to lay them side by side in the snow, wrapped like dolls or

shrouded like corpses, and stand around them in a muttering half-circle, voices crossing over and piling up, lamenting the couple's failure to heed previous instructions. The scene fades to silence and blackout as the snow continues to fall; into the silent dark, Taisheng speaks, and Tao answers:

“Are we dead?”

“No. This is only our beginning.”

Taisheng's voice, hoarse and hushed, is recognizably speaking in the *Shanxi* dialect. Tao's reply is more ambiguously placed, flattened to tonelessness; her final slurred whisper is almost indecipherable. The possibility of Tao and Taisheng's survival is belied by their staging in the shot (they appear almost formally laid out), the high hot flames of the gas incinerator, and the mourning color sifting coolly down from the sky. Their life and death simultaneously occupy the final screen's indeterminate blank, commingling to produce its final darkness.

The voiceover would seem to argue for a less pessimistic ending, juxtaposing the viewer's hopes and fears on the unrelieved blackness of the scene. It is possible that they have survived. But there is also another version of events: since within The World Park neither Tao nor Taisheng can approach anything resembling full participation or self-direction, nor can they reach the economic valuation which would allow them to buy themselves freedom, their only path of escape from the Park is through death. But the unquietness, the darker layer of meaning beneath the façades, is held in that troubling voiceover itself, speaking after death, into the dark: Tao insists that this is only their

beginning. If so, then two other simultaneous moments arrive in the deep field, which functions auditorially at this last extreme. In one, the full stop of the last scene is belied by the voices, moving their owners forward in time outside the scene, past the compass of the film, into some other, outside reality, which *The World Park* (and therefore the film) can never comprehend. In the other, the same – only the outside-reality is the single guaranteed escape the two lovers can take from the encroaching World Park. In this moment, they exit the Park and move into death. The voiceover demonstrates the horrible economics of their escape: along with Little Sister and Anna, Tao and Taisheng have paid the toll of their bodies and passed away, finally out of the World Park. They have gained entrance at last to another world, perhaps another life.

## Conclusion

The persistence of linguistic difference in Jia's filmography becomes particularly pointed in *The World*. While on the surface, the linguistic markers indicating regionalized difference support a reading of political allegory, the film also requires a reconfiguration of Sinophonicity. Through the relationships in the film, putonghua is rendered as one dialect among others, a form of communication employed within certain social parameters, not as a standard for communication. Instead, putonghua becomes the language of unfamiliarity, homelessness, and mindless repetition; its use an acknowledgement of some form of estrangement.

These movements of linguistic construction track onto Shu-mei Shih's concept of Sinophone articulation, specifically in the interplay between the Shanxi dialect and putonghua. The major Sinophone articulation at work is precisely that of incoherence in the service of a continual colonization. In the moment of speech, in the movement from dialect to putonghua, there is a refusal to substitute a sterile replica for some unknowable and changing articulation that must question the replica's enunciative power. *Putonghua* in the film functions to erase difference, even as the Shanxi dialect works against that disappearance, sharply indicting its most basic assumption: that all Chinese speak the same Chinese, that there is only one China, that only one China exists, and that it speaks *putonghua*. The film's intricate melding of Shanxi and *putonghua* functions to sway, counter and resist that unitary assumption.

Instead of being only a self-aware commentary on the nature of pastiche, the World Park in *The World* exists to satisfy the desire for the exotic by bringing an ersatz version of it to the outskirts of Beijing. The park suggests that it is enough to have taken the tours, to have ascended the scale model of the Eiffel Tower and pushed up the leaning tower in a photo, and that being out in the world is unnecessary for true comprehension of it. However, the park's existence only highlights the falsity and fabrication within its borders, inherent in every level of communication beyond the wordless moments of gaze and touch.

The film juxtaposes the aspirational desire to achieve a reality outside of China and the longing for genuine connection between human beings in order to critique The

World Park's assertions of sufficiency. Within this juxtaposition, the virtual or desirable "at one" of Chineseness breaks into the plural, artifactual Sinophone, reorganizing to include persistence of multiplicity and heterogeneity within the claimed oneness. Thus, the claim of oneness must contend with the "at odds," what Shih might call the "minor." The injured dancers, alienated guards, and crushed workers of The World Park provide their crucial witness, provoking a strengthened awareness of commonalities while requiring close examination of their purported cohesiveness. To leave the Park is to break its hellish monorail's endless circling, exposing its façades, then recognizing that Tao's final line validates unpredictability, in a language that shifts between dialects, through a death which may or may not also be a beginning.

#### Chapter 4. As Seen on the Internet: The Recap as Translation in English-Language K-drama Fandoms.<sup>29</sup>

The Korean drama fansite Dramabeans.com relies on the labor of its moderators, recappers, and fans to create a version of access into the affective, aural (musical and linguistic), visual, and narrative of the drama through the recap. The recap is a deceptively simple-seeming summary of the drama episode, with the writer's individual stamp of approval or disappointment, framing, speculation, and interpretative commentary, combined with visual demonstrations which also carry some of the affective weight. In this chapter, I argue that in the moment of reading, the recappers mediate a kind of immersive access to the drama in its original form, with cultural awareness and linguistic transparency intact. Thus, the recapper's labor manifests in the deliberate arrangement of screencaps and narrative summary to evoke affective response across several translations: across languages, cultures, and mediums of transmission. My paper provides a brief historical background and analysis of the fansite's emergence, discusses the fansite's cultural and affective work in terms of labor and compensation, then close-reads two specific exemplars to analyze the work of the recap as mediating affective engagement with the primary text of the K-drama.

The growth of online participatory cultures has produced vast arrays of digitized responses to popular media, the work of fans responding to the source texts and to each other, while facilitating recognition and access to source texts across geopolitical and linguistic affiliations. Dramabeans.com is a website that posts daily content on a constantly updated set of Korean popular media, with a focus on episodic television. From its beginnings as site moderator javabeans' personal blog, the site has gained a comoderator, girlfriday, a rotating cast of recappers, and a fan base of its own.<sup>30</sup> The site's

29 This chapter will be published as "As Seen On the Internet: Recapping Online Interaction in English-Language K-Drama Fandoms." Eds. Youngmin Choe and Kyung Hyun Kim. *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*. Durham: Duke UP, forthcoming March 2014. This material is republished here with permission of the publisher. Research for this project was partially funded by a doctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Many thanks to Professors Margherita Long, James Tobias, and Jonathan M. Hall, to the University of California, Irvine's Korean Popular Culture Conferences, and to all the fans whose labor, response, and affection so deeply inform this work.

30 I am using the names the commenters, recappers, and moderators have chosen for themselves, a customary citational practice within online subcultures. In this case, the names "javabeans" and "girlfriday" do not appear capitalized when they are credited as authors on the site; I have rendered their names as given. I would add that these names are often deliberate pseudonyms, and as within most online communities, attempts to connect online and offline identities are considered not only deeply repugnant but also potentially dangerous. I have respected these fandom conventions to the best of my ability.

primary post type is the episode recapitulation, or recap, a moment of reception that provides much more than mere episode summary. This documented excess focalizes examinations of the dynamics of transmission across media and language barriers in its online contexts. Fans remediate K-drama through the recap, engendering response through interactions in the comments, where fans often respond to the televisual broadcast, the fan-made subtitles, and the anglophone episode recaps as if they were a single unit. This chapter grew out of a desire to account for these phenomena, using Dramabeans.com as a case study, by considering the recap's situation in online cultures, and by analyzing the specifics of translation and mediation at the moment of reading.

In some ways, this chapter functions like a recap, an immersive echo of myriad experiences condensed onto the page, touching on sets of overlapping, sometimes conflicting discussions of representation, translation, fandom economies, subcultural societies, distributed online communities, and research methodologies before diving into close readings of its two exemplars. I have deviated somewhat from a strictly academic structure, in which a substantiated conclusion logically follows from a set of initial arguments. Instead, my discussions hold the appearance of linearity but not its substance, since linearity would require both a predictable route and no possibility of deviation. I have therefore assembled a primer to a few of the many issues surrounding online recaps and then performed a set of analyses on how the recap does its work, with particular focus on the details of intermedial transfer (how to keep the motion circulating through



the stills) and affective encounter (strategies for maintaining mediated yet personal emotional responses).

#### The Recap As Cultural Artifact: Dramabeans.com

Tracing the recap's long trajectories encapsulates a brief history of online response to popular media. From concise, individual "summary and indignant response" blog entries, the recap entered public forums, becoming the province of designated archivists, the recappers whose work would seed an entire community's reactive response. As a fan-based information-sharing method, the recap propagates the latest information on the fans' source material, providing these communities with increased impetus to regularly re-create the intensity of their relationship through discussions as much on the recapper's bias as on the source texts themselves. Each recapper's individual voice, opinions, wit, and consistency of presence are as privileged as the episodic information she or he presents; significantly the recapper lays no claim to any final interpretation. Instead, interpretation is a distributed collaborative process, changing with each response posted to the comments section. This form was popularized at the site Television Without Pity, an aggregator that started out as a single-show blog and became an early example of centralized online fan-based responses to network television in North America. TWoP's primacy as a pan-fandom meeting place and archive was publicly

acknowledged when it was acquired by Bravo in March 2007, throwing TWoP's "Spare the snark, spoil the networks" slogan somewhat in doubt.<sup>31</sup>

Discussion in the comments can range from nuances of interpretation to fan service counts, depending on the site's fan base.<sup>32</sup> Commenters responding to the initial recap can create shared points of agreement while simultaneously accelerating toward cheerful wrangling over detailed interpretations or fractious ad hominem disagreement, depending on the culture of the site. In this mode of interpretation, the text of any critical reading of the recap lies at its surface, within the fans' work and affiliations. Even leaving aside alternate forms of authorship or the complexities of online identity-play, a comprehensive survey of fandom demographics might provide information about fans' offline lives but would do little to interpret their labor. Beyond the formation of a singular fan, each fan community forms itself through its interactions, establishing social practices and shared terminologies, close-reading its source text to query facile conclusions and demand substantive answers, either from the source text or from one another. This cultural practice can be critical practice as well, an expression of enthusiasm that nonetheless addresses thorny problems or difficult concerns from within larger contexts of affective engagement.

The website Dramabeans.com provides valuable online space for this engagement. Currently one among several co-moderated anglophone Korean pop culture

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31 Television Without Pity, <http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/>, last accessed May 30, 2010.

32 *Fanservice* refers to gratuitous, often sexualized content within the episode, although the definition extends to include any fan-pandering detail, such as references to obscure characters who are fandom favorites, arcane plot points from thirty episodes ago, or references to other works in the same genre.

sites, the site provides a centralized meeting place for anglophone fans as well as specific kinds of access to the K-drama and their associated cultural production. Korean drama is a form of episodic television occurring at the locus of hourlong drama and primetime soap opera, with attendant intricate romantic subplots. Dramatic contexts can range from historical epic to espionage thriller to romantic comedy, and while locations vary, the modern “trendy” series tend to take place in or near Seoul. In contrast to North American soap operas, K-drama usually air biweekly over a period of several months before reaching a definitive ending. For the most popular episodes, audience ratings can reach over 40 percent (for example, 2009’s *Sons of Sol Pharmacy*, or 2012’s *The Moon That Embraces the Sun*).<sup>33</sup> From 2005’s *My Name Is Kim Sam-Soon* and 2007’s *Coffee Prince* onward, growing K-drama awareness in online communities has led to specific needs for multilingual, frequently anglophone-centric forms of access.

The recap site Dramabeans.com is notable for its recap focus and strong writing, as well as its evident and unashamed K-drama partialities. Other co-moderated sites tend to function as aggregators of information and less as aggregators of opinionated response, thus serving different purposes within fandom ecologies. Dramabeans.com seems to have begun as a result of site moderator javabeans’ reentry into the world of K-drama through renewed appreciation as an adult; her website started life early in 2007 as a two-entry WordPress blog. The recaps themselves, starting with 2007’s *Dal Ja’s Spring*, seem to

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33 See javabeans, “Sol Pharmacy’s finale makes it top-rated drama of the year,” <http://www.dramabeans.com/2009/10/sol-pharmacys-finale-makes-it-top-rated-drama-of-the-year/>, and javabeans, “The Moon That Embraces the Sun: Episode 16,” <http://www.dramabeans.com/2012/02/the-moon-that-embraces-the-sun-episode-16/> for details.

have initially been reposted from another very large K-drama and fandom centralization site, whose forums provide large networks of information and availabilities on current and historical K-drama. The first documented episode recap at Dramabeans.com opens with a discussion of javabeans' previous activity on K-drama forums:

So I've been writing these episode summaries for *Dal Ja's Spring* on soompi—a site to which, if you are a kdrama fan and are yet unfamiliar, you must hie on over and acquaint yourselves immediately. Since I wrote up recaps for many (though not all) episodes, I figured I'd post them here as well. Why let hours of perfectly useful procrastination go to waste, right?

The twelve comments on this first recap give no hints as to the site's eventual traffic. By the end of the *Dal Ja's Spring* recaps, in March of 2007, the number of posts per month rises from two to 32. That month also sees the emergence of two soon-to-be staples of Dramabeans.com: the Song of the Day (eventually tied to episode recaps) and the Random Friday post (eventually the Friday Open Thread). With 78 comments on javabeans' March 16 recap of *Dal Ja's Spring's* finale and 133 comments on the March 11 analysis of *Hana Yori Dango 2's* adaptation aesthetics,<sup>34</sup> a readership emerged early in the site's life. The quick rise in comment numbers suggests that javabeans was already

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34 Early entries on Japanese drama at Dramabeans.com do exist, but while Japanese and Korean drama remain closely linked through larger East Asian cultural flows and circulations (*Hana Yori Dango* or *Boys Over Flowers* being a prime example), the site's current focus is chiefly on K-drama, with sidelines in Korean music, film, and celebrity culture.

known for the quality of her recaps in other forums and that a contingent of readers followed her to her own site.

Dramabeans.com gives often far-flung K-drama fans somewhere to congregate, where their interests and obsessions can be part of normal, non-niche, watercooler-level interactions, with all the possibilities of informed commentary and mutual exchange. Shared knowledge leading to wider discussions is the prerequisite for a conversation, or more accurately, for myriad linked conversations taking place simultaneously, which can become the germ or seed of a kind of online-specific cultural formation. That base of common knowledge is mediated in the burgeoning communities through Dramabeans.com's dedicated cadre of recappers. The site's accreted knowledge can constitute a nontrivial chunk of its participants' comprehension of K-drama itself, well beyond the specifics concerning the trendy drama of the week. The site's recaps do not stop at summary and analysis: javabeans and girlfriday also include various updates on the stars themselves, translating material as needed. For example, when Choi Jung-Won, lead actor of the drama *Wish Upon a Star*, wrote a photo essay of life on the set for the news publication *Ilgan Sports*, javabeans was there to bring it to her own readers as well.<sup>35</sup> By giving readers an echo of the relentless media saturation surrounding the trendy K-drama scene, the site also provides a brief submersive (but never quite

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<sup>35</sup> See javabeans, "A Day on the Set with Choi Jung-won," March 6, 2010, <http://www.dramabeans.com/2010/03/a-day-on-the-set-with-choi-jung-won/>. The translations, though uncredited, are likely the site moderators' own work.

*immersive*) cultural experience, a little dunk into the deep waters of specific cultural contexts.

What began as an individual effort by javabeans has spread into multiple simultaneous recaps by several recappers, the addition of comoderator girlfriday in June of 2010, and multiple updates and posts per day. Dramabeans.com also provides translated interviews, a glossary, and a series of encyclopedic entries on the nuances of K-drama staples such as the piggyback ride, the word *oppa*, and the fraught transition from *jondaemal* (formal or polite speech) to *banmal* (informal speech).<sup>36</sup>

Dramabeans.com documents site moderators javabeans' and girlfriday's fixations on specific actors, including Lee Seung-gi, Gong Yoo, and Kang Ji-hwan, which led to completed recaps of Kang's lower-rated 2010 drama *Coffee House*, as well as recaps of *One Night, Two Days (IN2D)*, a dual-commentary departure from K-drama into variety television propelled by Lee Seung-gi's popularity. However, javabeans' Kang Ji-hwan fixation was not enough to generate full recaps of early 2011's *Lie to Me*; lack of interest resulted in the intensely hybrid-form weecap, a capsule summary of the plot with an open thread for longer discussion beneath it; the weecap form is much less engaging, and thus demonstrates how much is present in a recap beyond mere plot summary.

Dramabeans.com has also developed its own specific cultural practices, including the

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36 For example, the Piggyback Ride is explained through two other tropes: drinking and skinship, which culminate in the hero having to cart the drunken heroine home, a K-drama convention which in girlfriday's analysis combines inadvertent physical contact, masculine strength, gentlemanly honor, and tinges of incest and infantilization. Eun-Chan in *Coffee Prince* destabilizes this trope nicely. See girlfriday, "Pop Culture: Piggyback Rides," July 11, 2010, <http://www.dramabeans.com/2010/07/pop-culture-piggyback-rides/>.

rotating headers that Dramabeans.com's graphically inclined commenters design gratis, and the ritualistic Friday Open Thread. But the recaps themselves, and the recappers' unapologetically idiosyncratic responses to their source texts, continue to hold a large piece of Dramabeans.com's online real estate. Even in the streamlined redesign, the newest recaps hold pride of place up top in the Featured section.

One component within this phenomenon is that the fansite actually has its own dedicated fans, readers who come specifically to the site and trust its work above others. Although *Coffee Prince* was perhaps not the most-watched K-drama of 2007, according to javabeans' final summation of her work, her 60,000-plus word recaps of the novel and scene-by-scene analyses of the drama garnered well over 2,000 comments, making it "nothing short of a phenomenon" on the site,<sup>37</sup> with an unofficial soundtrack that continues to generate a high number of page hits. These recap readers, by focusing on the site itself and not its putative primary sources, are exercising a privilege of readable texts: control over time, and reading in translation, viewing experiences not supported by the televised source. This behavior can also be interpreted as an outgrowth of instrumentalizing consumption: time, the most valuable commodity of urban modernity, must be conserved in order to allow either more consumption or more refamiliarization with the self, as mediated through participation in online collectives.

The specificities of transnational, bilingual online communication are heavily implicated in the seeming transparency of Dramabeans.com's mediations between source

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<sup>37</sup> See javabeans for the numbers, at, "Coffee Prince: Seventeenth Cup (Final)," August 27, 2007, <http://www.dramabeans.com/2007/08/coffee-prince-seventeenth-cup-final/>

texts and fan recipients. But the recap implicates its readers into understandings mediated by the recapper's narrated response; that is, the recapper's involvement as recorded in the texts brings with it a wealth of information to which the reader gains access. This borrowed transparency ought to bring wariness: the relationship between anglophone fandoms and non-anglophone source texts can contain profound ideological difficulties. Online environments have sometimes been analyzed in terms of the ostensible flattening of offline *naturecultural* groups into a single *netizenry*<sup>38</sup> or online group affiliation, a seemingly analogous, very slippery term that bears only passing resemblance to national affiliations. While not propagating any rhetoric of national formation, Dramabeans.com still contains echoes of artificially induced offline cultural familiarity in the recapper's language capabilities, knowledge of common tropes, and awareness of media hype, which are thus partially preserved throughout the site. This information is present in the recapper's documents of episode reactions, and the reader's easy access to these borrowed competencies facilitates what seems like a transparent translational experience.

#### Flexible Negotiations: Compliance, Consumerism, and the Gift

There is no single account possible for the interplay of consumption and gifting within fandoms; market forces and social forces, and their cultural formations, precede and are not localizable within subcultural formations. Media theorist Matt Hills presents a

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38 The term *natureculture* is a hallmark of the writings of both Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, who use it to evade the question of whether causation or even correlation are the product of nature or nurture, especially when discussing formulation and dissemination of social praxes within specific groups. The use of the term in this context is meant to point out the artificiality of the designation *netizenry*, even as this grouping of recappers, readers, and commenters seems to beg a single name for their collective.



compelling argument for the necessity of analyzing fandom accounts through a series of twisting reflexive inquiries. Hills' readings of fandom studies as an academic construct find closure or conclusion, and strict categorization of experiences, as the primary relations to fandom as taken up in its academic study. Hills suggests that this nonviable model of closure, narcissistic because falsely definitive, must be given up in favor of sets of self-reflexive inquiries into participatory cultures. He advocates these deliberate destabilizations as useful in laying out the stakes involved in their formation and maintenance, and to explore the specifics of fandom cultures, which are not univocal even within their own boundaries.<sup>39</sup> Fandoms are not often univocal, and writing about them either acknowledges their aggregate nature or falsifies their experiences, yet academic analysis seems to demand a kind of conclusive effort. Hills' methodology is therefore useful when delineating approaches to complex issues such as fandom funding or cultural appropriations within fandoms, since it allows an exploration of complexity with a concomitant acknowledgment of variance within a single culture, even on a single site.

Proposing online subcultures as an amorphous group, or considering their productive abilities only in revolutionary or reactive modes, would likely provide an

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<sup>39</sup> Hills pursues this self-reflexive trajectory by interrogating his own interpellations to account for the diversity of fandom practices. As he puts it in a roundtable at Henry Jenkins' blog, "The greatest difficulty with the label of acafandom is that it misleads us into thinking there's one referent to be championed, critiqued or defended." Acafandom is a portmanteau of "academic fandom," as derived from "acafan," or a fan who is also an academic; the terms refer to the academic study of fandom cultures, methods, and production, primarily in English, especially from the perspective of a participant in that fandom who is using his or her academic training to analyze it. See Matt Hills' comments for more context at "Aca-Fandom and Beyond: Jonathan Gray, Matt Hills, and Alisa Perren (Part One)." August 29, 2011. [http://henryjenkins.org/2011/08/aca-fandom\\_and\\_beyond\\_jonathan.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2011/08/aca-fandom_and_beyond_jonathan.html)

incomplete account of Dramabeans.com's transnational and transactional mediations. Commodified consumption of its recaps is facilitated by the site's linguistically mediated translational power, which provides a translucent reading experience facilitated or mediated by the recapper's knowledgeable responses. Comparatist Shu-mei Shih views this kind of commodification as an expression of transnational access privilege on the part of the anglophone population, vectored through what she considers an unequal balance between powers of commodification within languages. That is, cultural production in other languages has the power to be translated, while anglophonicity compels translation. However, the dangers of this commodification, while real and expressed on the site in terms of value for time, are mediated through fandom itself, which uses its financial commodity presence (a seeming compliance with dominant cultural models) in order to fund and further the culture of the gift, in which the recappers maintain and curate the site, creating novel-length recap collections and posting content daily, actions which have only passing monetary justification. Shih's account of linguistically mediated unequal relations seems to condemn the work of the fans and recappers at Dramabeans.com to unending vacillation between consumption and production, with little chance to escape the flows of greater and lesser determinacy and power. In this reading, the localized control exerted by the site takes up an intermediary role of its own, placing the power of "decipherable localism," or the presentation of local national culture with the anticipation of ready decipherability, primarily with the fans behind Dramabeans.com. The positionality of a readily readable text in translation

becomes very interesting when examined in light of Shu-mei Shih's insistence on mapping "*on whose terms and on what terms that reach is made possible*" (60).

The text in this case must be considered not only in terms of the specificities of K-drama and even the attendant media hype but also the K-drama cultural norms being presented as in need of explanation, as opposed to those that become transparent, the pellucid difference through which the online fan traverses with, at best, a faint intellectual twinge. This translucent reconstruction of cultural difference and its partial reclamation of offline local knowledge in the service of fandom could warrant Shih's pointed questions of representation and availability in online contexts. The anxiety underwriting this analysis lies in the projected subsumption of cultural production through loss of linguistic specificity—that is, translation can produce static, rendering the *K* in *K-drama* a letter and nothing more. As Shih acerbically puts it, "Through flexible negotiations between national and ethnic cultural codes, easy consumption and assimilation are guaranteed."<sup>13</sup> This ease of consumption at Dramabeans.com must then come under serious question as a viable circumvention of extant capitalist transaction models.

I have no wish to minimize this aspect of consumption practices as they occur at Dramabeans.com. However, Shih's reading is complicated by a set of simultaneously occurring practices at the site, whose interactions create a nonteleological exploration of ways to relate to the source texts. These questions emerge through the easy consumption of mass production, which Shih identified as part of a process of minoritization through the power of ready translatability. This ease of consumption, facilitated by its pop-

cultural focus and smooth translations, has come under scrutiny, not least as a partial evasion of extant distribution and access models. What Benedict Anderson calls “a certain privacy to all languages” (148) is circumvented through immediate access to competencies and contextual information provided both within and around the recaps at the site.<sup>40</sup> The reader slips into the cultural production of a social group through that mediated clarification of previously opaque cultural and linguistic barriers. This slippage creates problematic, productive excesses and multiple submersions into another popular culture, which belong to the reader during the recap through the recapper’s mediation but degrade once outside that moment of shared affinity. By insinuating issues of cultural and linguistic specificity between and within the recaps themselves, Dramabeans.com creates an instability at the conjunction of linguistic exclusion and online translingual promiscuity, as well as a productive flow from the separation of offline affiliations, which can be used to read its insinuations into cultures of compliance and consumption.

Fandom conversations demonstrate wildly varying amounts of and desires for critical engagement, enthusiastic acclaim, or a sometimes volatile mixture of the two. An idiomatic indicator such as “Don’t harsh my squee,” in which *squee* is an all-encompassing term for uncritical enthusiasm, demonstrates this self-reflexive descriptor as a simultaneous imperative for acceptable interaction. While not a given, lack of overt contraindications in an original post usually indicates openness to critique while assuming

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<sup>40</sup> Anderson’s comment on linguistic exclusivity comes at the beginning of a longer meditation on the impossibility of acquiring all languages, as a preface to his discussion on the importance of perceived purity or continuity in the propagation of both nationalism and racism. See 148–49.

affective sympathy for both source texts and fellow fans.<sup>41</sup> Of course, both modes exist at Dramabeans.com.

Of the two most common negative responses on the site, disagreements with the recap itself are encouraged by the structure of the recap and comments, as well as by the terms laid out in the site FAQ. The other, demands for faster or increased recaps, has drawn the ire of site moderators on several occasions. This fan base imperative to recap a specific drama joins the inevitable requests to post recaps faster (faster!) to create the kind of alienating experience that would render the recap in terms of functionality, making the site more responsive to readership input, but debarring the recappers from the precise affective engagements which render their recaps, with their lengthy analyses and real-time responses to the source texts, so attractive to begin with. The kind of affective labor present in the recaps at Dramabeans.com, where the recappers mediate their responses from the source texts to their readership, renders such a functional model of production in terms of ingratitude for the work being done.

Social response supposedly undergirds the gift-based economies of fan cultures, where the work one fan does is compensated by other fans' responses in the form of (positive) comments. This response constitutes one of the major form of interaction between the fan and his or her fandom community, and as such, the responsive fan comment constitutes an important physical inscription of presence and engagement, both

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41 For an in-depth discussion of types of uncritical fan response, see Fanlore's entry on *Squee*: <http://fanlore.org/wiki/Squee>. The discussion overtly decentralizes the rational or objective response from its construction as the most preferable or only creditable kind of response to media texts.

with the recapper's work and the fandom source, as well as the population of fans whose paths all cross at this particular site. The careful attention and affective engagement of fellow fans, as present in the comments, are supposedly the recapper's basic form of compensation, beyond the satisfaction and engagement of producing the recap in itself. While the gift exists in the recap itself, the unit of exchange is not only the comment but the thanks of the commenters too, their tangible gratitude for work done well.

The site remains committed to stringent analysis of its material, while unabashedly standing by the personal investment and enthusiasm of its recappers. However, as site moderator and originator, javabeans also sometimes receives derisive commentary, especially when there is a drama that some readers think she should be recapping.<sup>42</sup> Although the word *ungrateful* has been highlighted less in moderator responses than in the flood of other fans' defensive comments, the idea is certainly an underlying bolster of their indignant response. This idea of ingratitude suggests that the foundational gift-economy form of exchange within fandom must also contain a kind of affective taxation, requiring acknowledgment of work done, as well as the more familiar monetary compensation that increasingly characterizes even the supposedly gift-based fandom interaction. The site's production wanders between the readership's hopes and

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42 A sample of simultaneous commodification and analytic response can be found in the 352 comments on guest recapper thunderbolt's tongue-in-cheek mash-up of three different K-dramas, in response to javabeans' exasperated tweet concerning recent importunate recap demands. Comments spanned the gamut from calls to recant (see the comment thread at 22, begun by Kate, and comment 93, from SprinkledPink), to heated justification (see comment 150, from amhrancas). The entire thread is worth reading in the interests of cataloguing the fan responses. thunderbolt, "Can You Hear My Boss Protect the New Gisaeng's Heart: Episode 1," Dramabeans.com. August 27, 2011. <http://www.dramabeans.com/2011/08/can-you-hear-my-boss-protect-the-new-gisaengs-heart-episode-1/>

demands, the recappers' labor and desires, and all the fans' mixed affiliations, to produce destabilizations of both compliant and consumerist models of interaction.

Overviews of fandom can vacillate around questions of docility and compliance, especially in relation to the critical aspects of fandom production.<sup>43</sup> The impulse toward production in the spirit of communal fervor drives the participation of a fan within the community; as media theorist John Fiske puts it, “[The] moment of reception becomes the moment of production in fan culture” (40). This moment becomes crucial when dealing with the question of fan response as a kind of critical practice, since it includes complex overlapping phenomena. For Fiske, whose strict dichotomous structures of cultural and economic factors form his account of fandom interactions, this critical fandom-generated response is an excessive reactivity, differentiating a fan from a “normal” consumer of culture in degree of intensity but not in kind. I propose with Matt Hills that Fiske’s approach, while attractively conclusive, risks obscuring some of the nuances of fandom’s apparent cultures of compliance and gift, and offer instead a few readings of Dramabeans.com’s consumer behaviors, ranging from the commodification of the recap through to a manifestation of gift culture through finance capital.<sup>44</sup>

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43 See Matt Hills’ first chapter in *Fan Cultures*, where he works out the value of maintaining a tense continuum across dispassion and affection, within gratification and consumption, when discussing fandom participation and production.

44 See Hills, *Fan Cultures* 51–52, for his discussion of Fiske’s article. For a counter-example to Fiske’s approach, see Hills’ deliberate underminings of his own certitude and conclusiveness in his recommendations for autoethnographic self-reflexive research within fandom cultures, especially on page 81.

We begin with the Althusserian<sup>45</sup> interpellation of the fan at the moment of reception and with the recaps emerging from an intimately affective relationship with the source texts themselves as well the communities surrounding them. Moving first to a more straightforward definition of compliance, simply assuming the recapper's immediately sympathetic stance to every aspect of the canonical text could, in the context of impassioned response, still be an mistake. The first question on Dramabeans.com's FAQ<sup>46</sup> clearly demonstrates that, while unquestioning devotion is a legitimate and recognizable fandom form, it is not often in use at Dramabeans.com, a site whose headers include the phrase "blogging my K-drama obsession," while its founder observes on the About page that "just because it's pop culture doesn't mean discourse has to be shallow."<sup>47</sup> Any tensions between critical response and enthusiastic affection manifest as a rich archive of call-and-response, germinating instead of reiterating orthodoxies concerning source texts and community formation.

There is another nuance to the most compliant recap, moving from the attentive toward the devotional. Being in this kind of compliance with a source text requires fervent recapping, relaying details and nuances of intimate personal reactions as well as

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45 Louis Pierre Althusser's theory of interpellation into state-sponsored social relations considers the subject's emergence as simultaneous with the address by the state. I am not applying Althusser with an eye to the potentially hegemonic apparatus of (in)gratitude, but to the simultaneity of the emergence of subjective presence within fandom and the subject's address by a fandom text – in this case, the recap. A fan emerges at the moment of the reading as s/he responds in specific ways to the address of a fan recapper's texts, which elicits response through the affective engagements present in the recap.

46 "How come you're so sarcastic? Just tell us what happened in the episode/article, without your stupid opinions!" javabeans and girlfriday. "FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions."  
<http://www.dramabeans.com/faq>.

47 javabeans, "About," <http://www.dramabeans.com/about/>. This quotation has survived multiple reworkings of the About page's contents.



subtleties of characterization and narrative arc. This deeply felt sympathy moves the recapper from factual recountings toward speculations on future plot development, discussion of alternate possibilities, gripes with character inconsistencies or clumsy retconning,<sup>48</sup> and comparisons with other works in the same genre or by the same actors, as part of the recapping gesture. The devout recap thus shares characteristics with its apostate form, both relaying information dovetailed with attentive critical discussion. Fiske discusses the fan's devout productivity as a kind of epistemic intervention, saying that "it also participates in the construction of the original text and thus turns the commercial narrative or performance into popular culture," changing consumption in transformative ways (Fiske 40). This attractive claim is also deeply problematic, since it requires an unsustainable purification of capitalist structures from fandom action. As Matt Hills puts it, "Conventional logic, seeking to construct a sustainable opposition between the 'fan' and the 'consumer,' falsifies the fan's experience by positioning fan and consumer as separable cultural identities" (Hills 29). This continuing complication of fandom's devotional aspects complicates readings of gift and commodities in fandom contexts.

The gift economies, or exchanges based in social or affective response, become even more interesting and convoluted in these transnational and translational contexts.

The gift culture funded through capitalist commodification dances at the edge of falling

48 "Retcon" is a portmanteau of "retroactive continuity," a term which indicates the integration of a late-blooming plot revelation or character development into the series' extant world as if the show had always intended to progress toward this point. A clumsy retcon is not well-integrated into this material, and becomes clearly artificial to the audience: the plot or characterizations become contradictory, or else the worldbuilding no longer makes sense.

into market economies at all times and can be indecipherable from the market economy when considered in terms of moneymaking. However, the presence of the gift within the recappers' giving of themselves through their affective labor in making the recap keeps Dramabeans.com teetering between personal affiliative texts and what Fiske calls "industrially produced texts," which nonetheless provide opportunities for fans to 'excorporate' the products of the industry" (Fiske 25).

However, discussion of revenue generation from fandom participation and production remains complex. One major concern within fandom communities is the exploitation of fan labor for others' financial gain, as well as host sites' attempts to edit and control information stored on their sites. These interacting issues have led to fan-based archive initiatives, notably the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) and its dedicated servers, purchased by fan donation.<sup>49</sup> Dramabeans.com's relationship to affective engagement and compensation, complicated by its generation of advertising revenue, falls between compliance (with capitalist/consumerist models of revenue generation) and opacity (since that compliance apparently occurs for reasons beyond pure remuneration). My own fandom insinuation suggests that these two considerations—the site's persistence and growth and the generation of ad revenue—are not only linked but sourced in a genuine desire to continue providing recaps and the concomitant fandom interaction in the comments.

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<sup>49</sup> The Organization for Transformative Works's detailed mission statement and history, available at its website, demonstrate the pride it takes in its independence from other fan platforms' legal concerns. It is possible to read a slight affinity between this position and that of the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

After beginning as a personal nonrevenue-generating WordPress site and then moving through a brief Donations period, Dramabeans.com began running paid advertisements on the site's main page. The ads are in the sidebar and do not impinge heavily upon reader consciousness; sponsored posts are rare and well flagged as such. This restraint is a contrast from other blogs and fan sites, which may list sponsorships only at the very bottom of a post or allow ads to frame or be deliberately integrated within the reading material, thus capturing the reading eye and forcing reader participation. Posts at both Dramabeans.com and elsewhere demonstrate that javabeans considers generating revenue for the continuing maintenance of the site as contiguous with her commitment to the fan base.<sup>50</sup> Despite its engagement with capitalist modes of consumption and remuneration, the current schema of revenue generation at Dramabeans.com is also implicated in the maintenance of the gifting apparatus. The ads replace the Donations button, becoming the site moderator's method for decoupling content generation from direct donation in an effort to defray site maintenance costs while staying within accepted fandom mores. These questions of cost, upkeep, compensation, and deflection require reconsiderations of gift culture away from the decoys of technoecstatic models toward the infrastructural considerations governing representation and participation in larger online economies.

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<sup>50</sup> javabeans writes: "One of the questions I get asked the most on Dramabeans is how I manage to watch and recap so many dramas all the time . . . girlfriday and I both probably spend a lot more time on the site than could be considered healthy (it's all for you!), and on a few occasions I've made the conscious effort to scale back in order to balance out my life—but ultimately I always come crawling back like a junkie in need of her next kdrama fix. Which isn't even so much a metaphor as it is an accurate description of [my] life." javabeans, "Intel giveaway," November 24, 2010,

## On Reading K-drama: The Recap as Mediating Source Text

Moving the action of Korean drama from television screen to computer monitor contains two moments of translation, from moving drama to stills and text, and from Korean into English, as well as two moments of critical response in which the English-language text holds primacy of place. The fan tracks the recapper's movement across languages and media, remediating them as a unified virtual text from the dispersed textual amalgam encompassing not only the drama itself but its translation and reception as well. The persistent presence of the recap readers, whose primary experience of K-drama comes through the recaps, renders the recap a kind of mediated source text. For that source-rendering to occur, allowing these readers to participate in the larger fandom with something approaching commonality, the recap must bear significant resemblances to the K-drama it remediates, while simultaneously mediating between the source text and its fans. These multiple flows of meaning and affinity all pass through the recap itself, which mediates each in specific ways, while also becoming a strange version of source text as readers reweave its multiple mediations into a seemingly seamless cultural artifact. The structures creating and emergent from this remarkable mediation form the basis of the analysis of specific examples taken from Dramabeans.com.

Critical code theorist N. Katherine Hayles deploys medium-specific analysis in digital contexts to emphasize the underlying materiality of the medium under consideration, as well the intermedial reactions the medium enables, since media change with relation to each other. As she puts it, medium-specific analysis "attends both to the

specificity of the form . . . and to citations and imitations of one medium in another” (60). For the purposes of Dramabeans.com, medium-specific analysis means discussing visual stills, the text of the recap, and the comments below the recap as simultaneously separate components that require consideration, as well as taking a multimedial cross section of an experiential moment gathered around the episode being recapped.<sup>51</sup> Materiality in this reading is not limited to the physical. As Hayles points out, “Materiality should be understood as existing in complex dynamic interplay with content, coming into focus or fading into the background, depending on what performances the work enacts” (71). Despite its online form, the recap has a material presence, combining textual, visual, and aural evidence to produce an echo or faint specter of the moving medium of the television drama. My analysis uses Deleuzian theory to discuss the ways in which that specter or echo can occur or emerge, through the pervasive emphasis on affective reaction within the recap, from its textual and visual aspects. Deleuze’s focus on the affective work and subjective time of cinema provides a strong corollary for the consideration of the recap-reading experience, in which the disparate pieces of the recap texts (texts, images, songs) meld with the reader’s physical hardware.

One of the recapper’s most powerful tools is nonlinguistic: the screen captures, or screencaps, are still images taken from a moving source and inserted into the recap, bolstering the recapper’s account through its visual record of affective engagement. This

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<sup>51</sup> The songs linked on Dramabeans.com are important enough to warrant their own discussion, but since my analysis focuses on the text and image of the recap, I must reluctantly bracket the role of music as affective sink and chronological amplifier on the site, and move on.

interplay deserves further consideration, since it is crucial to the recap's performative abilities. In Gilles Deleuze's contemplation of the philosophical fields opened up by the advent of cinema, he considers the dyad of movement (*Cinema 1*) and time (*Cinema 2*). Deleuze's insistence on the specificity of the nonlinguistic image—that it has a methodology of meaning different in kind from linguistic or text-based work—renders the screencap, the still image captured from the moving episode, an artifact in its own right. The intensity of the screencap retains the shock of movement in the context of the recap, serving to call the moment back from the reader's memory, or as a metonym for the movement arrested in the screencap itself. Extrapolating from this shock, the recap moves the screencap into motion, while the still image enables the creation of motion through its projection onto the brain-as-screen. Within the *movement-image*, which privileges movement across time, lies the *affection-image*, which Deleuze centers on the face: the “pulsion” or flows between admiration/wonder and desire/power are concentrated at this site of supreme meaning and ethical engagement (*Cinema 1* 87–91).<sup>52</sup> In the Deleuzian analysis the close-up on the face has a well-documented affective role: as he puts it, “the pure affect, the pure expressed of the state of things in fact relates to a face which expresses it (or to several faces, or to equivalents, or to propositions)” (*Cinema 1* 103). The close-up as screencap provides a “pure expressed” inserted into the text of the recap, re-creating the shock of the brain through the break in the change of medium. Interpretation of screencaps occurs in terms of specifically sympathetic affective

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<sup>52</sup> Deleuze's discussion of the close-up and the affection-image occur primarily in *Cinema 1*, and I rely specifically on pages 87-91.

use. While the recap's textuality can streamline events or outright skip disliked storylines, the screencap functions as both break and involuntary affective engagement in the flow of the text.

In the context of K-drama recaps, the screencap as affection-image is therefore of critical importance. The screencaps at Dramabeans.com are heavily character-focused, concentrating on facial expressions or other affective weight as carried within each image. The initial interaction launches the affective mechanism unleashed within each episode; the longer-term relationship, built up between the screen character and the invested viewer, is an important characteristic of any successful form.<sup>53</sup> In the case of the recap reader, this link is strengthened not only through the textual renderings but the insinuation of the screencaps as well. Thus the screencap is a necessary innovation for translating an affective, moving visual medium like K-drama into the flat screen and still images of online engagement, allowing the recap to move, as Deleuze says, "from the stone to the scream" (89) —that is, from stillness into precipitate action, with immediate affective weight.

The screencap's power is in evidence throughout javabeans' recaps of Korean Broadcasting System's 2010 drama *Wish Upon a Star* (see Figure 4-1). In *Wish Upon a Star*, the two lead characters are faced with a set of contrived circumstances: lawyer meets spunky girl with many siblings; they must move in together with the lawyer's two

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53 The accelerated or "binge" watching pattern, where a 16-episode series is finished in a weekend, seems to alter the affective experience of some English-language K-drama fans. The links between speed, affect, access, and fan control suggest a larger set of interlocking phenomena, requiring a dedicated analysis, which unfortunately lies outside the scope of my current analysis.

brothers, and hijinks ensue. javabeans' recap of *Wish Upon a Star*'s eighth episode demonstrates the mechanics and specificities of Deleuze's image-based theory, as well as its larger implications for the transmission of affect as central to the recap's work. The recap of Episode 8 opens with a triptych of faces; in order to sustain viewer interest, the previous episode had ended in a vicious verbal exchange between the leads, with a small sibling caught in the middle.<sup>54</sup>

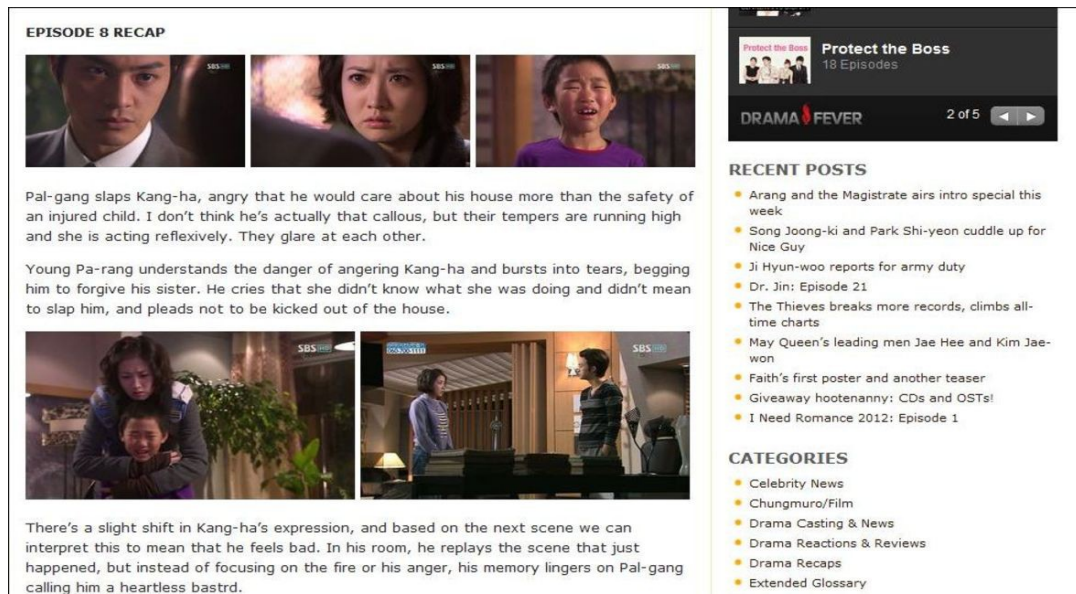


Figure 4-1. This image is taken from *Wish Upon A Star*'s Episode 8 Recap, written by javabeans and posted January 29, 2010. Note the screencaps' integration into the larger recap. The text and screencaps in the figure are preceded by an introductory screencap, a brief note on javabeans' changing reception of the drama, and a link to a song by Dyne.

Looking at the three faces from left to right re-creates the tense rhythm of the shot-reverse-shot, a technical convention for conveying a seamless conversation so familiar it has become nearly transparent. In this case, the screencaps pan from scowling lawyer to frowning heroine, with the crying child caught mid-sob, reestablishing the recap reader

<sup>54</sup> See Figure 4.1. My discussion focuses on the first triptych.



within last episode's fraught affective landscape. The triptych of faces contains the entirety of this opening, and to look at each in turn is to engage the affective mechanism at work throughout the recap. The screencaps reveal the shot's own formulaic ubiquity, even as the close-ups of the faces elicit a measure of unwilling affective engagement, of a kind with the involuntary engagement required by film or televisual media.

The ubiquity of the close-up throughout the recaps of *Wish Upon a Star* is intensified by the placement of these screencaps in their shot-reverse-shot sequence, to have the characters facing each other even on the computer monitor. Together, the screencaps facilitate Deleuze's affection-image, in which the face in close-up "prepares a paroxysm" (*Cinema 1* 87), initiating a serial intensification of affect that passes between the faces in close-up until the scene "pass[es] from one quality to another, to emerge on to a new quality" (89), which is then integrated into the reading fan's reactive, affectionate, enthusiastic participation. The screencaps are not chosen lightly: all on their own, they have a specific purpose, distinct from that of the written text. Instead of simply buttressing the words, the images participate in a primary concern of K-drama: not just narration, but incitement of affect. In this sense, the screencap is an integral part of the recap itself.

The affective power of K-drama, and the importance of its visceral immediacy to the reading as well as viewing publics, requires that the recap's still image and typed text convey that transformed and transformative weight from screen to reader. This is demonstrated in another example, the recapped emotional peaks in the 2007 drama

*Coffee Prince*, a series which intensified K-drama awareness in anglophone online communities, not least because it brought new readers to Dramabeans.com. In *Coffee Prince*, a cross-dressing girl (Go Eun Chan) working odd jobs as “the man of the house,” and a rich but disgraced chaebol heir (Choi Han Gyu), must work together to transform an ailing coffeehouse into a viable business venture. Their romantic relationship develops in fits and starts, alternately helped and hindered by Eun Chan’s decision to continue passing as a young man. Han Gyu’s subsequent crisis of sexual identity intensifies until it precipitates that critical drama turning point: his confession of love.

javabeans’ recap of the series demonstrates particular care with this moment, the crowning scene of Episode 10 (Tenth Cup), retaining precise descriptions and an abundance of screencaps. In a subsequent post, javabeans includes an excerpt from the actual shooting script with her own translation, including the production notes. javabeans prefaces the post by noting how it “is turning me into a starry-eyed fangirl,” who would produce even more than the episode recap, before documenting translational practices before launching the entry:

Yes, you may notice I’ve taken a few liberties with punctuation and such, which I’ve done because I find Korean and English have different cadences and speech patterns . . . I’d rather preserve the tone of a piece than transcribe to a perfectly literal but less-than-elegant effect.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> javabeans, “Anatomy of a Scene: Tenth Cup,” August 1, 2007, <http://www.dramabeans.com/2007/08/anatomy-of-a-scene-tenth-cup/>.

The ellipses, which dominate the notes, document an insertion of time into the translated transcription of this crucial scene. Consider their ubiquity in the script javabeans translates in “Anatomy of a Scene: Tenth Cup,” immediately after Han Gyul turns around for the last time and heads back to the cafe:

Han Gyul: *[aching heart, with warmth]* “Whether you’re a man, or an alien . . . I don’t care anymore.”

Eun Chan, *heart hurting, overwhelmed*

Han Gyul: “I tried to get rid of my feelings and I couldn’t . . . so let’s go, as far as we can go.” *[watching quietly, with a small smile]* “Let’s try.”

Eun Chan, *heart aching . . . happy . . . lowering her head . . . soon overflowing with tears . . . worrying for the future.*

Han Gyul, *looking at this Eun Chan . . . holding Eun Chan’s lowered head carefully, protectively . . . his smile faltering . . . absorbed in his thoughts . . . happy but not purely so.*

Eun Chan *carefully takes a step closer, wrapping her arms around Han Gyul’s waist . . .*

*wishing time could stop like this.*

The seeming excess of ellipses also signals an insertion of time into the script on the part of the mediator. The effect is to create an echo of the scene’s real-time slowness, the spaces inserted in the service of affective response. The text of the recap enervates its screencaps with this same affective weight, cutting Han Gyul’s sudden movement into a

slow-motion diptych reminiscent of stop-motion chronophotography. Significantly, the recap switches to a near-transcription of the scene, emptying its prose to fill its images with power, while the script holds its ellipses to indicate insinuation into diegetic time. The entirety of the character, narrative, and emotional arc have built to this moment; in the recap, narration moves swiftly past Han Gyul's longing and indecision as everyone waits, breathless, for what Han Gyul will do as he walks in the door:

*He runs in to face Eun Chan, staring intensely at her face . . .*

*Startled, Eun Chan starts to explain that she's trying to fix some damage to Yu Ju's mural drawing.*

*Still silent, Han Gyul swoops in purposefully—*

And it is the screencap that gives readers the lovers' long-awaited kiss. In the delirium of the moment, the detailed narratives give way to a series of near-contiguous images linked to direct quotes, occurring in some slowed subjective time, heavily weighted with affective power, as Han Gyul finally confesses his attraction openly to Eun Chan: "Whether you're a man, or an alien . . . I don't care anymore." This potent line encapsulates Han Gyul's character development, and its recording within the recap (as well as its afterlife on Dramabeans.com as the ultimate love confession) matches the visual record of Deleuze's metonymic affection-image as focused on Han Gyul. Into the stillness of his revelation comes a space, the ellipsis within Han Gyul's confession taken up by Eun Chan's stunned, silent face, passing to the reader through the proliferating

screen captures. In this moment the faces meet, the text and image meld, and the screens superimpose their motion and stillness upon the brain.

This moment of crystallization bears comparison not to the movement-image in *Cinema 1* but the time-image of *Cinema 2*,<sup>56</sup> a moment heavy with the flicker of affective storms at play between the two leads and their viewers—before the crystal-image shatters with Han Gyul’s sudden movement, and the action continues. The crystal-image is Deleuze’s term for a specific kind of sensory disruption in a film, which manifests as a dilation or splitting of time, as sensory data fall out of synch with each other, and the past and present superimpose themselves on the viewer’s perception: “Time has to split . . . in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the present pass on, while the other preserves all the past. Time consists of this split, and it is this, it is time, that we *see in the crystal*” (*Cinema 2* 81). This crystallization marks the presence of the time-image, manifesting in the recap reader’s melding of the screencaps, the ellipses, the narration, and the quoted script as s/he progresses through the devoted recaps of this crucial scene. In the moment of reading, the fan experiences both affective echoes—his or her own, as recalled from watching the scene, and the recapper’s deeply felt reaction, as captured in the recap.

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56 “Subjectivity is never ours—it is time.” Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 82–83. See especially chapter 4, “The Crystals of Time,” for elaboration of the time-image’s dependence on affective weight for the fragile moment of crystallization.

## Conclusion

The acts of translation involved in the recap, from distributed into participatory fan culture and from motion into stillness, reproduce the K-drama as multiple simultaneous texts, their affective weight tied to temporal flow. The deliberate deployment of text and image recreates the flow and solidification of time for the recap readers, almost against their stated desire to hurry through or linger less with the dramas. The recappers mediate these translations from within extant linguistic, economic, and affiliative infrastructures, negotiating within and online interchanges in something perilously reminiscent of good faith translation, even as their remediations open up critical and affective responses. In a similar spirit, I have attempted to open a series of ways into a larger inquiry, to consider the implications of this site's interactions both within and around online fandom cultures, by marking a series of approaches to relevant questions with overlapping sets of concerns. In the spirit of fandoms' profound engagements with and myriad responses to their texts, I request that my readers think of this chapter itself as a recap, and I hope it constitutes an opening move for many generative conversations.

Chapter 5. “C’est moi qui te formerai dans un premier temps”: Language, Mother Tongue, and the Fugue in Nancy Huston’s *Prodige polyphonie*.

In francophone writer Nancy Huston’s *Prodige polyphonie*, the voices of several narrators trace the story of Lara, her mother Sofia, and her daughter Maya, through a textual rendition of the musical form called the fugue. Lara’s narrations guide the text, giving vital voice to her daughter’s life through a complex speculative restructuring of narrative time; Lara’s voice fuses past and present. However, her mother’s and daughter’s transformative states – genius, death – leave Lara feeling both trapped and unnecessary, and she eventually escapes Sofia’s death and Maya’s approaching international debut through a fugue state of her own. Using Huston’s nonfiction essays on piano and mother tongue, as well as Luce Irigaray’s theories on language in intimate relation to the mother’s body, I explore the reformulations of music and maternity Lara creates in the speculative space of the incubation room, and extend it throughout her projected future for Maya. I join a statement on maternal language to the existing critical reception of the text, which focuses more heavily on the formal statement made by translating the fugue from musical to narrative terms.

Introduction:

In Nancy Huston’s literary text *Prodige polyphonie*, bodily materiality and cultural discourse conflate in the dual experiences of musicianship and motherhood. Maya’s taste for the fugue is the lingering hallmark of her premature life in the incubator, the mix of mechanical noises and her own body, and the sound of her mother’s hushed, incessant voice, keeping her engaged within her physical body and anchored to her mother. I argue that the text’s fugue-based structures are present to entwine the narratives of Lara, a damaged narrator formed through powerful discursive structures, and of Maya, Lara’s daughter, to whom Lara gives the gift of a life which begins other than or outside of these contexts: indeed, in a time and space during which Maya cannot know herself, Lara narrates a relation to music which owes its vitality to a material world which surrounds, enervates, and comes before and after other interrelations, expressed as a birthright or a native tongue. Thus, what Lara desires for Maya is an origin from within

her own experiences, but outside of that damaged part, in which she is not a musician but instead an interpreter of others' musics; what Lara wants for her daughter is the experience of unquestioned competence, compelling a more seamless relation, both to music and to the natural world. The extended moment of maternal and mechanical formation is extremely powerful; the novel's entire narration of Maya's musical prowess happens in a remarkable mixture of the future and present tenses, indicating that each scene is part of Lara's whispered narration, the sound of her voice woven into the hiss and thump of the machines.

I deploy a musical turn here because I consider the fugue's structural arrangements a significant part of the text's speculative, contingent projections into potentially bifurcating futures. Lara's play – her daring supposition that she can, in fact, create Maya “dans un premier temps,” rests on her own ability to avoid recreating her own traumatized relations to music and maternity with Maya. This gamble expresses itself through the fugue's heterogenous temporality, with music an affective/effective stand-in for the entwined linguistic and maternal alienations which define Lara's relations with her own mother. That Huston invokes the musical term beyond the literary term indicates both the excess of affect uncontainable by the linguistic, and the inability of a conventional novel structure to capture the chronological disjunction of Lara's speculative leap.

Huston's text poses two central questions: whether Lara and Maya's placental relationship can be reestablished, once severed, and whether Lara's dire maternal relation



with her mother Sofia can be transformed. Both of these questions relate directly to the major concerns of this dissertation, moving between discursive and material events as the grounding of change, growth, and becoming (whether agential or not), and eventually its central consideration: what would it take to thrive, given a world that desires you/me instrumentalized or just... absent? Huston's *Prodige* juxtaposes music and language to demonstrate how thoroughly maternal alienation suffuses Lara's experience of both, then uses the fugue's formal structures of repetition and transformation to speculate on and potentially escape a seemingly-unbreakable repetition of the same through the emergence of Lara's daughter Maya, the prodigy. The text posits two different paths for these prodigal daughters, outside of the white cocoon room which frames Lara's narrations, and suggest both an ominous devouring of material reality by symbolic logic, and an evasion of that self-destruction through the creation of some new language, another mother tongue.

I use both the actual and the virtual experiences of musicianship and the mother-daughter relation to read Lara's eventual silence as not only a dissociative episode, but also an episode in the sense it holds within fugue structures: as an interstitial time, having little or relation to the subject. Several of Huston's novels and writings entrench the leavetaking of one language and taking up of another within the affective and intellectual ties of motherhood and music, specifically within the two kinds of keyboards, and most specifically of all within the distinct, but sometimes simultaneous enunciations found in the musical form of the fugue. Finally, I argue (somewhat orthogonal to other readings of

the ending) that the child Lara formed in a first or initial time, in the common time of the shared placental relation, becomes the daughter who will lead Lara through her own fugue episode into something different: an eventual becoming, another metamorphosis from one state into another.

Thematic Discussion of Nancy Huston's Literary Work and Introduction to *Prodige polyphonie*:

Nancy Huston is an accomplished writer, a bestselling author in her home country of France and winner of several literary prizes, among them the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens in 1996 and the prestigious Prix Fémina in 2006. She has chosen to write in French, although her first language was English; she lives in France, and is often introduced, somewhat evasively, as a Franco-Canadian writer. I say evasive, for although factually accurate, Huston's geographical location and chosen daily language show a tension-filled relationship with both national identity and mother tongues. Huston's novels coalesce around the concept of alienation or otherness, often signalled by an uncomfortable, self-aware relation between language, national identity, and affiliations deliberately chosen in adulthood over the less-fraught identity markers of early life.

Huston's concerns over national belonging recur across her novels, even as her documentation of the centrality of the French language and struggles between the primacy of the Parisian accent and the presence of other francophone accents, reflect the turmoil of postcolonial political relations as they play out in France. The decoupling of

childhood, home, and language shows clearly in her nonfiction work, which tend to document the logics of creation and the difficulties of having a childhood steeped in one language and an adult life in another. For example, see *Journal de la création*, *Une enfance d'ailleurs* and *Lettres parisiennes*, dealing with the dual arrival of a book and a child, a compilation of francophone writers' experiences of their childhood, and a collection of letters between Huston and Leila Sebber, dealing mainly in their shared experiences as writers and as displaced, between-state francophones.

There is also *Nord perdu*, a memoir published in 1998, very close to *Prodige's* publication in 1999, describing Huston's self-removal from English, her reemergence as a francophone writer, and her continuing, pervasive disorientation between languages, inheritances, and belongings. She opens this memoir with a discussion of strategies for dealing with comprehensive self-hatred: "Bien des comportements peuvent être inspirés par la haine de soi. On peut devenir artiste. Se suicider. Changer de nom, de pays, de langue. Tout cela à la fois. . . . (1)"<sup>57</sup> These terms – art, suicide, abruptly changing affiliations – become equivalent in their listing together, and the final clause unites them all into a single act. These sentences, renunciation and a kind of permanent personal alienation, form the conclusion of an opening quote from Sviatoslav Richter, on self-hatred – a quote which also forms the epigraph to Huston's *Prodige*. The singular opening broaches two differing modes or forms of exploration, one fictional and polyvocal, and the other supposedly autobiographical and therefore singular – but if

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57 "All sorts of behaviour can be inspired by self-hatred. You can become an artist. Commit suicide. Adopt a new name, a new country, a new language. All of the above. . . ." (*Losing North* 1).

anything, the opening lines of *Nord perdu* decouple the writing self from the observed self a remarkable violence. For Huston, language is clearly an important index of affiliations, even as the threat of linguistic blanks lends itself to a kind of stage fright or impostor syndrome. Huston addresses this idea repeatedly throughout *Nord perdu*, often in terms of terrified, obsessive perfection: “Subsiste quand même, presque toujours, en dépit de ses efforts acharnés, un rien. Une petite trace d’accent. Un soupçon, c’est le cas de le dire. . . . Et cela suffit ” (33).<sup>58</sup> The concern with perfection in language performance is intermingled with a concern for the divisions and passing of time, reflected in the relation between childhood and adulthood, as delineated through the passage from one language to another.

This passage between time, language, and personal relations is a living part of Huston’s oeuvre; she has now translated several of her own texts from French back into English, moving between the languages she calls “mother” and “stepmother” in *Nord perdu*. Others have queried her investments in her own translations, circumstances which manifested most notably in the case of her novel *Plainsong*. Set in the flat and brutal plains of the Canadian Prairies, *Plainsong* was the first novel Huston had written initially in English. However, the work found no publisher in that language, so she set it aside. Some years later, Huston translated the novel from English to French, publishing it with Actes Sud in 1993. As *Cantique des plaines*, the novel not only found itself successful, it

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58 “No matter how lengthy and arduous their efforts, however, a little something almost always gives them away. The faintest trace, just a *soupçon* (good word for it) of an accent. . . . That’s all it takes” (*Losing North* 22).

won Huston the Governor General's Award for francophone Canadian writing that year, sparking a lingering contestation of the novel's French-language designation and issues over Huston's status as an authentically francophone Canadian, since her French is not inflected by Québécois or Métis heritages; she learned the language in France. These vexed questions over authenticity only mirror Huston's larger concerns over genuine belonging as linguistically marked.

Another axis of Huston's work, a fixed concern which parallels her relation to language and estrangement, is certainly music, especially music for the solo piano or harpsichord. Two of her novels concern pianists (*Prodige; polyphonie* and 1981's *Les variations Goldberg*, named for one of Bach's most famous compositions), and musical terminology is referenced throughout her bibliography. For example, in Huston's 1996 novel *Instrument des ténèbres*, its private scordatura (or dissonance, and the name of the journal kept by the protagonist) contrasts with its literary sonata (a highly structured musical form, and the protagonist's name for her developing novel), for an example of Huston's commingling of literary and musical terms, outside the context of musicianship).

Huston indirectly but clearly addresses the close relation between mother, mother tongue, affective engagement, and music when she discusses her abandonment of the piano in favor of the harpsichord. In *Nord perdu*, Huston crucially indexes her own relationships with attachment, musicianship, and motherhood when she ties the piano to violent surprise and childhood abandonment, linking English to the piano as "instruments

maternels ” (64), before claiming French and the harpsichord as having “une forme d’expression plus subtile, plus monocorde, discrète et raffinée. Jamais d’explosion, jamais de surprise violente en français, ni au clavecin ” (65).<sup>59</sup> The distinction between the languages and the instruments rests in a profound personal experience linked specifically to control, and avoidance of the violent damage which an adult can inflict on a child. Despite the application of a Bakhtinian polyphony, which separates the voices of the text from the author and each other to create a multivoiced, conflicting text which does not necessarily reflect anything from authorial experience, Huston’s avowed crisis and conflation, between instruments, languages, and modes of feminized creation, power her exploration of three women with their three pianos: Russian immigrant Sofia, her daughter Lara, and Lara’s daughter, Maya, whose premature birth ushers in the text’s opening movement.

Grandmother Sofia, an accompanist of Russian descent, defected from the then-USSR with her violinist husband, landing in France before Lara was born. Sofia inhabits the world of music as unquestioningly as she does the worlds of France and Christianity. She is deeply religious, and her narrations take the form of conversations between herself and God; this could have ramifications for Huston’s own models of motherhood inflected with Albertan religion, or else it could index a relation between Sofia and her own musicianship which is not constitutive for Sofia’s agential subjectivity. Sofia dotes on

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<sup>59</sup> “motherly instruments. . . their expressivity is infinitely more subtle, discreet and refined. Speaking French or playing the harpsichord, in other words, there are never any violent surprises or explosions” (*Losing North* 50).

Maya, her *vnoutchka*, an extremely gifted pianist born 16 weeks premature, and whose survival was initially very uncertain. Lara is Maya's mother and the text's primary narrator; *Prodige* opens with her early delivery and subsequent frantic attempts to keep Maya alive. Lara believes that her voice and care, the depth and strength of her passion for Maya, kept Maya alive to term.<sup>60</sup> Lara's narrations to Maya, which centers on her musical abilities and the training Lara will give her, form the majority of the text.

The reader experiences Lara's narrations to Maya (and thus, the majority of the text) in a strange doubled time, in which the future and the present occur together. Lara is narrating to the infant Maya about events which have not yet occurred, but the narration moves from the future to the present tense within the first few lines of each segment: Lara predicts, imagines, or speculates the future the reader receives as the events of the text, and it is her voice which binds all the rest of the narrative pieces together. She speaks the words which bind and tie Maya to life, in the interregnum, letting her voice do what her body could not, blurring that boundary with the strength of her passion for her daughter. This speculative declaration of Maya's giftedness, her bodily relationship to music and eventual triumphant conquest of her audition, comprises the kernel of Lara's actions: she is forming that new relation to the world, for her daughter, setting the stage to create a world she herself desperately needs, but cannot reach.

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60 Lara was married to Robert, but they separated over the events surrounding Maya's birth. Lara considers Maya's survival and persistence her great achievement, while Robert admits that Lara's dedication to Maya during this time drives him away from them both. He describes her as "obsédée, obnubilée (32)," and while on the surface his complaint is petulantly about the lack of conjugal sex since Maya's premature birth, his gradual but determined distancing also demonstrates his deep fear of the strength of Lara and Maya's closely bonded relationship, which Robert considers strange and suffocating, and exclusively without room for him.

Lara's voice is the text's final fugitive subject, and when she flees her life, after the death of her mother, it goes haywire, then silent. The recurring motif of her inability to read or even find music suddenly reverses itself, the written form of music pursuing her even as she flees it. Lara must eventually abandon her voice and her body to escape her music, the hold it has on her, and the destruction it has caused in her. This leavetaking, the passage from one state into the next, may have emerged out of Huston's own abandonment, but surpasses authorial history to become an open-ended statement about metamorphoses, as Maya transforms Lara's earlier monologues into something else, a language which exceeds the dictionary. This incredible change is itself presaged in the structures of the musical and psychological fugue.

#### Polyphony and Futurity: The Fugue as Speculative Literary Structure in *Prodige*

In a brief discussion on the text's genre, literary critic Anne-Rosine Delbart points out that *Prodige's* subtitle, *polyphonie*, occurs in the space normally occupied by the word *roman*, or novel; that is, the subtitle indicates the formal conventions governing the text:

La polyphonie dans les récits, c'est-à-dire l'entrelacs des voix et la superposition des points de vue est un choix énonciatif très prisé. La Canadienne anglaise Nancy Huston sous-titre même son roman *Prodige* (1999) « polyphonie », instituant par là le procédé en nouveau genre littéraire : le livre multiplie les blancs typographiques, rapporte isolément



les propos et les pensées des intervenants; les fragments s'enfilent en instantanés d'émotions et renforcent la dénonciation de l'incommunicabilité." ("Double je" 767).<sup>61</sup>

This insight from Delbart has structured *Prodige's* critical reception, providing literary critics with a deliberate deviation from the novel toward a text patterned after the music for solo keyboard or piano which so clearly structure the narratives. The musical term gets its name from the behavior of the musical subject, which flees through the score, and from the listener's desire to catch it; the term comes from the Latin *fuga*, to take flight, or to flee.

The Bakhtinian idea of polyphony is taken up in the schism I read between Lara's material existence and the speculative events she describes for Maya's life, which then become taken up in the narrations as if they had already been, or were in the midst of happening. I consider these multiple fugues as deliberate structures of Huston's text. The term has been taken up into several disciplines, which allows for several variations on its meaning within *Prodige*: not only the contrapuntal musical form, but the literary polyphony, and the shattered or blank identity of the fugue state, are referenced in the initial presentation of the fugue. The term "polyphony" is also likely a reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's readings of Dostoevsky. Bakhtin's analyses focus on the polyphonous

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61 "Polyphony in narratives, that is, the interlacings of voices and the superposition of points of view is a very esteemed enunciative choice. The English Canadian Nancy Huston even subtitles her novel *Prodige* (1999) "polyphony," instituting from there the process into a new literary genre: the book multiplies the typographic blanks, isolating the proposals and thoughts of the interveners; the fragments unroll in instants of emotion and reinforce the denunciation of incommunicability." This translation is my own. Earlier in the text, Delbart points to Bakhtin's isolation of polyphony as a distinct narrative style, fundamental to Dostoyevsky's entire oeuvre.

narrative as Dostoevsky's major genre innovation, which had gone unrecognized by the literary critics of the day. Bakhtin defines polyphony as "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (6) positing the autonomy of the character apart from the author and from the other characters as the method of creating another polyphony between reader and novel, and this parsing of intratextual relations (instead of their unification) as the critic's central task.

David A. Powell, a bilingual critic with publications on music in relation to literature, writes explicitly on ways the musical fugue manifests in Huston's text. He indexes the ways Lara structures Maya's future through her unceasing whispered flow of words, somehow connecting Maya from the world of the incubator to music itself. Powell's research blends discussions of J.S. Bach and Jacques Derrida into a careful analysis of Lara's final episode, yet somehow stops short of connecting her music to her words. Instead, Powell holds up her collapse into silence as a validation of Derridean theories of language, the total eclipse of the origin, and the mark of the always-escaping trace. I thus find myself alone in connecting the psychological fugue state, the discussion of music in relation to both language and the mother, and the repetitions and returns within the musical fugue structure as echoed in the chronological uncertainties of the text.

Literary critic Patrice Proulx has written on several of Huston's texts; in her analysis of *Prodige*, Proulx focuses her attention on the connections between feminine creative power, mother-daughter jealousy, and textual polyphony (although without overtly referencing Bakhtin). Proulx's analyses discuss what *Prodige* adds to

conversations on feminine creativity in Huston's oeuvre, specifically addressing "[t]he connection between life and the potentially transformative powers of the creative process" (Proulx 182) in ways which converge on the maternal contexts of Lara's narration. However, for Proulx, the text holds musical genius and maternal care as a zero-sum game: artistic satisfaction and genuine love struggle for Lara's devotion until she breaks. Lara retreats from Maya's talent out of jealousy and fear, argues Proulx, and forecasts her own doom clearly: Lara sees "the end of her clearly-defined purpose in life and marks the beginning of a series of incidents destined to take her in a downward spiral" (Proulx 184). This reading of Lara's eventual descent into silence, while fitting within the surface of the text, also requires that the reader agree with its construction of maternal affiliation and artistic production as somehow in competition with each other, which must also require that they be sourced in the same kind of creative genius. This, for me, is where the ladybugs, moths, and damselflies which hover near Maya conflate with Lara's escape and retreat into silence – that what might be perceived as an ending might also be perceptible as a transformation, a metamorphosis from something known to something quite different. This transformation is also shadowed in the fugue, both within the structure of the musical form, and the travelling return of the psychological state. Let us examine the musical context first.

In the musical fugue, a single theme, stated early and in a single voice, eventually returns through another voice, while descants, inversions, or fragments of the initial subject are taken up by other voices. Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is considered

one of the most important of the Baroque composers. His choral and symphonic works are well-known, and form an important part of his opus; however, Huston's novel focuses specifically on Bach's works for the solo keyboard, or *clavier*,<sup>62</sup> with particular attention to the polyphonic, contrapuntal nature of his compositions. For such a composition to be polyphonic, it must possess several distinct musical strands which combine to produce a larger harmonic structure – that is, each distinct fragment must also complement the others present to produce harmonies in keeping with the overall structure of the piece. For the fugues on solo keyboard, it is possible to chase the repeating piece of music through the score or musical text; however, part of the chase involves being able to identify this musical subject through all its transformations, whether inversion or transposition along the keyboard. The musical subject or theme, normally first introduced in the right hand, often reappears as a set of echoes in a form called the canon, in which the subject is restated in separate voices, each introduction overlapping the next, before the voices begin interweaving themselves, forming the complex interrelations between note intervals through simultaneous variations on and responses to the subject which are the hallmark of polyphonic music. In *Prodige*, Nancy Huston has adapted this musical form into a literary one, creating a text in which music, language, time, and creation chase each other through the text.

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62 Bach never saw a piano; his music for solo keyboard is performed on a harpsichord when something approaching authentic reproduction is desired. However, the piano is the primary contemporary instrument for Bach's keyboard compositions, and piano recordings of the Partita No. 6 (E minor) abound; see Murray Perahia (2010) and David Fray (2012) for recent examples. For an important historical precedent, see Glenn Gould's 1952 recording of the Partita; Gould is mentioned by name in *Prodige*, and also haunts Huston's first novel, aptly named *Variations Goldberg*, a Bach composition intimately associated with Glenn Gould's interpretation of it.

The transformational structures of the musical fugue, usually only apprehensible in aural form, arguably provide alternate readings of Lara's eventual projected collapse. They also help elucidate the maternal dereliction and death subtending Lara's final devolution from linguistically-based symbologies (language, music) into affective blankness. Beyond the narrative preeminence of J.S. Bach's works for the keyboard, it is a fugue which governs the novel's polyphonic arrangement, and which eventually provides the novel's ambiguous, circular final episode. The deep structures of the fugue undermine the linear chronological and narrative point of view characteristic of the novel form, requiring the reader's complicity in the creation of this polyvocal view. The fugue form's emphasis on the turning and returning of thematic elements highlights the emphasis on disjointed chronologies, the blending of future and present indicated in the narrative verb tenses, which suffuse the text and make its speculative nature most clearly apparent.

Lara's narration to Maya contains the germ of her speculative attempt to reframe music and the body of the mother for her infant daughter. The space of speculation opens as Lara narrates an improbably complete reformulation of her own fraught relation to the piano, based on the relation of music to play through the stars themselves, to the music of the spheres. This passage records Lara in the process of completely remaking what musical, maternal, and linguistic relation could be or become, for Maya:

C'est moi qui te formerai dans un premier temps – mais gentiment, gentiment, ce n'est qu'un jeu, ce n'est que le bonheur. . . les quatre-vingt-

huit notes du clavier et puis les cent millions de constellations dans  
l'univers, chaque note une étoile et toi aussi, étoile ma petite étoile, et tu  
*joueras*, n'est-ce pas ? (31)

Huston translates the passage as follows:

“I’ll teach you myself at first – but gently, very gently, it’s only a game,  
it’s only happiness, I’ll teach you everything I know and everything I don’t  
know about music, the eighty-eight notes of the keyboard and the hundred  
million constellations in the sky – every note a star – including you, yes, a  
star, my little star – and you’ll *play*, won’t you? You’ll know what it means  
to play – yes, like a child, like a game, the simplest, most natural thing in  
the world. . . .”

(*Prodigy* 24)

In their 2011 article for *Discours*, linguists Catherine Schnedecker and Myriam Bras collect and parse myriad uses for the idiomatic French phrase “dans un premier temps,” and find that beyond its denotation of “initial” or “immediate” attempt or form of action or thought, the phrase also has two alternate cognitive groupings: one under *otherness*, in which the phrase serves as transition between an initial idea and a reversed or different one, and another under *time*, in which the phrase transitions a realisation from an early stage to a later, often contradictory one. Huston’s translation for this passage leaves out the word “initially,” substituting the even more interesting “I’ll teach you myself at first,” with its emphasis on the game and the happiness linked through the presence of the

maternal example. The other entry into speculation occurs as Lara also engages to teach Maya “everything [she doesn’t] know about music,” divested of the constant terror of dissociation and illiteracy which haunts Lara’s own music.

It is clear from these linked ideas in Schnedecker and Bras that the denotations of “initial” or “at first” are inadequate; the phrase already contains within it the presence of an unknown other, implying a later, probably contradictory presence latent in this first statement. These two groupings place the phrase directly within the province of speculation, of futurity and becoming, revealing the link between Lara’s musical and Maya’s linguistic formation. What Schnedecker and Bras are tracking is the linguistic record of a virtual presence: their study allows perception of the futures which originate in this initial statement. This phrase marks the space of speculation, and its destabilized chronologies mirror the musical fugue’s repetitions, hesitations, and answers – as well as the psychological fugue state’s evasion and, eventually, return. In this reading, the resultant silence is another form of cocooning, a seeming departure which constitutes an actualized metamorphosis. It is a record of both presence and futurity, opening the time of a contradictory future, in which everything might be completely and unpredictably different from what it is right now.

Through its entwined, repeating narrative voices, *Prodige* presents different versions of the same questions, narrating the entry into music as comprised of painful distance, measured in the failure of perfection, while also narrating the posited or supposed (or hoped-for, wished-for) speculative narrative, which allows music and

subject to exist together in a way and time which does not destroy either of them. Lara in this moment is someone who, given the charge of holding her child to life, does so by attempting to formulate a culture of music which is native or intrinsic to Maya, musicianship as a game she can play with the world. Within the intertwining and doubling of time and narration, the text demonstrates Lara's practical agony of experience – her musical stuttering, her inability to find the music itself, as well as Maya's seemingly effortless conquest of both the black Pleyel piano, Lara's nemesis, and of musicianship itself, making it her own.

Fugue Time: Incubator, Cocoon, and Bach's Partita No. 6

*Prodige* interlaces its narrators' timelines, moving from Lara narrating at Maya's incubator to the future so projected within each scene. Bach's Partita No. 6 in E minor, an important intertextual work, provides a relation to these fugal chronologies through the documented schism between its written and performed time signatures. The controversy over the Partita's last section, the Gigue, concerns its time signature, the regulation of the number of beats per measure, which determines the piece's overall rhythm, and along with the speed of play, regulates the listener's understanding of the piece's supposedly dancelike nature. As recorded in the earlier printings, the time signature is a strange one: a doubled common time, indicated by the facing "cut Cs" at the beginning of the Gigue. However, the Gigue in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was understood as a triple-time dance (1-2-3 1-2-3) instead of the heavier and less dancelike two- or four-beat measure given, and was



performed as such despite the given time signature.<sup>63</sup> So the Gigue begins its history with a schism between its written representation and its embodiment in time; this duality remains present in some contemporary recordings, although not all. Glenn Gould's recording has the Gigue's subject in a very fast duple meter, Gould aggressively digging his fingers into the keys to get even more velocity in a display of superlative technical skill. Murray Perahia's 2010 rendition of the Gigue maintains the duple meter, but at a tempo allowing the elusive triple meter to haunt the three beats of the subject's longer notes, a fascinating combination of the two time signatures into one interpretation. I believe *Prodige* does the same through the repetition and transformation of its subjects.

Based on the intricate canonical structures, and the temporal complexities introduced through the multiply-voiced introduction and return of the musical subject in its initial and transformed states, literary critic Maude Pépin suggests that the narrative fugue allows for a multiplicity of possibilities within the narrative of *Prodige*, noting that this structure “[laisse] miroiter un éventail de sens possibles, plutôt que de les enfermer dans des propositions définitives” (60).<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, Pépin's vision of the “liberté d'interprétation,” fuelled by music's “caractère non figuratif” (60),<sup>65</sup> while holding somewhat true for a musical text's affective reception, is constrained by the narrative's precise structures, which emerge from the structure of the fugue itself. Consider the care required to foster inversion in this context: the main subject emerges as an inverted

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63 The information I have on this aspect of the Gigue's performance was gleaned from various recordings, including attempts to recreate both time signatures for the Gigue.

64 “[lets] shimmer a fan of possible senses, rather than closing them up in definitive propositions.” My translation.

65 “liberty of interpretation,” fuelled by music's “non-figurative character.” Translations mine.

version of itself; that is, the intervals between the notes are maintained, but where once the fugue's opening fifth leapt upward (C-G), the fifth now leads down (C-F) the keyboard, and so on. Similarly, the Pleyel baby grand's long black sweep functions in Lara's imaginary as her mother Sofia's coffin, an image she addresses to her daughter's white incubator; this visual dualism remains linked through the silent physical bodies of grandmother and granddaughter while presenting their precise inversions of black and white, past death and before life. But it is Lara, narrating, who composes them into the formal frame of the fugue itself. Structure remains an integral part of meaning, and the presence of the polyphonic in itself can be analyzed for content.

Maya's experience includes the beeps, thuds, and aspirations of her artificial womb, the white cocoon which kept her alive between weeks 24 and 42. Lara narrates that time thus:

Une machine suit les battements de ton coeur, une autre le rythme de ta respiration, une autre encore ta température, la teneur des gaz de ton sang, les machines battent la mesure et nous dansons avec elles, un deux trois, un deux trois, c'est une valse ma petite Maya. (96)<sup>66</sup>

Lara notes the complex interrelations between rhythms of the various machines keeping Maya in this world as she hovers, like the white moths which haunt the text, in the interstices between between life and death. This interstitial time is the first of several

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<sup>66</sup> “ One monitor follows your heartbeat, another records the rhythm of your breathing, a third keeps track of your temperature, and yet another measures the gas content in your blood. The monitors beat time and we dance with them – it's a waltz, my little Maya!” (*Prodigy* 64).

intervals in the text, and involves aspects of the fugue itself, weaving them together to describe several versions of women interacting with time, with the processing of time itself, as a form of relating to or staying in relation to the world.

The fugue's ability to alter or loop a seemingly linear timeline, audible to the listeners and visible through its repetition and inversion in the score, also appears in these textual repetitions, signalling the eventual collapse of the textual timeline. However, I argue that intricately laced into the fugue's structure are the three main voices, of Sofia, her daughter Lara, and her daughter Maya, the prodigy of the title. Yet Maya's incredible musical gifts are themselves a product of her mother's speaking voice, whispering to her in an unending rill across weeks 24 to 38, as she hovers in her incubator between death and life. These regular rhythmic noises, which Lara describes so minutely, merge with Lara's voice into the lifeline holding Maya present and attached to this life, regulating her bodily functions so that she can emerge from the cocoon instead of being stifled or suffocated, silent within her round white walls. From its beginnings Maya's life is sustained by a mixture of human voice and an interplay of machinic sounds, as the technologies sustaining her continued existence emerge as a single aural entity, one polyphonic mix with varying tempos and timbres keeping her alive, from moment to moment. It is clearly this original polyphony which drives Maya's attachment to Bach later in life.

Maya's taste for the fugue is the lingering hallmark of her premature life in the incubator, the mix of regularizing mechanical noises and her own body, and the sound of

her mother's hushed, incessant voice, keeping her alive and anchored, engaged within this life. These mingled sounds lead to her maternally-derived affection for Bach: the complex underlying rhythms of all those machines, woven into Lara's voice, form a contrapuntal regulatory system, each sound regular and distinct, but melded together with the others into an effect Maya's developing body can literally feel. Lara's quiet words, running incessantly over the counterpoint of the machines, serve as narrative threads tying Maya to the land of the living, narrating her life to her in the present, even as it occurs in the future. This chronological uncertainty, underscored by the use of the future tense in Lara's narration as the events unfold in the present for Maya, picks up the regulatory repetition, inversions, and transformations of a single musical theme or subject, which are the hallmarks of the fugue.

#### Language and Music in Relation to the Mother

Perfect or absolute pitch, the ability to identify and recreate a musical note without any outside references, is a genetic trait, and no amount of training can confer it. Maya has it; Lara does not. This situation echoes the interrelation of native speaker performance and mastery of the piano, in which Lara's education by Sofia contains the echoes of teaching someone to parrot another language convincingly, even if understanding is not present. Reading *Prodige polyphonie* as a discussion of the destructive tendencies of perfect performance emerges by twining the mastery of solo piano performance with language acquisition, or more precisely, with the awareness of an

introduced distance from an initial, first, or mother tongue, and then joining musicianship, language, and perfection to an attempt to control that distance – whether to shorten or maintain it. In this schema, Sofia can be refigured as a mother alienated from her French surroundings, who maintains her daughter at a strictly metered distance from her own presence, inextricably entwined with that of the piano’s voice. That black Pleyel dominates Lara’s dream life, and her images (of the Pleyel as a too-exacting master, as her mother’s body, as her mother’s coffin) demonstrate the strength of Lara’s identification of the piano with her mother.

Ma mère m’envoyait à l’autre bout de la maison, tu sais, loin d’elle, le plus loin possible. Puis elle jouait une note. Si je l’identifiais correctement, j’avais le droit de faire un pas en avant. Mais si j’avais faux, il fallait reculer, tu te rends compte Maya ? Je mettais *une heure* parfois à arriver jusqu’à ma mère, jusqu’au piano où elle se tenait ! (30-31)<sup>67</sup>

The difficulties of mastering the instrument, the problems of performing exactly as desired in a foreign or second language, and the distance between the self and the mother’s body, come together in the much-analyzed scene of Sofia training Lara’s abilities to recognize musical notes, presumably in relation to each other, since her ear is not absolute. Lara does not have perfect pitch, and her walk across the room could take upward of an hour, if she made mistakes; the likeliest possibility here is that Sofia was

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<sup>67</sup> “My mother would send me to the far end of the house. You know, as far from the piano as possible. Then she’d play a note, and if I knew what it was, I could take a step forward. But if I got it wrong, I’d have to take a step back – can you *believe* that, Maya? Sometimes it took me a whole hour just to reach my mother at the piano” (*Prodigy* 24).

not verbally correcting the child Lara, only allowing her to step forward or making her stay still, as the music (as the matriarch) dictated. This strict maternal training interlaces musical and linguistic proficiencies into the child's physical body, tying Lara's movements to the sounds of her own voice and her mother's piano. Sofia's deliberate silences contrast with Lara's halting voice, linked indelibly with her mother's silent judgment and her own bodily movement.

Sofia's musical training has produced an incontrovertible relation between music, maternal judgment, linguistic silence, and physical control in her daughter. Lara's narration conflates the power of absolute pitch with the absolute presence of physicality, which links the infant Maya to the planet: "Oh je n'avais pas l'oreille absolue mais toi Maya ton oreille est absolue, regarde, c'est l'évidence, et ton menton aussi, absolument absolu..." (31).<sup>68</sup> From her absolute ear, Lara moves to Maya's absolute chin and nose, which also joins the machines keeping Maya alive to this absoluteness, as Lara catalogues the sensors obscuring Maya's nostrils. Lara vows to Maya that her training will be different, a testament to music which pours forth as naturally as water from the sky: "Toi tu joueras, tu sauras ce que jouer veut dire – oui, comme un enfant, comme un jeu, comme la chose la plus simple et la plus naturelle du monde. . . j'ai le pouvoir de tout te donner, vie, musique, rier, joie, soleil, pluie" (31),<sup>69</sup> effortless and full of playfulness, as Lara's own training was not. In this moment Lara reimagines her maternal relations

68 "And all that just because I didn't have perfect pitch! But *your* pitch will be perfect, Maya. I'm sure of it. Look at your ear! It's absolutely perfect. So is your chin..." (*Prodigy* 24).

69 "You'll know what it means to *play* – yes, like a child, like a game, the simplest, most natural thing in the world . . . I've the power to give you anything in the world – life, music, laughter, joy, sunshine, rain" (*Prodigy* 24).

through her ideal relationship to music, creating for her own daughter the charity, playfulness, and closeness she so desperately desired for herself.

This reading of the text brings out the undertones of bilinguality and immigration present in Lara and Sofia's relationships to music, even as Maya's own approach will later be considered in inhuman terms: not just as the angel transmitting the music of the spheres (as commonly attributed to J.S. Bach) but as Benjamin's insects in flight, as Lara's birdsong and birds in flight, and through the elision between Maya's audition for world-famous pianist Dianescu and the falling wall of rain which drenches her after it. All of these comparisons bring out the ways in which Maya's music both proceed from her own being, yet classify that relation and the subsequent music in terms of titanic, unearthly, or inhuman prowess. Dianescu's weary recitation of the privations and unchildish devotions required to produce a substandard genius of the keyboard demonstrate the artificiality and constructedness of such a child performer. However, Maya's performance is of another order, an intrusive event in which his astute language, so sarcastically laid down before Lara's verbosity, are genuinely silenced by Maya's incredible gift.

At the audition for Dianescu, Lara narrates Maya's mastery of the solo piano in terms of the emergence of a natural action, as if flowers had bloomed, or butterflies emerged from their cocoons. These images from nature, which link Maya's extraordinary talent to Benjamin's entomological studies, give Maya's gifts an inevitable, unattainable component, of a kind with her perfect pitch. The physical immediacy of Maya's playing

is evident in Lara's narration: not just through the shift in verb tenses from future to present, but in the viscerality and precision of her language, as the reader follows Lara and Dianescu into the immediate experience of Maya's playing. But both Lara's narrative voice (describing the scene to Maya-in-incubator in the future tense) and the earlier description of Maya's incubation in the white cocoon of their shared room, filled with sounds which regulate Maya's every breath, provide the other part of her facility with Bach: like the listener of contrapuntal music, Maya apprehends the universe as a regulated entity, whose regulation is most clearly apparent through sound. Lara's earlier voicing of Maya's future life appropriates the fugue's nonlinear timelines, gathering momentum as Lara predicts her own voiceless collapse just as Maya's gift reaches its next metamorphosis, just as her friend Benjamin's tiny silkworm moths emerge from their elegant cocoons.<sup>70</sup>

Although Maya revels in her profound attachment to both life and the piano, her felicitous relation to either is not shared by her mother. Lara's relation to her daughter is intimate and profound, but her relation to music is that of a naturalized stranger. These relations produce dissonance within Lara, two notes clashing irrevocably. It is notable that although there are three women playing three pianos in this text, the only time two of

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70 Benjamin's silk moths, which both he and Maya describe as disappointing ("pas spécialement jojo" (126)), also contain just a hint of another possibility: that Maya's incredible gifts may not inevitably lead to a glittering future as a solo pianist. Benjamin's constant referrals to Maya as "libellule" and "coccinelle" (dragonfly/damselfly and ladybug) reinforce this image of seclusion before transformation, since both insects must pass through dramatic changes in their life cycles before taking on adult forms. (The damselfly undergoes an incomplete metamorphosis, passing through an aquatic stage and an imago stage before becoming an adult, while the ladybug passes through a complete metamorphosis, involving larval and pupal stages (there's the cocoon), before assuming its adult form.)



them collaborate on a performance, it goes horrifyingly awry. They are playing a Schubert Fantasia for four hands; Maya takes the last movement too quickly, contra her *babushka*'s earlier caution regarding each piece's singular tempo. Lara cannot sustain the same speed, and her fingers first miss, then snarl, then stop. As Sofia narrates,

soudain elle ne sait plus. Ses doigts s'embrouillent et s'enlisent, plaquent trois ou quatre accords aberrants – et s'immobilisent au-dessus du clavier, comme horrifiés. Puis retombent inertes sur ses genoux.

Maya continue seule un moment, incapable de s'arrêter, entraînée par le pur plaisir de ses doigts qui font des cabrioles... puis elle s'arrête et pouffe de rire. Jette ses bras autour de sa mère et s'exclame : “ Ouaaaah !

On s'est bien amusées, hein, pendant un moment ?! ” (104)<sup>71</sup>

This ending, which Maya does not think of as disastrous (she celebrates the joy of the duet, not its abrupt conclusion) signals change for Lara, as she begins her retreat into fugitive silence from here. However, the physical interlacings of Maya and Lara's hands demonstrate the tight interweaving of their polyphonies in this crucial scene. Even as Lara's voice wavers, the urge to flee rising, their linked hands demonstrate the transitory but material physical link she shares with her daughter in this intimate, ominous performance, showing through the schism opening now the connection which had been

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71 “But all of a sudden she loses it. Her fingers grow entangled, then bog down completely, thumping out several heavy, aberrant chords – then seize up as if in horror, suspended motionless over the keyboard – then flop down into her lap, and stay there.

Maya continues a while by herself, unable to stop, drawn on by the pure pleasure of feeling her fingers caper and acovrt upon the keys.... At last she breaks off. Laughing gaily, she throws her arms around her mother's neck and exclaims, ‘Wow! We sure had fun for a while there, didn't we?!’” (*Prodigy* 69).

present before. Maya's facility suggests the closer relation between music and mother, the piano in her case a lifegiving entity which does not separate her from her mother's body but reunites her with the womb created within Lara's nurturing whispers and the incubator's sustaining noises. But Lara hears the dissonance now, combining her distant mother, her damaged music, and her lively daughter, to whom music is a birthright and the lifegiving fugue, her proper element and her native tongue. The ambiguous time of the Gigue conflates with the image of their tangled fingers as Lara sinks deep into her own intolerable silence, the overt denial of her mother's physical body layered over Sofia's death as Lara finally enters the fugue state.

#### "Dans un premier temps": Initial and Metamorphic Times

Lara's entry into the fugue state seems to signal the collapse of her narrative's temporal uncertainties, closing down the speculative space she opened with her narrative projections into Maya's life. Toward the end of the novel, Lara suffers a clear disassociative episode, leaving her family and house abruptly, then taking on a new persona (the woman in a film, drinking red wine and smoking in bed) before succumbing to total exhaustion and affective inertia, terrifying her rescuer with the blank indifference of her eyes. Lara's narrations first tangle, then cease; she is taken from Maya and the reader as if she had vanished, her narration now absent from the text. Lara's final flight and psychological unravelling is the single iteration of the fugue not openly addressed in the critical reception of *Prodige*, but given the diagnostic characteristics, the condition's

relevance to the text is hard to ignore. In the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (the DSM-IV), the fugue state is characterized by escape, confusion, and amnesia: “The predominant disturbance [of the subject’s life] is sudden, unexpected travel away from home or one's customary place of work, with inability to recall one's past” (289).

Lara’s descent into the fugue is also marked by her total retreat from music, her fleeing from both its notational forms and from the sound itself: through her total silence, she actualizes the inaccessibility of her own musicianship, its strict alienation from her body and emotions. It is significant that, given Lara’s attachment to the spoken word, her fugue state enters its deepest amnesiac muteness when the music she has sought throughout the text (*Où est la musique?*) attacks her as little black notes or notes eating through the unsullied whiteness of the bedsheets, like moth holes proliferating, or cinders burning through the world. In this moment Lara sees her two-person perfect white cocoon with Maya literally being eaten away by music, and this realization sets her running somewhere else, anywhere this consumption is not yet or has never been true. This is Lara’s own composition, a fugitive piece, and its emergence signals either an ending, or else the movement from the familiar toward something new.

It is tempting to read *Prodige*’s ending with the finality and brevity of a diagnostician: there are no words. There is no cure. However, I argue that Lara’s break with reality incites in Maya the crucial first steps toward the end of her mother’s speculative engagement, toward its goal: not to repeat the previous musico-maternal

relations, but to invent them anew. The musical fugue contains a structure – called an episode – which includes material not recognized in the subject or its variations, and which either presages a coda – or the introduction of another subject to form a double fugue, a fugue with more than one subject endlessly repeated and varied. While critics tend to read *Prodige*'s ending as a breakdown of all its early promises into maternal jealousy, dead moths, and escape fantasies, the juxtaposition of Lara's episode, with its incubator and moth images (both are swathed in white; both require transformation), with Maya's vocal refusal to let her mother just leave her, indicates rather the presence of a doubled fugue, or a new form – something unspeakable from where we are now. Maya's disregard for her dictionary's conventions guides me here.

When Maya arrives to visit her mother holding a dictionary, all the voices in the fugue sound at once: the links between music, annotation, writing, and language spread to join the entomological metaphor of the cocoon or chrysalis, as well as the chronologized transfiguration of the (female) body which results. The musical fugue joins the linguistic transformation to suggest, faintly, the possible outlines of a way out of weary repetitions of maternal death in order to enter symbolic logic. Instead, Maya reaches for a lexicon never made in France, creating instead a linguistic sign which has no referent in this world. The incubator, the cocoon, the fugue, and even Lara's episode all bring Maya to this cusp of creation, where she could abandon her mother to the cold room in the sanatorium. She chooses instead to remain at her mother's side, speaking her back to life, reversing the terms of their relation to, perhaps, transform it.

The last two narrative segments, with their ten-year separation and joint explanation of the *mouche-libellule-papillon* triptych, knot the themes of the novel into a single nonsensical word: *moulipa*. This word, occurring nearly spontaneously in Maya's last narration to her mother, is the last of three chimeric words she has constructed out of the names of animals. Maya's narration indicates a deep awareness of the possibilities within these chimeras, of not just escaping the current lexicons but of completely rewriting them. Lara's voice had been the only thing tying Maya to life, in the hospital's white room. In the same way, Maya attempts to retrieve her mother, acknowledging the end of one fugue, but indicating the entry of something new as she speaks her mother's words back to her.

Maya's penultimate narration leaves the actual outcome in doubt; her demand that her mother return to her is not answered, as the chronology loops around to Lara and the infant Maya's release from the hospital. The relation between the body and music is disrupted by Maya's *moulipa*, with that metamorphosis or "deuxième temps"<sup>72</sup> reemerging not at the end of the narratives but at their beginning, with Lara: she murmurs the word, and the doctor considers it nonsense variant of her daughter's name. This abrupt cut does not indicate the ultimate impossibility of Maya's demand for reconciliation; instead, it brings us back to an earlier developmental stage: another cocoon. Instead of reading Lara and Maya's shared musicality as a zero-sum game, this narration "dans un premier temps" invokes the possibilities of a different subject, with a

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72 Second or next iteration

new language on her tongue, in a relation which returns from daughter to mother the full force of their longing for each other.

00. *Envoi*: Kaleidoscopic Movement.

This project has made up a set of attempts to index the monolingualism of indifference, to escape reactive binaries through the creative refigurations afforded by speculative fiction, and to find the points of irruption between what is now and what could, perhaps, begin to emerge. The suggestion of opening up from one form or way of life into another requires investigation of the ways to produce the novel, the genuinely new, as an other way to reconceive relations between difference. As I hope my analyses have indicated, the metaphors of maternal affection, bodies, and language throughout these chapters are not there to reify the maternal body, or posit it as the primary feminine role. Instead, they argue for a serious consideration of a powerful metaphor for organic creation of newness. The philosophical and ethical implications for relation across difference become, in this reading, considerable.

Although all fiction and most critical work participate to some extent in the work of speculation, speculative fiction forms itself around that permission, a kind of wonder, a critical passion, for the questions after that first “what if...?” This is the methodological import of Suvin’s *novum* for the project: not its genre-distinguishing capabilities, but its ability to capture the moment in which what is transforms into what might be, or what could become.

Those moments of critical fissure, eruption, and breakage, the varied emergences of speculation and event, can be characterized by a specific form of language: the

subjunctive tense. The subjunctive takes the form “Suppose... as if it were,” and forms both the answer to a question and the basis of an explanation.<sup>73</sup> Seen in the subjunctive, the world refigures itself from what is into diffracted sets of probable, possible, hoped-for or imagined possibilities. This has some clear applications for speculative fiction, and for speculative work itself: after all, what speculative fiction foregrounds is not merely innovation or even literary techniques, although both are valuable contributions. What I am after, in this methodological investigation, is the results of the permission speculative fiction gives itself to wonder what it would be like if the entire world were different, after even one substantive change, or how the results would differ in a situation where another variable was absent or strictly regulated. The subjunctive is the speculative tense, the contingent or wandering tense, within which the what-if blurs in and out of presence, allowing attempts to create or imagine sets of implausible possibility without needing to choose one, closing down the rest and collapsing the subjunctive into the declarative or nominative tenses.

Again: suppose that many forms of ethical relation across irreducible difference do exist. Right now, hovering all around us. How do we recognize them? How, in that recognition, a mutual knowledge and consent, might we go about transforming our relations with others? And what myriad things might we become, in experiencing them?

In each chapter of this project, I have attempted to trace the opening up, closing down, or stopping before something which I dare to call difference, or at least the

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<sup>73</sup> Informal discussions of (and with) philosopher Larry Wright, on explanation and context, have been helpful to my thought here.



preparation for or the beginning to emerge of difference. In each chapter there is, I argue, an uncanny material but invisible presence, neither specter nor hovering angel, so much as the virtual at the brink of manifesting into actual life. These chapters form my experimental sites, and what they send or report back are the variations at the edge between being and becoming. Kaleidoscoping these together gives the grounds from which to begin the next investigation – not progress so much as movement. These speculations form sustained projections of alternate times based in the change of fundamental phenomena in one world, and posit that those alterations come through a recognition of difference without denigration, and of all the worlds that would come about as a result of those speculations. As if they already were. As if they had already become.

*Riverside, August 2013*

*SDG*

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