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# Liminality, Marginality, Futurity: Case Studies in Contemporary Science Fiction

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## **Abstract**

This thesis analyzes the relationship between science fiction worlds and the worlds in which they are imagined. While this study is interdisciplinary, the central concept employed is Victor Turner's theory of liminality. Science fiction worlds are liminal spaces; though they are cognitively or existentially linked to objective reality, the points of divergence reveal the boundaries of dominant cultural paradigms. The liminal worlds of science fiction are particularly hospitable to marginalized groups, such as racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities. Engaging with other worlds is method for theorizing alternate structures of reality. Drawing from Darko Suvin's work on science fiction and utopia, I argue that imagining other worlds through science fiction world-building is a powerful tool for world-making. The thesis contains three case studies of 21st century American science fiction authors, all of whom reflect trends in postmodern writing. John Scalzi's critically acclaimed novels parody common science fiction tropes, simultaneously revealing and revising our understanding of the genre. His theory of Narrative in *Redshirts* is a powerful allegory for Bourdieu's theory of doxa. In her popular romantic science fiction novels, Gail Carriger creates a textured steampunk world in which vampires and werewolves are fully integrated in society; their presence enables an exploration of other forms of marginality. The final case study discusses fanfiction of large science fiction franchises. A product of convergence culture, fanfiction is a liminal medium that allows consumers to critique dominant media. Fanfiction allows greater agency for marginalized individuals to imagine their own futures. Together, these case studies demonstrate the social relevance of recent postmodern science fiction. The worlds contained in these stories have radical, transformative potential, so long as we are unafraid to use it.

## **Disciplines**

Anthropology

LIMINALITY, MARGINALITY, FUTURITY: CASE STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY  
SCIENCE FICTION

By

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In

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the relationship between science fiction worlds and the worlds in which they are imagined. While this study is interdisciplinary, the central concept employed is Victor Turner's theory of liminality. Science fiction worlds are liminal spaces; though they are cognitively or existentially linked to objective reality, the points of divergence reveal the boundaries of dominant cultural paradigms. The liminal worlds of science fiction are particularly hospitable to marginalized groups, such as racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities. Engaging with other worlds is method for theorizing alternate structures of reality. Drawing from Darko Suvin's work on science fiction and utopia, I argue that imagining other worlds through science fiction world-building is a powerful tool for world-making.

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“We just can’t resist the gravity of alternate worlds.”  
-Jonathan Gotschall, *The Storytelling Animal* (2012)

“New Crobuzon was a city unconvinced by gravity.”  
-China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station* (2000)

## Introduction

Sometimes, Jasper Swift thinks the city is alive.

She can always feel Evren's pulse; it's everywhere, all around her, in the flicker-lit streets and the siren-taut air. But nights like these, it feels as if the city is breathing. She hears the rhythm of inhale-exhale in the wind, and the humid midsummer night presses against her skin like the puff of breath before a lover's kiss.

In truth, she knows the city like a lover—better than a lover, really, as there's nothing love-like in her casual sexual encounters. But Evren is different. Evren, she loves. She loves Evren in a way she has never loved anyone but herself.

It's fitting, then, that the city is a part of her. She keeps a perfect map in her head, a three dimensional replica splayed across the landscape of her memory. She could navigate with her eyes shut or blindfolded or simply in the dark. She dreams the streets of this city, each night, walks through alleys, visits landmarks, learns and relearns the ever-changing sprawl.

-J. R. Sanchez, *Static* (2012)

The city of Evren sits at the intersection of two rivers. It consists of twenty-four color-coded districts. Jasper Swift is one of the city's nearly sixteen million residents. Evren is the Turkish word for "universe," and it is a city I conceived as something more than. Evren is more than a city; it is a fictional world. Unlike New York, Hong Kong, or London, Evren was a tabula rasa upon which I could project my own hopes and desires. Even with the dislocation of time and technology, I felt constrained by these real cities' stable location on the map, their names; these alone are referents to the cities' historical, political, and cultural legacies. In writing a science fiction noir novel about desire, I wanted to be free of that. Evren exists because I wanted to build a world from the city-grid up—technology, politics, and social mores. I wanted to craft a city by hand so that it would fit the story I wanted to tell.

This is the power of world-building. In imaginative literature such as science fiction, authors have the unique opportunity to build new worlds. These worlds are, by definition, fantastical departures from the worlds in which the authors and readers find themselves. However, the departure is not total. These fictional worlds do not exist in isolation, in the cold,

dead vacuum of space. They are, rather, satellites orbiting our own world. They derive from their authors' imaginations, and their authors are part of this concrete world. Therefore, when authors sit down to write a novel, to build a new world, they work with a template, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Every brick in every building and every relationship in every culture is a choice, mediated by the bricks and relationships in the nonfictional world. The author must decide whether to keep elements constant, or to change them. These choices are rarely neutral. World-building means building a world to fit a story, yes, but it also means building a world in relation to a series of historical, political, and legacies.

This thesis is an investigation of these forces.

My research question is as follows:

*How can fictive world-building be understood in relation to the real world?*

A few corollary questions include:

*What relation do social structures in science fiction bear to existing societies? What does this mean for minority groups, who necessarily find themselves on the periphery of their social structure?*

Essentially, I am interested in world-building as a cultural process. I believe the relationship is reciprocal: science fiction worlds both draw from and react to reality, and these fictional worlds may in turn influence culture. I explore these questions in a variety of dissimilar science fiction venues: critically acclaimed science fiction, popular romantic science fiction, works written by science fiction fans, and small selections of my own work. Throughout these case studies, I argue that science fiction worlds are liminal spaces, constructed through a series of meaningful social inversions. By placing marginalized groups at the center of fictional worlds and narratives, these works have the potential to challenge the dominant social order. Drawing

from poststructuralist and queer theory, I assert that world-building is a form of discourse and can serve a powerful function in the project of world-making.

Growing up, it occurred to me that my feelings of difference were more than adolescent growing pains, but I lacked the vocabulary to articulate this. As a woman, I was confronted by daily reminders that I was less capable than my male counterparts. As a queer person, I was endlessly assaulted by images of assumptive heteronormativity. As a young person, I was frustrated by the unspoken notion that I should sit and wait until I “grew up” to do anything useful. As a future city-dweller, I was haunted by the existential boredom of small-town life. I felt, as Edward Sapir put it, “alienated from an impossible world” (Benedict 2013:142).

And, alienated from my own impossible world, I began to search for possible worlds.

I found fragments spread across countless sf/f novels. I found strong female characters, like Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* series and Éowyn in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. I discovered queer characters, like Jill Gulbirra in Philip Jose Farmer’s *Riverworld* series, and the normalization of same-sex desire in Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *Time Enough for Love*. I explored the fluidity of gender in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*. These were the books I grew up with, the worlds I took refuge in.

When I found that these worlds, too, were not enough, I began to build my own. I built worlds where a young woman could captain a starship, where humans could slide between gender identifications as easily as Le Guin’s Gethenians. I built Evren, a city mediated by utopian desire.

Fictional worlds are thought experiments, liminal spaces where the cat is simultaneously dead and alive. We control some variables, alter others, and let events unfold. And that’s

important, too. Beyond the parameters of the experiment, there is the result. Fictional worlds are populated by fictional people with fictional lives. Stories are the engine that makes fictional worlds go.

This, too, is a story. This is a story about stories—how we create them and how they recreate us.

## 1. Methodology

Literature is neither a traditional nor an obvious subject for anthropological research. It has its own devoted academic disciplines, with their own traditions of literary analysis. A literary study might discuss the characterization of a particular character, consider the deployment of a motif, or analyze the tone of the prose. All of these hypothetical studies are grounded in the text; in fact, literary studies rarely stray from the words on the page. While there is certainly utility in traditional textual analysis, these discussions often ignore the social context of the text. There is a world beyond the page, a world that cannot be ignored. A piece of prose does not exist in cultural isolation; rather, it is both a product of and a productive force for culture.

I am advocating for an interdisciplinary approach. In the following chapters I will identify clear intersections between literary criticism, gender studies, and cultural anthropology. These disciplines view similar problems through different lenses, and I believe they have much to learn from one another.

Finally, while I recognize that a discussion of methodology is always already a discussion of theory; however, I would like to limit this section to the fundamentals.

First, I would like to position literature as a proper anthropological subject.

Story is an integral part of social life. Stories play a crucial role in culture, just as culture plays a crucial role in stories. All human societies have myths. All religions have origins stories, as do nations. By day, we surround ourselves with books, movies, newspapers. We tell children bedtime stories. When we sleep, we dream more stories. Stories are everywhere. Jonathan Gotschall offers multiple explanations for the function of story. The first is that stories are

didactic; they “delight in order to instruct” (Gotschall 2012:59). He also suggests that stories, which tend to be organized around *trouble*, serve as a rehearsal for real life trouble. Perhaps most salient in anthropology, he argues that stories function to reinforce social solidarity: “Story is a form of social glue that brings people together around common values” (Gotschall 2012:28). Essentially, story can be seen as a form of *communitas*. Whichever of these functions we choose to believe, the point is that story *has* a function beyond idle musing. And that function, I believe, is deserving of anthropological study.

The link between anthropology and literature has been a subject of limited scholarly discussion. A. Owen Aldridge views the links as a common search for invariables, or universal human characteristics (Aldridge 1989:62). The Literary Turn in anthropology also provides some precedent, as does Geertz’s desire to read culture as text. In his seminal work on thick description, Geertz writes: “Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries” (Geertz 2013:294). If, as Geertz posits, culture should be read as text, why not the converse? Why not read text as culture?

First, it is necessary to dispense with the premise that text is static. Although words do rest, unmoving, on the pages of books, or flicker across stationary screens, the meaning contained within them is anything but static. Rather, as posited by Ricoeur, text is discourse, and discourse, as Miles Richardson further argues, is speaking (Richardson 1989:34). Speaking is an act: a human act, and an integral aspect of everyday life. Text, therefore, is a cultural act. I want to argue that literature, like other arts, is a form of cultural performance. Substituting Richardson’s definition of discourse for Foucault’s, understanding text as discourse becomes even more significant. Text is both a claim to knowledge and an act of power. It is certainly

worthy of anthropological study.

My subject, however, is not literature at large but world-building.

It might seem that there is a danger in comparing the fictional societies of science fiction to the societies in which they originate. After all, as Herbert Spencer wrote of nonfictional societies, “Society is a growth and not a manufacture” (Spencer 2011:16). Fiction, at first glance, is wholly manufacture. Especially science fiction and fantasy, where world-building is paramount. Authors sit at their computers (or typewriters, if they’re technophobes like Harlan Ellison) and construct cultures piecemeal. Everything is—or should be—a choice: intentional, planned, and meaningful. But is it purely manufacture? Don’t our stories grow out of our own cultures?

I can’t answer that question here, seeing as it bears a striking resemblance to my research question, but in advance of a full answer, here’s the short one: yes, they do, and yes, that is exactly the point.

The question, then, is how to study literature from an anthropological perspective as opposed to a literary one.

The Geertz quotation provides a good start. Read culture as text. Study the cultures presented in literature. Study them as you would study a brick and mortar culture. It is possible, I think, to draw a rough analogy between an anthropological study of literature and more traditional forms of participant observation. For literature, participant observation is the act of reading. It is not enough to merely observe the words on a page; rather, the active reader participates in the creation of textual meaning. Reading is always active. Authors draw outlines, but readers color in the image. Ambiguity and imagination work together to create meaning.

Text, then, is a culture in and of itself. Fiction's structure is its form, yes, but also its world-building, characterization, and plot. These are, so to speak, the literary facts—objective, observable, and indelible. The imponderabilia of literature, however, is the meaning contained therein. Meaning lies in symbolism, themes, and cultural significance. It also lies in the personal meaning readers take away from the text—the punctum, to borrow from Barthes.

This, however, is only half the story. Obviously there are cultures produced and reproduced in novels but novels themselves are also located within cultural webs of significance. But the significance is twofold. As such, I am concerned with both. In the following chapters of analysis, I begin with close readings of the texts at hand, examining the fictional worlds firsthand. I observe the social structure and the relations within it. But I am also interested in these fictional worlds as cultural discourse—both how they are produced and the function they serve in the real world.

As I have already stated, world-building is always a conscious act, but this process is more apparent in fantastic genres, where the author must build a culture from the ground up. Because this process is conscious and intentional, I believe the author's stated motivations are essential to any anthropological study of literature. For this reason, I take an emic approach. This is, in large part, my reason for selecting Gail Carriger and John Scalzi as case studies. Both authors maintain a meticulous online presence. They write about their writing, their thoughts on social issues, and their reasons for constructing worlds the way they do.

At first glance, John Scalzi, Gail Carriger, and sf fanfiction are unlikely bedfellows. Scalzi is the darling of the critical sf establishment. *Redshirts* won the Hugo for Best Novel in September 2013, and Scalzi himself was president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America from 2010 to 2013. He has something of a chameleon postmodern style, taking on the

diction of classic works. *Redshirts* is a *Star Trek* parody, and *Old Man's War* follows in the tradition of Golden Age space operas. Carriger, on the contrary, is firmly entrenched in the steampunk community. Her novels have a romantic flair and are marketed as sci-fi lite for a female audience. The cover art for her novels always features an attractive woman in an elaborate Victorian dress against an old-fashioned backdrop. Her writing is popular, but not critically acclaimed. Finally, fanfiction is a complicated subgenre, comprised of works written by fans who draw from traditional media as source material. Fanfiction is a liminal fiction, from the bottom or margins, against the grain of traditional media. I chose Scalzi, Carriger, and fanfic authors for the very reason that they represent three distinct trends in science fiction: critical acclaim, popular romance, and nonprofessional writing. Furthermore, Scalzi, Carriger, and fanfiction represent distinct trends in postmodernism.

It should be obvious that I have little interest in the notion of anthropologist as an impartial observer or absolute authority. Drawing from Geertz, my approach is subjective. Both literary anthropology and queer theory stress the academic's role as the author of a scholarly text. Drawing from postmodernism, knowledge is never objective, and neither is its presentation. Rather, there exists in form a unique opportunity for reflexivity, self-awareness, and experimentation. As my subject matter is liminality, it seems fitting to apply this concept to my form as well.

My experience is not separable from my academic interests. Neither is my identity as a writer, particularly one who writes science fiction. So much of my understanding of world-building is derived from my own attempts at building fictional worlds. For this reason, most chapters begin with a quotation from my science fiction writing. I offer these passages without

context, in the hope that they will reveal something, however opaque, about the process of constructing meaning through world-building.

I have drawn substantial inspiration from *Women Writing Culture*, an interdisciplinary volume of essays concerned with both literary anthropology and intersectionality. While distinctly anthropological in character, these essays are also postmodern, reflexive, and acutely concerned power relations in the production of knowledge. These essays are also experimental in form, drawing from fiction and taking a highly interpretive approach. The introduction cites Nellie Wong: “Your poems and stories alone aren’t enough. Nothing for you is ever enough and so you challenge yourselves, again and again, to try something new, to help build a movement, to organize for the rights of working people, to write a novel, a play, to create a living theater that will embody your dreams and vision, in energy and print” (Behar 1996:7). This quote, in many ways, summarizes my investment in this work. I am a writer, and I am unsatisfied with the status quo. While I might like to believe that stories alone can change the world, and while other people’s stories certainly have changed *my* world, there is always an underlying feeling that stories are not enough. They are, at the end of the day, stories. Fiction. Liminal. *Not real*. I think, in part, that writing about fictional worlds is my attempt to make them more real.

## 2. Toward a Definition of Science Fiction

“Don’t you ever think it’s strange?” Essalie asks.

She and Isak standing on the observation deck, staring back at Yun as the ship breaks out of orbit.

“Which part?” he quips, a smile in his voice. “We *are* traveling through space, after all.”

Essalie rolls her eyes. “Not that. I mean, for a universe this vast, this teeming with life, I’ve always wondered why it wasn’t more diverse.”

“Jin might disagree with you there.”

Essalie thinks of the foreign texture of Keuri’s skin, the curve of her tale. She’s no more than a speck of dust on the pale yellow dot rapidly receding in the distance. “Those are details,” she says. “Thousands of star systems, thousands of lightyears apart, and somehow, beneath the skin, we’re more or less the same. Obligate bipeds with two primary sexes and opposable thumbs. We all have large brains and helpless infants. Shouldn’t we be more different?”

-J. R. Sanchez, “The Disappearing Frontier” (2013)

Any discussion of science fiction as a genre must begin with the demarcation of boundaries—or, in simpler terms, a definition. Unfortunately, science fiction, like most genres, defies easy categorization. Writers, filmmakers, critics, and fans cannot reach a clear consensus. Even the term “science fiction” is unstable; many well-reputed sf authors, such as Harlan Ellison, prefer the term “speculative fiction,” as it encompasses a broader body of work. While hard sf titles such as Larry Niven’s *Ringworld* may deal in the minutiae of scientific theory, speculative fiction offers a home for work whose concern is social rather than scientific, such as Ellison’s *A Boy and His Dog*. However, I persist in my usage of “science fiction” because it has cultural traction; unlike “speculative fiction,” which only has meaning for a select group of industry insiders, “science fiction” is a genre designation with widespread cultural meaning. Furthermore, the reference to “science” gestures to one of the genre’s defining characteristics.

As with any search for a definition, the dictionary is the best place to begin. The *OED* defines science fiction as: “imaginative fiction based on postulated scientific discoveries or

spectacular environmental changes, freq. set in the future or on other planets and involving space or time travel” (OED) This definition presents three defining hallmarks of science fiction: it is imaginative, it has a basis in science, and its setting is temporally or spatially removed from the reality of the author. It is difficult to take issue with these points, but this definition does little to get at the heart of science fiction. It fails to answer—or to ask, for that matter—why science fiction is useful. What social processes create science fiction worlds, and what function do these fictional worlds serve?

First, let’s disseminate the “imaginative” component. Science fiction is one of many imaginative genres, where authors rewrite the laws of nature, construct the technology of the future, and explore other worlds. Other imaginative genres explore magic, the supernatural, or monsters of the night. Fantasy and horror, among others, qualify as imaginative genres, and here lies the first categorization pitfall. In bookstores and common parlance, science fiction is often lumped with fantasy; however, as most fans will acknowledge, there are lightyears of difference between *Star Trek*, whose whole premise is exploring the scientific marvels of the final frontier, and *Star Wars*, where space has no real relevance to the plot. In short, the descriptors “imaginative” and “fantastic” refer to the result—warp drive or hyperdrive. The difference between science fiction and fantasy is how you get there.

In fantasy, either the answer doesn’t make sense, or it doesn’t really matter; in science fiction, the answer is always science. What separates science fiction from fantasy is the pretense of rationality. Neither elves nor magic provide any explanation for their existence; aliens and technological wonders do. What I mean by “pretense” should be obvious. Despite the scientific impossibility of exceeding the speed of light, as demonstrated by Einstein’s  $e = mc^2$ , countless space operas from *Star Trek* to *Old Man’s War* employ faster-than-light travel. The science here

is symbolic rather than practical or predictive. The scientific basis for science fiction stories is precise. Darko Suvin, the father of sf studies, has observed that a science fiction world's cognitive logic is located in one narrative element. Drawing from the utopian work of Ernst Bloch, Suvin observes, "A novum or cognitive innovation is *a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality*" (Suvin 2010:68). The novum is "such a radical novelty as to reconstitute the entire surrounding world and thus, in a sense, to create (through not *ex nihilo*) a new world" (Freedman 2001:79). The novum is the linchpin that ties science fiction worlds to the realities in which they originate. It is a recognizable point of inversion, from which everything else may blur out of focus. Suvin has introduced the concept of cognitive estrangement to explain this phenomenon. The goal of science fiction, he argues, is to inspire new ways of thinking about human society—and to subversively challenge the status quo by transferring it onto an imaginative landscape. This is what is meant by "other worlds." They are our world, shifted, displaced, kaleidoscopic and out of focus.

Robert Adams, a modern science fiction author and literature scholar, has written that "specific SF nova are more than just gimmicks, and much more than clichés; they provide a symbolic grammar for articulating the perspectives of normally marginalised discourses of race, of gender, of non-conformism and alternative ideologies. We might think of this as the progressive or radical potential of science fiction" (Adams 2006:17). Here we see that science fiction can be both a reaction to the status quo and an act against it. Many would argue that is actually the point of science fiction. In a recent interview, New Wave veteran Harlan Ellison reflected on changes in the genre. When asked, "Why don't speculative fiction writers today cause more trouble?" Ellison responded:

Ah, kiddo, I wish I could give you an answer. I sigh woefully, [sighs], because that's what writers are supposed to do, afflict the contented. But most of them don't. Most of them just want to tell a story, and I guess that's a noble endeavour in and of itself, to tell a story. Storytellers can be teachers, like Aristotle, or they can just be storytellers like— I don't know, who's writing the trash these days? I don't know who's writing trash over there where you are, but whoever it is, you pick the name, put it in for me. [Walter 2013]

Disregarding Ellison's reputation as a crotchety misanthrope, his point gets to the heart of the question. What is science fiction *supposed* to do?

To Paul Kincaid, it is a genre that has worn out all its tricks. In a review of one best-of volume, he claims sf “writers have any real conviction about what they are doing. Rather, the genre has become a set of tropes to be repeated and repeated until all meaning has been drained from them” (Kincaid 2012). As an explanation, he concludes, “science fiction has lost confidence in the future” (Kincaid 2012). In the introduction to *The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year* (the year being 2012) Jonathan Strahan cites Kincaid's critique and offers his own rebuttal. The goal of science fiction, Strahan responds, is “to imagine... the way the future might be” (Strahan 2013:2). But these imaginings are never neutral, just as knowledge is never neutral, and Strahan notes the recent trend science fiction has taken: “In 2012 science fiction and fantasy continued to move slowly but hopefully away from the white male Anglo Saxon Mayberry of its youth and towards a more mature, diverse, and inclusive future” (Strahan 2013:2).

Because of this tangled web, I find it necessary to craft my own definition of what science fiction is or should be. I offer the following criteria.

First, *science fiction is a genre of the fantastic*, and like other literature of the fantastic, is about stretching the doxa. Cognitive estrangement is the process through which this occurs.

Second, *science fiction is a genre of invention and inversion*. The novum is the literary mechanism that drives this inversion. It is also an insistence to rationality.

Third, *science fiction is a social endeavor*. It is about imaging other futures and, as such, has subversive potential. These worlds are communal and part of a collective process of world-making. Ultimately, science fiction is a social project. But it is also a personal project, both individualized and multivocal.

No study of science fiction could be complete without some discussion of science fiction studies. Harlan Ellison has called sf is a “game of ‘what if?’” (Walter 2013). Like liminality, science fiction worlds are a realm of infinite possibilities—in theory, at least.

Traditionally, science fiction has served traditional means. To return to Strahan’s observation, sf has until recently been the domain of “the white male Anglo Saxon Mayberry” (Strahan 2013:2). Essentially, Golden Age science fiction actually does function according to Turner’s hypothesis. Introduce aliens, wild sexuality — defeat it all, reaffirm your own culture. In this framework, Turner’s functionalist assumptions regarding ritual seem to hold. Roberts and Luckhurst suggest that second-wave feminism inspired a catalytic paradigm shift in the genre. According to Luckhurst, the feminist intervention of the 1970s effected ‘a new reflexivity about the conventions of SF, exposing how a genre that praised itself for its limitless imagination and its power to refuse norms had largely reproduced patriarchal attitudes’ without question them for much of its existence” (Roberts 2006:73). The development of a more social science fiction coincides with the development of feminist theory and the advent of postmodernism. While this relationship is only in part causal, it does represent an important trend. While sf has traditionally imagined other worlds only to destroy them, presented the other as unequivocally dangerous, and reinforced the status quo, it doesn’t have to. Over the past forty years, while Kincaid claims the genre was slowly dying, science fiction has stretched its own limits of what it, as a genre, can be.

And what the genre can be is a utopian project. Suvin ultimately concludes, “utopia is not a genre but *the sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction*” (Suvin 2010:42).

I return, briefly, to Suvin’s theory of *cognitive estrangement*, which was briefly introduced in the introduction. In Suvin’s view, “cognition” refers to the outlook that “sees the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable, and therefore subject to a *cognitive* view [...] not only reflecting *of* but also *on* reality” (Suvin 2010:xix). It is, in this sense, much like Bourdieu’s doxa. ‘Estrangement’ is pulled from literary theorists, namely Victor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht. The essence of cognitive estrangement, however, is best expressed by a quote from sf author Joanna Russ:

I began reading science fiction in the 1950s and got from it a message that didn’t exist anywhere else then in my world. Explicit sometimes in the detachable ideas, implicit in the gimmicks... most fully expressed in the strange life-forms and strange, strange, wonderfully strange landscapes was the message: *Things can be really different*. [Suvin 2010:10]

This is cognitive estrangement, the heart of science fiction. It is an exploration—a promise—that things could be different.

### 3. A Brief Primer on Liminality, Doxa, and Discourse

Elysium was, Seren concluded as they re-materialized on the surface of the much-anticipated M-class planet, unspectacular. Klein, Teddy, and Chief Medical Officer Jonah Finch, however, seemed to disagree. Seren expressed her wonder at the slightly lowered jaws of her companions through a characteristically raised eyebrow.

“We’ve come to Eden,” Klein murmured.

Seren was tempted to point out that the garden designated as Eden was over 470 light-years away from their current position, on a pale blue M-class planet called Earth. She was ready to burst into full sarcastic speech until she remembered that they were not joking at this juncture....

She stuck out her tricorder and began taking readings on this ordinary M-class planet. Admittedly, she could understand why some would call the scene idyllic. The sky was a canopy of lavender silk—flushed permanently the same hue as the shimmer of Earth’s sky at dawn. They stood in an overgrown field of emerald green that extended seemingly infinitely in all directions. The temperature was temperate, with a mild wind that whispered through the silence. There was neither animal life nor evidence of humanoid civilization in humanoid sight.

-J. R. Sanchez, *Eternity* (2009)

Like language and culture, academia is a form of communication. Each discipline is its own system, with its own unique lexicon. As different disciplines work toward different goals, communication between them is often limited. In practice, this has created discrete islands of knowledge, an archipelago without contact; in practice, separate disciplines often come to the same conclusions through different means. Throughout my research, I have found that the same idea is represented by many words. For this reason, I have found it necessary to use an interdisciplinary approach. I take theories from three different fields. As this is primarily an anthropological study, my theoretical foundations come from cultural anthropology. However, because my subject is science fiction, I have also reviewed sources from the field of science fiction studies, as seen in the previous chapter. The third major theoretical body is queer theory, which is essential in any discussion of marginality. This chapter addresses anthropological theory.

Anthropologically, it is necessary to begin with my working definition of culture. My understanding of culture is informed by the Geertzian view that culture is the “webs of significance” that humans have spun around themselves (Geertz 2013:291). I also use Lee Drummond’s interpretation of “culture as a continuous synthesis of ideas, a creative process” (Drummond 1981:655). I would like to emphasize that culture is both dynamic and constructive. It is not stable and does not exist independently of its constituents. It is generative as well as receptive.

Victor Turner’s work on *liminality* provides the basis for my work. In his study of ritual, Turner defined liminality as the middle stage of rites of passage, as well as their driving force. In the liminal phase, the proverbial “betwixt and between,” the social order is upended. An individual between life stages is separated from society, high becomes low, and structure breaks down. Perhaps most importantly, liminality is an imaginative space: “Liminality may perhaps be regarded... as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (Drummond 1996:72). For Turner, however, this liminal exploration of possibilities has few lasting consequences because the ultimate purpose of both ritual and liminality is to repair and recreate social solidarity. As a student of Max Gluckman, Turner’s premises are functionalist in nature. In his view, engaging in anti-structure is essentially a form of ritualized rebellion. By sanctioning anti-structure for designated and limited allocations of time, actual rebellion is prevented.

Liminality also has applications beyond the ritual schema. Art is a liminal space. Turner himself observes, “artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, ‘edgemen,’” (Turner 1985:128). But I am not the first to transfer Turner’s discussion of liminality from social drama

to fictional drama. Drummond has applied this work to movies in his 1996 book *American Dreamtime*. Developing a theory of culture as semiospace, Drummond draws a connection to Turner: “The critical factors in liminality, like those in the theory of culture as semiospace... are movement and interstitiality within some specifiable domain of symbolic or semiotic space” (Drummond 1996:75). Drummond argues that watching a film is a liminal act, which separates the viewer from society in a similar manner to how a rite of passage separates an initiate from society.

I would argue that reading a book is much the same. Reading a book roughly parallels the ritual structure. By picking up a book, readers voluntarily separate themselves from their worlds. It is a seemingly solitary act, and soon, everything they know is turned upside down. There is a new world, with new rules. Imaginative fiction is the anti-structure to society’s structure. And, like a rite of passage, reading is—or has the potential to be—a transformative act. When the reading is done, and the reader reintegrates with reality, the memory of the experience is still there. Good books stay with you; they should change you somehow. Because good books, like Turner’s liminality, are *a realm of pure possibility*, full of new ideas and relations.

While Turner suggests the engagement with anti-structure necessarily reaffirms structure, I abandon these structural-functionalist assumptions. My reasoning can be summarized by the final sentence of the previous paragraph. If liminality truly is a realm of pure possibility, which introduces a constellation of new ideas, I have a hard time believing that this process must necessarily reify old ideas. This seems woefully reductive. I assert, therefore, that engaging with anti-structure can be a creative process. I take my cues from the French post-structuralists, namely Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault.

*Doxa*, in Bourdieu’s view, is a perceived structure of reality. *Doxa* is what individuals

consider possible, or the only set of possibilities they believe to be possible. It is, essentially, a set of limitations on cognition: “Schemes of thought and objectivity can produce the objectivity that they do produce only by producing misrecognition of the limits of the cognition that they make possible, thereby founding immediate adherence, in the doxic mode, to the world of tradition experienced as a ‘natural world’ and taken for granted” (Bourdieu 1977:164). Imposing a specific doxa is an act of symbolic—and often political, though not always—power. Because it is naturalized through a lifetime of enculturation and indoctrination, it is difficult, though not impossible, to change doxa. Doxa is structure and stands in stark opposition to liminality and anti-structure.

*Discourse* is not an idea specific to Foucault, but he did rework the definition significantly. Like Foucault’s understanding of power, discourse is subtle and multidirectional, and as with power, the dichotomy of dominators and dominated is a false one. Discourse is polyvalent. Foucault writes: “We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominated discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (Foucault 1990:100). Furthermore, as a polyvalent force, discourse can work either for or against power: “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (Foucault 1990:101). Discourse is itself an expression of power.

I want to emphasize the interworkings of liminality, doxa, discourse, and cognitive estrangement. Though these ideas stem from different disciplines and radically different schools of thought, I find all of them useful in crafting a theory of science fiction world-building.

In line with Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement, I want to suggest that imagining other worlds is a way of breaking with the doxa—with the accepted forms of being—and the first step to overcoming them. This is possible because sf worlds are liminal spaces. The reader is estranged from reality, presented with a fantastic set of new possibilities, confronted with the strangeness of anti-structure. The ideas contained therein are a form of Foucauldian discourse, and have all the trappings of discourse. Fiction is power because text is always already a claim to knowledge. It can be a way of challenging and reversing the discourse of hegemonic ideas.

Or, at least, fiction has the potential to challenge and incite, to change and ignite.

Science fiction is an exploration, an imagining, and a promise of hope for those who need it most.

#### 4. World-Building and World-Making

The city is a labyrinth.

Sometimes I think the city is many cities, overlapping, hidden, layered, a new face to be discovered each day. I've never left Nova Espero in twenty-eight years, never wanted to. It's my job to know this city, but it still surprises me. I think I could live here twenty-eight lifetimes without a moment of boredom.

I could never be bored, not on a morning like this, not when the city has given me a mystery, a clue, a fresh face to discover.

I take the trolley to the Vilaço. The neighborhood is packed with the young, the unemployed, the bohemian. The workweek means nothing here, in this colony of students and artists. No, they wander the streets, sip maldolça coffee at cafés, lounge in parks. They don't bother me, don't seem to notice me, but I don't fit in, and I know it. I'm too straight-laced, conservative, middle-class in the pencil skirt and heels I wear for work.

-J. R. Sanchez, "Nova Espero" (2012)

World-building is an invisible art. Chances are, unless you are a creator or a scholar of fictional media, you have never heard the word before. And yet, world-building is something you encounter almost daily. Every book you read, every film you watch, and every song you hear—not to mention commercials and advertisements—is an example of world-building. Fiction or nonfiction, realism or fantasy, world-building is everywhere. World-building is, in short, the creation of fictional worlds.

By "world," I refer not to a physical world. Earth, Mars, and any host of exoplanets are physical worlds that exist in the physical universe; they may also be fictional worlds. Here, however, I use "world" to refer to setting; however, "world" goes beyond what we might consider the traditional definition of setting. It is not only the place where the action of a story occurs, but also the logic that holds the world together. The world consists of geography, climate, architecture, and physics, but it also contains culture. Politics, religion, ritual, and tradition are all elements of a fictional world. Social structure, social norms, and taboos are also elements of world. While not every fictional world will address all—or even half—of these

features, all worlds will address some of them. As a general rule for good world-building, the majority of the changes made and addressed should in some way be relevant to the narrative. Ultimately, world-building is a consequence of story.

The second half of the term, “building,” foregrounds another important characteristic. Every choice, whether intentional or unintentional, is an element of world-building; every small detail reveals the character of the world. Characters lead readers through their worlds, revealing its machinations through their actions.

Fantastic genres simply put world-building on display. The art itself remains invisible, as we consumers seldom pay attention to the color of the drapes. Indeed, the very nature of the job is to be invisible. Like good tailoring, good world-building should be seamless. No matter how many dragons or time machines populate the world, these developments should feel natural. These details are not superfluous. They exist because they are necessary for the narrative. World-building is much like Chekhov’s gun. Creating a world with time travel capabilities for a story that has little or nothing to do with time travel makes little sense. It’s wasted potential. Rather, the points of divergence between the present and fictional world should be meaningful and necessary. Science fiction worlds make the stories told in them possible.

But there is another consequence of saying that fictional worlds make stories possible. If some aspect of the design, some feature in the environment, or some flaw in the society dictates the narrative, then the world cannot be considered neutral. Worlds are rarely ambivalent because stories are *never* ambivalent. If the narrative focuses the destructive character of genetic engineering or the democratic potential of space travel, then the worlds themselves are polarized. Fictional worlds have textures, orientations, alignments. They are charged, positive or negative, good or bad. An example of a “good” sf world is the United Federation of Planets in the first few

*Star Trek* series and movies, where the Federation claims to have solved issues of poverty, inequality, sexism, and racism. “Bad” worlds are easier to come by; there are countless totalitarian regimes with malicious intent, such as Oceania in *1984* or Panem in *The Hunger Games* trilogy.

The distinction, of course, is that of utopia and dystopia, and I want to argue that it is science fiction’s relationship with utopia that reveals science fiction’s relationship with the present.

If we are going to argue that science fiction worlds have some deep, fundamental connection to utopia—or the utopia/dystopia binary—then it is necessary to discuss what exactly utopia is meant to signify. Carl Freedman has traced the relationship between science fiction and utopia from Darko Suvin back to Ernst Bloch. For Freedman, utopia has three dimensions. It has a generic meaning, derived from Thomas More, which which we are all colloquially familiar. It has a political-economic meaning, which primarily refers to the writings of Marx and Engels. Finally, utopia has a philosophical and hermeneutic meaning. It is this third category that provides the most insight here. As a hermeneutic, utopia is a way of thinking rather than a matter of planning. Freedman observes: “Utopia, in the philosophical and hermeneutic sense, cannot be seen straight on, but only in fractional prefigurations” (Freedman 2001:83). Suvin and Bloch understand utopia as something that exists in the “Not-Yet,” “Not-Yet-Being,” “In-Front-of-Us,” “Front,” or an ambiguous not-present. Utopia exists in futurity, though its existence is abstract rather than concrete. Utopia is not the logical endpoint of a bourgeois progress narrative; rather, utopia is a product of *hope*.

Bloch’s understanding of utopia has two components. First, utopia is an object of hope; second, those hopes are firmly rooted in the present. Taking each of these points in turn, utopia is

defined by its relationship to hope. This hope, however, is not personal. While it may be, and often is, experienced individually, it does not reflect personal desires in the near-future. Utopia is not about maybe someday getting married, getting a raise, or even getting an abstract happily ever after: “Utopian hope or longing... possesses an inherently collective character” (Freedman 2001:74). This hope is about grander social concerns; it also markedly more radical. Freedman considers utopian thinking a natural, *human* pursuit: “Utopia, which in one sense is always elsewhere, always escaping our actual horizons, is in another and no less important sense inscribed in the innermost core of our being” (Freedman 2001:74). Utopia is this process of collectively imagining a future that looks and feels radically different. It is worth noting, however, that this sort of radical, politicized hope has the most meaning for those whom the present does not benefit. Imagining the otherwise has little significance to those whose needs are served by the status quo. Utopia, therefore, is always already affixed to marginality. As I’ve already prefigured, imagining the future always begins in the present: “The essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present. If we had not already gone beyond the barriers, we could not even perceive them as barriers” (Freedman 2001:77). Thinking utopia means delineating these barriers; it also means breaking them down. Utopia as a hermeneutic is the process of doing this work. Utopia is a *transformation* of the status quo to something better.

What, then, does this mean for the relationship between science fiction and utopia? Marin has stated that literary exploration of utopia is always “an ideological critique of ideology” (Freedman 2001:83). That is to say, a novel does not exist outside the ideological apparatus in which it is written. This is yet another way of anchoring a book to the specific time and place of its origins. But it matters more for science fiction than other genres, where the book’s temporality is almost certainly out of synch with objective reality. It helps to be reminded that

the relationship between science fiction worlds and the present goes deep. Like utopia in the general sense, sf utopias are defined by their collective character. Sf worlds “are cognitively linked to the world we do know and are invested with our actual longings” (Freedman 2001:79). Utopia in science fiction, then, positively polarized worlds represent a transformation from the present to a world more in line with people’s dreams. By the same measure, dystopia could be viewed as an expression of fears and anxieties. Dystopia, too, is a dreamscape, but it is made of nightmares. Most worlds are a composite of dreams and nightmares. Even utopia and dystopia fail to delineate a clear binary. Collective hopes and fears are really two sides of the same coin. Both are part of the same imaginative process.

It’s that imaginative process that I want to address next. To that end, I turn to another body of utopian studies, this time in queer theory. Although this work is not directly about queer people, by which I mean individuals who identify as LGBTQ, this work is certainly about *queerness*. I use the term in its broadest sense, to evoke anything that goes against the grain of hegemonic cultural norms; essentially, I use queerness here as a rough gloss for marginality, anti-structure, or in Turner’s words, liminal “edgemen.” I also use queerness in José Esteban Muñoz’s way, as a utopian hermeneutic. There is a clear connection between liminality, marginality, queerness, and utopia. In trying to understand the effect fictional worlds can have on the real world, I would like to use the concept of queer world-making.

The project of queer world-making is public, performative, and utopian in nature. It is a concept without an easy definition. When asked in an interview with Annamarie Jagose how queer world-making functions in theory and in practice, Michael Warner explained it as:

The idea is that the activity we undertake with each other, in a kind of agonistic performance in which what we become depends on the perspectives and interactions of

others, brings into being the space of our world, which is then the background against which we understand ourselves and our belonging.... The world made in public action is not an intended or designed world, but one disclosed in practice. [Jagose 2000:5]

The goal, then, of queer world-making is an intimately “public world of belonging and transformation” (Berlant and Warner 1998:558). Warner and Berlant argue that the intimacy of queer world-making must go beyond the sexual relationships that traditionally define queerness; these new forms of intimacy do not necessarily correspond “to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation. These intimacies *do* bear a necessary relation to a counterpublic—an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation” (Berlant and Warner 1998:558). The queer world is neither absolute nor tangible; it is made (and remade) through acts of intimate sociality—performances, rituals, and avowals of queerness—whether organized events, such as pride parades and queer film festivals, or the quotidian, as simple as holding hands with a same-sex partner on the street.

It is the quotidian side of world-making that I want to address. Fiona Buckland, who has studied social dancing in queer clubs as a form of world-making, speaks of her desire to “link the everyday to the utopic” (Buckland 2001:1). Both Buckland and José Esteban Muñoz emphasize the utopian potential in the quotidian, in having a coke with someone (Muñoz 2009:6), or in dancing in a queer club (Buckland 2001:2). Or, I suggest, in reading a book, discussing it with a friend. This is the meaning of world-making: not fully intentioned or designed, public yet intimate. At its heart, queer world-making is a utopian project. Suggesting that queerness is always already a utopian project, Muñoz claims, “We must dream and enact new and better pleasure, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing”

(Muñoz 2009:1). Queer world-making is that propulsion. It is an acknowledgement that utopia can be made in everyday life.

How, then, do we bridge the gap between the sprawling utopian project of queer world-making and the small-scale world-building of science fiction novels?

The gap is smaller than we might think. Drawing from Warner, world-making is both public and performative. And so is literature. Literature is an inherently public and collective experience. There is something inherently utopian about the act of writing, of imagining, of etching words onto a page to form an image of hopes and longings. Authors create stories for public consumption. Readers consume these books and actively engage in the process of creating meaning. I do not believe that reading is a Platonic dystopia of shadows against a cave wall, or even a culture industry of manufactured meanings. Science fiction worlds in particular require an active spectator. Good science fiction should “engage the audience in an act of argumentative world-creation” (Parrinder 2001:15). World-building, no matter how thorough, can only provide an instruction manual; readers must mentally build an image of the world themselves. The process is a fundamentally collective act of imagining.

We may read books alone, we discuss them with friends, family, classmates, colleagues, or strangers on the Internet. Stories are not self-contained; rather, they are cultural objects that have the power to shape and reshape the worlds in which they are produced. This is the power and the frustration of fiction.

World-making is a project with the same goals as the concept of utopia; world-making simply provides a context for understanding or enacting utopian desires in the present. World-making means reconstructing the landscape and redefining our world and spaces of belonging; it means relocating the center and the periphery. Fictional queer world-making is the act of

redrawing the map. Books must create a queer, or liminal, universe. It is not about carving out a place for marginalized characters in a duplicate present, but rather about the construction of a queer future counter to the existing world.

Alternately, world-making aims to imbue the liminal with stability or permanence. While for Turner the liminal exists to reify the boundaries of the not-liminal, queer world-making urges the creation of a liminal counterpublic. That counterpublic goes on existing long after the book ends.

## 5. Case Study I: John Scalzi

There were three reasons Lydia Garcia-Perry would never forget April 1, 2203. She turned twenty-two, she watched a man die, and her final command simulation became a little too real.

“Shit, I feel like an adult.”

“You *are* an adult.”

“Yeah, but I usually don’t feel like one.”

-J. R. Sanchez, *Bright Stars Burning* (2013)

John Scalzi is an author obsessed with making the periphery central. His work uses seemingly absurd, or even playful, premises to do so. Both *Old Man’s War* (2005) and *Redshirts* (2013) are examples of a social order completely upended, and both novels are parodies of classic science fiction tropes. *Old Man’s War* is, as the title suggests, about an intergalactic war fought not by young men but by seventy-five year-olds. *Redshirts* follows the life and death of starship crewmembers whose narrative destiny is to die. Within the frame of critically acclaimed science fiction, Scalzi’s work thoughtfully examines social structure and imagines other ways of being.

*Old Man’s War* is a sprawling space opera in the tradition of Robert Heinlein. Like *Starship Troopers* or *Time Enough for Love*, *Old Man’s War* spans galaxies and decades. It’s a swashbuckling, old-fashioned humans-fight-aliens-for-the-right-to-colonize-other-planets story. And while, at first glance, that trope appears tired and worn out—not to mention reductive and conservative in its representation of the Other—Scalzi gives it a modern update. The soldiers of Earth’s Colonial Defense Force (CDF) are not young, strong men, but seventy-five year-old men and women, whose consciousness is transferred into new bodies. The new bodies are younger versions of the recruits, grown from their own DNA—with a few minor enhancements. They

new bodies have green-tinged skin, enhanced with chlorophyll. They have cat-like eyes. They are exceptionally strong and heal exceptionally fast. They are fighting for the human race, for Earth, but they have cut all ties to Earth, and with their augmented bodies, their connection to humanity is tenuous at best. These, I would argue, are liminal states. Scalzi overturns the traditional social order by placing the old in a field traditional reserved for the young: the military. The recruits are declared legally dead on Earth and shuttled between galaxies and planets. They are stripped from their bodies and find themselves in a nebulous, undefined place somewhere between human and alien.

Much of the novel works to position or reposition older people in a society that privileges youth. The traditional value of relative age groups can be seen in this quote: “It makes a weird sort of sense to have *old* soldiers, because young people are more useful to their community. They have their whole lives ahead of them, while *we* are eminently expendable” (Scalzi 2005:56). Lines such as these, sprinkled throughout the novel, reveal biases and preconceptions about age and utility— notions that the narrative proceeds to overturn. Later, protagonist John Perry learns otherwise. A CDF official tells him:

“That’s one of the reasons the CDF selects old people to become soldiers, you know— it’s not just because you’re all retired and a drag on the economy. It’s also because you’ve lived long enough to know that there’s more to life than your own. Most of you have raised families and have children and grandchildren and understand the value of doing something beyond your own selfish goals. Even if you never become colonists yourselves, you still recognize that human colonies are good for the human race, and worth fighting for. It’s hard to drill that concept into the brain of a nineteen-year-old. But you know from experience. In this universe, experience counts.” [Scalzi 2005:160]

Here, Scalzi refines valuation based on age, and in so doing challenges the real-world dichotomy of young/old as useful/useless.

Scalzi also works to redefine notions of family as something bound in blood. Recruits are legally declared dead; they must leave everyone and everything they love behind. Thus stripped

of all preexisting social relationships, they are urged to forge new bonds. The result is a found family, bound together by bonds of queer kinship rather than blood. This is exemplified by John's actions to save Jesse and Harry, two other soldiers he met immediately after joining the CDF. When they insist that they don't want to be sidelined, he tells them:

Look. Alan is dead. Susan and Thomas are dead. Maggie is dead. My squad and my platoon are all gone. Everyone I've ever cared about out here is gone but you two. I had a chance to keep you two alive and I took it. I couldn't do anything for anyone else. I can do something for you. I need you to be alive. You're all I have out here... I know what you are to me. You're my family now. Jesse, Harry. You're my family. Don't be angry with me for wanting to keep you safe. Just *be* safe. For me. Please. [Scalzi 2005:284]

John finds a family in the CDF, and he does whatever it takes to protect them. That family also comes to include Ghost Brigade member Lieutenant Jane Sagan, who wears the body of John's dead wife Kathy but not her personality.

Jane Sagan is the embodiment of liminality. Six years prior to meeting John, she was born into an augmented version of Katherine Perry's twenty-something body. She was trained to serve the CDF special forces, and she is keenly aware of her position as defender of humanity who is not quite human. I quote the following speech at length for impact.

"You have no idea what it's like to be one of us... You said you wanted to know about me. What part do you want to know? Do you want to know what it's like to wake up one day, your head filled with a library of information—everything from how to butcher a pig to how to pilot a starship—but not to know your own name? Or that you even have one? Do you want to know what it's like to never have been a child, or even to have *seen* one until you step foot on some burned-out colony and see a dead one in front of you? Maybe you'd like to hear about how the first time any of us talk to a realborn we have to keep from hitting you because you speak so slow, move so slow, and *think* so fucking slow that we don't know why they even bother to enlist you.

"Or maybe you'd like to know that every single Special Forces soldier dreams up a past for themselves. We know we're the Frankenstein monster. We know we're put together from bits and pieces of the dead. We look in a mirror and we know we're seeing somebody else, and that the only reason we exist is because they *don't*—and that they are lost to us forever. So we all imagine their lives, their children, their husbands and wives, and we know that non of these things can ever be ours." (Scalzi 2005:321-322)

*Redshirts*, which won the 2013 Hugo Award for Best Novel, is something else entirely. The novel reimagines *Star Trek: The Original Series* free of copyright complications. As Trekkies will know, *TOS* developed a reputation for bizarre away team protocol. Whenever the Enterprise encountered a new planet, the away team generally consisted of multiple bridge officers—usually both the captain and first officer—and a security detail. The security crewmembers wore red uniform shirts and had a nasty habit of dying before the first commercial break. The redshirts were, in a word, irrelevant. They were props, created and killed in service of the plot of the week. In *Redshirts*, Scalzi critiques this trope through an act of social inversion. The redshirts, at the periphery of the *Star Trek* universe, are his protagonists; meanwhile, Captain Abernathy, Science Officer Q’eng, and Medical Chief Hartnell are bit characters. The universe, however, doesn’t seem to know it.

When Ensigns Andrew Dahl, Duvall, Hanson, Finn, and Hester join the crew of the USS *Intrepid*, they soon discover that something is wrong with the ship. The crewmembers avoid the commanding officers like the plague, and the *Intrepid*’s away team mortality rate is higher than that of any other ship in the fleet. Causes of death include: falling rocks, toxic atmospheres, pulse gun vaporizations, shuttle door malfunctions, and ice sharks (Scalzi 2013:65). Traumatic death is a certainty for all but the Abernathy and his highest-ranking advisors. Dahl and his friends discover an explanation—that their entire reality is the product of an early 21<sup>st</sup> century science fiction television show based on the adventures of the starship *Intrepid*. That show, which is a cheap knockoff of the original *Star Trek*, “intrudes on [their] reality and warps it” (Scalzi 2013:208). Don’t worry, the characters think this sounds as ridiculous as you do.

However, as mentor-figure Jenkins soon convinces them, their reality is so strange it can only be fiction. Each episode of the television show forces their reality to conform: ““The

Narrative’—Jenkins’ term for when the television show crept into their lives, swept away rationality and physical laws and made people know, do and say things they wouldn’t otherwise.... It’s like an irresistible impulse because it is an irresistible impulse—your will isn’t your own, you’re just a pawn for a writer to move around” (Scalzi 2013:214). Lieutenant Anatoly Kerensky, the ship’s astrogator, further explains this phenomenon: “When the captain tells me I’m going to be on an away mission, it’s like some other part of my brain takes over” (Scalzi 2013:153). The Narrative disrupts the characters’ agency; they cannot live freely while it exists. And in many cases, they cannot die freely, either. When characters die in the show’s poorly written scripts, real people die. When Ensign Finn defies the Narrative in order to save the life of Maia Duvall, who appears to be the glorified extra of the week, his punishment is death. Literally. The Narrative changes course, as smoothly as if it meant to do this all along. Finn takes Maia’s place on the away team, and the culprit was an old acquaintance of Finn’s; of course Finn is the one who would die in the suicide bombing. It should be no surprise that everyone is afraid of the Narrative—afraid of its hegemonic power over their lives. Dahl explains this paralyzing fear: “Everyone on this entire ship is afraid, Maia. They hide and they disappear and they find ways to *not think* about how much time they spend hiding. And then comes the moment when they can’t hide and they have to face themselves” (Scalzi 2013:183). And it should be no surprise that Dahl makes it his mission to stop the television show from ruining their lives.

At first glance, *Redshirts* does not appear to be doing any radical social work; it most obviously critiques fiction, not culture. The critique of fiction is clear: build worlds consistently, and treat characters like people rather than plot devices. While it does invert an existing social order, that social order is itself a fictional representation. The novel’s primary novum, strangely enough, is not the starship *Intrepid* or any of its bells and whistles. The novum, rather, is this:

“When you create a science fiction show, you create a new fictional timeline which starts just before the production date of the television show” (Scalzi 2013:283). There is no real rationalization or explanation for this fact, though a bastardization of multiverse theory could do the trick. The question, however, is what any of this actually means.

While it is by no means imperative to read the Narrative allegorically—another layer of distortion, nesting dolls, and metaception—there is a strong case for it. The Narrative is a mode of symbolic power; it is, quite literally, an imposed structure of reality. Rather like doxa, the Narrative assigns Booleans, rendering possibilities either true or false. Defying the Narrative is inconceivable; for the few who dare, the consequences are lethal. Truly going against it requires co-opting it—using the show’s shoddy science to go back in time, talk to the producers, and convince them to change their ways—rather like reversing discourse. Allegorically, the Narrative can be read as any cultural script, any guide for teaching the dominant behavioral paradigm. As it often steers individuals against their own best interest, the Narrative can be associated with forms of structural violence or inequality—with sexism, racism, homophobia, etc. It is this reading, I believe, that renders the novel most powerful.

As a metanarrative, *Redshirts* is reflexive and self-aware. Ultimately, it demonstrates the power of fiction to create tangible worlds. The events of the novel are explained by the premise that the creation of a science fiction world results in the creation of a real, alternate universe (following multiverse theory). In this universe, such an idea might seem preposterous. But, allegorically, there is a very clear point. The worlds we create in stories are something more than. Not tangible, maybe, but far from static. In 1966, Gene Roddenberry created a universe where the Federation was a symbol of peace, where alien species worked together for the greater good, where starships explored for the sake of exploration. To date, that universe has inspired

four additional television series, twelve feature-length films, and countless tie-in novels. That universe launched fanfiction as an organized artform. That universe inspired John Scalzi to create another universe that I am writing about now. Fictional universes are real, and not just in our imaginations. Just as they are structured by reality, they also structure it in turn.

## 6. Case Study II: Gail Carriger

They lived in a steam-powered world, with dirigible-dotted skies and smoke-blowing factories.

-J. R. Sanchez, *All the Pretenders* (2012)

It's a familiar image—and an attractive one. Nostalgia for the early days of the Industrial Revolution haunts science fiction. It's the world of characters such as Nikola Tesla and Ada Lovelace, both of whom are ripe for fictionalization (see *The Prestige* and *The Difference Engine*, respectively). It's also the world of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, who get much of the credit for bringing science fiction through its adolescence (note that credit for the birth of science fiction goes to Mary Shelley and a few other young women). This world is held together by a series of shared images of dirigibles and automatons, parasols and bustles, brass and octopi. This is the world of steampunk.

So what is steampunk? In its simplest form, steampunk is a form of postmodern pastiche. It is a series of citations, some historical and some literary, that create a shared imaginary world. In *The Steampunk Bible*, Jeff Vandermeer offers the following equation: “STEAMPUNK = Mad Scientist Inventor [invention (steam x airship or metal man / baroque styling) x (pseudo) Victorian setting] + progressive or reactionary politics x adventure plot” (Vandermeer 2011:9). Steampunk is a genre, an aesthetic, and a movement all at once. It has origins in both actual history and imagined history. As a genre, it includes both works written by Victorian authors imagining the future and contemporary authors reimagining the past. As an aesthetic, it is a time-collapsed pastiche. As one steampunk practitioner describes it:

It's Edwardian formal wear with industrial trim. It's the lovechild of Hot Topic and a BBC costume drama. It's the gentility and politeness of Victorian manners with free-range cross-dressing options. It's salvaged suits with maker gadgets attached. It's clock parts and candy stripes, and everything in between. It's open to change, it's adaptable, it welcomes invention, innovation, and art. It's personalized and characterized—the

ultimate in individuality. It can be worn only in part—a waistcoat here, a vintage military jacket there—or in full-on head-to-toe glory. [Carriger 2010:401]

As a movement, steampunk includes authors, artisans, and fashion aficionados.

Steampunk is a polymorphous phenomenon, unified by its queer temporality. Gail Carriger, American-born anglophile and practicing archeologist, defines steampunk as “a re-imagining of either the past or the future where steam technology never died, and electricity never dominated, and a Victorian aesthetic overshadows all. Think Jules Verne and hot air balloons flying to the moon” (Carriger 2013). Finally, steampunk is “simultaneously retro and forward-looking in nature” (Vandermeer 2011:9). The importance of this characteristic cannot be overstated. For all its anachro-futuristic gadgets in Victorian drag, steampunk cannot be considered as a simple commentary on the past. On the contrary, steampunk is, like all science fiction, a place where time collapses. Writing about the past while thinking about the future is ultimately commentary on the present.

Steampunk can be best described as an experiment in collective world building. It is both a community and a collective project in imagining. Carriger has written on the sense of unity in what is a seemingly disparate community: “We all simply found each other in the end: and not just the writers and the fashionistas, but the makers and the musicians and the artists as well. And we formed into a strange little social movement without any real objective, organization, or political agenda” (Carriger 2010:401). What is notable is that the people who are drawn to steampunk are, in most cases, those who feel disenfranchised by the dominant culture. Those who come to steampunk are marginalized, in one way or another, and they are looking for an alternative. Carriger suggests that it is the steampunk aesthetic that binds them: “Fashion has become the social construct that connects the eco-warriors with the threadbangers, the artists

with the makers, the scholars with the dilettantes, and the authors with the fans. The power and the potential in steampunk attire is in its community-building effects, in the connections that it fosters and conversations it opens up between people” (Carriger 2010:403). Carriger views steampunk as a response to “a pervading feeling of political upheaval and economic chaos right now, a sense that the world is crumbling about us” (Carriger 2010:402). Steampunk is not only a response to social alienation but also an attempt to fix it. For Carriger, steampunk “brings with it a sense of control in chaotic times. Whether acknowledged openly or not, I believe there is a part of the steampunker psyche that believes if we can dress and act the part with integrity and class, making use of society’s unwanted inanimate objects, we are exerting control over the crumbling ugliness of the world around us” (Carriger 2010:402).

Steampunk is social and radical. Steampunk is liminal and marginal. And ultimately, steampunk is transformative. It is marginalized people, coming together, and collectively imagining a liminal space where things could be otherwise. In this sense, steampunk is not only world-building but also world-making.

Here, I wish to turn from Gail Carriger’s anthropological observations to her steampunk fiction. Although an unlikely choice for a case study, there are numerous ways to justify studying her work. I want to talk about Gail Carriger because her works are a) part of a SF subgenre that is also a subculture, b) marked to women, c) an example of the widespread supernatural trend, and d) popular rather than critically acclaimed. Moreover, as demonstrated above, Carriger is both a scholar and an articulate spokesman for the community. She is keenly aware of the social significance of her books and the greater steampunk movement. My primary reason for studying Carriger, however, is as personal as it is simple. I discovered her books in January 2011. I read

them, and although I'd had no previous exposure to steampunk, I saw a world I could relate to. And isn't that what this is all about?

*The Parasol Protectorate* series is five books long and follows protagonist Alexia Tarabotti from spinsterhood to motherhood. Throughout the series, Alexia falls in love, finds herself in countless near-death situations, marries, faces off against every supernatural sect imaginable, wears elaborate dresses, uncovers family secrets, and drinks quite a lot of tea. I want to argue that the strangeness of this world facilitates the strangeness of its characters, and vice versa. Vampires, werewolves, and ghosts are literally liminal creatures, stuck somewhere between life and death. Their immortality is fragile, imperfect. Vampires can be felled by a single ray of sunlight. The world they inhabit is a similarly liminal space.

The books are set in a steampunk world, in which "Enlightenment" is a somewhat broader term, referring to the acceptance of supernatural creatures—namely, vampires, werewolves, and ghosts. Most of the action takes place in Victorian England, where the aforementioned supernatural species are fully integrated with high society. Vampires dictate fashion; werewolves are patrons of the arts. Carriger writes: "Alexia's world is steampunk: an alternate 1800s England with new and different mechanicals, evil scientists, and attack automatons. The integrity of the alternative world is held together by the simple fact that I play by my own Victorian science rules (no magic)" (Carriger 2013). There is an internal logic to the science of Carriger's world. The implication is that this thing called "soul," which is quantifiable, is not supernatural at all. This internally valid, externally pseudo-scientific invention is the *novum*. This is the true point of difference that separates Alexia Tarabotti's world from our own and allows for the existence of vampires, werewolves, and ghosts. And, as

Carriger's explanation suggests and the SF genre demands, the books are careful in their insistence to rationality. For Carriger, supernatural does not imply unnatural. This becomes apparent in a description of a werewolf's transformation from human to wolf form: "Mind you, there was no glow, no mist, no magic about it. Skin, bone, and fur simply rearranged itself.... The basic principles of conservation of mass still applied whether supernatural or not. Werewolves had to obey the laws of physics just like everyone else" (Carriger 2009:57). Carriger uses humor to cement the laws of this world while also cognitively binding it to our world. See? she asks. Even in this strange dreamscape where men turn to wolves some things are inviolable. The dreamscape isn't so far from home.

Carriger has created an intricate backstory—part history, part myth—for the society. Elizabeth I was responsible for the "full societal integration" (Carriger 2009:54) of the supernatural sect. Before then:

The dark days before the supernatural was revealed to daylight folk. Before the hives and packs made themselves known on the British Isle. Before that prestigious revolution in philosophy and science that their emergence triggered, known to some as the Renaissance but to vampires as the Age of Enlightenment. Supernatural folk called the time before the Dark Ages, for obvious reasons. For them it had been an age spent skulking through the night. [Carriger 2009:46]

In the present, a Bureau of Unnatural Registry (BUR) documents supernatural persons and investigates supernatural wrongdoing. Socially, werewolves and vampires have plenty of cultural and political capital. They are not only socially integrated but also socially influential: "The truth of the matter was that most Alphas and hive queens in the modern age held power by the same civilized means as everyone else: money, social standing, and politics" (Carriger 2009:34). These details serve many functions. First, they help us contextualize the behavior of the characters. Second, they give color to the world that takes shape between the lines on the page. Third, they delineate the ways in which this world is simultaneously different and similar from

our own; for each difference, there are two similarities. For each glaring departure, there are threads anchoring it to the world we know.

To borrow a concept from cinema, steampunk is all about *excess*—that which does not directly serve the narrative but exists to give texture to the world. In cinema, excess is automatic and inescapable; an image contains, by definition, more visual detail than necessary. In modern prose, there is a tendency to privilege linguistic economy. Create the strongest image in as few words as possible, they say. Be a Hemingway, not a Faulkner. Contain the world in a story, not a story in a world.

Steampunk goes against this trend because steampunk is, in a sense, counter-narrative. Steampunk is about both the world and the aesthetic. The genre classification lives in the details, not the narrative. It is Barthes's third meaning, or Thompson's cinematic excess. It's about background, ornamentation, and incidentals. In steampunk, the style and color of Alexia's dress is as important as the fact that there are scientists whose occupation is "the weighing and measuring of the human soul" (Carriger 2009:94). Creating a steampunk world is about cultivating an atmosphere. There is an early scene in which Alexia and her friend Ivy take a stroll through Hyde Park. Their conversation is unmemorable, and though they are eventually run into an emissary from a vampire hive, none of this is striking. What is striking is that Alexia and Ivy watch dirigibles coming in for a landing:

They flew Giffard-style steam-powered airships with de Lome propellers. It was the latest and greatest in leisurely travel. The upper crust, in particular, had taken to the skies with enthusiasm. Floating had almost eclipsed hunting as the preferred pastime of the aristocracy.... The two ladies stood watching as one of the dirigibles came in for a landing.... "What remarkable times we live in," commented Alexia, her eyes sparkling at the spectacular sight. (Carriger 2009:34)

Many of the details in this passage are unnecessary; they are window dressing. Throughout the series, Carriger provides endless descriptions of high fashion and delectable pastries. She

describes gadgets and gizmos such as the “harmonic auditory resonance disruptor” and Professor Lyall’s magnifying “glassicles.” Again, most of these details do little to advance the plot. They do, however, enhance the reality of the world. Enhancing the physical reality of the world through detailed description in turn enhances the reality of other elements. If you can believe in dirigibles landing in Hyde Park as two well-dressed ladies with parasols watch, then why can’t you believe in vampires and werewolves?

As one might expect, this fictional Victorian England is, like its historical counterpart, strictly governed by its rigid social structure. Rules govern the behavior of mortal humans and supernatural creatures alike. Because the guidelines for human behavior are more or less historically accurate, I’ll focus on supernatural etiquette. In the first few pages of *Soulless*, a vampire attempts to feed on Alexia. She is, understandably, appalled by his boorish behavior. As she explains, “A vampire in a state of extreme hunger had two socially acceptable options: to take sips from various willing drones belonging to him or his hive, or to pay for the privilege from blood-whores down dockside” (Carriger 2009:20). There are clear expectations for supernatural behavior. Despite their seemingly uncouth habits—such as drinking blood or shape-shifting on the full moon—vampires and werewolves are supposed to have manners. Furthermore, they have alternate social structures. Vampires live in hives. Much like bees’ hives, each vampire hive has a queen; the queen is the only vampire capable of turning humans into new vampires—or reproducing, so to speak. Similarly, werewolves have packs. Each pack is run by an alpha, who has a beta and a gamma as lieutenants. These social structures are believed to counter the animalistic element of the supernatural temperament. The implication is, by forcing social contact and ensuring close interpersonal bonds, the supernatural will remember their humanity, or what is left of it.

Also as one might expect, there are social consequences to defying the social structure. A werewolf without a pack, for example, becomes a security risk: “Loners were dangerous: community-oriented animals cut off from the very social structure that kept them sane and controlled.... Brawling, violence, feasting on human flesh, and other such illogical carnage—that was the loner’s game” (Carriger 2009:61). The situation is similar for vampires who forsake their hives: “Roves were rare among the bloodsucking set. It took a lot of political, psychological, and supernatural strength for a vampire to separate from his hive. And once autonomous units, roves tended to go a bit funny about the noggin and slide toward the eccentric end of societal acceptability” (Carriger 2009:45). I want to emphasize here that social structure equals sanity. This is an interesting anxiety for a steampunk novel. Carriger is intensely aware of the tensions between individuality and alienation. The anxiety would seem to suggest a wistful longing for simpler days, when everyone knew his or her place in an inflexible social structure, but that is not the case. This social rigidity is not emblematic of conservative politics or nostalgia for a stiffer society. On the contrary, as some of the greatest departures from both history and contemporary society, the hive and the pack are sites of social transformation. First, these social structures are inherently based on social mobility. No one is born supernatural; being supernatural is always already an act of becoming. Second, because no one is born supernatural, the supernatural kinship structure is founded on something other than blood. These are, for the most part, families of choice. Packs and hives are found families. They are queer kinship structures. This, too, is a form of social mobility.

Alexia Tarabotti is not your average Harlequin heroine. (I say this with the greatest respect for Harlequin heroines, of course.) Throughout *Soulless*, the first book of the pentalogy, Carriger positions Alexia as an outsider in her society. Her outsider status becomes apparent in

both the way others perceive her and the way she relates to others. At the start, her future husband, an alpha werewolf, observes that she has “simply got a jot more backbone than most females this century” (Carriger 2009:23). To her mother, Alexia is “revoltingly independent” (Carriger 2009:29). The narrator notes: “Whatever it was, Alexia had been born that way, full of logic and reason and sharp words” (Carriger 2009:29). Even physically, Alexia stands apart from her counterparts, with “skin a little too dark and her nose a little too prominent” (Carriger 2009:23). She also *presents* herself as different. She takes pride in her status as an outsider, a spinster, and an outlier. She flaunts her education and sharp wit at dinner parties, “never one to pass up an opportunity to display her bluestocking tendencies” (Carriger 2009:96). She chooses her friends on the basis of their character, not their social standing. She prides herself on being useful rather than ornamental. At times crass, unsentimental, and irreverent, Alexia is, as Turner would call her, a liminal edgeman.

And, in a society obsessed with the *supernatural*, Alexia is a *preternatural*, or, soulless. Following the pseudoscientific premise that supernatural ability is the result of excess soul—a quantifiable, yet illusive substance, much like aura, chi, or energy—preternatural ability results from the absence of soul. Where excess soul fuels artists and other creative spirits, the soulless are pragmatic people. Often perceived as cold and unfeeling, they render supernatural abilities inactive upon physical contact. For this reason, the supernatural often refer to them as “soul-suckers” (Carriger 2009:43). Initially, Alexia keeps her preternatural heritage a secret. She keeps herself apart. At the start of the series, Alexia herself is rather like a rove vampire or a loner werewolf.

Alexia is not the only character to defy social norms and expectations. The characters who come to form her pack, so to speak, are all outsiders in their own right. Lord Conall

Maccon, the Scottish alpha werewolf Alexia comes to marry, is gruff, reticent, and generally oblivious to social niceties. Ivy Hisselpenny, her best friend, is an actress with atrocious taste in hats. She also befriends Madame Lefoux, who has three strikes against her: she is an inventor, a butch lesbian, and a Frenchwoman. Finally, there is Lord Akeldama, an effeminate gay rove vampire with a propensity for flowery terms of endearment. While Alexia sets herself apart from her mother and her sisters, these are the people who become her family. They all exist at the margins of polite society, and they all find each other. This is a powerful message. The gang of heroes at the center of Carriger's steampunk world is full of liminal figures. They are queer, gender non-conforming, and diverse in nationality and ethnicity. Despite these characteristics that should marginalize them, they are the heroes of the story. And more than that, they are allowed to find each other.

This is transformative because it presents a different set of possibilities, a different structure of reality, a different *doxa*. This is transformative, and it is powerful. This is *rare*. If stories tell us what is or might be possible, then Carriger's stories are doing something impressive. This is what spoke to me when reading these books three years ago.

## 7. Case Study III: Fanfiction

They walk hand-in-hand down the streets of Chelsea. It's getting too cold to go out without mittens and fuzzy hats, but Kara clasps Theo's hand tightly in hers. She can see her breath when she exhales, and the cold soaks through to her bones.

"Maria got a new sim," Theo is telling her, oblivious to the storm inside her skull. "A spaceship one. It's really cool. There's even an antigrav setting and everything. Plus it has an awesome soundtrack."

"There's no sound in space," she tells him absently.

He wrinkles his nose. It's red from the cold. "That doesn't matter."

She shrugs. No matter how many games they play or how many false realities they simulate, space will never be anything but a silent vacuum.

"Can I go over to her house after school?"

She glances at him curiously. His eyes are so bright. "I thought Maria's mother was sick."

"She was," Theo agrees impatiently, "but not anymore. They killed the cancer, and she got better. Remember?"

She doesn't, but her memory for social minutia is hardly what it used to be. She thinks it was stage four cervical cancer, but "stage four" isn't what it used to be, either.

-J. R. Sanchez, "The Grease Track" (2013)

We are living, as Alexis Lothian (2012) puts it, in the science fiction future. We wake to alarms on our phones. We check our email accounts, our Twitter feeds, and our favorite news outlets as we brush our teeth. We read on our tablets during breakfast. We listen to podcasts, personalized Pandora radio stations on our way to school or work. We come home and flip on our computers or our televisions. We spend our days plugged into technology and surrounded by screens. We surround ourselves with audiovisual media of all mediums. This is largely possible because virtually all modern media is digital, and the Internet allows for easy access of digital data. The Internet, in short, makes it possible for us to be connected to multiple media streams continuously and simultaneously.

Henry Jenkins (2009) has termed this phenomenon *convergence culture*. This means that every story, image, and brand plays itself out across the maximum number of media channels. In addition to the comic book-inspired movie, for example, there is a tie-in novel. There is an

original motion picture soundtrack. Convergence culture is, on one hand, a product of consumer culture. It's easy to see the possibilities for critique here. Certainly a Marxist critique emphasize the ways in convergence culture is simply a technological elaboration of Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry, where our desires are manufactured and produced for us, where ideas of personalization and agency are merely well-marketed illusions. I don't want to belittle this danger because, yes, of course there is a danger when a handful of publishing houses and production companies have a monopoly on stories. But Jenkins's point, and mine, is that they don't. At least, not entirely.

A hallmark of Web 2.0 is its participatory character. The term "Web 2.0" is now fifteen years old, and the concept is outdated, as we've progressed to newer and stranger things. Web 2.0 refers not to a technological change but a cultural one. The term describes the change in how people began using the Internet differently in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The moniker signifies the rise of social media, user-generated content, and other forms of virtual community building. Web 2.0, in short, is when the Internet began to explore its full potential as a *web* of interconnectivity. The examples are endless: Facebook, Youtube, Blogger, Twitter, Reddit, and even the comment section on the typical news article. The commonality, of course, is connectivity.

I am particularly interested in the intersection of user-generated content and virtual community. I am interested in the ways user-generated content creates and shapes virtual communities. I am interested in how this content and these communities relate to the concrete world beyond the Internet. I believe fanfiction—original content created by ordinary people, then uploaded to the web communities—provides important insights into these questions. After all, it's only fitting that the Internet, a thing of science fiction imagining, is reshaping the genre

itself.

So what is fanfiction?

The short answer is in the name. Fanfiction is fiction written by fans, or consumers of traditional media.

The long answer is, well, longer.

Fanfiction is fiction derived from traditional media, written by fans of that traditional media. Fanfiction ranges in length from a hundred-word “drabbles” to novel-length epics. The source material can be a book, television show, movie, or video game; anything from the Harry Potter heptalogy to the game of Tetris can inspire fanworks. Anything with a fictional world, characters, and a narrative is fair game. It is difficult to analyze the demographics of writers or readers of fanfiction for the simple fact that most interaction happens either completely anonymously, under pseudonyms, or with very little factual interchange. The stereotype runs that fanfiction is primarily written by women of two demographics: middle-aged housewives and teenage girls. However, this stereotype is reductive and difficult to prove. What can be said, definitively, is that fanfiction is currently produced and consumed by individuals who have access to the Internet.

Although fanfiction is a phenomenon with a significant history, and illustrious precursors such as the *Pamela* craze and every Sherlock Holmes adaptation not written by Arthur Conan Doyle, its modern history begins in the 1960s with *Star Trek*. Historically, fanfiction was compiled in zines and circulated either through mail or at conventions. In the past two decades, the Internet has supplanted this process. Authors of fanfiction found communities on sites such as LiveJournal, FanFiction.Net, and now ArchiveOfOurOwn (AO3). Post-LiveJournal,

individual authors post their work to sites like AO3, which have a searchable tag system based on fandom, category (general, m/f, m/m, or f/f), character, relationship, and rating, among other tags. Readers can search the database or follow specific authors to get their reading fix. While this process may seem less interactive than zines or conventions, this is not the case. If anything, the Internet has opened fan communities to a wider range of people. Fanfiction is an inherently social, or communal, activity. There is still a clearly defined community beyond the writer—betas (proofreaders), readers, and the bulk of fandom. There are survivals from the LJ era, when works were posted in fandom-specific communities, such as fests, prompts, exchanges, and Big Bangs. Fanfiction is fundamentally dependent on media and popular culture.

It's difficult to discuss fanfiction all at once because it is not a coherent activity. All fanfiction shares a fundamental dependence on media and popular culture, but from there, it diverges radically. Fanfiction isn't a genre, exactly, but a medium. It is its own medium, which often overlaps with traditional literary practice, but has its own unique characteristics. Like any medium, it has many categories and subgenres. There are fix-it fics, which rewrite perceived problems in canon, such as plot holes or unwanted character deaths. Future fics speculate what could happen in the characters' future. While these variations tend to be plot-based, some fanfiction is simply porn, often expressed as "PWP" for "porn without plot."

Then there is Alternate Universe fanfiction, more frequently referred to simply as an "AU." Though any act of willful canon divergence can be considered AU, it typically refers to transplanting the characters into a different "universe," or *world*, where their day-to-day lives look radically different. There are a number of stock AUs that pop up in almost every fandom. It's common to see action movie characters working in coffee shops, starship crew members wreaking havoc in a high school, or detectives running around Hogwarts.

I am less interested in fanfiction of science fiction source works that drop the sf elements. I am not interested in writing about characters from a sf setting who have sex in a bedroom that could exist in any world. What I do want to write about is fanfiction that builds science fiction worlds, regardless of the source material's genre. I take the AU as my point of departure because it bears the closest structural resemblance to the sf works I have discussed so far. Good AUs introduce one point of difference, or inversion, and build a world around the consequences of that choice. They populate this new world with familiar faces, but though they inhabit the same skin, these characters are new people, uniquely shaped by their worlds.

Before positing explanations for the function of fanfiction, I offer two brief examples of powerfully constructed AU fanfiction.

First, FanFiction.Net user cable69's 200,000-word, as of yet uncompleted, *Enterprise High*. As source material, cable69 takes J.J. Abrams's 2009 *Star Trek* reboot. It's an AU, in which the crew of the USS Enterprise are students at San Francisco's illustrious Enterprise High School. Although this may sound like an AU that strips a science fiction work of its science fiction aspects, this is not the case. The world cable69 creates retains its sf character. The story is still set in the twenty-third century. Starships and interplanetary travel still exist. Although teenage James Kirk is not a starship captain, he is part of Enterprise High's hovercar club. The story follows Kirk and his fellow club members through a year of high school, chronicling their attempts to navigate school, relationships, family tragedies, and an epic hovercar rivalry. While the plot is memorable, both funny and heart-wrenching, cable69's world building is something else entirely. Her twenty-third century San Francisco is uniquely different from the San Francisco of any official *Star Trek* franchise. It's more grounded in the social concerns of the

present moment. The story description promises an eventual relationship between Kirk and Spock, but the journey there depicts relationships between Spock and Uhura, Kirk and McCoy, and others. Cable69 creates a society with different expectations for relationships. Sexuality is both fluid and flexible. Homosexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, and polyamory are completely accepted. Leonard McCoy has two dads. Nyota Uhura hooks up with her friends Gaila and Christine Chapel. In a late reveal, we discover that Spock was designated female at birth but identified as male from an early age. Cable69 uses the futuristic setting to normalize queerness and project a vision for a better society—something Gene Roddenberry would certainly approve of.

Second, Eliezer Yudkowsky's, also known by the username Less Wrong, multi-chapter epic *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality*. Often referred to simply as HPMOR, the in-progress work currently has over one hundred chapters. The source material is, obviously, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. The plot loosely follows that of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, recording Harry's first year of misadventures at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The point of inversion, or novum, is simple: Petunia Evans marries Michael Verres instead of Vernon Dursley. They accept Harry into their family, and Michael, who is a scientist, teaches young Harry the tenets of rationality. Yudkowsky's Harry is, like Yudkowsky himself, a genius, a scientist, and a rationalist. The series is saturated with eleven year-old Harry being an obnoxious rationalist and consistently the smartest person in the room. When they first meet on the Hogwarts express, Harry and Hermione list quarks. He has no compunction when it comes to telling his Hogwarts professors exactly when they're wrong. As a scientist, Harry's primary goal throughout the series is to understand what sort of science magic is. He and Hermione conduct elaborate experiments to this end. When Hermione dies in a vicious troll attack, Harry vows to

bring her back, through whatever combination of science and magic necessary. Every line and gesture demonstrates Yudkowsky's agenda. A researcher at the Machine Intelligence Research Institute, he is an unabashed transhumanist, meaning he believes humans should strive to improve their biological limitations (such as death) through technology. On his blog, Yudkowsky writes:

I do not tell a tale of the land called Future, nor state as a fact that humanity will someday be free of death—I have no magical ability to see through time. But death is a great evil, and I will oppose it whenever I can. . . . I don't think humanity will always be stuck in the awkward stage we now occupy, when we are smart enough to create enormous problems for ourselves, but not quite smart enough to solve them. I think that humanity's problems are solvable; difficult, but solvable. [Yudkowsky 2004]

Transhumanism is a mode of science fiction futurity turned nonfictional. Like science fiction, transhumanism strives to imagine a better, more utopian future. Against the specter of death, the transhumanist immortality project is ultimately about hope. And fanfiction is one of Yudkowsky's most successful attempts to disseminate a vision of a transhumanist future.

Fanfiction also has a unique place in discussions of postmodern literary practice. While Scalzi is parody and Carriger is pastiche, fanfiction is self-conscious in an entirely more complicated way. Fanfiction is emblematic of something that is neither parody, which playfully mocks the original, or pastiche, which uncritically celebrates the original. Because fanfiction can do both of these things simultaneously, or neither. While there are a variety of motivations for fanfiction—to fill in a missing scene, to resolve sexual tension, or to simply imagine how things could be otherwise—these motivations are satellites orbiting a common sun. At the end of the day, the story on the page or the screen or the airwaves is not enough. There are a few frames through which to consider this fact. Borrowing Michael de Certeau's thesis in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, one could argue that fanfiction is ultimately about individualizing, personalizing,

or internalizing mass culture. One could also argue that fanfiction emerges from the tension of enjoying media while simultaneously feeling that it is not enough. In a quote that has been well-circulated on Tumblr, Jenkins observes, “Fandom, after all, is born of a balance between fascination and frustration: if media content didn’t fascinate us, there would be no desire to engage with it; but if it didn’t frustrate us on some level, there would be no drive to rewrite or remake it” (Jenkins 2013). These views are by no means mutually exclusive. Individualizing mass culture and working through frustrations with it can be and often are two descriptions of the same process. Despite its corrective function, fanfiction is not cynical. It imitates the old while simultaneously suggesting the possibility of something new. Its citations of existing culture are always already transformative gestures.

Arguably, fiction is always already a liminal space. Removed from reality, authors create alternate worlds through a subtle trick of inversion. Fanfiction, however, adds an additional layer of distortion. Published literature and Hollywood films are the epitome of “high.” Fanfiction, written largely by amateurs, is free of the standards and restrictions of traditional media. Furthermore, Turner writes, “Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed” (Turner 1985:97). There is a corollary implication that fanfiction, as the “low,” defines high literature/art as such through opposition. In addition to being “low” culture, fanfiction is also a literature of marginality. Turner observes that “artists tend to be liminal and marginal people, ‘edgemen,’” (Turner 1985:128). The creative process, he suggests, exists in opposition to structure; ritual is a way of bringing it in line. Of *communitas*, Turner writes: “*Communitas* breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority” (Turner 1985:128). Fanfiction is a similar rupture. It comes from the margins: predominantly women, either housewives or teenage girls,

many of whom are queer, many of whom come from racial or ethnic minorities. It is beneath or inferior to traditional publishing. It exists at the interstices of structure. In a post entitled “Fandom as Inhabitation of Negative Space,” Tumblr user and fanfic writer saathi1013 discusses the role of fanfiction:

Fanfic exists in the interstices, in the ellipses and the enjambment. Fanfiction exists in the moment before the wave function collapses. A transformative work doesn't actually transform the original media it is based off of (because the original medium exists in a fixed state and cannot be literally changed by fans unless the canon creators allow it to be so) so much as take the essential structure of the narrative and the characters and twist it, turn it, rotate and reflect it until we've built a fractal around it. [Saathi1013 2013]

Saathi1013 eloquently positions fanfiction as something that exists in the cracks and crevices of traditional media. Here, negative space means liminal space, and as a liminal space, it is, in this formulation, impermanent. Fanfiction is, in every sense, anti-structure.

Here, Turner's functionalist assessment of liminality may hold some weight. Following the functionalist assumptions at the heart of Turner's ritual theory, fanfiction could ultimately be understood as a form of ritualized rebellion. Fanfiction is an open forum where fans may air their grievances. They can take a piece of media that they find problematic, and they can fix it. They can write canonically heterosexual characters into queer relationships. They can genderbend a male character into a woman or racebend a white character into a person of color. Or they can rewrite the events of one episode, alter a character's choices, or simply change the color of the drapes. But at its heart, and for most of its practitioners, fanfiction is a transformative pursuit. AO3, for example, is a project of the Organization for Transformative Works. In most cases, fanfiction is about fans transforming something imperfect into something better. So, with the blessing of professional authors and show-runners, fans consume traditional media, they critique it in online forums, and they write fiction that solves issues of representation or repairs narrative holes. They create a liminal space, but at the end of the day, they leave it. They leave behind

their fanfiction worlds to go back and consume more traditional media. Following Turner, the engagement with liminality has repaired their relationship with original works. They go back, watch another episode of the show or buy the next book in the series, and there is no impetus for real cultural transformation.

There is some validity in this interpretation. People continue to consume problematic media even as they deem it “problematic.” And because the consumption continues, there is no fiscal motivation for the producers to change their bad behavior. Fanfiction can, and often does, serve a conservative function, but that is not its *only* function. The idea that fanfiction is a transformative pursuit has to account for something. For a more nuanced view of the power relations associated with fan practices, I turn once again to the theories of Foucault and Bourdieu.

The traditional media establishment exercises (symbolic) power over society. Established and entrenched, the Big Six publishers or film studios have a specific claim to truth. Furthermore, they have the ability to impose a certain structure of reality. The symbolic power of media should be a given. Fictional worlds create and recreate our so-called objective reality; they are both structured and structuring. Furthermore, fictional worlds define what is possible in the real world. Their narratives define possible narratives for consumers’ lives. Intentionally or unintentionally, books, movies, and television impose limits on cognition. They play a powerful part in defining doxa. Regardless of genre, they show what is possible and what is not, and these limitations bleed from fiction into nonfiction. This is particularly dangerous in that the reality represented by media does not match objective reality. Women, racial and ethnic minorities, and LGBT people are severely underrepresented. Numerous nonprofit groups conduct research on these disparities, including GLAAD’s Studio Responsibility Index. According to their findings

for 2012, of 101 films released by major studios, only 14 contained LGB characters and none contained transgender characters (GLAAD 2013:6). Essentially, media consistently, systematically under represents non-male, non-white, non-heterosexual people and renders minority groups invisible, or nearly so. This does real, personal damage. As Tumblr user relax-o-vision writes, “We stretch our existence over stories,” and when stories systematically exclude and erase, this harms those who find their existence denied (relax-o-vision 2013). This perpetuates frames of sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia; for these underrepresented groups, the absence of representation often results in internalized forms of these prejudices.

Fanfiction, I suggest, serves as a way of reversing this discourse and of stretching the doxa imposed by traditional media. In fanfiction, ordinary people have the ability to rewrite what is possible. In rewriting source material with better narratives that defy harmful stereotypes, by giving women and POC more substantial roles, and by writing queer relationships, fanfiction authors redefine their doxa. They create fictional worlds with new possibilities and, in so doing, resist the symbolic power of traditional media. In a 2009 video short about convergence culture, presented in true convergence culture fashion, Henry Jenkins speaks to this transformative power:

A world governed by principles of participatory culture has the potential to be much more diverse than a world controlled by a small number of media producers. As average people develop an ability to tell their stories, we’re seeing different perspectives emerge. We’re seeing different groups gain representation. We’re seeing groups challenge the dominant media images that have been constructed for their lives. [Jenkins 2009]

Where Turner would conclude that this small rebellion against established media is a reparative act, post-structuralism offers the possibility of something more revolutionary. Fanfiction demonstrates the agency of individuals, as well as the polyvalent nature of discourse. Fanfiction is a way of reversing discourse, of claiming or reclaiming media, of creating a more equitable

mediascape. Fiction is itself an act of power by groups that might traditionally be considered powerless. Far from repairing social solidarity, a poststructuralist account presents fanfiction as an act of resistance, defiance, and power.

Fandom is by no means a utopian idyll. Saathi1013 points out that fandom often replicates dominant cultural narratives. A recent blog post on Lady Geek Girl and Friends observed that, while fanfiction has certainly increased visibility for gay men, it hasn't done the same for queer women. Only 3.5% of fanfiction on AO3 is femslash, or fiction that depicts romantic relationships between women (porluciernagas 2014). Fandom is not immune to sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia. The power—though also the danger—of fandom is that fans can carve out their own spaces. Fans search out corners of fandom that share their interests and stay away from those that don't. The danger is self-isolation and reification, but of all the dangers discussed here, this one is minor.

Because fanfiction is a copy of a copy, a simulacrum, a double distortion of reality its primary relationship is with other fiction, not reality. While original fiction uses the real world as its base, fanfiction worlds use preexisting fiction worlds as their base. As saathi1013 observes in an earlier quote, fanfiction does not actually transform source media, nor does it practically transform dominant social structures. However, that isn't its purpose. While original fiction, then, imagines other possibilities for reality, fanfiction imagines other possibilities for fiction. Fanfiction presents an alternate picture of what fiction could (and can) be.

But it isn't just that.

Fanfiction is more than meta fictional commentary on what publishing might look like. While it might not directly transform dominant social structures, it does transform the people who read it. Like science fiction, it images other worlds. What's more, it plays a part in creating

communities with a shared belief in those worlds. Fanfiction is a form of world making, and that is the ultimate transformative power.

## Conclusion

Talia has always felt like a dropped stitch in the fabric of the world.

Her adolescent growing pains have always felt like something more than; that all-too normal cocktail of awkwardness and loneliness with a dash of angst consumes her more often than not. She feels her isolation in her every pore, the friction of this world against her own skin. She doesn't fit, never has, and it's nothing to do with the mystery of her existence. She doesn't look the part of a Blake, the respected farming family that has made their home in Gary, Indiana, for five generations. She has skin like brown suede, both too smooth and too strong. She wears Coke-bottle glasses to correct the weakness of her preternaturally blue eyes. She bears a host of deadly allergies: shellfish, pollen, gluten, peanuts, and sometimes air itself. She has never fit in this world, but it has never occurred to her that she might not be *of* this world.

“You need to be honest with me,” Dr. Fey tells her, “if you want this to work.”

There's nothing wrong with me, she wants to say, to scream, to implore. The only thing that's wrong is this world.

-J. R. Sanchez, “A Savage Wild” (2013)

In many ways this work is a survey—samplings from across the smorgasbord—because I want to make a point that applies to science fiction as a whole. A bit ironic, I know, given my attitude toward the nomothetic. However, my argument is ultimately suggestion rather than law. Science fiction can, and should, reimagine social possibilities. It doesn't always, but it should, and by sampling works that do so in different categories, I want to suggest the versatility of this goal. Award-winning novels can make these points. Popular novels can make these points. Fanfiction can make these points. And so can a variety of other categories of science fiction.

Although my work has been primarily limited to literary science fiction, other science fiction media are doing similar work. Guillermo del Toro's 2013 film *Pacific Rim* is an homage to machine versus monster movies with a social conscience; in economy of lookalike action films where one white man saves the world, *Pacific Rim* is a diverse film “the world saving the world” (D'Addario 2013). Recent television shows are doing similar work. Fox's *Almost Human* features an emotive android played by Michael Ealy, an African American man; the show

addresses the way racism often manifests as dehumanization by exploring the interlocking prejudices Dorian faces from society. BBC America's *Orphan Black* focuses on a swarm of clones, all played by Tatiana Maslany. In addition to issues such as bodily autonomy, genetic engineering, and the ethics of human experimentation, *Orphan Black* is very much a feminist show, displaying "women in their multitudes" (Manson 2014) and normalizing queerness as another fluid element of personality. Popular video games like *The Last of Us: Left Behind* are beginning to include queer characters; they are also creating participatory futures with increasing attention to marginality.

The Internet and other elements of convergence culture have also opened the doors for stories from a less centralized media apparatus. In addition to fanfiction, convergence culture also allows for alternative publishing and producing structures. Small hubs of storytellers can come together with limited financial resources and publish ebooks; marketing these books to interested parties is easy with social media. Small publishing houses have the ability to tell nontraditional stories. One example is Jacqueline Koyanagi's debut novel *Ascension*, published in December 2013 by Masque Books, which features a black, disabled, lesbian as its protagonist. Furthermore, Kickstarter, Indiegogo, Patreon, and other crowdsourcing hubs make it possible for artists with no resources to create high-quality works. Blue Delli quanti's serial webcomic *O Human Star*, which crowdsources through Patreon, follows the lives of two queer men and a transgender teenage girl in a world full of intelligent robots. There are just a handful of examples; the Internet is full of others. There are countless online spaces for marginalized people to find stories that speak to them and to tell their stories to others. These voices are part of the discourse, and it's difficult not to see hope in that.

The questions in contemporary science fiction are intricately interwoven with the issues of postmodernism. Earlier, I cited Paul Kincaid's anxieties that sf is a dying genre, tired and outdated, simply recycling the same old ideas year after year. In some ways, my choice of case studies appears to support this argument. John Scalzi writes space operas with a clear connection to the Golden Age of science fiction, decades past. Carriger relies on vampires and werewolves, which have become incredibly cliché in recent years. Fanfiction directly recycles other people's work, borrowing other people's characters in what might seem like a startling lack of originality. All of this might appear to support Kincaid's fears, as well as a central anxiety of postmodernism: that nothing truly new can be created; that all we create is merely citation; that everything we have left is some mix of parody and pastiche. I understand the anxiety, I really do. I understand the feeling of sitting on my couch, watching *Almost Human*, and thinking, *I've seen this glittering city before*. But I also remember watching a few episodes further, watching until I could shake the feeling I was watching a *Bladerunner* ripoff, watching Dorian interact with another android whose primary function was sex work, watching him validate her personhood. Suddenly, I wasn't watching the same old show I'd seen a hundred times before.

This is how contemporary science fiction works. If it isn't already, the genre is becoming a postmodern one. It stands on a foundation of old tropes: spaceships breaking down in the middle of space, androids trying to feel, scientists performing unethical experiments, humans struggling to find their place in a universe that is both too small and too large. The defining characteristic of contemporary science fiction, however, is how these tropes are used. It is no longer enough—if it ever were—to deploy these uncritically, to use them to recreate the present in the future. And that's what the case studies here are truly about. Scalzi deconstructs Golden Age tropes even as he deploys them. Carriger uses vampires and werewolves to make an

argument about marginality. When fanfiction recycles source material, it repurposes, refashions, remakes. The genre itself is adapting, evolving, becoming something more inclusive, more utopian, and more radical.

Too often, critics write science fiction off as escapism. The entire genre is categorically dismissed. It's frivolous, detractors say, all style and no substance. Gratuitous explosions in space, with nothing to back them up. It's foolish, they say, to spend so much in such empty worlds. After all, no one uses "escapism" without censure heavily implied. Still, fans sometimes try to reclaim this term. They say, "Yes, it is escapist, and that's okay. The world is a scary place, and sometimes we need to escape from it." After all, for people who live at the margins, escaping to liminal worlds is a comforting concept. For these fans, escapism means *escape from* an inhospitable reality. While I understand the motivation behind this impulse to reclaim escapism, I vehemently disagree with it. Even as I acknowledge that I seek refuge in fictional worlds, I resist this notion that the escapism of science fiction is futile or frivolous. I reject the notion of escapism because the escape isn't really an escape. Transforming the real world means engaging with it.

Good science fiction isn't escapist because it isn't an escape from the real world at all. It isn't about running away, no matter how valid that impulse may be. Good science fiction is about transforming the world, whether it makes this goal explicit or not. Good world-building means creating a fictional world that has an existential link to our own. The way characters behave and are allowed to behave in their world should tell us something about the way we are allowed to behave in our world. Good science fiction is liminality, marginality, and futurity, working together to make the real world better. Science fiction worlds are liminal spaces, and the best of

them use their liminal structure to give agency to marginalized groups. The best of them are invested with the hopes and longings, the fears and anxieties of real people. These worlds exist in a dimension of futurity, regardless their temporal location. They operate on a utopian level, presenting new doxa and new possibilities for human experience.

The very best science fiction worlds are those we don't leave. These are the worlds that stay with us; these are the worlds we can't escape. These are the worlds that strike a chord on a personal level. These are the worlds that expand our doxa, that resonate with our personal hopes and fears, that show us other ways of being. The very best science fiction worlds are examples of not only world-building but also world-making. They change us, and piece by piece, book by book, science fiction worlds shape the future.

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