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Beverly Howell Belser Date

"Only The Gods Are Real: The Dialogical Theology of Postmodern American Science Fiction"

By

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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

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This dissertation is an examination of the ways in which science fiction literature offers us a vantage point from which to explore American religion as it is embedded within the economic, social, political, and technological dynamics of the late twentieth century. In this dissertation I seek out alternative visions of American religion in *The Dispossessed* (1974) by Ursula Le Guin, *Trouble on Triton* (1976) by Samuel Delaney, and *American Gods* (2001) by Neil Gaiman. These three proof texts each enact a kind of dialogical theology—a religious thinking technology—that rearranges the reader and their perceptions of the world in multiple directions and on many levels at the same time. Given the relationship between dialogic possibility and context, the dialogical theology of these texts is defined by the depth of their roots in American history and culture, making theirs a distinctly American dialogical theology that maps the complex and contradictory relationships between religion, culture, technology, and social change. Part of my question asks how changes in the ambient socio-political rhetoric in the United States become changes in American dialogical theology. Understanding the relationship between history, discourse, and the novel helps us to see the ways in which how we understand religion is bound up with the broader concerns of any given particular historical moment. This project does not provide an ontology of religion, but rather uses the notion of dialogical theology as a lens through which to bring *The Dispossessed, Trouble on Triton,* and *American Gods* to life and as a result to open up our understanding of American religion specifically as well as the broader category of the religious.

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Prologue

"There are sometimes good reasons for sorting out the difference between social reality and science fiction, but r we should not actually believe that somehow these categories are ontologically pre-established different things."

- Donna Haraway[1]

The Story:

For a long time I have been looking for alternative ways to talk about religion. It is impossible to get at religion from the outside because there is no outside—no essence[2] of religion or objective perspective on religion; no embodied experience of religion or cognitive encounter with it that occurs unmediated by culture, history, and discourse; no perspective that is not saturated with power relations that condition the mind and the body, both social and individual. Searching for the "truth" of religion is a fruitless and downright dangerous gesture, and yet grappling with this thing we call religion is also an ethical imperative. Religious authority has been invoked as justification for violence, oppression, and subjugation throughout history and into the present. Webs of religious influence and power, the boundaries at which religion becomes visible and those at which it disappears, are bound up in culture, formations of selfhood, from "the State," and embedded in our current technologically sophisticated

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[1] Nicholas Gane, "When we Have Never Been Human What is to be Done?," *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 23 nos. 7-8 (2006): 153.

[2] In his new book on Foucault and religion Mark Jordan makes a similar argument as he describes what Foucault meant by religion and Christianity. He states, "For me, there is no formulable essence of religion, no clear way of separating its words from the rest of human speech. (The claim that religion can be neatly bounded is a corollary of atheism, while the denial of God's existence can be the highest pitch of theology.)" Mark Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 8.

global capitalist society. If we want to begin to think differently about religion, then we need to approach the study of religion from unexpected places. In this project, that place is science fiction literature.

My interest in the intersection between narrative and religion derives from a curiosity about the everyday challenges of communicating our ideas and experiences given the limits of language and the written form. Mark Jordan highlights this difficulty by describing the ethnographic imperative to write and claim the "truth" as he explains, "Narratives are artifacts constructed according to conventions. That insight applies to novels and to news reports, but also to the large and small stories we tell every day about ourselves."[3] How then do we go about communicating our deepest fears and our greatest hopes? Where can we find visions of possible futures and maps to lead us out of what feels like a stagnant present? Science fiction can help bridge the gap between religious subjectivity and narrative constraint. As Madeline L'Engle suggests, science fiction offers much more than an escape, for "To think about worlds in other galaxies, other modes of being, is a theological enterprise."[4] Theological in the sense of being concerned to something larger than everyday human experience. For some this is framed as the relationship between God and humanity, but more generally speaking it is humanity's relationship to the numinous. The belief that

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[3] Mark Jordan, "Writing 'the Truth'" in *Practical Matters*, Issue 6: "Engaging Religious Experience: A Return to Ethnography and Theology," Accessed February 26, 2015, http://www.practicalmattersjournal.org/issue/6/centerpieces/writing-the-truth

[4] Madeline L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (Michigan: H. Shaw, 1980), 158.

our everyday experiences always contain the more-than-present potential of divine possibility.

Much of our communication happens, however imperfectly, through language. As Jordan explains, we cannot hope to write the Truth,[5] but we can attempt to write better stories that embrace the "theological lessons of contradiction, repetition, unsaying, and silence."[6] That is, complex extra-literal signification that emerges obliquely in the gaps of language in order to trouble the claim that language describes the world or our experiences of the world in whole or in part. The choice to label this phenomenon "theological" frames this conversation as one being held in part within the disciplinary boundaries of religious studies and that these moments of signification are religious phenomena. This dissertation maps my own theological project—to seek out alternative visions of the future in the unlikely places of an alienated America and distant moons; embodied in unlikely people who may be gods and who may be Martians; and performed through rituals of asceticism, blood, sex and body modification in *The Dispossessed* (1974) by Ursula Le Guin, *Trouble on Triton* (1976) by Samuel Delaney, and *American Gods* (2001) by Neil Gaiman. These

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[5] I capitalize "Truth" here to draw an ideological distinction between truth as one possible set of discourses or as a theoretical goal never attained over against "Truth" either as an attempt to fix discourse or as one's ultimate teleological goal. In other words, some narratives, theories, concepts, and categories are more true than others but at the same time the small "t" reminds us that all discourses are fraught with power dynamics and that ultimate Truth is a fiction at best and an act of violence at worst. David N. Livingstone applies this analysis to the question of how we define religion by arguing that "To have command of definitions is to have control of discourse. For this reason it is not surprising that exegetical fussiness over the precise meaning of terms is characteristic of those apologetic works that aim to fix disciplinary identity." As quoted by Thomas A. Tweed in *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 32.

[6] Jordan, "Truth."

science fiction stories are human stories; they are theological stories, and they both display and reveal the ever-changing relationship between religion, culture, technology, and social change.

Novels offer unique opportunities to simultaneously challenge and explore the limits of language, especially with respect to its dialogic potential. M.M. Bakhtin explores the many voices of the modern novel in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,*[7] by foregrounding the relationships between language,[8] meaning, and heteroglossia.[9] For Bakhtin, the novel plays on the complexity and ambiguity created by dialogical relationships, making room for open-ended meanings. He emphasizes that the novel cannot be analyzed in terms of its language or style alone because the genre can employ many styles of writing and many language systems. Language and meaning achieve their full potential because the novel maintains a connection to the lived world of the

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[7] M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

[8] Language, for Bakhtin, is a fraught subject. He analyzes the complexities of word choice to underscore the relationships between words, meaning, and context: "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language . . . but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. . . Language is not a neutral medium . . . Expropriating it . . . is a difficult and complicated process." *Dialogic Imagination,* 293-294.

[9] Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as the "base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will ensure that a word uttered in that place will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions." Ibid., 428.

present, or the "openended present."[10] The novel is thus intensely and actively social. The interactions between the context in which a novel is written and the context in which it is read, as well as the relationship between authorial intent and meanings generated by readers, are limitless. Meanings come to life and take many forms depending on the knowledge and experiences that the reader brings to a given text. Regardless of authorial intent, once the novel enters the world it becomes something different with every reading because of the shifting and evolving dialogical interactions between reader, text, and context.

As theorist Donna Haraway suggests, the study of fiction—of literature—is the study of human life, of history, and of social change. It is also the study of religion. Haraway reminds us that reality is not Reality.[11] There is no part of human life, experience, or what we term "reality," that is any less constructed, mediated, and tropic from what we understand as "fiction." For Haraway, "Fact and fiction have this interesting etymological connection and fact is this past participle—already done, and fiction is still in the making."[12] While there are important differences between social reality and science fiction, we must always

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[10] Bakhtin defines this dynamic by explaining that "The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialog as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it—it does not approach the object from the sidelines." Ibid., 276-277.

[11] By this I mean something akin to Plato's allegory of the cave. Scholars do not have unmediated access to the "really real" and to think that we do is to assume we have the authoritative view on life and meaning. We are only ever able to see "through a glass darkly." I understand this as part of my ideological commitment.

[12] Gane, "Never Been Human," 153.

remember that they are not fundamentally different from one another.[13] The dialogical power of the novel exist because of the novel's ongoing relationship to the lived world, whether through the author or reader, and it is this relationship that allows the novel to intervene in the present and suggest future possibilities.

The tendency of scholars in the past towards drawing neat distinctions between concepts such as "fact" and "fiction" are part of what Haraway describes as the "tyranny of clarity," or "the belief that any semiotic practice is immaterial. It's the same mistake as thinking that the virtual is immaterial. It's the mistake of thinking that intercourse, communication, conversation, semiotic engagement is trope-free or immaterial."[14] Naming and rejecting the tyranny of clarity is Haraway's ideological commitment to the messiness, openness, and provisionality of life that highlights the ways in which all of our experiences are mediated by layers of signification.[15] This dialogical commitment permeates the very style in which she writes, and the ways in which she frames her arguments. As she explains, "I am committed politically and epistemologically to stylistic work that makes it relatively harder to fix the bottom line . . . I think that it is

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[13] As Haraway puts it, "it is always both [fiction and social reality]. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't do a little sorting work, but you remember that it's sorting work." Ibid.,153.

[14] Ibid., 153-154.

[15] At the beginning of her interview with Gane she states this quite well. She explains that "My PhD is in biology. I loved biology . . . But I also always inhabited biology from an equally powerful academic formation in literature and philosophy. Politically and historically, I could never take the organism as something simply there. I was extremely interested in the way the organism is an object of knowledge . . . / It was never really possible for me to inhabit biology without a kind of impossible consciousness of the radical historicity of these objects of knowledge." Gane, "Never Been Human," 135-136.

actually something I inherited out of my theological formation."[16] Here, Haraway extends Jordan's invocation of the "theological lessons of contradiction, repetition, unsaying, and silence"[17] to include life—at both macro and micro levels—as containing much more than what we can define.

The other side of an ideological commitment to non-closure—to opacity over transparency—are the methods that support this commitment to dialogical openness. Haraway describes methods and other knowledge-making projects as "thinking technologies" that "have materiality and effectivity. These are ways of stabilizing meanings in some forms rather than others."[18] This is a reminder that, while we rely on categories to order and make sense of the world such as gender, race, sexuality, class, religion, etc., the ways in which we construct and choose our categories matters, as do the ways in which we must inevitably destabilize them. Haraway argues that "almost any serious knowledge project is a thinking technology insofar as it re-does its participants. It reaches into you and you aren't the same afterwards. Technologies re-arrange the world for purposes, but go beyond function and purpose to something open, something not

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[16] Donna Haraway links her interest in open narratives and layered meanings with her early Catholic theological formation. She explains that "the whole framework and, in particular, the idea that as soon as you name something and believe in a name, there is an act of idolatry involved—the idea that the names of God are always, finally, deeply suspect . . . if you seriously are trying to deal with something that is infinite, you should not attach a noun to it, because then you have fixed and set limits to that which is limitless . . . It is an unnameableness. It is the theological tradition that focuses on unnameableness." Donna Haraway, "Methodologies as Thinking Technologies: Interview with Donna Haraway" in *Bits of Life: Feminisms at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology,* eds. Anneke M. Smelik and Nina Lykke*, (*Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 34.

[17] Jordan, "Writing the Truth."

[18] Haraway, "Thinking Technologies," 35.

yet."[19] While we need categories, theories, and thinking technologies, I agree with Haraway that we shouldn't make them transparent. Instead, Haraway encourages us to transform our categories into visible tools that make noise[20] and to highlight rather than ignore their imperfections.

Dialogic work is one thinking technology that informs this study. Unlike dialecticism, in which binaries construct and reinforce one another to form a coherent whole, dialogics unfold in many directions and on many levels at once without resolving into a larger or coherent whole. The goal of dialogical cacophony is not synthesis or resolution, but a complex depiction of the relationships and interactions between social systems, power relationships, cultural constraints, and creative process. The closed system of dialectical signification does not allow much room for challenging hegemonic norms without destroying the system completely. Dialogical relationships, however, already contain the possibility, however small, of "something open. Something not yet."[21] They also make it possible to hold together incompatible truths.

The aspects of dialogical thinking technologies that resonate most deeply for me are the twin dynamics of personal and social transformation. In other words, that it gives us the ability and the ethical imperative to change the world for the better. That is the "something open, something not yet"[22] that she

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[19] Gane, "Never Been Human," 154.

[20] Or work as "an artificial device that generates meanings very noisily." Donna Haraway, "The Promise of Monsters," in *Cultural Studies,* eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 304.

[21] Gane, "Never Been Human," 154.

[22] Ibid., 154.

emphasizes as a crucial component of thinking technologies. Hope is an integral part of Haraway's work. She emphasizes again and again that we are never as stuck as we think we are, and that the realities of everyday life allow for moments, however small, of revolution. Referring to the "Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway clarifies:

> there is a kind of fantastic hope that runs through a manifesto. There's some kind of without warrant insistence that the fantasy of an elsewhere is not escapism but it's a powerful tool. Critique is not futurism or futurology. It's about here and now if we could only learn that we are more powerful than we think we are, and that the war machine is not who we are. You don't have any ground for that, it's a kind of act of faith.[23]

This project is about exploring the places that help us remember that there are other ways to be and live. Leaving space for hope is a crucial aspect of this task, as is holding a space for the impossible and dialogical thinking enables us to do both. Reading at the intersection of Haraway and Jordan, I advocate that we bring dialogical thinking to Jordan's theological lessons of contradiction, repetition, unsaying, and silence—all of which are already aspects of a dialogical dynamic. My three proof texts each enact a kind of dialogical theology—a religious thinking technology—that rearranges us and our perceptions of the world in multiple directions on many levels. Given the relationship between dialogic possibility and context, the dialogical theology of these texts is defined by the depth of their roots in American history and culture, making theirs a distinctly American dialogical theology that maps the complex and contradictory relationships between religion, culture, technology, and social change.

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[23] Ibid., 152.

The story of this dissertation is thus also a story of ethical and theological refusal. A refusal to name and limit what is un-nameable and infinite because it is an impossible and dangerous task. Impossible because religion both as a living social concept and religion as a divine phenomena overwhelm our capacities of definition. Dangerous, because any attempt to fix definitions must inevitably turn a living concept into a tool that can be used as a weapon against others.[24] The story of how we are—of how anyone is—"religious" becomes an impossibility if our criteria demands that we simply capture and communicate what's "really going on." At the same time, we desperately need stories about religion, and about religious experiences.

Religious stories orient us to the world around us—the world of past, present, and future. As Gaiman states in *American Gods:*

> Religions are, by definition, metaphors after all: God is a dream, a hope, a woman, an ironist, a father, a city, a house of many rooms, a watchmaker who left his prize chronometer in the desert, someone who loves you—even, perhaps, against all evidence, a celestial being whose only interest is to make sure your football team, army, business, or marriage thrives, prospers, and triumphs over all opposition.
>
> Religions are places to stand and look and act, vantage points from which to view the world.[25]

Gaiman's definition of religion highlights the multiplicity of religious belief. He emphasizes the way that religious perspectives shape the way we view the world. This is not unlike Jordan's declaration that we cannot separate religious speech

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[24] Of course a tool can also be used for positive purposes. The point is that the tendency to use religion as a weapon has a long and bloody history.

[25] Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*. 10th Anniversary Ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 452.

from human speech.[26] We cannot separate how we view the world from how we view the world as religious. Instead, we need stories that show us facets of religious life that we have never encountered, and that use religion in ways we never would have imagined.

We also need the impossible as this is the domain of hope, imagination, social change, utopia, and futurity. It is the domain of the ineffable. It is our task, our challenge, and our ethical responsibility to honor the truths and complexities of particular religious stories without denying the enormous range of religious subjectivity that is not named, and that may not even be nameable—narratively or otherwise.[27] Dialogical theology as religious thinking technology can help us to make sense of the ever unfolding play of meanings. It gives us a way of thinking about religion that re-orients our perspective on the world around us while also undoing the category of religion itself so that it remains open, something not-yet.

In this dissertation I will trace the play of dialogical theology as refracted through the pages of *The Dispossessed* (1974) by Ursula Le Guin, *Trouble on Triton* (1976) by Samuel Delaney, and *American Gods* (2001) by Neil Gaiman. These stories are populated by cyborgs, aliens, space travel, and mythical gods,

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[26] Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies*, 8.

[27] As Donna Haraway emphasizes, "I do metanarratives all the time. I'm interested in big histories but I won't let it be one story." In Gane, "Never Been Human," 147.

and each meditates, in its own way, on how we postmodern humans[28] have become who we are by speculating on what we may become. As Ursula Le Guin reminds us, "when science fiction uses its limitless range of symbol and metaphor novelistically, with the subject at the center, it can show us who we are, and where we are, and what choices face us, with unsurpassed clarity, and with great and troubling beauty."[29] Subjectivity—our ability or inability to formulate a sense of self in relationship to the world and the forms that selfhood takes—in the changing postmodern world is an enduring question of science fiction. What kinds of selves are possible and how those selves make sense of the world.

Subjectivity shapes our relationship to the world around us and is the means by which we make sense of our reality. By foregrounding issues of subjectivity, science fiction helps to theorize the ways in which the issues of the present will shape future possibilities, not just for subjectivity, but with respect to society more broadly. Delaney emphasizes the powerful bond between science fiction and the issues of everyday life writing, "Science fiction is about the current world—the given world shared by writer and reader . . . science fiction poises in a tense, dialogic, agonistic relation to the given."[30] Science fiction offers us a place

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[28] The postmodern context is crucial, as it is a crucial part of the context for each of these three authors. Haraway also emphasizes our cyborg ontology, saying: "By the late 20th century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. This cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality." Donna Haraway, "Chapter 4: A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century" in *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments,* eds. Joel Weiss, Jason Nolan, Jeremy Hunsinger, Peter Trifonas, (Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 118

[29] Ursula Le Guin, "Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown" in *Speculations on Speculation,* eds. James Gunn and Mathew Candelaria, (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), 135.

[30] Samuel Delaney, "Some Presumptuous Approaches to Science Fiction" in *Speculations on Speculation,* eds. James Gunn and Mathew Candelaria, (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), 291.

from which to see ourselves and our society differently, and to grapple with the relationships between religion, culture, technology, and social change that shape the past, the present, and the future of this world.

Science fiction, perhaps more than any other genre, is about worlding. Gaiman, speaking about the power of reading fiction more generally, and the creative power of science fiction more particularly, argues that:

> Fiction can show you a different world. It can take you somewhere you've never been. Once you've visited other worlds, like those who ate fairy fruit, you can never be entirely content with the world that you grew up in. Discontent is a good thing: discontented people can modify and improve their worlds, leave them better, leave them different.[31]

Gaiman talks about how fiction builds empathy and our capacity for creativity and communication. He emphasizes the ways in which our ability to imagine is key to our ability to change the world. According to Haraway, we are already becoming beings of science fiction, we are already cyborgs, obscuring the boundary between science fiction and social reality.[32] Novels can show us who we are in relationship to other people and to the larger world; "You learn that everyone else out there is a me, as well,"[33] and how technology is shaping our world and changing what it means to be human. Human beings are messy, complicated creatures. Each of my three novels addresses the challenges of subjectivity as process, but not a given; a process of understanding who we are given our relationships to history, culture, and technology. A process whose

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[31] Neil Gaiman, "Why Our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading, and Daydreaming" in *The Guardian,* October 15, 2013. Accessed on April 21st, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/15/neil-gaiman-future-libraries-reading-daydreaming

[32] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 117.

[33] Gaiman, "Future."

ultimate goal is unclear—certainly not to realize the myth of a unified self—but whose beauty and promise lies in the chaos of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true.[34] This is also a process that is intimately religious. This is worlding. This is dialogical theology.

The Dispossessed, Trouble on Triton, and American Gods are all stories about American Gods. More specifically, these are all stories steeped in American religious culture. They are all, even *Triton* and *The Dispossessed* which take place on far away moons, about America, American culture, and American history, which are all inextricable from American religion. American history, as refracted through the knowledge and beliefs of each author, grounds these stories and the contexts in which their narratives unfold. How these novelists view the world as religious—their vantage points and socio-cultural positionalities—shape the social and political issues that emerge, and indeed the very ways in which they become issues at all. While Delaney, Le Guin, and Gaiman deploy religion very differently—both with respect to how it floats to the surface of each narrative and how it functions as part of the narrative's fictive world—these three novels matter, in particular, because of the role religion plays in each fictional reality. Each of these authors explore how the religious is fundamentally related to imagination, subjectivity, discourse, and social structure. These three novels thus provide rich contexts for the deployment of dialogical theology—contexts that attend to the dynamics that enable dialogical

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[34] I am indebted to Haraway here for some of this language. She talks about the necessity of incompatible truths in her "Cyborg Manifesto," 117.

signification while highlighting the role and significance of the religious in everyday life.

This dissertation is thus an examination of the ways in which science fiction literature offers us a vantage point from which to explore American religion as it is embedded within the economic, social, political, and technological dynamics of the late twentieth century. Part of my question asks how changes in the ambient socio-political rhetoric in the United States become changes in American dialogical theology. Understanding the relationship between history, discourse, and the novel will help us to see the ways in which how we understand religion is bound up with the broader concerns of the particular historical moment. This relationship affects not only what we see but also conditions what is "seeable." Theorists such as Carl Freedman and Frederic Jameson have also argued that science fiction is the genre most capable of depicting and examining the complexities of the "contemporary world system"[35] characteristic of the late

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[35] Fredric Jameson, in his *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992) considers science fiction the privileged genre of postmodernism. He argues this affinity on the level of structure as well as content, as of course the two are related. First he suggests that science fiction, especially cyberpunk, attempts to "think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system. It is in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that, in my opinion, the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorized" (38). Later he argues that historical fiction and science fiction relate, loosely, to modernism and postmodernism, for "if the historical novel 'corresponded' to the emergence of historicity, of a sense of history in its strong modern post-eighteenth-century sense, science fiction equally corresponds to the waning or the blockage of that historicity, and, particularly in our own time (in the postmodern era), to its crisis and paralysis, its enfeeblement and repression." Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 284.

twentieth century,[36] especially in North America.[37] The tension between the collision of incompatible truths that constitute the American dialogical theology of *The Dispossessed, Trouble on Triton, and American Gods* speaks to American religious subjectivity by showing how wonderfully messy, open-ended, and opaque they are—a perfect thinking technology for opening up our assumptions around American religion and religious signification more broadly.

The Novels:

Trouble on Triton and *The Dispossessed* were both published in the mid-1970's and so my journey into the American religious imaginary begins in the late 1960's and early 1970's. This was a volatile time in American history, as the relative social conservatism of the 1950's gave way to dramatic upheavals in the 60's that continued to reverberate into the 70's and 80's, specifically around ideas of race, sex, and sexual orientation, enabling the creation of new subjectivities and identities. Both *Triton* and *The Dispossessed* can be read as critical utopias that respond in part to the social and political upheaval in

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[36] The differences between modernism and postmodernism as well as the shape of life in the late twentieth century are all an important part of framing this argument. The economic, social, and political forces at work in particular moments of history make certain ideas and ways of thinking more or less possible. Jameson explains that "the economic preparation of postmodernism or late capitalism began in the 1950s, after the wartime shortages of consumer goods and spare parts had been made up, and new products and new technologies (not the least those of the media) could be pioneered. On the other hand, the psychic *habits* of the new age demands the absolute break, strengthened by generational rupture, achieved more properly in the 1960's." Ibid., xx.

[37] This assertion is clear in two senses. One, that the majority of the science fiction being written in the latter half of the twentieth century was being written by American authors. Two, as should be clear from the previous footnote, Jameson's theory of postmodernism is itself very "Americanocentric." He writes that "it was the brief 'American century' (1945-73) that constituted the hothouse, or forcing ground, of the new system, while the development of the cultural forms of postmodernism may be said to be the first specifically North American global style." Ibid., xx.

America. They were written and published as the US struggled with the war in Vietnam, the wake of feminism's second wave, the emergence of the gay rights movement as a real political force, and the continued influence of civil rights gains and set backs from the 1960's. This era also saw the twilight of the space race, which peaked in 1969 with the Apollo 11 moon landing.

The 1970's saw key economic and political changes in the United States, as global capitalism, jumpstarted by economic and technological growth following the end of WWII, grew and strengthened, catalyzed by Nixon's elimination of the gold standard in 1971. This act eliminated the historical ties between US economic growth and physical currency, initiating economic expansion into virtual realms. In the literary world, science fiction was gaining more mainstream acceptance and critical acclaim in the 70's and 80's, with writers such as Le Guin and Delaney along with Joanna Russ, James Tiptree Jr., and Marge Piercy writing socially and stylistically sophisticated novels and short stories. These writers drew on the social and political upheaval of the time to create imaginative sf futures, alternative histories, and alien presents that dramatize issues of sex, sexuality, race, identity, economics, technology and war.

The Dispossessed is Le Guin's radical anarchist thought-experiment set on the distant moon Anarres. The book explores the dynamic between the anarchists of Anarres and the capitalists on their long-ago home planet of Urras. In *The Dispossessed* Le Guin creates society whose values, language, economic, and social structure are based on radical anarchist beliefs. It is a small ascetic society whose structure depends on communal support and communal sacrifice.

Delaney wrote *Trouble on Triton* partially in response to Le Guin's austere and sanitized utopia, and I read them as a pair to show two very different utopian projects with two very different social commitments. Unlike the anarchists of Anarres, the residents of Triton are free to indulge their appetites and desires in a complex urban environment. Triton is a heterotopia,[38] or a place outside the realm of everyday life, where logic is unmasked as one possible way of ordering the world among many others. Delaney explores the freedom and constraint of social norms by dramatizing the relationship between rituals and bodies in ways that push our understanding of how norms, be they social, religious, or otherwise, influence our perceptions and desires.

The social revolutions of the 60's and 70's created new subjectivities—whole new kinds of personhood—that Le Guin and Delaney explore and expand in their novels. New subjectivities come with their share of accompanying constraints, as each emerges already enmeshed in and articulated at least in part through existing social and cultural mechanisms of power and control; and yet with these changes and their attendant subjectivities also comes hope. Hope that the future can be different. Hope that we will be able to find ways of making life

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[38] The full title of *Triton* is *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*. He even includes the following quote from Foucault's *Order of Things* in one of the novel's appendices:

> *Utopias* afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things . . . to "hold together." This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental *fabula*; heterotopias . . . desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.

From Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things,* (1970; repr. New York: Routledge, 2002), xix.

more live-able and more affirming for more people. We cannot get rid of categories, identities, and subjectivities but we can destabilize them and refuse attempts to fix their meanings. The kinds of categories we employ and the language we use to describe them is important, as are the ways that we use them to destabilize and challenge one another. Looking back to the utopian longings so powerfully articulated by Le Guin and Delaney in the 70's reminds us how much is changed and yet how much remains frighteningly familiar. These authors remind us how powerful the utopian horizon is as a site that simultaneously refuses and invites.

The third novel, Neil Gaiman's *American Gods,* is a very different kind of science fiction novel. It contains no space travel, aliens, or future technology. Instead, it is American religious history re-imagined and animated in an alternate present by a British author.[39] Gaiman offers us a creative bricoleur's perspective on postmodern religious life in the United States while simultaneously creating a deeply affective and detailed story about one man's search for meaning and self-discovery. *American Gods* is both a compelling story in the grand sense—a narrative in the tradition of myths and supernatural stories of gods and men—as well as a technically sophisticated narrative of American religious history, memory, and futurity. Gaiman plays with the conventions of myth and sacred narrative by crafting a bricolage of histories, fairy tales, tall tales, old wives tales, rituals, and sacred spaces that places all on equal footing. Religious "truths" or

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[39] Neil Gaiman comments on fact that he is a British author writing a book about American Gods. He describes wanting "to write a book that included all the parts of America that obsessed and delighted me, which tended to be the bits that never showed up in the films and television shows." Gaiman, *American Gods,* x.

"doctrines" don't take precedent over the half-remembered stories of our grandmothers. If anything, quite the opposite. In some ways *American Gods* is the least traditionally "science fictional" of the three novels given that science isn't a driving force but the evolution of technology and humanity's relationship to it is a primary source of narrative conflict. In its outlier status it shows the breadth and complexity of the genre while also demonstrating the ways in which science fiction expands the range of dialogical possibility.

American Gods also depicts some of the discursive shifts in American religious histories and cultures at the turn of the 21st century. In contrast to the social revolutions of the 60's and 70's, the 1990's and early 2000's heralded a new era of American culture wars fought over issues of abortion, homosexuality, gun control, and the separation of church and state. At the turn of the century, the relationship between religion and politics in the United States played out on a national scale and the heated and polarizing rhetoric of the debates often silenced the more complicated stories that comprise most of American religious history. Gaiman cuts through this rhetoric to tell a much less familiar story of American religion; one based on immigrant experience and America as sacred space long before Christopher Columbus. *American Gods* is an intensely dialogic portrayal of religious history, and one that demonstrates the ever-changing relationship between religion, culture, technology, and social change.

The Structure of the Dissertation

The first chapter of the dissertation establishes the overall context of the project, including more detail about postmodernism, critical theory, and language. In this section I explore heteroglossia and the relationship of the novel to other forms of writing including sacred text. I will also contextualize the relationship between religion, modernism, and postmodernism with an eye to secularization theory in the context of nineteenth and twentieth century America.[40] Chapter 2 provides an overview of science fiction as a genre along with additional framing taken from Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" that emphasizes the relationship between science fiction literature, religion, and social change. In chapter 3 I begin my examination of *The Dispossessed* and delve more deeply into the utopian genre in science fiction. Chapter 4 centers around Delaney's *Trouble on Triton.* I explore the concept of heterotopia in more detail with additional emphasis on subjectivity and performance. In Chapter 5 I turn to Gaiman's *American Gods* to explore Gaiman's vision of American religious history and its legacy in American culture. Gaiman emphasizes uses religion and sacred space to talk about the immigrant experience in the United States and the ways in which America shaped and was shaped by people from all over the world.

What I hope to accomplish with my use of the term dialogical theology is

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[40] I will examine secularization theory as it is articulated by theorists such as Talal Asad, Tracy Fessenden, and John Lardas Modern. This quote from Modern suggests the general idea about secularism in America that I will explore in more detail: "Rather than signal a decreasing influence of the religious, secularism names a conceptual environment—emergent since at least the Protestant Reformation and early Enlightenment—that has made "religion" a recognizable and vital thing in the world. To make inquiries into secularism is in the way to ask how certain concepts of religion (and the social formations that revolve around them) became consonant with the way things were—in essence—as portrayed by a secular political order." John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 64.

to describe a way of seeing—a thinking technology—that helps us unpack some of the dynamics that make up this thing we call religion. I the category "religion" to make a lot of noise! To creak and groan under the weight of its discourses and tropic failures in order to discover its dialogical potential. I considered calling this theological task counter theology or even cyborg theology—something related to queer theology and feminist theology and womanist theology—but I don't want to set up a separate kind of theology. Let's explode the category of theology to show how it is intrinsically radically dialogical and thus more alive, vital, complex, and impossible than our stilted use of the term so often expresses. This is why we need science fiction stories. They are texts to which the impossible is an invitation to creativity; the very grounds of their possibility. Here we can catch a glimpse of that place where theology is already political, already queer, already radical, already full of incompatible truths, and intensely dialogical. It is my hope that this theology can change the world.

Chapter 1: Language, Discourse, and Religion

The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek—it must be rejected, altered and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas.

- Toni Morrison[41]

One method for getting at what we mean by religion and how that meaning has changed and is changing, is to look at discourse. Thomas Tweed argues that, as scholars of religion, we are all "called to exegetical fussiness" about the definition of religion—that "disciplinary horizon" that gives our efforts both meaning and coherence.[42] This practice requires careful attention, for we must hold onto the significance of religious meaning without fixing that meaning or overdetermining its shape, attentive to the power dynamics of the discourse even as that discourse circumscribes what can be known and spoken about religion and religious significance. Tweed quotes David N. Livingstone, who

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[41] Toni Morrison, "Nobel Lecture," December 7, 1993. Accessed June 9, 2014, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html

[42] Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 53.

reminds us that "To have command of definitions is to have control of discourse. For this reason it is not surprising that exegetical fussiness over the precise meaning of terms is characteristic of those apologetic works that aim to fix disciplinary identity."[43] Such narrowing of the discursive sphere delegitimizes alternative meanings and perspectives and thus does violence to the identities and experiences of those who do not fit into hegemonic or normative parameters. Language shapes the way we understand ourselves and the world around us. Much like the concept of religion itself, we cannot think our way outside of language. We can, however, trace its affects, limitations, and the places where it begins to break down. These practices of language are crucial for coming to terms with discourse, or the ways in which language is used to communicate thoughts and ideas whether orally or textually.

In *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault,* Mark Jordan examines Foucault's explorations of language and discourse and the ways in which they intersect with, and are inextricable from, religious forms of signification. Jordan explains that, for Foucault, "Religious writing isn't defined by its subject matter so much as by its liturgical alteration of bodies in time. Religious language attracts Foucault by its ritual processes, not its table of topics."[44] If we only pay attention to obviously religious discourse, that is, discourse that is explicitly on or about religion in some form, then we miss the ways in which religious language is inseparable from the rest of human speech.

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[43] Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 32.

[44] Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies,* 199.

In other words, if we take seriously the idea that "there is no formulable essence of religion"[45] then we must chase religious discourse to the places where it becomes something else altogether. Jordan goes on to explain that:

> Foucault's inquiry presupposes that religion arises from and issues in fields of forces inseparable from the rest of human history. What distinguishes it is not some rigid connection with an already separate realm of special entities. Religion is distinguished instead by how it arranges languages and practices—teachings and rituals—to control this world and the bodies very much in it.[46]

The idea here is not to try and parse out what counts as religious language but to recognize the ways in which power functions in and through language. Tracing the operations of power through language enables Foucault to locate the historical shift from religious control to social control in the disciplining operations of "the Norm:"[47] the socially accepted code for behavior, identity, embodiment, and good citizenship. No longer the church, but the state, is the ultimate source of disciplinary authority. In other words, Jordan reminds us that "There is no bright line between the old religion and the secular state, however much the latter prides itself on being utterly distinct. In many ways the secular is another mode of religious reform, the latest reformed religion."[48] Foucault calls the Norm the "new law of modern society"[49] and other, older, forms of discipline are susceptible to its influence as they seek to please or compete with the state.

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[45] Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies,* 8.

[46] Ibid., 9.

[47] Ibid., 53.

[48] Ibid., 53.

[49] Ibid., 53.

Foucault also turns to the novel as a way to grapple with the slippery language of power. He turns to his favorite novels for, "In them he finds narrative containers strong enough to hold together the mutating languages of power."[50] Jordan explains that Foucault doesn't see his writing as factual as opposed to novelists who write fiction. He uses the question of fact versus fiction to leverage the conversation around what counts as truth and how fiction and fact claims work to destabilize either the historical past or the political present. In other words, he talks not about how history is fiction, but how "History *fictions*."[51] Quoting Foucault: "One 'fictions' some history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true; one 'fictions' a politics that doesn't yet exist from a historical truth." Jordan explains that "Politics makes historical fictioning true—so illuminates our politics. A truth from history fictions a new politics—so shows something important about the politics of writing."[52] Novels can be, at their most radical, powerful forces for social transformation because of their ability to fiction our understanding of the world we live in and so show the ways in which our given political reality is neither inevitable nor unchangeable. They are powerful tools of social critique and imagining futurity.

Literature matters, at least in part, because discourse matters. Samuel Delaney reminds us that "what discourse does above all things is to assign import. Discourse . . . is what allows us to make sense of what we see, and hear,

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[50] Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies,* 77.

[51] Ibid., 81.

[52] Ibid., 81.

and experience . . . It tells us what to pay attention to and what to ignore."[53] Discourse is thus shaped by historic forces in contextually specific ways, so that the meaning "woman" or "phone" or "doctor" in Atlanta in 2015 is different from the meaning of that same word in Atlanta in 1915, presuming that said word has meaning in both times and places. In *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary,* Delaney gives us brief glimpses into historical moments to see how changes in discourse were tied to fundamental changes in economic and social life. In each case a technological innovation dramatically altered the discursive and social landscape by changing how individuals interacted with one another and conducted their daily lives.

The first example he gives is that of light. In modern America, with the advent of electricity, power grids, and the general ubiquity of lights in houses, on streets, and for signs, we take light for granted and come to cherish it only in those rare moments when it becomes unavailable. This has not always been the case. With respect to light in the pre-electric era Delaney explains that:

> Light was at the nexus of a great deal more physical energy and daily planning. Thus, because of our vastly different relation to it, light was a different social object from what it is today. And thus, every mention of light, in any text from that period, whether it be in the deadest of hackneyed metaphors or in the most vibrant and vivid poetry is referring to a different order of object.[54]

Similarly, the invention of the lead paint tube, which was much smaller and more portable than previous receptacles for holding paint, changed "the relation of the artists to society [and] . . . through that change, changed the relation of society to

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[53] Samuel R. Delaney, *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary*, (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 11.

[54] Ibid., 12.

art, [which] resulted in a major reformation of the discourse of 'art.'"[55] In other words, the invention of the lead paint tube made painting more possible for more people because it was more accessible both economically and physically. As a result, more people created and owned paintings which transformed art—the material artifact as well as the discourse about those artifacts—from solely the property of the elite to a more popular phenomenon.

Two things should be immediately apparent from these illustrations. First, to understand the range, complexity, and significance of discourse we need to analyze it historically. We cannot understand discourse without understanding the events that have shaped its formation. Second, though discourse shapes society, it is itself fundamentally transformed by social and economic forces. Delaney reminds us that "the discourse of sex and the discourse of race have changed far more—catastrophically more—since 1956[56] than has the discourse of light since World War II."[57] The discourse on race, sex, sexuality, class, and ability have all changed radically in the last sixty years. These changes have, in turn, transformed economic, social, and political relationships in the United States and these are relationships that continue to evolve. As Foucault reminds us, in the United States religion is inseparable from political, economic, and social life on even the most basic level. One of our tasks here is to chart some of the ways in which discourse on religion has changed in the United States from

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[55] Delaney, *Shorter Views*, 22.

[56] The year when schools were desegregated in the US.

[57] Ibid., 13.

the Nineteenth Century to the present and what that means for the study of religion.

Modernism and Literary Theory

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*[58]

As we begin to unpack the religious traces in American science fiction novels, we must consider the role of literature and narrative in the development of both discourse and subjectivity. We will begin by examining theories of language and literature that emerged in the late 19th Century and into the early 20th. This time period roughly corresponds with the rise and development of "modernism." Modernism as a concept is a useful construction to talk about certain trends in philosophy, literature, and art that roughly correspond to the late 19th to early 20th Century. Modernism is generally distinguished by a rejection of the certainty of Enlightenment thinking and the technological, economic, and social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Some of the characteristics of Modernism include experimenting with aesthetic style, a centered though alienated subject, and emphasis on the power of Utopian

[58] T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962,* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963), 208.

thinking and projects.[59] Some modernists include author Walter Benjamin, Pablo Picasso, and the architect Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris) who each departed from traditional aesthetic forms in literature, art, and architecture. Modernist art and architecture is quite literally a radical departure from the work of previous eras, as each poem, novel, building, and painting represents a utopian-inspired break from previous forms.

The evolution of capitalism and increasing urbanization of life contributed to the development of modernism, which also saw a devaluation of institutional religious belief and a greater emphasis on scientific knowledge. Tracy Fessenden tracks the evolution of the "religious" into the "secular" in her book, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature.* She shows how the idea of secularism developed in the 19th Century as a shift in the discourse around democracy and modernity, and an emphasis on the dichotomy between good and bad religion. As she explains:

> the assumption that some religions or aspects of religions have simply played themselves out . . . is crucial to the developmental schema of good and bad religion—the first associated with freedom and enlightenment, the second with coercion and constraint—implicit in the progress narrative of democracy.[60]

What is often lost in this transition are the ways in which, as Foucault highlights, religious authority was taken up by social institutions as social discipline in the

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[59] I am most indebted to Jameson's parsing of the characteristics of Modernism, which he discusses in dialogue with the characteristics of Postmodernism. He shows how they blend together and where they part and also some of the dissent between Modernists such as Habermas and Adorno. The in's and out's of Modernism are not the focus of this project and so I aim to orient the reader in time and with respect to the evolution of these theories but not to linger. I am referencing most specifically Jameson, *Postmodernism,* p. 14-17 and 58-59.

[60] Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature, (*Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 2-3.

form of the "Norm" and so slipped into the every day lives of individuals. As Max Weber reminds us in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of* Capitalism,

> what has often been forgotten . . . is that the Reformation meant not the elimination of the Church's control over everyday life, but rather the substitution of a new form of control for the previous one. It meant the repudiation of a control that was very lax . . . in favor of a regulation of the whole conduct which, penetrating all departments of private life, was infinitely burdensome and earnestly enforced.[61]

This is the same point from Foucault that Jordan explores in *Convulsing Bodies*. That is, the ways in which bodily discipline—for the purpose of social control and regulation—becomes the new secular religion. Secularism ushers in a period of regulation far more pervasive and powerful than any religious system that came before. Religious discourse is thus not absent in modernist literature or literary theory, but it is transformed into a discourse about democracy, subjectivity, embodiment, and morality.[62]

The novel is a rich setting for exploring the evolution of religious discourse in whatever form it takes. One of the goals of Fessenden's *Culture and Redemption* is to examine those literary works through "which Protestant culture in America became entrenched, serving . . . as 'bearers and shapers of a language that makes some forms of discursive experience available while it ignores, excludes, or suppresses others.'"[63] Similarly, I am interested in exploring my three 20th Century American science fiction novels for the ways in which they

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[61] As quoted in Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption,* 4.

[62] As Fessenden emphasizes, "Evacuating religious authority from its institutional locations, the Reformation generated its presence 'everywhere,' not least in secular guise." Ibid., 4.

[63] Ibid., 6.

shape language and engage with discourses around religion, culture, technology, and social change. The novels help us see through the ways in which Protestant culture has become de facto American culture by challenging the fictional history on which it is premised and in so doing "fictioning" our political present. They open up the past by giving us glimpses into alternative archives that run counter to the hegemonic, politically acceptable history of the United States while simultaneously creating new visions of the future.

Bakhtin and Dialogical Language

The novel is a rich setting for analyzing discourse not only because it is a reflection, in many ways, of the kinds of discourses being used at the time of its writing, but also because of how the novel makes use of language, setting, context, and dialogical meaning. M.M. Bakhtin explores the range of narrative signification alongside the emergence of the modern novel in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Over the course of these essays Bakhtin notes the ways in which the novel as a form offers a departure from previous forms of aesthetic writing, including poetry and the epic, as well as the ways in which language and discourse functions in the novel to break up the sense of a closed system of meaning and signification. The result is a form of writing that is able both to capture the specificities of its socio-historical moment but also to transcend that moment and evolve over time, with every new reader or community of readers, to become something even the author could not have

imagined. The dialogical complexity of the novel is key to making it such a strong narrative container for holding, in one space, the vagaries of language.[64]

Key for Bakhtin's theories is his formulation of *heteroglossia*, which denotes the multifaceted field of play in which language and meaning encounter one another. More precisely, heteroglossia is the:

> base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will ensure that a word uttered in that place will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions.[65]

For Bakhtin, the novel plays on the complexity and ambiguity created by heteroglossia to create meaning, but meaning that is open-ended rather than closed down. He emphasizes that the novel cannot be analyzed in terms of its language or style alone because it employs many styles of writing such as poetry, satire, or mythology as well as many language systems such as poetic language, conversational language, or foreign language in one work. In so doing, the novel employs the "centrifugal" and "dis-unifying" forces of heteroglossia to counter the "centralizing and unifying" forces seen in works that speak of "one language of truth" and that seek to "*unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world"* in their image.[66] Into this category Bakhtin places the writings of Aristotle, Augustine, and the "Cartesian poetics of neoclassicism," all of which sought to establish and reinforce a particular worldview and politico-ideological space in which only certain perspectives, people, and discourses held value. In contrast,

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[64] Nodding back to Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies,* 53.

[65] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 428.

[66] Ibid., 270-272.

the novel participates in the opposite movement, whereby through humor, satire, and play, we find that "all 'languages' wear masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face."[67]

Bakhtin highlights the subversive potential of language in the novel by emphasizing its dialogical tendencies, which is to say the multiplicity of meaning and signification and the refusal of dialectical synthesis. The dialogical character of the modern novel is part of what gives it its revolutionary potential because it is always connected to the past as well as the present. As Bakhtin explains, the novel maintains its connection to the lived world of the present, or the "openended present"[68] because:

> The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialog as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it—it does not approach the object from the sidelines.[69]

Rather than being an isolated and isolating event, the novel is intensely and actively social. The context of its writing is one moment and the context of its reading is another, just as the author is one person and the community of readers another. The interactions between them are boundless and never-ending, and so are the dialogic possibilities. The novel is a place where meanings come to life and take many forms depending on who is reading and what they bring to the text, and once the novel enters the world it becomes something different every

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[67] Bakhtin, 273.

[68] Ibid., 7.

[69] Ibid., 276-277.

time it is read. This is also key to the ways in which novels intervene into the present and suggest radically different possibilities for the future.

For science fiction, a genre that depends on maintaining enough shared context to be intelligible while altering, subverting, and negating other aspects of human life, history, and experience, the ever-evolving relationship between language and social, cultural, and historical context is an enduring theme. More specifically, the science fiction novel takes literary discourse about democracy, subjectivity, embodiment, and morality and transforms them in specific, often critical, ways to suggest alternative arrangements of meaning and signification. We can thus begin to talk about the lens of dialogical theology as a thinking technology that helps us to see the ways in which these are religious conversations and concerns in flux.

Philosopher and theologian Paul Ricoeur writes extensively about the power of the text, and the ways in which language, working within the structures of written discourse and through the creativity of aesthetic forms, has the power to transform reality. The creative act is inherently revolutionary: "Once an author undertakes to write something down, he or she undertakes to compose things in a way that differs from the exchange of words characteristic of the dialogical exchange . . . the *work* has its specific rules of composition that make it a narrative, a poem, an essay, and so on."[70] These differences are what enable written narrative to wield transformative power, for within these forms the author practices an aesthetic manipulation of language that take it beyond

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[70] Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics,* trans. David Pellauer (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 13-14.

everyday meanings. Ricoeur puts sacred text and nonreligious[71] fictions into the same conversation, and speaks powerfully about the role of language and imagination in constructing and transforming our understandings of self and the world. He does not take his analysis as deeply as Bakhtin, as his goals are focused more on explaining how language operates in literary texts rather than how language, form, and the dialogical promise of heteroglossia work in the novel. Ricoeur holds a tension between what he sees as the relative autonomy of written literature and the immediacy and communal nature of oral discourse. For him, one of the fundamental differences between oral and written narrative is that in everyday spoken discourse, people make use of concrete referents. In written narrative, this relationship is more ambiguous.

Ricoeur argues that literature has two diverging orientations. On the one hand we have the self-isolating world of the literary work, which he links to the limiting experience of the author as a singular persona. At the same time, however, and "contrary to this centripetal tendency, literary language seems capable of augmenting its power to discover and transform reality—especially human reality—by taking a distance on the descriptive function of the ordinary language of conversations."[72] The example that Ricoeur uses most is that of the metaphor, whereby two seemingly incompatible "semantic fields" are brought together to transform one another and create a new semantic possibility,[73] which

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[71] This is not a technical distinction—think of the Bible versus popular literature.

[72] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics,* 14.

[73] The example Ricoeur cites is a verse by Baudelaire: "Nature is a temple where living pillars…" Ibid., 15.

he characterizes as a "redescription of the world."[74] Through the use and manipulation of language the author helps us see the world from new and different perspectives by highlighting the ways in which it is more than it appears. More than the accumulation of quotidian experiences and realities. Not exactly sacred, but ripe with potential.

The inventiveness of literary language and the characteristics of literary form and contextual ambiguity that set it apart from oral discourse also set it apart from our own temporal experience. Ricoeur calls the separate world created by the narrative, and most seen in poetry and narrative art, the "*world of the text*." It is a "possible world . . . a place I can think of myself inhabiting in order to carry out there my own-most possibilities."[75] Sacred text and nonreligious texts both contain imaginative possibilities for human life and selfhood as suggested by the world of the text, and thus both contain similar transformative potential. This has important implications for the field of religious studies, which has been historically fond of strong divisions between so-called sacred and secular texts. For Ricoeur, however, "Religious studies is a public inquiry into the meaning of symbolic discourse, not a rationalist justification of religious beliefs or a confessionalist defense of traditional doctrines."[76] Such an approach does not necessitate prioritizing narratives that are traditionally religious, but holds a place for all types of written narrative,

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[74] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics,* 16.

[75] Ibid., 17.

[76] Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. and trans. Mark L. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 4-5.

including popular fiction. In his introduction to *Figuring the Sacred* Mark Wallace explains that:

> In theological parlance, Ricoeur maintains that a variety of nonreligious and religious fictions (including the Bible) are potentially revelatory—not in the sense that they are *deposits* of divinely inspired truths but because they faithfully *enact* a productive clash, and sometimes a fusion, between their world and the world of the reader. Ricoeur understands *revelation* in performative, not propositional, terms: it is an event of new meaning between text and interpreter, rather than a body of received doctrines under the control of a particular magisterium.[77]

For Ricouer then, the transformative potential of narrative resides in the play between the world of the text that creates a place for readers external to themselves into which they can bring their imagination and sense of self, and the structural effects of creative language—especially the metaphor—in opening new spaces of understanding that impinge on our everyday understanding of the world. The power of the human imagination to transform "the real" is an important part of Ricoeur's theory, and he sees it as a corrective for doctrinal truths and the Cartesian emphasis on rationality and logic. Bakhtin too writes against the centripetal trends in narrative and criticism, to which the disorienting affects of heteroglossia are a corrective. Ricoeur takes his analysis of the imaginative potential of aesthetic writing another step, however, in order to suggest that these moments of revelation are also catalysts for achieving more unified sense of self.

Subjectivity is one of the crucial questions of postmodernity and an integral part of my theological examination of dialogical language. For Ricoeur,

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[77] Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred,* 8-9.

the task of constructing[78] a more unified self is an unquestioned good, and it is connected to his sense of what the religious imaginary, via mythopoetic writing in particular, can bring to the modern, fractured, subject. As Mark Wallace explains, for Ricoeur, "the journey to selfhood is made possible by the subjects willingness to receive new ways of being through its interaction with the text-worlds of literature, myth, and religion."[79] This journey presumes a fractured subject whose sense of identity is already saturated with the system of symbols and signification we are all born into, as:

> Figurative language first interprets us before we interpret it. Since there are no 'shortcuts' to selfhood, only when the subject traverses a hermeneutical 'long-route' trough the revealing power of the symbol can he or she enlarge and empower a fuller and more satisfying understudying of the self.[80]

Mythopoetic literature plays a crucial role in this process because, Ricoeur argues, it offers the modern subject something analogous to what ancient myth offered so called primitive peoples—namely, the experience of the sacred. He explains that we cannot return to the pre-modern (or pre-critical) state to have an unmediated experience of the sacred, but that through fiction we can enter a "second naiveté" by opening ourselves to the sacred as glimpsed through the transformative possibilities of literature.[81] The construction of the self for Ricoeur is thus deeply linked to a formulation of the world whereby ultimate,

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[78] In his introduction to *Figuring the Sacred,* Wallace contends that for Ricoeur, selfhood is a "*task* to be performed, not a *given* that awaits passive reception by the subject," Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred,* 4.

[79] Ibid., 2.

[80] Ibid.*,* 5.

[81] Ibid., 6-7.

transformative meaning is linked to imagination, creativity, and the sacred. It is a deeply religious formulation of selfhood, though not prescriptive or doctrinal. Science fiction, arguably a form of modern myth, provides an opportunity to reflect both on who we are and who we may become.

Another aspect of selfhood that is central for Ricoeur is ethical, and concerns the ways in which the self is constructed in relationship to "the other." More specifically, Ricoeur draws on Levinas' formulation of the self and the other, which states that the other always precedes the self and calls the self into being. As Levinas explains:

> I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an "I," precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and in controvertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual "I." So that I become a responsible or ethical 'I' to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself—to abdicate my position of centrality—in favor of the vulnerable other. As the Bible says: "He who loses his soul gains it."[82]

If we apply this formulation of ethical selfhood to Ricoeur's writings on narrative, we see how the encounter with the other inside the world of the text has the ability to radically refigure our own self-understanding in ways that would not be possible in everyday lived reality. Or, as Neil Gaiman points out, "You learn that everyone else out there is a me, as well."[83] No matter how different are the lives and experiences of the characters in *American Gods, Triton,* and *The Dispossessed,* by entering into the world of the text we are taken into their worlds and live their experiences. These characters challenge our sense of self with the reality of their own alternative formations. Literature contains a diversity of

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[82] Richard A. Cohen, ed., *Face to Face with Levinas,* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 27.

[83] Gaiman, "Our Future."

perspectives, situations, and experiences not found in everyday life, and the degree to which we are able to enter the world of the text and open ourselves to the experiences of the other affects our sense of the possibilities inherent in everyday life while also enhancing our ethical development. In order to make sense of some of the ways religious language is deployed and contested in literature, we will turn to the relationship between secularism and religious discourse as it developed in 19th Century America.

Modernism, Secularization, and Discourse in the Nineteenth Century

> How does it feel to live within a secular age? Or as the philosopher Charles Taylor asked: what is at stake when faith, "even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others"? What are the effects, religiously speaking, of living in a world that naturally divides itself into a series of choices to be made, sold, and tried on for size?
>
> John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*

In *Secularism in Antebellum America*, John Lardas Modern explores the ways in which *Moby-Dick* is quite literally a novel of its time, not just with respect to subject matter or setting, but in the sense that "Melville's story is both a prophetic and paradigmatic scene of modernity—its emergence, its parameters, and its limits"[84] including the evolving role of religion in American life. In *Moby-Dick,* Melville explores what it means to be an American in the middle of the 19th Century, with the explosion of steam and electric technology, the evolution of the

[84] Modern, *Secularism*, 36.

State[85] into an intangible regulatory body, and the "expansion and extension of an American media sphere."[86] Modern is especially interested in mapping these changes, and the ways in which they were naturalized, on the level of discourse. He calls *Moby-Dick* a "ghost story"[87] full of the haunting specters of modernity that the characters are grappling with yet never see clearly nor fully understand.

This state of being "at sea" in modernity's complex web of discourse is an experience that Modern likens to being haunted by forces beyond our understanding. These moments of haunting are mirrored in the text, as Modern explains:

> In the whale's "wake of creamy foam, all spangled with golden gleamings," the reader begins to glimpse the generative power of an American discourse: social mores, epistemic rituals, and habits of imagination that bind the crew of the Pequod together in common cause. For like the white whale, discourse does not exist as a matter of measurement. It does not act directly and immediately upon individuals. It is rather an airy substance that presses upon one's actions. It is an amorphous constellation of ideas and moral vectors that cannot be named in the certain terms of empirical analysis.[88]

Modern discourse is haunted, as is modernity itself, by the past, or, more specifically, by the accretion of social mores, conceptions of subjectivity, economic systems, discourse, and other interconnected and amorphous webs of power that saturate the present. This is not to say that the present is inevitable,

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[85] Modern here points to Foucault who discusses the evolution of "statecraft" in the period between Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) and the publication of *Moby-Dick* in 1851. Foucault explains how "Across Europe and America there appeared new modes of governance that utilized statistics, probability, and the leverage of the "population" in order to generate the normal range of individual behavior. As linear, top-down impositions of authority gave way to situations in which one's horizon of possibility, as opposed to one's physical frame, was acted upon," *Secularism,* 37.

[86] Ibid., 29.

[87] Ibid., 22.

[88] Ibid., 43.

but that modernity does not represent a break from the past, especially given that the past conditions our ability to imagine the future. Modern's use of self-consciously religious language to describe the play of power also highlights the role of religion in American life in the 1850's, especially with respect to choice and religious identity.

As the title suggests, one of Modern's primary interests in *Secularism in Antebellum America* is the nature of religious belief and the role of religious ideas in this time of change. Modern employs the metaphysical language of ghosts, specters, and haunting in order to trace threads of religious influence in *Moby-Dick* that are not always obvious. He also delineates a robust theory of secularization that accounts for both the continued power of religious ideas and beliefs as well as their official absence from the sphere of government and civil society in mid-19th Century America. Modern cites the observations of Charles Taylor who argued that the nineteenth century heralded a growth of independence which led to "a 'nova effect, the steadily widening gamut of new positions' . . . [that] generated an unprecedented potentiality of responses to and habituations of something conceived of as the religious. . . the range of choices that emerged, not to mention the ability to choose, were remarkable"[89] This ability to choose, argues Modern, was revolutionary.

The possibility and promise of religious diversity led directly to the development of discourse on secularization By this concept we do not mean the retreat of religious belief to private life, but in fact quite the opposite. Instead,

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[89] Modern, *Secularism*, 57.

> Rather than signal a decreasing influence of the religious, secularism names a conceptual environment—emergent since at least the Protestant Reformation and early Enlightenment—that has made "religion" a recognizable and vital thing in the world. To make inquiries into secularism is in a way to ask how certain concepts of religion (and the social formations that revolve around them) became consonant with the way things were—in essence—as portrayed by a secular political order.[90]

This quote resonates with the observations by Foucault, Weber, and Fessenden earlier in the chapter. Religion does not go away. People do not stop believing and practicing. In fact, the deeply religious assumptions that inform American understandings of selfhood, good citizenship, public participation, and civic duty become no less religious but simply more taken for granted as the status quo as they are subsumed by the state. Religious influence becomes less visible, but to use Modern's own metaphysical language, it haunts the American public understanding of what is "normal" and what is "good."

The implications of this formulation of secularization are far reaching. The dominant forms of religious belief and moral development, in this case Protestant Christianity, become inextricable from the social and political landscape of the United States. Despite the existence of a great variety of religious diversity in the United States, the dominant narrative of American religion is often limited to a Protestant Christian perspective. In *Culture and Redemption,* Tracy Fessenden explains that:

> In the United States, whose founding documents aimed to unite a presumptively (if diversely) Christian population under the mantle of religious tolerance, the rule of noninterference between religion and government, far from consigning all religions equally to the silent margins of the political, instead created the conditions for the dominance of an increasingly nonspecific Protestantism over

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[90] Modern, *Secularism,* 64.

> nearly all aspects of American life, a dominance as pervasive as it is invisible for exceeding the domains we conventionally figure as religious.[91]

Protestant Christian ideals and assumptions serve as the foundation for the notion of manifest destiny, the deeply held belief in American exceptionalism, the ways in which we embrace ides of democracy and freedom, and of course what it means to be a "good" American. On the individual level, this phenomena accounts at least in part for the haunting affects of discourse that Modern discusses, especially as they relate to agency and identity.[92] Though much has changed since 1851, including as Delany reminds us, revolutions in the discourse of race and sex, The United States remains a country saturated in religious significance disguised as patriotism and national identity.

Understanding the role that religion continues to play in American culture is crucial to taking it seriously as a phenomena with continued relevancy. In other words, the kind of secularization thesis that argues for the elimination or devaluation of visible religion in the public sphere is part of a campaign against religious significance. In such a formulation religion is categorized as anti-modern, epiphenomenal, and unworthy of serious consideration. This accounts for some of the reasons why scholars in fields such as philosophy or cultural studies treat the idea of religion, whether as an institution or a set of beliefs and practices, with derision. Fessenden comments that "However distorting a lens for reading this history, secularism flourishes as an operative rubric in American literary studies because it appears to be the best answer to the limitations

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[91] Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption,* 61.

[92] I am thinking of course of the discourse around what it means to "count" and to be a valuable member of society. Only certain races, sexes, gender identities,

ascribed to religion."[93] Going back again to Foucault, we see how, no matter how strongly the secular state wishes to cast itself as an entity separate from religion, it is perhaps simply religion's newest form.

Fessenden goes on to explain that there are real political repercussions from questioning the secularization thesis. Questioning the secularization narrative risks making it appear as though you are advocating for an expanded role of religion at a time where religious conservatives and radicals are railing against liberal values, democracy, and Western culture in general.[94] Such a standpoint is anathema in liberal academic contexts. This shortsighted view of religion, however, fails to take into account both the diversity of views within Christianity and Protestantism respectively as well as the rich—and often erased—history of religious pluralism in the United States. Fessenden implores us to:

> Consider how a simplified narrative of secularization may in fact work to strengthen the hold of a particular strain of conservative Christianity in American public life. When secularism in the United States is understood merely as the absence of religious faith, or neutrality in relation to religious faith, rather than as a variety of possible relationships to different religious traditions . . . then religion comes to be defined as 'Christian' by default, and am implicit association between 'American' and 'Christian' is upheld even by those who have . . . very little invested in its maintenance.[95]

Such a narrow perspective on the American religious landscape erases the experiences of groups such as Native Americans, Jews, Muslims, and a myriad of other non-Christian immigrant groups that make up a significant portion of the

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[93] Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption,* 2.

[94] Fessenden was talking in particular about the growing power of the religious right in the US at the turn of the 21st Century (Ibid., 3). I think we can extend this notion into 2015 by taking a global look at how terrorist groups are claiming religious justification for terrible acts of violence. They often set religion and democracy at odds with one another.

[95] Ibid., 3.

American population. Gaiman explores this theme in great detail in *American Gods* and shows just how much American history is missed, erased, and forgotten when we hold too tightly to the idea of America as a Protestant country. This narrow view of American religion also leads to its casual dismissal as both backwards and irrelevant by postmodern theorists.

Postmodernism

If modernism sees religion as a ghost that haunts American identity, postmodernism tries to exorcize the ghost all together. Many postmodern theorists see religion as a backwards subject, in line with the characteristics Fessenden identifies with "bad" religion, and as something that needs to be eliminated from the public sphere. The assumption seems to be that religion is an anachronism or a superstition with no place in the technologically-driven postmodern context. While this aspect of postmodern theory is both shortsighted and downright offensive to scholars of religion, not to mention religious practitioners, other aspects of postmodern theory are more helpful, especially with respect to the ways in which it helps make sense of the technological, economic, political, and social changes in American in the late 20th and early 21st century. The challenge is to see the ways in which a postmodern conversation about what it means to be human is already religious. The questions of democracy, subjectivity, morality, and embodiment are as crucial to postmodernism as to modernism, and just as deeply religious. Each of my three novels was written in what can be loosely called the postmodern period, and as

such are subject to some of the same forces, themes, and upheavals that postmodernism highlights as a theoretical lens.

To put postmodernism in context, we begin in a world transformed by WWII, the driving forces of late capitalism,[96] and perched on the cusp of social revolution. Postmodernism is a political, economic, technological, and social phenomenon. Frederic Jameson, whose theory of postmodernism I most draw upon, explains that:

> the economic preparation of postmodernism or late capitalism began in the 1950's, after the wartime shortages of consumer goods and spare parts had been made up, and new products and new technologies . . . could be pioneered. On the other hand, the psychic *habitus* of the new age demands the absolute break, strengthened by a generational rupture, achieved more properly in the 1960's.[97]

The technological, economic, and social dynamics that circumscribe the essence of postmodernism came to a head, for Jameson, in 1973. As he explains, "both levels in question, infrastructure and superstructures—the economic system and the cultural 'structure of feeling'—somehow crystalized in the great shock of the crises of 1973" with "the oil crisis, the end of the international gold standard . . . the end of the great wave of 'wars of national liberation' and the beginning of the end of traditional communism."[98] These events are the catalyzing elements that

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[96] Jameson posits that capitalism has had three revolutions in power technology that correspond to three stages of capitalism. The last, or third phase, is given the name "late capitalism" to suggest that it is a significant change from the previous iteration of the system. More concretely, some of the characteristics include new "forms of transnational business . . . the new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges . . . new forms of media interrelationships . . . computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now global scale." *Postmodernism,* xix.

[97] Ibid., xx.

[98] Ibid., xx-xxi.

launch the United States and Western Europe into postmodernism. The political, technological, economic, and social factors are all essential pieces of the puzzle.

Jameson's theory of postmodernism is his theoretical intervention into the changing socio-economic conditions of modern life under the forces of "late capitalism" and the consequences of those changes on everything from culture to subjectivity. It is also a highly provisional theory. Postmodern theory is not intended to explain the postmodern condition. Jameson is trying to narrativize a phenomena that exceeds the logic of narrativity and to create sense out of something that by definition is not just fragmented but fragmentation itself. He reminds us not to forget about history, and not to forget about the complex ways in which cultures and ideas evolve. The "fundamental ideological task" of postmodernist theory "must remain that of coordinating new forms of practice and social and mental habits . . . with the new forms of economic and organization thrown up by the modification of capitalism—the new global division of labor—in recent years."[99] These postmodern practices are so subtle and pervasive that, as Modern would describe it, they become like a net of power and signification "weaving itself over the skin and underneath."[100] The result is a new kind of postmodern subjectivity:

> just as (for Weber) new inner-directed and more ascetic religious values gradually produced 'new people' capable of thriving in the delayed gratification of the emergent 'modern' labor process, so also the 'postmodern' is to be seen as the production of postmodern people capable of functioning in a very peculiar socioeconomic world indeed, one whose structure and objective features and

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[99] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* xiv.

[100] Modern, *Secularism,* 32.

> requirements—if we had a proper account of them—would constitute the situation to which 'postmodernism' is a response.[101]

Technological development, economic development, and subject formation are inextricably linked in the production of postmodern people, just as the people in any age are shaped and determined by their own socio-cultural and economic environments. The question becomes what do these postmodern people look like and how are they different?

The key elements at play in postmodern theory, and thus in the production of postmodern people, are culture, economics, technology, historicity, and subjectivity. In postmodernism, culture has become a product. More than this, "postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process"[102] whereby culture and economics are on a continuous feedback loop.[103] This process is enabled by the forces of reification, or "the 'effacement of the traces of production' from the object itself, from the commodity thereby produced."[104] Reification makes it possible for the consumer of material objects, be they toys, clothes, or computers, to forget about the work that went into making them—work often done by poor, lower-class people whose lives would burden us with guilt if we saw them. As Jameson indicates:

> For a society that wants to forget about class, therefore, reification in this consumer-packaging sense is very functional indeed; consumerism as a culture

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[101] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* xv.

[102] Ibid., x.

[103] Ibid., xv.

[104] Ibid., 314.

> involves much more than this, but this kind of 'effacement' is surely the indispensable precondition on which all the rest can be constructed.[105]

In other words, it is precisely because we are not faced with the consequences of our consumerism or brought face-to-face with the misery upon which our ever accelerating commodity culture is built that our consumer culture is so spectacularly successful. The process thus comes full circle and reinforces the ongoing reification of culture and commodities.

The postmodern emphasis on culture and materialism is also one of the things that sets it apart from modernism, as culture has become a second nature —that is, a replacement for the natural world. Jameson explains that:

> In modernism . . . some residual zones of 'nature' or 'being,' of the old, the older, the archaic, still subsist; culture can still do something to that nature and work at transforming that 'referent.' Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which 'culture' has become a veritable 'second nature.'[106]

This quote emphasizes both the increased human mastery over the natural world in the late 20th and early 21st century as well as the ever narrowing gap between the "natural" and the "built" worlds. Jameson, however, uses the argument that the postmodern world is a built world to declare that the sacred is extinct in postmodern culture. He argues that whereas the sublime was previously linked to nature and the divine, postmodernism now has the technological sublime. The technological sublime is purely material though, as the name suggests, not any more less incomprehensible. Thus, in pre-capitalist society the "other" was nature while under postmodernism the "other is technology.

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[105] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 315.

[106] Ibid., x.

It is unclear why Jameson uses this argument to argue that the sacred is extinct unless we assume that he is operating under a rubric of "real" versus "false" religion, which is connected to Fessenden's parsing of "good" and "bad" religion and to secularization theory more broadly. In other words, Jameson seems to be arguing that real religion, and thus authentic experiences of the sacred, must be connected to supernatural forces. This makes religious belief and practice appear backwards in a postmodern world, as something that "ought to, or eventually will"[107] play itself out according to an overly simplistic rendering of secularization theory. Instead, we need a theory of religion that sees both the natural sublime and the technological sublime as equally valid aspects of an always-changing dialogic theology.

The incomprehensibility of global capitalism, computers, and networked technology is one of the hallmarks of postmodern subjectivity and it is the root of the technological sublime. As Jameson argues:

> The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself.[108]

The difficulty of grasping these systems is on full display in cyberpunk science fiction, which Jameson calls an especially postmodern example of the science fiction genre in both style and content.[109] The technological sublime and the places where it shifts into questions of ineffability and supernatural divinity are

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[107] Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption,* 2-3.

[108] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 38.

[109] Ibid., 38.

favorite topics of science fiction of all kinds. The line between the natural world and the world of human innovation is obscured almost completely in Delaney's *Trouble on Triton*. Late in the novel a doctor asks the main character, Bron, what a society's responsibility is to its citizens once it is able to create not only new physical bodies but also desires and false memories. Where does that leave embodiment and subjectivity? The hallmark of the postmodern condition is not alienation but fragmentation in the face of ever more incomprehensible technological and economic forces. The kinds if problems and questions raised by the increasing interpenetration of bodies, technology, and globally networked systems are political, moral, and theological. Foucault's panopticon manifests internally as well as externally. The regulating powers of the state enter our bodies not merely through the disciplining control of the Norm, but physically via technology that is subtle, pervasive, and sophisticated. Postmodern subjectivity, as we will discuss in depth in the next chapter in conversation with Donna Haraway's theories, is a cyborg subjectivity.

Jameson highlights a method for coping with the disorienting totality of postmodernity called cognitive mapping. Cognitive mapping is both a tool and a method for regaining agency that functions by helping us make sense of our social and spacial position in a disorienting world. He describes this tool as "An aesthetic of cognitive mapping—a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system."[110] Science fiction is one of the aesthetic genres that makes use of

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[110] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 54.

the concept of cognitive mapping to depict alternative worlds as well as to give us a perspective on our own postmodern reality. Cognitive mapping helps us to think the postmodern, or, in other words, to grasp some sense of our positionality vis-a-vis the comprehensive global forces of the postmodern condition.

The need for an aesthetic of cognitive mapping is also driven by the next major theme in Jameson's analysis of the postmodern condition—the crisis of historicity. The crisis of historicity feeds into the sense of the technological sublime and highlights the need for an aesthetic of cognitive mapping while at the same time being perpetuated by the increasing commodification of society and the reification of the modes of production. Jameson defines historicity as "a perception of the present as history; that is, a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective."[111] Historicity enables the creation of grand narratives and narratives that describe history in a way that explains the present as the inevitable result of the past and thus as something that was meant to be. This view of history as proof-text for the present also then predicts the future as it is destined to become for the ruling or dominant group.

Jameson argues that the historical novel as a genre "corresponded" to the emergence of historicity in the early nineteenth century as the "triumphant middle classes . . . sought to project its own vision of its past and its future and to articulate its social and collective project in a temporal narrative distinct in form

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[111] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 284.

from those of earlier 'subjects of history.'"[112] Science fiction mirrors this development in that it "corresponds to the waning or the blockage of that historicity and, particularly in our own time (in the postmodern era), to its crisis and paralysis, its enfeeblement and repression."[113] Science fiction, then, offers postmodern subjects alternative ways of imagining the future that are not premised on a direct line from the past or some sense of predestination, but on the ability to critically engage the present to create future possibilities. The genre thus arms the postmodern subject against the alienating forces of postmodernism by offering something beyond the incomprehensible present. Even though science fiction offers a response to the crisis of historicity, it should not be read as a corrective for it. Indeed, what Jameson emphasizes is that science fiction is uniquely able to make sense of our break with the past and to use it for something productive—an operation with utopian undertones.

One of the consequences of the loss or enfeeblement of historicity, however, is that it exacerbates the fragmentation of the subject. Untethered from history, the postmodern subject struggles to find a sense of self:

> the accessibility of a workable subject position or the absence of one—is itself a correlative of the unity or lack of unity of the outside world . . . What one concludes . . . is not that the 'unified' subject is unreal or undesirable and inauthentic, but rather that it is dependent for its construction and existence on a certain kind of society and is menaced, undermined, problematized, or fragmented by other social arrangements.[114]

One of the differences between the modern and the postmodern subject has to do with subject formation, as modernism is characterized by the alienation of the

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[112] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 283.

[113] Ibid., 284.

[114] Ibid., 137.

subject while postmodernism is characterized by the fragmentation of the subject.[115] Jameson argues that "a once-existing centered subject . . . has today . . . dissolved,"[116] the implications of which include the waning of affect and the the rise of the "new simulacrum" which means that we can no longer access the past but rather our own images of the past which are themselves copies—or "our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach."[117] This raises many other questions about the nature of history and historical analysis, as it calls into question whether there is anything we can point to and call "history" at all.[118]

Postmodernism is at one and the same time a theory that covers the actions of dominant groups and also describes the conditions for the emergence of micro political and minority groups.[119] It does so at least partially because it denies the power of either theological or dialectical views of history. The former describes a view of history that sees it as divinely controlled and thus divinely foretold, while the latter paints a picture of history as inevitable—the present as an inevitable consequence of the past. Postmodernism introduces another view in which all is provisional—neither the past nor the present is closed down, though they may be impossible to access. If dialecticism may be attributed to modernism, then the postmodern is the time of the dialogical. We must move

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[115] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 14-15.

[116] Ibid., 15.

[117] Ibid., 25.

[118] Ibid., 282.

[119] Ibid., 318-319.

past Jameson's narrow framing of theology as divine mandate and religion as supernatural mumbo-jumbo in favor of a dialogical theology that both speaks to and emerges from the complexities of postmodern life.

Using the lens of dialogical theology I seek after the moments of potentiality left by our not-yet determined past, present, and future. These moments are highly regulated, maddeningly mediated, and all but impossible to become conscious of because we can only glimpse them indirectly. Jameson tells us that the individual experience is more suspect and less obvious than ever before. The "truth" of individual lives is bound up with the social, economic, and political events that have shaped the place and the culture of the place where the subject resides, and "those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizeable for most people."[120] We must be able to grasp the complexities of the present and the legacy of the pasts that feeds it in order to begin to conceptualize alternative futures. This is what makes postmodern theory so valuable for this project. It delineates not only what is at stake in this process, but the forces that collude to make those sites of meaning so difficult to discover and engage.

Science fiction narratives offer exciting places to use postmodernism against itself, so to speak, in order to expose some of the forces at play. Jameson explains that "in science fiction we can use reification as a tool—a kind of praxis. Thus mitigating its alienating affects and transforming it into a method for

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[120] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 410-411.

postulating human possibilities."[121] I want to suggest as well than in these science fiction texts we will also find ways to think about religion that do not relegate it to the past either historically or conceptually, but rather are enhanced by the insights of postmodernism and their implications for the postmodern subject—in them we find our postmodern dialogical theology.

[121] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 285.

Chapter 2: Science Fiction, Religion, and the Postmodern

"It's been my contention for some time that SF is not about the future. SF is in dialogue with the present. It works by setting up a dialogue with the here-and-now, a dialogue as intricate and rich as the writer can make it."

- Samuel Delaney, *Shorter Views*[122]

"The reading of science fiction drives us into lands where we have never set foot and yet which—because they are cognitively linked to the world we do know and are invested with our actual longings—do indeed amount to a kind of homeland. Even more than the novel of the artist, the defining features of science fiction are located on the In-Front-of-Us, at the level of the Not-Yet-Being, and in the dimension of utopian futurity."

- Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*[123]

In order to consider some of the ways in which this thing we call "religion" is a different order of thing now than it was one hundred, or even twenty, years ago, we need to consider some of the ways in which it functions in a postmodern context and how those ideas compare to older understandings of the term. Religion is not a thing. It is not a static concept, but a set of (often contradictory or contentious) discourses about and around shifting webs of practices, texts, materialities, identities, cultures, and archives. In her book *The Invention of World Religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa traces the formation of the discourse of "world religions" in the 20th century. She sets her project apart from more traditional religious studies narratives in a way that is helpful for my own project.

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[122] Delaney, *Shorter Views*, 343.

[123] Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction,* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 70.

First, Masuzawa noted that for many religion scholars, "the line between asserting the reality of religions and asserting the legitimacy of religion(s) as a proper subject for study is at best ambiguous."[124] A scholar with the first agenda will write a very different type of argument than one who is concerned with the second, and a scholar who fails to mark the distinction between these two approaches may end up with a muddy and unconvincing argument that fails to manage either task.

I have always been much more interested in what people do with religion, and with how religion functions as an idea or a framework for ordering one's perception of the world, than with what religion means in any kind of objective sense. Masuzawa puts this clearly as she says "I have been always more inquisitive about the marvelously loquacious discourse on religions—which, to my mind, is one of the most curious and conspicuous features of Western modernity—than about what this modern Western discourse insists on calling 'religion itself.'"[125] I have no interest in being the religion police, looking to either legitimize or delegitimize various religious discourses. Instead, I find it more interesting to note both the places where conventional religious language and imagery shows up in unexpected contexts (such as when Donna Haraway speaks of divinity and the sacred in her "Manifesto for Cyborgs"), as well as those places where topics with religious resonances are examined using, for lack of a better term, secular language. The unwieldy dichotomy of sacred/profane or religious/

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[124] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions,* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 7.

[125] Ibid., 10.

secular is at least part of the issue. There is no ontological distinction between sacred and profane or religious and secular. These are boundaries created in order to mark off and enforce a privileged category. Analyzing the discursive map that underlies and creates the meanings of these terms in context tells us a great deal about the values and power relationships at work. In this way we can begin to tease out how religious language functions in context, and what implications it has for how the term changes over time as well as from one context to another.

Narratives, including religious narratives, are epistemes or situated ways of knowing. They shape how we understand ourselves and our experiences as well as the conditions for what is possible. But epistemologies change, and narratives record and reveal, at least partially, the situated possibilities of their historical moments. Science fiction narratives, in particular, contain more possibilities than our everyday lives allow for. Expanding the range of narrative possibility is part of what science fiction does best. I am not interested in defining science fiction any more than I am interested in defining religion, but of all the writing about the theory of science fiction as a genre, I find Carl Freedman's take on Darko Suvin's theory of "cognitive estrangement" the most compelling. Suvin defines science fiction as "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to that author's empirical environment."[126] As Freedman emphasizes, science

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[126] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 7-8.

fiction is characterized by the "dialectic between estrangement and cognition . . . If the dialectic is flattened out to mere cognition, then the result is 'realistic' or mundane fiction . . . if the dialectic is flattened out to mere estrangement . . . then the result is fantasy."[127] Science fiction literature offers commentary on the status quo while also depicting alternatives or a way out of the seeming inevitability of either the present or the future.

This broad stroke definition of science fiction gets at many of the key ways it differers from other genres, but Freedman highlights one important nuance, which is that "cognition" in particular is too ideologically laden as an external category. That is to say, an author like C.S. Lewis treats the Christian paradigm as cognitive reality while an atheist or a Muslim might not.[128] To account for these differences in epistemology, Freedman suggests that we look not for the existence or absence of cognition, but for the "*cognition effect*," which is "the attitude *of the text itself* to the kind of estrangements being performed."[129] The reader need not judge the degree to which a plot or idea is cognitive, whether that cognition is dependent on scientific or technical knowledge or religious belief, but how the author portrays the events. This is a helpful rubric for identifying the science fiction-ness of a particular work but it is not a hard and fast rule. We can always find novels that straddle genres or fit imperfectly, but the guiding

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[127] Freedman, *Critical Theory*, 16-17.

[128] Freedman has a helpful discussion of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy versus Lewis's Space Trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra,* and *That Hideous Strength).* He talks about how, for Lewis, Ransom's adventures are highly cognitive from within the paradigm of Christianity. Tolkien, on the other hand, makes it clear that his world exists in a "noncognitive disjunction from the mundane world." Lewis's books are thus understood as science fiction while Tolkien's are not. Ibid., 17-18.

[129] Ibid., 18.

framework of estrangement and cognition effect helps to get at the key aspects of what sets science fiction apart.

The cognitive dissonance and narrative estrangement of science fiction helps to break us out of the often unexamined conventions of realistic fiction in order to emphasize the social, political, historical, and technological forces at work in these texts—forces that, though connected to ones that we recognize, may operate in wholly different patterns or directions—in order to represent the impossible. Science fiction texts can thus theorize and explore alternative subjectivities, ontologies, political structures, technological achievements, and social arrangements that are at the very edge of what we can imagine. These possible representations of the impossible also include alternative ways of thinking and talking about religion that exceed the language of everyday experience, which, indeed, all good religious language does.

Science Fiction, Postmodernism, and Critical Theory

The aptness of science fiction as a site of critical reflection on religion and American culture goes deeper than these moments of style or narrative estrangement, however, to include the ways in which science fiction has special affinities with both postmodernism and critical theory. Frederic Jameson argues that the science fiction novel is today what the historical novel was in the early nineteenth century in America and Europe. He explains that the historical novel relied on and reinforced a strong sense of historicity whereby the present was understood as the inevitable result of past events. Edward Said would call this

relationship to historicity the result of "a privileged, genealogical useful past"[130] used to erase all unwanted elements such as evidence of violence and oppression as well as the alternative histories and experiences of marginalized groups in the name of progress. This method of writing history flattens the narrative so that it represents only those events that support and validate the institutions and groups in charge of the status quo. Science fiction, however, works in the opposite direction by, in Foucault's terms, "fictioning" the politics of the present. In his book *Critical Theory and Science Fiction,* Carl Freedman explains that:

> the past . . . in science fiction, is of value not so much for its literal accuracy in all detail . . . as for its role in establishing the historicity of the present—in the sense of denaturalizing the present by showing it to be neither arbitrary nor inevitable but the conjunctional result of complex, knowable material processes.[131]

Science fiction novels, especially sub-genres like alternative history, treat the knowability of history as a question or a conceptual problem rather than a given. These novels thus "not only deal with history as material but also with historiography as theoretical structure."[132] This interrogation of history is accomplished, in part, because of the play of heteroglossia and dialogical signification.

Science fiction stages an escape from the feeling of being stuck by jumping forward or sideways or even backwards into alternative history, but each time breaking us out of the quotidian in order to reflect back upon present conditions

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[130] I am indebted to Tracy Fessenden's use of this quote in the introduction to her book *Culture and Redemption* where she uses it to talk about Puritan justification for violence against Native Americans in New England in the 18th Century. Fessenden, 6.

[131] Freedman*, Critical Theory*, 55-56.

[132] Ibid., 61.

and highlight aspects of the postmodern condition that may have otherwise remained invisible. Similarly, Freedman argues that there are "*structural* affinities between the two modes of discourse"[133] (meaning the discourse of science fiction and that of critical theory). These structural affinities include an emphasis on "historical mutability, material reducibility, and utopian possibility" that also by extension require "historical concreteness and rigorous self-reflectiveness."[134] Science fiction offers us a unique vantage point on the postmodern condition that is both engaging and enlightening because it uses the fragmented and fragmenting affects of that condition as opportunities for imaginative re-creations of our world that remain tethered to it.

In other words, the science fictional world is different in time or place from our own, "whose chief interest is precisely the difference that such difference makes. It is also a world whose difference is concretized within a cognitive continuum with the actual."[135] The result of this cognition effect is that science fiction has the potential to catalyze real social change rather than leaving a reader feeling trapped by the banality and alienation of the postmodern status quo. We simultaneously recognize ourselves, or some part of ourselves and our society, while at the same time seeing how things can be different. The future is not inevitable. The notion that the present is more than it appears, or holds potential that we cannot always see, is also a deeply religious perspective. The

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[133] Freedman, *Critical Theory,* xix.

[134] Ibid., xvi.

[135] Ibid., xvi.

lens of dialogical theology helps us see the structural similarities between, not just critical theory and science fiction, but science fiction and religious discourse.

The style of science fiction writing, and the ways author's deploy language, is also different from either mundane or fantasy literature. Science fiction writers find ways of writing the impossible. One way they accomplish this is by rendering language extremely literal. As Samuel Delaney explains at the end of *Trouble on Triton:*

> Such sentences as 'His world exploded,' or 'She turned on her left side,' as they subsume the proper technological discourse (of economics and cosmology in one; of switching circuitry and prosthetic surgery in the other), leave the banality of the emotionally muzzy metaphor . . . and . . . become possible images of the impossible.[136]

The science fictional world is a place where worlds can and do literally explode, and where turning on your right side might mean physically activating the left side of your body whether that be bio-ware or mechanical. Sacred text and myth are other genres where the literally impossible becomes possible. In *American Gods,* which draws heavily on myth, characters are raised from the dead, meet gods on the road, and go behind the scenes of everyday life. They are scenes from religious myth and ancient history enacted in 21st Century America. These are the stories of gods having physical, real-world relationships with people. Gaiman tells us that his story is impossible and yet also that it happened. These are possible visions of the impossible. These are religious texts.

The creative power of science fiction, however, is radical in another way. It is a tool that helps us grapple with the seemingly unassailable totality of the

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[136] Samuel R. Delaney, *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1976), 285.

postmodern condition. It helps us to conceptualize the forces and mechanisms of the reified global capitalist system that operates all around us and within us with little visible effect. Freedman explains what's at stake:

> the world capitalists system—becomes increasingly hard to conceptualize as it becomes increasingly comprehensive and unchallenged. It is not only that, consequently, the postmodern destruction of historical meaning places special obstacles in the path of historical . . . thinking. It is also . . . that postmodernity, even while rendering the very category of totality difficult to grasp, renders *itself* into so increasingly smooth, self-sufficient, and perfectly rounded a totality that it becomes harder and harder to find a point of purchase from which to launch any praxis of the sort associated with critical theory. Such a project seems, to a greater and greater degree, to be like climbing a wall of glass.[137]

Science fiction novels have the ability to give us a point of purchase on the glassy totality of postmodernity. They give us both an entry point into the dynamics of global capitalism and a vantage point from which to engage critically with those dynamics. The act of creating another world, or another version of our own world, and then theorizing the lives and dynamics and socio-political systems that exist there helps us to theorize our present. The twin dynamics of cognition effect and estrangement allow us to see forces that are invisible in our own lives, and in so doing, enable us to dream.

Social change is predicated on our ability, first and foremost, to dream. To imagine how things could be different and only then to take action. This line of thinking is often associated with the concept of utopian hope. Utopia has many connotations, from its literary origin with Thomas Moore's *Utopia* in 1516, to its economic and political history with various socialist groups (with special reference to the writings of Marx and Engels, especially *The Communist*

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[137] Freedman, *Critical Theory,* 191-192.

Manifesto published in 1848), and finally its philosophical and hermeneutical meanings developed by philosophers such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Frederic Jameson, and Ernst Bloch.[138] Science fiction has a long history of utopian writing, including two of my books: Le Guin's *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* and Delaney's *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*. These novels, and other utopian science fiction novels like them, combine all three meanings of utopia as they simultaneously deploy utopian themes in literary form that interrogate economic and political questions by representing alternative social, economic, and political systems that raise hermeneutical and philosophical questions about hope and social change.

Freedman argues that Ernst Bloch's writings on the concepts of hope and utopia are most helpful for understanding more fully the ways in which science fiction texts are rich contexts for utopian thought. He describes how Bloch's concept of utopia is not a place or even a plan, but a hermeneutic: "a way of thinking and of reading."[139] Freedman draws on Bloch's work, *The Principle of Hope*, published in three volumes from 1954-1959. For Bloch, utopia is not a thing to be achieved, but rather something we strive towards. In other words, utopia:

> depends upon what Bloch calls the Novum, that is, the *radically* (though not purely) new, which by definition cannot be exhaustively or definitively mapped. Utopia is to be found in the Not-Yet, or the Not-Yet-Being, or the In-Front-of-Us . . . Utopia can never be fixed in . . . the present, because it exists, to a considerable

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[138] I am drawing here on Freedman's three part breakdown of utopia as a concept. *Critical Theory,* 62-63.

[139] Ibid., 64.

> degree, in the dimension of futurity . . . as the future is the object of *hope,* of our deepest and most radical longings.[140]

These longings, however, are not personal, but the longings of a collective group, and so cannot be fulfilled or fueled by selfish or personal desires like greed. They "demand, rather, a revolutionary reconfiguration of the world as a totality."[141] This is key to utopia's orientation towards futurity—a horizon that we never really reach but that, in striving towards, demands that we change the status quo and not simply our own personal situation.

The utopian Novum shares many of the characteristics of the science fiction novel in that it, too, depends on twin dynamics of cognition and estrangement to achieve its effects. The Blochian utopian principle relies on a connection to the actual world in order to achieve the creation of a future world (or at least the hope of one). In the science fiction novel, then, utopia finds its fullest literary expression. More than that,

> the cognitive rationality (at least in literary effect) of science fiction allows utopia to emerge as more fully itself, genuinely critical and transformative. In this way, the dynamic of science fiction can on one level be identified with the hope principle itself. The reading of science fiction drives us into lands where we have never set foot and yet—because they are cognitively linked to the world we do know and are invested with our actual longings—do indeed amount to a kind of homeland . . . the defining features of science fiction are located on the In-Front-of-Us, at the level of the Not-Yet-Being, and in the dimension of utopian futurity.[142]

The open-endedess of science fiction literature, achieved through the dynamics of dialogic language, heteroglossia, cognition effect, and estrangement, make it a

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[140] Freedman, *Critical Theory,* 64.

[141] Ibid., 64.

[142] Ibid., 69-70.

radical narrative form. It brings a critical view of history together with an alienating perspective on the present that renders, even partially and fragmented, the totality of the postmodern condition into something we can grasp. No matter how partial science fiction's intervention is into postmodernity, nonetheless the possibility of this intervention—the existence of this critical lens—is the bearer of the utopian principle of hope. "Utopia is a form of *cognition* and . . . Utopian hermeneutics is . . . a kind of *labor,* a political practice."[143] Utopia is far from narrow-minded or selfish escapism, it is the practice of hope, the hermeneutics of social change, and the challenge to recognize the promise of futurity that exits, no matter how small, in the present.

The key to hope and social change is our ability to perceive the present as open and full of potential rather than solely closed-down and limited. The combination of postmodernism and critical theory as applied to science fiction literature have the ability to help us peel away the accretions of power, history, ideology, and culture that cling to the concept of religion not to discover some truth about it, but to learn some of the ways it functions—both how and how well it functions, how the concept has changed over time, how it changes with culture, and what is at stake in the conversation about religion—thus allowing us to reflect on what religion means now in 21st Century North America, and how that is both similar and different to what it meant even thirty years ago. One such postmodern theory is contained Donna Haraway's seminal "Cyborg Manifesto."

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[143] Freedman, *Critical Theory,* 66.

A Manifesto For Cyborgs—Feminism, SF, and Critical Theory

A Cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction . . . The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience in the late 20th century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.

- Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"[144]

Michael Levy argues that the mid 1980's "was a time for manifesto's,"[145] and one manifesto in particular from 1985 dramatizes both this apparent trend in 80's sf and the wider implications of sf tropes and narratives for critical theory in the US: Donna Haraway's "Manifesto For Cyborgs." This document, which has been released in many versions over the years, is a powerful manifesto for the revitalization of socialist feminism in the US and abroad as a way to catalyze the women's rights movement especially with respect to the technological realities of the present and how those forces are dramatically reshaping labor and capitalism. She articulates the intersecting dynamics of global capitalism, technology, women's labor, and feminism by crafting an "ironic political myth"[146] based on the image of the cyborg—both real and imagined. Haraway's theory of the cyborg is both deeply dialogical and deeply theological. She highlights the

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[144] This text has seen many versions over time, but it was originally published as "Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism" in *Socialist Review*, no. 80 (1985): 65-108. The version I am using in this paper is a reprint of this article as "Chapter 4: A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century,"*The International Handbook of Virtual Environments,* eds. J. Weiss et. al. (Netherlands: Springer, 2006), pp. 117-158. Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 117.

[145] Michael Levy, "Fiction, 1980-1992," *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction,* Eds. Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sheryl Vint (New York: Routledge, 2009),159.

[146] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 117.

interplay between culture, technology, and social change within the rubric of a hybrid language of science and religion that explodes limited understandings of either category and reaches toward something much more complex.

One of the things that makes Haraway's manifesto so powerful are the ways in which she weaves together technological, political, religious, and science fictional language to build her argument. Nick Mansfield explains that the "success of Haraway's argument is that she sees how these different domains — the machine, the biological, the conceptual and the political — interconnect with one another, where technology as a material reality and as a cultural fiction are not separable."[147] The image of the cyborg is a perfect vessel for her argument, for it is simultaneously biological and technological, created and creative, feared and revered, a being of speculative fiction and one of material reality. When Haraway was writing back in 1985 the specter of a cyborg future must have seemed radical, even though, as she argues, we were already cyborgs.[148]

In 2015 it is no longer a stretch to see the modern American, or indeed individuals from almost any corner of the globe reached by capitalism and technological innovation, in terms of the cyborg. We are literately and figuratively fusions of biology and technology from the medical innovations of artificial hearts and artificial limbs to the more subtle use of blood sugar monitors and wireless fitness bands that track how our bodies move and function. Similarly, our smart phones and tablets are veritable extensions of our

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[147] Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: theories of the self from Freud to Haraway,* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 161.

[148] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 118. She speaks especially of modern medicine and it's fusion of human and machine (117).

bodies and minds and have changed the ways in which we think and communicate in very real ways. Even so, these technological advances have become simply the way things are, and Haraway's still prescient argument reminds us of the social and political implications of these innovations. She highlights the ways in which technology is never neutral, and how bodies and body politics are enmeshed in discourses of capitalism, sex, religion, race, ability that have real and everyday affects and implications.

At the time of her initial writing, "cyborg" was a dirty word in feminist circles. Haraway explains that:

> My feminist friends and others in 1980 thought the cyborg was all bad. That's a simplification, but that was the reigning attitude towards science and technology among my buddies. It was too much either a kind of unsustainable realist, quasi-positivist point of view about science that believes that you can actually say what you mean non-tropically, or an anti-science back-to-nature program. The 'Cyborg Manifesto' was a refusal of both of these approaches, but without a refusal of an ongoing alliance. The 'Manifesto' argued that you can, even must, inhabit the despised place.[149]

Haraway refuses to take sides between feminism and technology, or between science and social theory, because she insists on a both-and approach. Only by grappling with all aspects of our postmodern reality can we find a way forwards. In the same way she also embraces religious language and the power of myth. The manifesto is itself an "ironic political myth" after all, and as such is "faithful as blasphemy is faithful," requiring deep seriousness if not blind allegiance, while its "Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play. It is also a

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[149] Gane, "Never Been Human," 156.

rhetorical strategy and a political method."[150] She insists on complexities over clarity, and speaks to the importance of not resolving different perspectives and competing truths into some larger grand narrative. Grand narratives conceal far more than they reveal, and offer no tools for social change. We must embrace the messy, irreverent, and despised places for our political myths, and so Haraway offers us the cyborg.

Haraway argues that inhabiting the cyborg is a worlding operation that opens us up to an entirely different ontology or order of being. Cyborg logic runs counter to that of Western logic in part because "The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of unification with nature in the Western sense."[151] The de-naturalized cyborg is both a promise and a threat. The promise of a different sort of future premised on a radical break with older narratives of how we have come to be human. Haraway explains that:

> The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence . . . Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other . . . Unlike the hopes of Frankenstien's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate . . . The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden . . . Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not remember the cosmos . . . The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential.[152]

She argues that rather than deepening the dichotomies between mind and body and animal and machine that "high technology" and "scientific culture" so often

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[150] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 117.

[151] Ibid., 119.

[152] Ibid., 119.

signify, the cyborg offers us a way to bring them closer than ever before.[153] At the same time, the cyborg maintains a tension between masculine technology out of control and a the promise of a different future based on our cyborg ontology—an ontology that is both "imagination and material reality."[154] The hybrid discourse Haraway employs in her manifesto mirrors the hybrid ontology of the cyborg. This discourse is, in both cases, the center of their power—both material and imaginative.

The force of Haraway's argument is undeniable, even almost 30 years after the first publication of the manifesto, and is due in large part to this hybrid, or "chimeric," discursive frame. As she argues, "By the late 20th century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized, and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. This cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics."[155] Haraway brings myth and science together in a way that expands the force and imaginative potential of both fields. So too with religion and technology. The rhetorical force of the document comes at least in part from her sense that all language is "tropic" and incomplete, and that by bringing together these seemingly incongruous images, discourses, and ideological frames she shows both the limitations of each form as well as the ways in which they illuminate things about one another that are not otherwise apparent. By tropes, Haraway means that "I'm interested in tropes as places where you trip . . . They are about breakdowns and that's why they are creative. That is why you get

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[153] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 121-122.

[154] Ibid., 118.

[155] Ibid., 118.

somewhere you weren't before, because something didn't work."[156] She goes on to explain that "the world is about tripping . . . communication is about tripping . . . all language is tropic . . . The tyranny of clarity is about the belief that any semiotic practice is immaterial."[157] This is a radical statement and a truth not acknowledged often enough even within the humanities. From the perspective of a biologist it is truly prophetic. What gets lost in so many conversations about science and technology is that empirical knowledge is just one form of gathering and sharing information among many other forms, none of which are value-neutral or ontologically pure. Haraway's propensity to put discourses from many different disciplines side by side underscores the ways in which knowledge is produced from discourses and practices rooted in the material reality of their social and historical contexts as well as the mechanisms of power that undergird those discourses and practices.

Haraway thus theorizes language as a tool alongside the tools of modern technology. Specifically, she cites that "communications technology and biotechnology are the crucial tools re-crafting our bodies. These tools embody and enforce new social relations for women world-wide."[158] Yet Haraway goes beyond describing mechanisms for physical change and goes after the ways in which these technologies also re-craft lived social reality, for:

> Technologies and scientific discourses can be partially understood as formalizations . . . but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing

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[156] Gane, "Never Been Human," 152.

[157] Ibid., 153-154.

[158] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 130.

> meanings. The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge. Indeed, myth and tool mutually constitute each other.[159]

The most striking thing about this passage is the way Haraway links scientific discourses with tools and myths and then further argues that myth and tool mutually constitute one another. It is not a new argument that myths derive from and shape cultural norms, and so are tools of social regulation and even social possibility ("possible bodies" is one example), but this argument takes the relationship between myth and tool in two additional directions. On the one hand, she is couching modern technological and scientific discourses in terms of myth as well, and so suggests their participation in these same discourses of regulation and control. Haraway is also suggesting that we can use this coupling of myth and tool, this co-arising of signification, to our advantage by re-writing the myths and re-shaping the tools. Haraway has the deft ability to cut through layers of discursive obfuscation that conceal the relationships between the mechanical tools of biotechnology and myths, including Western myths of origin, to reveal their power to simultaneously inscribe and enforce meaning, and thus discipline, on bodies—especially women's bodies—around the world. It is with this same deftness that she turns to argue for the use of stories as tools to reinscribe some of these sites of power.

The multiplicity of discourses and the "struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication" are an integral part of "cyborg

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[159] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 130.

politics."[160] For Haraway, stories are tools, and writing takes on revolutionary power. The ability to write against the tyranny of clarity calls for a hybrid methodology, including science fiction. In the fifth section of "A Cyborg Manifesto" she explores "Cyborgs: A Myth of Political Identity" through the examination of "personal and political 'technological' pollution" via texts on the "Constructions of women of color and monstrous selves in feminist science fiction."[161] In this section Haraway expresses that she "is indebted in this story to writers like Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delaney, John Varley, James Tiptree, Jr., Octavia Butler. . . These are our story-tellers exploring what it means to be embodied in high-tech worlds. They are theorists for cyborgs."[162] This acknowledgment recalls her statement from the very first page of the manifesto where she declares that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion."[163] In a concrete way, "Cyborg monsters in feminist science fiction define quite different political possibilities and limits from those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman."[164] Far from being silly stories about far distant futures and fanciful technology, science fiction writing can be "deadly serious" as she explains that "Contests for the meanings of writing are a major form of contemporary political struggle. Releasing the play of writing is deadly serious . . . Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of

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[160] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 142.

[161] Ibid., 140.

[162] Ibid., 140.

[163] Ibid., 117.

[164] Ibid., 146.

original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other."[165] She is drawing especially on the history of black women in the United States, for whom literacy and claiming the tools of narrative were an integral part of their struggle to be recognized as fully human. It is not that narrative can defeat racism, sexism, or any other "ism," but that alternative narratives refuse the status quo. They refuse the logic of totalizing narratives built on the backs of those whose humanity they deny and erase.

Stories function as tools in part to subvert dominant narratives of power and the ontology of original unity. In other words, these "tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture."[166] This is a central component of cyborg ontology and cyborg politics—the force of a different ontology, a different logic of self and signification—one that thrives on "noise and advocate[s] pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine."[167] These are also what Nicholas Gane refers to as "dirty ontologies,"[168] by which he means approaches and methods that challenges the "tyranny of clarity." In the conclusion of her manifesto, Haraway puts it this way:

> the production of universal, totalizing theory is a major mistake that miss most of reality, probably always, but certainly now . . . Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools

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[165] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 141.

[166] Ibid., 141.

[167] Ibid., 142.

[168] Gane, "Never Been Human," 153.

> to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia. It is an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear into the circuits of the supersavers of the new right. It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories. Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.[169]

Part of Haraway's genius lies in her ability to recognize complex truths. The kind of subjective truths that eat away at our belief in grand narratives of any kind in order to reveal something both frightening and beautiful. The cyborg is that image. It is not an easy identification she asks us to make, but it is one that leads to a more promising future.

Finally, a significant part of the rhetorical force of Haraway's argument derives from her use of religious language and imagery. She uses provocative language such as "myth," "blasphemy," "faith," and "goddess" but she is not using them in a traditional religious context—far from it. This is a manifesto about feminism, technology, and capitalism—not religion. Her use of religious language, then, is neither hollow nor naive. These are words wielded with power and ferocity—with intentionality and calculation. She taps into the discursive history of religious language to give her argument weight but also in order to speak about and invoke a different kind of future. The model for postmodern feminists is not the goddess but the cyborg. In this way, Haraway leverages religious language and religious discourse to project an alternative analysis of the present and so suggest alternative futures. She transforms religious language into language that is inextricable from the discourses of science, technology, and the human, and in so doing reveals that religious language, like all language, has

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[169] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 147.

always been messy. It has always been more-than. Haraway uses religious language as a tool with the full awareness that language is never just a tool but a "worlding" operation. Haraway's world is a cacophony of "incompatible things together because [all] are necessary and true,"[170] including science, faith, myth, technology, biology, religion, and science fiction. We will now turn to a brief introduction to science fiction as a genre.

Science Fiction, A Brief History

"To think about worlds in other galaxies, other modes of being, is a theological enterprise."

Madeline L'Engle[171]

Science fiction is one of those genres that brings with it a host of preconceived notions regarding its content, value, and cultural status. To be more precise, people who are familiar with and love science fiction in all if its varied forms will argue for its complexity, relevance, and sacred (if not prophetic) value. For others, science fiction evokes images of pre-teen and teenage boys surrounded by comics and pulp magazines, or perhaps star trek figurines and movie posters, who never go outside and interact with the rest of the world. Many scholars disregard science fiction on the basis of its perception as a "low" or "popular" culture phenomenon with no serious application within the academy. The myth of "high" versus "low" culture has been long dismantled by cultural

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[170] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 117.

[171] L'Engle, *Walking on Water,* 158

theorists who expose this discourse for what it is—a power play for relevance and dominance in which certain voices and perspectives are silenced by devaluing them. Much like the discourse around sacred and profane or religious and secular, the division of high versus low culture reveals more about the peculiarities of the cultural moment in which it takes place than anything intrinsic to the phenomena under scrutiny. In the shift from modernism to postmodernism, the ability to draw such neat divisions between phenomena became even more suspect, as the very idea of a "pure" category dissolves in front of our eyes. There is no longer a privileged perspective, no more stable essence, and no longer can we presume to fix the boundaries of any cultural phenomenon with precision (nor would we want to). All this being said, let us take a quick look at some of the history and evolution of science fiction as a genre so that we can have a shared understanding of some of the perennial concerns and themes of the genre, and begin to understand the ways in which is offers us a unique vantage point on religion as well as the conditions of postmodernity.

Though the term "science fiction"[172] is quite young,[173] many of the themes of science fiction, such as travel to other worlds, encounters with alien beings, and time travel have roots that reach as far back as the 17th Century.[174] Adam Roberts points out that some argue that the "first true sf novel" is Johannes

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[172] Some of the authors that follow will abbreviate science fiction as "sf."

[173] Many attribute the modern version of the term to sf editor Hugo Gernsback in the 1920's. Arthur B. Evans writes that "The sf genre obtained its name and social identity during the early decades of the twentieth century in the American pulp magazines." Arthur B. Evans, "Nineteenth-Century SF," in *Routledge,* 13.

[174] Adam Roberts, "The Copernican Revolution" in *Routledge,* 7.

Kepler's *A Dream, or Lunar Astronomy,* written in 1600 about a voyage to the moon and encounters with alien life.[175] Roberts chooses the Copernican revolution as a watershed moment in the pre-development of science fiction as a genre because it marked a shift in the discourse around science and religion. Namely, the "Copernican revolution is bound up with the ways in which science supplanted religion and myth in the imaginative economy of European thought; and sf emerges from, and is shaped by, precisely that struggle."[176] This statement is somewhat misleading, as Roberts is not arguing that science supplanted religion in the 17th Century, but rather that Copernicus's scientific theories of planetary movements mark the first moments when knowledge gained through scientific observation supplanted the previously unassailable doctrines of the Catholic Church.[177] Roberts thus also marks an important aspect in the evolution of any genre or cultural phenomenon, which is the way in which its evolution is co-occurring with the historical, political, and social conditions that enable its existence.

Another of the major origin points for science fiction lies in the 18th Century with the writings of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. These two writers are credited with bringing some cohesion to the emerging sf genre by pioneering two of the major modes of sf to this day—the "hard/didactic" mode of Verne's *voyages extraordinaires* and the "speculative/fantastic" mode of Wells's

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[175] Roberts, "Copernican," 4.

[176] Ibid., 5.

[177] Ibid., 4-5.

"scientific romances."[178] Arthur B. Evans highlights the historical conditions that accelerated the development of sf in this period as he points out how "The explosion of sf-type narratives during the nineteenth century can be understood only within the historical context of the industrial revolution and the transformative (and often alienating) social changes that accompanied it."[179] One such narrative, considered to be many the first modern sf novel, is Mary Shelly's 1818 novel, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. Here we leap onto the next step in the evolution of science's grip on the public imagination with the rejection of its absolute power. Evans argues that:

> Shelly's Gothic novel exemplified the Romantic rejection of the eighteenth-century Cartesian belief in the scientist as hero and in technology as inherently good. *Frankenstein* expressed the fears of an entire *mal-du-siècle* generation caught in a sudden paradigm shift between tradition and modernity . . . and popularized . . a standard nineteenth-century sf archetype: the mad scientist who, in his hubris-filled pursuit of knowledge and power, betrays basic human values.[180]

Even so, Evans also notes that some scholars argue that *Frankenstein* does not take place in "technologically saturated" society and thus does not qualify as the first true sf work. That distinction can only be given to the works that emerged in "late modernity."[181]

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[178] Evans, "Nineteenth-Century SF," 13

[179] Ibid., 13.

[180] Ibid., 13.

[181] Ibid., 14.

"Late modernity"[182] in the United States gives rise to what most science fiction scholars agree is the modern emergence of sf in the form of Hugo Gernsback's pulp magazine *Amazing Stories* (1926-2005). The period of pulp sf had a stronger influence on the development of sf than anything else to date, and Farah Mendlesohn explains that:

> The 'pulp' element of the new sf came not from Gernsback directly (who disapproved of it) but from the nature of the commercial market in the 1920's, and sf's habit of borrowing, begging, and stealing its clothes from every other popular genre developing contemporaneously. In addition, it came from a change in the market and a wider understanding of what constituted proper literature for adults.[183]

The market change that Mendlesohn alludes to was facilitated by both the drop in paper prices brought about by the invention of cheap wood pulp paper and the expansion of the railways that made it possible for reading material to reach a wider audience than ever before.[184] The pulps solidified many of the themes and terms of science fiction, and also brought together the community of science fiction writers and readers in a way that had never before been possible. Mendlesohn credits the efforts of Gernsback with establishing the "parameters within which the field's critical debates took place, and host[ing] the community of highly vocal readers and writers that we now call 'fandom.' This community created what we now understand as the language and ideological rhetoric of

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[182] This is a less than precise term and I am not sure it really does anything helpful other than mark the time between the increase in industrialization and that period scholars call "modernism" (also up for debate) and the emergence of postmodernism. So let's argue that late modernity corresponds roughly to the period between WWI and the start of postmodernism in the late 50's/early 60's. It may be useful to consider "late modernity" to indicate both a certain level of technological saturation that Evans indicates and also a growing sense of modernity's failure as a cultural orientation.

[183] Farah Mendlesohn, "Fiction, 1926-1949" in *Routledge,* 52.

[184] Ibid., 52.

sf."[185] The pulps thus laid the foundation of modern science fiction, and the developments that follow build on the community and conventions of the genre as well as its increased popularity and cultural visibility.

The 1950's in the US saw the science fiction pulp magazines give way to a more sophisticated book market and the rise of specialty publishers as well as more interest in sf from traditional publishing houses.[186] Science fiction was growing up and becoming more serious and more literary. Rob Latham explains that science fiction's rising popularity and growing cultural visibility in the 1950's was due in large part to:

> the technological revolution that accompanied the Second World War in a host of inventions, from atomic bombs to television, whose existence had been foreseen in the 1920's and 1930's pulps. The accelerated tempo of scientific development in the postwar period, with all manner of new devices conspiring to transform or threaten people's live, made sf seem not only prescient but uniquely relevant, since one of the genre's key themes has always been the inescapable reality of technosocial change.[187]

While in the pulps of the 1930's the main themes had been "the invasion story, the exploration/first contact story, and the invention story,"[188] post WWII topics tended to address man-made disasters such as the rise of atomic devastation, ecological disaster, industrial pollution, and overpopulation.[189] Latham goes on to point out that sf writing on these topics made it one of the few places that social and political criticism (though masked) were being printed in the mass market and that this veiled critical writing in the 50's led to the more

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[185] Mendlesohn, "Fiction, 1926-1949," 54.

[186] Rob Latham, "Fiction, 1950-1963" in *Routledge,* 80.

[187] Ibid., 85.

[188] Mendlesohn, "Fiction, 1926-1949," 54.

[189] Latham, "Fiction, 1950-1963," 86.

sophisticated and overt social criticism (especially with respect to gender and sexuality) that emerged in the 1960's so-called "New Wave" movement.[190]

1964 is considered to mark the birth of the New Wave movement in science fiction, and while some ostensibly New Wave authors such as Samuel Delaney and Joanna Russ deny that the term has any real significance,[191] it does mark a moment after which science fiction themes broadened and grew more complex. Helen Merrick argues that "In retrospect, what the 'battle' of the New Wave most obviously highlighted was an ongoing professional and critical anxiety over the cultural positioning of the genre. . . a divide over sf's relation to the mainstream."[192] The visibility of science fiction in the 60's entered a new, and more respectable, level. This era saw literary bestsellers such as Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land,* Frank Herbert's *Dune*, and the US paperback release of J.R.R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* as well as the release of sf TV and movie mega-hits such as *Star Trek* (1966).[193] Two science fiction blockbusters followed in the 70's with *Star Wars* (1977) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) which furthered the transition, already begin in the early part of the twentieth century with early films such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), from the primacy of print sf (whether magazine or book) to visual sf (in TV and movies).[194]

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[190] Ibid., 86-87.

[191] Samuel R. Delaney and Joanna Russ, "A Dialogue: Samuel Delaney and Joanna Russ on science fiction" in *Callaloo,* 22:27-35.

[192] Helen Merrick, "Fiction, 1964-1979" in *Routledge,* 102.

[193] Ibid., 103.

[194] Merrick, "Fiction, 1964-1979," 103.

Merrick also points out that the 60's and the 70's marked the entrance of science fiction into the academy and the publication of some of the most influential science fiction critical theory to date.[195] Author and editor Judith Merril argued at the time that what the New Wave did well was highlight a cultural shift in the relationship between science and knowledge. As she explains:

> The literature of the mid-20th century can be meaningful only in so far as it perceives, and relates itself to, the central reality of our culture: the revolution in scientific thought which has replaced mechanics with dynamics, classification with integration, positivism with relativity, certainties with statistical probabilities, dualisms with parity.[196]

As Merrick points out, what Merril argues here is that the "shifts" identifiable in New Wave writing correspond not to a rejection of science or scientific thinking, but "rather as a contemporaneous and realistic reflection of the state of scientific discourse in a post-Heisenberg age."[197] Yet again we see how the style and content of sf shift to match the social, technological, and political climate of the US, as indeed any genre must in order to stay relevant. The shifts in scientific perspective that we find in New Wave science fiction, however, were far from the only changes in this period. Issues of identity, gender, and sexuality play a major

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[195] Merrick lists the founding of the Science Fiction Research Association (1970); the founding of the academic journals *Foundation* (1972-) and *Science Fiction Studies* (1973-); and the publication of critical works by Darko Suvin, Samuel Delaney, and Brian Aldiss. Ibid., 103.

[196] Judith Merril, "What Do You Mean: Science? Fiction?," *Extrapolation,* 7(2):30-46. As quoted in Merrick, 105.

[197] Merrick, "Fiction, 1964-1979," 105. In 1927 Werner Heisenberg first postulated his uncertainty principle, in which he argues that the "act of observing alters the reality being observed" such that for subatomic particles one can either fix that particle's speed or position but not both at the same time. This realization challenged previous scientific assumptions that "the universe and everything in it operates like clockwork," in "People and Discoveries: Heisenberg States the Uncertainty Principle, 1927," *A Science Odyssey*. Accessed on October 1, 2014, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aso/databank/entries/dp27un.html.

role in many of the award winning novels and short stories from this period including those by Ursula Le Guinn, Johanna Russ, Samuel Delaney, Anne McCaffrey, and James Tiptree Jr. (Alice Sheldon). These writers drew on the cultural issues of the 60's and 70's in the US to create incredibly imaginative science fiction futures, alternative histories, and alien presents that dramatize issues of sex, sexuality, race, identity, economics, technology and war. The novels and short stories from this period remain vibrant and thought provoking, as the issues they explore remain relevant and their predictions, at times, are strikingly prophetic.

The next big movement in sf literature and film was cyberpunk, which began in the early 80's and was relatively short lived. Cyberpunk, though first invented as a term by Bruce Bethke, came into prominence in the writings of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling.[198] Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) is the best known of the genre, whose tropes include "the disaffected, inevitably cool computer cowboy hero; the brain-modifying wetware and input jacks; [and] the polluted future dominated by evil corporations."[199] In *Postmodernism,* Jameson argues that cyberpunk was the most sophisticated attempt to date to grasp the alienating conditions of postmodern global capitalism. He names science fiction's cyberpunk as the evolution of the spy or conspiracy theory novel, and describes how it is "fully as much an expression of transnational corporate realities as it is of global paranoia itself."[200] Cyberpunk literature presents us

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[198] Michael Levy, "Fiction, 1980-1992" in *Routledge,* 155-156.

[199] Ibid., 153.

[200] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 38.

with an "attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system."[201] This brings us to one of the unique aspects of science fiction that makes it so useful for this project, which is the tendency for science fictional projects to explore various aspects of the postmodern condition and in so doing offer us a vantage point from which to begin to theorize or make sense of the fragmented present.

Literary science fiction has not undergone very many radical changes since the rise and fall of cyberpunk, but has rather experienced a deepening of its many varied themes and types. The diversity of science fiction writers has increased, and along with it we have seen an increase in treatments of race, sex, sexuality, religion, ecology, subjectivity, and politics. The genre has become as rich and complex as any that have come before, and its narratives are full of questions about technology, meaning, identity, and the human condition. These are questions that have been raised many times before, and in many settings. What science fiction (especially since 1950) brings to the conversation is a particular perspective on science, technology, and humanity that helps us to critically grapple with the dynamics at work in the postmodern condition as well as the interplay between religion, culture, technology, and social change.

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[201] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 38.

Chapter 3: Utopia and Subjectivity in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

An antiutopian might understand himself as being critical in rejecting hope, but in the rush to denounce it he would be missing the point that hope is spawned of a critical investment in utopia, which is nothing like naive but, instead, profoundly resistant to the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present.

- David Halperin[202]

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias.

- Oscar Wilde[203]

In this chapter and the two that follow I will give a thematic summary and analysis of each novel keeping in mind the lens of dialogical theology and the postmodern American religious imagination. The goal of this overview and analysis is to highlight the ways in which each of these three novels offers us an example of dialogical theology by employing dialogical openness as a form of thinking technology that rearranges the reader's understanding of religion, specifically, and American history and culture more broadly. As I articulate in

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[202] David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12.

[203] Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism,* 1891. Wilde was a great admirer of the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin who was also one of Le Guin's big inspirations for some of the anarchist ideas in *The Dispossessed.* The connection between Wilde and Kropotkin, as well as Wilde's own contributions to "literary anarchy" are documented in George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements,* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1962), 447.

the prologue, the dialogical theology of each of these texts is inextricable from their 20th Century American context. Each of these distinctly American dialogical theologies map the complex and contradictory relationships between religion, culture, technology, and social change in unique ways and each novel has a different emphasis within and among this nexus of relationships. In terms of *The Dispossessed,* we will take a closer look at the relationship between utopianism, subjectivity, religion, and social change.

The complete title of Ursula Le Guin's Hugo Award winning novel, published in the Summer of 1974, is *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia.*[204] Though now shortened to simply, *The Dispossessed,* losing the second half of the title risks losing sight of the provisionality of Le Guin's anarchist utopian argument. *The Dispossessed* was written during a moment in American history that saw the revival of utopian thinking brought about by leftist political activism in the decades following the end of WWII around issues of women's rights, civil rights, and gay rights. It also comes out of the anti-war movement in the Pacific Northwest and protests against the Vietnam War. More specifically, however, the anarchist utopian theory was inspired in large part by the anarchist thinker Peter Kropotkin[205] who advocated for a communist society based on voluntary

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[204] Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003 [1974]).

[205] Ursula Le Guin: "*Dispossessed* is an Anarchist utopian novel. Its ideas come from the Pacifist Anarchist tradition - Kropotkin etc. So did some of the ideas of the so-called counterculture of the sixties and seventies" in "Ursula Le Guin Q & A," *The Guardian,* February 9, 2004. Accessed on July 9, 2015: http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/feb/09/sciencefictionfantasyandhorror.ursulakleguin

association between workers and free availability of necessities.[206] The novel itself focuses on the dynamic between the two very different worlds of Urras, a capitalist civilization, and its moon Anarres, whose inhabitants employ an anarchist communist system of governance. The action of the novel unfolds through the life and experiences of the protagonist Shevek, a brilliant physicist born on Anarres who travels to Urras in search of a unified field theory that would revolutionize not only the field of physics but the material, economic, and political conditions of everyday life across the galaxy.

The Dispossessed is one of the most detailed and compelling modern literary utopias ever written, and the success of the novel depends in large part on the intentional transparency of of life on both worlds. In other words, though the reader is clearly supposed to prefer the way of life on Anarres, it is far from a perfect society. Shevek's journey from Anarres to Urras takes place largely because of the inadequacies of Anarresti life, work, and social freedom. Even so, from an ethical standpoint the deprivation and constraint of Le Guin's anarchist utopian society wins out over the hedonistic excess, class struggle, violence, and capitalist reification on Urras that so clearly mirror the flaws of our own American society. Le Guin's imperfect utopia demonstrates that another way of constructing society is possible. She demonstrates what Ernst Bloch calls the principle of hope—of utopia as hermeneutic and cognition—a way of perceiving

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[206] I am drawing on details from Victor Urbanowicz, "Personal and Political in *The Dispossessed,"* in *Science Fiction Studies* #15, Vol. 5, Part 2, July 1978 and Carl Freedman in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction,* 115-116.

openness in the present and reaching forward toward a horizon of utopian possibility.

The success of Le Guin's anarchist utopia is also facilitated by her attention to language and subjectivity. In her detailed portrayal of Anarresti life, she details how subject formation, language, and social structure are co-determinate and inextricable from one another. Certain language, especially that relating to property, ownership, and class, and thus certain thoughts, are not "native" to Anarres and have no meaning in their system of governance and daily life.[207] This affects every aspect of life on Anarres, from the organization of labor, child rearing, sexual relationships, family relationships, and day-to-day interactions between individuals.

The following pages of this chapter will proceed thematically and chronologically through the action of the text. The transformative potential of Le Guin's novel, and the ways in which it engage with dialogical theology, are best seen in light of the arc of the novel as a whole. Close readings have their advantages, and are absolutely essential for teasing out the mechanics behind an author's use of language, discourse, and heteroglossia. In this case, however, I want to keep the focus on the kind of world that Le Guin builds for us and the dialogical possibilities suggested by such a world. If religions are vantage points, as Gaiman argues, then I want to explore Le Guin's vantage point. From there we

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[207] For example the terms "*propertied class"* and "*unpropertied class"* do not exist in Pravic (the language of Anarres) but only in Iotic (the language of Urras). Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 42.

can explore her use of critical utopianism, subjectivity, social change, and dialogical impossibility in her theological project.[208]

An Ambiguous Utopia

The Dispossessed centers around the life and work of Shevek, a brilliant physicist born on the moon Anarres, into a colony founded by a group of anarchists. We don't know exactly when or where Anarres is, but only that it is the moon of an Earth-like planet named Urras. Urras is similar to Earth in terms of its ecology while its political and economic structures resemble those of Western industrialized capitalism. Urras has a class system based on gender, wealth, education, and presumably ability. There is not much talk about racial difference, and the entire world of Urras seems to be ruled by a larger government that is then separated into smaller governing bodies similar to states. Anarres was founded by a group of political refugees who chose to leave Urras in order to found their own anarchist community free from capitalism and government control. The moon Anarres is ecologically very different from Urras as there are almost no natural resources save for metals. Simply procuring food and water is a challenge, and the environment as a whole is harsh and unforgiving.

The narrative of *The Dispossessed* proceeds on two parallel but chronologically opposite timelines. The chapters of the book alternate between

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[208] I am calling *The Dispossessed* a "theological project" in the sense of Madeline L'Engle's quote that "To think about worlds in other galaxies, other modes of being, is a theological enterprise." Madeline L'Engle, *Walking on Water,* 158.

Shevek's trip to Urras and his life on Anarres. The book begins (Chapter 1) with the actions immediately following decisions he and Takver (the partner[209]) make in the final chapter of his timeline on Anarres before he leaves for Urras (Chapter 12). Chapter 1 is thus Shevek's trip to Urras while Chapter 2 leaps back in time to give us an account of his childhood and adolescence as well as our first introduction to Anarres. Chapter 3 then gives us his first days on Urras and his initial meetings with the scientists of the University at A-Io while Chapter 4 jumps backwards again to narrate Shevek's late teens into his early twenties. These are formative years when he goes to the University at Abbenay on Anarres to study advanced physics and he begins writing the kinds of theories that first grab the attention of the Urrasti scientists in the first place. The rest of the novel proceeds in similar fashion. The reader comes to see the vast differences between the two societies as the story continues and we begin to understand the radical ways in which Anarres and Urras differ from one another as the two timelines grow closer together.

For the reader, Urras is not a particularly alien world. Its class and economic structure roughly parallel that of Western industrialized capitalism, and the violence, sexism, and religious fanaticism that so bewilder Shevek are all too familiar to an American reader. Le Guin presents us with a world that is not significantly different from our own in terms of structures of power, though certainly there are contextual, technological, and cultural differences, but then

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[209] Takver is Shevek's romantic partner, though no one on Anarres would use a possessive term for any kind of relationship. There is no marriage on Anarres and no sense of personal property, so there is also no sense of husband or wife. Shevek and Takver are partners to one another, and refer to one another as "the partner" to indicate a neutral relationship. However, they are lovers and build a family together over the course of the novel.

she begins slowly to peel away the veneer of normality. She challenges the given-ness of this apparently familiar world through a back and forth contrast between it and the radically different social and economic structures on Anarres as well as through Shevek's experiences of alienation on Urras.

The force of cognitive estrangement in *The Dispossessed* thus happens in two simultaneous directions. We first feel Shevek's intense cognitive estrangement as he moves from his home world to the alien world of Urras. Then Le Guin incites a sense of cognitive estrangement in the reader as we attempt to understand the alien world of Anarres with its anarchist utopian society and philosophy. By the end of the novel, the direction of the estrangement is reversed. We go back home with Shevek to Anarres, leaving behind the systemic violence and cruelty on Urras along with its exploitative and selfish profiteering inhabitants. In the end we are estranged from Urrasti society as a result of our distaste for its unethical government and the oppression and inequality of its people, and so, in turn, from our own oppressive and flawed capitalist system.

The history of Annares is one of economic and political utility. Before the Odonian (named after Odo, the philosopher behind the anarchist revolution) political settlers arrived, the moon was mined for the metals needed by Urras in their rockets and industrial applications. Though the details of the revolution itself are not clear, Le Guin tells us that the Urrasti government decided to buy off a group of anarchist revolutionaries with their own world "before they fatally undermined the authority of law and national sovereignty on Urras."[210] For the

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[210] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 94.

next twenty years ships brought the new settlers to Anarres before the "port was closed to immigration and left open only to the freight ships of the Trade Agreement"[211] that bring the settlers petroleum, fossil fuels, electronics, and some plants or seeds. In turn, eight times a year they take "back to Urras a full load of mercury, copper, aluminum, uranium, tin, and gold."[212]

Anarresti society is based on the life and writings of an Urrasti anarchist named Odo. Le Guin gives us some biographical details about her, but mostly we see her through the anarchist utopian society she envisioned. Odo was born and died on Urras, and the Odonian societies that were established and grew on Anarres were inspired by her life and writings, especially her work *The Social Organism.*[213] There are two important issues that Le Guin highlights about the transformation from political theory to practical anarchist community. One is that Odo never set foot on Anarres. As Shevek comes to realize, sitting next to a statue of her in Anarres' central city Abbenay:

> Odo, whose face he had known since his infancy, whose ideas were central and abiding in his mind and the mind of everyone he knew . . . had lived, and died, and was buried, in the shadow of green-leaved trees, in unimaginable cities, among people speaking unknown languages, on another world. Odo was an alien: an exile.[214]

Shevek soon becomes both an exile and an alien himself when he travels to Urras. In this moment, sitting next to the statue of the long-dead social philosopher, Shevek realizes both how connected and how very far apart Urras and Anarres

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[211] Ibid., 94-95.

[212] Ibid., 92.

[213] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 101.

[214] Ibid., 101.

are. The Odonians of previous generations and especially Shevek's generation are living practitioners of a social philosophy written in another language and from not just another culture but a whole other world. This is a remarkable feat when we think about how many acts of translation and interpretation this move would have required. The fact that they succeeded in creating a functioning utopian society, even an imperfect one, is revolutionary.

Second, because Odo never visited Anarres, her plans for how to map the new social order and the means of creating and sustaining a community were based on the lush green world she knew—Urras. As a result, some of the spacial relationships that derived from her ideas needed modification. The spacial layout of a community or a city is directly linked to the kinds of social regulation that are possible and thus practiced. We see a similar theme in Delaney's *Triton*. On Anarres, Shevek explains that:

> Decentralization had been an essential element in Odo's plans for the society she did not live to see founded. . . . There was to be no controlling center, no capital, no establishment for the self-perpetuating machinery of bureaucracy and the dominance drive of individuals seeking to become captains, bosses, chiefs of state.Her plans, however, had been based on the generous ground of Urras. On arid Anarres the communities had to scatter widely in search of resources and few of them could be self-supporting, no matter how they cut back their notions of what is needed for support . . . they would not regress to pre-urban, pre-technological tribalism. They knew that their anarchism was the product of a very high civilization, of a complex diversified culture, of a stable economy and a highly industrialized technology that could maintain high production and rapid transportation of goods. However vast the distances separating settlements, they held to the idea of complex organicism . . . that balance of diversity which is the characteristic of life, of natural and social ecology.[215]

Anarres, however, has a very different kind of ecology and a surprising lack of diversity. As a result of the limits placed on decentralization given the lack of

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[215] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 95-96.

natural resources and the difficulty of growing food and generally achieving self-sufficiency, the Odonians needed to link their settlements together for support. None were capable of full self-sufficiency and the settlers needed to create a central network of computers to coordinate the "administration of things, the division of labor, and the distribution of goods."[216] The computers as well as most of the work syndicate offices were located in the de facto capitol city of Abbenay. The result is that "from the start Settlers were aware that the unavoidable centralization was a lasting threat, to be countered by lasting vigilance."[217] These adjustments suggest the ways in which social, political, and economic theory often need to be adjusted on the ground. When theory meets practice and the messy demands of real life break in, even the best theories have to be adjusted. This is one of the fundamental reasons why utopias in practice are all but impossible. As Le Guin well knows, even the most socially progressive utopian system will have problems. The best we can hope for is not a pure utopia, but a critical utopia that attends to the struggles inherent in striving for a utopian ideal that necessarily remains a little bit out of reach.

Language and Religion

Another one of the fundamental aspects of this new anarchist society is an entirely new system of language. The language of Urras is called Iotic, and the new anarchist language of Anarres is called Pravic. With Pravic, Odo and the

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[216] Ibid., 96.

[217] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 96.

early Odonians attempted to create a non-hierarchical language with no words for certain concepts that would not fit into their anarchist socialism, such as "class." There is also a strong social convention against use of language in such a way that it conveys a sense of ownership or private property. In other words,

> The singular forms of the possessive pronoun in Pravic were used mostly for emphasis; idiom avoided them. Little children might say "my mother," but very soon they learned to say "the mother." Instead of "my hand hurts," it was "the hand hurts me" and so on; to say "this one is mine and that's yours" in Pravic, one said, "I use this one and you use that."[218]

It is not unusual for Odonians to have favorite items, such as a favorite pencil or blanket, or even to adorn themselves with some jewelry ("People in the small towns wore a good deal of jewelry. In sophisticated Abbenay there was more sense of the tension between the principle of nonownership and the impulse to self-adornment."[219]) but they did not consider these items their property, and nothing (not even the jewelry) is ever bought and sold. Instead, the economy on Anarres is based on making basic necessities available to everyone according to their needs. In times of deprivation they do have to ration limited resources such as food and water, but the concept of keeping something for your own personal use so as to put yourself before others or in a place of privilege above others is heavily stigmatized as per the social Norm.

The principle of nonownership filters through the Pravic language in other ways as well. On Anarres, there is no division of labor between men and women, and no sense of inequality between men and women at an institutional level.

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[218] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 58.

[219] Ibid., 324.

There are still moments where men and women do not relate to each other or to certain ideas/behaviors in the same way, which may relate more to Le Guin's inability to theorize a fully gender-blind society rather than to a deeply held Odonian belief in the differences between men and women.[220] Similarly, sexual behavior is not stigmatized on Anarres, and men and women are free to couple as they choose, having same sex or opposite sex relationships of whatever brevity or duration that suits them. Le Guin appears to favor relationships between pairs of individuals (a kind of serial monogomy), though certainly given Odonian sexual freedom and permissiveness any voluntary coupling between any number of individuals (such as in polyamory) would not be frowned upon.

Later, when Shevek learns Iotic in order to read Urrasti physics and exchange ideas with Urrasti scientists, he is able to grasp the language in a large part due to the shared logic of physics itself. Many of the social concepts elude him, and only when he is on Urras and sees the hierarchical shape of that society does he begin to grasp some of the subtler power distinctions and their implications. Le Guin is showing the reader that though Pravic and Iotic differ greatly, both systems are contextual and provisional.

Religion enters *The Dispossessed* differently on Anarres and Urras and those differences are reflected in the two respective languages. On Anarres, religion is part of the natural capacity of the human mind. It is not an institution

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[220] Delaney raised huge questions in his *The Jewel Hinged Jaw* about the unquestioned sexual politics in *The Dispossessed*. He highlights the ways in which she leaves many patriarchal and heterocentric paradigms untroubled in her anarchist utopia. Her sexual politics are also very conservative. The central character in the novel may be an anarchist, but he is still a monogamous white man in a stable relationship with a woman and they have two biological children. Samuel Delaney, "To Read *The Dispossessed," The Jewel Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction,* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009[1978]).

or indeed any external entity but rather some intrinsic component of Anarresti identity (though not all individuals develop their "religious capacity"). Urras, on the other hand, has institutional religion complete with churches, creeds, and prescriptive beliefs. In other words, religion on Urras looks much like institutional religion looks in the United States with a range of different belief systems that claim a position of power and authority over their adherents.

Once Shevek learns Pravic he talks to his friends about some of the Iotic words that made it over into Pravic, and now have different meanings in Pravic. These words include "bet," "damn," and "hell." When Takver asks what hell means, she explains that "I used to think it meant the shit depot in the town where I grew up. 'Go to hell!' The worst place to go."[221] Another person says that "hell" means Urras itself, but Shevek clarifies that "hell" is "in the religious mode, in Iotic" and on "Urras it means the place you go to when you're damned."[222] Though the friends do not talk explicitly about either the presence or lack of an afterlife or a judgmental God in Odonian philosophy, we can assume from their response to the word "hell" that the force of a religious institution acting to shape the will and behavior of individuals would be counter to their anarchistic sensibilities and subjectivities. In other words, hell is conceivable as a real place located somewhere unpleasant in the physical world and in the same or similar temporal moment, but it has no force as a moral abstraction.

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[221] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 234-235.

[222] Ibid., 235.

Sheik's experiences with Iotic religious categories suggests something else about Urrasti institutional religion as well, which is that it has undergone some form of secularization. One of his friends comments that it is bad enough that Shevek has to read Iotic, but religion as well? To which Shevek replies "Some of the old Urrasti physics is all in the religious mode. Concepts like that come up. 'Hell' means the place of absolute evil."[223] Old Urrasti physics blends religious language and science in much the same way that religion and science were blurred in Western Europe and the Americas before the Enlightenment and through at least the end of the 19th Century.[224] As is implied by the qualifier "old" physics, and as is borne out by Shevek's subsequent experiences on Urras, religion and science have since come to occupy separate spheres. At the same time, however, Le Guin is highlighting the depth of the connection between religious subjectivity and subjectivity more generally, especially with respect to the development of specific moral sensibilities and social conventions that support specific ideas of Statehood and good citizenship.

To devout believers from Urras, Shevek, a man without institutional religion, is a "dangerous atheist."[225] He is dangerous because he is not, apparently, beholden to a higher sense of obligation—a moral authority more

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[223] Ibid., 235.

[224] "Until about 1860, science and religion were widely perceived to be in harmony, although the increasingly separate practices of science and religion made reconciliation of their insights more and more difficult. After 1860, tensions between science and religion increased, with a few intellectuals trumpeting the change and most striving mightily to retain the harmony." Paul Jerome Croce, "Antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction: 1838-1877; Science and Religion" in the *Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History* (Scribner's, 1999) for the section on "Antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction: 1838-1877." Accessed on June 23, 2015, http://www.stetson.edu/artsci/american-studies/pc19thscience.php

[225] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 14.

superior than himself: "this curious matter of superiority, of relative height, was important to the Urrasti; they often used the word 'higher' as a synonym for 'better' in their writings, where an Anarresti would use 'more central.'"[226] At first this line of thinking makes no sense to Shevek until he realizes where the ideological difference lies. Speaking with the Urrasti physician Kimoe who is looking after him during his trip to Urras he exclaims; "You admit no religion outside the churches, just as you admit no morality outside the laws. You know, I had not ever understood that, in all my reading of Urrasti books."[227] Shevek knew, from learning Iotic and reading Urrasti physics, that religious discourse was a constant undercurrent in all of their old books on science and philosophy. Shevek never understood why the a religiously-based system of ranking was used (higher versus lower) until he understood that higher equalled better because it was the language of value—the only language of value that matters. Institutional authority is the only authority that Urrasti officially recognize. Religion requires churches and morals require laws. There is no sense of how a religious or moral subject could exist without these institutions.

The difference in religious subjectivity on the two worlds is radical, with each group only obliquely able to grasp what the other means by this category. Anarresti religious practice is ontologically a different order of thing from Urrasti religious practice. Shevek explains to the doctor that the difference between their two concepts of religion is fundamental:

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[226] Ibid., 15.

[227] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 15.

> In Pravic, the word *religion* is seldom. No, what do you say—rare. Not often used. Of course, it is one of the Categories: the Fourth Mode. Few people learn to practice all the Modes. But the Modes are built of the natural capacities of the mind, you could not seriously believe that we had no religious capacity? That we could do physics while we were cut off from the profoundest relationship man has with the cosmos?[228]

Le Guin is pushing on the category of religion to challenge our expectations of what counts as religion and to suggest an alternative to institutions that is rooted instead on embodied awareness and mindful practice. For Shevek, there is no line between philosophy and religion, nor indeed between physics and religion. There is no secular versus sacred divide, nor any divisions of high versus low culture. Religion is part of being a well-rounded human being who is connected to the world around them—to all life—and who cultivates awareness of the natural world.

Not everyone on Anarres, however, is quite as expansive as Shevek in their thinking. His skill in physics is so highly advanced that it moves beyond the logical mechanics of math into speculation about the nature of space, time, and the universe. He is an artist, and his skill far outstrips that of his instructor Sabul. At the Institute in Abbenay, Shevek audits a class on Frequency and Cycle taught by Gvarab: "Gvarab saw a much larger universe than most people were capable of seeing, and it made them blink."[229] Her work was unconventional, and far more abstract than traditional mathematics. When Shevek tells Sabul that he is interested in her work, and in "Simultaneity principles" more generally, Sabul ridicules him saying; "Grow up. Grow up. . . We're working on physics here, not

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[228] Ibid., 15.

[229] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 108.

religion. Drop the mysticism and grow up."[230] Shevek, too, sees a larger universe than most people, and it is key both to his perspective on the connection between religion and the universe as a whole as well as to the brilliance of his theories. Where Sabul sees mysticism Shevek sees the place where physics and mathematical theory come to life, but he is one of only a very few who are able to understand and see the implications of this kind of work. On Anarres value judgements are based on utility—on how essential something is for supporting communal life on a harsh planet. In this context, as Shevek comes to realize, mysticism and other intangible expressions of aesthetic or poetic sensibilities are not considered central to survival and are treated as dangerous impulses that threaten the future of the community as a whole.

Utility as Ethic and Social Control

Abbenay itself is clean and uncluttered, with heavy industrial buildings on the outskirts and residential and light industrial buildings toward the center. Related industries are clustered together so that all aspects of the textile industry, for example, are located side by side. The buildings are small and unadorned, with most being only a single story with small windows. On Anarres, form follows function with little or no room for ornamentation or provisions for more than basic physical comfort: "the principle of organic economy was too essential to the functioning of the society not to affect ethics and aesthetics profoundly. 'Excess is excrement,' Odo wrote in the *Analogy*. 'Excrement retained in the

[230] Ibid., 104.

body is a poison.' / Abbenay was poisonless."[231] When Shevek arrives in Abbenay, also the university town, to study advanced physics in his early 20's, he encounters moments of friction over where the line is drawn between excess and harmless comfort. This apparently simple issue builds throughout the novel to becomes an ideological battle over ethics, art, and subjectivity.

As a single man, he expects to be assigned a bed in a dormitory but finds himself booked into room 46, the first private room he has had in his entire life. Other than the socially-expected privacy around sex, "privacy was not functional. It was excess, waste. The economy of Anarres would not support the building, maintenance, heating, lighting of individual houses and apartments . . . privacy was a value only where it served a function."[232] Shevek feels some shame at being put in a private room, as if he is being ostracized or given special privileges, but he soon comes to realize that there is a function to his solitude. "A room of one's own," as we know from Virginia Woolf, is preferable for concentration and high levels of academic productivity. Still, Shevek wonders how necessary his single room is and he gets anxious when he wonders how the Institute (the Central Institute of the Sciences, where Shevek is studying) refectory manages to serve dessert every night instead of the once or twice a decad[233] common in other refectories. The two apparent luxuries that Shevek holds dear are his books on physics, including some Urrasti tomes, and a bright orange handmade blanket that was left in room 46 by the previous resident.

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[231] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 98.

[232] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 110-111.

[233] Anarresti unit of measuring time. A decad is ten days.

The dual extravagances of the orange blanket and Shevek's work in advanced physics push forward two key aspects of the plot. They both exemplify the freedom of initiative that is crucial on Anarres at the place where it pushes against the far edge of utility. In the case of the blanket, which Shevek comes to love as a thing of beauty—a bright spot in a very bleak world—aesthetic and ascetic tendencies clash. When Bedap, a friend of Shevek, sees room 46 for the first time he exclaims "Shev, you live like a rotten Urrasti profiteer."[234] The focus of Bedap's castigation is the blanket, to which Shevek asks how a handmade blanket, left by a previous tenant, can possibly be excessive on a cold night:

> "It's definitely an excremental color," Bedap said. "As a functions analyst I must point out that there is no need for orange. Orange serves no vital function in the social organism at either the cellular or the organic level, and certainly not at the holorganismic or most centrally ethical level; in which case tolerance is a less good choice than excretion. Dye it dirty green, brother!"[235]

Bedap soon comes to apologize for his rant about the blanket, but he is expressing a deeply held Odonian perspective on aesthetics and utility. The very real need for utility in all things leads people to discount artistic expression and innovation as secondary and sometimes dangerous. The demands of everyday life and the need for people to perform basic tasks outweighs almost all other impulses in the name of necessity. There is a social expectation that you will go where you are needed, and thus to the posting assigned by the Divlab. Even though the division of labor is supposed to be determined equally and randomly, with people able to both focus on their areas of expertise and interest while also

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[234] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 162.

[235] Ibid., 162.

participating in regular work details, the Divlab can post you anywhere. Though you can request a new posting, very few people actually go so far as to refuse a posting out of fear of social stigma. The needs of the many outrank the desires of the few, at least in terms of the social Norms on Anarres. Anarchy has its limits given the requirements to sustain a functioning community.

We meet two artists in *The Dispossessed* who represent opposite poles of artistic life. The first, Tirin, is a childhood friend of Shevek and Bedap who goes on to write and perform a satirical play about Odonian and Urrasti culture. We find out that Tirin goes on to write and re-write the same play over and over again throughout his life. It's a play about an Urrasti man who smuggles himself onto Anarres in a moon freighter and then goes around Anarres trying to buy and sell goods and who cannot adjust to life outside a system of capitalist relationships, both economic and moral. Despite his training as a math instructor, Tirin was never posted to a teaching or administrative job, but only to physical labor jobs in remote parts of the country. Bedap tells Shevek that after a series of these jobs he lost track of Tirin and once he tracked him down he saw he had been posted to the Asylum on Segvina Island. At the time Shevek dismisses Bedap's assertion that Tirin's posting to the Asylum isn't voluntary: "'Don't feed me that crap,' Bedap said with sudden rage. 'He never asked to be sent there! They drove him crazy and then sent him there.'"[236] Shevek still insists that Tirin must have requested therapy and needed time away from his critics. He cannot fathom that Tirin was forced into the asylum, and he asks Bedap "Are you trying

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[236] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 170.

to say that the whole social system is evil, that in fact 'they,' Tirin's persecutors, your enemies, 'they,' are us—the social organism?"[237] Shevek cannot accept that he is complicit in a system that would strip another Odonian of their rights. He does not yet see the flaws and limits in Odonian society because he has not felt them himself.

Shevek's experiences with the second man, Salas, a musician, helps him to see the problem of the artist on Anarres more clearly. Salas, though trained as a musician—a composer more specifically—has never taken a posting as either a musician or a music teacher. He has never, in fact, worked in his field of study. He explains to Shevek that while there may be jobs at the Music Syndicate, he doesn't want to be posted there because they don't like his music: "You see, I don't write the way I was trained to write at the conservatory. I write dysfunctional music."[238] Still aghast at the narrow-mindedness of his fellows, Shevek exclaims "But how can they justify this kind of censorship? You write music! Music is a cooperative art, organic by definition, social. It may be the noblest form of social behavior we're capable of . . . The artist shares, it's the essence of his act."[239] He wonders how Divlab could justify not posting Salas to a job in his field regardless of the petty opinion of his syndicate. Bedap explains that they justify it because they deem music non-essential: "Canal digging is important, you know; music's mere decoration."[240] Though Shevek sees Bedap's

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[237] Ibid., 171.

[238] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 175.

[239] Ibid., 175.

[240] Ibid., 175.

point, he is not yet able to criticize his society so openly and cynically. He still believes in the revolution that his society represents, and in Odonionism as an ideal way of life. He does not yet realize how far apart the ideal of Odonianism and the reality of Odonian life are from one another.

The social pressure for utility and the primacy of the fundamental tasks required for social cooperation and everyday life undermines the spirit of innovation on Anarres, and turns revolutionaries like Shevek, Bedap, Tirin, and Salas into social pariahs. As Shevek becomes more advanced in his studies, he begins to see connections between his own work in advanced physics and the artistic callings of his friends Tirin and Salas. None of them fit into the normal order of Odonian life because their talents and their interests exceed the minimum competency required for utility. Basic physics and math, traditional music, and even minimally-threatening satirical plays all have a place in social and material life. The social utility of music and art is recognized on Anarres, but it is also bounded by the notion of excess. Taken too far, the aesthetic impulse becomes excremental. So too, can the scientific impulse reach beyond the practical—especially in a society as constrained as Anarres by both resources and social organization. Shevek is determined to pursue his theories beyond the point at which they are useful on Anarres, and he eventually becomes an outcast for insisting on pursuing his beliefs and studies in the face of a protracted drought and famine on Anarres.

The hardships brought about by the drought and severe food shortage on Anarres change Shevek from an idealistic young man into a world-wise adult. By

this time he is in a partnership with Takver, a woman about his own age, and they have a daughter named Sadik, whom Shevek loves deeply. He is sent away on an emergency posting soon after Sadik is born in order to help with famine and drought relief, and Takver and the baby are sent to another part of the country. When he returns, his physics mentor Sabul—the man who encouraged his work on Urrasti physics and whose own work, Shevek came to realize, was entirely derivative and far less sophisticated than his own work—essentially kicks him out of the Institute. Sabul appeals to functionality, telling Shevek that "What you have to face is the fact that at this point there is no physics to be done. Not the kind you do. We've got to gear to practicality."[241] It is clear that to Shevek that Sabul is being petty and small-minded, essentially punishing Shevek because he is a more capable physicist. Despite his efforts, Shevek is unable to find a posting near Takver and Sadik, and refuses to simply go and be with them despite the ostensible freedom to do so. He remains driven by social obligation and signs on again for an emergency posting for an indefinite period as a work coordinator in a phosphate mill.[242] It is four years before Shevek is able to reunite with Takver and Sadik, and during his time away he endured unimaginable hunger, deprivation, and hardship. In the area where Shevek was posted people laid down and died on the job from hunger, and yet he and others persevered in order to help bring Anarres as a whole through the difficulty.

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[241] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 265.

[242] Ibid., 270.

After his reunion with Takver, Shevek expresses his belief that Tirin, though perhaps not forced into therapy, also had no real choice or even the ability to choose and came out a "destroyed person." He tells Takver, "Tir was crazy already. By our society's standards . . . Tir's a born artist. Not a craftsman—a creator. An inventor-destroyer, the kind who's got to turn everything upside down and inside out. A satirist, a man who praises through rage."[243] Ultimately, Shevek realizes that the belief that Anarres is free of laws and and external regulations is completely erroneous. As he explains to Takver:

> we're ashamed to say we've refused a posting. That the social conscience completely dominates the individual conscience, instead of striking a balance with it. We don't cooperate—we *obey*. We fear being outcast, being called lazy, dysfunctional, egoizing. We fear our neighbor's opinion more than we respect our own freedom of choice. You don't believe me, Tak, but try, just try stepping over the line, just in imagination, and see how you feel. You realize then what Tirin is, and why he's a wreck, a lost soul. He is a criminal! We have created crime, just as the propertarians did. We force a man outside the sphere of our approval, and then condemn him for it. We've made laws, laws of conventional behavior, built walls around ourselves, and we can't see them, because they're part of our thinking. Tir never did that. I knew him since we were ten years old. He never did, he never could build walls. He was a natural rebel. He was a natural Odonian—a real one! He was a free man, and the rest of us, his brothers, drove him insane in punishment for his first free act.[244]

Shevek realizes, in a way that he was not able to before, the ways in which the normal rules of civility and the deep sense of duty instilled in every Odonian are their own kind of regulating force. The policing force of public option and community pressure are immensely powerful, and it took Shevek running up against the force of this external will acting over and against his own personal will

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[243] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 328.

[244] Ibid., 330-331.

to understand the ways in which their lives are constrained even in a utopian anarchistic society.

Shevek's experiences with the narrow-mindedness of Sabul, the extreme self-sacrifice demanded by Annaresti life, the petty retributions by Divlab and other administrative officers who refused to post him near Takver for years on end, and the experiences of Tirin and Salas drive him to do the most radically Odonian act he can imagine—leaving Anarres and traveling to Urras to pursue his passion for physics. He realizes that he was wrong to give up physics, and to give up on the book he was working on before the famine. His seemingly selfish desires are in fact the exact opposite, for:

> A healthy society would let him exercise [his] optimum function freely, in the coordination of all such functions finding its adaptability and strength. That was a central idea in Odo's *Analogy* . . . With the myth of the State out of the way, the real mutability and reciprocity of society of society and individual become clear. Sacrifice might be demanded of the individual, but never compromise: for though only the society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice—the power of change, the essential function of life. The Odonian society was conceived as a permanent revolution, and revolution begins in the thinking mind.[245]

Shevek realizes, as Tirin must have realized but could not reconcile, that his greatest passion, his optimum function, and his greatest service to Anarres and Odonian life are one and the same despite social pressures to the contrary. In response to what they see as the increasingly closed-down and anti-radical orientation of their Anarresti fellows, Bedap and Shevek go on to form the Syndicate of Initiative and open up radio communication with scientists on Urras. The Urrasti are eager to communicate with the Anarresti, and especially

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[245] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 333.

with Shevek, but many Anarresti are angered by the communication and exchange of ideas with the profiteers on Urras. The anger and resentment directed at Bedap, Shevek, Takver, and even now ten year-old Sadik is virulent, and Takver in particular has a difficult time dealing with the hatred. She complains to Bedap that "I don't like violence. I don't even like disapproval!" to which he responds "of course not. The only security we have is our neighbor's approval. An anarchist can break a law and hope to get away unpunished, but you can't 'break' a custom . . . We're only just beginning to feel what it's like to be revolutionaries."[246] The revolution of one or two individuals against their society, especially when that society is based on progressive social ideals, is a crushing endeavor. Shevek is invited to Urras by a group of scientists at the University in A-Io to accept a prize for his work in physics and Takver insists that he must go. He must embrace his calling and shake up the settled Odonian ways to show that more is always possible, and the revolution can leave and also come home again.

Imagining the Impossible or, the Necessity of Incompatible Truths

The Urrasti scientists bring Shevek to their planet in order to accomplish a very specific task. They want him to write a theory unifying the fields of Sequency and Simultaneity, a General Temporal Theory, that would make instantaneous space flight possible. The Urrasti were not up front with Shevek about what they want from him, and he found out about it, and the implications for such a theory, from an engineer at their Space Research Foundation. He shows Shevek around the factories, machine shops, and spaceship hangars and

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[246] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 363.

tells him that yes, as impressive as all this technology is, he, Shevek, is "the man who can tell us when to scrap this whole job—throw it all away." When Shevek asks what he could possibly mean, the engineer explains "Faster than light travel . . . Transilience. The old physics says it isn't possible. The Terrans say it isn't possible. But the Hainish . . . say that it is possible, only they don't know how to do it . . . Evidently if it's in anybody's pocket . . . it's in yours."[247] At first Shevek doesn't understand the connection between his theories and the work at the Space Research Federation, but the engineer goes on:

> "If you provide the theory, the unification of Sequency and Simultaneity in a general field theory of time, then we'll design the ships. And arrive on Terra, or Hain, or the next galaxy, in the instant we leave Urras! This tub," and he looked down the hangar at the looming framework of the half-built ship swimming in shafts of violet and orange light, "will be as outdated as an oxcart."[248]

The Urrasti government wants Shevek, the anarchist from backwater Anarres, to craft an impossible theory that will revolutionize the technology and thus the economy of the entire solar system. With such radical technology the Urrasti will be in a position to dominate the economy and control the known universe. It becomes clear as the narrative progresses that the Urrasti government is closely monitoring Shevek, including bugging his room and monitoring his every move. They did not bring him over as a gesture of brotherhood but for economic gain. Late in the novel one of the Urrasti scientists, fed up with Shevek, asks another man: "Where's his theory? Where's our instantaneous spaceflight? Where's our

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[247] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 86.

[248] Ibid., 86.

advantage over the Hainish? Nine, ten months we've been feeding the bastard, for nothing!"[249]

Once Shevek realizes that he is being used by the Urrasti government and being kept as a prisoner in fact if not in name, he makes the decision to finish his theory and then share it with the universe. The theory that Shevek attempts (and succeeds) to solve is related to the general "theory of everything" or Unified Field Theory attempted first by Albert Einstein (referred to in *The Dispossessed* as the Terran scientist Ainsetain). The Unified Field Theory is still considered impossible in our current generation even though it remains a field of inquiry. Shevek, as he considers Ainsetain's accomplishments, notes that the Terrans "had been intellectual imperialists, jealous wall builders" who refused to see the connections between physics, philosophy, and all of reality. Even more to the point, Ainsetain's "physics embraced no mode but the physical and should not be taken as implying the metaphysical, the philosophical, or the ethical. Which, of course, was superficially true."[250] The superficiality of this truth, and the walls the Terrans placed between science and other aspects of reality, guaranteed their failure. These false divisions led Terran scientists to concentrate on "the technological mode so exclusively as to arrive at a dead end, a catastrophic failure of imagination."[251] Wall builders lack the ability to see connections across the externally imposed boundaries between disciplines and modes of thought. It takes someone like Shevek, a man from a planet without walls—physical or

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[249] Ibid., 232.

[250] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 278-279.

[251] Ibid., 279.

psychological—to create a general theory of everything or, in this case, a General Temporal Theory.

Solving the problem of the General Temporal Theory requires Shevek to imagine the impossible by embracing both the necessity and the truth of apparently incompatible phenomena. He must bring together theories that do not resolve into a larger whole—dialectically or otherwise, but that simply coexist —in order to hold the complexity of the universe:

> He had been groping and grabbing after certainty, as if it were something he could possess. He had been demanding a security, a guarantee, which is not granted, and which, if granted, would become a prison. By simply assuming the validity of real coexistence he was left free . . . The fundamental unity of the Sequency and Simultaneity points of view became plain . . . The wall was down. The vision was both clear and whole. What he saw was simple, simpler than anything else. It was simplicity: and it contained in it all complexity, all promise. It was revelation.[252]

His revelation is the product of anarchistic thinking. The refusal to build walls and divide the complexity of all life into bounded disciplines with different claims on value and validity. He is an anarchist among anarchists, for his thinking is radical both in terms of the Urrasti and Anarresti value systems. For the Urrasti, the sciences take priority over other aspects of human experience such as ethics or philosophy as seen in the views of the Terran theorist Ainsetain. In the Anarresti value system of utility, the value of Shevek's abstract theories of knowledge appeared silly at best and dangerous at worst in the face of the challenges brought about by famine and drought. Solving the problem of the universal theory requires Shevek to use all the capacities of the human mind, including the religious capacity (which, after all, describes "the profoundest

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[252] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 280.

relationship man has with the cosmos"[253]) without any barriers between physical and metaphysical reality nor indeed between any phenomena. This dialogical view of the universe, in which phenomena coexist but do not necessarily coalesce, becomes Shevek's gift to all known peoples and aliens.

Shevek's journey back to Anarres requires him to escape from the University at A-Io and go underground. He is taken in by revolutionaries on Urras who are protesting (violently) the inequalities and corruption that are systemic in the nation of A-Io and who eventually smuggle Shevek to the Terran Embassy on Urras. Once there he speaks with the Terran ambassador, Keng, who takes him in and protects him from the Ioti (the people of A-Io). Keng holds the place of a neutral observer. She tells Shevek a bit about Terran history, and that from a Terran perspective, Urras represents the closest thing to a paradise that they can imagine. Shevek himself, and the utopian promise of Anarres, represent the impossible. She asks him to imagine what her world must be like given that Urras, his idea of hell, is the very best society a Terran can imagine. It is to this woman that Shevek asks:

> Is there no alternative to selling? Is there not such a thing as the gift . . . Do you not understand that I want to give this to you—and to Hain and the other worlds —and to the countries of Urras? But to you all! So that one of you cannot use it, as A-Io wants to do, to get power over the others, to get richer or to win more wars. So that you cannot use the truth for your private profit, but only for the common good.[254]

The Terran ambassador, Keng, is shaken by Shevek's presence and the power of his convictions as well as by the way of life he represents. For reasons we can

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[253] Ibid., 15.

[254] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 345.

guess but that are never made explicit, she agrees to keep Shevek out of the hands of the Ioti government, return him to Anarres, and help him spread his theory for the common good. She accepts his gift and tells him that his theory, and the technological breakthroughs that will follow from it, "might change the lives of all the billions of people in the nine Known Worlds."[255] Shevek's impossible theory is the foundation for both instantaneous communication across space and time (using a device called the ansible) as well as instantaneous space travel. Keng explains that the gift of his theory will "make a league of worlds possible. A federation. We have been held apart by the years, the decades between leaving and arriving, between question and response. It's as if you had invented human speech! We can talk—at last we can talk together."[256] The barriers of time and space that had closed down the dialogical power of speech are lifted, and the future is full of radical potential.

The novel ends with Shevek's return to Anarres. He us unsure of what the future holds and yet is content that he has seen his ideas through to the end. He needed to leave in order to finish his work, and he knows that if he had managed to finish on his own world that they would not have been able to appreciate it. Even so, by finishing on Urras he came dangerously close to losing both his ideas and himself to the propertarians of A-Io. It is the absolute worst fate he can imagine. His Hell. By risking Hell Shevek changes the world and makes the idea of his society—"An idea of freedom, of change, of human solidarity"[257]—real to

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[255] Ibid., 344.

[256] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 344.

[257] Ibid., 345.

Keng, the Terrans, and the Hainish. He too, and not simply his theory, are the impossible made real. Proof that the problem is not the impossibility of utopia but the failure of imagination.

From Dialectics to Dialogics

Many theorists from Fredric Jameson to Tom Moylan and Carl Freedman have made much of what they argue are the dialectical relationships at the heart of *The Dispossessed*. They cite the relationship of Urras to Anarres as one of dialectical opposition and synthetic unity. Each planet needs the other, the utopian and the dystopian, as a counterpoint that underscores the significance of each individual world as the opposite of the other. Carl Freedman goes on to argue that Shevek's goal of achieving a unified field theory, which requires him to reconcile the opposing forces of synchrony and diachrony, offer the reader another dialectic,[258] one that Le Guin herself mirrors in the narrative arc of the novel as a whole as a kind of "dialectical epistemology."[259] In other words, Freedman casts Le Guin's entire project in dialectical terms—synchrony and diachrony are both necessary and true and "intellectual walls" between physics, metaphysics, philosophy, and ethics must be transcended.[260] Though Freedman is correct that the walls must come down between these categories, he does not take the demolition far enough. Removing walls around categories to erect a dichotomy in their place by insisting on a dialectical synthesis only rearranges the

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[258] Freedman, *Critical Theory,* 112.

[259] Ibid., 113.

[260] Ibid., 113.

walls. The substance of Freedman's argument follows a similar path to my own, but by insisting on a dialectical framework he stops short of Shevek and Le Guin's dialogical anarchy and thus the full force of Le Guin's radical utopian vision.

Jameson, on the other hand, casts the very question of utopia as a dialectical problem, arguing that utopia's negative dialectic—that is, its simultaneous impossibility and indispensability—is only further reinforced by its re-emergence as a "pedagogical and transformative dialectic."[261] Moylan highlights the moment when Jameson suggests that dialectical epistemology falls short of the utopian project. He argues that the "'deepest subject' of the utopian text, and its most 'vibrantly political' intervention, is 'precisely our inability to conceive it, our incapacity to produce it as a vision.'"[262] Moylan describes this move as another instance of dialectical process, describing how utopias inspire texts and communities while simultaneously negating and transforming them.[263] This insistence on dialectics is far too restrictive. What Jameson is pointing to as the "deepest subject" of the utopian text transcends dialectical epistemology and enters into the realm of the dialogic. While *The Dispossessed* has some elements of dialectical thinking, Le Guin's ultimate push is to something beyond a union of co-creating and co-dependent opposites. She is pointing instead to systems, language, and signification that are fundamentally incompatible and yet also both

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[261] As quoted in Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), 90.

[262] Moylan quoting Fredric Jameson, "Review: Of Islands and Trenches: Naturalization and the Production of Utopian Discourse," *Diacritics,* Vol. 7.2, 1977, 2-21. 21. Moylan, *Scraps,* 93.

[263] Ibid., 93.

necessary and true—not true in a way that resolve into dialectical synthesis but true in multiple directions, dimensions, and moments.

The Odonian approach of equating value with utility comes with its own set of issues and leads to one of the biggest moments of utopian critique in the novel. When the notions of free speech and free exchange of ideas are challenged by Anarresti who want Shevek and his friends to stop voicing their own ideas and support the status quo, Shevek laments, "We don't cooperate—*we obey*."[264] Both obedience and cooperation are weighted differently on Anarres than they are for Urras, and despite Shevek's critique of Anarresti society, he remains deeply committed to its continuation and success. The larger point, however, is the way in which Le Guin is using dialogical thinking technologies to highlight the ideological commitments of both the Urrasti and Anarresti societies. It is important to move beyond the limits of dialectical thinking and into the realm of the dialogic in order to appreciate the ways in which language, ideology, ontology, and subjectivity within each individual society create a complex and contradictory picture that is only compounded when we examine the dynamic between the two worlds and world-views.

The goal here is not to undermine dialecticism, but to reach beyond it in order to consider the ways in which a dialogical approach will give us a different picture of the dynamics at work in *The Dispossessed*. In other words, the dialectical approach always holds, as part of its taken for granted telos, that some set of opposite things will resolve into a greater whole. Dialogical thinking does

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[264] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed,* 330.

not expect resolution, but instead maps a set of phenomena not necessarily so that we can understand them, but so that we can see them. Dialogical language and dialogical thinking help us make sense of complex and often invisible ideological processes that enable us to perceive the workings of institutionalized (and thus normalized) power. My own approach, which is to bring to the text the lens of dialogical theology, helps me to see the ways in which religious signification and religious subjectivity are expressed in *The Dispossessed* in more than explicitly religious contexts and language. The concept of utopia has deep resonance with religious thinkers and communities, and Le Guin's intentionally flawed literary anarchist utopia is part of this lineage.

In addition, she crafts intricate interactions between language, social structure, and social convention in order to highlight their role in subject formation. She gives us both possible and impossible subjectivities in *The Dispossessed* to show how the very ability to be seen—to be recognizable—as a subject is bound up in the rules of language itself. If you approach the question of subjectivity from a dialectical standpoint then you define a subject by an external standard. Either you fit the requirements for who counts or you do not, and are thus defined not by what you are, but by what you are not. A dialogical approach to subjectivity requires us to look for fragments, gaps, absences, and silence in order to do the hard work of discovering something about the unsayable that goes beyond the ways in which it stands for the opposite of an acceptable set of identity categories. In *The Dispossessed* Le Guin shows us that alternative subject formations are possible, and even though some are more

successful than others, she unsettles the apparent given-ness of subjectivity and so opens up a space of hope with respect to future possibilities for identity formation, social structure, and social change. In addition, because of utopian science fiction's relationship both to the historical present and the historical past, she also suggests new methods to approach the archives of the past in order to let the voices "from beneath history"[265] speak.

This process intersects with my dialogical theology lens in two ways. The first is that searching for the lost voices of history is itself a sacred task. The second is that the struggle for signification—the historical workings of power that delineate the line between the possible and the impossible—is a kind of theological struggle.[266] In other words, the status quo is supported by a narrative about the past that succeeds in part because its power relations disguise themselves as a kind of mythology. Foucault helps us break through the reification of history by, as Mark Jordan explains, historicizing "power by casting it as a protagonist in gaudy narratives because he means to highlight the stagecraft, the scripting, the mythology—I mean, the theology."[267] This is a good reminder of the multi-directional nature of power and that theology, a term with more than its fair share of baggage, silences voices more often than it raises up the voiceless. Dialogical theology attends to the negative aspects of power and

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[265] In this line of reasoning I am drawing on Mark Jordan's *Convulsing Bodies* where he talks about Foucault's attempts to theorize how we may begin to access the gaps and silences in history by letting the archive speak. Especially Pp. 17-19.

[266] I am continuing to draw on Jordan's language here, as he calls the historical workings of power "the mythology—I mean, the theology." Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies,* 83.

[267] Ibid., 83.

subjectivity but also refuses to leave us stuck there. Much like Shevek, who, discontented with the range of subjectivity available to him on his own planet strikes out for another world, we can explore alternate subjectivities that will leave us forever changed when we return home again.

Chapter 4: Ritual, Performance, and Embodiment in Samuel Delaney's *Trouble on Triton*

Utopias *afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical.* Heterotopias *are disturbing, probably because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things . . . to "hold together." This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental* fabula*; heterotopias . . . desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.*

- Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*[268]

This chapter will proceed in the same spirit as the last. I will offer an overview of the novel, *Trouble on Triton* and give a topical summary of the book's narrative arc. This novel is extremely rich and complex, and Delaney brings elements of ethnography and cultural theory to his writing. He plays with the Foucauldian dynamic of the heterotopia in *Triton* as well as with the question of how ritual, embodiment, subjectivity, and social structure are inextricably linked. One of his driving questions is how we come to know ourselves. How do we understand ourselves not simply as subjects, but as embodied beings? In *Triton,* embodied identity is highly mutable and subject to whims of fashion, fetish, and personal desire. Rituals of body mortification abound as one basis for religious

[268] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things,* (1970; repr. New York: Routledge, 2002), xix.

significance, and rituals of both artistic and cultural performance highlight the production of meaning between individuals and groups at the places where signification becomes transcendent or, conversely, fails.

We learn much in either case, and for Bron, our hapless protagonist at sea in these mystifying forces, we see the perils posed by a dialogical postmodernity. Perhaps more than any other character in this project Bron would benefit from a sense of dialogical theology and an understanding of the power of repetition, unsaying, and silence, but Bron cannot sit with ambiguity. He can neither give in to the dialogical possibilities of life on Triton nor find a way back to the dialectically-driven now-archaic societies of Earth or Mars (his home planet). Not only has religion become a different order of thing on Triton, but so has all embodied reality including that based on race, sex, gender, and sexuality. Ritual and performance offer, through their set patterns of signification, one sure way of making meaning among many and yet even those rituals are always changing and always shifting. Rituals arise in a moment only to be undone and redone in another moment. A different context. A different set of meanings.

Bron is trapped by the Foucauldian dynamic whereby the past fictions the present and the present fictions the past. He seeks fervently after an arcane subjectivity (patriarchal heteronormativity) that is not just out of place in his current context but that was no more objectively true an ideology than anything forged in the Outer Satellites. In other words, he is living in a future that, the possibility of which, for us, fictions the conditions of our historical and political present. Delaney's heterotopian future projects not yet possible arrangements of

politics, economics, religion, identity, and embodiment that, like Le Guin's ambiguous heterotopia, are not perfect and yet offer a wider space for signification than our current present allows. Bron, however, tries to cling to a view of the world, and of the relationship between the sexes, that holds up the historical grand narrative that men are stronger, smarter, and more dependable than women and so fiction the grounds for his own political present in which men and women have finally attained social, economic, sexual, and political equality.

Samuel Delaney's *Trouble on Triton* is a powerful examination of Mark Jordan's theological lessons of contradiction, repetition, unsaying, and silence. The book follows the actions of Bron Helstrom as he seeks to find love and meaning in 2112. This succinct summation belies the many lessons Delaney has in store for us, as from the very beginning the concepts of love and meaning, not to mention history, language, discourse, and subjectivity are slowly and systematically estranged and deconstructed. The text is a meditation on the limits of self-knowledge, interpersonal knowledge, and cultural knowledge on two resonant levels: the level of the plot itself with the misadventures of Bron and his associates as well as on the level of the larger framework of the novel and the cognitive estrangement that it evokes in the reader. In her 1996 introduction to *Triton*, Kathy Acker compares the novel to an extended metaphor about Eurydice and Orpheus. That is, the mythic quest by Orpheus, a writer, to find and be reunited with his dead love Eurydice. The myth describes Orpheus's quest after his unknown and unknowable dead lover. Acker explains that there are three manifestations of Orpheus in *Triton:* Delaney himself, the reader who enters the

text with Delaney, and Bron.[269] She argues that Bron, "another appearance of Orpheus, is . . . searching for someone to love. . . he's trying to find himself. Every search for the other, for Eurydice, is also the search for the self. Who, Bron will ask, do I desire? Who can I desire? What does my desire look like?"[270] The tri-part Orpheus—Delaney, the reader, and Bron—must encounter the same set of questions and undertake the same quest. A quest for this abstract (impossible?) self and an examination of one's desires—not just sexual desire but the desire for a different kind of future and a different kind of humanity.

For Bron, a man born on Mars and an alien on the moon colony Triton in which he lives, the challenge posed by such self-examination is overwhelming. He suffers not just a failure of imagination but a refusal of imagination. He cannot see his way out of the tight web of social cues and controls that he imposes on himself. As Acker explains:

> Delaney's story . . . becomes a conversation . . . not only about identity, desire, and gender, but also democracy, liberalism, and otherness . . . a conversation about societies that presume the possibilities of absolute knowledge and those societies whose ways of knowing are those of continuous unending searching and questioning . . .[271]

These are Foucauldian questions about social discipline and the working of the Norm on bodies and identities. In *Triton t*he body is the battleground on which the war of subjectivity is waged. What bodies are possible? What selves are possible? In the two societies we see in *Triton*—the politically, socially, and

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[269] Kathy Acker, "On Delaney the Magician: A Forward" in Samuel Delaney's, *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia,* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996 [1976]) *x.*

[270] Ibid., xi.

[271] Ibid., xii.

technologically progressive societies on the satellite colonies and the repressive one on Earth and Mars—embodied selves are caught in a fraught relationship to the larger forces that co-construct their identities.

In *Triton,* the cultures of Mars and Earth are closely related. As the two settled worlds they are culturally and socially distinct from the various moon colonies, including Earth's moon and the moons Triton, Io, and Iapetus. Mars is also the oldest non-Earth colony and its social and political structure are most closely related to that of Earth itself, which Delaney describes as a backwards world full of sexism, poverty, environmental ruin, and oppression. Earth and, to a slightly lesser degree Mars, both presume the possibility of absolute knowledge and the kinds of hierarchical thinking, social, and political organization that follow from this worldview. For the moon colonies, for whom technological advances have revolutionized daily life, the idea of absolute knowledge is somewhere on the spectrum between an impossible idea and a heretical one, but most certainly a crazy idea. Absolute knowledge is the kind of idea that only someone from the backward planets of Earth and Mars could possibly believe. On the satellites, as a doctor explains to Bron late in the book:

> We have the technology . . . to produce illusions, involving both belief and knowledge of those beliefs as true . . . What are your social responsibilities when you have a technology like that available? The answer that the satellites seem to have come up with is to try and make the subjective reality of each of its citizens as politically inviolable as possible, to the point of destructive distress.[272]

Bron is in distress. He is trapped between two worldviews that do not make sense together and he is unable to hold the two in dialogical tension in the way that some of the other characters from Earth and Mars, like his good friend

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[272] Delaney, *Triton*, 225-226.

Lawrence, are able to manage. *Triton* is a dialogical novel with a dialogical episteme and the lens of dialogical theology will enable us to attend both to the silences—the presence of unspeakable and unknowable desires—and the impossible coexistence of colliding worldviews.

Delaney encourages readers to use their imaginations in order to bridge the gaps between the world we know and the world of the novel. He argues that science fiction is a genre that invites readers to play with the text and extrapolate beyond textual borders. The dialogical affect of the novel is thus not contained solely within the pages of a book, but reach far beyond into readers' past experiences and present realities only to shoot forward again to influence future suppositions. *Triton* is full of complex ideas about possible egalitarian social structures and alternative arrangements of sex and gender that push the issue of subjectivity and social structure. In the very beginning of the novel, after the title page and the dedication page but before the book begins, he gives us a quote from Mary Douglas's *Natural Symbols* that sets up the theoretical framework for his meditations on the interaction between the physical body and the social body. It also sets up Bron's central struggle as a struggle for signification in a bounded world. The quote reads in part:

> The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of the society. There is a continual exchange of meaning between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other. As a result of this interaction, the body itself is a highly restricted medium of expression.[273]

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[273] Mary Douglas in Delaney, *Triton,* v.

Douglas, a British cultural anthropologist, first published *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* in 1970. It was written against the backdrop of the socially revolutionary 1960's in Europe and the United States and deals with the relationships between symbols, rituals, bodies, and cosmologies. Delaney is setting the reader up for a novel that will challenge our preconceptions about what we know and what we can know about our own bodies and the bodies of others. It is thus, fundamentally, a novel about how we know what we know about ourselves and the world around us—the construction of meaning, discourse, and subjectivity mediated vis-a-vis positionality with respect to embodiment[274], culture, history, and place.

While *The Dispossessed* is an "ambiguous utopia," Delaney's *Triton* is an "ambiguous heterotopia."[275] Much like Le Guin, Delaney is interested in troubling the idea of utopia but taking it farther. The quote from Foucault that introduces this chapter also appears in *Triton*. It comes just after the title page for "Appendix B / Ashima Slade and the Harbin-Y Lectures: Some Informal Remarks Toward the Modular Calculus, Part Two" with its dedication "A critical fiction for Carol Jacobs and Henry Sussman."[276] Heterotopian spaces are spaces outside the normal order of society that work dialectically to set up boundaries between who and what "counts" as recognizable (and thus acceptable) with respect to subjectivity, morality, reason, and citizenship. Heterotopias include

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[274] I am using this as a kind of shorthand for all the ways our bodies matter. Certainly with respect to sex, gender, race, ability, nationality, etc.

[275] The full title of the novel is *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia.*

[276] The title page shows on page 291 and the Foucault quote is on the following page: 292.

both stable and temporary phenomena and spaces. More permanent and spatially bounded heterotopias include prisons, mental institutions, and monasteries. Other heterotopian spaces are much more fleeting and temporary such as carnivals, spaces of social protest, and parades or marches. These are all spaces and moments that cause the facade of social hegemony (not to mention the political and cultural ones) to fray or wear thin to reveal that their ideological foundations are something other than the natural order of things.

A heterotopian perspective is, among other things, a view from the margins of society. It is simultaneously both inside and outside of social life, and as such it gives us a point of traction on the slippery facade of the monolithic and normalized everyday status-quo. Utopian dreaming has its usefulness as a motivating force that energizes social dreaming and hope, but it isn't enough. First wave gay rights activists didn't always maintain a concern for women, and almost never took issues of race and class into account. Similarly, second wave feminists fought over what to do about the lesbian issue and also regularly ignored the needs of poor women and women of color. The question of racial equality in the 60's focused almost exclusively on the desires and motivations of heterosexual black men. Heterotopias force us to confront who counts and why. Whose voices are heard, whose are absent, which discourses are possible and which are impossible. As an openly gay African American science fiction writer living and writing in New York City in the turbulent 1960's and '70's, Delaney straddles many social categories that have often been in conflict with one another and his heterotopian vision of the future has much to tell us about our present.

A heterotopian perspective is also a kind of thinking technology. That is, it offers a certain perspective on the world that re-orders our relationship to it. Haraway reminds us that a thinking technology "re-does its participants."[277] That is, it changes the world by changing our understanding of the world. Though the relationship between a heterotopia in either space or time to the rest of society operates in a seemingly dialectical fashion, heterotopias are a deeply dialogical phenomenon. This is part of what makes hetreotopias in general, and the heterotopia of *Triton* more specifically, such successful thinking technologies. In *Triton* Delaney builds a society that is leaps and bounds more egalitarian than our own, but still it is one plagued by war and the threat of violence. He shows us that we can imagine a more equitable future not based scarcity and social control like we get in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed,* but based instead on diversity and excess. The messiness of city life and multiplicity of desire. It is not a utopian dream but a heterotopian dream: ambiguous, tenuous, messy, unspeakable, and full of beauty and wonder.

Trouble on Triton

The twin, and as Delaney underscores, related themes of ritual and performance play a major role in *Triton*. The novel is full of religious fanatics, performance artists, prostitutes (legal and illegal), and socially scripted behavior of all kinds. The book's namesake, Triton, refers to Saturn's largest moon which has been colonized and serves as the backdrop for most of the action in the novel.

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[277] Haraway, "Methodologies as Thinking Technologies," 35.

The main character, Bron, is a 37 year-old tall, blonde, muscular nordic-looking man born on Mars but now living the city of Tethys on Triton (Neptune's largest moon). He is thus an alien on Triton, and everything from his one gold eyebrow —a symbol of some since forgotten[278] violent sexual fad on Mars—to his social code of conduct and his views on men and women mark him as an outsider. We first meet Bron walking home from work to Serpent's House, the nonspecific (as to sexual orientation) men's co-op he has been living in for six months.

We learn a lot about Bron and about Tethys in the very first page of the novel. One of the first thing we learn is when and where we are:

> So, at four o'clock, as he strolled from the hegemony lobby into the crowded Plaza of Light (thirty-seventh day of the fifteenth paramonth of the second year$_N$, announced the lights around the Plaza—on Earth and Mars both they'd be calling it some day or other in Spring, 2112, as would a great number of official documents even out here, whatever the political nonsense said or read), he decided to walk home.[279]

This one sentence contains an enormous amount of information about the world of the novel. We know that Bron lives in a densely populated area and is close enough to his home to walk. We do not yet know what Delaney means by the "hegemony lobby" but we can assume that is is some kind of building given the use of the term lobby. We also know that Triton uses an different system to mark days and years than the one that the reader is used to but, at the same time, that is is for political and not practical reasons. The Earth system is still the default,

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[278] In fact Bron goes on about how no one would know what his eyebrow means. It seems to make him feel special—a bit of an outlaw: "he still enjoyed the tribute to a wilder adolescence (than he would care to admit) in the Goebels of Mars's Bellona. That gold arc? It had been a small if violent fad even then. Nobody today on Triton knew or cared what it meant. Frankly, today, neither would most civilized Martians." Delaney, *Triton,* 7.

[279] Ibid., 1.

and we also know that Mars and Earth are more closely aligned with one another than either of the two worlds are with Triton. We do not yet know that Bron was born on Mars, but when we do, and as we learn more about the differences between Mars and Earth and Mars and the moon colonies, this initial context informs the political backstory. It also helps us understand why Bron often seems and feels out of place on Triton and among native "moonies" (people born on the various colonized moons). Finally, we know that we are in the relatively near-future. 2112 is only 136 years in the future from the book's publication date of 1976. This means that humanity made extremely fast technological progress on space travel and colonization but that there are also still individuals alive who were born on Earth in the recent enough past for the politics, history, and culture of Earth to be part of recent memory and thus still have relevance and resonance.

In the sentences that follow, we learn a bit more about the city itself and the people who surround Bron. At roughly 10,000 inhabitants Tethys is a small city compared to some in which Bron has lived (presumably his home city of Bellona on Mars is much bigger), but is larger than some other satellite cities. The city itself is enclosed in a large dome that provides both atmosphere and gravity and also projects a "sensory shield" that shows an artificial sky that, in this opening moment "swirled pink, orange, gold. Cut round, as if by a giant cookie-cutter, a preposterously turquoise Neptune was rising. Pleasant? Very."[280] As he walks home, through the Plaza of Light, Bron wonders to himself

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[280] Delaney, *Triton,* 1.

if he is "reasonably happy" or, at least, "happily, reasonable?"[281] As part of his self-examination he wonders how this very act of wondering sets him apart from his fellows. This is the first moment of many where Bron compares himself to the people around him. He is rarely satisfied with his own opinion of himself and of the kind of person he is but always looks for some sort of external measure.

In this case he decides to compare himself to five random people to see how he compares. The first person he picks is a woman, "a handsome sixty—or older if she'd had regeneration treatments—walking with one blue, high-heeled boot in the street; she's got blue lips, blue bangles on her breasts." In the case of this woman, and indeed the other people Bron compares himself to, he never speaks or interacts with them. We learn a few things from his observation of the first woman. First, that something called "regeneration treatments" exist for people as they age, though we don't know how common or how available they are. Second, this is our first indication that fashion on Triton in 2112 is very different than on Earth. The one blue high-heeled boot is a bit of a puzzle. She may have one bare foot and one shod foot, she may have only one leg, or she may have one boot that fits both of her feet, or (and this ends up being the case) she has one boot in the street and one boot on the sidewalk. Her blue lips may be makeup or some kind of cosmetic surgery (much like Bron's gold eyebrow), and the breast bangles conjure the image of circular bracelets for her breasts which are, presumably, otherwise naked. We soon learn that Triton doesn't have any social stigma against nudity, and some individuals go around completely nude (even to

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[281] Delaney, *Triton,* 1.

work) on a regular basis. The wide-open fashion possibilities and all but *de rigueur* public nudity on the Outer Satellites are a running theme in *Triton* and serve as one of the constant reminders of cultural difference and the ways in which social norms influence embodiment on micro and macro levels.

In the next few pages we meet other inhabitants of Tethys, including the other people Bron compares himself to. We meet an adolescent boy who is the blue bangled match to the blue bangled woman and a man with cages around his paint-speckled and work roughened hands who is either an executive with an arcane and expensive hobby (like carpentry) or an eccentric craftsman who works for those selfsame executives. Either way we learn that wood is scarce and there is no need for people to do physical labor except as a fad, a mark of status, or for religious reasons (all the reasons, of course, are interconnected). The cages are an ostentatious affectation meant to call attention to his work-roughened and paint stained hands and to keep them intact. They are a fashion choice.

The fourth person Bron focuses on, almost by accident, is a female mumbler. The mumblers are our first introduction to the prolific and extremely varied religious life on Triton. We learn later that there are somewhere in the range of 100 different religious groups on Triton,[282] and that they are constantly evolving and changing. Some only last a matter of days or weeks before dissolving or transforming into something else. The mumblers are one of the more popular and public religious groups in Tethys, and the complete name of the group is "the Poor Children of the Avestal Light and Changing Secret

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[282] Delaney, *Triton,* 99.

Name."[283] The group moving through the square is about twenty four in number, dressed in rags, dirty, and covered with sores (all three are conscious choices as every citizen on Trition is entitled to housing, basic necessities, and medical care free of charge). They speak only in chants; uttering long multisyllabic mumbles as they move, eyes down or covered, with begging bowls outstretched to the crowd. Bron has some history with the mumblers and attended their meeting seven years previously. He went two three instruction sessions designed to teach the first of the "Ninety-Seven Sayable mantras/mumbles: *Mimimomomizolalilamialomuelamironoriminos* . . . After all this time he wasn't *that* sure of the thirteenth and the seventeenth syllables."[284]

We never learn exactly why Bron attended meetings, but we learn here that he doesn't so much mind the dirt and rags, but very much minds the sores. He considers his time with the mumblers to have been a kind of "brutal intellectualizing."[285] Bron attended meetings and took the first steps to become a mumbler because he thought he ought to from a logical standpoint rather than an emotional or spiritual one. He recounts that the "mumblers, however laughable, *were* serious. (He had been serious, seven years ago. But he had also been lazy-which was why, he supposed, he was not a mumbler today but a designer of custom-styled, computer metalogics.)."[286] Laziness (especially emotional

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[283] Delaney, *Triton,* 2.

[284] Ibid., 2.

[285] Ibid., 38.

[286] Ibid., 3.

laziness)[287] turns out to be a recurring theme with Bron. He has trouble understanding emotions, including his own, and often resorts to using his own brand of skewed logic in order to justify his actions and beliefs. It is thus much more fitting that he became a metalogician[288] than a mumbler. He cannot understand the ascetic lifestyle demanded by the mumblers, including the refusal of basic hygiene and medical care, as a spiritual choice and now rather looks down on them as silly and misguided.

The fifth person Bron chooses to compare himself to is himself. After his encounter with the carpenter and the mumblers, Bron decides to make his way towards an ego-booster booth. The booths have been around for the last eight years as a way for the residents of Triton to access snippets of the video and audio surveillance collected by the government on each individual resident. We get a brief rundown of the history of the booths from their inception to the present, beginning twelve years previously when one of the public channels began to voice concerns over the fact that the government had, on average, ten hours of videotape on every citizen with an identity card or set of credentials. Still others protested that, with almost complete certainty, no human has ever seen the footage and that it wouldn't matter (for either security or privacy reasons) if

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[287] In her breakup letter to Bron later in the book the Spike calls him "emotionally lazy. Delaney, *Triton,*" 192.

[288] Metalogics is a field that Delaney invents for the novel, and he has extensive pages of conversation between Bron and other characters that go to great lengths in order to explain what metalogics is and what it does. First, it is a field of study prefaced on the given that problem solving uses formal logic as a guide but not an absolute (49). Instead we use a kind of meta-logic. Bron explains to another character: "The goals of metalogics are, one) the delimitation of the problem and, two) an exploration of the interpenetration among the problem elements in significant space. In old Boolean terms . . . you might call it a rigorous mapping of the Universe of Discourse." Ibid., 52.

anyone ever had. Finally, in response to the demand that the government make this footage available for citizens to review, someone came up with the idea of the ego-booster booth. The booth activates when you put "a two-franq token into the slot . . . feed your government identity card into the slip and see, on the thirty-by-forty centimeter screen, three minutes' videotape of *you,* accompanied by three minutes of your recorded speech, selected at random from the government's own information files."[289] The goal of the ego-booths is thus to bolster faith in the government as well as the government's information-collecting project. The government on Triton is simultaneously the kind of institution that keeps very close tabs on its citizens while also caring about public opinion. In an environment where critical limitations on space, air, and resources must be part of daily life, the fact of institutional surveillance—the future technological panopticon—is not surprising. The government on Triton is thus simultaneously highly intrusive and highly permissive. This, too, is a moment where we see differences between Delaney and Le Guin's visions of utopia. Social regulation is an inescapable part of any functioning society, but the ways in which we arrange those social institutions are bounded, theoretically, only by our imaginations.

Ego-booster booths are found on all the "Outer Satellites," which leads us to conclude that there is at least some form of unified or cooperative government that includes Triton among its members. We never learn the full extent of this government or its workings, but we do learn that each satellite has somewhere between 30 to 37 political parties and that all parties serve at the same time. As

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[289] Delaney, *Triton,* 4-5.

government official Sam tells a man on Earth, "They all win. You're governed for the term by the governor of whichever party you vote for. They all serve simultaneously . . . It makes for competition between the parties which, in our sort of system, is both individuating and stabilizing."[290] Delaney gives us the bones of a political system that is institutionalized and capable of regulating individuals across the vastness of space in, presumably, some difficult and highly constrained environments while also allowing for individual freedom of expression and flexibility with respect to the will of the people.

At the moment when Bron is first contemplating the ego-booster booths, however, we don't yet know the extent of the government or its surveillance, but only that Bron is reflecting on his experience with them vis-a-vis the supposed millions of individuals who did use them "over all the inhabited Outer Satellites."[291] The significance of this moment is not just that it sheds light on the population of the Outer Satellites, the behavior of its citizens, or the political and technological connections between them, but that it lets us see how Bron feels about himself with respect to his fellow citizens and their behavior. Is he (and are they) the type who uses the booths, the type who does not, or the type that uses them occasionally and perhaps ironically? Bron muses: "He hated being a type. ('My dear young man,' Lawrence had said, '*everyone* is a type. The true mark of social intelligence is how unusual we can make our particular behavior for the particular type we are when we are put under particular pressure.')"[292] Bron

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[290] Delaney, *Triton,* 185.

[291] Ibid., 5.

[292] Ibid., 5.

hates being a type because he hates to think of himself as predictable or as someone whose behavior (or beliefs) are susceptible to influence by outside forces. He is the kind of arrogant person who categorizes others and tells them that he knows just the kind of person they are but he grows angry and resentful of anyone's presumptions as to his character or personality. This is one of the biggest challenges of having Bron as a narrator. He is, fundamentally, untrustworthy both as to his opinions and observations of the world around him as well as with respect to his own emotions and feelings. He is so concerned with the "type" he is, and on not being a boring or predictable "type" that he is unable to relax and just "be himself" because he is never really able to figure out who that is.

When Bron leaves the ego-booster booth to continue his walk home, he decides to wander, though it is a bit out of the way, through the u-l, or the unlicensed sector, of Tethys. The u-l plays a key role in the psychic, economic, and social health of the city:

> At founding, each Outer Satellite city had set aside a city sector where no law officially held—since, as the Mars sociologist who first advocated it had pointed out, most cities develop, of necessity, such a neighborhood anyway. These sectors fulfilled a complex range of functions in the cities' psychological, political, and economic ecology. Problems a few conservative, Earth-bound thinkers feared must come, didn't: the interface between official law and official lawlessness produced some remarkably stable *un*official laws throughout the no-law sector. . . Today it was something of a truism: "Most places in the unlicensed sector are statistically safer than the rest of the city."[293]

This is similar to the kind of "morality outside the law" that Shevek references in *The Dispossessed,* though it is manifested in a much different configuration. In a

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[293] Delaney, *Triton*, 8.

way, Triton's city planners created a space for lawlessness by setting aside a place for it, allowing it to regulate itself, and so taming it. The u-l is an example of orderly disorder where lawlessness is embraced as being integral to overall social happiness and wellbeing. It also formally ritualizes the relationship between criminal and citizen—between law and lawless—in the sense that it highlights the ways in which they operate as points along a spectrum rather than as mutually-exclusive categories. The "other" is contained within the "self" and both are part of a larger, messy, chaotic whole. Again, the relationship is far more dialogical than dialectical, and the u-l is a heterotopian space within Tethys just as the novel is a heterotopian world for the reader.

Our introduction to the u-l is also our first introduction to another fundamental difference between life in 1976 America and life on Triton. The categories of male and female as well as man and woman (sex and gender both) and thus the relationships between men and women, operate on a different logic than that of institutionalized patriarchy and heteronormativity so prevalent in the United States through the 21st Century. As Bron is walking through the u-l on his way home, all the while thinking to himself how much he enjoys being one of those people who embraces the unpredictability of such a place (oh yes, he is a type!), he hears someone behind him and, turning, he sees a woman hurrying after him, dressed in slacks and boots but with a cape around her shoulders and bare breasts. This is our first introduction to playwright and performance artist the Spike, and as she comes closer Bron sees behind her a hugely muscled lumbering man, filthy and naked:

> The woman was only six feet off when the man--she hadn't realized he was behind her . . . ?—overtook her, spun her back by the shoulder and socked her in the jaw. She clutched her face, staggered into the rail and, mostly to avoid the next blow that glanced off her ear, pitched to her knees, catching herself on her hands.
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> A-straddle her, the man bellowed, "You leave him—" jabbing at Bron with three, thick fingers, each with a black, metal ring—"alone, you hear? You just leave him alone, sister! Okay, brother—" which apparently meant Bron, though the man didn't really look away from the top of the woman's blonde head—-"she won't bother you any more."[294]

This passage raises many questions that it never really answers, but it challenges the reader to fill in the gaps and question our assumptions about how these individuals relate to one another. Is this usual behavior on Trition or in the u-l? It strikes the reader as unusual that a large, dirty, disfigured naked man would protect another man (Bron) from an approaching half-naked woman unless she was clearly bent on causing him physical harm. Perhaps she has a weapon that we do not know about?

But no, she does not. We later learn that the man who punched the Spike is named Fred, and that he is a member of the religious sect the Rampant Order of the Dumb Beasts. Bron asks why he struck her and attempted to keep her from talking to him and she explains that the Dumb Beasts are "another neo-Thomast sect"[295] that has been around for about six weeks. Punching her was Fred's idea of "excitement. Or morality. Or something" she tells Bron, and explains that the mission of the sect is "Putting an end to meaningless

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[294] Delaney, *Triton,* 10.

[295] Ibid., 12. The ne-Thomast is a reference to René Thom (51), who was a 20th Century French mathematician and topologist. Thom won the Fields Medal (the highest honor in mathematics) in 1958 for his work on catastrophe theory: "which was an attempt to describe mathematically how epidemics, earthquakes, revolutions, and other violent events can arise out of seemingly peaceful circumstances. If it were possible to explain such events mathematically, Thom reasoned, it might also become possible to predict and even prevent these events." Michael Belfiore, "Rene Thom Biography," *Encyclopedia of World Biographies*. Accessed on June 24, 2015, http://www.notablebiographies.com/newsmakers2/2004-Q-Z/Thom-Rene.html#ixzz3dz9TrwEh.

communication. Or is it meaningful . . . ? I can never remember. Most of them used to belong to a really strict, self-mortification and mutilation sect."[296] Even though she is never completely clear about what the Beasts stand for or why they believe what they believe, the range of significant space the Spike carves out for them is important. What is the difference, she suggests, between excitement and morality? What is the difference between meaningless and meaningful communication?

Delaney challenges our assumptions that these categories are ontologically different things rather than a matter of always shifting perspectives. The idea of meaningful communication is so subjective as to be, ostensibly, meaningless as a isolated category. The Spike also tells Bron that the fact the Beasts speak at all (since they are called the Order of the Dumb Beasts) is "supposed to be a very subtle sort of irony."[297] This is a religious order that operates on extremes and Delany puts the focus not on belief, which we can never quantify or even see, but on practice. More specifically, on embodied religious practices. This is a recurring theme in *Triton,* as Delaney troubles the boundaries between religion, performance, and embodiment throughout the novel. Religious practice is one place where religion becomes visible and shows us something about how religious bodies interact with the larger social body.

In *Triton,* this is often a relationship of protest or difference. The choice by many of the central religious practitioners in the novel to affect such grotesque

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[296] Delaney, *Triton,* 12.

[297] Ibid., 12.

embodied identities betrays the lengths to which other characters go to find meaning in this postmodern world. Bron isn't the only one struggling to find and forge a meaningful subjectivity. In fact, physical appearance in the Outer Satellites is subject to almost limitless alterations. Bron ruminates that Fred's filth, overdeveloped muscles, and sores are a combination of intentional neglect and "clinic-grown" physical enhancements.[298] Again we see the links between religion and embodiment, and if we recall the Mary Douglas quote from earlier in the chapter we begin to see how the physical body and the social body—inextricable as they are from one another—are being troubled on Triton in a very dialogical way.

This moment between Bron, the Spike, and Fred is also just the beginning of the profoundly different relationships of sex, gender, sexuality, and embodiment that we find on Triton. As the Spike muses later in the novel, Tethys is home to "forty or fifty sexes, and twice as many religions."[299] The sexes are loosely broken down into "nine categories, four homophilic . . . / Homophilic means no matter who or what you like to screw, you prefer to live and have friends primarily from your own sex. The other five are heterophilic."[300] The situation is even more complex than these divisions suggest, however, as both sophisticated refixation (designed to reorient or alter the dominant direction of one's sexual desire) and whole or partial physical sex change operations are available to any individual on Triton.

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[298] Delaney, *Triton,* 95.

[299] Ibid., 99.

[300] Ibid., 99.

In the midst of this dialogical signification, however, poor Bron is clueless. He misreads the situation between himself, Fred, and the Spike by assuming at first that the entire episode is about sex. He helps her to her feet, noticing that she, like him, is big-boned though he has cultivated large muscles while she "common in people from the low-gravity Holds or the median-gravity Keeps—hadn't bothered."[301] As she stands she laughs, looking at him, and keeps laughing which makes Bron angry and self conscious and so he says "I mean I thought you might be into prostitution." At this she sighs, stops laughing, and tells him "No. I'm into history actually."[302] Bron tells her that he used to be a prostitute on Mars in his youth but that now he is a metalogician. Bron never acknowledges her remark about history, and it seems to go right over his head. History has very little significance for Bron, for whom the immediacies of daily life and the demands of being civil in interpersonal relationships in life, work, and sex (or rather, sexualizationships,[303] which are ongoing sexual relationships between two or more people without a romantic or more comprehensive partnership component) take up all of his attention.

The Spike, however, is deeply concerned with history, provisionality, the ineffable, and the wonder of the dialogical present, and Bron is captivated by her. After their encounter with Fred the Spike pulls Bron into one of her micro-theatre pieces, though at first he does not realize that it is a performance. The Spike pulls him down an alley in the u-l following after an acrobat who back flips

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[301] Delaney, *Triton,* 11.

[302] Ibid., 11.

[303] Ibid., 46.

ahead of them, leading them into a small square. There, Bron hears a singer singing beautifully and sees a large mural. As he watches, captivated, an aerial acrobat climbs down a rope and, suspended, mirrors hanging from her toes, begins to perform. The performance becomes a sensory feast of music, dance, light, movement, and fire. Bron is awed and completely taken in by the performance. When the performance ends, it comes as a mildly unpleasant shock to him that the experience was a piece of theatre—a construction. The Spike explains that she and her fellows are part of a theatrical commune "operating on a Government Arts Endowment to produce micro-theatre for unique audiences."[304] As quickly as the performance emerged, the illusion vanishes along with the players, and, expressing gratitude to Bron for his rapturous appreciation, they bid him good night. Bron can't quite handle the idea that he was so completely taken in by what he perceives as the illusion of this transcendent moment, but he also can't get the Spike out of his mind.

The Spike is Bron's opposite in many ways, and much of the remaining novel is set against the backdrop of his pursuit of her. The complexities of *Triton* are too many to examine in this one chapter, and so I will focus on a few key moments. To summarize the rest of the novel briefly, Bron and the Spike have a few more encounters, including a brief sexualizationship. Bron, at least in part due to his past as a prostitute on Mars, is a bit of a sexual virtuoso, but the more they talk with one another the clearer it becomes that he and the Spike are not compatible. She humors him for a while and then she and the troupe head to

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[304] Delaney, *Triton,* 17.

Neriad to continue their micro-theatre performances. Meanwhile, throughout the novel we know that Triton is getting pulled into the war between the Outer Satellites and the Inner Worlds (Mars and Earth) and that Bron's fellow resident Sam is high enough in government intelligence to know what is happening behind the scenes. After the Spike's departure, Sam invites Bron to go with him and a number of other people on a diplomatic trip to Earth. We never find out what Sam is really up to, but Bron is detained by the police and interrogated for a while before being rescued by Sam. He is never allowed to interact with Earthlings or to really see what is happening on Earth. After his rescue, Sam takes Bron to a retreat in, literally, Outer Mongolia in order to rest and recuperate. Once there, he and Sam meet some Earthlings, enjoy the landscape and, of all improbable things, run into the Spike and the other members of the theatrical commune now performing theatre pieces on Earth.

Bron sees this as a sign that he is meant to be with the Spike. She, on the other hand, is barely tolerant of his attention and clearly wants to focus on her work. She is polite to Bron, and clearly understands that he means well even when he acts boorish. He, on the other hand, is too caught up in what has happened to him on Earth to really notice. Before he and Sam leave Earth to head back to Triton, Bron invites the Spike to go out to dinner with him. Sam tells Bron about a restaurant called the *Swan's Craw* that is about seventy-five miles away and offers an elegant dining experience. They even still take cash money, which is by this time a novelty. Thus begins one of the strangest accounts of Bron's behavior in all of *Triton*.

The Spike and Bron are picked up by some sort of futuristic vehicle sent by the restaurant that is staffed by four naked, gilded, women. Bron insists on calling them "footmen" and is struck by the fact that they are women and not men, as they would have been on Mars. This is just the start of Bron's troubles, as he is beside himself the entire time trying to figure out what the proper rules of speech and decorum are for this particular setting and given his and the Spike's status. He cannot stop thinking about who is, or who might be a prostitute; whether he and the Spike are seen as prostitute or client, and whether they are playing the roles correctly so as to be as socially impressive as possible. As a result he has a miserable evening despite the fact that the restaurant itself is beautiful, the food very good, and that the Spike is enjoying herself. After dinner is over the transport delivers them back at the retreat and Bron, miserable, attempts to get physical with the Spike twice before she elbows him in the ribs and leaves, leaving him confused, angry, and disgusted with himself.

The next day he, Sam, and the rest of the party from Triton leave Earth and head back home to Triton. Bron is aware that not everyone who came on the trip is making the return journey and that there are at least one or two people going back to Triton who hadn't come from Triton. No one talks about these changes and everyone pretends that things are normal, though it is clear that some kind of major political maneuvering was taking place while Bron was in Mongolia because now Triton is officially at war with Earth. The pace of the rest of the novel picks up dramatically once Bron returns to Triton in a way that highlights the dissolution of Bron's sense of identity and his frantic efforts at

salvaging some aspect of his subjectivity at all cost. Bron's personal life falls apart as war breaks out and yet he is not able to think of anything other than himself and his increasingly frantic need to understand and be understood.

Upon his return to Triton Bron finds that the Spike sent him a space-mail breakup letter. He picks up a facsimile of the letter on his way home to his co-op and stops to read it, thinking, at first, that the letter must be an apology. Instead, he gets a telling-off. Not only does she not want to date him, but she does not even want to be his friend. She doesn't like the kind of person he is, and though she sees now that he does have some sort of code of manners, she tells him "you are so emotionally lazy that you are incapable of implementing the only valid reason that any such code ever came about: to put people at ease, to make them feel better, to promote social communion."[305] She goes on to tell him that the only reason they got as far as they did was because he was her type, physically, but that it is clear that he does not love her, as he claims, and that he probably doesn't even know what truly loving someone means. As Bron is digesting this letter he starts to transform the story of what happened in his mind so that he can see himself as the victim of her ego and her cruelty and then all hell breaks loose. Standing in the Plaza of Light, a wind whips up furiously all around him—in a city like Tethys, enclosed as it is inside a dome, this signals atmosphere loss. The sensory shield goes black and the city erupts into chaos as buildings come apart, e-girls[306] begin evacuating and sectioning off parts of the city, and sudden gravity

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[305] Delaney, *Triton,* 192.

[306] These are the police, and they are not all girls. The name stands for "enforcement girls."

spikes are killing people at random. The chaos ends as quickly as it began and Bron, who had made it to his co-op and then evacuated with Lawrence, returns home with him after the danger is over.

In the midst of the destruction Bron returns home to find the original copy of the Spike's breakup letter sitting on his desk and he snaps. Unlike the people around him, and unlike (from what we see) culture on Triton in particular and the Outer Satellites more generally, Bron struggles to understand any experiences outside his own in more than a superficial or stereotypical way. Now, frustrated and scared, at the end of his wits, Bron complains to Lawrence that women just can't get along with men saying: "It's just a logical impossibility. I'm a logitian and I know." Lawrence, fed up with Bron's complaining, and the fact that Bron is focusing on only himself given the fact that many people have just been killed (including some of their friends) insists that the problem is not that women don't understand him. Lawrence angrily declares:

> Let me tell you a secret. There *is* a difference between men and women, a little, tiny one that, I'm afraid, has probably made most of your adult life miserable and will probably continue to make it so till you die. The difference is simply that women have only really been treated, by that bizarre, Durkhemian abstraction, 'society,' as human beings for the last—oh, say sixty-five years; and then, really, only on the moons; whereas men have had the luxury of such treatment for the last four thousand. The result of this anomaly is simply that, on a statistical basis, women are just a little less willing to put up with certain kinds of shit than men—simply because the concept of a certain kind of shit-free Universe is, in that equally bizarre Jungian abstraction, the female 'collective unconscious,' too new and too precious.[307]

Lawrence, our resident armchair sociologist and the voice of reason points out that Bron's way of thinking is anachronistic. He wants a woman who wants a

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[307] Delaney, *Triton,* 212.

man who is superior to her. A woman whose desire is to serve and meet the needs of her male partner and cater to his whims, with no thought to her own desires and her own will. Bron's problem, he explains, is that:

> You're a logical sadist looking for a logical masochist. But you *are* a logician. If you redefine the relationship between P and Not-P beyond a certain point—well, then you just aren't talking logic any more. All you've done, really, is change the subject.[308]

Lawrence is trying to explain that logic can't take Bron to an answer in this situation, and that expecting other people to respond do his desires in a logical way is missing the point. Lawrence is also trying to point out that logic itself is a construction, and one that isn't universal. What looks like logic to Bron is not the same as someone else's logic when it comes to relationships and behavior. Once you leave the realm of mathematical relationships then the conversation has really become about something else that is much more complex and subjective. Bron has very little capacity for ambiguity. He is not a dialogical thinker. Logic can only take him so far, and since he is stuck, he lies.

He tries to justify his thinking by telling Lawrence that while on Earth he was in great danger, and that when he saw the Spike she didn't care a fig about him or about his well being but instead about the frivolities of fashion, custom, and having a good time. She tells Lawrence that she doesn't like homosexuals and wanted nothing more from Bron than sex—no sort of deeper relationship—because she was emotionally unavailable. None of this is, of course, true except that the Spike did turn Bron down and break things off with him. Lawrence suspects that this story is not entirely true and, standing in the midst of their

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[308] Delaney, *Triton,* 213-214.

half-destroyed co-op, allows Bron to continue. The breaking point comes when Bron exclaims that only men can save society:

> women, or people with large female components to their personalities, are too social to have that necessary aloneness to act outside society. But as long as we have social crises . . . we need that particularly *male* aloneness, if only for the ingenuity that it breeds, so that the rest of the species can survive.[309]

Lawrence, in disbelief at this rant, calls him a fool over and over again and points out that the products of male ingenuity—of doing what is necessary for the survival of the species—are the dead people all around them. He had come into Bron's room to let him know that the war is over. The death toll, despite the loss of not a single soldier on either side, is unfathomably high. Five million people died in Lux on Iapetus, with many more dead on other Outer Satellite moons. Mars lost less than a million people before they surrendered, and 60-75% of Earths population is dead or dying. Triton got off the lightest of all. The legacy of the kind of anti-social male independence that Bron lauds can be, historically, a catalyst for brutality, violence, and disregard for life.

And still Bron refuses to step outside of his fixation on the plight of men, like him, who want the kind of woman who is so rare as to be impossible—the logical masochist who isn't actually logical at all but an arcane throwback to the oppressed woman. A fantasy for a past that is no less constructed than his present. His solution, driven by the only logical solution he can find, is to become the woman that he seeks. In the midst of the chaos, the death, and the

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[309] Delaney, *Triton,* 216.

destruction, Bron makes a headlong dash to a clinic in the u-l and, walking up to the counter, states: "I want to be a woman."[310]

Through Bron's experiences at the clinic we get a more detailed exploration of sex, gender, and sexuality on Triton. The passages that follow offer an insightful and thought-provoking discussion about the differences between sex, sexuality, and gender and the array of behaviors and beliefs that follow. To begin with, the receptionist, nonplussed, asks him "Yes. And what sex are you now?" Baffled, Bron asks what sex he looks like to her and she replies, if somewhat snidely,

> You could be a male who is partway through one of a number of possible sex-change processes. Or you could be a female who is much farther along in a number of *other* sex change operations . . . More to the point, you might have begin as a woman, been changed to male, and now want to be changed to—something else . . . Or . . . you could be a woman in very good drag.[311]

She casually explodes any assumptions that embodiment is obvious, self-apparent, or stable. Even so, she has already marked "male" on her console, and sends him through. In the pages that follow, we find an incredible sense of fluidity with respect to sex, gender, sexuality, and embodiment. The doctor who first meets with Bron correctly assumes that he is from either Earth or Mars, as he explains that "life under our particular system doesn't generate that many serious sexually dissatisfied types. Though, if you've come here, I suspect you're the type who's pretty fed up with people telling you what type you aren't or are."[312] Bron explains that he, now already being referred to as she by the doctors

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[310] Delaney, *Triton,* 219.

[311] Ibid., 219.

[312] Ibid., 220.

and staff, wants to become physically, hormonally, and psychologically a woman. This last part throws the doctor for a moment who assumes that she already feels like she is, psychologically, a woman, but tells Bron that it won't be a problem. Bron tells the doctor that she also wants a refixtation treatment in order to change her sexual orientation from "the current male plurality configuration," which is a "bisexual, female-oriented male" to the current female plurality configuration.[313] In no time at all (six hours and seventeen minutes) Bron is walking home in her new body, all changes completed.

Everyone takes Bron's sex change in stride with only mild surprise. She tells Lawrence that she did it "to preserve the species"[314] and Lawrence tells her that he hopes she had some "real" reason for doing this but will support her regardless and see her through the transition. As part of her transition Bron goes to see a therapist, a woman named Brian who is also from Mars and understands, culturally, Bron's perspective. She tells her that, in fact, the only way they can even have the kind of conversations they have about Bron's perspective on women's roles and men's roles is because they are both Martian. Furthermore, she tells Bron: "talking to you always makes me remember how glad I am I left Mars . . . I said before, you were a woman made *by* a man. You are also a woman made *for* a man."[315] Bron has sacrificed her sense of self to an idea, or, perhaps more truthfully, she has shaped her sense of self around an idea. The myth of ideal womanhood from the middle of the 20th Century in the United States

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[313] Delaney, *Triton,* 228-229.

[314] Ibid., 232.

[315] Ibid., 254.

complete with the belief that women are more emotional and less truthful than men as well as less reliable, less intelligent, and less logical. All of this despite the fact that she had been attracted to the Spike, who was most certainly none of those things. Yet somehow, faced with the Spike's rejection of her, and her own inability to figure out why she felt the way she did about herself and the people around her, Bron becomes that which she cannot even see. A woman in name, in body, and in gender, but not yet in experience. Not yet in practice.

Brian suggests that Bron should go out and find a man since it might make her a lot happier. When she goes out to try and find a man, however, we see the depth of Bron's conundrum as she all but shuts down with anxiety over how she should behave. She stands, unsure of what side of the bar to be on or where in the room to stand given the conventions of pickup signals and thinks to herself "I am here to be approached and cannot acknowledge an approach of any sort: Otherwise, I will turn off the person I am here to be approached by. That's ridiculous! . . . What in the world does *that* get you?"[316] In this place, and in this time, it leaves Bron lonely, unhappy, and unfulfilled. The novel ends with an anxious Bron, wondering why she has been lying to her friends about what she wants and what has happened to her and yet convinced that she never lied when she was a man. She feels overwhelmed and confused, unsure of what to do next "and there was nothing logical you could do about it."[317]

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[316] Delaney, *Triton,* 258.

[317] Ibid., 277.

From Performance to Ritual: Reformulating the World through the Body

The pervasiveness of ritual and performance themes in *Triton* dramatizes the gap between experience and discourse or, to put it another way, between what we know with our bodies and what we are able to put into words. Even more, however, it raises the question of what our bodies know and how those things come to be known. These gaps pose a problem for Bron, who is not always able to step outside of his own set of logical frameworks. He does not fare well in situations where logic fails or isn't appropriate and he would benefit from a switch to a different ideological framework. Performance and ritual are both meaning-making strategies whose effects and effectiveness are slippery and often indeterminate. Bron's difficulty with the ineffable aspects of both performance and ritual, be they religious, social, or aesthetic, highlight his inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to look beyond the quotidian.

Ritual, performance, and practice all describe and are constituted by socially-grounded ways of making and manipulating meaning. Performance has the ability to highlight the social constructedness of human action, behavior, and belief and to implicate the role of the Norm as a regulating force. It has the ability to de-naturalize things we take for granted (such as gender) and reveal that they are social constructs. Focusing on practices requires us to analyze what people do rather than what they say. It aims to get at more complicated descriptions of human subjectivity. Practice, like performance, focuses on the actions and behaviors of individuals within social groups rather than the workings of social institutions. In other words, paying attention to practices

requires that we look, not at what institutions say we believe or should believe—do or should do—but at what individuals actually do in their day-to-day lives. Both practice and performance thus have the ability to highlight the tensions between individuals and institutions.

Ritual, as described by religious scholar Catherine Bell, orders and re-orders meaning and significance. She emphasizes that ritual is the deployment of power itself, and that this differentiates it from both performance and practice. Both performance and practice are limited in the extent to which they can create social transformation. They are strategies for surviving and challenging the social world, and for creating meaning within that world. They are useful tools for exploiting the gaps in social power and unmask social hegemony for what it is—a regulatory system with a particular agenda whose power requires the subjugation of alternative points of view.

Rather than attempting to pin down ritual meaning, Bell seeks to explain how ritual works and what that means as a social and theoretical category. Her approach abandons "the focus on ritual as a set of special practices in favor of a focus on some of the more common strategies of 'ritualization,' initially defined as a way of acting that differentiates some acts from others."[318] What counts as ritualization is thus not determined by an outside observer, but is highly particular and situated. She emphasizes that ritual is "never simply or solely a matter of routine, habit, or the 'dead weight of tradition'"[319] but instead,

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[318] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory: Ritual Practice,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009[1992]), xv.

[319] Ibid., 92.

"ritualization could involve the exact repetition of centuries-old tradition or deliberately radical innovation and improvisation as in certain forms of liturgical experimentation and performance art."[320] Ritual may have some common traits, but it has no fundamental characteristics.[321]

As a way of acting, ritualization is connected to both the physical and the social body. Bell explains that the "strategies of ritualization are particularly rooted in the body, specifically, the interaction of the social body within a symbolically constituted spacial and temporal environment. Essential to ritualization is the circular production of a ritualized body which in turn produces ritualized practices."[322] This cycle is similar to that for the perpetuation of cultural norms and social hegemonies whereby we are all born into a Geertzian web of meaning that shapes us and that we also shape in return. Strategies of ritualization are moments of cultural play. Their function is to set some activities apart from others—to differentiate between, for example, the sacred and the quotidian—in order to transform established cultural meanings. What that transformation is cannot be arrived at in advance or from outside the particular moment of ritualization. Indeed, she argues that "ritualization is the strategic manipulation of 'context' in the very act of reproducing it."[323]

Another consequence, and aspect, of the embodied nature of ritualization is that it "is a particularly 'mute' form of activity. It is designed to do what it does

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[320] Bell, *Ritual,* 91.

[321] Ibid., 91.

[322] Ibid., 93.

[323] Ibid., 100.

without bringing what it is doing across the threshold of discourse or systematic thinking."[324] Again this is a similarity between ritualization and culture and it feeds into the thought-action dichotomy that Bell is resisting with her formulation. The fact that ritualization is an embodied practice (or set of embodied practices) whose meanings and strategies are often all but inarticulateable underscores not that it is action devoid of thought but rather that the logic of ritualization may be no logic at all, but a protean, subjective, and provisional flow of meaning, power, and significance that ritual participants all experience from their simultaneously shared and yet individual contexts. Bell draws on Bourdieu to argue that ritual practices draw their logic from a:

> logic embodied in the physical movements of the body and thereby lodged beyond the grasp of consciousness and articulation. The principles underlying this logic can be made explicit only with great difficulty; they are rarely in themselves the objects of scrutiny or contention. And yet, suggests Bourdieu, nothing less than a whole cosmology is instilled with the words "stand up straight!"[325]

The ways in which we move and carry our bodies have everything to do with culture, the regulating forces of the Norm, and the ways in which we weave our own sense of identity into this mix. Ritualization builds on these embodied sensibilities, but more than that, it is able to reformulate them through a hermeneutic of resistance and acceptance.

Ritualization does not function in the same way as doctrine. It is much more subtle, and in many ways much more powerful. It does not require belief, verbal or logical articulation, or assent to some kind of totalizing worldview.

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[324] Bell, *Ritual,* 93.

[325] Ibid., 99.

Ritual is not just a tool for some other purpose. It is the very operation of and manipulation of power itself. We see many characters in *Triton* who, unlike Bron, are able to engage with practices of ritual to help them manage their relationship to the larger world and create a space for themselves within that world. Ritual and dialogical theology go hand in hand as a religious thinking technology that operates both as a tool and as a strategy with the ability to powerfully reformulate one's relationship to the world. This is true on the level of the text itself and the actions of characters within the text such as the Spike, Fred, Lawrence and Sam who are able to maintain a dialogically rich relationship to the larger society of which they are a part. It is also true for the reader who, through their encounter with the text, comes to see the world differently.

The Spike shows us the transformative potential of ritual, especially framed as a form of dialogical theology in action that highlights the workings of dialogical power to reframe the quotidian. In other words, she uses ritual as a kind of dialogical theology that opens up the space of possible experience, meaning, and signification for her audience through a reformulation of the given moment. She is an astute cultural theorist who is able to discover the places where aesthetic performances create a larger world than the one we experience everyday. She transforms reality through ritual play and embodied practices of dance, song, music, and poetry. Early in the novel Bron looks up information about the Spike and comes across a critic who wrote of her work that they "do not so much begin and end; rather, they suddenly push familiar objects, emotions, and actions, for often as little as a minute or less, into dazzling, surreal

luminescence, by means of a consortment of music, movement, speech, lights, drugs, dance, and decor."[326] Framing her use of ritual as dialogical theology enables us to see the ways in which the Spike is breaking down divisions between ordinary and extraordinary or between sacred and profane in order to open up the experience of the present moment as already and always extraordinary.

Bron, however, is not able to grasp the transformative potential of ritual play, but only in the operation of ritual, including social ritual, as a regulating force. For Bron, rituals tell you what to do, what to say, and how to behave so as to achieve a desired result. Ritual is not a fluid concept for manipulating power but the brute application of desire. Bron frequently misinterprets simple social interactions as sexual advances or as elaborate ritualized behavior for the buying, selling, or exchange of sex such as the case with the first interaction between Fred and the Spike. Bron flattens all discourse, including social discourse, into the operation of desire and misses or fails to recognize the dialogical play of signification that overflows narrow categorization. This failure leaves Bron at the mercy of an increasingly complex, messy, dialogical postmodernism.

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[326] Delaney, *Triton,* 42.

Chapter 5: American Religious Bricolage in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*

Religions are, by definition, metaphors, after all: God is a dream, a hope, a woman, an ironist, a father, a city, a house of many rooms, a watchmaker who left his prize chronometer in the desert, someone who loves you —even, perhaps, against all evidence, a celestial being whose only interest is to make sure your football team, army, business, or marriage thrives, prospers, and triumphs over all opposition.

Religions are places to stand and look and act, vantage points from which to view the world.

- Neil Gaiman[327]

In this final chapter on Neil Gaiman's 2001 novel *American Gods,* I will undertake another thematic analysis of the novel as a whole. Part of the genius of *American Gods* is the way in which Gaiman weaves together stories and histories from many different traditions and cultures. A compendium of his source material is enough inspiration for many dissertations and I will not attempt to give a full account of all the religious and cultural histories that make up this novel. Instead I hope to give an account of the affect this novel has on our sense of American history and of American religious history in particular.

I have always been a fan of the pedagogical practice of putting unlikely things next to one another in order to see what kinds of unexpected relationships are illuminated. In other words, comparing apples and apples or American Judeo-Christian narratives to American Judeo-Christian narratives will certainly yield interesting results about localized phenomena specific to these types of fruit (or narratives), but what happens when we put apples next to watermelons next

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[327] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 452.

to dragon fruit? Or apples and dragon fruit next to automobiles? What unexpected relationships begin to emerge? What Gaiman does in *American Gods* is, to my eyes, akin to the religious version of putting many different kinds of religious and cultural fruit next to one another with a smattering of machines, technologies, and intangible phenomena relating to the postmodern condition. It is a bricoleur's approach to narrative and American religious history, and the result is an incredibly rich re-telling of American history that not only avoids being Christo-centric but in fact leaves out Christianity almost completely. This allows Gaiman to get at the bigger picture of America as sacred landscape against which the tableau of American religious history is one of constant change.

Neil Gaiman knows how to tell a good story. He is the kind of writer who crosses genres and narrative forms to unleash the magic of a great tale. His are old fashioned stories drawn from dream logic and half remembered folk tales. They are also new stories alive with modern concerns and complex, nuanced characters. The kind of characters whose stories could not have been told a hundred years ago. Or if they had been told, we could not have recognized them —not have heard them. For at stake here is not history, but our ability to recognize that which is impossible, unnameable, and unspeakable in our own history. This is the history that makes us who we are, and yet it exists just out of our reach. Gaiman's stories are often about reaching out and touching that history—those dreams and nightmares just under the surface of and at right angles to our reality—and in so doing we experience a world and become something more than we ever knew was possible.

His characters and, dare we say, his readers, become more alive to the potential in every moment, in every encounter, in every decision, and in every place. Gaiman's worlds are layered and rich with signification. Nothing is obvious in an expected way and he plays with the line where literal meanings cross into the absurd. In *American Gods,* Gaiman weaves a modern myth based on the legacy of North American pluralism, progress, and innovation born from the immigrant experience. This is a story that could only take place in America and it is at the same time a uniquely American story and a compendium of ancient mythic concerns about meaning, memory, and the supernatural. American Gods is a story about origins, destiny, and survival in a country with little respect for permanence.

With all this talk about Gaiman's use of myth and the supernatural, it is important to clarify how *American Gods* fits into the science fictional pantheon. This question is at the same time complex and simple. *American Gods* is a hybrid, polyvalent, and messy novel whose many voices and styles are part of a larger project of disruption. Gaiman wants to upset conventional genre categories, or perhaps it is more accurate to argue that he does upset them in order to display the ways in which life, history, and human experience overflow boundaries of all kinds. Given its disruptive stance, *American Gods* fits the parameters of a science fiction alternative history. Alternative histories help us come to terms with the forces that affect our lives as individuals and communities, forces that Fredric Jameson calls, in our late capitalist moment, postmodernism. In his book *Critical Theory and Science Fiction,* Carl Freedman

makes the case for the ways in which the projects of critical theory which, to my mind, is the practical application of postmodern theory, and those of science fiction are inextricably linked. He argues that "science fiction, like critical theory, insists upon historical mutability, material reducibility, and utopian possibility."[328] Freedman's aim in pairing an examination of critical theory with science fiction is not to apply one to the other, but to show the "*structural* affinities between the two modes of discourse."[329] *American Gods* showcases this structural affinity in its seamless bricolage[330] of ancient religious narratives intercut with one man's search for meaning and identity on the brink of the 21st Century. The juxtaposition of ancient narratives and modern concerns blurs the divisions between reified history and mundane human experience just as bringing the gods to life demystifies them while also revealing how they are, or can be, far more than characters from old stories or unreachable deities on-high.

Gaiman helps us think differently about American religious history by tapping into American religious myths from diverse cultures and bringing them together in unexpected ways. Storytelling, myth, and narrative both create and convey meaning as well as history. Gaiman crafts a bricolage of American religious history by bringing together myths and folk tales from across the

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[328] Freedman, *Critical Theory*, xvi.

[329] Ibid., xix.

[330] *The Electronic Labyrinth,* a project of the University of Virginia, has a very useful quote on how bricolage fits into postmodern theory on their page "Postmodernism and the Postmodern Novel": "Andy Warhol's multiple images of Marilyn Monroe and Kathy Acker's re-writing of Cervantes' Don Quixote are representative of the postmodernist trend toward to bricolage, the use of the bits and pieces of older artifacts to produce a new, if not "original," work of art, a work which blurs the traditional distinctions between the old and the new even as it blurs those between high and low art." Christopher Keep, Tim McLaughlin, Robin Parmar, "Postmodernism and the Postmodern Novel," *The Electronic Labyrinth,* 1993. Accessed on July 5, 2015, http://elab.eserver.org/hfl0256.html.

spectrum of the U.S. immigrant experience. You will not find the kind of religious diversity contained within the pages of *American Gods* outside of a textbook on American religion. Here we find a compelling collision of Indian, Caribbean, Norse, Egyptian, Middle Eastern, and Irish American religious histories, to name just a few. We can see Gaiman's postmodern positionality vis-a-vis whose stories are told and how they fit into the dynamic of the novel as a whole. Themes of space and place are also at the heart of the novel. The land, and American sacred space, are both key elements of Gaiman's story and are characters in their own right. The themes of practice and embodiment also ground the action of the book as meaning coalesces through embodied rituals and practices, often involving blood, sex, and eating or drinking. The novel comes together against the shimmering backdrop of impossibility in the act of giving way to a reality greater than our own. A tear in space and time that obviates the desire to make a meaningful distinction between fact and fiction.

An American Religious Bricolage: Myth, Place, and Ritual in America

A myth, underneath all the trappings, is a story. It is a particular kind of story full of religious signification that takes place outside of ordinary time. In *Myth and Reality,* Mircea Eliade lays out many of the basic theories about what constitutes a myth. He argues that "myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings.' In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality

came into existence."[331] Three of the key points about myth, for Eliade, are that they deal with the existence of the sacred, or the actions of Supernatural Beings; a connection to history that signifies that the story is based in reality; and a separation from the mundane in both time and space. It is important to remember that, in his analysis of myth, Eliade does not give an account of the political and ideological boundaries that these stories police. Myths are normative. They are not simple by-products of significant historical events or unmediated moments where we can see the sacred break through into the human world. These are always stories predicated on social, economic, and political interests and wield the weight of hegemonic power with supernatural force.

Paying attention to the social constructedness of myths does not rob them of their power, and the story of myth in the postmodern world is one of enduring influence. Much of the force of *American Gods* comes from the powerful grip that mythological stories and themes have on the public imagination. As Claude Lévi-Strauss reminds us, mythical thought "builds ideological castles out of the debris of what was once a social discourse."[332] He emphasizes the constructedness of myth and theorizes that its enduring quality is due, in part, to its function to transmit knowledge across time and space. The function of myth, for Lévi-Strauss, is to transmit practical knowledge about the natural world and our relationship to it. He explains, "far from . . . turning its back on reality. [Myth's] principle value is indeed to preserve until the present time the remains

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[331] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*. Trans. Willard R. Trask, (Long Grove, IL: Harper and Row, 1998 [1963]), 5.

[332] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) 21.

of methods of observation and reflection which were . . . precisely adapted to discoveries of a certain type."[333] This observation illuminates one of the primary conflicts in *American Gods*—what happens when the value of mythic observations cease to bear on the postmodern world in a meaningful way.

Myths are ancient thinking technologies that helped communities of people survive and thrive in certain conditions, contexts, and places. It may be a stretch to say that myths were the scientific observation of the times, but Lévi-Strauss draws a comparison between the two, arguing that lack of scientific method in our modern sense made myth "no less scientific and its results no less genuine. They were secured ten thousand years earlier and still remain at the basis of our own civilization."[334] This may be so, but myth no longer functions as the basis for humanity's relationship to the natural world, if it ever did. Myths have not gotten any less common, and modern myths emerge all the time, though the dramatic tension between humanity and the natural world that forms the basis of many ancient myths has shifted to the relationship between humanity and technology. This tension between ancient gods born from ancient myths and modern gods emerging from modern myths drives the narrative trajectory of *American Gods* and sets the stage for the battle to follow.

A Modern American Myth

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[333] Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind,* 16.

[334] Ibid., 16.

American Gods begins with our main character, Shadow, three years into his prison term and a month shy of his release. We know he is a big man, both tall and muscular, of indeterminate ethnic background. Throughout the novel people speculate about who Shadow's people are—everything from African American to hispanic, gypsy, or Native American. Shadow, who has never known his father, truly doesn't know. At thirty-two he is patient, observant, and smart. Shadow is focused on doing his time and getting home to his wife, Laura, and his job at the Muscle Farm with his best friend Robbie in Eagle Point, Indiana. Shadow's most formative acquaintance from prison was his cellmate, a man named Low Key Lyesmith, who introduced him to *Histories* by Herodotus and left him coins so that he can practice coin tricks.

The way Shadow takes to Herodotus's *Histories* is one of our first indications that he is different. While his fellow inmates comment about Greek women they know or how weird Greek food is, Shadow quotes the words of the ancient Greek historian back to Lyesmith, saying "Call no man happy . . . until he is dead."[335] The *Histories* is an account of ancient Greek history, politics, and religion and continues to serve as a lens through which Shadow is able to understand the events that follow. Later in the book he tells one of the other characters, Sam, about *Histories* and how it has a lot of stories about the interactions between gods and humans. He tells her that his theory about Herodotus is not to explain away the appearance of the gods that populate the text by calling Herodotus a liar or a product of his time, but rather "That back

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[335] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 5.

then people used to run into the gods from time to time."[336] The ease with which Shadow embraces this perspective explains, in part, his laid back approach to the events of the novel. Shadow must come to accept that not only are the gods real but they participate in everyday life.

As the gods would have it, Shadow is not destined to go home to his wife and his job and his friend in Eagle Creek. Two days before his release, with a sense of foreboding hanging in the air, Shadow is called into the warden's office. His wife is dead. She died in a car crash, and they are releasing him two days early. In shock, not really believing that this news is real, Shadow goes back to his cell, gathers his things and prepares to leave. On the plane to Eagle Creek shadow has his first vision of a buffalo headed man. Throughout the novel, the buffalo headed man serves as Shadow's guide. He is connected to the actions of the other gods and yet apart from them, and often gives Shadow help along the way. In this, his first vision, the buffalo man implores Shadow to believe saying, "If you are to survive, you must believe . . . / *Everything*."[337] Waking, startled, he finds himself on the plane in the middle of a bad storm. His plane is forced to land in St. Louis because of the storms and he is forced to rush to a second plane. It is here, on the second plane, that he meets Mr. Wednesday:

> His hair was a reddish-gray; his beard, little more than stubble, was grayish-red. He was smaller than Shadow, but he seemed to take up a hell of a lot of room. A craggy, square face with pale gray eyes. The suit looked expensive, and was the

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[336] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 151.

[337] Ibid., 17.

> color of melted vanilla ice cream. His tie was dark gray silk, and the tiepin was a tree, worked in silver: trunk, branches, and deep roots.[338]

Wednesday already knows a lot about Shadow, including his name, his final destination, that he does not in fact have a job waiting at home, and that his wife is dead. He offers Shadow a job and persists when Shadow blows him off angrily. Wednesday disturbs Shadow so much that he gets off the plane two stops before Eagle Point and rents a car to drive the rest of the way just to get away from him.

Wednesday, however, is not so easy to shake. Late in the evening, hungry and ready for rest, Shadow pulls in to Jack's Crocodile Bar. This wasn't a pre-planned stop. Shadow has never heard of the place before and decides to stop there on the recommendation of the cashier at the nearby Amoco. And yet, there, in the bathroom of Jack's Crocodile Bar, he finds Wednesday: "'So,' said Mr. Wednesday. 'You've had time to think, Shadow. Do you want a job?'"[339] Shadow again refuses, telling Wednesday that he already has a job waiting for him at the Muscle Farm when Wednesday explains that, no, Robbie Burton is dead and without him the Muscle Farm is dead too. He hands Shadow a copy of the paper and bids him read the article on page 7 that tells how Robbie Burton and Laura Moon were killed in an automobile accident when their car swerved into the path of an oncoming thirty-two wheeler.

With nothing left to lose, Shadow begins to waver and decides to wager his choice on a coin flip. One that Shadow rigs in his favor. And yet, when he looks at the quarter in his hand, he sees that Wednesday won after all. Wednesday tells

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[338] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 20.

[339] Ibid., 24.

Shadow that "Rigged games are the easiest ones to beat."[340] He next introduces Shadow to his friend, Mad Sweeney, who tells Shadow that he is a leprechaun. Wednesday goes to the bar to get all of them a drink and comes back with a glass of mead—"Honey wine. The drink of heroes. The drink of the gods"[341]—for Shadow to seal their bargain:

> You work for me. You protect me. You help me. You transport me from place to place. You investigate, from time to time—go places and ask questions for me. You run errands. In an emergency, but only in an emergency, you hurt people who need to be hurt. In the unlikely event of my death, you will hold my vigil. And in return I shall make sure that your needs are adequately taken care of.[342]

Shadow, with a few stipulations of his own that include going to his wife's funeral, getting paid a decent wage, and avoiding prison again at all costs, finally agrees. He is intrigued by Wednesday, and as much as he mistrusts him and is wary of him and his cold and menacing smile, he has nothing to go home to anymore.

Thus begins Shadow's adventure. Gaiman has described *American Gods* as a kind of road trip novel. The novel is not just one thing or even one genre, but it is about myths and "about America as a mythic place."[343] Gaiman explains at the very end of the novel that the book he wanted to write when he wrote this novel "would be a thriller, and a murder mystery, and a romance, and a road trip. It would be about the immigrant experience, about what people believed in when they first came to America. And about what happened to the things that they

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[340] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 31.

[341] Ibid., 33.

[342] Ibid., 33-34.

[343] Ibid., 540.

believed."[344] And so the novel is about Shadow and his adventures and his trips back and forth across the country, but it is also about America as a place and an idea. It is about the sacred places that are roadside attractions, and it is about the stories of immigrant experiences and the gods that follow from them.

Gaiman structures the novel so that small "Coming to America" stories break up the larger narrative of Shadow and his adventures. In these vignettes, Gaiman imagines how the gods of different cultures and religions were brought to America tens or hundreds or thousands of years ago from all over the world in acts of ritual, sacrifice, memory, and belief. He also uses these vignettes to introduce us to the texture of American religion and the diversity of the immigrant experience. One of the most astounding things about *American Gods* is the way in which gods of ancient Egypt such as Horace, Bast, and Ibis are brought together in the same novel with Odin, Kali, the thunderbirds of Native American lore, piskies from Cornwall, Ifrit from the Middle East, and kobold from Germanic mythology. These ancient gods and demons face off, in *American Gods,* with the modern American gods of the railroads, the automobile, the credit card, the internet, the television and media, and of capitalism itself. It's an unlikely and unwieldy cast of characters that Gaiman brings together masterfully into a journey of discovery for Shadow as well as for the reader.

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[344] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 540.

The conflict at the center of the novel between the old and new gods begins when Shadow is kidnapped by the technical boy[345] as he walks back from Laura's funeral. The technical boy may be an internet god or the god of the networks themselves, but he is the arrogant lead henchman of the new gods. Shadow is abducted on the side of the road and wakes in a limo facing a fat boy with bad skin and an aggressive, arrogant attitude. He asks Shadow what Wednesday is planning and what he is doing there. Shadow, who has only been working for Wednesday for less than a day at this point, tells him that he has no idea. The technical boy threatens Shadow's life if he is lying and tells the driver of the limo to drop Shadow back off at his hotel with the following message for Wednesday:

> You tell Wednesday this, man. You tell him he's history. He's forgotten. He's old. And he better accept it. Tell him that we are the future and we don't give a fuck about him or anyone like him. His time is over. Yes? You fucking tell him that, man. He has been consigned to the Dumpster of history while people like me ride our limos down the superhighway of tomorrow.[346]

He drops Shadow off in front of his hotel with the parting words: "It's all about the dominant fucking paradigm, Shadow. Nothing else is important."[347] When Shadow tells Wednesday about the encounter, Wednesday tells Shadow that he knows who the boy is and tells him only "They don't have a fucking clue."[348] Shadow shrugs off the encounter, as he is too caught up in feelings about his dead wife and doesn't yet truly believe that he is being visited by gods.

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[345] The technical boy appears like a character out of an 80's cyberpunk novel including the affected masculinity and frequent use of slang terms. Gaiman never defines which god he is in so many words, but he appears to be the god of the internet or of networks and networked technology. He is not the newest god but he is one of the most powerful new gods even if he is also a bit of an idiot.

[346] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 49-50.

[347] Ibid., 50.

[348] Ibid,. 50.

That night, however, Shadow dreams about an ancient hall of gods. He finds himself in an enormous room surrounded by statues and rough-hewn images. The hall of the gods has at least two vast rooms of unimaginable size filled with gods. One hall is filled with forgotten gods whose names and images are remembered in history books though they are no longer remembered and worshipped by people. The second room, even more vast than the first, is full of the gods "who have past out of memory. Even their names are lost" and, as a voice in his dream explains, "Gods die. And when they truly die they are unmourned and unremembered. Ideas are more difficult to kill than people, but they can be killed, in the end."[349] He sees visions of gods that are falling rocks and forest fires. Overwhelmed, Shadow awakes in a panic, and finds Laura, his dead wife, sitting on the corner of his bed brought partway back from death by a gold coin that Shadow had won from Mad Sweeney and had tossed into her grave.

Laura is both alive and dead. Mr. Wednesday is both a god and a man. Eternal and mortal. Shadow finds himself in a world that is always more than it appears. Laura leaves Shadow to continue his journey with Wednesday but she is continuously drawn back to him and plays a crucial role in keeping Shadow safe in the months to come. The next day, Shadow and Wednesday set off on their journey. The interpenetration of the ordinary and extraordinary or, in other words, the ways in which the seemingly mundane is always saturated with extraordinary potential and significance, is brought to full realization for Shadow

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[349] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 54.

during his time with Wednesday at the House on the Rock. It is here that Gaiman's perspective on American religion, sacred space, and the immigrant perspective first come together for the reader and for Shadow. It is here when Shadow realizes who Wednesday is, and who the other people around them are, and it is the place where he starts to believe.

The House on the Rock, as well as Rock City and Lookout Mountain later in the novel, are seemingly kitschy roadside attractions that are revealed to be places of great power. It is here, at the roadside attraction, and not in a church, temple, or conventional place of worship, where we find a window to the transcendent. Wednesday tells Shadow that, in the USA, churches are "about as significant, in this context, as dentists' offices." He goes on to explain:

> No, in the USA, people still get the call, or some of them, and they feel themselves being called to from the transcendent void, and they respond to it by building a model out of beer bottles of somewhere they've never visited, or by erecting a gigantic bat-house in some part of the country that bats have traditionally declined to visit. Roadside attractions: people feel themselves being pulled to places where, in other parts of the world, they would recognize that part of themselves that is truly transcendent, and buy a hot dog and walk around, feeling satisfied on a level they cannot truly describe, and profoundly dissatisfied on a level beneath that.[350]

These places represent a distillation of Americana. They are uniquely American not only because if their geographical location but because they represent some concentrated American force of will, inventiveness, entrepreneurial spirit, or sheer unfettered whimsy that would not have been possible in any other place.

The House on the Rock is a place of power for gods as well as people. It is a thin place where the veneer of reality is permeable and offers access to the "really real." The place where the gods can be their full selves. It is a place not

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[350] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 106.

bounded by the rigid rules of what is real and possible. It is thus a place where human worship or recognition of the divine meets the ability of the divine to manifest in the human world and to cross the veil. One of the gods, Mr. Nancy, tells Shadow that the world's largest carousel, which is a part of the House on the Rock, is "Like a prayer wheel goin' round and round . . . Accumulating power."[351] Shadow, Mr. Nancy, Czernobog (another old god), and Wednesday each mount one of the carousel animals. As the carousel goes round and round, "the lights went out, and Shadow saw the gods."[352] One moment Shadow is riding the carousel, and the next moment he is riding a living version of his carousel mount, a tiger with an eagle's head, under a starry sky.

When he looks at each one of the other three men, now riding their own animals beside him, he sees many images at one time. He sees the many faces of each god. In the case of Mr. Nancy he sees:

> an old black man with a pencil mustache . . . at the same time, in the same place, he saw a jeweled spider as high as a horse . . . and simultaneously an extraordinarily tall man with teak-colored skin and three sets of arms . . . and he was also seeing a young black boy, dressed in rags, his left foot swollen and crawling with black flies; and last of all, and behind all these things, Shadow was looking at a tiny brown spider, hiding under a withered ochre leaf. / Shadow saw all these things and he knew they were the same thing.[353]

When Czernobog rides up next to him he tells Shadow not to worry, that all of this is happening inside his head and isn't real. Even so, when he looks at Czernobog he sees "a grey-haired old east-European immigrant . . . true. But he also saw a squat black thing . . . and he saw a prince . . . riding, naked but for a

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[351] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 114.

[352] Ibid., 116.

[353] Ibid., 118.

bearskin . . . on a creature half-man, half-beast, it's face and torso blue-tattooed with swirls and spirals."[354] And as for Wednesday, he reveals to Shadow that he is Odin, the All-Father, the Hooded One, and Grimnir. He explains that "I have as many names as there are winds, as many titles as there are ways to die. My ravens are Huggin and Muninn: Thought and Memory; my wolves are Freki and Geri; my horse is the gallows."[355] Shadow wonders to himself what is real and remembers the advice of the buffalo headed man to "*Believe everything*."[356] Shadow and his companions then ride their mounts to a primitive hall to meet the other gods assembled there.

Once the gods are assembled, Wednesday explains to them all why he has gathered them together. He is gathering the old gods in order to oppose the new. He speaks of the weakened state of the old gods, in whom belief is waning. He tells them that the people who came to America brought the gods with them in their minds, and they took root in this new land. Yet, "The land is vast. Soon enough, our people abandoned us, remembered us only as creatures of of the old land, as things that had not come with them to the new. Our true believers passed on, or stopped believing, and we were left, lost and scared and dispossessed."[357] He explains that now the old gods have to scrape and scrimp in order to get by—in order to survive—when once they thrived. He cautions that new gods are "growing in America, clinging to growing knots of belief: gods of

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[354] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 118.

[355] Ibid., 119.

[356] Ibid., 119.

[357] Ibid., 123.

credit-card and freeway, of internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and of neon. Proud gods, fat and foolish, puffed up with their own newness and importance."[358] The new gods, he claims, are out to destroy them and the old gods must band together before it's too late.

Tensions between the two sides escalate when Shadow is abducted for a second time. His dead wife Laura comes to rescue him and the process kills his two guards (Mister Stone and Mister Wood). This is the opening volley in the escalating conflict between the two sides. After his rescue Shadow's adventure continues with a journey to Cairo, Illinois where he meets Mr. Jaquel and Mr. Ibis, two Egyptian gods who have been in the United States for 3,500 years (when Egyptians first came trading on the Mississippi River) and from there to Lakeside, Wisconsin. In Lakeside, Wednesday tells Shadow that he will be going by the name Mike Ainsel and urges him to keep a low profile. He is safe from the "other side" here in Lakeside as long as he doesn't draw too much attention to himself. Meanwhile Wednesday continues to recruit the old gods to his cause and sometimes enlists Shadow's help. One one of these trips he and Wednesday head to a reservation in South Dakota where Shadow learns two important things. First, he and Wednesday are forced to go "behind the scenes"[359] again in order to escape the opposition's goon squad and Shadow begins to get a feel for how to shift between the two realities. Second, Shadow begins to get a real sense

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[358] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 123.

[359] Ibid., 306.

that this battle between the old gods and the new sits on something bigger, and older, than either side: the land itself.

This Land is My Land, This Land is Your Land

The American landscape is one of the most important characters in *American Gods*. Gaiman explains that this novel is his attempt to understand and describe America.[360] He tells the reader in the introduction to *American Gods* that "I wanted to write a book that included all the parts of America that obsessed and delighted me, which tended to be the tidbits that never showed up in the films and television shows."[361] This includes many odds and ends of American culture and history, the peculiarities of people from different cultures and regions of the United States, and of course the sheer scope of geographic space and diversity. Even so, he cautions that "This is a work of fiction, not a guidebook. While the geography of the United States of America in this tale is not entirely imaginary . . . I have taken liberties. Fewer liberties than you might imagine, but liberties nonetheless."[362]

Space and place are both key concepts in *American Gods*. Tim Cresswell gives a wonderful introduction to the theoretical concept of space in his *Space: An Introduction* (second edition, 2015). There, he explains that "place" is a meaningful location. In other words, "Place is how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world. Place, at a basic level, is space

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[360] Gaiman, *American Gods*, ix.

[361] Ibid., x.

[362] Ibid., xv.

invested with meaning in the context of power."[363] Notions of place can be either fixed or temporary. Fixed locations may be tied to geography, such as a historical site or landmark, or they may be transitory such as with a ship or a carnival, but whatever the nature of the place, its boundaries are determined by notions of signification and power: "Places are . . . relational both inside and out."[364] Place is thus linked both to subjectivity and embodiment, as one shapes the other. Drawing on the work of Nigel Thrift, Cresswell argues that place must be understood in terms of embodied relationships in the world that are never complete but always ongoing, constantly "being performed."[365] Place is thus a key aspect of subjectivity and the possible range of subjectivity and embodiment are part of the unstable politics of place. Cresswell quotes J.E. Malpas who explains:

> Place is . . . that within and with respect to which subjectivity is itself established —place is not founded on subjectivity, but is rather that on which subjectivity is founded. Thus one does not first have a subject that apprehends certain features of the world in terms of the idea of place; instead, the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of place.[366]

It is now easy to see how notions of family, community, self, other, religion, nation, and history are all placed. They emerge from particular relationships with places, in places, and through the formation and dissolution of place. The formative influence of place also happens on multiple levels simultaneously, as places can overlap but also exclude. The idea of home is placed, as is nationality,

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[363] Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*. 2nd Ed., (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014) 19.

[364] Ibid., 48.

[365] Ibid., 69.

[366] Cresswell quoting J. E. Malpas, 50.

culture, and ethnicity all of which also impinge on other identity categories such as gender, race, class. In other words, David Harvey reminds us that "Symbolic orderings of space and time . . . provide a framework for experience through which we learn who we are or what we are in society."[367] Subjectivity and worldview (a placed-term) are thus both anchored by place with real, physical, effects on embodiment and imagination.

Religions are also always placed, both specifically in the sense of particular places of worship, but also extending outward in ever widening rings of social influence, like ripples in a pond. American civil religion, for example, is "Independent of any organized religious institution, whether church, temple, synagogue, or mosque, this civil religiosity is as firmly implanted on American soil as it is in the American calendar or in American creeds."[368] Religion as a concept becomes much more slippery in this diffuse form, and often becomes folded into other categories like patriotism and good citizenship. Sometimes a religion is defined in part by the ways in which it is dis-placed or place-less. Chidester and Linenthal remind us that sacred space is always contested. Contrary to Eliade's argument that sacred space manifests and humans merely discover it, they maintain that sacred space is created, managed, and controlled.[369]

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[367] David Harvey from *The Condition of Postmodernity,* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000 [1990]), 214. As quoted in David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, eds. *American Sacred Space,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

[368] David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, eds. *American Sacred Space,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 30.

[369] Ibid., 15-16.

Gaiman treats sacred space as a given in much the same way he treats myth as a sacred story with attention to the politics and power plays behind it that do not diminish its mystical qualities. In *American Gods* there is something inherently sacred about the land that draws people and operates as a mystical place of power. Chidester and Linenthal remind us that "sacred space is inevitably entangled with the entrepreneurial, the social, the political, and the other 'profane' forces."[370] in *American Gods,* sacred space is both discovered and made. There is a sense that some places, such as the geographical center of the United States or the tourist attractions Rock City and the House on the Rock are built on ancient sites of power. Still other sacred places are made through acts of sacrifice and ritual in keeping with the notion that "sacred space anchors more than merely myth or emotion. It anchors relations of meaning and power that are at stake in the formation of a larger social reality."[371] The creation of America, of American history, American culture, and of American religion is also the creation of American sacred space.

"In this sorry world, the symbol *is* the thing."[372] —*Loki*

Meanwhile, the battle between the old gods and the new has begun with small skirmishes around the country. Bilquis and the ifrit, two of the old gods, are killed, and there are a handful of other deaths and desecrations around the country. Back in Lakeside, Shadow's true identity is revealed to the town along

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[370] Chidester and Linenthal, *American Sacred Space,* 17.

[371] Ibid., 17.

[372] Gaiman, *American Gods*, 468.

with the accusation that he killed Mr. Wood and Mr. Stone. His new friend, Sherif Chad Mulligan, is forced to arrest him while they sort everything out. While in custody, the new gods hijack the television in the main room of the jail where Shadow is being held in order to show him a feed of Wednesday meeting with Mr. World—the leader of the new gods—ostensibly to broker a truce between the two sides. Instead, as Shadow watches, Wednesday is shot in the head and killed on the spot.[373]

Within the hour, Mr. Nancy and Czernobog, posing as federal officers, come the rescue Shadow from the Lakeside jail. They already know about Wednesday, and all three head to the geographical center of the United States in Lebanon, Kansas, order to get his body back from the new gods. Mr. Nancy tells Shadow that the center of the United States is a neutral place where neither the new gods nor the old gods have power. Czernobog elaborates that the center is the opposite of sacred. Not profane, but rather "Of negative sacredness. Places where they can build no temples. Places where people will not come, and will leave as soon as they can. Places where gods only walk if they are forced to."[374] He goes on to explain that "All of America has it, a little . . . That is why we are not welcome here. But the center . . . The center is worst. Is like a minefield. We all tread too carefully there to dare break the truce."[375] The two sides meet at a small, run-down hotel where, at midnight, they will exchange the body.

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[373] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 361-362.

[374] Ibid., 383.

[375] Ibid., 383.

It is here where Shadow runs into his old cell-mate Low Key, who he now recognizes is Loki, a god of the Norse Pantheon. Loki appears to be working as a driver for the new gods, and he claims to have no feelings towards Wednesday one way or the other.[376] He and Shadow go into room five, where Wednesday is laid out, and the rest of the old and new gods in attendance shuffle in as well. No one seems to know what to say and thinly veiled threats are exchanged on both sides that make it clear that Wednesday's death has cemented the battle to come. At midnight Shadow and his companions take Wednesday's body and leave. Shadow doesn't know what comes next but, remembering his oath to Wednesday when they first met, he knows that he will hold Wednesday's vigil.

Holding Wednesday's vigil, cautions Mr. Nancy and Czernobog, will kill him. Shadow is undeterred, and the three of them drive with Wednesday's body to the world tree which is located on a remote farm in Virginia. There, the three norns who look after the tree and who will supervise the vigil place Wednesday's body at the foot of the tree. They strip Shadow naked and tie him to the tree, five feet off the ground, where he will stay for the nine days of the vigil: "*Three days on the tree, three days in the underworld, three days to find my way back.*"[377] During this time Shadow is alone on the tree but visits and is visited, whether in real life or in a vision, many of the gods he has encountered during his travels with Wednesday.

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[376] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 395.

[377] Ibid., 388.

On the tree, Shadow progresses through stages of hyper-awareness to madness to a complete inability to tell what is real and what is imagined. He leaves his body multiple times, shifting between his body hanging on the world tree and his body behind the scenes. In one of these visions, Shadow meets with Czernobog's sister Zorya Polunochnaya at the entrance to the underworld. She guides him forward and bids him choose the path of hard truths or the path of fine lies. Shadow chooses truth and she takes his name from him and bids him walk down the right-hand path. Shadow then begins to live his life in reverse, from his time in prison when he learned of Laura's death to the trial that sent him to prison to the death of his mother from cancer when he was only sixteen. Finally, Shadow witnesses the moment when his mother meets his father—this man he never knew—and he sees that the man with his mother is Wednesday. In this moment it becomes clear to Shadow that Wednesday knew all along that Shadow is his son.

After this revelation, Shadow passes farther along his journey through the underworld and meets Bast, sister of Horace, Mr. Jacquel (Anubis), and Mr. Ibis. Shadow is both dead and not yet dead. Bast takes his heart and bids him travel down the middle path where he meets Mr. Ibis piloting a boat across a dark and vast underground lake. He tells Shadow that one of his jobs is that of a psychopomp who escorts the living into "the world of the dead."[378] He tells Shadow that he is not exactly dead, and that thinking of life and death as two states that are separate from one another, rather than being "different sides of the

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[378] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 428.

same coin"[379] is a mistake. Ibis escorts Shadow to Mr. Jacquel, who Shadow now recognizes as Anubis, the Egyptian dog-headed god, for judgment. He examines Shadow and sees all of his flaws and failings and finally, taking Shadow's heart from Bast, weighs it against his feather. The scales balance and Shadow chooses his destination. Not heaven, not hell, but simply nothing at all: "Not darkness. Not even oblivion. Only nothing."[380]

In another place, another reality, another moment, the gods are gathering. Gaiman calls Rock City, located on top of Lookout Mountain, Georgia, the "most important place in the southeastern United States."[381] He tells us that Lookout Mountain was sacred to the "Chickamauga, a branch of the Cherokee"[382] who lived there until the white men came and the Indian Removal Act of the 1830's forced them from the land. "For whoever controlled Lookout Mountain controlled the land; that was the legend. It was a sacred site, after all, and it was a high place."[383] Gaiman goes on to describe the oddities of Rock City, from its beautiful rock gardens to the caves that lie beneath them filled with dioramas of nursery-rhyme characters lit with blacklight into neon grotesqueries. With respect to the millions of tourists who visit Rock City every year, he explains that "When they leave, they leave bemused, uncertain of why they came, of what they

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[379] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 428.

[380] Ibid., 431.

[381] Ibid., 432.

[382] Ibid., 433.

[383] Ibid., 433.

have seen, of whether they had a good time or not."[384] It is here, to this place of power, this tourist attraction, this sacred place, that the gods come to do battle.

Back at the world tree, Shadow is still hanging. Mr. Town arrives, sent by Mr. World, in order to cut a branch from the tree to bring back to Lookout Mountain. Mr. Town has no idea why he has been sent on this mission and, in frustration and hatred for Shadow, who he still believed killed his two friends, "he jabbed the stick in the air toward the hanging man, in a stabbing motion. It was an instinctive gesture, containing all the frustration and rage inside Town. He imagined that he was holding a spear and twisting it into Shadow's guts."[385] The gesture was only that, and yet, "On the tree, Shadow's body began to bleed. The wound was in his side."[386] In this world of gods and men, the symbol is the thing. The line between an imagined spear and an actual spear is nonexistent. They are one and the same.

Mr. World needs the stick because he needs a spear. He needs the symbol and needs the thing itself. But why, asks the technical boy, as they stand waiting on Lookout Mountain. Why this stick? Why wait for it? What does it matter? "'Well,' said Mr. World, 'seeing that we're friends, here's the answer: I'm going to take the stick, and I'm going to throw it over the armies . . . As I throw it, it will become a spear. And then . . . I'm going to shout, 'I dedicate this battle to Odin.'"[387] Startled by this answer, the technical boy asks why he would do such a

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[384] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 433.

[385] Ibid., 443.

[386] Ibid., 444.

[387] Ibid., 450.

thing. Mr. World tells him that it is for the sake of power and food. Revealing his true intentions he says: "You see, the outcome of the battle is unimportant. What matters is the chaos, and the slaughter." With that, he takes his knife and pushes it up through the technical boy's chin and into his brain saying "I dedicate this death to Odin."[388] As the technical boy dies, his blood and his death dedicated to Odin, Wednesday returns.

With this indication that all is not what it has appeared to be up to this point, the narrative returns to Shadow and the escalating tension between the gods. The beginning of Chapter 18 is a meditation on the inadequacy of "reality" as a category. The possible and the impossible undo one another and leave us with the certainty that life is more, and that human experience is more, than we can fit into onto a page. In the quote that opens the chapter, a "singer's commentary on 'The Ballad of Sam Bass'" from *A Treasure of American Folklore,* Gaiman quotes the singer who says "You can't allus have things like they are in poetry. Poetry ain't what you'd call truth. There ain't room enough in the verses."[389] But what about in a novel which is, perhaps, the roomiest of all the literary genres? Even then, in all of its dialogical complexity, novels can point towards something or suggest a range of signification, but they too are limited perspectives. Gaiman always gestures to the ways in which life is more than what is seems. He cautions the reader, at the beginning of Chapter 18, that:

> None of this can actually be happening. If it makes you more comfortable, you could simply think of it as a metaphor. Religions are, by definition, metaphors, after all: God is a dream, a hope, a woman, an ironist, a

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[388] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 451.

[389] Ibid., 452.

> father, a city, a house of many rooms, a watchmaker who left his prize chronometer in the desert, someone who loves you—even, perhaps, against all evidence, a celestial being whose only interest is to make sure your football team, army, business, or marriage thrives, prospers, and triumphs over all opposition.
>
> Religions are places to stand and look and act, vantage points from which to view the world.
>
> So, none of this is happening. Such things could not occur in this day and age. Never a word of it is literally true, although it all happened, and the next thing that happened, happened like this.[390]

What happens next is that Shadow comes back to life. Whiskey Jack, a Native American cultural hero and not a god, comes to retrieve him. He tells Shadow more about the land and about the gods of America. He explains that "This is not a good country for gods" and that Native Americans found this out a long time ago and so "we never built churches. We didn't need to. The land was the church. The land was the religion. The land was older and wiser than the people who walked on it."[391] Shadow tells him that it may not be good growing country for gods, but they are still going to war. In that moment, when Whisky Jack tells him flatly that it won't be a war at all, but a bloodbath, Shadow understands. He sees the war for what it is—a two man con orchestrated by Loki and Odin for blood and death and chaos which is the source of their power. He knows that they will bring him back from the dead and that he must stop the war.

Horace and Easter come to get Shadow from the world tree and bring him back to stop the battle. When he is revived and dressed he mounts a thunderbird and heads for Lookout Mountain. Mr. Town, meanwhile, has been killed by Laura and she now holds the stick from the world tree. She confronts Mr. World, who we now know is Loki, who tells her that the stick is important because the

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[390] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 452.

[391] Ibid., 456.

stick is a symbol for the spear and "in this sorry world, the symbol *is* the thing."[392] We see now that this is not some dramatic conflict between old and new gods. New gods become old gods in time and newer gods are always emerging. What matters is the ritual and the blood and the belief. Loki tells Laura, "It's never a matter of old and new. It's only about patterns."[393] In her final act of devotion to Shadow she takes the spear and, saying; "I dedicate this death to Shadow," pushes the stick, which turns into a spear, through her chest and into Loki who is standing behind her.[394] Shadow arrives to hear Odin dedicating the battle to himself while Loki and Laura are on the verge of death. Odin and Loki tell Shadow all about the plan and about how they needed him to make it work. They ensured that Laura was killed so that he had no one to go home to. As Loki dies and Wednesday claims his victory, Shadow goes to stop the war.

Shadow goes to the top of Lookout Mountain to find the gods, only they are not there. He is in the wrong place. Shadow felt that "reality was thin"[395] there on the top of the mountain and he knew where the gods must be. Backstage. He thinks back to the feeling of shifting realities and of turning at "right angles to *everything*" and then it happened and he slipped through "To somewhere real. He was backstage."[396] He was still on top of Lookout Mountain and yet "it was so much more than that. This mountaintop was the quintessence

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[392] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 468.

[393] Ibid., 468.

[394] Ibid., 470.

[395] Ibid., 476.

[396] Ibid., 476.

of place, the heart of things as they were. Compared to it, the Lookout Mountain he had left was a painting on a backdrop . . . merely a representation of the thing. Not the thing itself."[397] He is no longer in Plato's cave staring at shadows on a wall. Shadow is experiencing reality itself and the gods are all there.

He sees powerful car gods and railroad gods who have seen better days. He sees the piskies, dwarfs, and giants. He sees Kali and the rest of the old gods, and he sees the new gods as well. All of these gods were created by belief, "It's what people do. They believe and then they will not take responsibility for their beliefs . . . and it is that belief, that rock-solid belief, that makes things happen."[398] Shadow recognizes that the gods are perched on the edge of a precipice, ready to fight and kill one another. He walks out into the center of the arena of battle and addresses both sides, telling them about Wedneday's con and that all that matters to Wednesday is not which side wins or loses, or if any side is victorious, but that gods die in his name. The dichotomy between the old gods and the new that Wednesday fed with animosity and rhetoric is a false dichotomy. He created the idea of old and new gods. There are no sides and there is no war. In America, the only constant is change, and no god is ever safe.

And so Shadow stops a war, loses a wife, gains a sense of self, and learns that America is a bad country for gods. America is a country of change. It is a country of immigrants and innovation. It is a country where nothing stands still and the one constant is the land. The buffalo headed man who has been

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[397] Gaiman, *American Gods*, 476.

[398] Ibid., 477.

Shadow's guide throughout the novel comes to him again in the end, after he stops the battle between the gods, and tells him he did well by making peace. The buffalo headed man is not a god. He is something more ancient, enduring, and permanent. He is the land. People and ideas and beliefs and even gods come and go, but the land endures.

What is Gaiman telling us about the American religious experience? We would be remiss in putting too fine a point on it. As Loki reminds us, "It's never a matter of old and new. It's only about patterns."[399] Belief, myth, ritual, and storytelling is woven into the fabric of what it means to be human. America is a land of remarkable cultural and geographical diversity. Innovation flourishes here and the oddities of America are tied to this diversity but there remains something ineffable about the American religious imagination. That ineffability gets tied to various understandings of the supernatural but also to the larger notion that reality always contains more than what we can know. The power of place, and of the American landscape, is part of Gaiman's larger point about religion. By calling religion a vantage point he is claiming that it is a spacial phenomena. Religion is placed in the sense that it comes from communities of people in place but at the same time places are bigger and more complex than any single narrative of identity, religion, or culture.

The Way We Never Were

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[399] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 468.

Gaiman troubles the line between myth and reality by making it unstable and ultimately by removing it altogether. Gaiman manages this juggling act by presenting both myth and religion as simultaneously bearing the weight of ancient truth while also not being "literally" true in our cynical postmodern world. He holds onto the notion from Lévi-Strauss that myths contain very real seeds of truth that are the result of deeply particular and situated (historically, culturally, chronologically, and geographically) events. At the same time, the postmodern relationship to myth is changing, as new myths emerge and old myths fade. Towards the end of the novel, as the gods are gathering to fight, Gaiman writes: "So, none of this is happening. Such things could not occur in this day and age. Never a word of it is literally true, although it all happened, and the next thing that happened, happened like this."[400] This approach to myth allows Gaiman the freedom to play, and to combine, and to experiment with stories from across the range of the immigrant experience and yet to do so while holding a space for their uniqueness. In other words, though to some "true believers" Gaiman's treatment of religion and myth may look blasphemous, he treats these stories with enormous respect for their historical and cultural roots and for the real power they contain. One of the ways that Gaiman accomplishes this very difficult task so effortlessly is through his brilliance in creating a kind of American religious bricolage.

If bricolage is an especially postmodern approach to the novel, it also shares deep affinity with the development of mythical thought. Claude Lévi-

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[400] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 452.

Strauss examines the connection between bricolage as a technical feat—the physical/material construction of something new from a limited selection of odds and ends leftover from other non-related projects—and as an intellectual exercise or mode of thought. He argues that mythical thought is a "kind of intellectual 'bricolage'" given that the "characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task at hand because it has nothing else at its disposal."[401] The results of mythical bricolage, much like those of technological bricolage, are often surprising and unforeseen given the creative invention demanded by this approach to the raw material. Lévi-Strauss explains that "the 'bricoleur' . . . derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he 'speaks' not only *with* things . . . but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities."[402] This insight as to the creative process of the bricoleur shines some light on Gaiman's choices in that it highlights the intentionality that is, by necessity, part of any bricolage. The choices, though a product of necessity, that bring together often incompatible and always unrelated materials, language, discourse, and culture are the larger point that drive the ultimate range of meanings signified by the bricolage itself—the created entity, whether intellectual or material or some combination of the two.

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[401] Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind,* 17.

[402] Ibid., 21.

American Gods is not, of course, a bricolage in a pure sense. Gaiman uses elements of bricolage, especially with respect to his use of myth and folk tales, within the larger framework of his novel. Lévi-Strauss offers an extended meditation on the relationship of the painter, which I extend to include the novelist, to the bricoleur. In this meditation, he theorizes how the painter exists partway between the scientist and the bricoleur, saying:

> The painter is always mid-way between design and anecdote, and his genius consists in uniting internal and external knowledge, a 'being' and a 'becoming', in producing with his brush an object which does not exist as such and which he is nevertheless able to create on his canvas. This is a nicely balanced synthesis of one or more artificial and natural structures and one or more natural and social events. The aesthetic emotion is the result of this union between the structural order and the order of events, which is brought about within a thing created by man and also in effect by the observer who discovers the possibility of such a union through the work of art.[403]

This technical parsing of the artists's relationship to objects, structures, and events relates back to how Lévi-Strauss understands both art and myth as created phenomena and the process through which they are created. In art, the artist takes "a set of one or more objects and one or more events which aesthetic creation unifies by revealing a common structure. Myths travel the same road but start from the other end. They use a structure to produce what is itself object consisting of a set of events (for all myths tell a story)."[404] The novel *American Gods* is, in totality, the dialogical creation of Neil Gaiman no matter how close he sticks to his mythical source material. Even so, by playing with recognizable myths, gods, and religious figures he is able to tap into the American religious

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[403] Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind,* 25.

[404] Ibid., 26.

imagination in a deeply affective way and so capitalize on the reader's ability to connect history and cultural memory to present emotions and the experience of being a human being in the postmodern United States.

One of the most powerful aspects of *American Gods* is the way in which the ancient past breaks through into the present. While Gaiman explores the dynamic of old gods and new gods, with ancient gods of the past giving way to the new gods of the present (for example, ancient tribal gods being forgotten and the new gods of the automobile and the internet rising to prominence), the old gods and new alike trade in the same fundamental elements of embodied human life: rituals of blood, sex, and food (or eating and drinking). Myth also functions, for Gaiman, in some of the same ways outlined by Eliade with respect to ritual, memory, temporality, and the divine. Because Gaiman holds a space open for the reality of myth, the supernatural, and the divine, the connection between myth and ritual is dynamic and ritual actions in mythic context have real and immediate consequences. Embodied ritual practice is key to the enduring power of myth because it literally connects the past and the present. Eliade explains that in "most cases it is not enough to *know* the origin myth, one must *recite* it."[405] In so doing:

> He who recites or performs the origin myth is thereby steeped in the sacred atmosphere in which these miraculous events took place . . . By reciting the myths one reconstitutes that fabulous time and hence in some sort becomes 'contemporary' with the events described, one is in the presence of the Gods or Heroes . . . by 'living' the myth one emerges from profane, chronological time and enters a time that is of a different quality, a 'sacred' time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable.[406]

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[405] Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 17.

[406] Ibid., 18.

Eliade emphasizes the link between myth, ritual, and remembrance in order to show how myth functions in the life of a community as an embodied phenomena. In other words, knowledge of a myth is not enough to demonstrate belief. Instead, one must recite or re-enact the mythic events, which serves to reinforce both the potency of the myth and the devotion of the ritual actors by erasing the gap between mythic time and the everyday. Eliade sets up a hard dichotomy between sacred time and mundane, chronological time, which he also calls profane time. Eliade is not a fan of grey areas. I get the feeling that he wouldn't like much running into Kali in a taxi or Loki in a prison like Shadow does in *American Gods*. At the same time, Eliade does provide for a perspective on myth that lets the gods become real and act in the world. It tears the veil between one reality and another, whatever the ontological status of that division might look like from day to day, and welcomes the supernatural into this world of the everyday in a real and powerful way. Gaiman, too, invites the gods to walk among us.

For Gaiman, not only does the recitation and reenactment of mythical events lead to a manifestation of both mythic time and the presence of supernatural forces (or gods), but the gods themselves rely on religious ritual for their power and existence. The question becomes one not only of what ritual and myth do for humanity but what they do for the gods. As a work of literary fiction, the juxtaposition of so many narratives with truth claims within a fabulated narrative structure lends the novel a different feel than if it was comprised solely of myth or bricolage. Gaiman makes familiar characters (including gods and

other supernatural beings), stories, and myths work differently than they do in their usual contexts. The dominant narrative of the United States as a Christian country is challenged by Gaiman's juxtapositions of alternative histories and religious plurality. The legacy of the immigrant experience in the United States is far more complex and diverse than the Christian experience, and Gaiman highlights the often erased (especially in the case of Native American tradition) and unacknowledged alternative religious histories that make up a significant part of America's formation as a country. He troubles easy definitions of American history, American religion, and American culture.

American Gods, perhaps more clearly than either of the previous two novels, manifests the play of dialogical theology. Gaiman's use of religious and cultural narratives of belief, sacrifice, memory, and forgetting engages with this notion of dialogical theology as a religious thinking technology that rearranges the reader's perception of America and American history in multiple directions and on may levels. As with the other two novels before it, the dialogical possibilities in *American Gods* are created in large part through the interaction between language, discourse, authorial intent, authorial context, reader context, and of course the depth of the narrative's roots in American history and culture. The dialogical signification of *American Gods* is magnified by Gaiman's own dialogical approach to his source material and his ideological commitment to messiness, provisionality, change, and contradiction without resolution. *American Gods* bears witness to a distinctly American dialogical theology that

maps the complex and contradictory relationships between religion, culture, technology, history, and social change.

Once we see America through Shadow's eyes we can't help but see a landscape populated by gods and full of unexpected sacred spaces. Not only does secularization theory miss the point by failing to understand the ways in which religious signification has become a part of everyday life in the United States, from our notions of democracy to good citizenship, but it also fails to understand the ways in which religion has changed as a category of signification in its own right. This thing we call religion is always changing and it always has. Much like the gods of America who grow old die because as people forget and the world changes, our understanding of religion must change as well. The gods haven't gone away, but the pantheon is always changing.

Epilogue

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes—all the better. All the better . . . It would bear the lightning of possible storms.

- The "Masked Philosopher," *Le Monde* (attributed to Foucault)

No one understands the perils of criticism better than Foucault. Often it rips apart the subject matter under its gaze, leaving behind dead fragments and empty silence. It is far easier to use criticism to destroy than to create—far easier to break a concept, idea, theory, book, or sentence down into its component parts than it is to fit them together in such a way that they come to life and become more than we ever imagined. Mark Jordan reminds us that for Foucault, criticism "isn't a search to secure the grounds of true knowledge against skepticism so much as an effort to provide 'an ontology of the present, an ontology of actuality, an ontology of modernity, an ontology of ourselves.'"[407] A similar gesture, driven by a similar hope, drives my own project on American religion. This is not an ontology of religion, but I am using the idea of dialogical theology as a religious thinking technology in order to bring *The Dispossessed, Trouble on Triton,* and *American Gods* to life and as a result to open up our understanding of the religious.

Religion is one of those concepts that is always slipping its bonds to go on unsanctioned adventures. It's protean nature is one of the qualities that marks

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[407] Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies,* 177.

religion, however defined, as one of the enduring facets of human history and human life. The study of religion has led me on my own adventure during which I have explored alternative science-fictional worlds that are at one and the same moment utopian and dystopian, whose landscapes are painfully real and yet deeply provisional, and whose dreams are of necessity both achingly palpable and utterly unknowable. I always return again to think about the ways in which literature is able to achieve what theory cannot.

Now, in the world of social media and bite-sized fragments of information that travel around the world at staggering speeds, people have begin to lament the demise of the novel just as they lamented in the past the demise of religion. These Chicken Little reactions to technological changes are almost always short-sighted. The novel isn't any more dead than religion, but forms change and people change and technology will continue to change and take everything else with it. As Loki tells Laura at the end of *American Gods,* "It's never a matter of old and new. It's only about patterns."[408] The patterns of human life. The drive to create and to understand and to gesture towards the ineffable. There will always be stories and story-tellers no matter what new forms those narratives will take. Each form will have it's own problems and delights and who knows what my own lens of dialogical theology will be replaced with in the future.

Part of the energy that drives this project is my concern at the proliferation of reductionistic and polarizing discourse around religion. The predictable and seemingly inescapable polemical arguments around faith, belief, morality, and

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[408] Gaiman, *American Gods,* 468.

politics flung back and forth across the landscape of public discourse like so many unholy grenades. In the United States, public discourse on religion seems always to be reaching new lows, while the academic discourse fights for nuance, creativity, and relevance but too often reaches for the same theorists, theologians, and frameworks again and again without moving the conversation forward into new territory.

My intervention into this madness are two science fiction novels from the 70's and another quasi-science fiction novel from pre-9/11 2001. Even though these novels are apparently disconnected, they all come from critical moments in American history. Each of these wonderful narratives came out of a fraught moment in American political and social history and they engage with big questions about what it means to be human, what it means to be ethical, and what the future holds for humanity. The year of the publication of *American Gods* in 2001, though no one knew it at the time, is one of the most significant moments in recent American religious history. After September 11, 2001 it was not just un-American to be a Muslim (or perceived as one), but, according to the vitriolic discourse of the day, anti-American. The radical plurality of *American Gods* disrupts this narrative and serves to "fiction" the political present that conservative pundits and right-wing Christian groups were attempting to create. The legacy of *American Gods* has remained one of continued influence, and in 2014 it was announced that the novel would be made into a television show on the Starz network. Since then there has been much speculation as to the plot and casting of the show, but its creators have spoken publicly about how crucial it is

to maintain the ethnic,[409] cultural, and religious diversity of the narrative. It will be interesting to see both how the narrative is adapted to the small screen and how new and old fans alike respond to the material when it airs in 2016.

My hope for this dissertation is fairly straightforward. I hope that it helps us see religion a little bit differently. All the theory on postmodernism and the dialogical imagination aside, this project has been worth doing because it reveals ways to reframe the world. The ability to reframe our world is absolutely essential for imagination and play, and thus for social change. Literature really can change the world. From *Harry Potter* to *Sense and Sensibility* to *Neuromancer,* novels invite us into their worlds and leave us forever changed. To then turn and speak of this as a spiritual or a theological moment is not either to raise the spectral wall between spirit and mind or to reduce the insights of these novels to religious teachings. The direction of this relationship moves the other way—from the world of the text to the category of the religious. The idea is not to reduce the novels in this project down to their religious significance thereby putting them in a box they were never made to fit into, but to use the dialogical complexity of these musings on what it means to be human to explode our narrow definitions of the religious. We need to reframe the conversation about religion to talk not about what it is, but about a range of significant space. American religious cultures are constantly emerging, changing, and fading away. We need a way to think about religion that helps us see phenomena in motion

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[409] Louisa Mellor, "Exclusive: Bryan Fuller on the *American Gods* TV Adaptation," *Den of Geek,* September 10, 2014. Accessed on August 17, 2015. http://www.denofgeek.com/tv/american-gods/32045/exclusive-bryan-fuller-on-the-american-gods-tv-adaptation#ixzz3Cx4PPFYV

and to, as Foucault says, "bear the lightning of possible storms."[410] I hope that, for the moment, dialogical theology can be one such tool.

[410] Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher."

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