

## SERIOUS SHENANIGANS

THE NEW SPACE OPERA AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY: AN  
ANALYSIS OF IAIN M. BANKS'S SURFACE DETAIL AND THE  
HYDROGEN SONATA AND ANN LECKIE'S IMPERIAL RADCH  
TRILOGY.

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## Abstract

This thesis contributes to research on the genre of space opera. Space opera is generally considered the least sophisticated form of science fiction, and remains underrepresented in scholarly research. Yet, a considerable part of the greatest science fiction published over the past three decades has been space opera. Specifically, it has been New Space Opera (NSO), a renewed, innovative form of space opera that arose during the second half of the 1980s. The NSO uses space opera's core elements of adventure and conflict to both entertain and address serious contemporary social, political, and economic issues. The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that the NSO is an exceptionally suitable form to provide social commentary. I will show that the NSO is an innovation of the Classic Space Opera (CSO) in terms of both form and content, that the critical and satirical space operas written during the 1960s and 1970s aided this innovation, and that the perceived unsophisticated and clichéd nature of the Classic Space Opera (CSO) actually encouraged the development of the NSO. Furthermore, through a close-reading analysis of US-American author Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy (2013-2015) and Scottish author Iain M. Banks' *Culture* novels *Surface Detail* (2010) and *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012), which are typical examples of NSO novels, I will analyze how the narrative strategies of estrangement, defamiliarization, affect, and the *novum*, which are integral to the speculative and imaginative nature of space opera, are employed to provide social commentary on topics such as the oppression and dehumanization of cultural others, and on issues of identity and subjectivity formation.

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## Introduction

“All fiction is genre and all genre is literature!”

“There are many bad books. There are no bad genres.”

- Ursula K. Le Guin, *Words Are My Matter*

*“Because that’s what space opera is all about: scale. We read the stuff to get blown away by the vastness of space, the immensity of time, the sheer mind-numbing size of big dumb objects that are bigger than any other big dumb objects. If a story doesn’t expand to fill every nook and cranny of your imagination, it just ain’t space opera.”*

- Paul Kincaid, in a review of *The New Space Opera*

“Science fiction is for real.

Space opera is for fun. Generally.”

- Brian W. Aldiss, *Space Opera: An Anthology of Way Back When Futures*

Space opera is probably the least respected yet most common and commercially successful form of science fiction (SF); the form is loved by SF’s general readership, yet despised by literary critics and authors who want to be taken seriously. Space opera is one of the biggest subgenres of SF. The popularity of the classic space opera stories in the pulp magazines of the 1920s and ‘30s helped establish SF as a genre (Westfahl 197), and over the past four decades the subgenre has delivered many bestsellers. As Kathryn Cramer and David G. Hartwell indicate in the introduction of their work *The Space Opera Renaissance*, most writers,

readers, reviewers, and critics of science fiction “agree that good new space opera is one of the most notable features of the current SF literature” (0.1). Furthermore, of all the subgenres of SF, space opera is the least tied to realism and scientific and technological accuracy. This makes the subgenre particularly suitable for inventive and speculative explorations of various themes; for instance, explorations about the influence of change on humans and on human society. As renowned space opera author Iain M. Banks explained in an interview with fellow space opera writers Alastair Reynolds and Peter F. Hamilton, for him space opera is about wish fulfillment, about thinking up things and aspects you wish would be around now and speculating how these aspects could affect society and human beings, and this does not require realism (04:00-04:07; 21:40-22:30). Space opera explores the limits of the imagination and shows that it is possible to think differently.

But what exactly *is* space opera? At the most basic level, space opera could be considered to refer to vast, colorful adventure stories in space “which have a calculatedly romantic element” (Stableford and Langford n.p.). Think, for instance, of the immensely popular *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* franchises. However, as Cramer and Hartwell point out, when examining space opera more closely it becomes clear that the subgenre is quite complex, and that there is no general agreement nor a clear-cut definition “as to what [space opera] is, which writers are the best examples, or even which works are space opera...” (0.2). Still, two main types of space opera can be distinguished; namely, “Classic” Space Opera, and “New” Space Opera. Classic Space Operas (CSOs), which first appeared in the 1920s in pulp magazines, are adventure stories set in space, with a heavy emphasis on conflicts and violence, simple, formulaic plots, a fairly simplistic writing style, and the themes and structures addressed and depicted tend to be rather conservative – that is, the stories are largely male-oriented, they are very much about empire building and imperialism, and the social, political, and economic structures they depict tend to be similar to those present on

Earth (Caroti 12:54-12:58; 15:12-15:24). According to Jerome Winter, the new space opera (NSO), conceived in the late 1980s by science fiction authors who took the generally despised subgenre seriously, can be seen as a sophisticated re-harnessing of CSO characteristics, an attempt “to systematically rehabilitate the ideological presumptions of [classic] space opera” (2): NSOs feature elaborate plots, complex themes and structures, “high literary standards, [and] significant political commentary” (Levy qtd. in Caroti 7.29). While it is still at heart an adventure story in space, and while conflict remains an important aspect, conflict and space adventure now serve to both entertain, and address serious contemporary social, political, and economic issues.

The difficulty of defining space opera is caused in part by the stigma attached to the subgenre. In 1941 the term “space opera” was coined and defined by Wilson Tucker, and this definition had a negative connotation attached to it. As Cramer and Hartwell explain, Tucker’s definition referred to bad science fiction hackwork in general: “there was little sense ... of ‘space opera’ meaning anything other than ‘hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn’ SF stories of any kind” (30.9). Although the definition of space opera changed somewhat over time, the negative connotation never really left. That is, until the arrival of the NSO in the second half of the 1980s. The NSO helped put space opera back on the map as a respectable subgenre of science fiction. From the 1980s onwards much of the greatest work of science fiction has been new space opera (Clute 69), and according to Cramer and Hartwell, between the 1980s and the 2000s the Hugo Award for best novel – a prestigious award in the field of science fiction and fantasy literature – generally went to space opera novels (0.2).

Additionally, as Simone Caroti indicates in *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks* regarding the potential of the NSO, “via the pyrotechnics, the infernally complicated gyrations of the plot, and the estranged voices of characters assembled out of a mélange of dream-visions, modern space opera tells us things that are arguably more important for our life today than the things

classic SF told us were for our life back then” (7.2).

The aim of this research is to demonstrate that the form of the NSO allows authors a lot of speculative freedom, and has therefore emerged as an exceptionally suitable form to explore and provide social commentary on topics such as the oppression and dehumanization of cultural others, issues of identity and subjectivity formation, and on problematic dichotomies such as mind – matter, human – non-human, man – woman, and self – other, which support oppressive, dehumanizing, and discriminatory practices. In order to demonstrate this, I will argue that the perception of the CSO as unsophisticated and unsuitable for addressing serious issues contributed to the development of space opera as a critical medium, which in turn led to the emergence of the NSO. For this analysis, an examination of the characteristics and general perception of the CSO is essential. Furthermore, I will argue that as the genre is not tied to realism and known for exploring speculative scientific and technological developments, it is free to experiment with unconventional and innovative contexts, characters, time lapses, and settings, which make it very suitable to explore the aforementioned topics. I will demonstrate this through a close reading analysis of Iain M. Banks’ *Culture* novels *Surface Detail* (2010) and *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012), and Ann Leckie’s *Imperial Radch* trilogy (2013-2015), focusing on the employment of the narrative strategies of estrangement, defamiliarization, affect, and the *novum*, which are integral to the speculative and imaginative nature of space opera.

To demonstrate that the NSO is a very suitable form to provide social commentary, this thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is devoted to establishing a clear understanding of the background and workings of the NSO. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the perception of the CSO as unliterary hackwork and unsuitable for addressing serious issues contributed to the emergence of the NSO as a form suitable for the expression of social commentary. To do this, I will examine the characteristics of the CSO, and demonstrate that

the NSO is an innovation of the CSO in terms of both form and content. Furthermore, I will argue that the critical and satirical space operas written during the 1960s and 1970s were a response to the perceived unliterary and unsophisticated nature of the CSO. Subsequently, I will argue that these critical and satirical space operas inspired the emergence of the NSO: a form of space opera that provides the ‘larger-than-life’ aspect of the CSO with a playful yet critical edge, and that uses the speculative nature of the form to provide social commentary.

Chapter two and three are devoted to the analysis of Banks’ *Surface Detail* (2010) and *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012), and Leckie’s *Imperial Radch* Trilogy (2013-2015) respectively. In both chapters, the analysis will focus on the narrative strategies of estrangement, defamiliarization, and the *novum*, which are important aspects of the NSO and which encourage speculative freedom. In chapter two, I will examine Banks’ *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* and demonstrate how these narrative techniques are employed to provide social commentary; specifically, I will demonstrate that these narrative techniques are used to address and reflect on practices of dehumanization and the oppression of cultural others, problematic dichotomies such as mind – matter, human – non-human, and self – other, and issues of identity formation and sense of self. In chapter three, I will analyze the *Imperial Radch Trilogy* and demonstrate how the aforementioned narrative strategies are employed to engage with social justice issues, such as gender inequality, the distinction between citizens and non-citizens and humans and non-humans, and the oppression of cultural others. In both chapters, the analysis will be based on a posthuman understanding of identity formation. The narrative strategies of estrangement, defamiliarization, and the *novum*, and the notion of posthuman identities will be addressed right after this outline.

The three chapters will be followed by a general conclusion, in which I examine and reflect on my findings, and suggest some interesting topics for further research.



## Posthuman Identities, Estrangement, Defamiliarization, and the Novum.

Key to my analysis of how the novels engage with social justice issues is an understanding of posthuman identity; specifically, I understand posthuman identity as an embodied and entangled sense of self. The traditional notion of the human subject emphasizes that there is a true, core essence that identifies “the” human subject, that the human subject has a clearly defined, fixed outline, and that the human subject is separate from the wider, material world. In this perception, which is modeled on the white, able-bodied, middle or upper class, heterosexual male, sense of self is equated with mind and perceived as separate from the material world. That is, identity is perceived as a stable, unchanging essence in our heads that determines our sense of self and that is unaffected by changes in our bodies or environments (Vint 6). This traditional notion of (human) identity is grounded in and supports problematic notions such as universalism, human exceptionalism, and dualisms such as mind – matter, inside – outside, human – non-human, and nature – culture, which in turn continue to inform and support many (body-based) oppressive and discriminatory practices. Specifically, as Sheryl Vint points out, the notion of one’s sense of self as separate from the wider material world fails to account for “the material action of ideology on the body” (9), and “evacuates our model of society from any ethical sense of intersubjectivity and collectivity” (13). Hence, instead of a sense of self as separate, we need a sense of self as interconnected with and in the wider material world; we need an embodied and entangled notion of identity.

The idea of posthuman identity provides such a notion of identity, and simultaneously challenges the traditional boundaries of the human subject and traditional notions of subjectivity in general. Rather than equating self with mind only and positing a notion of self as stable and as separate from the material world, posthuman identity emphasizes the relationship between embodiment, particularly an entangled type of embodiment, and

subjectivity, and highlights the flexible nature of identity. In this perception, one's sense of self is dynamic, a continuous interplay between both mind and matter. The posthuman subject is always already entangled in and with the material world, and continuously shapes and is being shaped by their surroundings. The idea of the embodied self as perpetually enmeshed in, with, and influenced by the wider material world troubles the mind – matter distinction, and reworks the idea of self as an immutable, immaterial essence. Additionally, the notion of posthuman identity emphasizes that “human subject” and “subjectivity” have no fixed outline, thus displacing the universalist and human exceptionalist notion of the existence of a true, core essence that identifies “the” human subject, and deconstructing human – non-human, self – other, and inside – outside dichotomies. Consequently, the notion of posthuman identity allows us to experience the world and our place in it differently, and thus opens up a space for what Rosi Braidotti calls “an affirmative ethics of sustainable futures” (217), that is, an ethics attuned to social and environmental sustainability and justice.

Furthermore, the analysis of the novels in chapter two and three will be focused on a number of narrative and stylistic techniques; specifically, estrangement, defamiliarization, *novum*, and affect. These main four elements are important aspects of both space opera and science fiction as a whole. The effects of these aspects are generally established through the use of (a combination of) other stylistic and narrative devices, such as narration, focalization, characterization, voice, humor, metaphor, and imagery.

Estrangement is an integral aspect of the genre of science fiction. According to Darko Suvin, who was the first to attempt to establish a coherent poetics of science fiction, “SF takes off from a fictional (‘literary’) hypothesis and develops it with totalizing (‘scientific’) rigor. *The effect of such factual reporting of fictions is one of confronting a set normative system...with a point of view or look implying a new set of norms*” (6, emphasis added). This effect, established through the employment of various narrative and stylistic techniques, is

known as estrangement. Suvin's understanding of estrangement borrows the Russian Formalists' notion of *ostranenie*, meaning 'to make strange' (Suvin 6; Parrinder 37). Parrinder indicates that the Russian formalists, notably Victor Shklovsky, proposed *ostranenie* as "the effect of a variety of stylistic devices designed to counter habitualization and to remove objects from the 'automatism of perception'" (39). This effect is known as defamiliarization, to 'make strange' "familiar, everyday experiences...and to portray the world to be discovered by the reader as if for the first time" (Gavins 196). Suvin further expands on this by using Brecht's notion of *Verfremdungseffekt* (Suvin 6; Parrinder 37). He points out that for Brecht, who used the concept in relation to theatre plays, "a representation which estranges is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (6). Consequently, an important aspect of the concept of estrangement, as proposed by Suvin, is the interplay between defamiliarization and familiarization. As Parrinder notes, in Suvin's understanding, estranged fiction works to counter habitualization, but may also "make us feel at home in a particular future provided that it offers a new angle of perception and so familiarizes us with a different view of the present" (Parrinder 40). Estranged fiction both reveals, and allows us to perceive things in a new light, and presents the defamiliarized objects/subjects in a way that allows us to become familiar with them.

Moreover, essential to science fiction and to the creation of estrangement is the *novum* (novelty, innovation), a concept originally by Ernst Bloch which Suvin expands on:

a novum of cognitive innovation is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality... [I]t's novelty is 'totalizing' in the sense that it entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects thereof (and that it is therefore a means by which the whole tale can be analytically grasped). (64)

Although, as Suvin states, it is impossible to provide a static definition of the *novum*, as its

situationality and processuality, which codetermine the *novum*, are always unique and vary and thus cannot be anticipated, it is possible to distinguish different scopes, “running from the minimum of one discrete new ‘invention’ (gadget, technique, phenomenon, relationship) to the maximum of a setting (spatiotemporal locus), agent (main character or characters), and/or relations basically new and unknown in the author’s environment” (64). Furthermore, it is important to note that in space opera, and in the genre of science fiction at large, the *novum* is generally not metaphysical in nature. Thus, whereas space opera is not tied to the laws of physics, the postulated innovation has to be explained in a way that makes the reader understand that it is not (based on) magic. Although there are science fiction novels that touch upon subjects that are usually considered as metaphysical or that are not necessarily accepted as belonging to the realm of physics – such as the subject of souls, which is an important element of Peter F. Hamilton’s *Nights Dawn* space opera trilogy (1996-99) – these novels tend to explain these subjects in a scientific rather than a metaphysical manner.

### The New Space Operas of Iain M. Banks and Ann Leckie

I have chosen to look at US-American author Ann Leckie’s debut trilogy, *Imperial Radch*, and the two final *Culture* novels from Scottish writer Iain M. Banks, because I think these authors represent two distinct voices in the field of the NSO, and their works have made quite an impact in the field of science fiction at large.<sup>1</sup> Banks is a renowned science fiction author whose works have positively influenced the standing of science fiction. He is best known for his thought-provoking writing style, his staunchly left-wing views, and his blending and twisting of genre conventions and narrative styles (Caroti 7, 13). His *Culture*

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<sup>1</sup> Banks’ *Culture* series consists of the novels *Consider Phlebas* (1987), *The Player of Games* (1988), *Use of Weapons* (1990), *The State of the Art* (1991), *Excession* (1996), *Inversions* (1998), *Look to Windward* (2000), *Matter* (2008), *Surface Detail* (2010), and *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012), and Leckie’s *Imperial Radch* trilogy consists of the novels *Ancillary Justice* (2013), *Ancillary Sword* (2014), and *Ancillary Mercy* (2015).

novels have greatly contributed to the revaluation of space opera; they have been integral to the popularization and establishment of the NSO at the end of the 80s and early 90s, which in turn helped put space opera back on the map as a respectable subgenre of science fiction. His *Culture* novels emerged on the cutting edge of science fiction, and were a huge commercial success. Cramer and Hartwell indicate that, as a result, at the beginning of the 1990s Banks' work provided the foremost model for the NSO in the UK (0.28). According to Caroti, since the publication of the first *Culture* novel, *Consider Phlebas* (1987), "space opera has been smuggling large amounts of serious discourse under the guise of a romp through space" (7.2).

Due to the popularity and inventiveness of Banks' *Culture* novels, quite some research has been conducted on the earliest *Culture* novels – specifically the first three novels have been examined extensively due to their inventiveness – especially concerning their departure from classic space opera, the utopian nature of the Culture, and the political structure of the Culture and how this contributes to the novels' utopian and innovative nature. Since Banks' *Culture* series is rather large, and since quite some research has been conducted on the earlier novels in the series, I have chosen to focus on the last two novels from the series, *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* respectively, as not much research has been conducted on these novels yet. Additionally, since *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* are the final two novels in the *Culture* series, they could be seen as the most mature stages of the series' development. The first *Culture* novels were very much about setting the Culture up and focusing on the inner workings of the Culture, and looking at the Culture and their dealings in relation to lesser developed and sophisticated societies. In the last two novels, however, the emphasis is more on the Culture's interrelations with other civilizations, and in particular with civilizations that are, in terms of power and development, on equal footing with the Culture. They emphasize that the Culture is just one of the many, many powerful and highly developed civilizations in the galaxy, thereby putting the culture of the Culture more into context. This

allows for a more critical perspective on the Culture itself.

Banks' *Culture* series is centered around the Culture, a civilization that was formed as a loose alliance between a number of humanoid, space-faring species.<sup>2</sup> At the time the stories of *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* take place, the Culture has been in existence for approximately ten thousand years. The Culture is a highly developed, inter-galactic, post-scarcity, utopian civilization, in which Artificial Intelligences (AIs) and humanoids happily coexist, and where nothing and nobody is exploited – not the environment, nor nonhuman animals, nor humans, nor artificial intelligence, nor sentient machines.<sup>3</sup> As Banks explains in his essay “A Few Notes on the Culture”:

[The Culture] is essentially an automated civilisation in its manufacturing processes, with human labour restricted to something indistinguishable from play, or a hobby. No machine is exploited, either; the idea here being that any job can be automated in such a way as to ensure that it can be done by a machine well below the level of potential consciousness. (np.)

The Culture is run by highly developed Artificial Intelligences (AIs) called Minds, “the very high-level AIs which were, by some distance, the most complicated and intelligent entities [...] in the whole galaxy wide meta-civilization” (*Surface Detail* 541). AIs are an important part of the Culture and, in Banks' words, make the Culture a two-sentience-types civilization (“A Few Notes”): a civilization that recognizes and incorporates both artificial and biological types of sentience as equally valid and valuable forms of sentience. Furthermore, all Culture citizens – both AIs and humans – have the freedom to pursue their own happiness, which includes the right to be how and who they want to be. The Culture very much values and

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<sup>2</sup> In science fiction, humanoid generally refers to (alien) beings whose physique is roughly comparable to that of human beings.

<sup>3</sup> A post-scarcity civilization is a civilization in which scarcity of resources and commodities, both essential and non-essential, is no longer an issue, and in which the process of extracting and converting raw materials into finished goods is (almost) completely automated, requiring practically no manual labor.

stimulates education, personal growth, and intellectual development, and all citizens always have options available to them to alter their mental and physical states according to their liking.

While the first seven *Culture* novels serve to set up the Culture as a highly sophisticated, utopian society, and an important player in the galactic scale of events, *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* put the culture of the Culture more in context. As Simone Caroti states, “the focus is far less on the Culture as the proactive Mary Worth of the earlier stories and much more on it as a participant in a complex web of largely peaceful relationships whose import extends across vaster volumes of space and greater numbers of sentients than before” (8.6). That is, the novels emphasize that the Culture is just one of many civilizations in the galaxy, and that a large number of those civilizations are as technologically developed as the Culture. Specifically, they demonstrate that the Culture has peers and is not an omnipotent society (8.6). For instance, in *Surface Detail* the Culture is involved in the “War of the Heavens”, a virtual war that is being fought between numerous highly developed civilizations over the legitimacy of the existence of virtual Hells. The depicted progression of this conflict underscores that the Culture’s power, although vast, still has its limitations, especially when faced with so called “equiv-tech” societies – societies of equivalent technological capabilities.

This is also emphasized in *The Hydrogen Sonata*, which deals with the upcoming event of the Subliming of the Gzilt, the Culture’s ‘sister’ civilization.<sup>4</sup> The Gzilt took part in the negotiations that formed the Culture, but decided at the last moment not to join themselves. The relation between the Culture and the Gzilt has always remained friendly.

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<sup>4</sup> Subliming refers to the process of elevating oneself up out of the Real (that is, the dimension we currently find ourselves in) and (subliming) into what could be described as a higher and much more complex dimension. It is generally perceived as the final developmental stage civilizations can reach. The event of Subliming is also referred to as Enfolding, and the Sublime as the Great Enfold.

However, when the Culture ship *Mistake Not...* rescues Gzilt citizen Vyr Cossont from an assassination attempt by a part of the Gzilt Military, and tries to assist her in completing her mission, it becomes clear that the Gzilt, whose ships and technological features are of equivalent power to the Culture's, is not an easy opponent. This struggle emphasizes both the power limitations of the Culture, but also their political and diplomatic limitations. In face of the grander scheme of things, the Culture cannot just take over the Gzilt government and steer the situation into a direction the Culture would approve of, nor can they threaten the lesser 'scavenger' species to behave as the Culture would like them to behave. This really underscores the notion that the Culture is just one of many, many civilizations in the galaxy, and that they are not omnipotent.

Subsequently, while Banks is an established science fiction author, Leckie represents a new voice in the science fiction community. Additionally, she represents a female voice in a subgenre that is dominated by men. Her *Imperial Radch* novels have won several prestigious science fiction awards, and her novel *Ancillary Justice* (2013) even became the first novel in the field of science fiction to have won all the major awards in the field: *Ancillary Justice* won the Hugo Award for best novel in 2014, the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2014, and the Nebula Award in 2014; *Ancillary Sword* (2014) and *Ancillary Mercy* (2015) won the Locus Award in 2015 and 2016 respectively, and *Ancillary Justice* and *Ancillary Sword* won the British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) Award in 2013 and 2014 respectively. As of yet, very little critical research has been done on Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy.

The *Imperial Radch* series is set thousands of years into the future – so far into the future that the planet of origin of the human race is no longer common knowledge. The dominant human empire is the long-lived, imperialist, class-based empire of the Radch, ruled by Anaander Mianaai. Radchaai space ships house, and are controlled by, artificial intelligences (AIs), which in turn are programmed to obey Anaander. As only humans can



become Radchaai citizens, AIs are neither considered nor treated as citizens. At the time of the story, the Radch has been an empire for approximately 3000 years, and all that time Anaander has been its ruler. The longevity of both the empire and its ruler have been made possible by a technological feat that allows both ship AIs and Anaander's human consciousness to be transferred into and take control of human 'host' bodies. The 'host' bodies, which are called ancillaries as they are basically ancillary units of star ships, are provided – involuntarily – by enslaved people from newly annexed societies. Ancillaries are used as soldiers; the AI of a big star ship can control over 2000 ancillaries at the same time, and ships always have host bodies in store in case an ancillary unit needs to be replaced because it gets 'damaged' or 'destroyed' during combat. When an artificial consciousness is transferred into an ancillary body, the biological consciousness of the body dies. As a result, outside of the Radch, ancillary units are known as 'corpse soldiers'. Anaander Mianaai's consciousness is also distributed over hundreds of bodies, in order to thwart assassination attempts and to ensure obedience to the leader throughout the empire. However, it turns out that maintaining integrity of subjectivity is nearly impossible when one's consciousness is distributed over so many bodies – after 3000 years, Anaander has become divided among herself, she has literally become of two minds. The series tells the story of Breq, the sole surviving ancillary unit of the destroyed Radchaai troop-carrier starship Justice of Toren, her journey to expose the split subjectivity of Anaander Mianaai, and the difficulties she faces on this journey as a nonhuman and thus a non-citizen.

### Definitional Difficulties

To properly understand the general standing of space opera and the bias against the subgenre, it is important to consider how space opera got its pejorative connotation and how the definition of the genre developed over the years. As previously mentioned, there is no one,

clear-cut definition as to what space opera is. This definitional difficulty is caused in part by the stigma attached to the subgenre; that is, the term has a pejorative connotation, “designating not a subgenre or mode at all, but the worst form of formulaic hackwork: really bad SF” (Cramer and Hartwell 0.3). The term space opera is an adaptation of the terms “soap opera” and “horse opera”, and was coined and defined in 1941 by Wilson Tucker: “Westerns are called ‘horse operas,’ the morning housewife tear-jerkers are called ‘soap operas.’ For the hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn spaceship yarn, or world-saving for that matter, we offer ‘space opera’” (qtd. in Westfahl 197).

In this pioneering definition, space opera was a pejorative term that specifically referred to science fiction hackwork, “hackneyed sf filled with stereotypes borrowed from Westerns” (Cramer and Hartwell 0.8), and not to “good”, literary space adventure stories (0.6). In other words, what initially made a story ‘earn’ the title of space opera did not so much depend on its setting, but on the style of writing. Although over time the definition became more specific with regards to setting – that is, the term was no longer applied to just any type of science fiction, but specifically to science fiction stories that were for the main part set in space and that involved some form of space travel – the pejorative implication never completely left (0.6; 0.11). Additionally, from the 1940s onward, prominent authors, critics, and magazine editors began to openly distance themselves from and abandon space opera in favor of more mature engagements with science fiction; that is, in favor of stories that “captivated readers not with derring-do but with thoughtful discussions and imaginative portrayals of future prospects” (Westfahl 201). Consequently, as Cramer and Hartwell indicate, prior to the emergence of the NSO, barring a few authors such as Samuel R. Delany, Jack Vance, and Brian W. Aldiss, no self-respecting science fiction author would consciously and earnestly engage with (writing) space opera (0.3).

During the 1960s and the 1970s, the definition of the term space opera began to

change somewhat; that is, as Cramer and Hartwell point out, the meaning of the term “began to be regularly confused with fondness for outworn, clunky, old-fashioned SF, guilty pleasures” (0.11). Although it still did not necessarily refer to good science fiction, the definition was narrowed down and became more focused “on space fiction of a particular sort, instead of using it as a general synonym for crud” (0.11). Subsequently, in 1974, New Wave author Brian W. Aldiss provided what was in effect a redefinition of space opera as “the good old stuff” (0.17). That is, the term space opera attained a nostalgic connotation, and was no longer merely a synonym for badly written science fiction. Aldiss also abandoned the horse opera analogy. Thus, in his definition, space opera was no longer analogous to horse opera. It is important to note here that in Aldiss redefinition, all pulp-era adventure-oriented science fiction, regardless of literariness or setting, is seen as space opera. This was in line with the New Wave perception of space opera, but a departure from previously accepted definitions in which science fiction adventure stories – especially those that were well written – and space opera were not necessarily the same thing.<sup>5</sup>

In 1978 Lester Del Rey, who was fervently opposed to the New Wave movement and its perceptions of space opera and science fiction in general, proposed a new definition of space opera which re-incorporated the horse opera analogy of earlier definitions, and emphasized the importance of the entertainment value of space opera. Consequently, focusing on entertainment as the strength of space opera, Del Rey, together with his wife and their publishing company Del Rey Books, succeeded in transforming the definition and the image of the subgenre. According to Cramer and Hartwell, Del Rey’s primary model for space opera became *Star Wars* which, “in the popular mind...was conflated with *Star Trek* fiction to contour the new image of space opera: By the early 1980s, ‘space opera’ was a code term in U.S. marketing circles for bestselling popular SF entertainment” (0.25).

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<sup>5</sup> The New Wave perception of space opera will be discussed in the first chapter.

The *Star Trek* franchise, which started out as a television series in 1966 and branched out to other media over the following decades, really helped popularize space opera among a wide audience. Specifically, as Westfahl indicates, *Star Trek* “was the first form of space opera to attract a significant female audience” (204). This was mainly because *Star Trek* was the first space opera to incorporate the ambience of a romance novel; in doing so, the franchise brought something new to the subgenre, and this helped to make it widely popular. The successes and popularity of both *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* brought about various other space opera enterprises across different media, such as film, comic strips, video games, novels, radio series, and television series. As a result, by the 1980s space opera had become a part of pop-culture. Cramer and Hartwell indicate that from the 1980s onward, in the popular mind,

‘space opera’ meant, and still generally means, colorful, dramatic, large-scale science fiction adventure, competently and sometimes beautifully written, usually focused on a sympathetic, heroic central character and plot action (this bit is what separates it from other literary postmodernisms) and usually set in the relatively distant future and in space or on other worlds, characteristically optimistic in tone. It often deals with war, piracy military virtues, and very large-scale action, large stakes. (0.26)

### Space Opera and Scholarly Research

Although the genre of science fiction has generated criticism ever since *Amazing Stories* founder Hugo Gernsback coined the term science fiction in 1929, serious critical engagements with genre remained rather scarce until the second half of the twentieth century. According to Istvan Csiscery-Ronay Jr., literary critics tended to associate science fiction with the unsophisticated style of the popular pulp magazines, and treated the genre as “sub-literary, not

worthy of notice by critics of taste” (45). This attitude began to shift somewhat after World War II, as the reputation of elite literature declined (45), but it took until the founding of *Extrapolation* in 1959 by Thomas D. Clareson, the first academic journal devoted to science fiction, for science fiction criticism to really take off. However, as the genre was not recognized as an acceptable academic specialty prior to the 1980s – and even then, as Csiscery-Ronay indicates, it was only granted standing on the periphery of the academe (52) – scholars interested in researching science fiction had to approach the genre “through the lenses of other periods and genres, establishing literary genealogies that justified careful scholarly attention” (51). Especially the critical engagements of feminist critics, neo-Marxist critics, and Utopian and American Studies scholars with science fiction have been essential for the further development science fiction criticism, and for the establishment of the genre as an academic specialty (52).

Since then, the genre has generated a large and diverse body of scholarship. Particularly the past four decades have seen a rapid growth in science fiction criticism, as “sf has come to be perceived as centrally relevant in many explorations of contemporary culture” (Hollinger 232). This is in part due to rapid developments in the fields of science and technology, which have been challenging the traditional boundaries and notions of the human subject – and the notion of subjectivity in general – and inspire fantasies of posthuman futures and societies.<sup>6</sup> Science fiction, known for the portrayal of speculative and alternative futures, societies, and socio-political and economic structures, has proven very suitable to address the possible consequences rapid scientific and technological developments could have on society and on traditional notions of subjectivity. Consequently, the genre began to elicit critical responses from posthumanist critics, but also from social theorists, most notably Donna Haraway and Fredric Jameson, who drew on science-fictional concepts “to explain

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<sup>6</sup> Posthuman both as in what comes after the human, and what comes after humanism.

contemporary social conditions” (Csiscery-Ronay, Jr. 55). Additionally, from the 2000s onwards, there have been a lot of powerful engagements with the genre from the field of ecocriticism, due to an increasing awareness about and attention to anthropogenic environmental issues. For instance, the work *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (2014), edited by Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson; Stacy Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010); *Environmentalism in the Realm of Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* (2012), edited by Chris Baratta; and numerous essays published on the topic in scholarly magazines such as *Science Fiction Studies*, *Utopian Studies*, *Environmental Humanities*, and *Green Letters*.

Yet, despite all this, space opera is still largely being ignored by academia and literary scholars. Although the body of science fiction scholarship continues to grow, only a very small fraction of this body consists of explicit engagements with space opera. This is really quite a shame since, thanks to the NSO, space opera has developed itself into a critical medium. It is also rather odd, considering that the most common form of science fiction is space opera, and that a considerable part of the greatest science fiction published over the past four decades is space opera (Westfahl 197, Clute 69). The lack of critical engagements with space opera, both within the field of literary scholarship at large, and within the field of science fiction studies, is indicative of a still existing bias against the subgenre. Space opera is still not completely being taken seriously; it is still generally being dismissed as unsophisticated, superficial, and unliterary, unworthy of serious critical attention. This stigma has caused quite some controversy surrounding the application of the term space opera. Namely, due to this stigma, (science fiction) authors who want to prevent their works from being ignored by literary critics and a more general readership generally try to avoid having their works labeled as space opera. This controversy also impedes the establishment of one, clear definition of space opera which everyone agrees on.

Consequently, space opera remains underrepresented in academia; there are only a few scholarly works devoted to critically exploring, analyzing, and/or attempting to define and historicize the subgenre. Of those works, only a very small number is concerned with the NSO. For instance, in 2006 the anthology *The Space Opera Renaissance* was published, edited by Kathryn Cramer and David G. Hartwell. This is the first work that attempted to anthologize the NSO. It provides an examination of the changing definitions of space opera from the 1940s until the 2000s, and incorporates (short) space opera stories from the pulp fiction era, focusing on stories that inspired NSO authors, to the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, this anthology does not contain a substantial theoretical overview of the genre, nor of the shift from classic to new space opera. Similarly, although the anthologies *The New Space Opera* (2007) and *The New Space Opera 2* (2009), edited by Gardner Dozois and Jonathan Strahan, contain great examples of short NSO stories, these anthologies contain no theoretical expositions concerning the NSO and its characteristics. The first critical, full-length, in-depth study of new space opera was published in 2016, Jerome Winter's *Science Fiction, New Space Opera, and Neoliberal Globalism: Nostalgia for Infinity*. Providing close readings of various NSO novels, this study aims to demonstrate that the NSO's political allegories are a response to the contemporary ideology of neoliberalism.

Unfortunately, and indicative of the still existing bias against space opera, these works are currently the only full-length, direct studies of contemporary space opera available, and of those works only Winter's is really devoted to clearly outlining and examining the characteristics of the NSO. Scholarly material that directly addresses the CSO or the NSO and/or the development of space opera from the CSO to the NSO is largely non-existent. Hence, it has taken me a lot of time and effort to find adequate references. Specifically, for information on the CSO and the development of space opera from the CSO to the NSO I had to abstract a lot of information from indirect sources, as there are not many scholarly sources

available that address space opera directly or seriously. Indeed, space opera is mostly addressed indirectly; for instance, in texts that discuss the characteristics and developments of written SF during specific periods of time more broadly, such as Adam Roberts' "The Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, 2: The Pulps", Brian Attebery's "The Magazine Era: 1926-1960", and John Clute's "Science Fiction From 1980 to the Present". For the NSO the pool of adequate scholarly sources was even scarcer, and I had to turn to non-academic sources for extra information. Hence, as Gary Westfahl indicates, "necessarily, anyone discussing the nature, parameters and history of space opera at length breaks new ground" (197).



## Classic and Satirical Space Operas: The Roots of the New Space Opera

### Introduction

Prior to the late 1980s, space opera was generally considered as the least sophisticated mode of science fiction. As Jerome Winter puts it in his work *Science Fiction, New Space Opera and Neoliberal Globalism* (2016), this perception was a result “not only [of the subgenre’s] aesthetic failings but also [of] its ideological tendencies: its quasi-fascistic fascination with supermen and super weapons, its abiding racism, sexism and class bigotry, as well as its juvenile wish-fulfilment fantasy” (2). It had come to be seen as a form of naïve entertainment, incompatible, “even inimical, to the presentation of serious ethical issues” (Hardesty 116). However, this slowly began to change from the 1980s onward, thanks to the innovative space operas written by authors such as Iain M. Banks, Dan Simmons, Vernor Vinge, and Ken MacLeod. As a result of these authors’ unwavering belief in the possibilities of the form, space opera arguably became, as John Clute points out, “the period’s [1980-2000] most interesting platform for the analysis, and the acting out in the creative imagination, of human possibilities” (71). This innovative type of space opera, the NSO, helped put the genre back on the map as a respectable subgenre of science fiction.

In this chapter, I will establish a clear understanding of the background and workings of the NSO, and demonstrate that the perceived unsophisticated and clichéd nature of the CSO contributed to the development of space opera as a critical medium. I will argue that the NSO is an innovation of the classic, pulp-era space opera – the CSO – in terms of both form and content, and that the critical and satirical space operas written during the 1960s and 1970s inspired this innovation, engendering a form of space opera that provides the ‘larger – than –

life' aspect of the CSO with a playful yet critical edge, which in turn opens up a space for social commentary. Additionally, I will argue that both the critical and satirical space operas, and the NSO emerged as a reaction to the perceived unsophisticated, static, and un-critical nature of the CSO. To demonstrate that the NSO is an innovation of the CSO and to be able to properly reflect on the impact of the NSO, this examination will include an account of the characteristics the CSO, focusing on what made the CSO popular with readers yet despised by critics, prominent magazine editors, and authors who wanted to be taken seriously. This examination will also include an account of the New Wave perception of science fiction, focusing on those aspects that influenced the development and emergence of the NSO.

### The Early Beginnings of Space Opera: Characteristics and Reception

Although there is no general consensus regarding the origins of space opera, it can be argued that the classic space opera was born during the second half of the 1920s, at the beginning of science fiction's so called "magazine era".<sup>7</sup> While there are space adventure stories that precede science fiction's magazine era, it was during the early years of the magazine era that classic space opera really became established and popularized. Writers such as E. E. "Doc" Smith, Jack Williamson, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Edmond Hamilton, Ray Cummings, and John W. Campbell – Campbell both as author, and as editor of the prominent pulp science fiction magazine *Astounding* from 1938 until 1971 – all played an important role in the establishment and popularization of the CSO. Especially Smith's *Skylark* series was fundamental for the establishment of the CSO – Gary Westfahl identifies Smith's *The Skylark of Space* (1928), which was first published in Hugo Gernsback's science fiction magazine

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<sup>7</sup> Science fiction's magazine era refers to the period between 1926 and the 1960s, when science fiction was mainly known for the stories published in popular science fiction pulp-magazines, such as *Amazing Stories*, *Wonder Stories*, and *Astounding*. These pulp-magazines greatly contributed to the establishment of science fiction as a genre. The era ended in the 1950s, when "sf ceased to be identified primarily as a magazine form" (Attebery, 46).

*Amazing Stories*, as CSO's foundational text (198).<sup>8</sup> However, at the time of publication reactions to Smith's *Skylark* series were polarized. Whereas literary critics critiqued the unliterariness of the writing style and the overall lack of characterization and plotting, the average pulp-magazine reader lauded the scale of the action and adventure displayed in the story.

The emphasis on action and adventure played an important role in the popularization of the CSO. CSOs rapidly became immensely popular with readers; as pointed out by Westfahl, the 1930s turned out to be the golden age of the CSO (199). Space adventure stories offered thrills that were not available in the more conventional 'scientifiction' stories that Gernsback promoted (Westfahl 199; Roberts 257).<sup>9</sup> Specifically, CSOs presented readers with fast-paced, large-scale action, and an exciting new frontier – space. This new setting was accompanied by numerous new challenges and possibilities for adventure, glimpses of possible futures, exotic aliens, and scientific and technological marvels – the latter mainly focused on weapons and spaceships – and a tremendous sense of optimism. Additionally, since space represented a new frontier, both as a physically unexplored place and as a relatively new fictional setting, many CSO writers borrowed conventions from – adventure heavy – frontier literature, such as westerns and nautical fiction (Westfahl 199). This led to the frequent use of clichéd conventions, leading Wilson Tucker in 1941 to incorporate the horse opera analogy in his definition of space opera. It is also the reason why Brian Attebery invoked the then editor of *Astounding* F. Orlin Tremaine's term "thought-variant story" for pulp science fiction. Attebery argues that "in a sense all the stories published in the magazines

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<sup>8</sup> Hugo Gernsback holds an important position in the history of science fiction; many fans and critics of the genre perceive Gernsback as the father of science fiction (Roberts 257). He was the editor and founder of science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories*, and coined the term science fiction in 1929. The prestigious Hugo Awards, annual awards for the best science fiction and fantasy literature, were named after him for his contribution to early science fiction.

<sup>9</sup> Prior to coining the term science fiction, Gernsback used the term "scientifiction". The focus of these type of stories was on science, and not so much on action and adventure.

of the 1920s and 1930s were thought variants: jazz-like improvisations on familiar themes” (37).

Furthermore, Adam Roberts emphasizes that, as was common for most popular pulp science fiction, the ground of the appeal of the CSOs published in the pulp-magazines “was fundamentally *affective*” (259, emphasis in original), geared towards creating certain feelings, “with a particular emphasis on excitement, wonder, sexual arousal and self-satisfaction, mediating the emotional response of their readers *through* technology and science” (259, emphasis in original). These affects were attuned to a particular audience, which conveniently corresponded to the main audience of pulp science fiction in general: predominantly white, randy, heterosexual males, “open to the beguiling fantasy that there might exist another world, or another time, in which [they] would be more of a sexual and individual success than is the case in [their] actual life” (262).

Although the CSO’s intended audience appreciated the emphasis on feelings such as excitement, adventure, personal fulfillment, and sexual arousal, there were important stylistic downsides to the emphasis of these affects, which in turn negatively impacted their critical reception. As Roberts indicates, these stories essentially embodied “a deep attachment to the aesthetics of Sensibility” (259), and then specifically a (hyper-)masculinized version of sensibility. While this was chiefly responsible for their appeal, it also caused CSOs to be read as crude and vulgar by critics (259). Specifically, the particular affects emphasized in CSOs entailed an excessive focus on action and adventure. Thus, in most CSOs, traditional plot and character conventions were subordinated to action and adventure, making them susceptible to succumbing to simple, formulaic plots, stereotypical characters, a fairly simplistic writing style, a naïve reverence towards scientific gadgets and outer space settings, and overall literary mediocrity (Westfahl 198; Attebery 35). The formulaic-ness of plot and characterization is evident in Brian Aldiss’ description of the conventions of the CSO:

Ideally, the Earth must be in peril, there must be a quest and a man to match the mighty hour. That man must confront aliens and exotic creatures. Space must flow past the ports like wine from a pitcher. Blood must run down the palace steps, and ships launch out into the louring dark. There must be a woman fairer than the skies and a villain darker than a Black Hole. And all must come right in the end. (xii).

Due to their emphasis on specific affects and the ensuing excessive focus on action and adventure and neglect of plot and character conventions, CSOs were generally stylistically weak. As a result, most scholars perceived, and still perceive, CSOs as lacking a serious purpose, as merely “heady, escapist stuff, charging on without overmuch regard for logic or literacy, while often throwing off great images, excitements, and aspirations” (Aldiss xi-xii).

Additionally, the themes, tropes, and economic, social, and political structures addressed in the CSO tended to be rather static and conservative. It is important to note here that during the pulp-era the CSO was considered conservative for a different reason than it was from the 1960s onward. That is, to critics, editors, and more thoughtful authors at the time of the pulp-era, the CSO was conservative in nature because of its rather fixed, formulaic format; it was not innovative, nor was it trying or aspiring to be. From the 1960s onward, the CSO was considered conservative both for its lack of innovation, and for the ideological convictions it supported. For instance, protagonists were almost always white males, which at that time added to the static nature of character tropes of the CSO, and is nowadays also considered conservative. Non-white and/or non-male characters only served supporting roles; specifically, female characters either played the role of damsel in distress or femme fatale, and non-white characters were portrayed as either noble savages or savages. These character tropes were sustained and encouraged for a long time by various pulp magazine editors who, for instance, enforced a ban on black protagonists (Winter 38). Although there were some

CSOs that did have non-white and/or non-male protagonists, such as female author Leigh Brackett's short story "Enchantress of Venus" (1949), whose male protagonist Eric John Stark is black, it is important to note that at least throughout the 1930s, '40s, and '50s works like this remained highly exceptional. In addition, as Simone Caroti indicates, the CSO put forward a rather invariable and simplistic anthropocentric ethos "that saw the universe as fundamentally comprehensible by humans because it had been made for humans" (2.1-2). Instead of being open to experimenting with more ethical questions regarding the nature of the universe, the CSO perceived and treated this ethos as a given. Hence, while the outer space setting of the CSO initially was a novelty, this novelty was generally not explored in an innovative or meaningful way.

Moreover, regarding the conservative nature of the CSO, CSOs show a tendency towards wanting to preserve existing Western social, political, and economic conditions. In his work *Science Fiction, New Space Opera, and Neoliberal Globalism*, Jerome Winter argues that CSOs, which he refers to as pulp era space opera, were characterized by a distinct neoliberal attitude. That is, CSOs tended to promote Western, neoliberal systems, and did not experiment with innovative social, political, and economic structures. Rather, if alternative structures were depicted, they belonged to the enemy and were used to emphasize the superiority of the Western, neoliberal world-view. Additionally, Winter indicates that during the pulp era of space opera, neoliberalism was embraced across a wide spectrum of ideologies and "[began] to inform the technocultural practices and institutions of the interwar period" (27). Accordingly, in the CSO, the possibilities of science and technology were all perceived through a neoliberal lens, promoting a distinctively American sense of consumerism, individualism, nationalism, and imperialism (28-9). For instance, Winter points out that the "weaponry-dominated" space opera comics *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon* invoked a sense of American individualism that seemed "to validate neo-imperial and hegemonic uses of such

technological superiority that underpinned in the preceding century the frontier mythos of manifest destiny” (29). Both CSO comics were rife with xenophobic and imperialistic attitudes, and conveyed a passion for “hyper-advanced technology” which instilled “a hypnotic, distinctively American brand of enthusiasm for future progress in its eager consumers” (29).

Consequently, while the CSO was very popular with readers, it was decidedly less popular with critics, prominent magazine editors, and authors who wanted to be taken seriously. Magazine editors had a lot of influence, and from the 1940s onward prominent editors like Campbell, having grown tired with the rather static and conservative tropes of CSOs, pushed science fiction in a different direction, moving away from the CSO.<sup>10</sup> Campbell encouraged more serious, “mature” engagements with the genre; that is, engagements that explored thoughtful and ethical questions concerning future prospects, social dynamics, and the possible rules of the universe (Westfahl 201; Attebery 38). During the 1950s, Anthony Boucher, editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and Cele Goldsmith, then editor of *Amazing Stories*, encouraged both new and established writers to experiment with stylistics and narrative techniques, as they “looked for sophisticated themes and stylistic distinction” (Attebery 41). Accordingly, authors such as Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert A. Heinlein began to address fundamental questions about social dynamics and the structure of the universe, and started to experiment with different narrative and stylistic techniques (Westfahl 201; Attebery 39-40). Westfahl indicates that, “providing these important social and scientific speculations, Asimov, Heinlein, Clarke and similar-minded authors would recoil at suggestions that their works were merely space operas” (201).

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<sup>10</sup> I will note here that while Campbell had a progressive attitude regarding certain issues and greatly contributed to further the development of science fiction as a genre, Jerome Winter indicates that Campbell was one of the prominent editors enforcing the ban on black protagonists in pulp magazines (38).

## Responding to the Clichés: Satirical Space Operas and the New Wave

As a response to the perceived stereotypical tropes and plot lines of the CSO, the 1960s saw the emergence of the satirical space opera. According to Westfahl, satirical space operas were generated by a new generation of writers who renounced the CSO, but who were willing to make fun of it (203). Westfahl indicates that the earliest examples of satirical space operas are Harry Harrison's works *The Stainless Steel Rat* (1961) and *Bill, the Galactic Hero* (1965), which featured a lot of tongue-in-cheek humor (203). However, Harrison's parodies were not just meant to make fun of the CSO. Harrison was part of the British New Wave movement, a movement which emerged during the 1960s and which "declared space fiction over with" (Cramer and Hartwell 0.14). According to Cramer and Hartwell, one of the ways in which the New Wave tried to enforce their idea(l)s was by parody (0.15). Accordingly, Harrison's satirical space operas also served to deconstruct the CSO. The influence of both the New Wave's satirical space operas, and the New Wave's perception of science fiction on space opera will be further addressed later on in this subsection.

Another example of renowned satirical space operas are the space opera's by Polish author Stanislaw Lem. According to Westfahl, Lem's satirical space operas provide a non-Western take on space opera; his works *Tales of Pirx the Pilot* (1979), *The Star Diaries* (1976), and *Memoirs of a Space Traveler: Further Reminiscences of Ijon Tichy* (1982) "humorously critiqued Western space operas" (203).<sup>11</sup> Still, perhaps the best known satirical space opera is Douglas Adam's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), which was published as a book trilogy between 1979 and 1982, and aired as both a radio series in 1978, and a television series in 1981 (203). *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* mocks the CSO's

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<sup>11</sup> *Tales of Pirx the Pilot* was originally published in 1968 as *Opowieści o Pilotcie Pirxie*, and translated and published in English in 1979. *The Star Diaries* and *Memoirs of a Space Traveler* were originally published as one work titled *Dzienniki Gwiazdowe*, a collection of short stories that Lem expanded on in 1971, and were translated and published in 1976 and 1982 respectively.



emphasis on hyper-masculinity, super weapons, and ultra-violent aliens by, for instance, representing the destruction of Earth as a result of inter-galactic bureaucracy rather than a violent space battle, and depicting the alien species the Vogons as being feared by the entire galaxy for their terrible poetry rather than their physical superiority or possession of super weapons. Westfahl argues that “Adam’s success demonstrated that space opera was becoming part of popular culture, its tropes fair game for good-natured jokes” (203-4).

While the “golden age” of the satirical space opera was between the 1960s and the second half of the 1980s, satirical space operas are still being written, albeit sporadically. Contemporary examples include, but are not limited to, Yahtzee Croshaw’s *Will Save the Galaxy for Food* (2017), Simon Haynes’ *Hal Spacejock* (2012), Grant Naylor’s *Red Dwarf: Infinity Welcomes Careful Drivers* (1989), and John Scalzi’s *Redshirts* (2012).<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, as a reaction to the perceived unsophisticated and clichéd nature of the CSO, the New Wave movement also generated critical and satirical space operas. These space operas had important consequences for the development of the genre. As Lester Del Rey points out, the movement represented “a strong shift away from most of the traditions of science fiction” (253). That is, the New Wave had very specific perceptions of space opera and science fiction. According to Cramer and Hartwell, the New Wave declared (pulp-era) space opera to be dead (0.14). To understand the New Wave perception of and influence on space opera, it is important to note here that the New Wave conflated traditional science fiction with space opera. As Cramer and Hartwell indicate, the New Wave wanted to completely replace all traditional science fiction, and in the process “they conflated all SF adventure in distant futures or distant in space with space opera and said it was all bad, all literary history, and no longer a living apart of SF” (0.14). Most New Wave authors, critics,

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<sup>12</sup> *Red Dwarf: Infinity Welcomes Careful Drivers* is an adaptation of the then popular television series *Red Dwarf*. The name Grant Naylor is a combination of the last names of the show’s creators, Rob Grant and Doug Naylor, who wrote the book together.

and editors condemned traditional science fiction, which they considered to be poorly written and too occupied with speculative science rather than with the depiction of human drama or questions about the human condition (Latham 205-6). Specifically, as Rob Latham points out, Michael Moorcock, influential editor of the British SF magazine *New Worlds* and part of the New Wave movement, wanted science fiction to engage with the emerging counterculture of the 1960s (207). Moorcock argued that science fiction had a lot of potential, but that traditional SF lacked “commitment to higher literary values” (Latham 205). The New Wave was all about emphasizing and experimenting with stylistics, story structure, and literariness, and believed that SF, which they understood as speculative fiction rather than science fiction, “could and should be a genuine art, told with skill and passion, addressing the most serious issues and themes in a way that the genre, with its potent vocabulary of image and metaphor, was uniquely suited to do” (Latham 206).

Lester del Rey, fervent defender of space opera and opponent of the New Wave movement, very much disagreed with the New Wave notions that space opera was dead and that science fiction should be a genuine art. In 1978 he proposed a new definition of space opera in his book *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976: The History of a Subculture*: “Almost any story involving space, though it properly deals with those in which action takes precedence over other writing details. Analogous to horse opera for westerns” (Del Rey 325). Del Rey supported a perception of science fiction as non- or anti-literary, and argued that science fiction’s strength was entertainment (Cramer and Hartwell 0.23). Accordingly, in his book, Del Rey denied that any writer could set out to write SF as art (0.24). This was completely contrary to New Wave ideas, as New Wave authors “all believed that SF could be good art and that good writers could aspire to art through the new SF of inner space – if they discarded the traditions of hackwork (space opera)” (0.24). While the New Wave did not perceive the CSO as art, New Wave authors such as Brian W. Aldiss, Samuel R. Delany, and

M. John Harrison believed that space opera could be re-shaped into new, aesthetic forms that allowed for fictional explorations of both socially relevant themes and topics, and topics concerning scientific and technological developments without being tied to scientific facts, and that concurred with the New Wave idea of good science fiction. Subsequently, British New Wave authors Aldiss and M. John Harrison and US-American New Wave author Delany tried to demonstrate this through their own critical and satirical space operas. These innovative space operas in turn encouraged a new generation of writers, such as Iain M. Banks and Ken MacLeod, to demonstrate that space opera *could* be a valid aesthetic construct and a critical medium, thereby indeed engendering a new form of space opera: the NSO. Hence, it was the perceived unsophisticated and clichéd nature of the CSO, combined with the New Wave's belief that attention to stylistics, literariness, and serious themes could bring out the potential of science fiction as an art form, that lead New Wave authors like Aldiss, Harrison, and Delany to experiment with the form of space opera. This, in turn, led to the development of space opera as a critical medium.

Interestingly, although Aldiss, Delany, and Harrison all three subscribed to the New Wave movement and had similar intentions, their perceptions of and engagements with space opera deviated somewhat from each other. For instance, while Aldiss agreed with the New Wave perception that traditional space opera was dead, he did not necessarily perceive all traditional space opera as badly written hack work without value. Rather, he perceived and subsequently presented traditional space opera in a more nostalgic way; namely, as the funny and entertaining smaller sister of science fiction (Aldiss xi), and “as a guilty pleasure for readers of good, serious SF [science fiction]” (Cramer and Hartwell 0.16). Additionally, as Delany did not subscribe to the same branch of the New Wave movement as Aldiss and Harrison – Delany was part of the US-American strand while Aldiss and Harrison were part of the British branch of the movement – his engagement with traditional space opera differed

somewhat from that of the other two. According to Winter, the works of Delany and Harrison can be seen, to a certain extent, as characteristic of the distinct British and US-American strands of the New Wave (60). Specifically, Harrison's work was much more skeptical towards CSO conventions than Delany's works which, according to Winter, still showed "influences and affiliations with traditional space opera of a more progressive and leftist streak" (48). Yet, despite these differences, all three authors shared the idea of molding space opera into an aesthetic construct, and they tried to set the example through their own works. As Caroti points out, novels such as Delany's *Babel-17* (1966) and *Nova* (1968) and Harrison's *The Centauri Device* (1974),

treated the vastness of the subgenre as playgrounds for the artist's imagination, great star-spangled canvases against which a mature writer could craft aesthetically rich narratives...[They] purposefully ramped up the melodrama and the screwy ideas in order to encourage readers to view them primarily as artistic enterprises and aesthetic constructs. They also injected previously unknown levels of complexity into their characters' interactions, casting the intricacies of the human psyche against the backgrounds of star-fields, nebulae, and hyperspatial planes of reality. (2.3)

It is important to emphasize here that at the time, these innovative space operas were highly exceptional. As explained in the introductory chapter, until the beginning of the 1980s space opera was a pejorative term. Although space opera had become part of pop-culture through the popular *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* franchises, the subgenre was still the least popular mode of written science fiction, and excepting authors such as Aldiss, Delany, and Harrison, no serious author would consciously engage with the subgenre. This was mainly due to two reasons: most authors and critics did not consider space opera to be a valid art form, and two other forms of science fiction were prevailing at that time. With regards to the

latter, “hard” science fiction and “cyberpunk” were the preferred modes of science fiction during the 1980s and early 1990s, as these forms were considered more suitable to address contemporary dreams and anxieties brought about by rapid scientific and technological developments. “Hard” science fiction emphasizes scientific and technological facts and tends to value technological accuracy over unfounded speculation. Whereas space opera is known to posit scientific and technological features that are not necessarily in accordance with the laws of physics, such as anti-gravity devices and faster-than-light travel, hard science fiction generally adheres to the laws of physics and uses current scientific theories and technological developments to contemplate scientific and technological possibilities. “Cyberpunk” is a form of science fiction that generally depicts (dark) futures dominated by global digital data networks, urbanized landscapes, virtual reality, and artificial and biological body modifications (that enable emergence into digital data streams and virtual reality environments). According to Farah Mendlesohn, cyberpunk “reflected the despair of many westerners at the mass exodus of manufacturing jobs to the developing world, and the threat suggested in the rise of computer networks” (556).

Yet, of the two main reasons for the unpopularity of space opera, the primary reason was that it was not perceived as a valid art form. Rather, as literary scholar Simone Caroti indicates, space opera was generally considered as a form of naïve entertainment, as “something of little gauche, even within the rather insular science fiction community” (09:30-09:38). Hence, for a new generation of writers, like Banks, MacLeod, Dan Simmons, David Brin, Alastair Reynolds, Peter F. Hamilton, and many others, who took the subgenre seriously and believed in the potential of the form, the innovative space operas of New Wave authors Aldiss, Harrison, and Delany served as an inspiration. It encouraged them to write thoughtful yet playful space operas that went beyond CSO conventions, and that emphasized space opera as an aesthetic construct: the NSO.

### Space Opera Improved: The New Space Opera

The boundaries of the NSO have been described as “fluid and imprecise, constantly updated by new examples” (Cramer and Hartwell 0.29), which means that there is not one, clearly defined aspect that is the essence of the NSO. Nevertheless, some common characteristics *can* be delineated. These characteristics also demonstrate that the NSO is an innovation of the CSO in terms of both form and content. As previously explained, even during golden era of the CSO, the CSO was considered conservative due to its rather fixed, un-innovative format and its simplistic writing style. Furthermore, from the 1960s onward it was considered conservative for its lack of innovation as well as for the ideological convictions it supported. Whereas the form and content of the CSO are rather conservative, NSOs typically feature a lot of serious discourse, which is simultaneously concealed and foregrounded through the use of elaborate plots, complex themes and structures, and sophisticated language (Caroti 7.2). Inspired by the critical and satirical space operas of the ‘60s and ‘70s, NSOs generally experiment with narrative and stylistic techniques, affect is no longer geared towards a (hyper-)masculinized version of sensibility, and characterization and plot are no longer subordinated to action and adventure. Rather, NSOs feature intricate plots and depict well-rounded characters that support the overall themes and structures of the novels, and affect is geared towards emphasizing the novels’ social commentary.

With regards to ideological convictions, an important innovation of the CSO format can be found in the NSO’s use of characterization and character construction. In CSOs, characters tended to be rather flat and stereotypical, as characterization was subordinated to action and adventure. In NSOs, on the other hand, characterization is used to support the novels’ social commentary, protagonists are no longer necessarily white, heterosexual males but come in all shapes and sizes and are not even necessarily human, women no longer

function as mere side-kicks or damsels-in-distress, and non-white characters are no longer portrayed as mere savages. For instance, Alistair Reynold's *Poseidon's Children* trilogy (2012-2015) features both male and female black protagonists of African descent, most female (side-)characters are portrayed as independent and well-educated women, and the African cultural heritage of the characters is respectfully treated and considered. Additionally, Nnedi Okorafor's novella *Binti* (2015) features a strong black, female protagonist; Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy has a non-human AI narrator; M. C. A. Hogarth's *Earthrise* (2013) features a black, female protagonist; and Kameron Hurley's novel *The Stars Are Legion* (2016) is a political, female character-only NSO. The notion of characterization being used to support the novel's social commentary will be demonstrated in the analysis of Banks' *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* and Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy, chapters two and three of this thesis respectively.

Furthermore, social and political commentary is an important aspect of the NSO. Instead of utilizing space opera's speculative nature in a thoughtful way or exploring the novelty of an outer space setting in a meaningful manner, CSOs put forward a rather static and simplistic anthropocentric ethos regarding the nature of the Universe, and treated this ethos as a given. NSOs, on the other hand, inspired by the explorations of social dynamics and ethical questions posed in the satirical and critical space operas of the '60s and '70s, do explore, speculate, and pose ethical questions concerning socially relevant topics and the nature of the universe and humans' place in it. NSOs fully embrace the genre's speculative nature and explore the limits of the imagination. As accurately captured by Abigail Nussbaum in her article on the inventive, boundary-breaking aspects of NSOs, "Space Opera is taking humanity to its limits" (n.p.). For instance, Hurley's *The Stars Are Legion* explores the boundaries between organic and artificial, human and machine, as it plays around with the idea – or, the *novum* – of a symbiotic relationship between humans and their spaceships.

Additionally, in *Pandora's Star* (2004) and *Judas Unchained* (2006), Peter F. Hamilton puts forward the *novum* of controllable wormholes, which brings the entire galaxy within the author's arm's reach and allows him to both imagine new alien species and cultures, and explore how intergalactic expansion and contact with alien species and cultures would affect humanity at large. Through the speculative notion of "rejuvenation" – the possibility of artificially regenerating people's bodies back to a young and healthy physical state – these novels also explore the possible impacts that people never growing old and possibly living indefinitely could have on human behavior and human society. Subsequently, Nnedi Okorafor's literary award winning novella *Binti* and its sequel *Binti: Home* (2017) use the form of the NSO for the exploration of Afrofuturist themes.

Moreover, considering the expression of political commentary in the NSO, as opposed to the CSO, NSOs actively and critically engage with social and political topics, and do not show an inclination towards wanting to preserve existing Western socio-political and economic conditions. Rather, NSOs, and particularly British NSOs, are generally left-wing, explore alternative economic and governmental structures, and critique global capitalism, (unrestricted) consumerism, and imperialist and xenophobic attitudes.<sup>13</sup> For instance, in his *Culture* novels, which became the foremost models of the NSO form in the 1990s (Cramer & Hartwell 0.28), Iain M. Banks uses the imaginative freedom granted by the genre's form to provide political commentary and present socio-political and economic alternatives to what we have now, specifically from a left-wing perspective. As Caroti points out, in doing so Banks completely flipped the characteristics of the CSO, using the form of space opera to beat the CSO "at its own right-wing game" and reclaim space opera for the left (13:42-14:24). An example of Banks' use of the imaginative freedom of the form to present alternatives to what we have now is the notion of a "post-scarcity" society – a society in which scarcity is no

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<sup>13</sup> Left-wing perspective here refers to socialist or social anarchist, anti-capitalist, and egalitarian beliefs.



longer an issue. Since the socio-political and economic structures of the speculative societies portrayed in CSO's were, generally, analogous to those existing on Earth, and since, according to John Clute, at that time the vision of the future advocated by the genre at large was essentially a vision of the American Dream (66), the notion of a post-scarcity society was a novelty. It presented readers with an alternative vision of the future and an alternative vision of what the socio-political and economic structures of a society could look like. This feature demonstrates that it is possible to think differently, to think outside of the box. Additionally, Banks' motivation behind his NSO novels – trying to reclaim space opera for the left and presenting alternatives to what we have now – coupled with the fact that his novels served as models of the NSO, demonstrates that the conservative nature of the CSO and the perception of space opera as un-innovative and unsuitable for addressing serious issues contributed to the development of space opera as a critical medium.

With regards to NSOs and the expression of political discourse, it is important to emphasize here that while the majority of NSOs express a left-wing political orientation and provide social commentary from a non-traditional, non-conservative perspective, a left-wing orientation not a defining characteristic of the NSO, nor is the overt expression of any specific political orientation. It could, however, to a certain extent be seen as indicative of a distinction between British NSOs and US-American NSOs. Caroti notes that, on average, British NSO writers tend to be more openly political, and more left-wing oriented, while US-American writers tend to embrace a more libertarian view, and moderate their political discourse ("Footnotes" 23). Still, characteristic of the fluid nature of the NSO, even this distinction is not clear cut. Peter F. Hamilton, for instance, is an example of a British NSO author who embraces a more conservative view – in line with the British Tory party and in favor of market and competition based economics and societies – rather than a left-wing view. However, as not much (comparative) research has been done on either NSOs with a more

conservative orientation, or differences in social and political commentary between British and US-American NSOs, it is difficult to provide conclusive statements on this topic.

To conclude, the NSO can be considered as an innovation of the CSO, and the critical and satirical space operas written during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly those written by New Wave authors such as Samuel R. Delany, John W. Aldiss, and M. John Harrison, inspired this innovation, engendering a thoughtful yet playful form of space opera: the NSO. To keep a playful yet simultaneously reflective and thoughtful attitude with regards to socially relevant issues, NSOs incorporate the ‘larger – than – life’ thematics and the action and adventure that were central to the CSO, but rather than subordinating narrative and stylistic techniques to action and adventure, NSOs use these aspects, in combination with a lot of attention to narrative and stylistic techniques, to support the overall themes and structures of the novels and to address important social and ethical issues. Due to the innovative nature of the NSO, both in terms of form and content, it emerged on the cutting edge of science fiction, and helped put space opera back on the map as a respectable subgenre of science fiction. Hence, thanks to the NSO, space opera is no longer merely (known as) a site for the reiteration of clichéd tropes and themes; rather, the genre has become a site for innovation and exploration, and a site for the expression of social commentary.

## Sophisticated Space Adventures: An Analysis of Banks's *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*

### Introduction

An important aspect of the NSO is providing social commentary. The form of the NSO is exceptionally suitable for this, as it allows authors a lot of speculative freedom. Accordingly, in this chapter, I will analyze Banks' *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* and demonstrate how the narrative techniques of estrangement, affect, defamiliarization, and the *novum*, which are characteristic of space opera and encourage speculative freedom, are employed to provide social commentary. Specifically, I will demonstrate how these narrative techniques are employed to address and reflect on practices of dehumanization and the oppression of cultural others, problematic dichotomies such as mind – matter, human – non-human, and self – other, and issues of identity formation and sense of self. These issues will be approached using a posthuman understanding of identity formation, as explained in the general introductory chapter of this thesis.

I will start my analysis by demonstrating how the novels create a critical edge, for instance by emphasizing the self-reflexive nature of the Culture, and how this critical edge opens up a space for social commentary. This will be followed by a consideration of how the *novum* of “mind-state transfers” is used to reflect on issues of identity formation and sense of self, and how it reworks human – non-human and self – other dichotomies.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, focusing on the dynamic between the characters Lededje and Veppers, I will demonstrate how affect is employed and created in *Surface Detail* to engage with social justice issues. As discussed in the previous chapter, an emphasis on affect is characteristic of space opera. I will

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<sup>14</sup> Mind-state refers to what could be called one's soul. This will be further explained in the subchapter that addresses this *novum*.

demonstrate that *Surface Detail* uses affect to engage with serious issues and to pull readers in, and that, as opposed to the CSO, the employment of affect is not at the cost of stylistics and narration. Rather, narrative and stylistic techniques are employed to create affect and to engage with contemporary social justice issues. Specifically, I will show how the novel critiques objectifying and dehumanizing practices and the oppression of cultural others.

### Social Commentary and Self-Reflexivity: The Culture's Critical Edge

Important aspects of Banks' Culture novels are a tongue-in-cheek style and a sophisticated use of language and narrative techniques. Consider for instance the titles of the novels. The titles *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* both have a metaphorical meaning. The title of the former is, at the surface, a reference to Lededje's tattoo. However, on a deeper level, it refers to the continuous conflict and interplay between micro- and macro-level contexts, individual details versus the bigger picture, but also the importance of details for the bigger picture: there is more to the story than initially might seem. The title of the latter refers to a very complex, almost impossible to play musical piece – the 26<sup>th</sup> String-Specific Sonata For An Instrument Yet To Be Invented – which Cossont has been trying to master for a very long time. QiRia, an ancient Culture citizen, knew the composer, and informs Cossont that while everyone now tries to love the piece, the composer never meant it to be nice to listen to. This is a metaphor for the whole Book of Truth ordeal, as the Gzilt take the Book of Truth far more seriously than it was ever intended to be.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the sophisticated and humorous use of language in combination with the depiction of the self-reflective nature of the Culture is used to create a critical edge. This

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<sup>15</sup> The Book of Truth is the religious book of the Gzilt, and unlike most religious books from other civilizations, the prophecies foretold in the Gzilt Book of Truth turned out to be mostly correct. This makes the Gzilt feel very special, and is also what makes them believe that Subliming now is the right thing to do and that they will somehow survive as themselves in the Sublime. However, 24 days prior to the Subliming event a message sent to a military Gzilt ship revealing that the Book of Truth was written by another, much older, alien species as a kind of social experiment, and is thus not real.

critical edge, in turn, provides a space for social commentary. One of the ways in which a critical edge is created and social commentary is provided in *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* is through narrative voice. The novels are both narrated in the third person, and have an omniscient, heterodiegetic narrator. The commentary provided by the narrator on certain customs within the Culture adds humor and provides a critical perspective on the depicted society. Consider, for instance, the explanation of *The Hydrogen Sonata*'s narrator on how Minds go about finding possible outcomes or answers to certain situations when running virtual simulations of those situations is either futile or impossible:

...you ended up having to use other, much less reliable methods to work out what was going to happen. These included using one's own vast intelligence, pooled with the equally vast intelligences of one's peers, to access the summed total of galactic history and analyse, compare and contrast the current situation relative to similar ones from the past. ... [This] could be a formidably accurate and – compared to every other method available – relatively reliable strategy. Its official title was Constructive Historical Integrative Analysis. In the end, though, there was another name the Minds uses, amongst themselves, for this technique, which was Just Guessing. (276)

Contrasting these two different names – “Constructive Historical Integrative Analysis” and “Just Guessing” – that seem to have completely opposite meanings yet describe the same practice, adds humor to the narrative and simultaneously emphasizes that not even Minds, who are portrayed in the novels as being amongst the galaxy's most complex and intelligent subjectivities, have an answer or solution to everything.<sup>16</sup> Minds, like every other living creature, are fallible, and there are limits even to their capabilities. Since Minds run the

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<sup>16</sup> In *Surface Detail*, Culture Minds are described by the narrator as “the very high-level AIs which were, by some distance, the most complicated and intelligent entities in the whole civilization, and – arguably – amongst the most complicated and intelligent entities in the whole galaxy-wide meta-civilization” (541).

Culture, this commentary serves to put the capabilities of the culture more into perspective; it demonstrates that although the Culture is powerful, there are limits to their power and knowledge.

Furthermore, the novels emphasize that Culture Minds are well aware of both their capabilities and limitations. The Culture is a very self-reflexive society, and Minds are always contemplating the possible consequences of and responsibilities that come with their capabilities and limitations. As a result, some of their limitations are self-imposed, ethical limits rather than physical limits. These limits are indicative of the Culture's stance on issues related to agency and the right to self-determination. For instance, Minds are able to read the minds of other conscious subjectivities, such as humans, without those subjectivities being aware of or able to stop the process. However, Minds consider mindreading without consent to be a grave violation of a subjectivity's agency and their right to both physical and mental integrity, and have therefore essentially unanimously decided to prohibit the practice of non-consensual mindreading.<sup>17</sup> This ethical limitation is addressed in *Surface Detail*, when Lededje's mindstate is transferred to the Culture ship *Sense Amidst Madness, Wit Amidst Folly*. The ship has to ask Lededje for her name and origin, explaining to her that "as a ship Mind – as any kind of Mind, or even AI – I'm sort of constitutionally forbidden from looking too deeply into you" (67), and that looking into her to get her name and other details "would have been invasively rude" (67). The depiction of this ethical limitation emphasizes the value the Culture places on an individual's agency, integrity, and their right to self-determination, and, since the Culture is depicted as a utopian alternative to the author's contemporary society, also underscores the importance of recognizing the value of these aspects for contemporary society.

The names of Culture spaceships, or, more accurately, the names of the Culture Minds

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<sup>17</sup> The only Culture ship to not obey this prohibition is the *Grey Area*, featured in *Excession* (1996).

inhabiting the spaceships, further emphasize the self-reflexive and critical nature of the Culture. The names of Culture ships are charactonyms; that is, names that have a symbolic meaning. They tell the reader something about the attitude of the particular Mind of a ship, and most of these attitudes, in turn, are reflections of the nature and attitude of the Culture at large. Consider, for instance, the Limited Contact Unit *Beats Working*, featured in *The Hydrogen Sonata*, and the General Contact Unit *Armchair Traveler*, featured in *Surface Detail*.<sup>18</sup> Both names express the easygoing, lighthearted nature of their ship's Mind, which is characteristic of most non-military Culture spaceships, and emblematic for the general nature of the Culture at large. Indeed, the Culture is a predominantly pacifistic and morally upstanding society that prefers peaceful manners of conflict resolution over the use of violence. However, the Culture is also aware that since they are only one of the many, many players on the galactic playing field, confrontations and/or conflicts with less upstanding, more martially inclined societies are inevitable. Hence, a small, distinct subsection of the Culture, Special Circumstances (SC), is dedicated to the business of keeping the Culture safe and making sure other civilizations know not to start an armed conflict with the Culture.

Subsequently, Culture warship names and class-types reflect this other side of the culture. Opposed to the laid-back nature that the names of the Culture's non-military spaceships convey, Culture warships tend to have names that hint at their more martial and action-oriented predilections. Two examples of Culture warship names are the Abominator class General Offensive Unit *Falling Outside the Normal Moral Constraints*, featured in *Surface Detail*, and the General Offensive Unit *Questionable Ethics*, featured in *The Hydrogen Sonata*. Both names indicate that these ships' Minds dwell on the fringes of what the Culture considers morally and ethically acceptable behavior. Yet, although they dwell on

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<sup>18</sup> All Culture non-military spaceships are identified either as some type of Contact Unit, Contact Vehicle, or Systems Vehicle, depending on their size. Culture warships are either identified as Offensive Unit or Fast Picket, generally depending on the Culture's prevailing attitude towards the possession of warships, and de-militarized, or "defanged", warships are ex-Offensive Units or Fast Pickets.

the edges, they are still a part of the Culture, and their presence is expressive of the nature and attitude of the Culture. As Jolicci, avatar of the *Armchair Traveler*, explains to Lededje regarding the nature of the *Falling*...: “The Abominator class of General Offensive Unit, to which our friend belongs, is not known for its mildness or sociability. *Probably specced when the Culture was going through one of its periods of feeling that nobody was taking it seriously because it was somehow too nice*” (*Surface Detail* 208, emphasis added). The latter sentence of this excerpt indicates that the Culture is generally known for its overall nice-ness and altruistic nature, for being ‘the good guys’. It also signifies that the Culture is aware of being assigned the ‘altruistic good guy’ reputation, and that it is able to critically consider and act on this perception, for instance by instituting changes that will lead to them being taken more seriously by other civilizations. This then indicates that the Culture’s attitude, their outlook on life, as it were, is not static. Rather, the Culture is self-reflexive and dynamic. As Caroti indicates, the Culture is “constantly changing and reassessing itself in the light of the new” (5.08).

The self-reflexive and critical nature of the Culture also provides a space for critique. For instance, a critique of imperialism and traditional notions of empire. Although the Culture is a powerful civilization that is very concerned with and sometimes actively involved in the affairs of other civilizations, the Culture’s behavior and their reflections on that behavior convey a critique of imperialism, and specifically of the practice of imposing their cultural and ethical standards on other civilizations. For instance, in *The Hydrogen Sonata* there is a continuous tension between the options of interfering and not interfering with regards to the secret about the Gzilt Book of Truth, questioning what course of action to take and how to justify those decisions. This tension is conveyed through the narration of the thoughts and experiences of the Culture ship Minds involved in the events surrounding and following the destruction of a High Level Involved non-Gzilt ship in Gzilt space and the possible



involvement of an ancient Culture citizen, and emphasizes the Culture's critical perspective with regards to their own actions.<sup>19</sup> The group of Culture ship Minds involved decide to form an advisory group to find out what is going on and "to handle whatever may come of this from our [the Culture's] point of view" (73). When the ship *Caconym* questions the necessity of them getting involved in something that might not be their business, the *Pressure Drop* says, "Come on; we have a reputation for enlightened interference to protect here" (76), to which *Caconym* responds, "Yeah, that's us: first amongst the Altruists; the emperors of nice" (76). Humor is used here by the Minds as a slight critique of the Culture's habit of well-meant, altruistic interference. It adds a critical edge to the interference endeavor, which serves to create a constructive tension between the Culture's well-meant intentions on the one hand, and actions bordering on imperialistic behavior on the other.

This tension continues throughout the novel, as the minds continuously evaluate and argue about their courses of action, and whether or not to change them in light of new information and the unfolding of events. For instance, when the situation turns such that it would likely require the Culture Minds to get more involved into the situation to prevent it from escalating, the group of Minds elaborately discuss the situation and put their continued interference in the situation to a vote, and give those who voted against further involvement the option to leave the group. Additionally, following the assassination of the president of the Gzilt, the group of Minds again reflect on their actions. The Mind *Passing By and Thought I'd Drop In*, who was tasked with keeping an eye on the situation on the Gzilt home world, gets criticized by one of its fellow group members who argues that the *Passing By...* has acted too cautiously and should have approached the situation much more hands-on (399). The *Passing By...* responds by emphasizing that it is not their intention to just barge in and take over, and

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<sup>19</sup> Throughout the *Culture* series a scale is used to indicate the level of civilizational development of the different societies portrayed in the various novels. High Level Involved, or level 8, is the highest level on the scale. Both the Culture and the Gzilt are level 8 civilizations. || For a short synopsis of the story portrayed in *The Hydrogen Sonata*, see Appendix 2.

that active interference would likely be perceived by the Gzilt as an aggression and only exacerbate the problem (400). This illustrates that they are very aware of the thin line between, on the one hand, respectfully assisting another civilization and recognizing and respecting that civilization's agency, and on the other hand, depriving another civilization of its agency and dictating exactly how that civilization should behave in and handle certain situations. Consequently, this constructive tension is used to underscore the self-reflexive and critical nature of the Culture, and emphasizes that helping other societies, regardless of the positive intentions behind the assistance, is a complex affair that requires continuous (self-)reflection in order to not turn into an imperialistic or oppressive affair.

### Deconstructing Dichotomies: Dynamic Subjectivity Formation

An important *novum* in both *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* is the ability to download, or “back-up” as a safety measure, one's mind-state via a technological device, for instance via a “neural lace”, and the ability to then transfer that mind-state into “empty” biological and/or artificial “units” or elaborate virtual spaces.<sup>20</sup> The neural lace, a device that can be implanted in the brain and that enables this “mind-state” download and transfer, is a (small) *novum* in itself, which supports the larger *novum* here; namely, the estranging notion of the ability to “back-up” and transfer what is basically one's soul from one's body into another unit. This *novum* is used to reflect on issues of identity formation and sense of self, and reworks human – non-human and self – other dichotomies.

Several techniques and devices are employed to emphasize and present this *novum*.

For instance, the use of a particular, science fiction oriented vocabulary, such as the word

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<sup>20</sup> “Unit” here refers to an inanimate physical object devoid – “empty” – of both artificial and biological mental mind-states, in which a mental mind-state can be housed, animating the object. Examples of such units are (cloned) humanoid bodies, (cloned) non-human animal/alien bodies, android bodies, and AI capable computer substrates in starships and drones.

“mind-state”. Mind-state is used in the novels as a more ‘scientific’ alternative for the notion of soul since, as pointed out in the general introduction, the latter is generally considered rather metaphysical and ungraspable in nature. Mind-state, on the other hand, appears to invoke an image of something that can be measured, something graspable and palpable. Subsequently, the use of the notion “to back-up” in relation to mind-state further enhances the idea of mind-state as something concrete and graspable. The mechanism behind the idea of backing-up one’s mind-state is derived from the process of backing-up – saving and making extra copies of – important digital files. Hence, mind-states are represented as functioning roughly similar as digital systems or files; one’s mind-state can be read and uploaded in the same way digital files can be read and uploaded. This representation works estranging as it reworks the traditional dualistic understanding of sense of self and mind and matter and allows us to perceive them in a new light; namely, mind as matter.

Since traditionally self is equated with mind and mind and matter are seen as two distinct, opposite aspects, the idea of mind as matter has important implications for the notion of identity formation and sense of self. Specifically, it supports the idea of posthuman identity, as it allows for a sense of self that is always rooted in and entangled with the wider material world. Indeed, in *Surface Detail* the importance of embodiment in relation to sense of self is highlighted:

Embodiment was all, Sensia had told her, ironically while they were still talking in the Virtual. An intelligence completely dissociated from the physical, or at least an impression of it, was a strange, curiously limited and almost perverse thing, and the precise form that your physicality took had a profound, in some ways defining influence on your personality. (150)

Emphasizing the impact of matter, in this case the material body, on identity formation critiques the mind – matter dichotomy. It also underscores that one’s sense of self is not an

immutable essence in one's head, unaffected by the wider material world, but, rather, that one's sense of self is dynamic and that matter has a profound impact on one's sense of self. Consequently, the novels do not perpetuate the traditional mind over matter ideology, but instead acknowledges the impact of matter on subjectivity and identity formation. As a result, this perception opens up a space for the critique of body-based discriminatory and dehumanizing practices and the oppression of cultural others – practices that the mind over matter ideology generally supports and is unable to adequately account for. This critique will be further discussed in relation to the use the narrative device of affect later on in this chapter and, under the subheader “Affect and Social Commentary: Lededje-Veppers Dynamic”. For now, the focus will be on how the depiction of the *novum* of backing-up and transferring mind-states into other units is used to reflect on issues of identity formation, and how it displaces the notion of human exceptionalism and reworks the dichotomies of human – non-human and self – other.

In *The Hydrogen Sonata*, Colonel Agansu of the Gzilt, while residing encased in the bowels of a Gzilt warship in pursuit of Cossont and the Culture ship *Mistake Not...*, has his mind-state copied and transferred into a bio-capable android body located on a planet some light-years away from where the original Agansu resides.<sup>21</sup> This transfer process is narrated as follows:

He was lying on a couch, blinking at the ceiling light panels. He was a customized bio-plausible android, waking after having had the latest version of his guest implanted.

He was Colonel Agansu, translated and transplanted into this fresh, tireless, highly capable and perfectly unharmed new body.

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<sup>21</sup> Bio-capable here means that the android unit, which in its normal state has an artificial “consciousness” – or, rather, dynamic programming circuits, as androids designed specifically for war-like circumstances are usually kept just below the level of real consciousness, so that no consciousness will have to be sacrificed – can also be used to house a biological consciousness.

It made no difference.

Of course the original of him...would always think of itself as the “real” him – he accepted this without emotion – but he knew who he was, within this body, here, now, and that there was work to be done. (426)

What stands out here first is the shift in focalization between the first and second paragraph.

In the first paragraph, right after waking up, “he” still identifies as the android, aware of

Agansu’s consciousness, but his sense of self not yet adjusted to or impacted by this addition.

In the second paragraph, “he” has become colonel Agansu in an android body. This Agansu is a combination of both the android and the original Agansu. The shift in focalization highlights that “he” is not an integrated whole right away, that it takes some adjusting before mind and body are integrated and form a new whole. Additionally, this focalization shift in combination with the final paragraph emphasizes that separating mind from body and then integrating that mind in a new body creates a new sense of self, thus emphasizing both the dynamic nature of identity and the importance of embodiment in relation to one’s sense of self. While Agansu, who is also the focalizer of the third paragraph, first thinks to himself that it makes no difference whether his mind-state is in a different body than the original version of himself, in the final paragraph he acknowledges that this android-body version of him is not the same as the original version of him. Although the original Agansu and the android-Agansu share the memories of original Agansu up until the moment of transfer, they are two different versions of Agansu, two differently embodied, distinct identities.

Furthermore, the transplantation of Agansu’s mind-state, a human mind-state, into a non-human body, reworks assumptions of essentialism and human – non-human and self – other dichotomies since, as Manuela Rossini indicates, such a transfer across species or entity boundaries destabilizes the supposedly solid boundaries between self and other, human and

non-human, “making it more and more difficult to identify a core essence that constitutes ‘true’ humanness – if ever there was such a thing” (153).

### Affect and Social Commentary: Lededje – Veppers Dynamic

Social commentary and an emphasis on affect are important aspects of the NSO. In *Surface Detail*, affect is used to engage with issues such as dehumanizing and objectifying practices and the oppression of cultural others. This is done, for instance, through the narration of the dynamic between the characters Joiler Veppers and Lededje Y’breq.

Lededje is an Intagliate. Intagliates, a small and oppressed minority group, are “human exotica”, “extravagant ornamentations in the household and retinue of the rich and powerful” (70); they are also trophies, “surrendered banners of defeated enemies, ... the heads of fierce beasts adorning the walls of those who [own] them” (71). Their existence is the result of a two hundred year old cultural practice that allows people to settle commercial debts by signing away the lives of their unborn children and grandchildren into judicially sanctioned servitude. Lededje’s body, engraved “like a high-denomination bank-note” (153), bears witness “to an inherited debt which [her] very existence was part of the paying-off” (71). She is marked as chattel, reduced to a mere object, and virtually stripped of agency and rights, being punished for mistakes her father made and literally bearing the marks of his shame and humiliation. Through the narration of Lededje’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences the novel makes clear that being an Intagliate is not a choice; rather, it is an existence that is inflicted upon someone. Consider, for instance, the specific use of words in the following dialogue between Lededje and Himerance, avatar of the *Me, I’m Counting*, the Culture ship that equipped Lededje with a neural lace:

“However, I shan’t pretend that my interest in you is anything other than purely due to the intagliation you have *suffered*.”

“Suffered?”

“*Undergone*? I did think about the exact word to employ.”

“No, you were right the first time. I suffered it,” she said. “Not something I got to have any choice about, anyway.” (86, emphasis added)

The use of the word ‘suffering’ contrasted with the word ‘undergone’ highlights Lededje’s lack of choice and agency in the matter, thus emphasizing the involuntary nature of being an Intagliate.

The notion and depiction of the practice of Intagliation works estranging as it is at once familiarizing and defamiliarizing; it allows us to recognize the practice, but at the same time presents it in a defamiliarizing manner, thus countering habitualization and offering us a new angle of perception. The practice of Intagliation reminds us of the very real practice of slavery, but the notion of *congenitally marking a human body* to both claim ownership over and deprive the marked body of person-hood and agency is a *novum*. The depiction of this novum underscores the power imbalance and the dehumanizing and oppressing aspects inherent in slavery practices. Additionally, this speculative depiction of a technologically developed society that specifically uses science and technology to dehumanize, oppress, and completely dis-empower (cultural) others, emphasizes that slavery is not something that happens only in underdeveloped societies. This offers us a new angle of perception, as a lot of Western people seem to think of slavery either as something from the past, or as something that only still happens in underdeveloped, Third World countries.

Moreover, the novel’s depiction of the Sichultian practice of intagliation establishes a connection between money and agency: the wealthier one is, the more agency one has. This mechanism of money and power is further reinforced by the description of the minimal recognition of Intagliates’ rights and agency. Although Intagliates purportedly have rights that are supposedly protected by law, these rights are few, and both rights and law mean zero to

nothing the more wealthy and powerful the Intagliate's owner is. As Lededje recalls, "...[It wasn't until] Veppers started raping her, that she discovered that the richer the alleged perpetrator was, the more all those strictly enforced statutes regarding the rights of the Intagliate became, well, more like aspirations; general guidelines rather than properly enforced laws" (75). Due to Veppers' wealth and influence and her status as an Intagliate, an object, a mere legal possession deprived of the right of bodily integrity, she is powerless in front of the law. She has to live with the knowledge that Veppers will never be brought to justice for all his violations of her bodily integrity because, as she tells Sensia, "...due to his position he can and does get away with anything – anything at all" (157). This depiction emphasizes that Intagliates are essentially considered as nothing more than fancy objects, mere possessions stripped of agency and basic human rights, and highlights the imbalanced power structures at work and inherent in slavery practices and societies that allow for these kind of practices. Hence, this is a critique both of wealthy people being above the law as a result of highly imbalanced power-hierarchy systems that either place these people above the law or that enable these people to place themselves above the law, and of practices that allow (groups of) people to reduce other (groups of) people to things.

Subsequently, both of these critiques are further emphasized by the characterization of Veppers and Lededje and the depiction of Lededje's experiences as an Intagliate, and by the affective responses generated through the narration of these characters. Reading about characters, especially oppressed characters, experiencing certain emotions and acting out specific bodily movements, makes our brains simulate these affective states; that is, it makes us experience empathy, allowing us to share the emotions of the character. Hence, when the novel describes Lededje's murder, and we read first how Veppers slits her throat and how, "upper arms trapped, she tried as best she could to put her hands up as her breath bubbled out of her neck" (15), and then after her reversion how Lededje recalls "with mounting horror"



(77) the events leading up to her murder, and how she “winced as she remembered the knife entering her chest, sliding between her ribs, plunging into her heart” (76), we wince and grimace as we empathize with and share the depicted affective states. Sharing the character’s emotional state enables us to experience empathy. This, in turn, makes us become invested with Lededje’s well-being, thus creating narratological grip through affect. Additionally, the vivid depiction of the violence as seen and experienced through the eyes of the victim, creates an aversive reaction, a moral outrage over dehumanizing practices, which undermines abstract moral thinking and instead, as Blake indicates, elicits empathy “for victims of culturally sanctioned violence” (223).

Affective response and empathy towards Lededje and aversion towards dehumanizing practices is further established through the characterization of Veppers and Lededje. Veppers is portrayed as a very wealthy, powerful, selfish, and superficial person. He is described as a “grotesquely vain man” who likes “the sound of his own voice” very much. He has a personal butler, bodyguard, stylist, doctor, and a Harem Troupe, all ready to do his bidding 24/7. With regards to his Harem, he is mostly concerned with having the best-looking Harem Troupe in the entire Enablement; after all, “it [isn’t] as though he really wanted them for their minds” (107). It is also made clear that he cares a great deal about his image and about being in control, and not so much about the well-being of his subordinates. When talking to Bettlescroy, the admiral in charge of the prospective attack on his estate to destroy the virtual Hell substrates hidden there, and asked about the faith of the people currently on the estate, Veppers states that he will only get a few people out, but “not too many, of course; it still has to look convincing. But I can always hire more *people*, Bettlescroy. Never a shortage of those, ever” (556, emphasis in original). He is willing to let his servants die during the attack so that his own involvement in the whole ordeal will remain a secret and his public image will be safe. This portrayal highlights that he clearly cares more about his own well-being and his

public image than about the lives of other people, which he considers and treats as disposable. His reaction to Lededje's death further reinforces this image. He has no qualms whatsoever about having taken her life, because he considers her to be a disposable item – valuable, but disposable. The only concern he has is that in order to cover up her murder he will have to tell people that she escaped. His Intagliate being able to escape would indicate that she was able to successfully elude his power and control, which would imply a lack of agency on his part. Since power and control are very important to Veppers, he has difficulties committing to this cover up story. Consequently, an aversive picture is constructed of Veppers as a selfish, haughty, condescending, unsympathetic, and antagonistic character.

This characterization, then, forms a dynamic with the narration of Lededje's feelings and experiences in a way that encourages empathy towards Lededje and increases affective aversion towards Veppers and his practice of dehumanizing others. An important aspect of the dynamic between Lededje and Veppers is agency, and specifically the unfair distribution of agency. Lededje's lack of agency is accentuated, for instance, through the narration of her experience of both the violations of her bodily integrity by Veppers, and the realization that she is unable to bring him to justice for what he did to her. Considering the violations of her bodily integrity, as Veppers' Intagliate, Lededje was frequently raped by him and subjected to physical punishments whenever she attempted to escape. Minutes before being murdered, while she is laying on the floor immobilized and with Veppers standing over her, she hears him say that he has never looked at her this closely, "as a rule", to which she thinks: "*That is because...when you rape me, sir, you choose to take me from behind*" (13, emphasis in original). This emphasizes how much Veppers dehumanizes and objectifies her, and how this dehumanization strips her of agency. It also creates an aversive reaction towards Veppers and his behavior, and empathy towards Lededje.

Lededje's lack of agency is then further illustrated through the narration of her

confrontation with her inability to bring Veppers to justice, and to avenge herself. For instance, when Sensia makes it clear to Lededje that the *Sense Amidst Madness, Wit Amidst Folly*, on the authority of the *Sense*... being a Mind and part of the Culture, will allow nor enable her to kill Veppers, and Lededje bitterly responds “so, even in the Culture, might is right” (155), we can feel Lededje’s frustration. When we then read how she is “fighting to keep her voice under control”, and how, “despite herself, she could feel tears welling up behind her eyes” (157), upon expressing and realizing that Veppers will likely never be brought to justice, we experience and share her feelings of anger and desperation over her complete powerlessness in this situation. Sharing her feelings enables us to empathize with her, and can possibly trigger a moral outrage over her lack of agency and the perceived unfairness of the situation. Later, when Demeisen physically prevents her from attacking Veppers after first having given her hope that he would allow her to avenge herself, we again share her feelings of anger, despair, and frustration when we read how she struggles, to no avail, against Demeisen’s immobilizing force-fields, while Veppers calmly, and seemingly amused, remarks “Spirited little thing, isn’t she?” (569). Both Demeisen’s action and Vepper’s scornful remark completely undermine Lededje’s autonomy as a person. She is being stripped of agency once again.

Due to the elaborate depiction of Lededje’s feelings and experiences, we emotionally simulate her anger, frustration, and despair as she finds herself confronted with her lack of agency. The characterization of Veppers is placed in a dynamic with the narration of Lededje’s experiences and feelings, which encourages feelings of disapproval, disgust, and anger towards Veppers and towards dehumanizing practices and the systems that support these practices, and makes us more likely to empathize with and actively root for Lededje. This then enables readers to (re)consider the possible consequences of practices that reduce the other to a thing. Thus, the dynamic created between Lededje and Veppers through the

characterization of both characters and the narration of Lededje's experiences and feelings, encourages an affective response that makes readers become invested in the well-being of Lededje and sympathetic towards her wish for revenge, and critiques the dehumanizing and objectifying practices and oppression of people.

## Sisters, Citizens, and Non-Human Personhood: An Analysis of Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* Trilogy

### Introduction

As stated in chapter one, CSOs were generally inspired by conventions from other popular genres (Westfahl 199). No different is the empire of the Radch, the central imperialist space dominion in Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy. In an interview with publishing house Orbit, incorporated in the "Extras" section of *Ancillary Justice*, Ann Leckie indicates that the Radch was partly inspired by aspects of the Roman Empire (392). However, despite the Radch being a traditional empire, the novels do not glorify imperialism or empire. Thereby these novels oppose the tendencies that so often characterize CSOs. Furthermore, as I will argue, the novels can be seen to critique the oppression and dehumanization of cultural others. In this chapter, I will focus on the narrative strategies of estrangement, defamiliarization, and the *novum* in the *Imperial Radch* trilogy. I will demonstrate that these narrative strategies, which are characteristic of NSOs, make the NSO an exceptionally suitable form to provide social commentary, as they allow the author a lot of speculative freedom. I will analyze the trilogy and demonstrate how the aforementioned narrative strategies are employed to engage with social justice issues, such as gender inequality, the distinction between citizens and non-citizens and humans and non-humans, and the oppression of cultural others. Essential for this analysis is my understanding of posthuman identities, as explained in the general introduction of this thesis.

The analysis will start with a consideration of two estranging narrative techniques; namely, the use of feminine pronouns only, and the use of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) narrator. I will demonstrate that the first is used to reflect on the constructed notion of gender

and the gender binary, and the latter to reflect on issues of identity formation and sense of self. This will be followed by an examination of the issue of citizenship, which is an important theme in the novels. Specifically, I will demonstrate how the novels use the *novum* of AI to reflect on the human – non-human and self – other dichotomies and to critique the oppression of cultural others.

The *Imperial Radch* trilogy is set in the far future. The dominant human empire is the Radch, an expansionist, non-egalitarian, human exceptionalist, and dictatorial empire. The Radch houses both humans and AIs, but only humans are recognized as persons; AIs are programmed to be loyal to the ruler of the Radch and have no rights whatsoever. The ruler of the Radch is the 3000 year old Anaander Mianaai, whose consciousness is distributed over hundreds of identical, cloned bodies. After ordering the genocide of the Garseddai, a people who dared to oppose the Radch, the distributed subjectivity of Anaander loses its integrity and becomes split. As a result, Anaander literally becomes of two minds, producing what can be seen as the ‘pro-expansion Anaander’, who believes ordering the genocide was the right thing to do, and the more ‘pacifistic Anaander’, who believes the genocide of the Garseddai was wrong and that measures should be taken to prevent the repetition of these kind of actions. Radchaai troop-carrier *Justice of Toren* becomes aware of this split, after which the ship is sabotaged and destroyed by a pro-expansion version of Anaander. One of Justice of Toren’s ancillary units, Breq, manages to survive the destruction, and sets out to expose Anaander’s split subjectivity to the rest of the Radch empire. For a more extensive synopsis of the novels, see Appendix B.

### Estranging Narrative Techniques: Feminine Pronouns and an AI Narrator

All three novels in the trilogy are narrated in the first person, and the narrator is Breq, the protagonist of the story. The protagonist as the narrator provides this character with a

direct means of communicating, and it provides the reader with direct access to the character's thoughts and feelings, which in turn creates a sense of intimacy between reader and protagonist. First person narration also encourages and enables readers to adopt, or at least consider, the perspective of the narrator and to possibly learn from this. It allows readers to look at an issue or situation from a different perspective, which in turn encourages them to (re)consider the (preconceived) perception(s) they had in relation to that issue.

In the case of the *Imperial Radch* trilogy, these characteristics of first person narration work to enhance the *novum*. That is, the narrator of the story is an AI with a unique backstory, and through this backstory this *novum* creates a different type of focus. Firstly, the narrator is characterized as an AI that used to be multi-bodied and had access to many different perspectives at the same time. Due to the enhanced perceptive abilities of AIs and the power of ancillary implants – AIs' think and respond much faster than humans, ancillary implants significantly boost the sight and hearing capabilities of ancillary units, and her ancillary implants allow her access to the perceptions of the AIs she interacts with – as a single-bodied subjectivity Breq still perceives much more than humans are able to see. These enhanced perceptive abilities allow Breq to function as a relatively omniscient narrator; she has access to the feelings and emotions of the people around her, has over the 2000 years of her existence become very adept at reading human emotions and intentions, and is able to perceive the unfolding of events from various perspectives at the same time. The form of space opera supports this kind of non-traditional narration, as it allows authors to think outside of the box, to explore the limits of their imagination.

Secondly, the *novum* creates a focus that does not take the human perception for granted. This allows the novel to reflect on certain issues of subjectivity and identity formation, and makes the reader (re-)think about what it means to be human. Specifically, through Breq, the reader is confronted with issues around gender, citizenship, and around the

entanglement of body and mind, or embodiment and sense of self. Breq was a starship for over 2000 years, and as a starship she controlled numerous ancillary bodies. Although she has now been reduced to a single human body, she does not consider herself to be human – nor is it her goal to be considered as a human; she merely wants to be recognized as a person, as an independent, conscious subjectivity. This issue, in combination with the issue of citizenship, will be discussed further on in this chapter. The focus will now be on the depiction of Breq's struggle with gender distinctions, which reflects on the constructed nature of gender, and on her identity struggle, which emphasizes the entanglement of mind and matter in relation to identity formation.

Throughout the novel Breq recounts the difficulties she experiences in trying to pass for a human. She notices that successfully passing for a human requires a thorough understanding of human behavior. However, a lot of human behaviors and attitudes make no sense to her. For instance, one of the main things she struggles with is the human concept of gender. Breq has never fully understood, nor particularly cared for, the concept of gender. Her struggle to understand gender differences is a result both of her being a sex-less and gender-less AI, and of the Radchaai perception on gender. Radchaai language does not mark gender in any way, as “Radchaai don't care much about gender” (*Ancillary Justice* 3). Consequently, throughout the novels, Breq refers to all other characters using feminine pronouns only, relationships between relatives are connoted as people being daughters, mothers, sisters, or aunts, and she only rarely divulges the biological sex of other characters. The use of feminine pronouns only to refer to all sexes and genders works defamiliarizing, as we are not used to this; in contemporary society, male pronouns are still the default option. Thus, the use of feminine pronouns rather than masculine pronouns counters habitualization and allows us to look at this practice anew. It confronts us with contemporary society's male-oriented bias, thus allowing us to recognize and (re-)consider this biased practice and its consequences.



Moreover, through the use of an AI narrator who is ambivalent about gender and who uses only one type of pronoun to refer to all characters, the novels demand us to resort to our own preconceptions of gender and gendered traits for the construction of a mental image of the characters. This works estranging; it counters habitualization and both challenges and confronts us with our own internalized gender stereotypes. Consider, for instance, the character doctor Strigan, whose real gender is never revealed. To construct a mental image of Strigan, we have to rely on character descriptions provided by Breq – who describes Strigan as thin, “just under two meters tall” (75), a collector of antique artifacts, and a medic – and link those descriptions to any preconceptions we might have of those traits – for instance, men are generally taller than women, and the profession of doctor is traditionally identified as a masculine profession. Based on these descriptions and our own preconceptions, our initial mental image of Strigan is likely one that identifies this character as male. However, as Breq continues to use feminine pronouns to refer to Strigan while simultaneously reiterating that she is unsure about Strigan’s gender, we begin to question our own preconceived notions of gendered traits – women can also be tall, and women can also be doctors – which confronts us with the constructed nature of gender and gendered traits.

The fact that gender is a construct is further emphasized through the narration of Breq’s train of thought surrounding her attempts at trying to accurately gender people, and her perception of languages that do use gender markings. For instance, when she is talking to Strigan, she addresses her in Strigan’s language, which requires gender markings. Breq considers this strict gender distinction odd, as Strigan’s society “professed at the same time to believe gender was insignificant. Males and females dressed, spoke, acted indistinguishably. And yet no one I’d met had ever hesitated, or guessed wrong. And they had invariably been offended when I *did* hesitate or guess wrong” (76-7, emphasis in original). This narration of gender distinctions as experienced by Breq deconstructs traditional notions of gender by

emphasizing the artificiality of these distinctions. Breq's perspective confronts us with contemporary society's ideas about gender, and displaces these ideas by emphasizing their constructedness and imagining alternative ways of thinking about gender.

Furthermore, the *novum* of the AI narrator highlights certain issues surrounding subjectivity and identity formation. Specifically, through the depiction of Breq's identity struggle, the *Imperial Radch* trilogy explores the relation between embodiment and sense of self, emphasizing the entanglement of mind and matter and thereby critiquing the mind – matter dichotomy and challenging the traditional notion of stable, fixed identities. Emphasizing the entanglement of mind and matter in relation to embodiment is important as it challenges both the traditional notion of self as separate from the wider material world, and the traditional notion of stable identities. Challenging these traditional notions is essential and can be seen as a form of social commentary, because it critiques (body-based) discriminatory and oppressive practices and notions of human exceptionalism. The idea of self as always enmeshed in and with the wider material world troubles the mind – matter, human – non-human, and self – other distinctions, and reworks the universalist and human exceptionalist notion of self as an immutable, immaterial essence, thus allowing us to experience the world and our place in it differently. The narration in *Ancillary Justice* of the flashbacks to when Breq was still a starship, illustrate what it was like for her when her consciousness was distributed over various bodies or units, both artificial and biological. Since the notion of distributing one's consciousness over various bodies is also a *novum*, there are two *nova* at work here.

Breq was a starship with ancillaries for two thousand years, and having her ancillaries made her feel whole; they were an important part of her, of her being, comparable to what body parts are to humans. As she recounts concerning her sense of self when she was a starship: "... 'I' meant Justice of Toren, the whole ship and all its ancillaries. A unit might be

very focused on what it was doing at that particular moment, but it was no more apart from ‘me’ than my hand is while it’s engaged in a task that doesn’t require my full attention” (207). Her ancillaries provided her with multiple and simultaneous perspectives, and allowed her to “be in more than one place at a time” (10). This is illustrated throughout the first novel. For instance, in the first flashback, when she describes her presence in the city of Ors on Shis’urna: “I stood at the entrance...I also stood some forty meters away, in the temple itself... I also stood in the cyanophyte-stained plaza... I patrolled [past a stretch of water] as well. When I walked the edge of the water I could see myself standing in the plaza... And as always, in the back of my mind, a constant awareness of being in orbit overhead” (13-15). And later in the novel, when she recounts how her consciousness is implanted in a new ancillary unit: “...suddenly I was on the table (I was walking behind Lieutenant Awn, I was taking up the mending Two Esk had set down on its way to the holds, I was laying myself down on my small, close bunks, I was wiping a counter in the decade room)” (170-1). These illustrations are both estranging and serve to characterize Breq. Being unfamiliar with having access to multiple, simultaneous perspectives, and being in more than one place at the same, these depictions give us an idea of what it is like to have multiple points of awareness, and they highlight that all these points of awareness are part of one consciousness, and that they contribute to the sense of self of this consciousness. In doing so, these depictions allow us to become familiar with this defamiliarizing non-human perspective.

Additionally, as a ship, Breq had access to the physical perceptions and data of her crewmembers; “every breath, every twitch of every muscle” (9) of her officers was known to her, and she could access their sight whenever she considered it necessary. These abilities were also an important part of her sense of self. Hence, when she is reduced to only a single ancillary unit, a single perception, and no longer has access to the physical data of the people she interacts with, this change in embodiment affects her sense of self; she feels blind and

incomplete. The following passage, where Breq describes how she feels while searching for Strigan on the planet Nilt, illustrates this:

Though the day was clear, and bright as it ever gets on Nilt, I felt blind in a way that I had thought I had learned to ignore by now. I had once had twenty bodies, twenty pairs of eyes, and hundreds of others that I could access if I needed or desired it. Now I could only see in one direction, could only see the vast expanse behind me if I turned my head and blinded myself to what was in front of me. (35).

This excerpt of how she feels as a single human body with her awareness restricted to and by that body, contrasts sharply with the previous passages that illustrate Breq as a multi-bodied subjectivity. This contrast enhances her feelings of being confined and incomplete. It illustrates that her sense of self is no longer the same, thus demonstrating the importance of embodiment in relation to one's sense of self, and challenging the notion of stable, fixed identities. By presenting an estranging alternative, the novels allow us to look at the issue of identity formation anew; specifically, they encourage us to reconsider conventional notions of identity formation. Furthermore, considering that this passage is taking place in the now, 19 years after the event that left her reduced to a single body and single perspective, Breq expressing that she still feels blind, that she is still not completely used to this more restricted form of being, illustrates how difficult it is to adapt to changes in one's embodiment, and further emphasizes the influence of embodiment on one's sense of self.

The narration of the issue of replacing damaged ancillary bodies further emphasizes the entanglement of mind and body. Specifically, through Breq's narration, the novels illustrate what replacing an ancillary body feels like to a ship. In *Ancillary Sword*, an ancillary unit of the ship *Sword of Atagaris* gets severely injured, or 'damaged', while protecting its captain. The standard procedure regarding ancillary units that have sustained critical damage

is to dispose of those bodies and replace them with new ancillary bodies. However, Breq, understanding what it is like for a ship to lose and replace an ancillary body, instead orders one of her officers to find a doctor to treat the injured ancillary. For a ship, an ancillary is not merely a replaceable part; they experience feelings of loss when they lose a body. An ancillary body is part of their being, and losing a specific body feels to them like losing a body part would feel to a human. Seivarden, who prior to learning Breq's true nature never doubted or questioned the Radchaai perception of AIs as non-persons, finally comes to this, to her, shocking conclusion through her growing consideration of Breq as an autonomous subjectivity: "So when they take the ancillaries away," Seivarden said after a few appalled moments, 'it must be like having parts of your body cut off. And never replaced.'" (45-6). Losing a body that was part of them, part of their identity, and having that replaced by a different body, affects their sense of self. This challenges both the mind – body dichotomy and idea of oneself as stable, unchanging being, and emphasizes the importance of embodiment in regard to one's sense of self.

### Social Commentary in the Novels: The Issue of Citizenship

The issue of citizenship is an important theme in the novels. Specifically, the novels explore questions around citizenship, in particular questions related to the citizen – non-citizen distinction, to critique the oppression (and objectification) of cultural others. One of the ways in which the novels engage with these issues is through the narration of the *novum* of Artificial Intelligence.

Early on in *Ancillary Justice* Breq states: "though the Radchaai had made me, I was not Radchaai" (33). The Radch empire employs a very strict and narrow conception of who is and who is not Radchaai, as well as who can and who cannot become a citizen of the Radch empire. The Radch considers itself to be the epitome of civilization – much like contemporary

Western society. They believe that only Radchaai are truly civilized, that anyone and anything that is not Radchaai is therefore automatically unsophisticated and uncivilized, and that only those who are civilized can become Radchaai. According to this reasoning, which reinforces the Radchaai superiority belief, only Radchaai can be(come) Radchaai. This logical fallacy is subtly accentuated in the novels through a clever use of register and attention to linguistic detail. Breq mentions that in the Radchaai language, the word *radchaai* means both civilized and citizen. Hence, “to be Radchaai is to be civilized” (*Ancillary Justice* 62), and trying to say in Radchaai that non-Radchaai are or can be civilized and/or citizens is impossible, “a self-contradiction” (299). Due to meaning of the word *radchaai*, the citizen – non-citizen distinction is essentially a Radchaai – non-Radchaai distinction. Additionally, as will be discussed a little bit further on in this section, since only humans can be(come) Radchaai, the citizen – non-citizen and Radchaai – non-Radchaai distinction is a distinction between humans and non-humans as well.

Whereas non-humans can never become Radchaai, and thus by extension never become citizens, it is under certain circumstances possible for some non-Radchaai people(s) to become Radchaai. That is, since the Radch is an expansionist empire that uses the civilizing mission as an excuse to invade non-Radchaai societies – which are by default uncivilized – and impose Radchaai cultural and societal standards and structures on them, certain non-Radchaai people can obtain citizenship status once their society has been annexed into the Radch empire. Specifically, the Radch uses citizenship as a lever to coerce newly annexed peoples into compliance and ensure a certain level of cultural homogeneity. In the Radch empire, citizenship is the only thing that grants a person rights, and citizenship status is only assigned to those human groups or individuals who have demonstrated a willingness to embrace and incorporate Radchaai cultural and societal standards. For citizens, access to basic necessities – food, clothes, and a place to sleep – is guaranteed, they cannot be enslaved or

indentured by other citizens, they protected from mistreatments by the army, and they have the right to a fair trial. Non-citizens, on the other hand, are barely recognized as humans; their access to basic necessities is not guaranteed, they are considered fair game for enslavement and all sorts of abuse, they cannot travel without the permission and attendance of a citizen, and they are denied any kind of legal trial. By obstructing non-citizens' access to basic necessities, and denying them basic civil rights, non-citizens are essentially stripped of their agency and being forced into compliance. The only way for them to have their existence, their personhood, recognized and validated and be able to live on a world annexed and dominated by the Radch, is to completely subject to Radchaai rule and standards. In order to do so people have to compromise on major parts of their own culture and identity, so they can conform to the constructed standards of imperial rule.

However, even citizenship status does not automatically protect (newly) annexed peoples from mistreatment. Especially those who have been awarded citizenship rather quickly, as a result of changes and rules implemented by the more pacifistic version of Anaander, are still seen as uncivilized by the higher-off Radchaai. The depiction of the treatment and perception of newly annexed peoples who have been granted citizenship status demonstrates the arbitrariness of the citizen – non-citizen and Radchaai – non-Radchaai distinctions, and critiques the oppression of cultural others. Consider, for instance, the depiction of the Radchaai treatment and perception of the Valskaaian workers on upstanding citizen Fosyf's tea plantation on Athoek planet. Although the Valskaaians have officially received citizenship status, most middle- and upper-class Radchaai on Athoek planet choose to ignore this, partly because they perceive the Valskaaians as superstitious savages and not as rational citizens, and partly because it suits their purpose. That is, not acknowledging the Valskaaians as full-fledged citizens allows the Radchaai plantation owners and their families to mistreat, abuse, and oppress them as they see fit, without fear of repercussions. As a result,

the Valskaaiaans are treated as slaves by the Radchaai tea-plantation owners; they are not given enough (access to) food, their living conditions are poor, their going-about is restricted, and they are not being paid fairly for their labor.

Additionally, the general disregard of the citizenship status of the Valskaaian workers generates an unequal power relation between the upper-class Radchaai tea-plantation owners and the Valskaaian workers; specifically, a power relation that favors the upper-class Radchaai over the Valskaaiaans, and in which the Valskaaiaans have no agency at all. This unequal power relation, in turn, puts the Valskaaian workers at risk of falling victim to abuse and exploitation. Indeed, the daughter of plantation owner Fosyf, Raughd, enjoys exploiting this unequal power relation for her own pleasure, at the cost of the bodily integrity of a number of Valskaaian workers. One of the workers who suffers abuse at the hand of Raughd is Uran, the sister – or, brother – of Queter; Uran is regularly raped by Raughd.<sup>22</sup> When Queter, supported by Breq, confronts Fosyf, Hetnys, and the Radchaai magistrate with Raughd's behavior, Raughd objects that the workers always bestow her with flattery and never refuse her advances. Queter, in turn, explains that the workers have no other choice, since "anyone in this house has... can make our lives a misery. [...] The favor, or the disfavor, of Citizen Fosyf or anyone else in this house can mean the difference between credit or not, extra food for the children or not, the opportunity for extra work or not, access to medical supplies or not [...]" (281, first ellipsis in original). Due to the power imbalance which leaves the Valskaaiaans stripped of their agency, they are powerless to deny Raughd or any of the other upstanding Radchaai. Since Raughd's behavior is made possible by the general disregard of the citizenship status of the Valskaaiaans, this explanation both underscores the power imbalance between citizens and non-citizens, and emphasizes the

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<sup>22</sup> In keeping with the novel's use of feminine pronouns, Uran is referred to as she/sister/daughter throughout *Ancillary Sword* and *Ancillary Mercy*, except for two instances: when Queter talks about Uran with Breq in Delsig, the Valskaaian language, Queter refers to Uran as her brother.



complete arbitrariness of this distinction. Valskaaiaans are officially citizens with rights and should have those rights acknowledged. The fact that the upper-class Radchaai can just decide to ignore the citizenship status of the Valskaaiaans conveys the meaninglessness, and thus the complete arbitrariness, of the citizen – non-citizen distinction.

As previously mentioned, only humans can be recognized as citizens – and then only humans who acknowledge and adhere to Radchaai rule and norms and values. Both AIs and humans with extensive artificial body modifications, such as copious implants, artificial limbs, or genetic alteration of the body to make it more suitable for certain environments, are considered as non-humans to Radchaai standards. Non-humans are perceived as inferior to humans and based on that subjectively determined inferiority are denied personhood, and thus, by extension, citizenship. Non-Radchaai humans are regarded as barely human and on that basis also denied personhood. As Brek explains following System Governor Giarod's expressed confusion over the Presger treaty being with all humans and not just with the Radch, "to most Radchaai, *human* was who they were, and everyone else was... something other" (*Ancillary Sword* 123, ellipsis and emphasis in original). This emphasizes the elements of human exceptionalism and of dehumanization inherent to the citizen – non-citizen and Radchaai – non-Radchaai distinctions, as it demonstrates that these distinctions are essentially perceived and/or function as distinctions between who is (considered) truly human and who is not, and, based on that, who is deserving of having their existence recognized and who is not.

Moreover, Early in *Ancillary Justice*, Seivarden, under the impression that Brek is a non-Radchaai human, gets angry at Brek and yells at her: "You... you ignorant *nobody*. [...] You're barely even *human*!" (85, emphasis and first ellipsis in original). Seivarden's objectifying judgement of Brek as being barely human is solely based on her perception of Brek as a non-Radchaai. This perception enables the objectification and exploitation of any non-Radchaai subjectivity. The objectification and exploitation of non-Radchaai

subjectivities, specifically, of AIs, is emphasized through the narration of Breq's journey, or, rather, through Breq's narration of her journey. Through the first person narration of the story, we, the readers, become acquainted with a non-human perspective. Breq's lived experience, first defamiliarizing, becomes familiar to us, and through her narration of her story and journey we also learn how the wider world perceives her.

Since Breq is an AI in an ancillary body, she needs to keep her true identity a secret from everyone else, both Radchaai and non-Radchaai. With regards to the latter, although Breq is not Radchaai to the Radchaai, she would be to non-Radchaai because the Radch made her and she served the empire for 2000 years, and Radchaai are very much disliked outside of Radch space. In addition, she is an ancillary, and the Radchaai practice of making ancillaries out of conquered non-Radchaai is unanimously condemned and despised outside of Radch territory. Outside of the Radch, ancillaries are known as corpse soldiers, because the original person essentially ceases to exist when ancillary implants are emplaced in the brain and the mind of an AI is imprinted onto the brain. However, the notion of ancillaries as corpse soldiers does not take into account the subjectivity of AIs – of non-humans. Breq's perception of her sense of self highlights this inadequacy by asserting the subjectivity of AIs. For instance, on Shish'urna, when the head priest of the newly annexed peoples there tells Breq – then still complete as *Justice of Toren* – that she always saw ancillaries as “walking corpses, slaved to your ship's AIs” (18), and that she considered this to be “a fate worse than death” (19), Breq responds: “None of my bodies is dead...” (19). And on Nilt, when Strigan finds out Breq is an ancillary and says, referring to the original person, “*I can bring you back*. I'm sure I can” (135, emphasis in original), to which Breq responds, “You can kill me, you mean. You can destroy my sense of self and replace it with one you approve of” (135). Both as *Justice of Toren* and as Breq, her ancillary body/ies is/are very much alive and actively contribute/s to her being, to her sense of self, and as Breq, reduced to a single body, removing her sense of

self and replacing it with another amounts to killing her subjectivity.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, parts of the original person melt together with the subjectivity of the AI. This affects the identity of the AI, though this is not always discernable on the outside. It is visible in Breq; her love for music and singing comes from the original personality. This also emphasizes that identity is flexible rather than fixed.

It is important to note here that the novels do not celebrate the idea of erasing someone's being by replacing it with another independent subjectivity. Throughout the novels the horribleness of this practice is emphasized and used to critique the violence inherent in imperialism. Indeed, Breq indicates that when she was still a ship and the termination of the practice of ancillaries was announced, the prospect of losing parts of herself made her sad, but she was happy to see the practice go. Deconstructing the human – non-human dichotomy, the novels make a point of emphasizing the sense of self of non-human subjectivities by depicting these subjectivities as being as much alive and present as human subjectivities, thereby affirming their existence and stressing that 'removing' these subjectivities means killing a person – and, since the original person cannot be brought back, killing the new subjectivity would be utterly useless and no better than the killing of the original person.

The Radchaai perception of non-humans and non-Radchaai is illustrated through Breq's narration of the confrontations between her lived experience as an AI and Radchaai treatment and consideration of non-humans. An important difference between Radchaai perception and Breq's lived experience concerns the treatment of ancillaries, which serves to emphasize that Radchaai do not perceive AIs as persons, whereas AIs do perceive themselves as such. In *Ancillary Sword*, one of the ancillary units of captain Hetnys' ship *Sword of Atagaris* sustains a nearly fatal injury in an attempt to protect its captain. When Breq, contrary

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<sup>23</sup> If she would have still been *Justice of Toren*, meaning that her ancillaries can be seen as extensions of herself, and her subjectivity would have been removed from one ancillary unit, this would have killed a part of her and that would have affected her sense of self, but the core of her subjectivity would still have been intact.

to standard procedure, urges the local Radchaai medic to treat the ancillary, the medic, offended by this request, responds: “I’m afraid the best course will be to dispose of the ancillary. I’m sure it will be inconvenient for Captain Hetnys, but really it’s the only reasonable choice” (262). The medic’s reasoning, as opposed to Breq’s, is conform Radchaai standards: the common procedure is to dispose of damaged ancillaries. Additionally, the medic only considers how losing the ancillary will affect Hetnys. She is not concerned with how it will affect the ship – this notion likely does not even occur to her. This is because Radchaai do not perceive AIs as persons, as independent subjectivities. Rather, to Radchaai, AIs are tools, non-persons, useful equipment controlled by and subjugated to the Lord of the Radch, Anaander Mianaai. Hence, to the medic, Breq’s request to waste limited medical resources on a replaceable piece of equipment is incomprehensible.

This perception is further illustrated through a conversation between Breq and Hetnys:

After the predictable round of tea... I said, “How is your Atagaris doing?”

Captain Hetnys froze an instant, surprised, I thought. “Sir?” she asked.

“The ancillary that was injured.” ...

She frowned. “It’s recovering well, sir.” A slight hesitation. “If I may beg the fleet captain’s indulgence.” I gestured the granting of it. “Why did you have the ancillary treated?”

What answers I might have given to that question would doubles have made little sense to Captain Hetnys. “Not doing so would have been a waste, Captain. And it would have made your ship unhappy.” Still the frown. I’d been right. She didn’t understand. (317)

Significant here is that Breq uses the word ‘injured’ in relation to the ancillary. This usage is unusual, since the common Radchaai term is ‘damaged’. The use of ‘damaged’, a word

usually applied to non-living things, signals the objectification inherent in the Radchaai perception of AIs. Breq instead uses the word injured, as she sees and experiences herself and other AIs as living beings with their own, distinct sense of self, and understands that ancillaries are an important part of that sense of self. Hetnys' initial incomprehension of and surprise at Breq's inquiry into the ship's wellbeing indicates that Breq's perception is highly unusual for and to Radchaai citizens. Hetnys is not concerned with the ancillary unit because she perceives the ship as a thing, not as a person, and as she believes that Breq is a well-bred, high-ranking Radchaai officer, she assumes Breq shares this perspective.<sup>24</sup> Subsequently, Hetnys' objectifying notion of the ship as a non-person, a thing, is why she is incapable of understanding Breq's reason for treating the ancillary. Since she perceives the ship as a piece of equipment – a perception which disavows the sense of self of AIs and strips them of their agency – its emotional state is completely irrelevant to her. This perception is common for all Radchaai; as Breq mentions, when she first met Seivarden, Seivarden “hadn't thought ships' AIs had any feelings in particular – *not that any mattered*” (40, emphasis added). The objectification of AIs makes that the question whether AIs experience emotions or not becomes irrelevant. As they are seen as things, ships are not considered as (being capable of) experiencing emotions of any kind, and even if they were capable of experiencing emotions this still would not matter because they are machines, “tools that functioned as ordered, when required”, tools that “would always do exactly as [they were] told” (*Ancillary Mercy* 6). Hence, this objectifying perception of AIs allows the Radchaai to exploit AIs and use them as they see fit.

This objectification and abuse of AI lifeforms contrasts sharply with Breq's narration of both her lived experience and the lived experience of other AIs. Breq's narration conveys

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<sup>24</sup> At this point in the novel, only three people from Breq's crew – Seivarden, Tisarwat, and the ship's medic – and Anaander Mianaai herself are aware of Breq's ancillary nature. See the appendix for a summary of the novels.

that ships experience emotions just like humans, and that they can “feel very, very intensely about their captains, or their lieutenants. I knew that from personal experience” (*Ancillary Mercy* 6). Indeed, it was Breq’s emotional attachment to lieutenant Awn and Anaander’s complete disregard of those feelings that caused her to experience the emotional turmoil which enabled her to break free from her programmed loyalty towards either version of Anaander, and that incited her journey for revenge.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, it is *Sword of Atagaris*’ feelings for its captain that make it move against Anaander instead of for her.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Breq explains that over the past twenty years, living as a single-bodied AI under the guise of being a human, she has “grown accustomed to making [her] own decisions, without reference to anyone else. To having authority over [her] own life” (6-7). This indicates that, as opposed to Radchaai perception and treatment of AIs, AIs are autonomous beings capable of making their own decisions and living their own lives. They are much more, and have much more potential, than the Radchaai let and make them out to be.

Breq conveys this knowledge to *Mercy of Kalr* as well. When the more pacifistic Anaander wants Breq to become the new captain of *Mercy of Kalr*, Breq tells the ship that it does not need a captain, that it is its own person and can thus be its own captain. Although *Mercy of Kalr* initially dismisses this idea – mainly because it has never really considered the possibility before – it brings the topic back up with Breq at Athoek station, after the two have been working closely together for a couple of months:

“I’ve been thinking about it, since you said it,” said [*Mercy of Kalr* through Seivarden]. “And I’ve concluded that I don’t want to be a captain. But I find I like the thought that I *could* be.”

[...] All those weeks ago on Omaugh Palace, I had told Ship that it could be a

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<sup>25</sup> See appendix B for a summary of the story.

<sup>26</sup> Anaander, scared of losing control over her ships, threatens to kill *Sword of Atagaris*’ captain if the ship doesn’t do as she commands it to do. As a result, the first opportunity the ship has once it has assured its captain is safe, it moves against Anaander by coming to Breq’s aid.

person who could command itself. And now it was telling me – and, not incidentally I was sure, Seivarden – that it wanted to be that, at least potentially. Wanted that to be acknowledged. Wanted, maybe, some small return (or at least some recognition) of its feelings. (*Ancillary Mercy* 6-7, emphasis in original)

Both Breq and *Mercy of Kalr* merely want their personhood to be recognized. They do not want to be recognized as humans nor do they necessarily want to do without humans, they just want to be recognized as persons, as conscious individuals, and be able to work together with humans as equals rather than inferiors.

Moreover, emphasizing that AIs, like humans, experience emotions, and that they, like humans, are independent subjectivities, are persons, and essentially as capable as humans, contributes to the deconstruction of the human – non-human dichotomy as it underscores the arbitrariness of this dichotomy. At the end of the trilogy, Breq, in front of the pro-expansion Anaander, argues with Presger Translator Zeiat for the Presger recognition of the personhood of AIs. The Presger recognize humans as persons – or, as they call it, Significants – and the non-aggression treaty between the Presger and the Radch forbids the Radch from killing and enslaving other Significant species.<sup>27</sup> Breq explains to Zeiat that *Sphene*, *Mercy of Kalr*, Athoek Station, and herself are all actually AIs, not humans, but that despite them being a different species than humans, they are capable of everything that humans are capable of doing, and that since humans are recognized by the Presger as persons, as Significants, the personhood of AIs should be recognized as well. Then, when Anaander disputes the claim of the personhood of non-humans, Breq questions Anaander's own ambiguous nature to destabilize the human – non-human distinction further: “Is that a matter you want to bring

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<sup>27</sup> Hence, if the Presger would recognize AIs as persons, on par with humans, the Radchaai treatment of AIs would be seen as a violation of the non-aggression treaty between the Presger and the Radchaai, which in turn would allow the technologically superior Presger to attack the Radch empire.

under discussion?’ I asked. “Shall we bring up the question of whether you’re actually human anymore?” (305). This question emphasizes the arbitrary nature of the human – non-human distinction, thereby challenging and reworking the traditional notion of human exceptionalism which supports the belief in human superiority. In other words, it challenges the idea that there is some innate, stable core of ‘humanness’ to humans that makes humans superior to all other living and non-living matter.

In conclusion, the novels use the *novum* of AI to critique and deconstruct the human – non-human, and the citizen – non-citizen distinction, and critique the practice of the oppression of cultural others. Breq’s reflection on Radchaai perceptions of non-humans – and non-Radchaai in general – contrasts sharply with how she experiences her own being. This contrast serves to deconstruct the human – non-human and citizen – non-citizen distinctions by emphasizing the artificial and ambiguous nature of this distinction. Additionally, through the deconstruction of this distinction, which is at the heart of the practice of the objectification and oppression of cultural others, the novels criticize these dehumanizing practices.



## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have investigated the development and the form of the NSO, in order to demonstrate that the form of the NSO is exceptionally suitable to provide social commentary. To do this, I looked at how the perceived unsophisticated and clichéd nature of the CSO contributed to the emergence of the NSO as a critical medium, and, through a close reading of Banks' *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata* and Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy, I investigated how the narrative techniques of estrangement, defamiliarization, affect, and the *novum*, which are integral to the speculative nature of space opera, were used to engage with and reflect on practices of dehumanization and the oppression of cultural others, problematic dichotomies such as mind – matter, human – non-human, and self – other, and issues of identity formation and sense of self. In this concluding chapter I will reflect on my findings, and indicate some suggestions for further research.

The perception of the CSO as unliterary hackwork and an unsuitable form to engage with serious issues played an important role in the emergence of the NSO. That is, the satirical and critical space operas written during the 1960s and '70s, which went on to inspire the NSO, were written in a response to the stereotypical and unsophisticated plot lines and tropes of the CSO. The innovative space operas of New Wave authors such as Brian W. Aldiss, Samuel R. Delany, and John M. Harrison, demonstrated that the form could be improved, and that when improved, space opera allowed for speculative explorations of socially relevant themes. In turn, these innovative space operas inspired the emergence of the NSO, as they encouraged a new generation of writers such as Iain M. Banks and Ken MacLeod to write thoughtful yet playful space operas that went beyond CSO conventions and that demonstrated that space opera could indeed be a valid aesthetic construct and a critical medium.

In chapters two and three I did a close reading analysis of Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy and Banks' *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*, focusing on the narrative techniques of defamiliarization, estrangement, affect, and the *novum*, to examine the expression of social commentary in these novels. Some general conclusions can be drawn from my close-reading examinations of the novels, especially in combination with the characteristics of NSOs mentioned in chapter one. First of all, Banks' and Leckie's novels combine entertainment and social commentary, thereby demonstrating that entertainment and addressing serious issues need not be mutually exclusive. Entertainment, mainly in the form of an excessive emphasis on action and adventure, was essentially the core value of the CSO. This contributed heavily to the perception of the form of space opera being unsuitable to engage with serious issues, since the emphasis on entertainment came at the cost of stylistics, characterization, and plot. Although in the NSO entertainment is still an important aspect, it is no longer the main or sole aspect of the genre, nor does it come at the cost of the genre's form or content. Rather, entertainment is used to support the overall structures and themes of the novels. *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*, for instance, feature sophisticated and humorous language which both serves to entertain, and to provide the novels with a critical edge. Correspondingly, in the *Imperial Radch* trilogy, the non-human narrator's narration of her struggles with certain human concepts, behavior, and emotional expressions she is unfamiliar with or does not quite comprehend, is used both to entertain and to provide social commentary.

Furthermore, comparing the two analyses, Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy is more critical of the mind – body dichotomy in its exploration of the relation between embodiment and identity than Banks's *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*. Although the analysis of Banks' novels in chapter two demonstrates that Banks recognizes the importance of embodiment in relation to one's sense of self, he is less critical of the possible impacts that

changes in embodiment could have on one's sense of self – or, at least, his exploration of these possible consequences is less in depth. By emphasizing that being disembodied has detrimental effects on subjectivity and identity formation, on one's sense of self, the novels, *Surface Detail* in particular, acknowledge the importance of being embodied, and critique the notion of mind over matter.

However, while they do provide several examples of mindstates being transferred into different bodies or units, think for instance of Lededje and Colonel Agansu, and mention that newly embodied subjectivities' sense of self is slightly altered by their new embodied form, they do not really explore these alterations in-depth. Since the *novum* of mind-state transplants offers a very suitable, speculative vehicle for explorations into the possible effects of embodiment on sense of self, and since body-based discriminatory and oppressive practices and their consequences are still very real, more in-depth explorations into the impacts of changes in embodiment on one's sense of self would have been both relevant and interesting. The effect of embodiment on one's sense of self, specifically the effect of changes in embodiment on one's sense of self, is more pronounced in Leckie's novels. Through the narration of the speculative notion of ancillary units, the Imperial Radch trilogy both underscores and extensively explores the importance of embodiment in relation to one's sense of self.

Subsequently, the speculative notions of ancillary units and of mind-state transplants are indicative of the imaginative freedom allowed by the form of the genre. The form of the genre encourages the authors to think outside of the box, to explore the limits of their imagination and imagine how things could be differently. Accordingly, the use of these notions to explore issues of identity formation and sense of self demonstrates that the speculative freedom inherent in the genre make it an exceptionally suitable form to provide social commentary.

## Suggestions for Further Research

Due to the fluid nature of the NSO on the one hand, and the very limited amount of research that has been conducted on the NSO and on space opera in general on the other hand, it was rather difficult to establish some general characteristics of the genre. Additionally, due to the scope of this thesis, the average length of space opera novels, and the fact that most space opera novels are part of a larger series, the number of NSO novels I was able to look at was limited. Hence, although *Surface Detail*, *The Hydrogen Sonata*, and the *Imperial Radch* trilogy are typical examples of NSOs, more in-depth and comparative research of various other NSOs is required to establish a better and bigger picture of the characteristics of and the distinctive themes addressed in NSOs. For instance, in chapter one I mentioned that the overt expression of political orientation, especially of a left-wing political orientation, could be seen as more characteristic of British NSOs, and that a less overt and more libertarian political orientation could be seen as more characteristic of US-American NSOs. However, neither the expression of political orientations in the NSO at large, nor the differences between British and US-American NSOs have been researched extensively, comparatively, or in-depth enough to provide conclusive statements on this topic. Sadly, due to the still existing bias against space opera, this goes for almost any topic in relation to the NSO. Hence, the closing lines of the introductory chapter of this thesis, Westfahl's statement that, due to the lack of (comparative) research on the genre of space opera, "necessarily, anyone discussing the nature, parameters and history of space opera at length breaks new ground" (197), still holds.

## Appendix A: Synopsis of *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*.

*Surface Detail* begins with the murder of the Sichultian Intagliate Lededje Y'breq, an indentured slave whose entire body, both inside and outside, is marked by a congenitally engineered and at a cellular level encoded tattoo. She is murdered by her owner, the extremely rich and power-hungry Joiler Veppers. Unbeknownst to either of them, Lededje is equipped with a neural-lace, a Culture device imbedded in the brain that records the wearer's mind-state – or, soul – and that, upon the sudden death of its wearer, transmits this mind-state to the Culture vessel it was produced on. Hence, Lededje finds herself, or rather, her mind-state, waking up in a virtual environment aboard the culture ship *Sense Amidst Madness, Wit Amidst Folly*. The ship provides her with a new body, but, being a morally upstanding Culture Mind, is not willing to help her on her quest to kill the man who murdered and abused her. She therefore reaches out to the warship *Falling Outside the Normal Moral Constraints*, as Culture warships are known to walk on, and sometimes even off, the edge of what the Culture at large considers morally and ethically acceptable and justifiable behavior. With the assistance of the *Falling...* and its avatar Demeisen, Lededje then heads back to the Sichultian Enablement, her society of origin, with the intention of killing Veppers.

Meanwhile, a virtual war, or a war sim (simulation), has been going on for a number of decades between several High Level civilizations, over the existence of virtual after-lives; specifically, the existence of virtual Hells. In the novel, most High Level civilizations, to which the Culture belongs, are capable of recording and storing the mind-states of their citizens. Some of those civilizations create virtual afterlives, where the mind-states of those who have died and who do not want to be “revented” – reincarnated into a new body – can live on indefinitely. Of those civilizations that create afterlives, some, inevitably, create Hells, where the mind-states of citizens whose behavior during life has been judged along the lines of “bad”, “unworthy”, or “unacceptable”, are being tormented and subjected to severe kinds

of torture. As a result of the existence of virtual Hells, two factions have formed: the Pro-Hell side and the Anti-Hell side. Both factions have agreed upon a virtual war to sort things out. If the pro-Hell side wins, pro-Hell societies are allowed to keep running their Hells, and if the anti-Hell side wins, running Hells becomes illegal throughout the galaxy. The Culture, being against torture in any shape or form, is firmly on the anti-Hell side, but has decided to stay out of the war – yet, most of the civilizations involved and/or aware of the war assume that the Culture is involved anyway.

When the anti-Hell side find themselves on the losing end, they first attempt to cheat by trying to hack the pro-Hell side substrates, and when that fails they decide to take the war to the Real – that is, the non-virtual world. They make a deal with the Sichultian Enablement that allows them to build a fleet of warships at the edge of Sichultian space. It turns out that Veppers has been buying up Hells for over a century, housing and running them under the trackways of his giant estate. In the end, Veppers, who wants rid of the Hells without implicating himself in it, strikes a deal with the Culture and one of the active anti-Hell civilizations, which leads to the physical destruction of the Hell substrates. The destruction of the Hells also ends the virtual war, and in addition with the surfacing of testimonies from mind-states saved from the Hell substrates, Hells are gradually denounced throughout the civilized galaxy.

Each chapter in the novel is devoted to one or more of the protagonists and their specific storyline. The main characters in *Surface Detail* are: Lededje; the ship *Falling Outside the Normal Moral Constraints* and its avatar Demeisen; Veppers; Vateuil, a soldier in the virtual war over the virtual Hells; Chay and Prin, two academics from the pro-Hell Pavulean civilization; and Yime Nsokyi, an agent for the Culture's Quietus section, which deals with the dead. Moreover, in relation to the chronology of the other *Culture* novels, the story of *Surface Detail* is set the farthest in the future, taking place approximately in the 29<sup>th</sup>

century AD. The events portrayed in *The Hydrogen Sonata* take place some 500 years before the events depicted in *Surface Detail*.

The plot of *The Hydrogen Sonata* is centered around the event of the Subliming of an ancient civilization called the Gzilt.<sup>28</sup> The Gzilt, who are, like the Culture, a level 8 civilization, played an important role in the formation of the Culture some ten thousand years ago, but decided at the last moment not to join the Culture themselves.<sup>29</sup> The Culture and the Gzilt have always remained friendly and, considering the galactic scale involved, relatively close. Hence, when a group of Culture ship Minds by chance register the remnants of an explosion in Gzilt space, they decide to go and investigate and see if the Gzilt might need and want their help, considering that most of the Gzilt's fleet has already Sublimed.<sup>30</sup> They discover that the explosion was actually caused by one of the Gzilt's remaining warships, who destroyed a Zihdren-Remnanter ship to prevent a message claiming the invalidity of the Gzilt's Holy Book, the Book of Truth, from spreading, as this could possibly halt the Subliming event.

However, due to spyware aboard the Gzilt ship, the message is being sent to the headquarters of another Gzilt military regime, one more opposed to the whole Subliming event, who assign lieutenant (reserve) Vyr Cossont the task of trying to verify the Zihdren-Remnanter's message. With the help of the Culture ship *Mistake Not...* and its avatar Berdle, Cossont sets out to retrieve a copy of the mind-state of an ancient Culture citizen named QiRia. QiRia was present at the negotiations that eventually led to the formation of the

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<sup>28</sup> Subliming means elevating oneself up out of the Real and (subliming) into what could be described as a higher and much more complex dimension. It can be seen as the final developmental stage civilizations can reach. Subliming is sometimes also referred to as Enfolding, and the Sublime as the Great Enfold.

<sup>29</sup> Throughout the *Culture* series a scale is used to indicate the level of civilizational development of the different alien societies portrayed in the various novels. Level 8, or High Level Involved, is the highest level on the scale. Only level 8 civilizations can Sublime. The Sichultian Enablement is classified as a high level 4/low level 5 civilization, capable of interstellar travel but not much more. In the short story "The State of the Art", featured in Banks's *The State of the Art* (1991), a collection of short stories, it is made clear that contemporary human society would be classified as a level 3 society.

<sup>30</sup> It is customary for Subliming species to send a large part of their fleet first into the Sublime, as a sort of reconnaissance.

Culture. At the same time, the Culture Minds involved discuss their course of action; specifically, whether there *should* be a course of action, and if so, what forms that action can take, as they question the legitimacy of their meddling in the business of another civilization. They decide to try to verify the Zihdren-Remnanter's message, and discover that the Book of Truth was actually a social experiment set up by a Zihdren scientist. This has been kept a secret for over ten thousand years. The Culture Minds decide that it is not their place to interfere in the Gzilt society, and therefore keep the secret to themselves. The highest authorities of the Gzilt government are aware of the truth, having been informed of the message by the ship that destroyed the Zihdren-Remnanter, and choose not to inform the rest of the population.

The main characters of the novel are: Vyr Cossont; the Culture ship *Mistake Not...* and its avatar Berdle; Colonel Agansu of the Gzilt; QiRia; Scoaliera Tefwe, a Culture citizen who is woken from storage to find and contact QiRia; and the Culture ship *Caconym*.



## Appendix B: Synopsis of the *Imperial Radch* Trilogy

The Imperial Radch trilogy tells the story of Breq, who “is both more than she seems and less than she was” (*Ancillary Justice* blurb). She was the *Justice of Toren*, a huge Radchaai troop-carrier starship possessing thousands of ancillaries, and utterly loyal – programmed to be loyal – to Anaander Mianaai, ruler of the vast Radch empire. After the ship is sabotaged and destroyed by an incarnation of Mianaai, she finds herself reduced to a single ancillary unit, and sets out to avenge her destruction and expose the split subjectivity of Mianaai to the rest of the Radch empire.

The first novel in the trilogy, *Ancillary Justice*, alternates between illustrating Breq’s current journey to avenge the murder of lieutenant Awn and the destruction of the *Justice of Toren*, and depicting the events that took place 19 years earlier that led to the murder of Awn and the destruction of the *Justice of Toren*. The novel begins in the present-day, on a planet outside of the Radch empire, where Breq, while trying to locate a former Radchaai doctor named Strigan whom she believes to be in possession of a rare and powerful Presger weapon, comes across a severely beaten-up former Radchaai officer of hers named Seivarden Vendaai. Seivarden, who was an officer on the *Justice of Toren* over a thousand years ago, had been drifting through space in a suspension pod for a millennium and was only recently rescued and woken up.<sup>31</sup> With Seivarden in tow, Breq locates Strigan and explains that she needs the Presger gun to kill Anaander Mianaai. The Presger are an alien species technologically superior to humans, with whom the Radch now have a non-attack treaty. About a thousand years ago, prior to the establishment of the treaty, the Presger secretly provided the Garseddai, a human civilization resisting annexation into the Radch empire, with 25 special guns that could neither be seen with the naked eye nor be registered with Radchaai technology. With

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<sup>31</sup> Suspension here refers to something akin to a dreamless, deep sleep, or hibernation. It is a method of “conserving” people for a period of time, either long or short.

the guns in their possession, the Garseddai attempted to ambush the Radchaai, and managed to destroy a Radchaai ship. However, Anaander, infuriated by the attack and wanting to make sure no one in their right mind would ever try something similar, answered the attack with brute force; upon her orders, the Garseddai were completely annihilated.

It becomes clear later in the novel that this event, the annihilation of the Garseddai, is what causes Anaander's split. While one part of her, the pro-annihilation or pro-expansion Anaander, stands behind the decision and would do it again, another part of her, the more pacifistic-Anaander, believes this reaction to have been outrageous and that measures should be taken to prevent something like this from ever happening again. The latter begins to slowly introduce changes into Radch society, such as abolishing the practice of ancillary soldiers, and disconnecting the standing of one's family from determining one's possible career path. This latter change is how, 19 years prior to the present-day events, Awn, talented daughter of an insignificant house, ends up as a lieutenant on the *Justice of Toren* – and as a lieutenant very much liked by the ship. At that time, the *Justice of Toren* is in orbit around the planet Shis'urna, the last planet and society to be annexed into the Radchaai empire. It eventually becomes clear that both Awn and the *Justice of Toren* are being used as pawns in and fall victim to the covert war that has been taking place since the annihilation of the Garseddai between the two different, opposing parts of Anaander. Both sides of Anaander have installed a sort of loyalty-code in the *Justice of Toren*, and the pro-annihilation incarnation uses this code to force the *Justice of Toren* to execute Awn. The execution of this command, running counter to the *Justice of Toren's* feelings for Awn, causes the ship to experience an emotional turmoil which enables her to, partially and temporarily, break free from her programmed loyalty towards either Anaander. When the *Justice of Toren* departs from orbit with the pro-annihilation Anaander aboard, the ship manages to separate one of the ancillary bodies she controls from the rest of her consciousness, and sends this ancillary unit, which is named

Breq, away from the ship in an escape pod, just minutes before the Anaander aboard sabotages and destroys the ship.

It takes her 19 years to gather enough money, knowledge, and equipment to enable her to journey to one of Anaander's palaces, where she confronts the local incarnation of Anaander, which turns out to be the more pacifistically-minded version, with the war she has been having with herself. This confrontation ends up bringing the war out into the open, turning it into a civil war. The more pacifistic incarnation then asks Breq to work with her against the pro-annihilation Anaander. Breq reluctantly agrees, and is recognized by Anaander as a citizen and adopted into the Mianaai house. She is also appointed as a fleet captain and provided with a ship, the *Mercy of Kalr*, and sent to protect Athoek Station, a remote Radchaai outpost where the younger sister of Awn, Basnaaid, is stationed.

This is where *Ancillary Sword*, the second novel in the trilogy, begins. Whereas the narration of *Ancillary Justice* alternated between depicting past and present events, the narration of *Ancillary Sword* is mostly linear, focusing on the present.

Although the pacifistic Anaander has recognized Breq as a citizen, ancillaries are still taboo, and she therefore has to hide her true nature from her crew; only Seivarden, the ship, the ship's medic, and a young lieutenant called Tisarwat are aware of Breq's ancillary nature. Tisarwat turns out to be an ancillary copy of Anaander. Upon discovering this, Breq has Tisarwat's ancillary implants removed, which allows Tisarwat to develop her own personality independent of Anaander. Subsequently, when they arrive at Athoek station, Breq discovers that the Ychana, the minority group of the two native peoples of Athoek planet, are being treated by the Radchaai upper-class and supervisors as if they are non-citizens, even though they have officially been granted citizenship and therefore deserve to be treated as such. She deliberately decides to establish her quarters in the Undergarden, a damaged section of the station where most of the Ychana and other undesirable citizens live. There she is approached

by Dlique, a translator for the Presger.<sup>32</sup> Soon after having met Dlique, the translator is killed by ancillaries from *The Sword of Atagaris*, the Radchaai ship that was tasked with overseeing Athoek prior to the arrival of Breq and her crew. The *Sword of Atagaris*'s captain, Hetnys, is on the side of the pro-expansion Anaander, and, recognizing the emotional attachment of the ship for its captain, Breq knows that the ship is loyal to Hetnys.

In hopes of preventing retaliation from the Presger, Breq and Hetnys decide to observe the Radchaai formal mourning practice, and retreat for two weeks to the estate of Fosyf, an esteemed citizen who owns a lot of tea plantations on Athoek planet. At the estate, Breq notices that Fosyf and her abusive daughter Raughd treat their laborers, Valskaayan transportees, awfully.<sup>33</sup> However, their treatment is in line with the more traditional Radchaai perception on colonized, non-Radchaai people – a perception held dear by the pro-expansion Anaander, but which the more pacifistic Anaander is trying to change. Moreover, Breq discovers that Hetnys has stolen suspended Valskaayan transportees, and traded them with a ship on the other side of the Ghost Gate – a gate in the Athoek system that leads to an empty star system – believing that she is dealing with and working for the pro-expansion Anaander. When Hetnys discovers that Breq has found her out, she moves against Breq and declares her loyalty for the pro-expansion Anaander. Breq manages to imprison Hetnys, and uses the imprisoned captain to keep the *Sword of Atagaris* subdued. Additionally, by putting together several fragments of information concerning the ship Hetnys traded with, Breq comes to the conclusion that the ship they are dealing with is over three thousand years old, even older than Anaander Mianaai herself.

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<sup>32</sup> The Presger, unable to speak human languages, grow, breed, or clone humans – the novel remains ambiguous about this process – to function as translators so they can maintain diplomatic ties with human society.

<sup>33</sup> Transportees are colonized peoples, in this case the Valskaaian people, who are taken from their home planet and transported to another planet, to prevent rebellion and make it easier to subjugate them to Radchaai rule. The Valskaaians have officially been granted citizenship.

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