

JAMIE WOODCOCK

The Expanse Expanded

 **RED FUTURES**

First published by Red Futures Ltd 2023

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First edition

ISBN: 978-1-7393944-0-0

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Acknowledgments

Jamie would like to thank Lydia Hughes for supporting his science fiction writing. He would also like to thank Una McCormack for encouraging this project to get started.

This book would not have been possible without the writers of *The Expanse*, everyone who worked on the TV series, and the contributions from the authors that follow. Thanks also to Matthew James Seidel and Lauren Bender for helping with the copyediting of the collection.

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About the Contributors

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Mary B Smith is a writer from Peoria, Illinois. She received her BSN from the University of Wyoming, completing her scholarship requirements by serving eight years in the US Army Nurse Corps. Following her true passion, she has written for news publications and a poetry anthology. She is the mother of six and attempts to write in her "free" time.

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Davide Mana is a palaeontologist and geologist, and holds a PhD in Earth Sciences from the Università degli Studi Carlo Bo in Urbino, Italy. He currently lives in a small village in the wine country of Northwestern Italy, where he pays his bills (usually late) as a freelance writer. In his spare time he reads fantasy and science fiction, listens to jazz music and cooks for his family.

Grigor (John) Velkovsky was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, which is where he currently resides. Leaving his country at a young age, he pursued philosophy at the United World College of the Adriatic in Italy, and continued to live abroad for many years. He studied at Westminster College in the US, where Winston Churchill gave his famous "Iron Curtain" speech. Graduating with a bachelor in Political Science and International Relations, Grigor was also keenly interested in psychology. Working with mental illnesses in a US maximum security prison was a catalyst for a deep curiosity about the human psyche, an appealing aspect of *The Expanse's* depth of characters - particularly Amos, Miller, and Naomi. As a product of the East but having spent his young adult life in the West, he's drawn into politics, society shifts, and existential questions arising from both sides. Grigor is currently an operations manager for a UK business bank and has worked significantly in the Fin-Tech sector for the past 4 years. He's an avid consumer of science fiction in all forms. He can be reached at: grigorvelkovsky@gmail.com and <https://www.linkedin.com/in/grigor-velkovsky>.

John Roselli is just a simple man trying to make his way in the universe, currently residing in Cleveland, OH. His love of science fiction started at an early age watching Star Wars and the original Star Trek series with his dad, and his love of science fiction stays strong to this day.

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Jamie Woodcock is the editor of this collection and also contributed a piece. He works at the University of Essex and is a researcher based in London. Jamie's research is available to read online (jamiewoodcock.net). He is on the editorial board of Notes from Below and Historical Materialism. More recently, he started Red Futures and is publishing science fiction.

About Red Futures

Red Futures Mag is an online magazine for Marxist and Left-wing Science Fiction. We run a group to share writing and work towards publishing it online. Please get in touch if you're interested in writing, joining the discord, or taking part in the project. You can fill out the contact form here: <https://www.redfuturesmag.com/contact>.

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The online version can be found here: <https://www.redfuturesmag.com/the-expanse-expanded>

The print book is available to order here: <https://www.redfuturesmag.com/shop>.

Introduction to the Collection

The Expanse was published as a series of nine books written by James S. A. Corey, a joint pen name of Daniel Abraham and Ty Frank. It is set in a science fiction future in which humanity has colonised much of the solar system, with the development of distinct cultures on Earth, Mars, and the Outer Planets. The story starts with the crew of the *Rocinante*, a missing person investigation, political intrigue, and alien technology, and covers a range of themes from political organising to terrorism, all the way up to civilisation-scale economic and social change.

The authors have added a further nine novellas and short stories. It has been adapted into a six-season TV series, comics, roleplaying and board games, and an upcoming Telltale game. There is also a podcast that goes into more detail about each episode of the TV series (amongst many other topics) with Ty Frank and Wes Chatham, the actor who plays Amos.

It has been over ten years since the publication of the first novel. After season three of the show, there was a fan-led campaign to save it following its cancellation by SyFy. It was later picked up by Amazon – reportedly after the intervention of Jeff Bezos. The popularity of *The Expanse* has been part of a wider resurgence of science fiction, reaching a broader audience and cultural significance. Across both the books and the TV series, *The Expanse* pays homage to classic science fiction and other genres like horror. What started as a text-based role-playing game has grown into a multi-layered universe of speculative fiction. The series imagines what would happen with human societies spread throughout the solar system, bringing the contradictions of today into the future.

This collection is the result of an open call for submissions aiming to discuss *The Expanse* from multiple angles and approaches. We have brought

together a collection that reflects on both the series and books, as well as the roleplaying game.

In “Neck Tattoos, Melting Glaciers, and Blue Goo”, Lauren Bender critically discusses the aesthetics of *The Expanse*. The essay digs into the design choices made for the TV show, particularly focusing on the ships, as well as the environments and wardrobe choices. Lauren explores how and why these choices were made, as well as the impact they have on the way the future is portrayed in *The Expanse*.

For “*Expanse* Fandom: Beyond the Material Plane”, John Bultena discusses the fan culture that has sprung up around *The Expanse*, noting how, unlike many other sci-fi franchises, there is comparatively little merchandising available. This has led to a flourishing of DIY culture, which can particularly be seen with the roleplaying game and the actual play of *Abraxas’ Precipice*, for which John is the game master.

Following on from this, there is a roundtable discussion of *Abraxas’ Precipice*, available on YouTube. Josh Simons hosts the cast, John Bultena, Donna Prior, Scott Mitchell, and Maria Moore as they reflect on storytelling within *The Expanse*.

Mary B Smith discusses “Heroism in *The Expanse*” in the next chapter. It focuses on Holden and Amos as different kinds of examples of heroes, examining the different moments in which they interact or respond differently in the story.

For “*The Expanse* or: How Holden Kept Worrying and Learned to Embrace Division”, Horst Trenkwill-Eiser explores the catastrophes in relation to our own historic and contemporary crises, providing a way to reflect on and unpack the politics of the series. Horst roots the series in the politics of the post-9/11 world order, criticising the ultimately limited political horizons portrayed in *The Expanse*.

Heather Clitheroe and Mark A. McCutcheon’s contribution “We should have brought a poetry grad student”, explores class in the series in relation to both higher education and organised labour. In particular, they draw out the representation of higher education and the role it plays within different factions, as well as the use of poetry within *The Expanse*.

In “The Politics of the Anthropocene: Environment and Society in *The Expanse*”, Davide Mana explores the themes of climate change and environmental crisis through *The Expanse*. Davide argues that it provides a warning against attempts to control the environment, particularly when then used as a part of social and political control.

For “*The Expanse: On the Cyclical Nature of History*”, Grigor (John) Velkovsky discusses the politics of the factions in *The Expanse*. The analysis takes in each of the factions, before moving on to discuss the role of ideology, history, and technology in the series.

John Roselli explores the characters in “The Heart of *The Expanse: Discovering Humanity in the Void*.” John argues that the appeal of the series can be found in the complex relationships between the characters and their development. This includes the powerful redemption arcs, particularly against the horrors of the series more widely.

In “The Future Society of *The Expanse*”, Marcin Stolarz explores the story in relation to the current crisis in Ukraine. Marcin discusses the refugee crisis in *The Expanse* that follows the bombing of Ganymede. Comparing this to the recent Polish response to Ukrainian refugees, it explores the presentations of humanitarian crises and what we can learn from this.

In the final chapter, Jamie Woodcock discusses “Work, Horror, and *The Expanse*.” Jamie details the strength of the series in its representation of work. This is compared to *Alien*, an important inspiration for *The Expanse*, which combines horror with a story that relies on blue-collar work. Jamie concludes that the horror ultimately wins out, leading to a story that revolves around a small group of protagonists, rather than a wider social transformation that we see the possibilities of at the start.

Neck Tattoos, Melting Glaciers, and Blue Goo: The Aesthetics of *The Expanse*

Lauren Bender

Utilitarian spaceships that account for gravity's pull in every facet of their design. Characters from three factions, each with their own form of dress. The neon-blue organic, crystalline horror of the alien lifeform called the protomolecule. From the outset, *The Expanse* took the world created by Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck in their series of nine novels and established itself as a show with a visual identity unlike any other science fiction series, with every element designed to reinforce its fundamental theme – how the disparities between different social classes might play out against the vastness and alienness of space.

The story told by *The Expanse* begins not with the opening action of its first episode, but with its title sequence. The purpose of any television show's opening sequence is to establish the show's identity, and *The Expanse's* opening certainly accomplishes that, creating atmosphere and setting the tone with its haunting Norwegian vocals. But more importantly, the title sequence, created by graphics company Breeder, rewards attentive viewers by showing a visual history of humanity and the solar system, providing crucial context for the tension between Earth, Mars, and the Belt. In *The*

Expanses' version of the future, 'we are wanderers, explorers and survivors,' according to Sharon Hall, executive producer for *The Expanse*. 'Breeder mapped the universe while adding specific texture and touch points that makes this journey very accessible.'¹

The opening sequence begins with the image of the Earth, as seen from space, at night, with its population centres lighting up the globe. This is a subtle, powerful choice. When most people picture Earth from space, they picture clouds swathing blue oceans and mottled green and brown continents. But *The Expanse* is about humanity, not nature, and in this version of the future, population growth and humanity's exploitation of natural resources has continued unchecked. The next shots, masterfully filmed by Breeder with a stuttering timelapse, tell this story through the images of retreating glaciers and the rising sea levels submerging Liberty Island, as a new platform is constructed to house the Statue of Liberty. These dire environmental conditions are ultimately what necessitate humanity's expansion into outer space – a story not of human curiosity or of scientific exploration, but a desperate, greedy grab for resources to further humanity's consumption.

The sequence continues with a shot of expanding construction on the lunar surface as a spare, elegant swarm of lines, representing the flight paths of spacecraft, circle the moon. According to Breeder, these rays of light draw inspiration from the work of German artist Carsten Nicolai, who used cathode ray TVs and pendulums to make magnetic forces visible to the human eye. Humanity's inexorable push into the solar system then continues out on Mars, as habitat domes are constructed on the surface. We see the shipping lanes of the asteroid belt and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn before the camera closes in on an astronaut, alone against the blackness of space and looking toward the sun. While later seasons add shots of Earth, Mars, the Belt, and the Ring Gates to other solar systems that contextualise the events of prior seasons, the visual story of humanity's push into the expanse of space remains fundamentally unchanged. It's a stylish, masterful opening sequence

¹ Justin Sanders, "Design/Dissect: "The Expanse" Show Open," Brief.promax.org, 2016, <https://brief.promax.org/article/design-dissect-the-expanse-show-open>.

that establishes a visual lexicon for the show and grounds the viewer in its universe.

The Design of the Expanse

When it comes to the design of *The Expanse* – from its spaceships to its costumes to its architecture – one principal generally rules: the supremacy of function over form. This is not to say that *The Expanse* is not stylish; its improvisations on different aesthetic themes within each of the solar system's cultures are distinct and breathtaking. But all of its ships, from the smallest corvette to the largest dreadnought, take into account the limitations of physics and are designed accordingly; the clothing of anyone flying on a spaceship is designed to allow for both zero-gravity movement and high-g burns.

Unlike the ships of other science fiction series like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* that handwave physics away with MacGuffins like hyperdrives or warp speed, gravity is king in the ship designs of *The Expanse*. In the world of both the books and the show, artificial gravity is only possible on ships with the use of hyper-efficient thrusters that accelerate ships to speeds that approximate a planet's gravity. Most of *The Expanse's* ships are thus designed with its thrusters in the rear of the ship (although from the perspective of the crew, the thrusters are always beneath their feet). We do not yet have the benefit of the fictional Epstein drive technology that makes this sort of spaceflight possible, but the ships in *The Expanse* are nevertheless designs that could conceivably be built in the future. Both military and civilian ships in the show are also generally quite large and bulky, with multiple layers of protection against the vacuum of space; in the case of military ships, they are also outfitted with rail guns, point defence cannons, and torpedoes that make for imposing profiles. There is also a certain irony in the fact that for a show called *The Expanse*, most of the interiors of its ships and stations are quite enclosed and claustrophobic; a spacefaring civilization might involve travelling unfathomable distances, but it's all done in very advanced tin buckets.

Of course, the show's most quintessential ship is the Rocinante, the Martian

Navy’s corvette-class frigate commandeered by the main characters in the show’s first season. Although the ship is cutting-edge Martian technology, it eventually becomes a symbol of neutrality and independence in the solar system. According to showrunner Naran Shankar, ‘[t]he orientation of the decks and the distribution of mass relative to the direction of thrust, these and many other factors dictate the form of our ships, which often end up resembling big, chunky buildings (which we love).’² Dr. Ryan Ridden, a post-doctoral research fellow at the Space Telescope Science Institute, describes in a YouTube video the Rocinante as something like ‘a Dutch canal house with a rocket attached.’³ The Rocinante’s design, with its heat-resistant tiles and missiles that can fire without affecting the ships velocity, is a far cry from science fiction’s well-known sleek ships like the Millennium Falcon or the Enterprise, but the show’s production and art designers ultimately achieved a design that is functional yet iconic – a true workhorse.⁴

For the ships of Earth, Mars, and the Belt, *The Expanse* created a compendium of ship designs that effectively convey information about their respective factions. Ships like the UN’s Agatha King, the Thomas Prince, and the Arbogast are depicted to illustrate Earth’s fading empire – according to production designer Seth Reed, ‘[w]e wanted to show that the UN was slightly behind Mars in both technology and ‘style,’ opting for a more plain ‘gray-ish’ look, and with ship silhouettes that were more blocky, less refined.’⁵ In keeping with Earth’s identity as the blue planet, the livery of its ships features blue trim as well as the UN flag. Mars’ ships, on the other hand, are on the cutting edge of military technology: they are sleek, state of the art ships that reflect Martian society’s authoritarian emphasis on military might, with black and red-orange livery and a flag reminiscent of Mars and its two

² Titan Books, *The Art and Making of the Expanse* (London: Titan Books, 2019).

³ Ryan Ridden, “Are the Expanse Ships Realistic? - Science of the Expanse,” YouTube, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA0fKJy9ewg>.

⁴ Jim Thacker, “Behind the Scenes: The Concept Art of the Expanse,” *ArtStation Magazine*, 2016, <https://magazine.artstation.com/2016/02/scenes-concept-art-expanse>.

⁵ Titan Books, *The Art and Making of the Expanse*.

moons, Phobos and Deimos.

In terms of a unifying aesthetic, the ships and stations of the Belt are more difficult to pin down. They range from run-down rock hoppers held together with spit and grit to high-tech stations and ships like Tycho Station or the Behemoth/Medina. Concept designer Tim Warnock identifies Belters as ‘truckers in space,’ in essence spiritual successors to the crew of *Alien’s* Nostromo.⁶ Over the course of the series, as the Belters rise and become a political force to be reckoned with, their ships grow more technologically advanced, with the Belters often repurposing the ships of other factions for their own uses, like the Mormon Nauvoo, which becomes the Behemoth and later Medina Station, or the Pella, an MCRN ship repurposed by Marco Inaros to become the flagship of the Free Navy. What does seem to unite this disparate group of ships is a ‘waste not, want not’ philosophy and an enterprising spirit – a willingness to make use of anything and everything at hand, disregarding legality and regulations in the process. The redesigned Behemoth reflects Belter pragmatism and lack of sentimentality, with workstations and cables crisscrossing the Mormons’ carefully designed ship interior.

Spaceships are one of the centrepieces of *The Expanse’s* design, but environments like Earth’s futuristic New York City, the asteroid colony of Ceres Station, Tycho Station, Mars, Ganymede, and Io are also key aspects of its worldbuilding. Except for Earth, all *The Expanse’s* stations and planets are locations that are hostile to human life, and their environments must be constructed to prioritise air filtration and other types of life support. However, within that constraint there is a large degree of differentiation between the locations of different factions. The skyline of New York City, with its added futuristic skyscrapers, buzzing drones and helicopters, is seemingly inspired by deconstructivist architecture, a postmodern architectural movement that often features fragmented non-rectilinear shapes. The buildings of Mars, appropriately for an authoritarian society that disdains ornamentation, are inspired by brutalist architecture, featuring exposed, unpainted rock or metal

⁶ Thacker, “Behind the Scenes.”

and minimalist shapes. The environments of Ceres and Tycho Stations, on the other hand, are a mishmash of human cultures and stacked prefabricated buildings that suggest crowded urban cities. ‘The pioneers who left Earth to mine the asteroids were a mix of all ethnicities, and Ceres reflects this: it has high-density Asian apartments, Middle Eastern marketplaces, Brazilian favelas, and Western comedy clubs,’ Shankar says.⁷

It’s also important to note that *The Expanse* does not depict its factions as monoliths; there is a wide range of social classes on Earth, Mars, and the Belt, and the show manages to accurately convey this nuance. Compare the decadence of Jules-Pierre Mao’s yacht, the *Guanshiyin*, for example, with the tent cities of people living on basic assistance from the government that Bobbie encounters in season 2 or the slums of Baltimore that Amos visits in season 5. These are all Earther living spaces, but *The Expanse* recognizes that even within the sphere of its most privileged political faction, there are still haves and have-nots.

Cinematography and Background Detail: Shooting the Expanse

Less conspicuous but still striking elements of the series include its cinematography, lighting, props, and graphics and heads-up displays. ‘*The Expanse* is different from a lot of typical television science fiction,’ says series cinematographer Jeremy Benning, CSC. ‘The series has a hard-edge look without being clinical. The sets are often techie and harsh, and the lenses help take some of that edge off and add more character, sort of a graphic novel look to the images.’⁸

The lighting of the show is carefully considered and designed, with the lighting mostly built into the architecture of the sets, providing a multilayered

⁷ Titan Books, *The Art and Making of the Expanse*.

⁸ Michael Burns, ‘Cinematographer Jeremy Benning on Creating the Look of the Expanse,’ *Fired by Design*, 2018, <https://www.firedbydesign.com/2018/01/18/cinematographer-jeremy-benning-on-creating-the-look-of-the-expanse>.

look. Benning cites American battleships as an inspiration for the Rocinante's signature blue battle lighting.⁹ However, the frequency with which artificial lighting is used in *The Expanse's* spaceships and space stations does present one possible criticism. The artificial lighting is a slick stylistic choice for the viewer, but in-universe, one would think that characters living on spaceships without access to sunlight would want their lighting to be as naturalistic as possible.

The crew of *The Expanse* also brought their signature attention to detail to the show's props. The ingenious mag boots are a practical solution for filming scenes in zero-gravity. Mag boots are used much less frequently in the books since they are not a realistic solution to walking in space, but they provide the show with a way to shoot scenes that take place in zero-gravity without having to resort to expensive wire work and special effects. Similarly imaginative are the transparent comms that pervade the show, which take the current trend toward thinner, lighter electronics to its natural conclusion. Even the graphics of the screens and interactive displays, from small communicators to large, curved screens to holographic displays, all adhere to a similar futuristic but practical aesthetic; in an interview, motion graphics designer Rhys Yorke noted that showrunner Shanker wanted as many displays as possible to be functional for the actors.¹⁰

Wardrobe and Style

The costumes of *The Expanse*, expertly crafted by costume designer Joanne Hansen, are an effective shorthand for the culture of each faction. The show admittedly features a lot of jumpsuits, space suits, and military uniforms. But within those limitations, there is nevertheless a huge amount of variation, as well as a few spectacular exceptions.

⁹ Indy Mogul, "The Cinematography of the Expanse | Camera & Lighting Breakdown," YouTube, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29MzR2m88G8>.

¹⁰ HUDS+GUIS, "The Expanse UI Design," HUDS+GUIS, 2021, <https://www.hudsandguis.com/home/2021/theexpanse>.

One of the most common looks for characters in *The Expanse* are the jumpsuit and the VAC suit, a space suit designed to be worn in the vacuum of space. The crew of the *Rocinante* is most often shown in one of these outfits, but each of the four members of the team adapt the look to suit their own style. Jim Holden is often shown with the top half of his jumpsuit worn around his waist, almost as if in rebellion against his role as the reluctant leader. Naomi Nagata wears a jumpsuit with a higher waist and open at the neck to show off her Belter tattoos. Amos Burton's jumpsuit features patches from the various crews he's worked on throughout his career, and is styled with the sleeves rolled up, while Alex Kamal wears his original Tachi jumpsuit as a point of Martian pride. 'The costumes were designed in time and place, and individuated,' Hansen says. 'Each of our cast brought their 'character' to the costume. It's really about creating a language between costume design, story, and character.'¹¹

The military uniforms of Earth and Mars are also carefully differentiated from each other. The Martian uniforms reflect their authoritarian, militaristic society – perfectly polished and completely buttoned up, with nothing out of place. In contrast, Hansen said in an interview of the UN's military uniforms, 'Earthers, they believe Earth is No. 1. Earth must come first, it's Avasarala's mantra, and in a sense, it clings in some ways to the past. So we give [the Earth costumes] a little bit more connection to a world we recognize now.'¹²

The Martian military has the edge, of course, with their power armour worn by the Martian Marine Corps' top soldiers. In-universe, the armour is equipped with a hydraulics system that magnifies the wearer's strength, an inbuilt multi-barrel minigun, rocket-propelled grenades, and an advanced heads-up display that monitors the wearer's environment. This \$150,000 prop suit was one of the show's most remarkable achievements, bringing to

¹¹ Titan Books, *The Art and Making of the Expanse*.

¹² Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, "'The Expanse' Costume Designer Joanne Hansen Explains Her Futuristic Fashion," *The Daily Dot*, 2018, <https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/expanse-costume-design-interview-joanne-hansen>.

life the fierceness and absolute competence of Bobbie Draper, as well as the incredible Martian investment in technology and weaponry.

The Expanse was also forced by necessity to create a visual shorthand for what a Belter looks like through costumes. In the books, Belters are uniquely identified by their elongated skeletons that are an effect of growing up and living their lives in very low gravity environments. Although the first episode of *The Expanse* shows such a Belter, this was unfortunately impossible to include long-term, especially for main characters like Naomi and Camina Drummer. Instead, the show uses clothing, hair, and makeup to define what a Belter looks like, drawing on a variety of cultural backgrounds and bringing in a variety of fabric patterns and colours for their look. This also results in one of the show's coolest looks: the Belter tattoos. As in the books, members of the OPA (Outer Planets Alliance, or the radical faction of the Belt) are identifiable by the split-circle tattoo. But in "Rock Bottom," (S1E6) Anderson Dawes explains that the old suit EVA helmets – cheap equipment usually provided by Earth corporations – would burn and 'the contacts would cook your skin.' Members of the older generation of Belters like Dawes wear these scars proudly, while members of the younger generation like Naomi and Drummer have geometric neck tattoos that mimic the scarring and pay homage to their elders' sacrifice.

No discussion of *The Expanse's* costumes would be complete without addressing Chrisjen Avasarala's fantastic wardrobe, of course. She combines iridescent jewel-toned South Asian saris and ornate jewellery with more avant-garde pieces, like the burnt-orange cloak she wears while walking through the snow to James Holden's family's home in "Windmills" (S1E7). She is in a category of her own, and one could devote an entire essay to exploring the nuances of her style, but there is a wonderful kind of tension and ambiguity to Avasarala's look. She is one of the most powerful people in the solar system, and yet she is also a woman of colour and a member of a historically oppressed nation. Her outfits convey elegance and sophistication, and yet she is foul-mouthed and often forcefully uncompromising in her interactions with other characters. As Hansen puts it, 'She's the only one with maybe enough freedom and power to exercise that privilege' of wearing

bright colours.¹³

The Expanse's Vision of the Future

The Expanse forecasts today's political, social, and scientific conditions 200 years into the future, and the show is thus necessarily grounded in physical reality. But the series also moves more firmly into the realm of science fiction and science fantasy with the introduction of the protomolecule and its associated constructs, like the ring gates and Laconia's alien hounds. The techno-organic protomolecule is technically not an alien lifeform in and of itself; rather, Protogen scientist Antony Dresden describes it in the first book of the series, *Leviathan Wakes*, as 'a set of free-floating instructions designed to adapt to and guide other replicating systems.'¹⁴ The show's interpretation of the protomolecule perhaps slightly softens the full-on horror of the books' vomit zombies, adding more blue bioluminescence than the book depicts, but the show's version is still plenty grisly and surreal. Like the creators of the video game *The Last of Us*, the concept artists of *The Expanse* drew on the look of endoparasitoids, or organisms that grow inside a host. 'We looked at examples from nature of one species invading a host,' concept artist Tim Warnock said. 'One really compelling example is that of an insect-pathogenizing fungus that infects ants, turning them into 'zombie ants.' There was also the idea of a metamorphosis that we wanted to convey.'¹⁵

One particularly clever choice that the show makes is the callback in "Home" (S2E5) to the bird flying in artificial gravity on Ceres from the first episode. The bird's appearance to Miller as he makes his way through the protomolecule-consumed Eros, whether it's really there or visible only in Miller's imagination, reinforces the protomolecule's power to synthesise intelligent life and create an alien hive mind as a byproduct.

¹³ Costume CO, "The Expanse Costume Design: Part 1," YouTube, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWo3mDrEe3o>.

¹⁴ James S A Corey, *Leviathan Wakes* (New York: Orbit, 2011), 344.

¹⁵ Titan Books, *The Art and Making of the Expanse*.

After the events of Eros' crash into Venus and the protomolecule's deconstruction of the Arbogast, the protomolecule reveals its ultimate purpose, forming the Ring Gate – not a biological function, but a technological one, and the design of the Ring Gate, with its black filaments and blue glow, reflects this. The designs of the protomolecule and its associated constructs, like the Ring Station and the structures on Ilus, provide an effective shorthand for the questions raised by the series – what was the civilization that built the protomolecule and the Ring Gates? What was the force that destroyed that civilization?

Unfortunately, *The Expanse*, with its cancellation after season 6, didn't get to fully explore the answers to those questions (although fans can read the story's end in the last three books of the series). But the show was nevertheless an unparalleled achievement in science fiction, creating a vision of the future that felt grounded in the possibilities projected by current technology, the limitations of physics, and the realities of human conflict. It is to be hoped that in the coming years, the technical and artistic achievements of the show's creators in building this fictional world will inspire other creators in the genre.

Expanse Fandom: Beyond the Material Plane

John Bultena

Attending *SiliCon* in 2022, I was privy to meeting numerous fans of *The Expanse*, seeing as several actors from the show along with authors and producers were present. In meeting these fans, I noticed they had a variety of outfits and makeup. These various cosplays featured items such as patches and data pads that were custom made. I complimented their efforts, while peering at the intricate nature of their costuming. I then shared with them my own project, *Abraxas' Precipice*,¹⁶ a game based on *The Expanse* is played live on the streaming platform *Twitch*.¹⁷ Some had heard of the game, but all were intrigued by this creative endeavour of mine, much like I was with their costumes.

Franchising entertainment changed with the release of *Star Wars* in 1977, specifically with how merchandising works. Post-*Star Wars*, nearly every film and television show had vast amounts of purchasable tie-ins: action figures, lunch boxes, clothing, board games, soap, notebooks, etc. A few years

¹⁶ *Abraxas' Precipice*, "Abraxas' Precipice," Linktree, <https://linktr.ee/abraxasprecipic>.

¹⁷ OnlyPlayWizards, "OnlyPlayWizards," Twitch, <https://twitch.tv/onlyplaywizards>.

later, this trend flourished with the advent of cartoons based on toy lines, effectively half-hour commercials, exemplified by *Masters of the Universe*, *GI Joe*, *Transformers* and many other cartoons of the 1980s. This trend continues. Walking into a Barnes & Nobles, being bombarded by *Harry Potter* and *Game of Thrones* items that simply have the logo on them, without even a character representation or scene depicted, it is common to see mass-licensed items. These items certainly do not contribute to the narratives of those stories and merely serve as mementos of those stories' existence.

Going to comic book conventions these days, one is overwhelmed by the sheer amount of merchandise for things that are not comic books in their primary medium. Often these conventions, which were focused on sharing artwork by artists from all over, have shifted to a local form of concentrated consumerism for mass produced goods for various franchises. This consumeristic trend of fandom is epitomised by Funko Inc.'s Pop! Vinyl line. Stylized, affordable statues, within standardised box sizes, to satisfy whatever pop culture interest one has, are readily available at your local Walmart.

The Expanse, both the television series and books, stands in stark contrast to this vast sea of merchandise. Fans of *The Expanse* are fairly hard-pressed to find merchandise for the franchise. There have been Eaglemoss's high quality models of the *Rocinante* and *Razorback*; the three KidRobot vinyl figures of Naomi, Holden, and Avasarala;¹⁸ a small scale *Rocinante* included with a Loot Crate;¹⁹ a board game put out by WizKids;²⁰ and two comic series put out by Boom! Studios, with another being released in 2023.²¹ Oddly,

¹⁸ KidRobot, "KidRobot x The Expanse 7-inch figures available now," KidRobot, 2018, <https://www.kidrobot.com/blogs/kidrobot-blog/kidrobot-x-the-expanse-7-inch-figures-available-online-now>.

¹⁹ Amazon, "Loot Crate The Expanse Rocinante Spaceship Replica - Exclusive Not in Stores," 2023, Amazon, <https://www.amazon.com/Exclusive-Expanse-Rocinante-Replica-Stores/dp/B079Z2JMMX>.

²⁰ WizKids, "The Expanse Board Game," WizKids, 2017, <https://wizkids.com/the-expanse>.

²¹ Boom! Studios, "The Expanse," Boom! Studios, 2023, <https://www.boom-studios.com/archives/category/series/the-expanse>.

the most elaborate line of official merchandise came through *The Expanse* T-Shirt Club Subscription on Amazon, with several dozen shirts offered over the years. The forthcoming video game focusing on Camina Drummer by Telltale Games is probably the biggest franchised media for *The Expanse* outside of the show or books.²² Nacelle is putting out *The Expanse* action figures, but the extent of the line or time frame is unclear.²³ For a show that was picked up by Amazon and well produced, this is a spartan amount of material goods for a contemporary franchise.

When SyFy did not renew *The Expanse*, it resulted in a passionate online campaign to save *The Expanse*, a grassroots fan campaign that garnered a lot of attention and culminated in the series being picked up by Amazon. This was not a fluke, as the fanbase was already adept at making things happen. Searching around online, one will find Facebook groups and Discord servers dedicated to *The Expanse*. This is not anything new, as online forums for various fandoms have existed alongside the internet for decades, but with *The Expanse* there is a very DIY-oriented maker culture that is readily apparent.

This DIY and/or maker fandom is intriguing, namely because when it occurs, it is not just a celebration of the franchise in question, but also a celebration of the fans' own labour. Some of the work shared goes well beyond hobbyist capacities. Take Karl Winkler's extensive cosplay. He has full suits of Martian military armour, power armour, custom EVA helmets based on the show designs, all self-made.²⁴ While Karl's work is exceptional, it is not unique. Whenever fans of *The Expanse* show up to conventions, many are in flight suits decorated with a variety of custom made patches, make-up, boots, etc. I am no different, as I went in my own flight suit and magboots to

²² Telltale, "The Expanse: A Telltale Series," Telltale, 2023, <https://telltale.com/the-expanse>.

²³ The Nacelle Company, "The Expanse Collectibles Coming from Nacelle," The Nacelle Company, 2023, <https://www.nacellecompany.com/press/the-expanse-collectibles-coming-from-nacelle>.

²⁴ Karlsexpense, "karlsexpense," Tumblr, 2023, <https://www.tumblr.com/karlsexpense/666153866116694016>.

LA Comic Con in 2022.²⁵ But none of these pieces were store-bought, official *Expanses* merchandise; rather, it comes from deconstruction of what is shown on the show and depicted in the books, and then planned out for fan-made construction. I purchased a flight suit, obtained patches from makers around the internet, and sewed them on. The boots were galoshes that were rigged to place red bicycle lights on the rear, to simulate the “on” function of magboots from the show. The parts were sought, discovered, modified, and assembled into a manner that bear resemblance to their on screen counterparts via the practice of kitbashing. None of these items came from licensing of *The Expanses*.

Besides the t-shirt of the month club, the single line that has the most SKUs would be the *The Expanses Roleplaying Game* by Green Ronin Publishing. There are four hardbound books (with two more on the way in 2023, as of this writing), a Game Master’s Kit, three sets of dice, and several PDF-only publications. The RPG is in an interesting position because it was signed off on by the authors of the series, Ty Franck and Daniel Abraham, making it as canonical as the books. Seeing as the authors kept major elements of the history of the future vague in the books and show, many portions are filled in by the RPG, for example how the UN rose to power due to extensive climate disasters and the following economic slump.²⁶ And unlike *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, ship technical readouts for *The Expanses* are only available in *The Ships of the Expanses* source book for the RPG, a book that maps out all 102 levels of the Donnager and dozens of other ships. The campaign book, *Abzu’s Bounty*, details efforts Jules-Pierre Mao was engaged in prior to the discovery of the protomolecule, as well as those of his competitors. The RPG not only develops the meaning of *The Expanses* just from the form’s demands to offer a thorough enough paracosm to play in, but also through the actions of fans, namely through the hobby element of tabletop roleplaying games.

²⁵ Abraxas’ Precipice, *The Expanses RPG Actual Play* (@AbraxasPrecipic), “Think @OnlyPlay-Wizards is ready for his shift on Tycho Station?”, Twitter post, 2021, <https://twitter.com/AbraxasPrecipic/status/1451705054533013507>.

²⁶ Steve Kenson et al. *The Expanses Roleplaying Game* (Seattle, WA: Green Ronin, 2021), 143.

For those not familiar, tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPG), exemplified by *Dungeons & Dragons*, involve a group of individuals coming together (in real or virtual spaces) to tell a story. In this dynamic, the players each have a character, called player characters, within a setting that is articulated by another player, often called the Game Master. Through dialogue and a set of rules that often utilise dice to simulate chances of success/failure, the story unfolds, generally with the player characters as the protagonists. *The Expanse Roleplaying Game* is no different.

What is fascinating is that the existence of *The Expanse* as a TTRPG is not a coincidence. Franck has discussed how *The Expanse* began as an idea for a massive multiplayer online role-playing game, but that direction was interrupted, as mentioned in an interview with *Polygon*.²⁷ Pivoting, Franck developed it as a setting for the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game* by Wizards of the Coast. Eventually, Franck was running this game and through playing it met Daniel Abraham. Many of the story's elements are classic RPG tropes: groups with varying backgrounds and exceptional skills forced to work together, repeatedly the only survivors of overwhelming odds, infrequent players weaving in and out of presence with the main party (Miller), various quest givers/patrons to work for (Fred Johnson), distinct factions that are distrusting of each other, and the list goes on. The very structure of *The Expanse's* plot, characters, and factions made it hyper-conducive towards adaptation to roleplaying games.

From their inception, RPGs have fallen within the umbrella of hobby gaming, which are games where one crafts and develops the elements of the games. This can be things like painting miniature game pieces, but more often than not it involves development of new rules into more formalised manners, known as home brewed rules. Specifically with RPGs, this involves creating new adventures, settings, characters, and whatever may populate or be played within these paracosms.

²⁷ Charlie Hall, "The Expanse, once a homebrew tabletop RPG, is going legit," *Polygon*, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/8/7/17660410/the-expanse-tabletop-rpg-kickstarter-green-ronin>.

All this brings me to my own project as a fan of *The Expanse: Abraxas' Precipice*. Anyone that knows me knows I dig *The Expanse*. I am well versed in the canonical lore, including the differences between the show and books. I have continued to utilise the novels in the university courses I instruct. But the most focused element of my fandom is the production and playing of *The Expanse Roleplaying Game* in the form of my actual play, *Abraxas' Precipice*. What is striking about this, compared to other fandoms I enjoy, is the lack of material items regarding *The Expanse* that I own. For *Dungeons & Dragons*, I have numerous books, miniatures, collectibles, a marquee from an original arcade cabinet from the 90s game by Capcom, and many more licensed materials with the official logo stamped on it. This has also been the case for other fandoms I have been active in, including a huge collection of Transformers at one point. But for *The Expanse*, a fandom I spent over six hours a week producing and promoting a show to play the role-playing game for, I barely have two shelves of material. Mostly books, but also a model of the Rocinante, a signed photo of Jacob Mundell (Erich from season 5), a set of *The Expanse Roleplaying Game* dice signed by some cast members, and a few other small things.

When I delve into *Expanse* fan pages and groups, the people I see that have physical objects usually are artworks, posters, or signed images. But anyone with a shelf full of items, they are mostly props that they built themselves. Some are 3D-printed, while others have identified the real basis for helmets from the show and rebuilt them. And much like those folks that build props or costumes as an expression of fandom, I have also built something – 160+ hours of gameplay exploring the kinds of stories both my players and I want to tell in *The Expanse*.

In May 2021, I began *Abraxas' Precipice*, my actual play of *The Expanse Roleplaying Game*. An actual play is where folks play a game, typically roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons* together, while sharing that experience via video or podcast. At the time, *The Expanse Roleplaying Game* had been out for over two years, but I had never really had an opportunity to play it. Certainly I was a fan of the franchise, and with the final season six on the horizon, I wanted to really delve into it, but not alone. So I gathered

some folks I knew that were fans and even asked around for folks that would be interested. I went and watched eight other actual plays of *The Expanse Roleplaying Game*. I took notes on their overlays (what their screen/layouts broadcasts look like), to see what worked and what did not, to know what would be conducive towards my own game. I dug around online for materials, backgrounds, graphics, images, etc. I contacted my friend that has a dungeon synth project, Vaelastraz, to come up with an opening, a space-appropriate theme. I went through the adventures by Green Ronin Publishing, found ones I liked and then modified them to my liking to be used for our game. I promoted, built social media presences, and shared my upcoming project with various *Expanse* communities. I did all that in about eight weeks prior to us playing our first episode live on Wednesday, May 19th 2021 at 6pm PST on [twitch.tv/onlyplaywizards](https://www.twitch.tv/onlyplaywizards).

To be clear, there is no money in producing and running an actual play. The question, then, is why do it? A few reasons. First, I enjoy roleplaying games, and have for over 33 years. Another was the enjoyment of putting something together, assembling it; this is the hobby factor. But tying back to *The Expanse* and what it offers that is two fold. The paracosm of *The Expanse* is heavily rooted in actual science, acting as an extrapolation of history, not just technological but also social. This rooted nature means that for my game, I could not just “magic” things away but would have to explain them. This forces me to constantly learn about new achievements in science but also in social theories, and always being aware of where we are going as humanity is just fascinating to me. But that I could get from other hard sci-fi RPGs. What really had me enthralled with *The Expanse* as an RPG is all the untold stories of the series. Questions rang in my head, things like, “How do you handle a refugee crisis in space? How does the public manage, knowing there are large blue people that do not need space suits in vacuum that can rip heads off of Martian Marines? or what is the process for someone to be radicalised to a cause like Marco Inaros’s?” It was stories like this I wanted to explore, the stories of the regular folks working in space as the history of the future unfolds. How do they manage? I often describe my show as ‘schlubs in space’ – that is, just the common folks just trying to get by.

Prior to writing this, I sat down with three of the four current cast members of *Abraxas' Precipice*, Donna Prior, Scott Mitchell, and Maria Moore, to reflect and consider what we are creating with this project and what *The Expanse* franchise means to us. Josh Simons moderated this round table discussion in December of 2022 and it can be viewed here: https://youtu.be/Y0b2NLAnE_Ns (it is also introduced in the following chapter).

Re-watching it months later, I can see the meaning we developed here. We are not just looking at *The Expanse* and saying, "Wow, cool spaceships, lets play with those," but rather seeing how its depictions of humanity ring true for us. We then take those themes and sink our teeth into them by utilising roleplaying to emphasise and articulate. Beyond that, we are also sharing these elements, inviting others along for the journey. In the conversation we discuss how we have utilised the game to understand real world issues and tragedies. The example that is often brought up is the refugee crisis caused by the MCR and UN conflict over Ganymede. While the show and books do have plots about it, they quickly move onto the heroes' story of chasing down the culprits of these conspiracies. But in our game we ask, 'What about the refugees? Wouldn't some be radicalised?' Taking those questions that are not satisfactorily answered by the books or show, I was able to utilise them for our games' plot and paracosm. This in turn allowed the players to think more about those same issues we face in the real world, refugee crises and political radicalization. We are not separate from the games we play and the fantasies we indulge in. Something is brought back from those liminal spaces and in doing so we find a richness.

This is the issue at hand with consumeristic based fandoms: the experience is packaged, complete. The object exists and it can certainly be played with, but because it is ready at hand there is a gap in the exploratory engagement. And should one not be able to afford it, then one simply does not play in that domain. One of the genius elements of *The Expanse* franchise has been its resistance to this. That it offers a paracosm, but not one that is complete or filled out, where the gaps can be engaged and a level of revelatory freedom grasped. The tabletop roleplaying game exemplifies this by handing over the reigns to the fans of a paracosm that is rooted but incomplete. The lack

THE EXPANSE EXPANDED

of merchandise and licensed goods has created a pressure of expectation other franchises have established. That pressure manifests in a DIY attitude towards *The Expanse* fandom, making the act of creation one of reverence for the source material.

3

Abraxas' Precipice roundtable, The Expanse RPG Actual Play chat for Red Futures Mag

Josh Simons hosted the cast of *Abraxas' Precipice*, John Bultena, Donna Prior, Scott Mitchell, and Maria Moore as they reflected on Storytelling within *The Expanse*. The introduction to the panel is transcribed here. It has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity. You can watch the full discussion here on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0b2NLAnEJs>

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Josh Simons: If you're listening at home tuning in, this is a recorded Roundtable discussion that we're doing for Red Futures Magazine. This is the cast of *Abraxas' Precipice*, which is a tabletop actual play show.

Really quickly I want to define what we mean when we say tabletop actual play, because I know we've got academics in the house and the sooner we define our terms the sooner we can move to an actual productive conversation!

So a tabletop role-playing game is a game that combines an element of

portraying a character, much like your video game RPG would do, where you step into the shoes of a character and your decisions shape the outcome of greater things in the universe around you. You do the same thing with the tabletop game where you have decisions that you make. Sometimes they are very tough and sometimes they are moral dilemmas. Your actions shape the universe as it unfolds around you. You also have a component of stats and numbers and mechanics, as you have different skills that you are trained in that you're good at and certain skills that you're not so good at – for example, maybe you shouldn't be trying to do anything like piloting without any experience. I wouldn't recommend it. So, you have both of those things and you roll dice. You have conversations around the table as all of the players together determine what course of action they want to pursue, make decisions, make friendships, break friendships – it's a great time! So that's what a tabletop role-playing game is. An actual play is when you take that game and perform it in some kind of online environment, whether that's a podcast or a Twitch stream or YouTube series.

There's a variety of ways you can do that, each one kind of fits different niches and they're different stories you can tell through [different mediums]. But the key piece about an actual play is that you are sitting down with a group of people playing the game and not editing out all of the mechanical bits. That's part of the fun. It's entertaining. Folks love to watch it and it's also educational. If you don't know how to play a game you can watch it and learn how to play the game, which is really great for me because I'm a visual learner and I like to see it played in order to learn how it goes.

So, I've defined my terms. Let's take a moment and do our introductions, much like in *The Expanse*, which focuses on an exceptional group of people doing exceptional things. We have an exceptional group of people, the cast of Abraxas' Precipice. I'm gonna start with John: Who are you? Where can people find you? And what is your role in the show?

John Bultena: I'm John Bultena and you can find me anywhere @onlyplay-wizards. It's always weird for me to say, but I don't want to say that I'm the creator of Abraxas' Precipice because I didn't create *The Expanse* and that's

what it is, it's an *Expanse* role-playing game. But I'm the game master for it, so I'm the one that articulates the storyline. I'm the one that does all the overlays and streams, and if you're talking to anyone at Abraxas' Precipice, then it's more than likely me. I put together the graphics, but my major thing with the game itself is to drive the storyline and articulate the world of *The Expanse* for these characters, not to necessarily rehash the world as it has been experienced in the novels or the show, but rather trying to flesh out the other crevices, the other places, that big universe.

Josh Simons: Yeah, it is a big universe. The unique challenge of a game master is to take storylines and unique things that are worth bringing into focus and presenting those to your characters to get into it, to experience those things in maybe a different light than you could in another form of media. So, in no particular order let's move around. I'm gonna ask Donna, can you introduce yourself: Who are you? Where can people find you? And what is your role in the show?

Donna Prior: Awesome, hi. I'm Donna Prior. I am easily found on Twitter I have a linktree so you can just look me up as Danicia, so you can find wherever I hang out on the internet. My day job is in board games and I also run a board game convention. My role here is player and my character is a captain of our ship and our crew. And I drive comfort and family within our crew.

Josh Simons: I like that. Okay, Scott I'll throw it to you next: Who are you? Where can people find you? And what is your role in the show?

Scott Mitchell: My name is Scott Mitchell and you can find me anywhere on the internet. Usually at smitchell22, mostly on Instagram is about the only one I really use religiously. I play Wyatt on the show. He's kind of, I don't know the best way to describe him. He doesn't like to get shot, but he gets shot quite a bit. That's about the best way.

John Bultena: When he gets shot, he gets shot in spectacular ways! It's not just like, "Oh I took a bullet. Thanks guys."

Scott Mitchell: I usually run out and my character will do whatever he can to protect everybody else, whether they're friend or foe. I think he'll just get shot for anything. Outside of this, I'm a barber here in Central Illinois, so that's what I do.

Josh Simons: You know every party in every tabletop game needs someone who's willing to step out and get in harm's way every now and then for the good of [the party]. Last but certainly not least Maria: Who are you? Where can folks find you? And what's your role in the show?

Maria Moore: Hello, I'm Maria Moore. You can find me everywhere on the internet at happycapster. I'm a variety streamer, TTRPG enthusiast and performer, and co-founder of Goblin Society Games, a TTRPG company. On this particular show, I am also a player. I play as Zeni Pezahl who is a bit of a wild card in the group. [They] started out as a lone wolf character thrust into this family unit and is learning how to be part of a family again. [They] thinks very little before emoting very loudly. Usually with threats of violence.

Josh Simons: It fits, it really does fit.

John Bultena: Zeni starts it and then Wyatt has to finish it. Zeni is the capital letter in the sentence and Wyatt is the period at the end.

Maria Moore: This is correct!

Josh Simons: So Zeni is the one writing cheques that Wyatt then has to deliver on. Love that. So, I am Josh Simons, I am our moderator for the day. You can find me everywhere on the internet at Joshua M Simons or on my website joshuamsimons.com. I am a content creator in the tabletop game space, and

by day I'm the community and content manager at Demiplane, which is a tabletop game company. So my entire day, 24 hours a day seven days a week, I'm thinking about tabletop games, which is kind of fun. I've had the great privilege of guesting on the show a couple of times, where I play Martian astrophysicist and engineer Dr. Marvin de Valentine. It is just an excuse for me to speak technobabble, because I'm not actually that smart, but I like to pretend it sometimes. So let's take a moment here, zoom out, and get a big picture of what *Abraxas' Precipice* is and what it's all about. John, do you have a good little blurb about the show in your words?

John Bultena: I've called it schlubs in space. Schlub just means the common people. It is this Hebrew word that defines someone who is not particularly special. That idea was reinforced for me about a year ago. I teach at the University of California, where I teach a writing class, and I had my students read the first two *Expanse* novels. We were also looking at engineering information, but my students read the first three chapters of the first book. One of my student's reactions was "This is about people that work in space. Like that's it, they work in space?" And I thought, that's so cool! Like what do you do? You go to school here on Earth and they're out there mining rocks and everything. That's what I approached it with. *The Expanse* has these people that are just workers on a ship, the Canterbury, and they get thrust into a huge conspiracy thriller, political thriller, and you have an opening scene that is very much this piece of cosmic horror. It's like an event horizon, but then you see 'Oh, now this is working people doing whatever' and I kind of wanted to take that angle with it...

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The full discussion can be found at the following YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0b2NLAneNs>

Heroism in *The Expanse*

Mary B Smith

The gritty sci-fi series *The Expanse* provides many opportunities to explore the question, “What is a hero?” I was initially introduced to the story through the TV series. Unfortunately, the series ended prior to the books’ ending, so I waded into the last three novels: *Persepolis Rising*, *Tiamet’s Wrath*, and *Leviathan Falls*. I will be pulling from these last three books and from the television series in my discussion. I was drawn to the development of two characters, Holden and Amos. Holden and Duarte may be a more obvious choice, but the nuance between Holden and Amos was more fascinating to me. We have in these characters a contrast, between a reluctant hero and an unlikely one. James Holden, the reluctant hero. This characterization is obviously applicable at the beginning of the television series, when he logs the distress call he was ordered to ignore, having left the UN Navy because his ethical code did not allow him to follow an unlawful order. He joins the Cant to escape responsibility, but the same scenario presents itself again, where he is forced to follow an unlawful order, and he can’t help but disobey. This single act starts a chain reaction he never could have anticipated, resulting years later in the ultimate sacrifice. Amos, on the other hand, presents as a completely amoral character driven by survival. Not the stuff heroes appear to be made of – remember his plan to shoot as many Martian marines as

possible. His journey to heroism is twisting, entangled in Holden's own. Let's explore Holden and Amos in this role of hero, comparing and contrasting how and why their heroism manifests in different ways.

One of the most striking scenes in the television series, and the producer of countless memes, involves Amos and Prax finding Prax's daughter Mei. The episode "immolation" (S3E6) demonstrates that Amos lives a life of absolutes. Once someone's true colours are exposed to him, his version of justice is swift. Prax wants to exact murderous revenge on the doctor who experimented on and kidnapped Mei. Amos intervenes to stop him, telling him he is not that guy. Amos believes Prax's true nature would not allow him to live with himself after killing. After Prax tells Mei that Amos was his very best friend, this forges Amos as the protector of this man and his daughter. The doctor does not realise the danger he is in, thanking Amos profusely until Amos says, 'I am that guy,' and ends the doctor violently. Amos appears to have a genuine desire to keep the good people good and make the bad people dead. If Amos sees you hurt someone completely innocent, he is coming for you. Always the steely eyed killer, but there is definitely a positive motivation there.

It is interesting that the books and show portrayed no discussion between Holden and Amos regarding what happened to the doctor. In an earlier incident, Holden was furious at Miller for shooting the doctor who used Eros as one big immoral biology experiment. (Has anyone else noticed that doctors, PhD or otherwise, are the worst in this universe?) Holden wants nothing to do with Miller after this, but doesn't bat an eye when Amos metes out the same death sentence to Mei's abuser. Holden takes a step closer to the world Amos lives in. It isn't that Holden isn't still heroic, but rather that he seems to recognize more grey. This different reaction from Holden signifies a convergence of what justice looks like to both men when a truly innocent party, a child, is involved. This common belief comes apart later in the books.

The introduction of the Clarissa/Peaches storyline exposes a soft underbelly to Amos' brutal tendencies and further evolves Holden's moral code. Amos is there when Jules Pierre Mao is captured, making him partially responsible for ending the life that Clarissa enjoyed, and starting her on the path of vengeance. Surprisingly, Clarissa does, like the *Frozen II* song,

‘the next right thing’ when she disables the Behemoth’s laser, helping to save humanity, even Holden, her professed enemy. Even after Peaches had attempted to kill Holden, and Naomi for that matter, Amos appears to see her as someone worthy of his time and possibly worthy of redemption. He helps transport her to prison, but then later goes to visit her on Earth. Clarissa asks him why and he doesn’t really have an answer. This bolsters the feeling I often have, that Amos wants a better life, different from the life he lived before the Rocinante. In his interactions with Clarissa, Amos seems to say, ‘If she can be redeemed, maybe I can be too.’ But this is not an all-consuming desire for Amos. After the meteor hit, Amos could have killed the remaining female guard to give Clarissa anonymity, but instead, he encourages the guard to go and find her son. Amos again protects the protector of a child, encouraging the guard to put the child ahead of her job.

The look on Holden’s face when Peaches arrives on the Rocinante is hilariously understandable. Not knowing everything Clarissa and Amos went through to get to Luna, her arrival is obviously very confusing to Holden. Shaking his head, he reluctantly gives shelter to someone he probably still fears. But when Bobbie comes aboard and Amos reveals Clarissa, Holden defends her presence, trusting Amos in this decision. This is a change for both characters. The previous iteration of Holden would never have trusted Amos to make the right decision when it came to judging a person’s potential for rehabilitation. The previous iteration of Amos would not have respected Holden’s opinion or friendship, enough to confirm their brotherhood, before bringing Clarissa on board. Amos sees Holden’s acceptance of the situation as confirmation of making the right choice. Holden in turn, expands his trust of others, believing them capable of making the right decision. He trusts the growth he has seen in Amos’ moral compass.

A new character’s arrival in the books helps demonstrate the continued solidification of the types of heroes both Holden and Amos end up being. Duarte’s daughter Teresa provides opportunities to show where each man is emotionally. Holden enters into pleasant conversation with her, but his actions are not those of a previous Holden, the defender of innocence, a line not to be crossed. He manipulates her, using her fear to cause her to

approach her father with her concerns, even though he knows Duarte is unstable. This leads directly to Duarte's initiation of the actions ending Cortázar's life. Duarte's love for her is dying but not quite dead. Holden seems to feel some remorse for this treachery, but his desperation overrides that reluctance. Ultimately this manipulation protects Teresa, but rips the rug out from under her world. Teresa is forced to use herself as a human shield so that the Rocinante can leave orbit.

I believe Holden's torture at the hands of the Laconian soldiers has a profound effect on him. Soldiers suffering from PTSD may not be objective in war. I believe militaries need soldiers who do not know the horrors of war. Soldiers need someone who understands their experience, but who has enough optimism to show them they can become whole again, without destroying those who hurt them. They can pull back from vengeance, and they can stop first-strike actions. In the end, Amos was not willing to sacrifice kids, while Holden was. Holden has been tortured and wants vengeance on the Laconians. In contrast, Amos has many opportunities to kill, kidnap, or extort Teresa. Instead, he bestows the nickname 'Tiny' on her, and gives her advice. When Amos is discovered and knows he will be shot, he tells her to close her eyes, so that she won't be exposed to that horror. He does not go down fighting, realising Teresa would get caught in the crossfire. Holden has been changed; Amos has not.

We then see Amos miraculously reappear, a little disconcerting to all involved! Why is Amos fundamentally unchanged by this stunning resurrection? It raises the question, what are we at our finite level? The protomolecule integrates consciousness without bodies but in Amos's case, it resurrects a body and maintains its consciousness within it. And somehow, Amos stays apart, fighting Duarte and the hive mind. I would like to believe it is his strength of character coming into play. Amos was forged on the streets of Baltimore. This unbreakable spirit is at the heart of Amos' evolution into an unlikely hero. Even after this twisted resurrection, Amos continues to demand the protection of children. I found his conversation with Evi, informing her that the experiments with Cara would stop, to be one of the most intense scenes in the books. When Amos says, 'Doc I get it. You're

a good person, and I like you ... I see that you're not getting off on this. That's why we're not having the other version of this conversation.'²⁸ The hesitancy expressed by Evi, as to the necessary evil of their actions, helps ensure a different outcome between what happens to her – nothing – and what happened to the doctor that took Mei – death. Amos believes that the safety of one child is more important than the universe. Amos is willing to risk humanity to stop the girl from reconnecting to Duarte. And Evi realises how serious he is: 'It was her body telling her that she'd just stared death in the eye.'

Evi and Holden are willing to shatter the rules, knowing they are outside the lines, the opposite of Amos. Holden is shown a former Laconian soldier now kept in a box, repeatedly irradiated and experimented on. He got Cortázar killed for doing the same experiments, but a creeping fear and desperation enters Holden's life. The Holden before this would not have wanted to put Teresa on that station with her father. He has seen Duarte before he disappeared. He knows Duarte now holds humanity's fate in higher regard than his daughter's safety, but Holden is still willing to risk Teresa on the off chance that she could change Duarte's mind. Amos also has first-hand knowledge of where Duarte's mind is, but he holds onto Teresa's hope that her love can bring him back from the control of the protomolecule. He seems to have seen it as her last chance to see her father, while Holden saw her as everyone else's last chance.

Amos sees the value in Teresa as a person, not a pawn. Holden is desperate to stop the attack, willing to try anything, use anyone. This reads like a last-ditch effort on Holden's part to stop the necessary sacrifice he might be required to make. With Amos, this feels like a simple hope that the love he sees Teresa have for her father might make a difference. When that is not possible, the old Holden re-emerges, accepting his fate. Holden makes sure Teresa gets out, pushes her to safety, and Amos is there to catch her.

I believe Holden shares a strength of character with Amos, but to a lesser extent. He seems to require a prodding, a potentially apocalyptic outcome to

²⁸ James S A Corey, *Leviathan Falls* (New York: Orbit, 2021), 320.

spur him to act. He is able to maintain his sanity in his interactions with the protomolecule, but Holden requires Miller's help Miller to maintain his sanity just long enough. Growing up, James was wrapped in the loving warmth of an unusually large immediate family, protecting him in the winters of Montana. In the end, he needs a friend, the one that fought with him through the craziness of Eros. Can anyone wish for more, than to die with a friend? Throughout the books and series, Holden lives like a man desperately running from destiny, but in the end, he reluctantly, heroically, embraces that destiny with the ever-present, coffee-loving resignation that we have come to love. Sometimes it is in the surrender that a person is finally free.

As Holden surrenders to this fate of being the literal touchstone for humanity's salvation, he sums up his entire life's direction so beautifully. His belief that our individuality is what makes the human race so incredible is apparent. He recognizes the power of individual thoughts and dreams, like those of Epstein, propelling us through the stars. Through his final actions, he makes the whole better, by the heroism of the one. "I absolutely believe that people are more good on balance than bad," he said ... "I'm not looking away from any of that, and I still think there's something beautiful about being what we are ... A few moments of real grace. Maybe it's only a little more good than bad in us, but..." "I don't have a fucking clue," Holden said, and then did it anyway.²⁹ James and Miller defy Duarte's plan, winning everything and losing everything all at once. The final, 'I saw a button so I pushed it' moment for Holden, the ever-reluctant hero.

In the end, Amos wins the fight against an instinct to destroy and rises above it. He becomes a builder of civilization. Amos is resigned to the fact that Holden is saving humanity while condemning parts of it to starvation and death. He asks Naomi, 'What about you, Boss? What do you think about all this shit?'³⁰ He has developed a fundamental understanding of family and loss, knowing how Naomi will mourn Jim, and that Alex will leave to be with his son. He accepts responsibility for Tiny and believes he can help

²⁹ Corey, *Leviathan Falls*, 500.

³⁰ Corey, *Leviathan Falls*, 510.

her move past her loss. Using his immortality in a complete departure from the way Duarte used his, Amos becomes the new touchstone for humanity. The epilogue shows that the essence of Amos never left, even after dying twice. He is the rock Earth stands upon when the space travellers show up. In his last words, which show Amos remains flawed by society's standards, he becomes its most unlikely hero. 'We're starting to get our shit together, and I've been doing what I can to help with that, but it's slow going. I'm not into job titles. Name's Amos Burton. If we're good, I'm just some asshole. If you're here to start some shit, I'm the guy you'll have to go through first. Tell 'em I said that.' Amos and Holden, two very different heroes, but heroes just the same.

The Expanse or: How Holden Kept Worrying and Learned to Embrace Disunity

Horst Trenkwill-Eiser

Unity and Division

At the end of the 20th century humanity finally entered the “End of History”. The Soviet Union collapsed and with it the (seemingly) bipolar post-war world order, leaving the USA as the sole global superpower. The space opened up by this collapse had to be filled and it was filled in with fantasy. If the end of this world order meant the advent of capitalist realism³¹ – the preclusion of the possibility of an alternative or even an end to capitalism – it also meant the arrival of its supplement: capitalist (unipolar) utopianism. While other utopias seemed far-fetched and out of reach, this utopia seemed sober, realistic and attainable, possibly even realised already. It is the idea of global political unity, of mankind finally coming together and democratically acting towards one goal. It is utopian because under capitalism, society, especially

³¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

global society, is always fundamentally split and unity of action can only be the result of political, economical and cultural force: hegemony.³²

Thus in the '90s, we see how US hegemony clad itself in the guise of world policeman, intervening where rogue states crossed the line, as in Yugoslavia or Iraq. Humanitarian interventions were not done for the sake of US hegemony, it seemed, but for the benefit of mankind. The culprits, small and local as they were, were attacked not so much as a global danger, but for crimes against humanity itself. As Chantal Mouffe argues, the political is structured a(nta)gonistically: any political identity needs an outside - an enemy for Carl Schmitt, an opponent for Mouffe.³³ So any political consensus and political structure is based upon exclusion and any global order, especially the liberal multicultural global order, cannot be attained without a hegemony upholding this exclusion. Lacking an adversary, the exclusion had to be enacted by declaring Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic villains, standing in the way of a truly unipolar order.³⁴ This world order, then, presented as benevolent and democratic. If only there weren't these troublemakers...³⁵

Catastrophe and Unity

The impossible realisation of this fantasy did not prevent it from slipping into pop culture. Indeed, Hollywood found fictional solutions to the dilemma of the paradox that in order to unite humanity you had to exclude part of it: the state of emergency, namely aliens and disasters.

³² Another, diametrically opposed "end of politics" was imagined by Samuel Huntington in his *Clash of Civilizations*, which embraced multipolarity, burying class politics under the struggle of quasi-homogenic civilisations. It also embraces hegemony without much sugar coating and thus has little need for humanitarian fictions.

³³ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

³⁴ This is absolutely not meant to downplay their crimes, which are plenty and horrible: mass killing Kurds by gas or of Bosnians are attempts at genocide. My point here is solely the role they had to play for a global order.

³⁵ Other integral members of this order, like autocratic oil regimes or China, were not troublemakers, of course.

A common feature of films like *Independence Day*, *Deep Impact* or *Armageddon* is that when faced with a common threat, humanity is finally forced to act as one. In *Independence Day*, an alien civilisation threatens the extinction of mankind. Shots of UFOs hovering over landmarks all over the globe remind the audience that, even though the film mostly shows events in the US, where coincidentally the actual action happens, events play out on a global scale. In typical Hollywood fashion, America saves the day, leading mankind into resistance and fighting back the technologically advanced aliens. Not only does this allow the film to stage the action as a fight of David versus Goliath and a repetition of the American Revolutionary War (referenced in the title of the film), it frames America as the representative of mankind itself. When Bill Pullman addresses humanity as the president of the United States, the audience cannot help but see him as the president of Earth. Unity arises from an external, but global threat.

Deep Impact and *Armageddon*, both released in close conjunction in 1998, imagine an asteroid colliding with Earth. While the threat in *Independence Day* is an alien civilisation possessing, one would assume, consciousness, these two movies deal with an adversary that is unconscious and intentionless – a senseless act of nature. But similarly to alien invasion, the threat of extinction forces humanity to act together. Remarkably, in both films the international teams sent to deal with the asteroid include Russians, symbolic for this truly global act. Being the more populist of the two, *Armageddon* displays a deep distrust in and disgust at politicians and scientists. It celebrates the common man, while *Deep Impact* clearly has a more positive image of politics. Nevertheless, the fantasy staged in both is similar. Furthermore, neither film leaves any doubt that it was the USA without whom Earth would have been doomed, whether the American male or American science. Cooperation is not leaderless; the leader is naturally the USA.³⁶ Disaster, then, ties mankind together; it presents humanity with the absolute outside:

³⁶ It should be noted this positive picture of the unilateral New World Order was not without its challengers even in the USA: antisemitic NWO conspiracy theories as well as series like *The X-Files* or *Dark Skies* betrayed a deep scepticism towards centralised (global) power.

inhumane, thoughtless, senseless nature.³⁷

Hegemony, not Unity

When disaster actually struck, it was neither nature nor alien. The terrorist strike on September 11, 2001 brought with it a new, forceful, though human, outside. Initially, reality seemed to conform to fantasy. NATO immediately declared mutual defence and only shortly thereafter attacked Afghanistan. The UN were all but united in condemnation. The space taken up by Al Qaeda was well prepared: it was the space taken by aliens and disasters in film. As the perpetrators of terrorist violence, Al Qaeda – and in the following years all Islamists – were the absolute other, the outside, the threat to be squashed. They were, in a word, monsters and as such, less than human.³⁸ For the next decade and more, the threat of Islamic terrorism haunted the self-declared West. But global unity, if it ever truly existed, proved to be fleeting. Not even two years after the 9/11 attacks, the decision to attack Iraq split the international coalition rallying behind the US. Exactly a year after 9/11, the refusal by German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to participate in a possible invasion of Iraq helped him secure re-election. Solidarity and unity did not last. ‘America is from Mars, Europe from Venus’, as Robert Kagan put

³⁷ If disaster is, in a way, already included in capitalist utopianism as opportunity, as the spark of progress, is it any wonder that climate change is not taken seriously before its serious effects are felt? Does it not stand to reason that catastrophe will be terrible, yes, but progress will naturally follow? This almost-religious belief mirrors the idea of the market eventually supplying the solution by free market believers (and projects it onto the political.) And can we fault people for believing it? After all, as Marx has demonstrated, crises are inherent to capitalism and its “successful” reproduction. If it were not this way, would not all sacrifices made to capital and the free market have been in vain? (What happens when this idea collapses and what fantasies can replace it will be addressed below.)

³⁸ There were, of course, voices highlighting the ties of Islamism to (capitalist, especially Western) modernity, arguing they do not represent an element of a primitive, violent past (and thus lack of culture, civilisation or humanity), but are inherent to modernity. See Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003).

it,³⁹ explicated this shift – Europeans naively believe in multipolarity and a peaceful international order based on cooperation, communication and common rules, while Americans know there is no peace without (one) power. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq turned into quagmires and contributed to further Islamist mobilisation. Instead of leading as a global hegemon, America found itself stuck in an unwinnable conflict while (supposed) allies and rivals kept gaining economic and political power, especially China but also Germany. In striking contrast to '90s fantasy, post-catastrophic 2000's reality had the antagonistic nature of the political fully and forcefully reassert itself.

Unsurprisingly, the genre of disaster movies changed. The delightfully nonsensical film *The Core* in 2003 still had a crack team of mostly American scientists save the world from destruction, but the disaster was a mere pretence for staging themes taken from Jules Verne's novels. Other films dropped the idea of successful political action altogether, either by showing its failure (*The Day After Tomorrow*), its impotence in the face of senseless forces of nature (2012) or by sheer omission (*Cloverfield*). The last of these shamelessly exploits the imagery of 9/11, limiting its focus to personal experience and reducing disaster to trauma, cutting off any political effects it may have, and thus placing America in the role of the brave, but ultimately helpless victim. This is the common theme to these three films: trauma and survival, but not agency. Ten years later, the genre would be repoliticised by the dark satire *Don't Look Up*, which takes up the idea of an asteroid hitting Earth (standing in for climate change) but due to dysfunctional political and media institutions the US are unable (and unwilling) to save the day, as is the rest of the world, acting without the US. Nothing remains of the hopeful endings of 1990s disaster films, which celebrated the survival of a now-united mankind. Instead, all that seems to be left is dying with dignity. Furthermore, the zombie genre returned and again and again staged an apocalyptic collapse of (political) order – by an unstoppable infection (*28 Days Later*, *28 Months*

³⁹ Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power. America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

Later, Dead Set, I Am Legend, The Walking Dead, World War Z, etc.)

The Expanse

Starting in 2011, the novel series *The Expanse* entered this symbolic field and reshuffled its elements. In this series we find almost all of the features already mentioned: catastrophe, alien forces, political struggle, terror and capitalist realism.

I will continue by sketching the political order presented by the novels and will then analyse how this is then reshaped again and again by disaster, alien contact and interstellar human expansion. I will discuss the unique perspective this science fiction series has on issues stemming very much from its own time and where it, even though it allows for a complication of the capitalist utopian fantasy, nevertheless fails to address its basis.

The world of *The Expanse* is, at least initially, tripolar: Earth, Mars and the Belt. Our contemporary political order and its allegiances have disappeared in favour of an interplanetary (dis)order in which Earth and Mars, the Inner Planets, hold much of the power and the Belt struggles to get by. It is not hard to recognise this as an echo of the Cold War, with two superpowers vying for control and the third one trying to carve out a place for itself, by cooperation, compliance, or resistance. What is lacking, though, is an ideological divide. It is, unambiguously, a struggle for power. To unite humanity in this order is to subjugate. This is the background of the senseless political infighting, distrust, bickering and quid-pro-quo repeatedly driving James Holden to despair. Holden, from the very beginning, is the one person who still believes mankind can and must cooperate. Much of *The Expanse* is a series of escalating tensions and Holden trying to bring everyone to the same table.

Aliens, Viruses, and Gates

One of the most striking elements of *The Expanse* is how events we would think would lead humanity to reassess its place in the cosmos – the encounter of alien life and the possibility of interstellar travel – are in fact just further turns of the screws of the prevailing political constellations. Rather than unsettling identities and goals, these events are almost immediately integrated into pre-existing power struggles.

Eros, as the first of the events shaking the world of *The Expanse*, is literally a first encounter with alien life. But faced with the knowledge of alien life, the three factions of humanity do not reconsider their issues. Neither is there the coming together in the face of nonsensical destruction, as we have previously seen in disaster movies. There is little of the awe of encountering another great (if dangerous) civilisation that the beginning of *Independence Day* instilled in its audience. What happens is rather akin to the horror of infection films, only that the first instinct of virtually all participants of interplanetary power play is to exploit the protomolecule for dominance. Using a virus as a bioweapon, or a virus originating from bioweapon research is an established trope of zombie and infection films (from *The Omega Man* to *28 Days Later*). *The Expanse* uses the same trope, but replaces it with an alien infection. Consequently, the encounter with alien life quickly turns into a cynical tale of politics as usual. As much as allegiances and even power may shift in the later novels, the protomolecule remains throughout the tool that promises power – much like a living nuclear bomb. No unity, then, is to be had from it.

Similarly, one would expect the possibility of interstellar travel, provided by the gates in the blink of an eye, to effect humanity. But much as with the protomolecule, the focus almost immediately shifts to the question of who controls this travel. Again and again, Medina Station becomes a focal point of interstellar conflict, notably with Marco Inaros's Free Navy and later Duterte's Laconian empire. Controlling Medina means controlling humanity's future at this point.

Living but non-sentient, terrifying but possibly exploitable, the proto-

molecule and the ring gates do not lend themselves to being an opponent, an outsider in opposition to which one could construct a unified humanity. Even more importantly, the rifts within humanity and the established patterns of interaction with nature (exploitation) push the need to use the protomolecule to the forefront. The awe of the encounter of alien life has turned into exploitation before the narrative of *The Expanse* has even set in.

Asteroids and Terror

The infection of Eros is a local disaster, but one that fuels the imaginations of the different factions. This disaster gains systemwide importance once the protomolecule takes over Eros' inhabitants and uses them to propel itself towards a source of more usable biomass: Earth. The form this takes is familiar: an asteroid, Eros, hurtling towards Earth, threatening to erase if not all of humanity, then at least its origin. But where 1990s asteroid films had humanity come together, assemble a crack team of scientists (or a ragtag group of engineers and drillers) or come up with solutions for the aftermath, *The Expanse* has no place nor time for such things. It's the Belters, of all people, who improvise to save their oppressors, with no support and little thanks from them. From the beginning, the 1990s optimism is lacking. Once Eros has hit Venus, it is business as usual.

But the threat of destruction by asteroid returns. *The Expanse* once again takes up 1990s disaster films here. Eros already was a twist of the asteroid trope, as it borrowed the remaining consciousness of Julie Mao, but with Inaros, this twist is taken even further. In 1990s disaster films, humanity is faced with senseless, unmotivated destruction. In *The Expanse*, asteroids are thrown at Earth on purpose. There is not a vague intelligence behind it, but a full-fledged political movement. One cannot help but see this as a kind of space-9/11, not only in the constellation of its actors (hegemonic power, radicalised violent resistance), but also in its imagery. *Nemesis Games* is written in such a way that the reader gets the inside perspective of the victims by way of Amos Burton, trudging through a 9/11 Manhattan writ large, as well as the outside of people almost-obsessively watching the images

from Earth. Marco Inaros uses recognisable anti-colonial vocabulary and by situating Naomi close to him, the novel leaves no doubt that Inaros is a monster (self-obsessed, often careless, and willing to sacrifice even those closest to him). But it also allows the grievances of the Belters to stand. It is telling that Naomi chose Jim after Marco; if Marco is the willingness to acknowledge the split in humanity and the desire to resolve it by erasing his opponents, Jim understands all sides and wants to resolve things by talking them out and finding a good compromise. Unlikely as it may seem after six books of Holden saving the world and the world turning back to its old ways, he manages to succeed.

Reshuffling the deck

In an inversion of reality and fiction, in *The Expanse* it is neither an asteroid, nor alien life that facilitates a compromise, it is terror. 9/11 was both a moment of (apparent) global unity, as well as the beginning of the end of American hegemony. Faced with their own weakness, the stricken UN, the representatives of a slowly collapsing Martian society and the OPA come together to form the Consolidated Fleet. This coalition of most of mankind is faced with an opponent who is reckless and has no qualms sacrificing the people they are fighting for. Inaros is a classical villain – so what was impossible in reality becomes possible fictionally: coming together in a moment of true weakness, faced with an opponent so universally despised they might as well have been non-human. The anti-Free Navy coalition still seems real enough; the true, and possibly only, moment of almost utopian optimism comes when this coalition does not immediately fall apart with the death of its *raison d'être*. The transformation of this coalition into a new interstellar order and the integration of the Belt is the outcome of political compromise, of unity in difference. In it, the importance of threatened identities (the Belt, but also Mars) is recognised and it succeeds by building upon and integrating difference. The Belt's way of life, for example, is threatened by the opening of new worlds and situating them as arbiters in the powerful role of the Transport Union allows for the continuation of

their ship-bound way of life. It gives power and status to the previously powerless. A second Free Navy is prevented not by subduing, but through disarming the powerless by giving them power, by integrating them into the power structure itself. A power structure that becomes possible because the old order has collapsed, Earth is in turmoil and Mars is collapsing due to the Martian Dream becoming largely superfluous. In effect, the one time unity is achieved in *The Expanse*, it depends on the prerequisites an *other* (Inaros, who is not a total *other*), and a coming together in weakness and dependence upon each other that suspends previous power relations – which depends on the intervention of catastrophe.

How closely tied the narrative of *The Expanse* and conflict really are can be seen in the 30 year gap that follows this compromise. There is nothing to tell. Narratively, unity, peace and stability are boring.

Power, violence, hegemony, unity: the nightmare scenario of Laconia

The final three novels present a new challenge and do so by erasing the power structure based on compromise and replacing it with the possibility of realising a first political, then literal unity of mankind. It turns out to be a nightmare. This challenge arrives in the form of the Laconian Empire and its High Consul Winston Duarte. This ascetic, thoughtful leader aims to put humanity under his rule. But he proclaims this is not for personal gain; indeed, he allows himself little luxury, and even his attempts at making himself immortal are ostensibly in the interest of mankind: putting an end to conflict, factions, and war. In his quest, he is not only willing to punish his subjects for subordination or to experiment on humans, but he also considers the need to sacrifice even his family and himself, all for the benefit of mankind.

The books leave little doubt that Duarte is a megalomaniacal sociopath. Resistance to his enforced order of eternal peace is characterised as noble and justified. All major characters of the series are part of this resistance. Directly putting Holden into Duarte's hands, the novels highlight their differences –

but also their similarities. Duarte seems to assume Holden to be on his side, that they would share the same goals. In a way, they do, but Holden disagrees with the means to achieve them. This parallel is highlighted not only in their discussions (or rather Duarte's monologues), but also in their deaths: in the end, both of them sacrifice themselves for mankind. In Duarte, Holden faces the underbelly of his own political goals. Here is someone willing to impose peace and enforce unity, but it turns everything into a nightmare: war for peace is ruthless. Benign goals allow for unleashing righteous, and thus limitless, violence. The lesson here is a common one: unity and peace without freedom are worthless. *The Expanse* sings the anti-totalitarian refrain.

This refrain is taken up again, more intensely, when the conflict with the strange beings of the ring space becomes more and more of a threat. The ring gates apparently have invaded their space and the beings are not taking it lightly. In ever-more escalating events, people in different solar systems – increasingly even multiple ones – lose their consciousness for longer and longer durations. Eventually, ships in the former slow zone are attacked and destroyed. As a resurrected Amos Burton proclaims, they are 'going to kill everybody.'⁴⁰ Once again, humanity is faced with the possibility of its destruction. This time, the threat *does* bear a similarity to the alien invasion narratives discussed above. Unlike the protomolecule, which was only a tool, the beings beyond or within the gates have a recognisable motive: revenge. They cannot and will not be used, as they are beyond the grasp of mankind – in an inaccessible space, beyond human experience and thus totally alien. This combination of alienness and comprehensibility makes them seem especially threatening.

The Laconians do not know how to deal with this new threat, so they initially fall back on time-proven tactics: draw them out, hit them, kill them. Once this fails, the battle becomes even more desperate, especially as the modified Duarte slips into a coma after the next time loss attack. This is when the pattern of unity in the face of extinction is taken to its most extreme point. Returning from coma, Duarte gains new powers, among them the power to

⁴⁰ Corey, *Tiamat's Wrath*.

invade the minds of other people and break down the barriers separating them. In other words: literal oneness. The people experiencing this oneness are at first disoriented but increasingly yearn for it and embrace it.

Duarte sees a solution to the threat of the ring entities in this unity. He wants to harness his subjects' energy to destroy his enemies. But he also sees it as an end in itself. This unity promises the realisation of his Laconian Empire at the level of the minds of his subjects: a collective mind, much like the Borg of *Star Trek*. Holden recognises Duarte's dream as a nightmare, but he is still forced to draw from the collective power of the people within the slow zone. To him, this is only a means, though. He wants to ensure the safe escape of the people trapped in the collapsing slow zone and sacrifices himself for them in the end. At the same time, he releases them from the yoke of the hive mind. It is probably symbolic that with his sacrifice he ensures humanity's survival by cutting the inhabited solar systems off from one another. Their survival is only possible if they disconnect – Holden has to give up the idea of humanity living as one in the very moment when he had the tools at his disposal to literally unify them. Holden chooses diaspora for humanity.⁴¹ In a way, *The Expanse* faces the imagination of a unified humanity head-on and exorcises it.

Living after the End Times

In *The Expanse*, catastrophe has happened – repeatedly. The imagery of catastrophe *The Expanse* used has been taken from alien invasion and disaster films and fictions. Its political grounding quite obviously lies in the early 21st Century. As with humanity in *The Expanse*, so we, too, have lived

⁴¹ Let us just quickly note the similarities to the *Dune* novels here: a God-Emperor who forces humanity onto a golden path through diaspora in order to ensure its survival. *The Expanse* splits up the roles between Duarte and Holden, humanises them – Leto is terrifyingly post-human – and puts humanity onto a similar path. This humanisation succeeds because Holden, as so often, did not have a long-term plan but acted in the moment – and because Holden is the series' resident humanitarian.

through catastrophe – repeatedly. And like us, *The Expanse* does not and cannot imagine a way out of discord. Neither catastrophe nor alien life manage to knock the world of *The Expanse* out of its cycle of struggle, much like how neither international terror, nor world economic crisis, nor a pandemic really change much about how we deal with the world. The amalgamation of instrumental reason (which manages to incorporate even alien life), moralist grandstanding (which makes us blame personal failure instead of structural failings) and, paradoxically, political disillusionment bordering on the cynical (which makes us accept the return of catastrophe as all but inevitable), is also our own. The distrust in the meta-narrative of global liberalism is recognisably part of our post-9/11 world. Unity is fleeting, conflict is constant. Like so many other recent products of the culture industry, *The Expanse* stages political conflict and draws much of its narrative energy from it. Similar to *Game of Thrones* (a powerful metaphor for the inability of a fractured mankind threatened by extinction due to climate change), it allows us to consume and even enjoy our predicament. It prevents itself from slipping into cynicism by centering both a chosen family (the crew of the Rocinante) and within it, a moralist.⁴² But in the end, this adds up to the acceptance of disunity as a virtue. Unable to imagine collective action as anything other than the result of reckless force or the erasure of the individual, *The Expanse* remains within the dominant frame of anti-totalitarianism, leaving behind even the last remnants of capitalist utopianism.⁴³ For all its detailed depiction of conflict (and openness to queer identities), for its imaginative conception of what mankind living in space could look like, what it would do to humanity to leave Earth, it never once imagines a possible change in what propels humanity into conflict. Is not the economic exploitation of the Belt by the Inners the reason for their struggle? Unlike Robinson's *Mars Trilogy*, there is no place for alternatives

⁴² Amos has outsourced his conscience to Holden after all.

⁴³ Or rather: utopianism, in a very neoliberal fashion, becomes individualised. "Effective altruism" is as much a justification for hoarding unjustifiable quantities of wealth as it is a utopian narrative of the power of the individual to save the world.

to capitalism in *The Expanse*. *Cibola Burn* offers a glimpse into the lives of the people affected, exploited and displaced by the forces of interstellar supercorporations. They suffer, they toil, they resist. But they remain heroes within the narrative specifically because their resistance is *local* and because it aims for integration into the interstellar market, rather than rejecting or outright abandoning it. If alternatives had found a presence in the series, one imagines this resistance would have occupied the same space as the Free Navy: irrational, if somewhat understandable terror. So while the fates of the inhabitants of that universe are riveting and while its world is convincing despite the fantastical feats of alien technology, its horizon never quite transcends ours. In space, there is no alternative.

6

“We should have brought a poetry grad student”: Higher education and organised labour in *The Expanse*

Heather Clitheroe and Mark A. McCutcheon

In memory of Sarah Mann (1985-2023), radical builder of a better future

*after work we succumbed
headlong in effusive rooms*

*to the science-fiction tales of democracy
and to their songs
—Dionne Brand⁴⁴*

⁴⁴ Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2001), 8.

The Expanse extrapolates a postcolonial future of interplanetary capitalist extractivism and exoplanetary colonisation.⁴⁵ In its setting, Earth acts as the imperial centre of governance and business, from which colonists and corporations radiate to the moon (Luna), Mars, and the gas giants' moons. Corey's meticulously realised 'transform[ation of] our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come,' as Fredric Jameson theorises science fiction,⁴⁶ envisions its future as one in which the building of both postsecondary education and organised labour are integral. *The Expanse's* capitalist Sol system thus gets built on a postcolonially extrapolated 'capitalist realism'⁴⁷ – complete with its systemic forms of exploitation, discrimination, class conflict, and other violence, all vividly summed up by the Belter antagonist Marco Inaros as the Inners' 'crimes of economy.'⁴⁸ The franchise frequently, critically comments on 'the history of colonialism'⁴⁹ and 'that frontier shit.'⁵⁰

The series' near-future, postcolonial 'capitalist realism' is not just plausibly realistic but even eerily familiar in its setting and premises; the plotting of the series adapts well-established devices and tropes (e.g. the classic science fiction tropes of first contact and of Frankensteinian hubris; the focalization of narrative according to both protagonists and antagonists; and of course the development of compelling, relatable characters) and also

⁴⁵ For Extractivism in *The Expanse*, see Emma Johanna Puranen, "The Ethics of Extractivism in Science Fiction," *Strange Horizons*, 26 (2022). <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/the-ethics-of-extractivism-in-science-fiction>. Some sources grounding our postcolonial and Marxist theorising, as settler scholars in organised postsecondary workplaces, include Lazarus 1999; Acoose 2001; Brand 2001 and 2020; Sugars 2004; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004, and 2009; Bould and Miéville 2009; Devadas and Prentice 2010; Baldy 2014; Atia and Houlden 2019; and Salvage Collective 2021.

⁴⁶ Fredric Jameson "Progress versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?," *Science Fiction Studies*, 9(2), (1982), 152.

⁴⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

⁴⁸ James S A Corey, *Nemesis Games* (New York: Orbit, 2015), 390.

⁴⁹ James S A Corey, *Cibola Burn* (New York: Orbit, 2014). 53.

⁵⁰ Corey, *Nemesis Games*, 14.

makes some critical innovations in plotting that challenge some of the tacit ideological underpinnings of science fiction and the novel more generally. Two prominent plotting patterns based in the series’ political-economic premises are, first, the bringing together of proverbially strange bedfellows (sometimes in pragmatic alliances, sometimes in principled solidarity), and, second and relatedly, the making of often-incremental decisions that cumulatively bring about progressive social change. *The Expanse’s* labour- and education-emphasising settings and openly anti-colonial plots thus narrate alternative plot forms that model praxis.⁵¹ *The Expanse’s* stories feature (among other things) personal transformations and rehabilitations achieved through community- and solidarity-building, as well as anti-fascist resistance, and plots that pointedly de-escalate violence and centre issues of economic and restorative justice.

Moreover, and more unusually for science fiction, *The Expanse’s* take on capitalist realism capaciously encompasses sympathetic and detailed representations of workers’ organisations like unions, and integrates these details of setting (which is one definition of working conditions) in many ways throughout the story, sometimes as crucial plot points.⁵²

The fictional world’s focus for organised labour is the asteroid belt, a

⁵¹ On the need for which, see Brand.

⁵² This is to say, *The Expanse* brings to mainstream popularity a labour-left tradition in science fiction that has developed in the shadow of the genre’s more famous ideological affinities with conservatism and fascism that make antagonists of labour interests (see Barnetson and McCutcheon). In this left-labour SFF lineage, unions and workers’ interests figure conspicuously—and sympathetically; Corey often cites Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979) in this connection, and some novels in this tradition recommended for *Expanse* fans are Melissa Scott’s *Night Sky Mine* (1996); Eric Flint’s and Cory Doctorow’s open-access novels, respectively, *1632* (2000) and *For The Win* (2010); John Wyndham’s *Stowaway to Mars* (1935); Alfred Bester’s *The Stars My Destination* (1956); a source Corey acknowledges [*Wakes* x]); and M.J. Locke (a.k.a. Laura Mixon)’s *Up Against It* (which Corey also acknowledges [qtd. in Mixon v). Relatedly, Corey’s *Star Wars* novel, *Honour Among Thieves* (2011), contributes a sly and enjoyable chapter to the franchise, with spot-on character dialogue, easter eggs for *Expanse* fans, and signature attention to working conditions and class conflict (as well as exobiology). *The Expanse’s* influences also resonate in new *Star Wars* TV series like *Andor* (2022-) and *The Mandalorian* (2019-), as well as other series like *For All Mankind* (2019-).

network of inner planets' corporate concerns, with their attendant security, and the diasporic population of the 'Belters' who live and work among the asteroids and gas giant moons. In this vast system, higher education is fiercely competitive to gain access to and narrowly instrumentalized to serve the interplanetary building and colonising economy (i.e., the STEM disciplines drive the system-building economy, and so enjoy pronounced social privilege over the arts). In contrast, organised labour is ubiquitous, accessible, and broadly empowered to legally represent and protect workers' rights, even in criminal cases. The competition for access to education contrasts with the series' emphasis on access in several key narrative contexts like plot and character development (for instance, Holden and his ethos of openness); and the diegetic science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) slant in dialogue and banter contrasts archly with the novels' constant references to and quotations of literature and culture, especially poetry. The beloved ship *Rocinante*, the crew's 'legitimately salvaged'⁵³ Martian frigate turned home and workplace to Holden and his crew, is named after the 'work horse' in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.⁵⁴

Our analysis of these issues builds on issues we've raised in our prior publications on *The Expanse* and shuttles dialectically between the novel series and the television series, and between details of narrative content and elements of textual and filmic form, in analysing pertinent print or film evidence. We focus especially on the series' detailed world-building in the suggestively interrelated contexts of higher education and skilled work. From

⁵³ James S A Corey, *Caliban's War* (New York: Orbit, 2012), 427.

⁵⁴ Coyly, the aforementioned *Rocinante* reference, for instance, also echoes Rush's 1977 song 'Cygnus X-1 Book I: The Voyage': 'I set a course just east of Lyra / and northwest of Pegasus / flew into the light of Deneb / sailed across the Milky Way / on my ship / the 'Rocinante' / wheeling through the galaxies / headed for the heart of Cygnus / headlong into mystery.' *The Expanse* varies and modulates the Quixote reference throughout, mainly to develop Holden's essentially Quixotic character; In "Dandelion Sky" (S3E10) the Investigator (played by Thomas Jane) says to Holden, 'You're the patron saint of lost causes, kid.' After Avasrala's fashion, we might summarize Holden's problem-solving method as *Fuck around and find out—then fix it*. 'James Holden and a bunch of Belters are fucking up our first exploration of an alien world; Avasrala rants in "Oppressor" (S4E5).

the Rocinante’s relatable rogues’ gallery of a crew, to Ganymede scientists like Praxidike Meng (*Caliban’s War*, *Babylon’s Ashes*), to the ticketed dock and ship workers, characters such as ‘Melba’ (the disguised Clarissa Mao), her supervisor Ren, or Jakulski (in *Babylon’s Ashes*); and from individuals like these to organisations, such as Cortazar’s research team of unbothered sociopaths, or the OPA, which as ex-UN Colonel Fred Johnson (played by Chad L. Coleman) insists ‘is only interested in human rights and good jobs for Belters’ (S1E4, “CQB”): such individuals and groups represent different labour forces, and thus symptoms of class conflict, but they also represent potential allies and coalitions, which are often articulated in relation to *The Expanse’s* settings and premises in higher education, advanced research, and expert labour.

Higher education can be understood in historical materialist terms as an institution for the reproduction of dominant social relations; as a set of copying and modelling practices⁵⁵ or ‘to produce layers of managers of capital.’⁵⁶ But the contemporary ‘university in ruins’ (a critical theory of the corporatising university that has held up all too well since Readings posited it in 1996) also, dialectically, harbours a repertoire of oppositional ideas and works, of counter-discourses, ancient and suppressed ways of knowing and being. As Jeannette Winterson reminds us, art predates capitalism and will outlast it;⁵⁷ and art’s long ambivalence toward capital has proven as much a thorn in the side of postsecondary education’s corporate managers who fiscally punish the arts programs they can’t just kill as much as arts curriculum remains in strong demand among students and sometimes even employers (e.g. Google sometimes earns headlines for prioritising the hiring of arts graduates proficient in so-called “soft” skills like creative problem solving). The troubling and widespread subjection

⁵⁵ See: Marcus Boon, *In Praise of Copying* (Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2013), <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/features/boon>.

⁵⁶ Dionne Brand, *Theory* (New York: Knopf, 2020), 174.

⁵⁷ Jeannette Winterson, “The secret life of us,” *The Guardian*, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2002/nov/25/art.artsfeatures1>.

of arts production and arts education to disinvestment, destruction, and denigration (as widely demonstrated by UK and Australian demoting of arts and humanities programs and, closer to home, by provincial government efforts, especially in Alberta, to reduce higher education to tar sands labour training) reproduces a riven collegium of two scholarly cultures. STEM ascends over the stubbornly un-useful arts, and the rift (in funding allocations, institution-building investments, etc.) breeds dissent among disciplines and faculties, dissent sometimes deliberately fomented by administrations on the divide-and-conquer model. The varied and widespread forms of attack on the arts in and beyond postsecondary settings are arguably symptoms of weakened organisations of academic labour (e.g. in the university's increasing employment of contractually limited, precarious teaching labour) and hence of corresponding compromises for academic freedom and fair, equitable scholarly labour, imperilled on a global basis by these intramural conflicts and corporate colonisations, set against the wider background of widening wealth disparity and the correspondingly opportunistic ascendance of fascism. Arts, on this account, harbours imaginative and radical practices in not just social reproduction, but social reproduction with a critical difference.

Higher education in *The Expanse* is often depicted as a commodity to be bought and sold, most emphatically on Earth. In *Leviathan Falls*, Holden recalls a tuition fund-raising *quinceñera* held for him as a youth.⁵⁸ It's implied that the Earth's huge population makes access to higher education scarce and competitive where available at all, but the political decisions behind maintaining such scarcity, rather than investing in and expanding its accessibility, go unmentioned. As for offworld living in a future where both life and livelihood hang in the precious balance of pressure and hull against the vacuum of space, STEM education is a practicality. Ship's engineers are an essential necessity – Naomi Nagata, for example, is frequently portrayed as Holden's partner and executive officer but arguably holds the most critical role aboard the *Rocinante*. All other tasks – Holden's efforts to broker peace, Alex's passion for flight, Amos' attempt to build a new life for himself –

⁵⁸ James S A Corey, *Leviathan Falls* (New York: Orbit, 2021) 159.

exist because Nagata keeps the ship running, repairs its damage, and tinkers with it to improve efficiency. The engineers and technicians of *The Expanse* hold themselves – and are held – apart. They are a quietly efficient, almost mystical group: they know and understand their world in a way that other characters, such as Holden, don’t. This quiet narrative of the critical centrality of STEM pervades the series, setting STEM apart from literature and culture to create the kind of complete cultural divide posited by C. S. Snow and that exists today in the kind of national funding schemes for research in Canada: the so-called Tri-Council, which keeps the social sciences and humanities distinct and separate from science and engineering, and from health.⁵⁹ If this divide is presented as canon in science fiction, it is because it is a convention required by the genre ... but also the understanding of the aloof separateness of science from the hoi polloi.

The accessibility of education presents another complicated and delicately-wrought critique of the postcolonial future that has its hooks in our own time. Nagata, a highly educated engineer, studies at an unnamed institution somewhere in the Belt, perhaps by correspondence. In the TV episode “Remember the Cant” (S1E3) Nagata suggests she qualified for her studies by accessing open educational resources (OER), then successfully proving her knowledge equivalent to formal eligibility requirements. MCRN officer Lopez (played by Greg Bryk) interrogates Nagata (played by Dominique Tipper):

LOPEZ: Your educational history is quite impressive.

NAGATA: I took free tutorials and tested through.

While not specifically noted, the assumption is that she learns in English and not Belter creole – a reasonable assumption, since as a Belter, she lives in the periphery as a colonised person, adapting to the system of coloniser. The type of training she seeks is simply not available to her in the Belt, and

⁵⁹ C.S. Snow, *The Two Cultures and The Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

the books imply a loss of culture as she embarks on her professional career, evidenced by her code-switch to mask her Belter language when mixing with Innerers, only returning to her heritage language in the company of other Belters. It stands in sharp contrast to the experiences of Martian youth, where the best and brightest study at lower and upper universities. Mars, a breakaway republic, demonstrates its STEM legitimacy by creating its own system of education, ostensibly to supply highly-educated personnel to sustain Martian generational terraforming ambitions and make other meaningful contributions. Both Martian protagonists, Draper and Kamal, served in the Martian military and presumably accessed higher education on the military service model. Corey's stories "Drive" and "Gods of Risk" detail Mars' education system and research culture. When Draper's nephew David gets his admission news, money goes unmentioned.⁶⁰ Other Martians talk about university this way: all about academic struggle and achievement, nothing about tuition: 'Kit is doing great. Picked planetary engineering as his major at Mariner Tech,' Kamal shares in *Persepolis Rising*.⁶¹ This and other MCR setting details – compulsory military service, the omnipresent educational exercises and recruitment posters in public spaces in the Mars settings of Season 4 – all strongly suggest that tuition is free on Mars; that the MCR publicly funds citizens' education costs as a public investment in skilled labour for militant nation-building.

As for *The Expanse's* densely populated Earth, the Kafkaesque post-secondary system under-serving the big blue marble is sketched in two contrasting TV episodes. In "Cascade," (S2E10) Draper (played by Frankie Adams) encounters Nico (played by Milton Barnes):

DRAPER: So you're a doctor?

NICO: I put myself on the vocational training list when I was seventeen years old. I'm fifty-two now. Still waiting for my slot.

⁶⁰ James S A Corey, *Memory's Legion* (New York: Orbit, 2022), 86.

⁶¹ James S A Corey, *Persepolis Rising* (New York: Orbit, 2017), 26.

And in “Subduction” (S4E3), UN Secretary General Avasarala (played by Shohreh Aghdashloo), trailing in polls to her competitor Nancy Gao (played by Lily Gao), gets critical dirt on the that competition: she learns that Gao ‘jumped the line’ and exploited personal connections to gain post-secondary admission ‘one week after she applied. No one’s that lucky,’ Avasarala speculates; ‘some people wait decades.’ For literary purposes, the figure of an exhausted, decadent, apathetic Earth – with its biosphere propped up by extraterrestrially imported resources and its billions of poor, huddled masses – well serves the fictional world’s postcolonial dispensation as its imperial centre. We note, in passing, that *The Expanse’s* consistently negative depictions of Universal Basic Income (UBI) policy suggest that its implementation on Earth is not a victory achieved from below by the working class but a top-down imposition by the United Nations government. Right-wing arguments in favour of UBI posit the income citizens get from it as their means to pay for state services posited as fully privatised and commercial. The inaccessibility of both education and health care on Earth worsens, in the story, when the rocks start falling, but even before then this inaccessibility seems a result of a hyper-competitiveness structured and stimulated by the state.

On Earth, the acute lack of opportunity is most keenly felt in Amos’ experience. In his back story (focalized in the story “The Churn” and in *Nemesis Games*), for a street youth born into and exploited by a future Baltimore’s rough prostitution trade there is no mobility, no practical opportunity for advancement. No training programs, despite his aptitude and intelligence. No grants, no scholarships. Only by assuming the identity of another is he able to leave Earth, taking up unexpected (read: hacked) admission to an apprenticeship program assigned to his assumed identity, Amos Burton – and from there, presumably earning certifications that allow him to gain employment in the field, setting him on a path to eventually work with Nagata.

Like Kamal and Draper, Holden accessed education through military service:

PRAX: You must've aced tactical warfare at the Navy OCS [Officer Candidate School].

HOLDEN: I didn't like it then more than I like it now. (S3E2, "IFF")

Other post-secondary institutions and industrial research complexes are referenced in *The Expanse*, including Earth-based institutions, those at Luna, and the extensive medical and agricultural systems on Ganymede. The higher education system in the Belt seems largely polarised between Ganymede as the 'breadbasket' of the outer satellites and Ceres as a cosmopolitan centre and a contested territory, whether between the Earth corporations that dominate its industry and the Belters who work for them, or between rival factions of the Outer Planets Alliance vying for its control. Ceres hosts a university that the young Belter refugee Felcia, in *Cibola Burn*, dreams of attending. In Felcia's story, access to university seems blocked mainly by her parents, who want her to stay and work with them on founding a sovereign Belter exoplanetary settlement. Accessibility in terms of tuition or financing goes unmentioned in the TV version. It's a conspicuous omission for a family, indeed a community, portrayed as poor refugees from Ganymede, for whom the affordability of education would be top of mind.

If the OPA's roots are in union-like social organisation, it is entirely possible that such organising has provided mechanisms to enable the underprivileged to access higher education – given, for instance, the implied ease with which Felcia will get there once she goes.

Where Mars makes education accessible to train citizens for war and civil infrastructure systems to enable terraforming, the Belt's educational institutions evidently also emphasise STEM excellence – interestingly, not for just utilitarian or instrumental ends but for imaginative, aesthetic, and even spiritual purposes. The quality of their work is essential to Belter pride as a testament to 'the pinnacle of creativity...the impossible made real',⁶² as the LDS Nauvoo is described before it gets repurposed, salvaged, and

⁶² James S A Corey, *Leviathan Wakes* (New York: Orbit, 2011), 344.

repurposed again.

The Expanse represents higher education and working conditions in relatively high resolution even for hard SF – as we’ve seen, it’s vital to many characters’ stories – but also as a contradictory institution and service that works both to further the public interest and to restrict access to specialised knowledge and the powers of mobility and critical thinking it cultivates. For all that *The Expanse* espouses the transformational social benefits of education as a public good, it offers a sharp critique of the systems of privilege and control that dole out those benefits to a select few: unevenly, and in dribs and drabs.

Amos enters the story in this kind of mentor-protégé relationship with Nagata. Over the arc of the series, Amos in turn pays forward Nagata’s investments in him of pedagogy and friendship. First he mentors the Ganymede botanist Prax Meng (played by Terry Chen) in ship mechanic work, and then in the use of lethal force. Prax compliments Amos as a ‘good teacher’ and comes to consider him his ‘best friend’ (S3E6, “Immolation”). Later in the series, this kind of mentorship recurs and is narrated in more depth and detail between Amos and Clarissa, whom he also mentors in ship mechanics.

In the TV series we first meet Clarissa (aka ‘Melba,’ played by Nadine Nicole) listening to her flask-sipping supervisor Ren’s ‘secret teachings, hidden wisdom’ on getting the most for one’s work: ‘You should clock in before you shower,’ he says, ‘log it as decontamination and,’ as he sips, ‘tool check time’ (S3E7, “Delta-V”).

The friendship between Amos and Clarissa builds a remarkable subplot of restorative, community-accountable justice in which the again somewhat ironically caricatured arts curriculum offered in US-style prisons – namely, a ‘creative writing class’ Clarissa takes while incarcerated—is contrasted to the trades practicum Clarissa undertakes on the Rocinante under Amos’ supervision. ‘Good work,’ he says of a job she’s done. ‘Good teacher,’ she replies, echoing Prax.

Throughout the novels and shows, characters play mentor and role model to one another, teach one another, and even run private ‘simulations’ of

other characters, somewhat like the protomolecule establishes echoes and repetitions among those exposed to it: first, visions of Julie haunt Miller; then visions of Miller haunt Holden. Before the Investigator leaves, Holden learns that the Investigator too has been haunted: by the collective dead of Eros. Holden's 'simulation' of Avasarala, though, is not like the Investigator that hounds Holden; his private Avasarala is an imagined advisor, not a neurological intrusion. In *Tiamat's Wrath*, Nagata thinks, echoing Holden in *Wakes*: 'Give the people enough information, and they'd be able to make the right decisions on their own.'⁶³ *The Expanse's* circular subplot patterns constantly have characters mimicking and role-modelling for each other, trading places, training protégés, undergoing profound reversals, and otherwise sustaining interpersonal resonance frequencies with one another. As Season 6 draws to a close, Amos and Draper sing along with Hank Williams Jr., echoing the late pilot Kamal, who also sang along while aboard.

The Expanse's motifs and devices of repetition, variation, citation, and modelling warrant something of a detour into poetry: specifically, into why there's just so much of it in this hard SF series. *The Expanse* plays with and playfully comments on citation practices, in keeping with the series' consistent references to intellectual property (references that are self-reflexive, since *The Expanse* itself is intellectual property). *Tiamat's Wrath* alludes to *Leviathan Wakes*, in a scene where the imprisoned Holden reads 'an old murder mystery set on an ice hauler in the Belt before the gates opened.'⁶⁴ In particular, poetry references and quotations recur prominently throughout the novels. These references include citations of or allusions to historical authors (e.g. Shakespeare,⁶⁵ Pope and H.D.⁶⁶), alongside references to fictional writers in *The Expanse's* culture (e.g. Alonzo Guzman, the 'famous poet' aboard the UN mission to the Ring⁶⁷); these references range from

⁶³ Corey, *Leviathan Wakes*, 510.

⁶⁴ James S A Corey, *Tiamat's Wrath* (New York: Orbit, 2019), 256.

⁶⁵ James S A Corey, *Abaddon's Gate* (New York: Orbit, 2013), 266; Corey, *Tiamat's Wrath*, 302.

⁶⁶ James S A Corey, *Babylon's Ashes* (New York: Orbit, 2016), 71.

⁶⁷ Corey, *Abaddon's Gate*, 251.

a nod to Daniel Abraham’s college mentor Vincent Barrett Price, whose poem ‘The Death-Self’ Miller remembers having read,⁶⁸ to familiar lines from well-known works.

Avasarala’s husband, Arjun, an English professor, sometimes appears as a comic foil, enthusiast of an esoteric and useless field of writing and study, and other times as the guardian and emissary of a precious, precarious cultural tradition; as Winterson suggests, a tradition beyond the interest but also the reach of capital: ‘Arjun’s dissenting voice murmured in her mind, “There will always be poetry.”’⁶⁹ Avasarala and Arjun often talk about how different are the ‘worlds’ they work in. ‘What can I do?’ he asks rhetorically, helplessly, while discussing cataclysmic events with her; ‘I teach poetry to graduate students.’⁷⁰

*‘If life transcends death, then I will seek for you there. If not, then there too,’ she [Avasarala] said. ‘It’s a fucking haiku. The man has a one-track mind and one train on it. Poetry. Save me from poetry.’*⁷¹

Avasarala hears Arjun’s lines in her head on the regular, and eventually they bite her bitterly in the jugular; this line of his gets repurposed by the sixth instalment as his epitaph.

Similarly, Clarissa’s participation ‘in a poetry writing course that the prison chaplain had put together’⁷² is retrospectively recounted by Clarissa with an eyeroll or two, but she nevertheless produces in the course a short original work she uses as a mantra, to steady her mind in troubled times (as Drummer repeats what Ashford says of his singing).

The *Expanse* novels narrate the misquoting and misremembering of lines of poetry as often as their citation *verbatim*. These touches of character

⁶⁸ Corey, *Leviathan Wakes*, 294.

⁶⁹ Corey, *Babylon’s Ashes*, 103.

⁷⁰ Corey, *Caliban’s War*, 494.

⁷¹ Corey, *Caliban’s War*, 494.

⁷² Corey, *Babylon’s Ashes*, 71.

subtly build the setting, with its cultural touchstones' attributions decayed by the lapse of centuries and the vicissitudes of taste, canon, tradition, and teaching. 'There was a thing you read me one time, About jack pines,' she [Avasarala] said. [...] 'Do you remember it? All I have is that it ended 'da-DAH, da-DAH, da-DAH, da-DAH, and paved the way to Paradise.'⁷³ Cognizant that this well might be a single reference we just haven't found yet, we read this passage instead as a misremembered mash-up of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Joni Mitchell: the line 'They paved Paradise' from Mitchell's 1970 song 'Big Yellow Taxi' and a rhythmic fragment from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1816 'fragment' poem, 'Kubla Khan': 'Weave a circle round him thrice, / And close your eyes with holy dread, / For he on honey-dew hath fed / And drunk the milk of Paradise.'⁷⁴

In *Leviathan Falls*, Tanaka 'remembered something she'd heard once: I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. She didn't know where the line came from. It didn't matter. She had a hunt to complete.'⁷⁵ The word 'hunt' in the context of this novel's plot signals the quotation's source, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. In *Tiamat's Wrath*, Holden reads the epitaph on Avasarala's tomb (Arjun's 'fucking haiku') but he can't place it: 'It's an interesting quote,' he said. 'I feel like I should recognize it.'⁷⁶

In *Leviathan Wakes*, Miller's transformation into the Investigator gives him, or it, a more literary turn of mind, recounted in a poetic, stream-of-AI processing and defragmenting of data amidst which references swirl and surface: '*Till human voices wake us*, he thought, without quite being able to recall where the phrase came from.'⁷⁷ Hardly random access, this line about 'voices waking,' quoted from T.S. Eliot's 1915 poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' foreshadows and resonates with several key points

⁷³ Corey, *Babylon's Ashes*, 102.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Jerome McGann (ed.) *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 395.

⁷⁵ Corey, *Leviathan Falls*, 167.

⁷⁶ Corey, *Tiamat's Wrath*, 5.

⁷⁷ Corey, *Leviathan Wakes*, 520.

along the roman-fleuve’s main plot, not least the rude awakening to voices in *Leviathan Falls*’ ‘hive-mind’ scenes. And Miller’s misremembering of the line amplifies his character; as mentioned above, elsewhere in *Wakes*, Miller half-recollects ‘The Death-Self’ (a clause that also summarises this character’s prognosis. True to form then, in *Cibola Burn*, the Investigator misquotes William Blake’s ‘The Lamb’: ‘Did He who made the lamb make thee?’⁷⁸

Beyond texturing the setting and developing characters, poetry does other work in *The Expanse*. The recurring references to poetry, poems, and poets complement the patterns of variation, iteration, and repetition – poetic forms – that infuse the prose with lyricism and, what’s more, structure and scaffold key plot points across the series’ arc. One obvious early example is *Leviathan Wakes*’ almost farcical conceit of the asteroid Eros, occupied by the star-crossed couple, Miller and Julie, flying, as if driven by desire rather than physics, to Venus, there to implant itself and gestate some rough new beast. The sequel alludes in its very title to Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*, whose antagonist, the enslaved Caliban, has re-centred anti- and postcolonial literary adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare, like Aimé Césaire’s play *Un Tempête* and Marina Warner’s novel *Indigo*. *Cibola Burn*’s ‘interludes’ with the Investigator figure a kind of machine learning poetics of conflict and contradiction between ‘the machine for finding lost things’ and Miller as a machine-copied, individual sentience, raging against the protomolecule machine that incessantly erases and remakes the Investigator in its continual attempt to phone home to its vanished Builders. In *Leviathan Falls*, the ‘Dreamer’ interludes sketch the plot’s deep back story via Cara’s impressionistic retelling of ‘the stories that grandmothers told’ about ‘a time before minds’ amidst ‘black oceans the size of everything.’⁷⁹ And poetry offers, too, a precedent for the invasive ‘hive mind’ phenomenon integral to *Leviathan Falls*’ plot; nothing short of Romantic poetry as such was famously defined by by Wordsworth and Coleridge, in their 1801 *Lyrical Ballads*, as ‘the spontaneous overflowing of powerful feelings.’ *Leviathan Falls*’

⁷⁸ Corey, *Cibola Burn*, 453.

⁷⁹ Corey, *Leviathan Falls*, 81.

'hive mind' experience somewhat literalizes this definition; and what puts it in a different light is the inability of the subject suffering it to know *whose* feelings so overflow.

While poetry is alternately played for laughs against STEM and an integral formal element of the text, the protomolecule's forms of learning and building 'the Work' look, from the outside, like grotesque or surreal acts (or crimes) of poetry. The horror on Eros in *Leviathan Wakes* emits an audible 'feed' in which some Belters hear sufficient music to sample and remix it. *Cibola Burn's* repeatedly replicated Investigator itself repeats lines like 'Gonna need a ride' and, with eminent lyricism, 'I wonder what that rain tastes like.' And those scenes in the novels where a human encounters the lethal ring entities become markedly more lyrical in style, as in Inaros' apprehension of himself as 'the vibration of a string on a nonexistent guitar.'⁸⁰

The poetic speech of those humans, like the Laconian children, who get 'fixed' by protomolecular means, together with the novels' 'Interlude' chapters, offers a further clue to the series' leftist leanings – and teachability. From Miller to Cara, these entities repeatedly articulate puzzlement and awe at the fact of matter: 'substrate' as Xan calls it.⁸¹ As Miller explains, a few times, to Holden, it is precisely because the human species takes a material form (in contrast to the immateriality of the vanished Builders) that humans are at all resistant to Ring entities; it's because Holden is made of meat that he can act on protomolecular prompts (to 'flip switches,' as the Investigator says) and get tangible results. *The Expanse's* thematic imagery of 'matter' and 'substrate' thus accords a certain valour and power to the material, and, as such, can be read – and taught – as a way to understand a foundational idea in Marxist theory, the distinction between base and superstructure:

The building-like metaphor of base and superstructure is used by Marx and Engels to propound the idea that the economic structure of society (the base) conditions the existence and forms of the state and social

⁸⁰ Corey, *Babylon's Ashes*, 509.

⁸¹ Corey, *Babylon's Ashes*.

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*consciousness (the superstructure).*⁸²

This theoretical model privileges the material as that which precedes and shapes the spiritual, but is also more complicated than reductive: ‘the superstructure of ideas is not conceived as a mere passive reflection but it is capable of some effectivity.’⁸³

Poetry, then, suffuses the settings and speech in *The Expanse* as texture that also primes the reader to engage with the protomolecule and its activities on poetic grounds since scientific grounds so often seem inadequate to its unpredictable changing of the laws of physics, never mind the axioms of political economy. As Faye says to Elvi in *Leviathan Falls*, while trying to interpret what the protomolecule subject Cara is telling them about the Builders’ history: ‘Seriously, I feel like we should have brought a poetry grad student along. This is bullshit as data.’⁸⁴ STEM holds sway where capital governs, but out on the peripheries, in the void between gate-linked stars and the darkness of dead planets, the remains of the Builders that characters encounter everywhere in *The Expanse* keep defying scientific knowledge and so demand other ways of knowing for when the going gets weird. Poetry, perhaps surprisingly, provides one such other way.

The protomolecule’s forms of learning and of ‘building the Work’ become legible, in different ways, as lyrical and poetic forms integral to the work (meaning Corey’s). Consider the scenes in which the protomolecular powers dismantle something and itemise its minute components: the deconstruction of the Arbogast, and Katoa’s dissection of the nurse, in *Caliban’s War*; and in *Abaddon’s Gate*, the ring station’s dismemberment and absorption of the Martian Marine Lt Paolo Mayer (played by Simu Liu in S3E10, “Dandelion Sky”). These protomolecular, autodidactic practices of inventorying not only find their narrative counterpart in protagonist Naomi’s practices of

⁸² Tom Bottomore et al. *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1983), 42., *emphasis added*.

⁸³ Bottomore, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 43.

⁸⁴ Corey, *Leviathan Falls*, 88.

inventorying; both practices also resonate generatively with the poetics of ‘inventory’ that have come to characterise the work of the Black queer radical poet Dionne Brand, past poet laureate of Toronto. Reading Brand’s work in relation to *The Expanse* dialectically brings into dialogue divergent texts, genres, and careers, because of their shared base of operations in Toronto, their work’s similar labour affinities and interests, and the unexpected resonance frequency to be heard between these very different works’ uses ‘inventory.’ Brand’s acclaimed 2006 book *Inventory* documents a wrenching, unflinching catalogue of a post-millennial world ablaze with Big Oil’s imperialist wars, body counts, and biosphere destruction; yet at the same time a world awash in intrinsic, irresistible gorgeousness, from hummingbirds to the farthest stars.⁸⁵

As Christina Sharpe writes, introducing Brand’s collected poetry, Brand’s ‘labours of witness and imagination’ produce ‘a poetics of liberation; she does not “write toward anything called justice, but against tyranny.”⁸⁶ And increasingly central to Brand’s work, in which ‘the aesthetic and the political are inseparable’⁸⁷ is:

*a kind of attentive gathering for which ‘inventory’ is simultaneously one name and also form, mode of inquiry, politics, and method. Collecting is accounting, and this method is not for reconciling. ... The poet’s task is to try to hold all of this and to work toward some pellucid understanding of those materials that others might want to forget, or have to forget, or put aside. The poet works memory, she works the news, she works the everyday – violence, sunsets, sirens, sidewalks, and oceans – and returns them to the reader utterly transformed by her lapidary attention.*⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Dionne Brand, *Inventory* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006).

⁸⁶ Dionne Brand, *Nomenclature: New and Collected Poems*. Introduced by Christina Sharpe (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2022), xviii.

⁸⁷ Brand, *Nomenclature*, xii.

⁸⁸ Brand, *Nomenclature*, xix.

‘Collecting is accounting, and this method is not for reconciling’: Sharpe’s hint at Brand’s political purpose in her work of inventory resonates with the resourceful necessity with which Naomi appears to retreat into inventory work, and with the tactical opportunities for resistance that she finds in appearing to retreat into inventory work.

In the TV series, an establishing shot in “Doors and Corners” (S2E2) shows Naomi tallying the Rocinante’s ordnance: ‘Inventory says we have 7,200 out of 10,000 rounds.’ In *Nemesis Games*, Naomi, captive aboard her abusive ex’s ship, seeks refuge or at least distraction in work like ‘checking inventories,’⁸⁹ an activity she repeats throughout the book.⁹⁰ As the author Brand’s poetry and the character Naomi’s demonstrate, inventory can mean or cover many other forms of work: the clarity and nerve to to tell it like it is – with attention to detail; the routine maintenance that allows one’s mind to drift, to plot; the accounting with an eye to outcomes other than reconciliation. ‘Her lists are *bristling*,’ writes Sharpe of Brand’s poetic method,⁹¹ using language that cites Brand; language that also echoes maritime military descriptions of ships or soldiers ‘bristling’ with munitions.

Brand’s poetry shares several other formal and thematic similarities and resonances with Corey’s novels. The present study hasn’t scope to delve into them all,⁹² but one is worth noting: the way both Brand and Corey name and centre Eros in their work. Brand’s poetic-political project deals in complex uncertainties, hard questions, and concrete things, but in dialogue and interview she’s long shown a knack for dropping one-liner mantras and manifestoes, as in this comment from around Y2K: ‘I think Eros is ultimately

⁸⁹ Corey, *Nemesis Games*, 302.

⁹⁰ Corey, *Nemesis Games*, 368, 403, 421.

⁹¹ Brand, *Nomenclature*, p.xix, emphasis in original.

⁹² See Mark A. McCutcheon, “Field testing a sampladelic sound jamming countermeasure against copyright bots,” Listening In on Literature: A Soundtable on Power and Surveillance, ACCUTE Conference, Montréal, 13 May 2022, rpt. in Spoken Web, <https://spokenweb.ca/accute-2022-soundtable>.

what we have been fighting for.’⁹³ With similar emphasis but in a quite different context, in *The Expanse*, OPA leader Johnson recognizes, in the events that befall Eros, a strategic opportunity to change the system’s balance of power: ‘Eros changed everything,’ he says (S2E6, “Paradigm Shift”).

In signature contradictory form, then, *The Expanse*’s story includes a subplot in which alien AI learns about the human-occupied solar system iteratively, and with attention to its poetry and culture; a subplot in which said AI then acts and reacts to what it finds with practices so unnatural and alien they’re legible only as poetry. Take as a chief example the protomolecule’s dizzying production of simulations, hallucinations, and other acts of echo, doubling, and otherwise challenging of the parameters of capitalist-conditioned subjectivity (the latter of which is what the best poetry achieves too). The repetitive and iterative methods—the poetic methods—whereby the protomolecule learns to make humans do things also thus become theoretically legible as the *superstructure exerting power over the base*.

The daisy chain of simulations and ghosts with which the main characters consistently haunt or channel one another across the series become likewise legible as figures of superstructure *affecting* base (pun intended). Miller hallucinates Julie, Holden hallucinates Miller, everybody hallucinates Duarte; Avasarala hears Arjun in her head, Holden hears Avasarala. Analogously, many characters teach and learn from one another, and so change: at the outset Amos calls Naomi boss, so then does Prax (who holds a doctorate, we should note) recognize Amos’ expertise by complimenting how well Amos has taught him; and by the end of *Babylon’s Ashes* Clarissa is calling Amos a good teacher too, and boss besides. Bobbie’s and Amos’ mis-sung lyrics of a song their dead friend loved further suggest how profoundly important modelling, iterating, repeating, and varying are, both as ways characters learn and grow and as foundational formal elements in Corey’s writing.

If, in some ways, the protagonists teach, learn from, model, and echo one

⁹³ Quoted in Nuzhat Abbas, “An Interview with Dionne Brand and Nuzhat Abbas,” *Herizons*, 13(3), 1999, 6.

another, then, dialectically, so do several of the story’s major antagonists, who successively become legible as iterative variations on toxic masculinity under the structurally violent social relations of colonial capitalism. *The Expanse’s* critique of the structural ills, violences, and injustices of colonialist-capitalist social relations takes the concrete, arguably anatomical form of a repetitious succession of specifically styled antagonists: horrible bosses who are toxic—vain, bullying – and, in the TV show, mostly white men (e.g. Errinwright, Ashford, Murtry, and Duarte). Marco’s the worst of the lot, but as cast in the show; as suggested by his namesake (the ancient Egyptian rebel ruler Inaros II), and in keeping with the series’ postcolonial thematics of imperial core and colonial periphery, his character does not necessarily present as white.

By virtue of the audio-visual fixity of film adaptation – specific actors embodying reimagined roles, recognizable locations staging key settings – the show amplifies the story’s subplots about minoritized and marginalised women using and mobilising expert knowledge to defeat bad bosses who tend to trend as toxic men.

If these horrible bosses in different ways reproduce a certain type, so too do the women to whom they offer violence tend to vary a certain tactical opposition to and survival of such violence characterised, first, by imaginatively applying their own learning and, second, by building coalitions and alliances based on genuine understanding and genuinely shared interests.⁹⁴

In season 1, Julie Mao (played by Florence Faivre), prodigal daughter of a corporate dynasty, is the unwitting victim of unethical, human subject-based research led by said dynasty, by her own father—and ‘patient zero’ for that research’s infectious repercussions. In season 2, the Martian marine Roberta Draper is no sooner in the field than she catches a fast case of PTSD, then gets gaslit by her commanding officers and compatriots, driving her to seek asylum with Earth’s government; her subsequent tussle with the

⁹⁴ Beyond the discussion here, readers interested in how *The Expanse* handles storylines involving abuse and trauma might read Rebecca Long’s review of Season 5.

protomolecular ‘hybrid’ also signifies a wrestling with traumatised self-doubt from which she emerges with renewed confidence in her training as a Marine (and indeed in her own senses). In season 3, the captaincy of the Belter ship the Behemoth is held by Camina Drummer (played by Cara Gee) who is constantly questioned, undermined, and usurped by the senior, white man Klaes Ashford (played by David Strathairn). In season 4, the UN scientist Elvi Okoye (played by Lyndie Greenwood) survives a catastrophic shuttle landing, is terrorised by the science mission’s murderous security chief, and, in ‘Oppressor’ (S4E5), rails against Holden’s withholding of information:

OKOYE: ...and when I ask you about it, you deflect.

HOLDEN: It’s complicated.

OKOYE: Yes, exactly like that. “Complicated, need-to-know, none of my business.” Enough of that shit!

In season 4, Murtry also violently persecutes Lucia (played by Rosa Gilmore), the Belter mother whose botched anti-colonial plot imperils her family and triggers her suicidal depression. Lucia’s daughter Felcia, dreaming of fleeing her family’s hardscrabble subsistence for postsecondary pursuits in the Belt, also faces exceptional hazard and violence: stuck aboard a ship falling out of orbit, Felcia gets tutored remotely by Nagata (who here pays forward the open education ethos of which she’s a beneficiary) to ‘deconstruct’ a net, unravelling its knots and reweaving it differently, to make it a tow cable.⁹⁵ In season 5, the Nagata is abducted and imprisoned by her abusive, manipulative ex-boyfriend; her escape amounts to an allegorical story centring the struggle

⁹⁵ As literary critics, we’re contractually obliged to note the correct, literal precision with which the word “deconstruction” is scripted into this scene: too often a misconstrued synonym for “destruction” or “dismantling,” deconstruction is a literary-philosophical reading procedure developed by Jacques Derrida to identify a text’s internal contradictions and reproductions of social power structures, in order to reconstruct the text through an oppositional or otherwise critical interpretation of it, or sometimes to illuminate how the text argues with or undoes itself; for examples, see books like Derrida’s *Plato’s Pharmacy* and *Spectres of Marx*.

of a Black body simply to breathe.⁹⁶ In season 6, Julie’s sister Clarissa suffers chronically deteriorating health from the side effects of an illegal elective surgery while also assuming proficiency and leadership in ship mechanics; meanwhile, Avasarala’s grief over overwhelming personal loss and depression over the catastrophic damage to Earth are exacerbated when she travels to space. Avasarala, we know from season 2, vocally hates space travel but has had to learn the hard way (in escape) how to cope with it. As the TV series winds up, that unwillingly-earned learning empowers her to succeed in an astonishing mission of interplanetary diplomacy and coalition-building, led by visible-minority persons identifying as women, against the megalomaniac trumpery of Marco Inaros. And, continuing with the novels, *Leviathan Falls* Colonel Tanaka suffers the extraordinary violence of ‘ongoing, intimate assault,’ unpredictably at that, as a *side effect* of her boss’ hubristic work, from which only Tanaka’s specialised skill set may disentangle her.

Nor does *The Expanse* shy away from dealing with the complex postcolonial fallout of systematic discrimination and oppression: lateral violence within or between minoritized persons or groups. The series is rife with Belter-on-Belter violence (always contextualised, whether as imperial “divide-and-conquer” strategy, as a last resort of the unheard or the unfed, and even as corporate R&D), and certain casting and scripting decisions highlight (without naming) the intersectional complexities of several such scenes. The Belter factions dramatise political infighting at a higher level that still grievously impacts their foot soldiers, like DeWalt crew member and spouse to Drummer, Serge Kylo (played by Willex Ly), who gets spaced to send a message. The Belter Sakai (played by Bahia Watson), is the Tycho engineer radicalised by Inaros’ faction to murder her boss, OPA leader Fred Johnson (played by Chad L. Coleman). And Marco’s lieutenant Karal (played by Olunike Adeliyi), placed aboard Drummer’s ship to ensure compliance with Free Navy orders, nourishes a burning antipathy to Naomi: maybe to ingratiate herself with Inaros, maybe for feeling betrayed by Naomi’s

⁹⁶ See Heather Clitheroe and Mark A. McCutcheon, “Review of *The Expanse* Season 6,” *Foundation*, 51(3), 2022.

departure and perceived defection to the Inners.

The co-authors have discussed how they rewrote and combined several novel characters to produce what Cara Gee, the actor who plays Drummer, the Belter captain turned pirate turned union boss, calls a ‘Frankenstein’ version of this character,⁹⁷ like and unlike their counterpart in the novels. The books’ Drummer debuts in the sixth volume; TV Drummer, early in season 2; the show also rewrites Bull’s spinal injury as Drummer’s instead, and rewrites and recasts Michio Pa’s polyamorous family crew as Drummer’s too. This attentive adaptation process affords Gee, who is Ojibwe (Chippewa), to deliver some dialogue lines (in a production made in Toronto) that are drenched in the historical ironies of Canada as a state based on and still committing colonial violence against the Indigenous peoples whose land the state occupies, and, furthermore, that connect these ironies to both work and learning. In ‘Fight or Flight’ (S3E1) Drummer, while drinking with Fred Johnson, describes the Behemoth this way:

DRUMMER: A cathedral converted into a warship sounds like the heart of a great and lasting nation.

To us as Canadian viewers, that line sounds like a critique of residential schools, and Drummer’s subsequent line about the repeatedly repurposed generation ship spells out this significance: ‘The Mormon pictures in my office always made me laugh, celebrating the pride of the inners, a history of coveting another’s homeland and killing to take it.’ In ‘Fallen World’ (S3E11, this episode’s title another variation on base contrasting superstructure), a grievously injured Drummer talks with a similarly injured Ashford (played by David Strathairn); her line here ironically foreshadows her union presidency and encapsulates a key postcolonial dilemma about the usability of the master’s tools to tear down the master’s house:

⁹⁷ Quoted in Ty Franck and Wes Chatham, “Episode 6,” The Expanse Aftershow, Youtube, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynyCMXijTig>.

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DRUMMER: I sacrificed too much of my life to adopt the tradition of my enemy.

Later in this scene, she interrupts Ashford’s anecdote with grim humour:

DRUMMER: If this is another of your teaching moment, I prefer for bleed out in silence.

Ashford’s subsequent command in this episode to ‘spin the drum’ both triggers the technology that will heal Drummer and rhetorically figures Drummer’s improvisational tactics to retake command of Medina Station.

In these ways, *The Expanse* TV series dramatises the complexities of intersectionally fraught workplaces in ways the source novels don’t, on account of elements of film production – like casting, dialogue, cinematography, and mise en scène, for instance – whereby the portrayals and conflicts of certain characters ground them in and signify on specific visible and audible details of cultural difference. These ‘warmly’ rendered and specifically embodied characters⁹⁸ solicit our sympathy and ask us to witness the systemic and insidious forms of violence visited on them and other equity-deserving persons and groups by the rule of rich, entitled men, the hegemonic establishment of ‘imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,’⁹⁹ an establishment that depends on postsecondary education’s gatekeeping of knowledge for its reproduction and legitimacy, and that is somewhat checked if not balanced by ubiquitously organised labour.

Where the evidence of one’s senses doesn’t prompt one to reach for an estranging epistemology like poetry, survival in space still apparently demands STEM excellence and expert labour, mutually constitutive institutions contextualised by the Belt’s ubiquitously organised work forces: from Ceres’

⁹⁸ See Constance Rooke, *Fear of the Open Heart: Essays on Contemporary Canadian Writing* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1989).

⁹⁹ bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 46.

'union' brothels that Amos extols (in S6E3, 'Force Projection') to the TV series' denouement in the founding of the "Transport Union" and the appointment of Drummer as its first president.

The Expanse's worldbuilding consistently represents, almost as social symbiosis, the mutual constitution of higher education and labour organisation, suggesting that they are both tools and weapons of class warfare in ways that can alternately oppress or empower, depending on the hand that wields them. The implication is that the scale of both the labour and the expertise equal to the gargantuan task of building habitat for humankind in hard vacuum depends on a lot of organising...without which maybe, as Miller reflects, 'the stars don't deserve us.'

Acknowledgements

McCutcheon wishes to thank the Athabasca University Faculty Association and Athabasca University for materially supporting the production of this research.

The Politics of the Anthropocene: Environment and Society in *The Expanse*

Davide Mana

With its rich tapestry of political intrigue and scientific speculation, its vast scope and its large cast of characters, *The Expanse*, written by James S.A. Corey, is generally recognized as one of the most popular and thought-provoking works of science-fiction published in the 21st century. The TV series based on the books proved equally successful and equally nuanced. Taking a sweeping look at the future of humanity in space, both book and TV series focus on conflict, and present us with personal, social and political conflicts. Set in the 23rd century, the series takes place deep into the geological epoch called the “Anthropocene” – and is shaped by it. In the following pages, I’ll take a very quick look at how the Anthropocene setting defines the politics and the conflicts of *The Expanse*.

Anthropocene and Simporocene

The evolution of a set of previously proposed terms, Anthropocene is:

a term widely used since its coining by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer

*in 2000 to denote the present geological time interval, in which many conditions and processes on Earth are profoundly altered by human impact. This impact has intensified significantly since the onset of industrialization, taking us out of the Earth System state typical of the Holocene Epoch that post-dates the last glaciation.*¹⁰⁰

While still not officially accepted as part of the geological time scale, the concept of the Anthropocene is quite useful in describing a present and a future in which humans have become the major factor of geological and ecological change on the planet, shaping the direction in which the natural systems at work in our environment.

It must be also noted that some authors have proposed “Capitalocene”¹⁰¹ as an alternative to ‘Anthropocene’ to emphasise how the major responsibility for the dramatic environmental impact of human activities since roughly the 15th century lies with only a portion of humanity, i.e. those responsible for a capitalist system. The argument is solid, but I’ll use Anthropocene here simply because it has been generally accepted, if informally, in scientific circles, while Capitalocene does not have the same level of recognition. Similarly, I will make very limited reference to another highly informal term for the catastrophic effects of human activities on the environment: the Simporocene – defined by Italian researcher Rodolfo Coccioni in 2016 as an epoch in which the fallout of human activities causes ‘an intensifying extreme and calamitous weather phenomena.’¹⁰²

The idea of humans shaping their environment (possibly with catastrophic results) is certainly present in *The Expanse* – both the series of novels and

¹⁰⁰ Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, “Working Group on the ‘Anthropocene’, Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, 2019, <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene>.

¹⁰¹ Benjamin Kunkel, “The Capitalocene,” London Review of Books, 2017, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v39/n05/benjamin-kunkel/the-capitalocene>.

¹⁰² Paolo Ferrario, “Terremoti, frane e alluvioni: è l’era del Sinforocene,” L’Avvenire, 2016, <https://www.avvenire.it/agora/pagine/terremoti-frane-e-alluvioni-e-lera-del-sinforocene>.

novellas by James S.A. Corey, and the TV series based on such books; yet environmental and ecological concerns are rarely presented at the forefront of the narrative, remaining in the background instead. Yet environmental themes underlay the whole *Expanse* universe and, as we will see, shape not only the worlds on which the action takes place, but deeply influence the political and social structures portrayed in the narrative. The Anthropocene is a time interval in which humans shape their environment, and in *The Expanse*, shaping (and being shaped) by the environment is one of the few experiences shared by all the inhabitants of the solar system.

Status Quo

The general plot of the novels and TV series is known, as are the main political entities in the setting: Earth, led by the United Nations Security Council; Mars, a state capitalist parliamentary republic with a strong militaristic element; and the Outer Planets, a loose assemblage of anarchist and libertarian organisations and free operators. Each of these political entities inhabits its own environment, and its social structures are internally determined in large part by the population's relationship with their environment (while external factors include these states' relationship with each other).

Earth is shown, from the earliest images in the series, as a world marked by the climatic crisis of the late 20th and early 21st century – during the title sequence of the first season we see ice caps melt and the sea levels rise. The show underscores that concept by presenting us with an altered New York skyline, a city walled against the sea.

Earth's compromised environment features as a strong item in the popular views expounded by the Martians - members of a nation single-mindedly focused on terraforming the planet Mars, to build an environment just as idyllic as the one the Earthers squandered. The terraforming effort (i.e., replacing the existing natural environment with one completely man-made) is central in informing Martian culture, and the criticism at the Earthers' handling of their own natural environment is part of the terraformers' mindset.

Both the Inner Worlds are therefore clearly ‘Anthropocenic’ worlds – on Earth, human activities have damaged the environment, while on Mars, human activities are building a new environment (incidentally, erasing the original one). Both are instances of humans being a major factor of geological and ecological change on the planet. Furthermore, the relationship between population and environment shapes the political landscape of each planet-nation. Both governments are essentially engaged in ecological management.

The United Nations Security Council needs to keep a resource-poor, overpopulated world from collapsing. The Earth UN system has been described as a form of ‘welfare capitalism’: a form of capitalism ‘characterized by a concern for the welfare of various social groupings (as workers) expressed usually through social-security programs, collective-bargaining agreements, state industrial codes, and other guarantees against insecurity.’¹⁰³ Much of the political discourse focuses on the preservation of the status quo by providing free assistance to the population. There are hints at activities aimed at mitigating the ecological damage – such as the rewilding of certain regions, hinted at by social structures such as James Holden’s family and their fight to keep control of a large wild area of Montana. In the second novel of the series, a project to rebuild the wilds in the Andes is mentioned passingly. Both projects, interestingly, seem to have a low priority for the UN Security Council, and at least in one case (Holden’s freehold) are managed by private citizens, apparently following a Passive Intervention Model.¹⁰⁴

The UN has a much more urgent problem to tackle than the wilderness – the increased social unrest that the failure of ecosystem services could unleash on an overpopulated planet.

As per the 2006 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), ecosystem services are ‘the benefits people obtain from ecosystems.’ The MA also delineated the four categories of ecosystem services – supporting, provisioning,

¹⁰³ See Merriam Webster, “Welfare Capitalism”, Merriam Webster, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/welfare%20capitalism>.

¹⁰⁴ Steve Carver, “Rewilding... conservation and conflict,” *ECOS*, 37(2), 2016, <https://www.ecos.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ECOS-37-2-2-Rewilding.-conservation-and-conflict.pdf>.

regulating, and cultural. All of the four categories mentioned by the MA appear to be compromised on planet Earth, and the government appears to supply for the lack of these natural services by providing state-sponsored alternatives – as Lopez summarises in S1E4: ‘Free food, free water, free drugs so that you can forget the aimless lives you lead.’ In other words, provisioning (food, drugs), regulating (water) and cultural (recreational drugs) ecological services.

Ironically, the ecological services artificially provided to the Earthers by their government, that the Martians point out as a sign of the Earthers’ environmental and moral bankruptcy, are the same services the Martian government is working to install and bootstrap (again, artificially, this being, after all, the Anthropocene) on Mars. The Martians are promised by their parliament a future that is the mirror of the Earth’s past – a green world with a functioning, self-sustaining ecology. The whole rhetoric of the Martian government hinges on what the Earthers squandered, and on what the hard work and sacrifice of the Martians will create. Underneath this rhetoric the Martian government acknowledges the fact that humans act as a geological and ecological force, and the government is trying to harness and pilot such planetary scale effects to its advantage. Ideally this would be the opposite of what happened on Old Earth, where ‘short-sighted and selfish’ (to quote Lopez again) individuals, faced with an environmental laissez-faire attitude, squandered the riches of their ecology. The Martian Republic is built on a hierarchic, military-based structure – a social ecology, if you will – because this structure is particularly suited to harnessing the energies of a whole civilization, and can be enforced and supported by a simple “them vs. us” narrative that requires a clear enemy, and a clear, if as yet out-of-reach destination, to be attained by following a clear, simple path.

The irony is further underscored by the fact that both the restoration of the ecological services on Earth and the building of ecological services on Mars depend on resources provided by the Outer Planets and the Belt - communities in which those same ecological services are used as a form of social control in the most brutal and basic form.

As we learn from the opening speech of the Gaunt Belter in S1E1: ‘Every

time we demand to be heard, they hold back our water, owkwa beltalowda, ration our air, ereluf beltalowda, until we crawl back into our holes, imbobo beltalowda, and do as we are told!’ Once again, primary provisioning, regulating and cultural services, artificially supplied, and no longer used as tools for benign (?) social control as on Earth, but as tools of outright oppression.

A parallel could be drawn between the Belt in *The Expanse* universe, and ‘global south’ countries in the 20th and early 21st centuries, whose natural resources are being extracted and exported, while they themselves suffer from a lack of resources and a compromised environment. And it is fitting that the Belters – de-facto the proletariat class of *The Expanse* solar system – are not allowed the control of the means of production (of air, water, food, raw materials), while at the same time being actively engaged in that same production (by mining asteroids, capturing cometary ice and farming food crops on Ganymede). They are an almost textbook example of ‘a propertyless industrial working class’ that ‘participate in a global system of production and exchange.’¹⁰⁵ It is unsurprising, at this point, that revolution is brewing in the belt. That Earth and Mars control and exploit the Belt and the Belters via a network of private companies competing in a neoliberal market only adds to the irony. The virtually infinite resources of the Belt have not created a post-scarcity society, but have become a resource for a capitalist system of scarcity, and one that uses that scarcity to control and oppress.

Even the fractious nature of Belter organisations seems to reflect a “divide et impera” policy, in which the oppressed are set one against the other by a distant oppressor. A case in point is the commonplace presence of Belter pirates that basically prey on their fellow Belters, but are perceived as a threat to Inner interests, and are therefore actively pursued by the navies of Mars and Earth. The Belt is exploited by the Inners, but many Belters have come to accept exploitation as the only way in which they can relate to their

¹⁰⁵Robin Blackburn, “Marxism: Theory of Proletarian Revolution,” *NLR*, I.97, 1976, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i97/articles/robin-blackburn-marxism-theory-of-proletarian-revolution>.

environment. The loot of the pirates is the stuff of ecological services: food, water, oxygen, and medical supplies.

The system is so pervasive that not even those that suffer in it can imagine an alternative, or a way to escape it. This concept becomes one of the engines of the fourth season of the show, in which the action is as motivated by the necessity to control Ilus' lithium reserves as it is by the sudden activation of the alien geo-engineering machines.

Revolutions

Having summarily described the state of the solar system at the start of *The Expanse*, we can now observe how the system is perturbed by two 'revolutions' – both 'environmental' in their expression, although originating from very different sources.

The first of these revolutions is the appearance of the protomolecule, a form of alien technology that is, at heart, a machine for the ecological hijacking of planetary resources. The protomolecule is an artificial ecology capable of infecting any other system and replacing it: 'a set of free-floating instructions designed to adapt to and guide other replicating systems',¹⁰⁶ for its own purposes.

The protomolecule is, in other words, almost a distillation of the essence of the Anthropocene: the ability of a civilization to artificially reshape a world on a geological scale. And it is in a much more efficient way than human activities ever could, as shown in the novel *Nemesis Games*, and in the fourth season of the show: Ilus is a planet whose whole system, on a geological scale, has been shaped by the protomolecule and then frozen when the alien terraforming machines stopped. It can be argued that whoever the creators of the protomolecule were, they were a lot higher than humanity on the Kardashev scale: the protomolecule is much more energy-efficient than

¹⁰⁶James S A Corey, *Leviathan Wakes* (New York: Orbit, 2011), 344.

anything humanity is capable of deploying in the series.¹⁰⁷

On the other hand, when first discovered by the humans in the solar system, the protomolecule is considered simply a new, as yet untapped resource. As such, it is immediately the object of an attempt to establish a monopoly by a private organisation, Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile, an Earth-er-owned company operating in the Belt. In seizing control of the protomolecule, the Earth oligarch Jules-Pierre Mao seeks an economical advantage, possibly to be ‘flipped’ into a political one.

Once the nature of the alien substance becomes apparent, Mao sets himself up as a would-be saviour of humanity. The research activities sponsored by his company seem instead aimed at setting Mao up as a ‘disaster capitalist’: ‘in moments of crisis, people are willing to hand over a great deal of power to anyone who claims to have a magic cure – whether the crisis is a financial meltdown or [...] a terrorist attack.’¹⁰⁸ Whatever the motivations of the scientists in his service, Mao has his own interests as his main concern, and they are only formally humanitarian.

The protomolecule is also, indirectly, responsible for the failure of the Mars terraforming push and, as a consequence, the collapse of the Martian state, with the mutiny of a significant part of the Martian military force. The appearance of the ring gate, with its promise of easily-accessible, habitable planets, provides a much closer destination for a large part of the Martian population, and one that is accessible by the present generation, and not a promise for a future the current Martians will never see. Having built their whole culture on the future destination of a terraformed Mars, the Martians experience a loss of direction and motivation the moment a similar, and much more easily attainable goal appears, courtesy of the ring gate.

Mao’s tinkering with the protomolecule and the subsequent failure of the Martian terraforming effort – two events that could only occur during the Anthropocene – are also related to the second equally world-shattering

¹⁰⁷ Nikolai Kardashev, “Transmission of information by extraterrestrial civilizations,” 1964, <https://articles.adsabs.harvard.edu/pdf/1964SvA.....8..217K>.

¹⁰⁸ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2006).

(literally) menace to human civilization: the rise of Marco Inaros and the Free Navy, which take centre stage once the protomolecule, and the first environmental and existential threat faced by the solar system in *The Expanse* is contained and defused. This is a literal revolution, in which ecology-altering tools are used as weapons of mass destruction and, once again, of social and political control.

The depiction of Inaros in the books and the series has been pointed out as a sign of the work's underlying conservative politics,¹⁰⁹ as an instance of the "White Genocide" trope; yet what we want to observe and analyze here is not whether the character conforms to a recurring (and outdated, if dramatically effective) cliché or not, but the attitude of the characters, and their politics, toward the environmental factors at play in the universe.

Marco Inaros is one of the possible expressions of the extremism nurtured by years of oppression on the Belt by the Inner Worlds. His ideal foils are Anderson Dawes, whose aim is to show how the Belters' way is different from the Inners', but has equal dignity; and Fred Johnson, whose plan is to acquire the means to play as an equal at the table of the Inners, playing by their own rules. His specular double – in the TV series – is Klaes Ashford, a pirate (i.e., a Belter that also preys on other Belters) who underwent a political 'awakening', coming to promote a strong but moderate position for the Belt. Compared with these other political figures, Marco Inaros is presented not as a revolutionary shaped by a political vision, but rather as a populist leader, dressing his own hunger for power in the rhetoric of freedom from oppression. His agenda is a "combination of rage, racism and revolution,"¹¹⁰ but ultimately a platform to promote his narcissism.

The main leaders of the Belter society show their different approach to their role, and the essentials of their agenda, through their relationship with the environment. To Fred Johnson, an Earther who joined the cause of the

¹⁰⁹Alex Mell-Taylor, "The Weirdly Conservative Politics of "The Expanse," Medium, 2022, <https://medium.com/fan-fare/the-weirdly-conservative-politics-of-the-expanse-8f151a2750f>.

¹¹⁰Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*.

Belt, the environment of the Belt, with its lack of resources and services, is just another issue on a long shopping list of problems to be solved. His main focus is economics, and as the product of a capitalist society, he reasons in terms of capital and work as a solution to their problems. To Anderson Dawes, the Belters must overcome the conviction that their environment is a resource to be sold, without any real connections to them ('Earthers have a home. It's time Belters had one, too' - S1E5). Ashford reasons in terms of political relevance, and to him the environment is incidental. To Marco Inaros, the environment is a tool. He therefore falls into the same pattern of those who caused, abetted or ignored the collapse of Earth's ecosystem in the series' past, and those that are currently (in the series timeline) exploiting the environment.

The Free Navy works in the background through the first three seasons of the show, and the early part of the book series, and when it comes to the fore, it does so by hitting the Earth with a series of meteor strikes – an environmental attack – that causes the death of millions of the Earth's population. However, more importantly (at least for this article), this triggers a dramatic planet altering event. This is the Anthropocene in action, a weaponized Simphorocene. Earth's overtaxed ecological services – both natural and state-sponsored – are undercut. Paradoxically, it is likely that the Inaros strike does not cause a mass-extinction – simply because the Earth of *The Expanse* already went through the Holocene extinction event – also known as the Anthropocene Extinction.¹¹¹ But with its corollary of extreme weather conditions, tsunamis and the drastic undercutting of the food chain, certainly the Free Navy's attack pushes the planet deeper into a Simphorocene spiral.

What the Inaros meteorites do is ultimately to make the target planetary ecosystem incapable of supporting human life – and the life of Earthers in particular. A similar attack on Mars, in fact, would be meaningless: Mars does

¹¹¹Ron Wagler, "The Anthropocene Mass Extinction: An Emerging Curriculum Theme for Science Educators," *The American Biology Teacher*, 73(2), 2011, <https://online.ucpress.edu/abt/article/73/2/78/18301/The-Anthropocene-Mass-Extinction-An-Emerging>.

not have an environment in place such that it could be killed by these means. For all his revolutionary rhetoric, Inaros is not as much a revolutionary as a warlord. Having established his position by his attack on the Earth, Inaros effectively does to the Belt what the Inners did – the Free Navy takes control of the primary ecological services, using the scarcity of the resources the Belters created to control and oppress the Belters themselves. The Free Navy does not seize and redistribute the means of production, but simply seizes and stockpiles food and drugs (i.e., takes control of the ecological services), blackmailing the people of the Belt while at the same time offering them a populist narrative of strength, courage and self-sacrifice.

Taming the Leviathan

In conclusion, what *The Expanse* tells us is that the human control of nature is, as yet, beyond our capabilities. Implicitly echoing John McPhee's *The Control of Nature*,¹¹² James S.A. Corey comes to the conclusion we can change our environment, but any control of such change is subject to such a huge number of variables that our hold on change is temporary at best. Our temporary control can be challenged by random events, or by human action, and when human action is involved, it is often the result of a feedback loop that is fueled by the same environment we are trying to control.

Use ecological services as a tool for control, and you will generate resentment, and rebellion. Fail to consider the impact that the environment has on your social and political structures, and you will be taken by surprise by unexpected, unforeseen crises. Even the creators of the protomolecule, with their complete (?) control over the reshaping of whole planets according to their desires, met their demise at the hands of an enemy they were unable to counter – a fact that seems to signal that no matter the scale of our control over nature, such control will never be complete and absolute. We can harness the power of the Leviathan, but we will never tame it, never truly be its master.

¹¹²John McPhee, *The Control of Nature* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989).

The Expanse: On the Cyclical Nature of History

Grigor (John) Velkovsky

Preface

This piece is written with the understanding that the reader has familiarity with the world of *The Expanse*. It is written from the perspective of the TV show (or up to the book *Babylon's Ashes*). Given the limitations of space, certain themes are explored slightly less than others. The Belt is viewed cursorily and mainly through the lenses of the big governments. This essay focuses on the following working questions: Does Earth represent Marxism's end goal and fundamental tenets? Is Mars an allegory for the American Dream? Is ideology a primary factor in the conflicts within *The Expanse*? Is history cyclical and technology a tool that improves the human condition?

Introduction

Ideology is a major driving force throughout *The Expanse*. There are numerous parallels between Mars and the United States – from its independence and the end of colonialism, its powerful industrial complex and strong military, and the dream for a better life gripping every facet of society. On the other hand, one can argue that Earth represents Marxism’s end goal and fundamental tenets. Basic Assistance exists to satisfy the needs of all, there’s free distribution of goods and provision of services. With the United Nations, states have been abolished in order to transition to a human world community. *The Expanse* illustrates perfectly the cyclical nature of history and that technology does not necessarily improve upon the human condition. It could be argued that it exacerbates the best and worst traits in humanity, in many ways creating new problems. Progress, but at what cost?

The Expanse provides a richness of ideologies set in the future. A yearning for new horizons and a breath of primal need to explore and discover. A familiar time not dissimilar to contemporary days. Where bleak survival and inequality are ever present, hope is a commodity to be bought and sold.

This piece seeks to explore the cyclical nature of history, its repeating elements despite the advent of technology. One can argue that a fundamental tenet of the show is that technological development does not and cannot better humanity; rather, it’s the human condition that needs to mature. Since our nature has remained the same, our problems are expressed in a similar historic fashion dialectically through the main factions – Earth, Mars, and the Belt.

The United Nations

In *The Expanse*, the primary governing body of Earth and Luna is the United Nations. It was formed as an answer to the number of global issues humanity faced throughout the 21st century. Rising population, starvation, climate change, and damage to the planet’s ecosystem led to the formation of a global government. This in turn meant that the different nation states and

their respective authorities became secondary to the UN and its executive branch. With the improvement of technology and space exploration, all extraterrestrial colonisation was firmly under the UN.

Before one can analyse whether the system is Marxist, one needs to define its fundamental aspects. The United Nations is a federal, parliamentary, representative, democratic republic, with an executive presidency as head of state. It has executive (Secretariat), legislative (General Assembly), judicial (Court of Justice), and military (Navy/Marine Corps) branches. It is responsible for the administration and governance of Earth and its colonies. In the books and TV show, it's depicted as having a broad scope of policies, initiatives, and a firm grip across the solar system. It is characterised by a centralization of power, with the UN having more control over the member states than the MCR does over its provinces.

The UN has strong military capabilities both offensively and defensively. A defence grid orbits around Earth, consisting of railgun platforms, as well as employing watchtower satellites. The faction has a significant presence across the Solar System, having the largest fleet in the sector and well-equipped personnel. Together with their intelligence agency, this superiority is used to enforce the UN's agenda, maintain order and stability in the system, and to protect Earth and its colonies from any external threats.

An important component to consider are the views of the UN and its overall approach towards the Belt. Belters are culturally, economically, and politically distinct from both Earth and Mars. The UN has a complex relationship with the Belt, which can be primarily categorised as using Belters for cheap labour to obtain resources within the solar system. The UN is focused on suppressing discontent. This is realised through a number of corporations employed by Earth to accomplish different goals and interests across multiple theatres. Ceres station is a clear example of this principle. As one of the first sites of human colonisation, it is the most important port in the Belt. It is initially governed by the United Nations as a protectorate, with a private security firm called Star Helix Security handling any day-to-day issues. Similarly, the CPM Security Corporation, a private security corporation, is primarily responsible for the security on Eros station.

The most critical aspect of the UN for our purposes is its mixed economy. Private enterprise and governmental control are equally visible in the TV show. The government is responsible for regulating the economy and ensuring that it runs smoothly, as well as redistributing wealth via its 'Basic Assistance' policy.

This policy is a form of welfare available to the citizens of Earth. It has wide coverage in terms of providing accommodation in government housing complexes, food and sustenance, medical care, and clothing. These services are provided free of charge, but citizens on this plan are subject to mandatory contraception, unable to have children legally, in order to control the population. A large portion of the population that utilises this program is uneducated – many of the citizens are forced to rely on themselves or each other to obtain knowledge and skills. There are uplift programs that provide educational or job training opportunities if strict requirements are met. Given the ratio of jobs versus relative population on Earth, a waiting list is established. Unfortunately, this means that for most people it can take years before a spot becomes available, if at all. According to Chrisjen Avasarala, a huge percent of the population on Earth is on Basic, on account of a lack of jobs for people to do.

At first glance, the United Nations seems to have adopted a lot of Marxist concepts. A critical principle in Marxism is internationalism. In order to achieve a true transformation of society, Marx recognised that the workers of the entire world would need to unite, as the change would only be successful if achieved across this level. This would bring about the ultimate goal of abolishing nations and completing the transition into a human world community. The basis of this component is the understanding that common interests affect workers globally. Centralised planning and central authority would be the definitive guide to economic, political, and societal decisions.

Marx was a convinced internationalist. He saw the nation state as a bourgeois creation. No revolution could take place effectively within the

*confines of one bourgeois system.*¹¹³

The ultimate goal of communism is a society based on cooperation, free distribution of goods, and provision of services, with widespread access to education, healthcare, and basic necessities. The distribution of these services is a top priority for the state or community in a true communist society. Cooperation and mutual aid would be emphasised, rather than competition.

*The crucial question for Marx, as for Sismondi before him, was not how particular imbalances – overproduction in a particular sector, for example – might arise, but how that led to general overproduction, to economic crises. Both Sismondi and Marx recognized that the pricing mechanism tended automatically to restore imbalances through declining prices for overproduced goods, rising prices for underproduced goods, and rising or falling interest rates according to supply and demand in the capital markets. But both also argued that beyond some magnitude of imbalance, this no longer worked – that there were destabilizing responses to extreme conditions, responses that took the economy further away from equilibrium rather than back toward it.*¹¹⁴

This so-called cycle of economic rise and collapse brought the working class through a lot of suffering. The UN seems to have resolved this particular issue with Basic Assistance, as the general population is better able to handle such market imbalances.

Another fundamental principle was the recognition of the existence of class struggle. The knowledge of inequalities that divided these classes was a main topic for Marx. He was keenly aware that there was inherent conflict between them due to the stark difference in goals that each espouses. Emancipation of workers was of big importance, which according to Marx was a task they

¹¹³Rupert Woodfin and Oscar Zarate, *Marxism: A graphic guide* (London: Icon Books, 2018).

¹¹⁴Thomas Sowell, *Marxism: Philosophy and economics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1985).

would pursue.

*This principle is inherent to real Marxism, which implies democracy and self-emancipation; it also means that democracy is the indispensable foundation for a new society (called socialism or communism).*¹¹⁵

One could make the argument that as a democracy, through Basic Assistance, and other uplifting programs, the United Nations has focused on providing emancipation for the general populace.

However, when one looks closer, one can see critical differences in some of the fundamental tenets of Marxism. The government of Earth and its colonies does not seek to overthrow capitalism or establish a socialist society. While the established programs have socialist elements, such as redistribution of wealth, it is not a fully socialist government. An essential distinction is that the UN has a mixed economy, preserving both private and state ownership as the means of production. Practically, Earth employs a number of privately owned corporations to pursue its interests in terms of engineering, construction, security, and policing some of its colonies.

The centralization of power in the hands of the UN can lead to a lack of accountability and transparency, and the emphasis on social welfare can sometimes come at the expense of individual freedom and responsibility. A clear theme within *The Expanse* is how the UN's system at times enables the wealthy to pursue their own separate agenda. The private sector is able to apply significant influence in the way the UN operates. This is evidenced by the ability of the Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile to successfully influence governmental agencies and affect the events of the entire solar system.

The Mercantile is one of the largest corporations in the Belt. With Jules-Pierre Mao being one of its owners, the corporation has Protogen as one of its main subsidiaries. Furthermore, he has shares in Star Helix Security, as well as CPM Security Corporation, which is later acquired by Protogen. A

¹¹⁵Critique Sociale, "The basic principles of Marxism", 2009, <https://libcom.org/article/basic-principles-marxism-critique-sociale>.

rich industrialist, Mao is therefore able to exert influence on Ceres, Eros, and Earth. He is fundamentally able to harness the protomolecule, at least initially, in an attempt to push his own independent agenda. This allows the wealthy corporate owner to reach a level of significant financial power. Working together with Sadavir Errinwright, the former Undersecretary of the United Nations, Mao is able to utilise UN facilities as well. Ordered by Protogen, and assembled on the Earth owned Bush Shipyards, 9 Amun-Ra-class vessels were successfully constructed. These ships are essentially the catalyst for the events that occur and trigger the widespread conflict in the Solar System between Earth, Mars, and the OPA.

Overall, the United Nations in *The Expanse*, is more socialist in its ideology than the Martian Congressional Republic, but it is not a Marxist government. It has a mix of socialist and capitalist elements in its policies and government. While Basic Assistance and internationalism are critical aspects of the UN, it is precisely the influence of corporations within the government that allow for events within the TV series to transpire as they do. There is no abolition of private property; in particular, the means of production are not owned collectively by the state or by the community. There's no equal distribution of wealth and resources across the UN's citizens. Finally, class is still very much an integral issue in society.

The Martian Congressional Republic

To pull oneself up by one's bootstraps is a quintessential American saying. One can argue that no other phrase better symbolises the fundamental tenets of America. The so-called American dream is an integral piece of idea, a significant thought that has shaped the minds of Americans since the inception of the country. Its impact on the development of American society cannot be understated.

There are a number of key principles that made the country what it is today from a geopolitical and social point of view. One of them is the ardent approach towards immigration. Anyone can come to this bastion of freedom to pursue opportunity and the promise of a better life. Similarly, it has

encouraged the average American to pursue their own goals and dreams, to start their own businesses and ventures. In essence, this entrepreneurial spirit and idea that one can achieve anything has fueled the growth of the American economy and brought the country significant recognition and prosperity. With such a mindset, innovation has also walked hand-in-hand with progress. Science, technology, and medicine have been unshackled and unleashed, no longer held back by outdated morals or taboos. Finally, regardless of race, origin, or other superficial factors, the American dream has provided a common identity - a sense of unity through hard work and determination. A shared sense of purpose where anyone can achieve anything through hard work.

Like the American Dream broadly construed, this one of the good life exists in a series of variations. The most common form was cast in terms of commercial success. For hundreds of years, American readers and writers have had tireless appetites for tales of poor boys (and, later, girls) who, with nothing but pluck and ingenuity, created financial empires that towered over the national imagination (and in some cases towered over the national landscape as well).¹¹⁶

While this concept has evolved over time, it's still a powerful symbol of prosperity, freedom, and inspiration. This is even reflected in the Mormon imagery on the "Nauvoo" showcasing American history and its integral influence with the prospect of leaving the Solar system. The scenes are reminiscent of John Gast's painting *American Progress*, an allegorical representation of the New West.

Drawing parallels between Mars and America is relatively easy. A colony initially composed of Earth settlers, Mars has a similar journey of independence. While at first dependent on the United Nations for resources, the colonists eventually became self-sufficient. A strong sense for self-

¹¹⁶Jim Cullen, *The American dream: A short history of an idea that shaped a nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

determination permeated Martian society, which eventually led to a desire for secession. While war was averted due to the discovery of the Epstein Drive, one could argue that it would have been an inevitable occurrence under different circumstances.

After a period of negotiations and with a bargaining chip to offer, Mars was granted the right to rule itself and to form the Martian Congressional Republic. As a political body, it is a federal parliamentary representative democratic republic. A key long-term goal that has gripped the society since independence is to terraform the planet and make it completely habitable in a similar fashion to Earth. The faction has some planned economy in order to accommodate the incredibly arduous task of changing Mars, something that can take many generations. However, the system still has corporations, private ownership, and small businesses. While the military does have stronger doctrine and governmental reach when compared to the United States, its military and industrial sector is very similar. Both nations have a huge budget when it comes to the creation of combat applications. While this is vital to Mars in order to safe-guard its rights for self-determination, one can confidently argue that diverting so many resources for military applications and technology has slowed down the terraforming process.

When one dives deeper, more similarities can be found between the MRC and the United States. Generally, Mars has elements of 'Manifest Destiny', principles from Ayn Rand's objectivism, and the core tenets of the American Dream. The faction espouses the frontier spirit, where people can build a better life for themselves, harness and tame a new planet, in a similar fashion to the American West, and work hard to achieve the dream of terraformation. And more than anything, Martian culture is defined by entrepreneurship and innovation.

This is reflected in the Martian Congressional Republic's focus on technology and its support for scientific research and exploration. The creation of the Epstein Drive changes the fate of humanity and opens a new page in human history. Similarly, while the UN fleet is numerous, the Martians have better technology, stealth ships, and are able to go toe-to-toe with Earth within a swift time-scale after its independence. Like America, Mars has

relied on immigration to fuel its research, with a large brain-drain from Earth. With a huge number of citizens having Basic Assistance as the only option, regardless of vocation, skills, or experience due to the lack of jobs relative to the population, many willingly choose to immigrate to the harsher but more meaningful conditions that Mars has to offer.

Both Mars and Earth share a similar disposition toward the Belters. Martians view the Belters generally as a proxy through which they can achieve their fundamental short and long-term goals. The Belt is caught in a game of chess between Mars and Earth.

In conclusion, the Martian Congressional Republic represents a new frontier and a new opportunity for people to build a better life for themselves, just as the American West represented a new frontier for the former European settlers. This so-called gold rush leads to a huge number of people leaving Earth and Luna in search of purpose. It is why the Martian society is cohesive and efficient, at least until the discovery of the rings and the events thereafter. From its independence and end of colonialism, Mars attains a powerful industrial complex and strong military. The dream for a better life grips every facet of society united by a singular vision to manifest destiny and terraform the planet into their so-called garden of Eden.

On ideology, Marxism, history, and technology

There are many reasons for conflict within *The Expanse* - personal ambition, resources, or power. But one can make a compelling argument that a lot of the war is based on ideology. Even when one looks at Mao, a character primarily driven by ego and personal aggrandisement, he is still interested in transcending the human condition. He is obsessed by the opportunity to push past biological limitations and usher human society into post-scarcity by harnessing the power to overcome vacuum via the Protomolecule. The various factions in the series have different ideologies and their fights are often based on disagreement over the future direction of humanity and the correct steps to bring forth a new future. A clear example of this is the difference between the Martian Congressional Republic and the United

Nations – one is driven by self-determination and the pursuit of technological progress, while the other is focused primarily on maintaining the status quo, stability, and order in the solar system. On a micro level, these cultural and ideological differences are personified perfectly in Lt. Lopez during his conversation with Holden in the TV show. With his great-uncle emigrating from Earth, the Martian wonders about the concept of endless blue sky, free air, and open water all the way to the horizon.

In the scene from the episode “CQB” (S1E4) of *The Expanse*. Lopez asks Holden if he misses Earth. This exchange reveals a lot about the ideological differences between Earth and Mars:

LOPEZ: I could never understand your people. Why, when the universe has bestowed so much upon you, you seem to care so little for it.

HOLDEN: Wrecking things is what Earthers do best. Martians too, by the look of your ship.

LOPEZ: We are nothing like you. The only thing Earthers care about is government handouts. Free food, free water, free drugs so that you can forget the aimless lives you lead. You're short-sighted, and selfish, and it will destroy you. Earth is over, Mr. Holden. My only hope is that we can bring Mars back to life before you destroy that too (S1E4, “CQB”).

These ideological differences almost verge to the point of creating sub-species or different branches of humanity when one considers the Belters. This chasm is brought about due to their inability to survive in Mars or Earth's gravity for very long. The cultural, biological, and ideological implications of not being able to live on any body in space with a large gravity well cannot be overstated. No scene exemplifies this more than Avarasala using gravity as a form of torture against an OPA member. The OPA member then later uses gravity as a tool to take his own life, preventing any information from being recovered. As Avarasala's assistant points out: it's also likely a statement. This opens up a deeper question about who is really in control. The lives and

survival of no other factions are more intricately tied to such basic forces of nature.

While none of the factions represent true Marxism, viewing *The Expanse* through such lenses can allow one to unravel and understand the background of these ideological conflicts. When we talk about political science, what concerns us fundamentally is the nature of society and what a good society represents. In a sense, the apotheosis or the apex question in political science comes down to this: what is the greatest society that we can achieve and how do we get there? What is the case and what ought to be the case? Marxism is a grand narrative that changed the way we think about a multitude of subjects, ranging from the essence and spirit of humanity to history and economy and the roles they play. In order to truly understand Marxism, one must realise that Marx's narrative is much more complex than it seems at first. The reason for that is due to the fact that it is a synthesis of three essential components or concepts - namely German idealist philosophy, British political economy, and French socialism. Thus, one can interpret that in synthesising those three strains of thought or ideology, Marx and Engels changed and improved each one from its original form. In a sense, Marxist critique reshaped all three of these components. Each faction within *The Expanse* seeks to change the solar system according to their ideal version of humanity.

Another key point is that Marx believed that his project was to explain human history scientifically, that one can explain nature and humanity's natural laws. One of Marx's fundamental critiques about capitalism is that it brings incredible dehumanisation and alienation due to the relations between the capitalist and the proletariat. This can be seen in the relationship of both Mars and Earth with their respective exploitative relations with the Belt.

Marx's grand narrative explains how everything unfolds dialectically through a process of conflict and resolution. Thesis and antithesis, which lead to a synthesis. For Marx, communism is a secular religion – heaven on earth, no class, no wars, no starvation, or social injustice. Marx defines and considers this redemption of the human essence and spirit to happen within one's life. Human emancipation according to his grand narrative is in a way a political emancipation from religion and property. By the end of the TV

show, no faction is the same and they're all changed by the events that unfold. The UN is forced to undergo a massive transformation and restructuring. With the ecological damage on Earth, the government is forced to approach the rest of the solar system on a more equal level. Committed to transparency and reform, it enshrines the principles of democracy and equality. Chrisjen Avasarala, forced to accept the new reality, has no choice but to accede to the new Belter-led Transport Union to regulate ship traffic through the Ring space.

This action leads to a new future for the Belters, turning them from the de-facto underclass of the solar system into a society with prospects for economic security. One can argue that Mars has changed the most, faced by significant challenges as a result of the events in the series. With the rings opened, the faction is forced to completely and utterly change its approach. Easy access to habitable planets means that the dream of terraformation is abandoned, leading to a massive societal shift. Because of these events, Martians are forced to become more cooperative with the Belters. This complete and radical shift later results in the creation of the Laconian Empire (something touched only peripherally in the TV show). Similarly, the OPA (Outer Planetary Alliance) and the Belters are given a new purpose, a new destiny, one determined by their biological difference and altered human condition.

Marx's theory of historical materialism is perfectly encapsulated in *The Expanse*. While the environment is different and the rules have changed, we see similar conflicts and ideological differences mirroring our present and contemporary world. The material conception of history is a theory that argues that social and economic conditions play a primary role in shaping human history. The essential driver of change is the mode of production and ownership of the means of production. While new technologies and the expansion of human civilizations into the solar system has the potential to liberate humanity, this is evidently not the case. *The Expanse* provides a clear example of how old concepts continue to play out. Skin colour and other superficial factors have allowed humans to oppress one another. The Belter deviation from the species norm and their physical differences have caused

them to be dehumanised and seen as lower in value by both Earth's and Mars' citizens. According to Marxist theory, history is cyclical with class struggle being a fundamental tenet. In *The Expanse*, the Belters personify this better than any other group. Marxism asserts that the class struggle is the engine of history, and that society is in a constant state of transformation as one class overthrows another. The formation of the Transport Union and the Treaty of Ceres are the culmination of this change.

Perhaps the most important element of the show is that human nature remains the same. Despite the technological wonders promising salvation, humanity faces the same issues that plagued mankind in the 20th century. Unless humanity matures and adapts to the new reality, the same problems will express themselves dialectically. The cyclical nature of history is conveyed through the ideological conflict between the UN and Mars. These two states mimic the relationship between America and the colonialist British Empire from one perspective. On the other hand, it's reminiscent of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, with two ideologically diametrically opposed nations locked in a constant arms and technological race, treating other states as pawns on the chess board. Eastern Europe has been the playground of the so-called Great Powers, with the Balkan Wars interconnected with the two World Wars. Belters similarly have their own chapter and involvement. As Marx predicted, they are alienated from their labour, unable to ever see the potential prosperity their resources can bring as they cannot survive the gravity of the planets. They have no future being trapped in the conflict of two great powers.

Marco Inaros is able to tap into this Belter sentiment perfectly as well as Mars' disillusionment after the ring system's discovery. At their core, Belters are still humans, struggling to find meaning in their space prisons. Alienated from everything and everyone, they yearn for a place to call home and a life beyond meagre survival. The desire for a better world and the promise of prosperity is what gave rise to one of the most oppressive systems to ever exist in the Soviet Union. Inaros is a would-be tyrant and an evolutionary dead-end, the product of the inability to cope with a meaningless brutal existence bent on survival. Where mutually-assured destruction is

a preferable doctrine, the end justifies the means. His genocidal insanity and utilisation of stealth-coated asteroids to attack Earth is essentially the Cuban Missile Crisis' worst possible potential outcome. Inaros' rise to power and his almost-successful attempt at becoming the system's de facto dictator is the perfect example of history's cyclical nature. Born out of historical materialism, he is a creature of oppression, a victim and abuser, receiving it and giving it in return out of deep-seated revanchism.

Those who struggle to change the world see themselves as noble, even tragic figures. Yet most of those who work for world betterment are not rebels against the scheme of things. They seek consolation for a truth they are too weak to bear. At bottom, their faith that the world can be transformed by human will is a denial of their own mortality.¹¹⁷

Following Marx and Engels's work, communism branched into many different schools of thoughts. This is mirrored by the Belters having multiple factions, each with its own underlying goal and method for achieving it. The dynamic relations between these groups within the OPA ultimately led to the final fate of the Belter nation.

Final words

In conclusion, while technology changes most aspects of our lives, some things stay the same - the human condition. As the British philosopher John Gray said, "The events which we've been taught are abnormal are in fact normal. Normal collapses, normal breakdowns, normal crises occur within most human lives."¹¹⁸ One can argue that it's due to human nature that history is cyclical. Nothing exemplifies that more than the Epstein Drive - a discovery able to transcend humanity into a new chapter of space exploration and colonisation, only for the technology to find itself used for all-too familiar

¹¹⁷John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on humans and other animals* (London: Granta, 2023).

¹¹⁸Gray, *Straw Dogs*.

purposes such as warfare. This is exemplified in the scenery during episode “Paradigm Shift” (S2E6), while Naomi and

Drummer look at the schematics of the UN missile. A close up shows that it uses an Epstein Drive. A key theme of this episode is how Epstein conceived of his engine as part of a human race no longer confined by distance. Ironically, it is then shown how this discovery became a key part of Earth’s military arsenal.

While the environment changes, one constant remains the same: humanity. Marxism taps into the human condition by addressing one of the most fundamental aspects of human life: the struggle for economic and political power. This is not just an abstract concept, but a tangible and ongoing reality for the vast majority of people in capitalist societies. It argues that this struggle is not unique to capitalism, but a feature of all class-based societies throughout history. By analysing the historical development of different modes of production and the relationship between different classes, Marxist theory seeks to understand the underlying causes of the human condition and to identify the means by which it can be transformed.

The theory also addresses the cyclical nature of our history. Understanding Marx and his theory broadens and enriches one’s viewing experience of *The Expanse*. Its tenets allow one to further appreciate the deeper nuances and ideological differences between the show’s factions. The background of these conflicts mirror the past and current events of our contemporary world.

Finally, Marxism emphasises the importance of working towards a society that is more just and equal, and the role that ordinary people have in achieving this goal. This is reflected in the way that the characters in *The Expanse* struggle against oppression and exploitation, and seek to create a better world for themselves and future generations. Holden never gives up on this dream, and like Don Quixote pursues this to the very end. He convinces Avasarala to agree with Camina becoming the President of the Transport Union (“Babylon’s Ashes”, S6E6), giving Belters finally a place in a shared future for humanity: “the only way we all move forward together.”

In order to transcend the cyclical nature of history, the human condition must first mature lest we are doomed to a repeating cycle of rises and falls,

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of the Holdens and Inaroses now and in the future.

The Heart of The Expanse: Discovering Humanity in the Void

John Roselli

If I were to list my favourite shows of all time, *The Expanse* would sit solidly in the top three, alongside *Brooklyn 99* and *The Mandalorian*. Few stories are able to captivate me on the level that the story of James Holden and the crew of the *Rocinante* has. The writing is exceptional, the universe feels real and lived in, the action is engaging, and the intrigue always keeps you on your toes. These aspects alone would make the show stand out on a must-watch list, but what really sets it apart for me are the characters we meet along the way. The world of *The Expanse* is similar to our own in that it is cold and unfeeling – a hard place to survive on your own. And just like our world, the people in it make all the difference, turning the cold and darkness into warmth and light, or, conversely, making the darkness even darker by snuffing out any glimmer of light and hope they see. This piece will focus on those characters trying to make a difference in the world of *The Expanse*: Detective Miller, James Holden, Naomi Nagata, Amos Burton, Alex Kamal, and Chrisjen Avasarala.

Detective Josephus Miller

The first person we meet on this grand journey is Detective Josephus Miller. We find him on Ceres, a strategic shipping port in the Outer Belt officially under the control of the Earth. However, the majority of Ceres are Belters. There is a lot of pro-OPA sentiment and it feels like a powder keg ready to go off. Miller doesn't care much for politics, however. It doesn't matter whose flag is flying; at the end of the day, he's just trying to get by. A hard-boiled career cop, he's been given a garbage assignment and an Earther partner, Havelock, that nobody else wanted. After going through a divorce, Miller has given in to his alcoholic tendencies, and his grasp on life has loosened. That's why he doesn't care who rules Ceres – no political party could help him get his life back together. When he is assigned an Earther partner, this is in essence his captain telling him how little he matters to the precinct.

Things quickly begin to change for him once he delves into a seemingly meaningless assignment. His mission is to find Juliette Mao, a missing Earth girl whose extremely wealthy father wants her back. The captain makes it clear that this isn't a solvable case. Miller's orders are to look so the precinct could say they did their job and proceed to wash their hands of the matter. It's just another assignment for Miller, the kind he has gotten used to. He is no longer an integral part of the force and had lost the right to any important cases. As Miller arrives at Julie's apartment, he's prepared to follow his orders. That is, until he starts to actually dig into Julie's life. Learning about her rejecting her place in society in order to pursue a cause she believes in challenges Miller's own world view. For a long time, he has accepted the label given to him by his peers and he has accepted that he is a failure and no longer a good cop. As the mystery of Julie Mao unravels, a piece of Miller's soul starts to be revived. The more he digs, the more he finds this young woman going against all odds because she believes in herself and her cause, and the more he starts to question his own life. Finally, this down-and-out cop decides that he is no longer happy with who he has become and starts to change his life to be who he wants to be. He stumbles several times, but now he is bolstered by a passion he hasn't felt in a long time. His mission is

to find Julie, and he is fully committed.

Meanwhile on Ceres, events spiral out of control with news of an ice hauler being destroyed. The powder keg is ignited with anti-Earth riots springing up across the station, one of them injuring Havelock. Havelock is an outsider, but he is also the only person left on Ceres who shows Miller any kind of respect. That fosters a mutual respect in Miller for the Earther. With political tensions only rising, Miller knows what will happen to his partner if he stays on the force. Before Miller continues tracking Julie, he warns Havelock to leave Ceres to save his life.

Dawes quickly tires of this down-and-out detective and pressures his captain to make him drop it immediately. Miller refuses, and his captain promptly releases from the precinct. While it is a blow to Miller's funds, he is now free to retake his life and he jumps at the chance. This signifies that Miller has performed a complete about-face since the start of the show. When he is first introduced, he always swims with the current, being careful not to rock the boat. He constantly avoids the OPA and any potential threats to the status quo, until the Julie Mao case dares him to come back to life. Miller's strength of conviction is on full display when he stands up to Dawes and when he saves Havelock. When Miller tracks down James Holden only by the name of his ship, it's clear that contrary to what the precinct believed, he was a very good cop.

James Holden

Next, we are transported to the Canterbury, an ice hauler providing water to the belt. Here we meet our main protagonist, Executive Officer James Holden, an Earther driven by conviction and a strong moral compass, with a genuine desire to do what is right. After trying several occupations, including a stint with the UN Navy, he ends up on the ice hauler. He doesn't really have a purpose in life at this point other than making ends meet, but that all changes when a distress signal is picked up by the Canterbury. Holden is dispatched with a small crew in a shuttle to investigate. It's a trap, and the ice hauler is mercilessly slaughtered, leaving Holden in charge of the survivors.

Holden has to balance out his righteous rage with the survival of his crew, and initially, he fails to prioritise correctly. He plans on using his damaged shuttle and shell-shocked crew to chase down a fully operational warship that has just sent several nukes into a civilian ice freighter. He is so committed to making them pay now and figuring out how to survive later that he isn't thinking clearly and it takes his newly promoted XO to talk him down and flee to safety. Throughout the series, we see that this is what makes Holden an effective leader. He understands himself well enough to know when he isn't thinking clearly and knows when he needs to listen to his crew. He also understands that there are times when he must override them in order to accomplish the mission.

He never seeks to be a leader. In fact, as we are introduced to him, he is actively trying to dodge his promotion to XO, even though he is clearly qualified for the role. It's because he understands the responsibility that a leader holds, and he simply doesn't want it. As a child growing up in Montana, his parents raised him to be a leader to protest the actions of the government that was seizing land from the people. From a young age, he was taught the true responsibility of leadership, and it understandably frightened him. When he is voted in as the captain of the Roci, he finally stops running and begins to embrace his calling. It's no longer only his own life that he is responsible for now, but also the lives of his crew as well. But he is ready, and they have a mission to accomplish.

He may be an Earther, but he's been in the Belt long enough to see through the propaganda of his government and see Belters, Martians, and Earthers as equally human. His crew consists of all three, a reflection of his political views. Instead of pledging loyalty to just one faction or being a part of none, in time Holden becomes the mediator between all three. His purpose becomes serving the people that are represented by their governments, not the self-serving officials that run them.

While Holden is the protagonist and does try his best, he is still ultimately human and has flaws just like the rest of the crew. He tries to do what he genuinely believes is right, but he doesn't always make the right choices, and though he strives to be selfless, he still makes several selfish decisions that

hurt both himself and the crew. One of his earliest and biggest mistakes is broadcasting everything he thinks he knows about the attack on the Canterbury before anything could be verified. This act nearly causes a war between Earth and Mars. On several occasions, he quarrels with OPA leader Fred Johnson, eventually getting the Rocinante kicked off of the only friendly port to them, Tycho Station. Some of his decisions are rash and ill-advised, but it is important to remember that he is not a saint, just a man trying to do his best.

Throughout the show, he's given many impossible scenarios where he must choose between the good of the solar system and the well-being of his crew, his love, or himself. He is asked time and again to risk his friends' lives in order to accomplish the task at hand. At one point, things do get to be too much for him and we see that even someone as determined and driven as Holden can be overwhelmed. His response is to become callous and even cold blooded. He stops being who he is at his core, and even begins pushing Naomi and the rest of his crew away. Even as strong as Holden is, he isn't able to save himself from his downward spiral, and it takes the support of the whole crew of the Roci for him to recover and get back on his feet.

The more we get to know Holden, we see that he is the opposite to Miller. While Miller bases most of his decisions (even saving Julie) on his own survival, Holden tries his best to make the right decision for the sake of everyone around him, even at his own expense. Holden is an optimist, who tries to believe the best about people. Miller is a jaded realist who learned much earlier in his life to not trust anyone too much. This dynamic between the two drives much of the first season, and they balance each other well.

Naomi Nagata

After the destruction of the Cant, Holden is ready to fly off the handle in a fit of righteous rage to avenge his fallen colleagues. That's when Belter engineer and newly appointed XO Naomi Nagata steps in and keeps Holden from getting them all killed. When it comes to ideology and survival, she sits in the middle, able to judge the best course of action between the two

extremes. She finds the compromises that keep them alive, but still stands for their cause. As a Belter, she wants the Belt to finally have its independence from the Inner Worlds, but she's not driven by a blind hate for the Inners.

Prior to the events of the show and before she was the chief engineer of the Canterbury, she was involved in an OPA cell that she thought was standing up to the Inners and working to better the standing of the Belt. She wrote software to overload the engines of ships in port to immobilise them and cause panic, and to really show the Inners that the Belt wasn't populated by fools willing to live under the boot of Earth. To her horror, her software was used to detonate the docked ships instead of just disabling them, killing many innocent people in the process. When she learned the part she played had led to death, and that the group leader had used her to cause terror, she ran. She abandoned her old life, eventually landing a spot on the Canterbury. During the events of the show, she still wants the Belt to get recognition and to stop being seen as less than the Inners, but she understands that not all Inners believe the Belt are scum. The crew she now looks after testifies to the ability of Earth, Mars, and the Belt to work together towards a common goal as the survivors of the Canterbury continue to unravel a conspiracy that spans the entire solar system.

As XO she is the perfect counterpart to Holden, balancing out his idealism with her pragmatism. As his desire to chase after a warship illustrates, sometimes his idealism gets the better of him and she has to talk him down. Conversely, there are times when she needs his idealism in order to keep the Rocinante flying for a purpose and not becoming just another freelancer trying to make a buck while the universe implodes on itself. They complement each other extremely well, so it's no surprise when a romance starts to take shape. Politically, Naomi also balances Holden by being a Belter. Though they are both non-aligned, their backgrounds naturally influence them differently. Holden growing up on Earth makes him slant slightly more towards the Inners whereas her growing up in the space stations of the Belt has her more sympathetic towards the Belt. Their respective knowledge of the workings within their former factions helps them navigate the dangerous political waters that they soon find themselves in.

Amos Burton

The next member of the Rocinante crew is Earther mechanic Amos Burton, the muscle of the team. When we first meet him on the Cant, the first thing we notice about him is that he is constantly looking to Naomi for guidance and orders. When the crew is finally out of danger, Holden asks him why he does that. Amos explains the reason he follows her directions is that he recognizes that she has good judgement and trusts her to always make the right call. After the crew are able to leave their shuttle and secure the Rocinante, he comes to recognize Holden's leadership ability as well. While Amos admires Holden for his moral compass and looks to him for guidance at times, that doesn't stop him from doing what he feels needs to be done to protect the crew. He grew up in Baltimore as an orphan until he was taken in by a woman named Lydia who felt compassion and pity for him. He learned how to survive on the streets and eventually got off Earth, determined to never look back.

Growing up on Earth was completely night and day for Amos and Holden. Holden was raised by a family commune and taught to lead, while Amos was raised by the streets of Baltimore and taught to survive. Holden grew up surrounded by love, while Amos grew up surrounded by fear and desperation. They both left Earth because they needed to. Holden needed to get away to try to find his purpose. Amos needed to leave so that he could find an actual life. And the life experiences that they both learned from their childhoods would ultimately prepare them for their roles in fighting the protomolecule, and those that wish to control it.

Amos does not associate with politics, leaving that to Naomi and Holden. His childhood taught him many hard lessons, but right and wrong and the nuances of morality weren't part of his upbringing. As a child, attaching himself to Lydia was how he learned to survive. Now, even as an adult, he continues to attach himself to people he looks up to in order to develop skills he lacks, with Naomi and Holden being his latest mentors. His quest to improve himself doesn't cause him any indecision when life is on the line though. If a shot needs to be taken, Amos shoots first and asks questions

later. The only metric of morality for him in those situations is if everyone he cares about is still alive.

However, Amos is not a brute. He doesn't use his strength to take advantage of the weak. This trait also originated in Baltimore on account of Amos knowing his life would have turned out a lot differently if Lydia hadn't been there to help him. Consequently, Amos is protective of those who can't protect themselves, especially children. While the team is on Ganymede searching for botanist Praxidike's missing daughter, Amos, not Holden, is the one constantly looking out for Prax. When even Holden is ready to give up, it is Amos that takes Prax to the side and sincerely promises him that they will find his daughter, giving the poor man enough hope to keep going.

What I admire most about Amos is that he is the best kind of friend anyone could ask for. He is completely loyal, but he isn't a yes man. The crew knows that he will have their back in any situation, but they also know he will call them on mistakes that he has perceived them to make. This trait causes him to bump heads with Holden several times early on when the two aren't ready to trust each other. The trust issues are resolved rather quickly though, with either man now willing to take a bullet for the other.

Alex Kamal

The final member of the Rocinante crew is former Martian Navy pilot Alex Kamal. The most laid-back of the group, he starts off as an outsider to the rest of the crew, but his friendly personality and Martian Southern drawl win them over quickly. Unlike Holden, Alex enjoyed his career in the Navy and became a skilled pilot. It was in the Navy he discovered his love of the stars – and flying through them. Unfortunately, this newfound love of his drew him away from his wife and son, and it was not long after that the divorce came. It wasn't that he stopped loving his family, it was that his love of the stars simply outweighed it. We can see how deeply he regrets how it all played out. But now as Holden's pilot, he has no shortage of flying in his foreseeable future. Apart from Naomi, he is the most patriotic of the crew, deeply loving Mars, but not at the expense of the rest of the solar system. He leaves most

of the politics to Holden and Naomi, unless he feels a moral obligation. His compassion also makes him the crew's peacekeeper. How he failed his family haunts him and makes him slow to judge others and ready to listen to them. When the crew has a falling out amongst themselves, he's always there for both sides to try to help smooth things over – particularly with a ship-cooked meal. His compassion is the counterbalance to Amos's violence. He prefers diplomacy and trying to talk things out. If negotiations fail, he knows Amos, and the rest of the crew, have his back.

Chrisjen Avasarala

The last character I wish to examine is Chrisjen Avasarala, the Deputy Undersecretary of the Executive Administration of the United Nations of Earth. She is a shrewd politician who knows how to play the game and isn't afraid to take risks. Our introduction is watching her interrogate a Belter terrorist by putting him on gravity hooks to torture him. This is illegal and she doesn't care. Her priority is the safety of Earth, and nothing else matters. Except, as we come to find out, maybe that isn't quite the case. Her son served and died in the UN Navy, and that sore wound is where most of her humanity went, slowly being covered by scar tissue and making her even more ruthless. This is until James Holden comes along with a broadcast that threatens to start a war in the solar system. She is no fool, and before making a plan of action, she studies Holden. In the process, she learns that he isn't the smartest with solar system politics, instead staying true to his cause and not playing the game. While she sees his political skills as lacking, she can't help but admire his foolish idealism. Seeing his desire to unite everyone in the face of a real and deadly threat even reignites some of the humanity that she had previously lost to her pain and her position.

Avasarala is a great character because of her complexity and how most of her motives remain hidden for a majority of the show. Because of that, I had a difficult time determining whether I should trust her. What eventually won me over is that unlike most politicians, she has feelings and empathy, and we see that fully on display when she invites Sgt. Bobby Draper to her staff

following the annihilation of Draper's squad.

Avasarala's greatest characteristic, in my opinion, is her readiness to act. Her knowledge of the political climate lets her navigate the talking points with ease, and her verbal spars with Undersecretary Errinwright are enjoyable to watch. However, she refuses to sit on her hands and let events play out. She doesn't like to sit and react to events, she tries to make the events react to her. Her disregard for the rules and conventions was a red flag to me at first because a person in authority who isn't scared to flout it is a potentially dangerous person. But then I saw that her motivations were never about consolidating power. At her heart, she is a grieving mother who wants to save other mothers from having to grieve for their children as well.

Conclusion

This is just an overview of the core characters that we meet in season 1. They all are dynamic. None of them stay the same throughout the course of the series. As you meet them and learn about them, you really start to relate to them, and watching them grow is rewarding. Seeing the crew of the Rocinante grow from coworkers who survived a terrible attack into a found family is beautiful. Miller transforms from a man who has lost all hope and meaning in life into a man that once again has a purpose and a reason to live. Holden learns to stop foolishly chasing his ideals blindly and becomes a very competent leader. Naomi goes from someone who will never believe in a cause again, to learning to trust and help Holden. Eventually her dream of the Belt being recognized as its own political entity comes to fruition. Amos stops being a drifter because he has finally found his home. Alex finds his passion as he pilots the Rocinante through their increasingly impossible scenarios. And Avasarala regains most of the humanity that she lost from being a career politician. This is what makes *The Expanse* such a powerful story: because it shows you both sides of humanity, from the depths of the Protogen corporation who are willing to sacrifice 1.5 million people in the name of "science" to the heights of James Holden and the crew of the Rocinante doing what they can to save as many as they can. It's not all black

and white. There are many grey areas involved, just as with every event in human history. Some people are evil, some are good, but most are just trying to do what they can to survive. It's a beautiful show because it never loses the humanity that is at its core.

Across all the characters, Miller is my favourite because I enjoy watching his redemption. When we meet Miller for the first time, he isn't at his lowest point, but it doesn't take long for him to get there. As his life spirals out of control he clings to this one mission, this one crazy goal, and he is able to find himself and transform through it. It doesn't happen instantly, and he has many ups and downs, getting back on his feet just to get knocked back down several times. Yet he refuses to give up, and in the end he is rewarded for his tenacity and accomplishes his goal.

I really enjoy watching the Miller-Holden dynamic play out because it reminds of my own internal debates. I like to imagine myself as a Holden, someone who wants what is right and won't stop until it's achieved, but in reality I find myself more like Miller, just doing what it takes to get by and not caring about what is beyond my immediate control. When Miller is at his lowest, I can empathise with him, and seeing him gradually redeem himself gives me hope. With Holden, seeing him be able to take all the punches that come his way and bend almost to the breaking point and yet not break – that inspires me to not give up on what I believe in.

I've highlighted these characters specifically because they are what really made the show come together for me. However, I don't want to leave any false impressions. This show is not just one heroic monologue after another followed by cheesy "power of friendship" moments. As much heart as there is on display, there is just as much darkness. From the clash of giant armadas in the silence of space to the screams of innocents following terrorist attacks to extremely wealthy and powerful men sitting at a table deciding the fate of billions of people, there is much darkness and distress. At times *The Expanse* is as cold and heartless as the vacuum of space, filled with the deafening silence of ghosts. This darkness amplifies the struggles of the Rocinante crew, as they fight to find the truth and help everyone they can. Indeed, nothing makes a candle shine so brightly as when it is surrounded by complete darkness.

THE EXPANSE EXPANDED

*As long as we're living and breathing, there's more we can do. We just
have to be strong enough*

- James Holden.

The Future Society of The Expanse

Marcin Stolarz

Are we doomed to be the same?

“The protomolecule changed everything except for what it didn’t.”

This is the main takeaway from *The Expanse* - a SyFy/Amazon Prime Video space opera that takes place in about 200 years from the present day. The series, books, and novellas take on the subject of how our civilization will look in the future. New technologies, expansion to Mars (which is by then an independent republic) and the Belt (where miners form clans and fight for resources exploited by the Inner Planets) pose the same problems that we have experienced as a species throughout the whole history of mankind - the fight for power and the uneven accumulation of wealth, with whole societies living outside of the zone of comfort and safety.

We join the heroes of this great work of literature and television in a moment where a new factor comes in – the protomolecule, something that has the potential to flip the whole balance of power upside down, but not the way people treat each other. But is this something that has to happen? Will

we always go around in circles, just further and having new sticks to beat each other with? I want to speculate on one aspect of this cycle – the way we treat refugees.

Ganymede bombed

We first meet Prax, one of the series' utmost positive faces, when he is fleeing his home of Ganymede after it was bombed and its economy shattered. He is carried onto a refugee ship unconscious and learns very fast that the 'us-them' paradigm works even in such places, where it seems that people are united in seeking help. In a grim scene, he parts with the friend that helped get on the ship and watches her being spaced because she belonged to the race of 'Inners' (as a Martian).

Weeping Somnambulist

In season 2 of the TV show, the crew of Rocinante – the series' main protagonists – have to go undetected to Ganymede, which suffered heavily from the battle between the United Nations (now unifying the nations and cultures of Earth) and the Mars Congressional Republic (an ex-UN colony). The station is in a state of humanitarian collapse. While our heroes pursue their goals, the refugees that want to get out of the warzone are in a worsening situation – the station's systems are in the process of cascading shutdown. The crew of the Weeping Somnambulist, a relief ship, want to help and get out over a hundred refugees from the now-isolated dock. Unfortunately, they cannot fill their air tanks due to the shutdown of the service responsible for this. They have air for less than half of these people. The crew, joined by Naomi Nagata of the Rocinante, has an impossible choice: take only the number of people they can (but how do they pick who gets to live and who doesn't?) or don't take anyone at all in the fear that they will be stormed on opening the gates.

Ceres Offensive

Fast forward to season 6, we see a situation where a humanitarian crisis is used as a weapon, and refugees are used as tools to gain advantage. Following the capture of a ship that directed all successful attacks on Earth, the Beltalowda – as the people of the Belt call themselves – leader decides to strip the whole Ceres station, the Jewel of the Belt, of everything that it needs to survive, including food, technology, and ships, and abandon it. The joint Earth and Mars forces are faced with a choice: leave the rebel citizens to themselves and let them die, or act humanely but let the opponent gain significant advantage in terms of tactics and time.

The choice is met with a decision: to help and act humanely. The forces that give away humanitarian aid are bombed, but the story of a Belter with a cat named 'Lazy Earther' warms hearts and brings the antagonised societies a bit closer.

Eastern Europe

Let's get back to our time. The last decade has faced us with a number of humanitarian crises, which have had to be handled by the nations of southern and eastern Europe. The most recent crises – and the ones closest to me – are two that followed each other. As a citizen of Warsaw, Poland, I've seen large numbers of people throng the border of Poland and Belarus – people from the far and Middle East, as well as Africa – promised that they will be able to cross the border of the wealthy European Union and find a new life. The second refugee crisis followed with Russia invading Ukraine and forcing millions to leave their country and seek shelter from their homes being shelled and people being murdered. These two events were met differently by the people of Poland, and I want to elaborate on this, especially the way the second crisis was handled not by the government, but the people themselves. This gives me hope that we are not doomed to repeat the same mistakes.

The Women of The Belt

The Expanse's (TV show) most charismatic women are the Beltalowda's Naomi Nagata and Camina Drummer. Both born and raised in the Belt, they fought their way through the lows to become prominent figures in the future world. They are not establishment, but rather leaders of hearts.

At the Weeping Somnambulist, Naomi rejected the idea of leaving refugees behind for her own safety. She faced the desperate crowd and explained the situation to them. They picked the most vulnerable and the young people and children, got them on board and fled the collapsing station. The others accepted that they might not make it and let them go.

At the Ceres Offensive, Camina Drummer saw how the leader of the so-called Free Navy abandoned his people for his own gains and looted his stocks and gave them back to her people. She became the natural leader of the counter-faction, and was recognized by the leaders of the joint force that occupied the station (yes, they stopped their pursuit to do that – which required another great female character, Chrisjen Avasarala, to oppose the idea of leaving people to die).

These are two notable and noble stances that saved many lives in a humanitarian crisis. We've seen and continue to see this type of reaction throughout all conflicts that have happened and are currently happening. It's nothing revolutionary to have people of heart oppose people of power. Is this the only motivation, the only way though?

The Unlikely Allies

Poland has nothing to be proud of with how it handled the Belarussian crisis. First the Polish military started making often brutal pushbacks through the border, and only after a while did they establish humanitarian centres that started helping the weaponized refugees by simply treating them as human beings. Obviously, many NGOs fought their way there to help these people, and the situation more or less normalised, though it's still not stable as Belarus continues to use them to impose pressure on Poland.

What we common people understand is that this situation was meant to antagonise us against people fleeing from Ukraine from the-then-forthcoming war. Poland isn't exactly known for being the most tolerant society, and we were supposed to react the same way in February 2022. The hardships in history between Poland and Ukraine reach back to the 16th century and both nations have committed atrocities against each other. What Putin didn't account for was that the exodus of Ukrainians dates back to 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and the Donetsk/Luhansk regions, and the Polish society became accustomed to their next-door neighbour speaking a different – though a very similar – language.

So when the invasion started, Polish society didn't wait for the reaction of the government and rushed in with spontaneous help. This time NGOs didn't follow the military but they had to help common people, who decided that their neighbours' aunts, daughters, mothers, grandmothers and other relatives needed help. Their colleagues from the offices needed help in picking them up from the border. The corner store woman's mother and sister had to be picked from near the warzone, and so on. Before the government stepped in, Poles welcomed over 2 million people into their homes.

Lang Belta, the United Nations, the Martian Colony

The point and connection between this latter event and my beloved series is that in the world of *The Expanse*, the societies are much more mixed than we are now, though they still remain in factions. Let's focus on the language – the biggest indicator of culture. Belters have a creole language. During humanity's expansion into the solar system, people from many different parts of Earth or Mars often lived and worked together, and they developed a pidgin language to communicate with one another. Over time this developed into a full-fledged creole language, lang Belta, which became a common tongue of the Belt and the outer planets.

Mars was at first colonised mostly by companies based in India, China, Japan and ... Texas. Their language is close to "common" English, but you

can only imagine the lingual diversity that this mix of people created.

The United Nations of Earth and Luna (the Moon is a federational republic) have mixed even more thoroughly – Pastor Anna Volodyova of Russian descent being is married to the African-born Namono, which means “younger twin” in Bantu. They both live on Earth with their daughter, first in Uganda, with a later move to somewhere called New Dolinsk, which suggests Eastern Europe.

Stronger together

With such a mix, it's easy to compare the situation between Poles and Ukrainians and the reality of *The Expanse*. Everyone's connected somehow, everyone has a relative everywhere. Are we really bound to repeat the old course of events in such a world? If this level of empathy is possible in our 21st century – which appears to be really going back to the 20s of the previous century – then in the 23rd it should be more optimistic than what is predicted in the series, providing that civilisation will endure to that time. *The Expanse* shows not only battles and mysteries, but also how the Earth changed as a consequence of how it's changing now. Big cities have flooded and have massive anti-flood walls. People live on basic income with AI handling most of the repeatable tasks, with lotteries for courses and universities with waiting times of dozens of years. This is something that we can already see as our near future. But I oppose the idea that we will repeat the same mistakes when we allow ourselves to interconnect, the way it's shown in the show. Even now, though going through another circle, we seem to be moving forward.

Work, Horror, and *The Expanse*

Jamie Woodcock

In the first episode of *The Expanse*, we are introduced to the universe through scrolling text. We are told of a solar system in crisis. We meet Julie Mao and an unexplained horror lurking in the reactor core. The camera moves to Ceres station, boiling over with tension. We hear of the exploitation of the Belt by the inner planets. We are introduced to Detective Miller, his new partner, and a mystery case. So far, the writers have introduced many potential plot lines. However, how they will unfold is still a mystery.

Throughout the early moments of the series, we also see many different kinds of work. We begin to see how people live and the role their work plays in the universe of *The Expanse*. This immediately roots the series in one version of a speculative future. This is not a future society with the replicator-enabled abundance of *Star Trek*. Instead, workers are exploited, relying on precarious supply chains of air, food, and water to survive.

This contribution to the collection on *The Expanse* focuses on the work we see in the series. The representation of work is one of the key components that makes the series so engaging. Work provides a powerful way to relate to and make sense of the universe. This shouldn't be a surprise, given how important work is for contemporary life. This is contrasted with horror, which drives the plot of *The Expanse*. There is tension between these two

elements and it is this contradiction that makes *The Expanse* so appealing.

Dulcinea

During the first episode of *The Expanse* we are also introduced to the Canterbury, an Ice Hauler (S1E1, “Dulcinea”). In the midst of activity, a voiceover talks of bonus cheques and competition over productivity rates. We see an industrial accident play out. First, a worker is crushed by ice, losing their arm in zero gravity. Then, a few scenes later, he is being stitched up. The medic explains: ‘well, you know that naturally, the company’ll try to screw you out of a good one, right?’ The worker responds that he knows what his contractual rights are and what he’s entitled to. They disagree on whether a Belter or Earth-made replacement is better. Clearly, health and safety problems in the workplace are far from uncommon. We meet Naomi and Amos as they walk with Holden through the corridors of the ship, arguing about PRP forms, arrangements for a retrofit, whether the company will pay for repairs – or more worryingly the cost-effectiveness of just paying out compensation – while they move through the worn-out and broken ship.

This is, as is often used in descriptions of science fiction, a universe that feels “lived in.” There are people who do jobs like those we do on earth, albeit with a different backdrop. They deal with problems that we may come across, too.

The first episode immediately brings to mind the opening section of *Alien*. As Ty Franck explains when discussing the episode on the Ty & That Guy podcast:

*The parallels are pretty obvious ... Daniel Abraham and I ... when we’re working on the books, we’re pretty upfront about what we’re influenced by ... and things like answering distress calls ... and the Canterbury is absolutely a call back to the Nostromo.*¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹You can listen to the Ty & That Guy podcast and find out more about it here: Wes Chatham and Ty Frank, *Ty & That Guy*, 2023, <https://tyandthatguy.com>.

In *Alien*, we hear Parker and Brett complaining about repairs, contracts, and bonuses. The *Nostromo* is not a glamorous spaceship. It is a workplace and in need of many repairs. As Ty continues:

That idea of space as a place filled with blue-collar workers was so powerful to me when I saw Alien. Obviously, I had seen the original Star Trek ... but they were military officers, they were important ... then you watch Alien and Parker and Brett are truck drivers ... they are merchant marines who wander around a leaking ship with pipe wrenches on their tool belts tightening fittings and fixing burned out motors and bitching that they don't get paid as much as the officers do. And that was revelatory for me. I was like 'Oh my god, that is what sci-fi can be.'

The purposeful similarity between the *Canterbury* and the *Nostromo* continues with the argument over the distress call. The workers on the *Canterbury* are caught between regulations that require them to answer the call, while also wanting to avoid pirates and get back to the dock for an on-time bonus. In a first glimpse of Holden's character traits, he answers the call. From here, the storyline begins to unfold.

Alien, as one of the most important science fiction films ever made, had a deep influence on *The Expanse*. *Alien* is defined by the combination of the science fiction genre with horror, which makes for such a compelling story. The horror drives the plot, while also providing a way to increase the tension and keep the story developing. *The Expanse* (particularly as it develops over the books) also blends the two together, as well as noir cop drama and a range of other influences. However, the influence of the 'idea of space as a place filled with blue-collar workers' also runs through *The Expanse*.

Work

Much of the series revolves around the legitimately-salvaged MCRN Corvette-class frigate that becomes home to the protagonists. While the ship is first named the *Tachi*, the new crew choose to rename it. Some

alternative names are proposed by Alex, including ‘Flamin’ Alamo’ or ‘Screamin’ Firehawk.’ Holden proposes the Rocinante, later shortened to Roci. This was also the name of Don Quixote’s horse. The name is a pun, with an approximate translation of ‘previously a workhorse.’ Quixote provides the title of the first episode (S1E1, ‘Dulcinea’), and in the episode Windmills (S1E7), when Avasarala meets Holden’s mother, they discuss a copy of *Cervantes*. There is, of course, an irony of calling an avant-garde MCRN frigate an old workhorse. However, it does become a near-constant site of repairs throughout the series, eventually ageing throughout the books. At one point, the ship is disguised as a working gas freighter, allowing even the ship to have a costume change. The Roci provides a means for the protagonists to move through the solar system and beyond, even going toe-to-toe with other military ships. Without it, the plot would struggle to develop from what would be a crew marooned on an asteroid.

The Expanse also starts with a range of familiar work-based science fiction tropes, including “truckers in space”, but also exploited asteroid miners. We are initially introduced to the Belt, dominated by the inners. However, the social relations in the solar system go far beyond just exploiting the labour of beltlers. As Mason Wong explains:

*The Belters are not simply subject to a system of colonial labor which leaves them in a state of quasi-indentured servitude. Rather, their entire existence is contained within a sophisticated, monopolistic network of supply chains and labor systems designed to be maximally extractive of the Belters’ production in such a way that they cannot participate in even the most basic economic activity without being exposed to life-threatening forms of rent-seeking on the part of colonial authorities.*¹²⁰

The Belt is both exploited and oppressed by the Inners as a source of raw

¹²⁰Mason Wong, “On Belters, Beijingers, and Rat-Catchers: Economies of Labor and Extraction in Speculative Fiction,” *Strange Horizons*, 2022, <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/on-belters-beijingers-and-rat-catchers-economies-of-labor-and-extraction-in-speculative-fiction>.

material and labour, as well as markets for Earth-based corporations.

The social relations of the Belt are sharply contrasted with those we see on Earth. Earth has a shortage of work – or rather an enormous surplus population. Far fewer workers are needed to produce the commodities necessary to sustain Earth’s population. In a process familiar to our Earth, an increasing proportion of workers have been made redundant, forming a reserve army of labour.¹²¹ We learn that much of the Earth’s population exists on ‘basic’, a form of Universal Basic Income (UBI). Instead of the dream that some on the left see UBI as a way of breaking the connection between work and survival, it appears to have been introduced as a form of social control. It is closer to the vision of Negative Income Tax (NIT) argued for by Milton Friedman, a right-wing free market economist.¹²² Basic hasn’t freed the majority of people on earth from the drudgery of work, but instead consigns them to a life of scarce opportunities. A select few are able to take on positions of power or escape, either through lottery or corruption. We also hear a negative view of the system during Holden’s interrogation on the Donager. As the Martian Lieutenant Lopez explains:

We are nothing like you. The only thing Earthers care about is government handouts. Free food, free water, free drugs so you can forget the aimless lives you lead. You’re short-sighted, selfish... and it will destroy you. Earth is over, Mr. Holden (S1E4, ‘CQB’).

On Mars, we find the structure of military discipline and deferred collective gratification. Here, work is valorised as part of a collective effort to terraform the planet for the benefit of future generations. There is certainly no shortage of work in undertaking this planet-scale public project. The Spartan, brutalist architecture of Mars combines with a strong work ethic. This can also be seen in the disdain both Lopez and Martian marines hold for Earthers.

¹²¹Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), 781.

¹²²Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962).

Most of the Martians we encounter in the series are skilled workers, trained either through the military or university system. However, despite the tight discipline, we also later find an underbelly of organised crime, drug use, and escapism.

One of the most interesting dynamics of *The Expanse* follows the opening of the ring gates. The possibility of travelling to 1,373 new systems, many of which have habitable planets, turns the social relations of the solar system upside down. Belters start heading to the ring gates, eager to escape the yoke of the inners. The locus of power shifts from the inner planets into the ring space, with Medina station becoming a key transport point and node for humanity. The UN is panicked by the possibility of losing control as Earthers call to colonise these new planets.

The control society of Mars rapidly disintegrates. A section of the military breaks away, heading for Laconia. Stockpiles of military equipment are looted by Martians who suddenly see the possibility of living under open skies elsewhere. The promise of waiting a generation or more for terraforming falls away. The breakup of the Martian dream has clear parallels with the collapse of post-Soviet Russia, with corruption rapidly spreading through the military apparatus.

At the start of the series, the social relations in *The Expanse* feel set in stone – or at least asteroid rock – with little possibility of change. The impact of the ring gates reshapes the horizon for humanity. Instead of fighting over the resources of the Belt, struggling in the dust of Mars, or controlling the population of Earth, there are thousands of new options available. The ring gates trigger an epochal shift in economic and social relations, particularly as colony ships start slipping through the control of the ring gates. However, these are not changes that have been brought about, or indeed fought for, by the people of any faction.

This pessimistic vision cuts across the richness of the world building in *The Expanse*, which goes far beyond the themes of horror. There is a solar system, at first, populated with people developing their own cultures from the situations they live in. The Belt is perhaps the strongest of these, with its own Lang Belta language, food, sports, music, betting, drugs, factions, and so

on. There is also the long term Mormon space colonisation project, although it gets repurposed during the story. There is a distinctly sociological feel to parts of the story, weaving a superstructure of activities that emerge from the new economic base of life in *The Expanse*.

Too often in science fiction, these aspects become disjointed from the economic relations. The way people work, why they do it, for whom, and under what conditions tells us important things about society (both in science fiction and our own world). Throughout the history of science fiction there have been many stories that either did not address the dynamics of work or the working class, or simply dismissed them. As Eric Flint, a science fiction author and critic, noted during a discussion at WorldCon 76, the class position of many science fiction authors shaped their perspectives on society.¹²³ Writers who did not have much experience of work, or who didn't have any connection to organised labour, were unlikely to make it part of the speculative stories they chose to tell.

There are some notable examples of science fiction authors that do focus on workers and organised workers. For example, Madeline Ashby, Paolo Bacigalupi, Cory Doctorow, Ken MacLeod, Adam Rakunas, Allen Steele, and Alex Wells.¹²⁴ Moreover, the Hugo Book Club Blog has compiled a long-list of the ways in which organised labour features in science fiction. This is broken down by whether organised labour features as primary, secondary, or tertiary to the depiction, as well as differentiating between guild, business, and solidarity unions.¹²⁵ *The Expanse* features in the list, with the entry:

Multiple Business Unions (Resource extraction workers, transportation

¹²³Quoted in: Hugo Book Club Blog, "Imagining the future of organized labour (part one of three)," Hugo Book Club Blog, 2018, <https://hugoclub.blogspot.com/2018/12/imagining-future-of-organized-labour.html>.

¹²⁴As noted in: Hugo Book Club Blog, "Imagining the future of organized labour (part two of three)," Hugo Book Club Blog, 2019, <https://hugoclub.blogspot.com/2019/02/imagining-future-of-organized-labour.html>.

¹²⁵See: Hugo Book Club Blog, "Organized labour in science fiction," 2019, <https://hugoclub.blogspot.com/2018/12/organized-labour-in-science-fiction.html>.

workers); Positive depiction – Union integral in democratic governance. Help defend rights of oppressed workers. Provide legal counsel to workers in need; secondary depiction.

Work, as discussed, plays an important role in the universe of *The Expanse*. This should not be a surprise, given how important work is for contemporary life. However, there are also other representations in some of the strongest pieces of recent science fiction television.

A strong example can be found with *Deep Space Nine (DS9)*, which departs from previous *Star Trek* iterations in a number of important ways. The first is that despite much pressure not to, the show developed series-wide plotlines and arcs, rather than the relatively discrete episodic format. The focus on the eponymous space station also means that we move away from the strictly hierarchical starship setting. The other series tend to focus on the deck and the captain barking ‘make it so’ while the work that this relies upon is relegated to nameless crew who slip into the background or are killed on away missions. Long before *Below Decks* (which could be an entry in this discussion in its own right), *DS9* brought to life a broader picture of life in space. Many of the characters are defined by their work, for example, Miles O’Brien the engineer (and union-man), Elim Garak the tailor (who may or may not have had a previous profession), and many others. It should also be remembered that the workers at Quark’s Bar form a union and quote Karl Marx during the episode “Bar Association” (S4E16), although it is dissolved after the pay raise is granted. The plot was no accident and was supported by the actors. For example, Armin Shimerman, who was both the actor portraying Quark and on the board of directors of the Screen Actors Guilds, explained:

People think of this as a comic episode. And it is, of course. But in truth, it’s really about union-management problems. The irony of it is that I play management in the episode. So, I thought that to make Rom have a reasonably hard job as a union organizer, I would have to be tough about it, to show the struggle to the audience. Although you don’t see it on TV

*very often, this is something that goes on in America all the time.*¹²⁶

More recently, work has featured strongly in the *Andor Star Wars* series. Again, like *DS9* it departs from previous iterations, featuring a much bleaker representation of *Star Wars*. Work features as a key part of the storyline. Much of the series focuses on the work of starting a rebellion, from the raising of money, organising clandestine activities, to carrying out operations. While other entries in the series and the films have often featured people scratching out a living in backwater planets, much more detail about the actual work is included. There are shift changes and workers in oil-stained uniforms breaking apart spaceships. There is the work of carrying out a heist, much less glamorous than the rebellion featured in the films. There is also a powerful representation of prison labour in the Narkina 5 Imperial Prison Complex.

The representations of work in *The Expanse* is part of this growing tradition of science fiction that takes both work and organised labour seriously. Like these examples, this is an important part of the appeal of *The Expanse*. However, the storyline is not driven by either the themes found in *DS9* or the march towards rebellion in *Andor*.

Existential Horror

The story of *The Expanse* is driven by the emergence of the protomolecule, how it is used by different factions, and the political and social effects this brings to the solar system. It is first developed as a weapon, leading to mass murder on Ceres, the impact with Venus, then the opening of the ring gates. There are familiar science fiction aspects here: the corporation run by a dynastic family, eager to use a new technology for both profit and political power. Ordinary people are used as pawns in a much bigger struggle, driven by conflict between the elite of the solar system. There are similarities here with the Weyland-Yutani Corporation in *Alien*, trying to profit from the

¹²⁶Terry J. Erdmann with Paula M. Block, *Star Trek Deep Space Nine Companion* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 315.

discovery of the xenomorph, regardless of the lives of the crew. In *The Expanse*, Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile and its subsidiary Protogen play a very similar role.

The protomolecule is not the xenomorph, however. The protomolecule, for all its horror, is ‘a set of free-floating instructions designed to adapt to and guide other replicating systems.’¹²⁷ The protomolecule may create horrors from its host, but it is following instructions. It becomes clear that the protomolecule is building a ring gate, connecting the solar system to a set of interstellar highways left by a long gone civilization. Elvi learns more about this long extinct civilization of Ring Builders from the Adro Diamond. Cara and Xan Bisset are able to connect with the diamond and access The Library held within it.¹²⁸

In Marxist terms, the protomolecule is the dead labour of this previous civilization, now set to automatically connect the ring gates to this wider network. The civilization lives on in the building of the ring gates. The protomolecule is a machine, albeit an incredibly complex one:

*The machine proper is therefore a mechanism that, after being set in motion, performs with its tools the same operations that were formerly done by the workman with similar tools. Whether the motive power is derived from man, or from some other machine, makes no difference in this respect.*¹²⁹

The balance of the colonial and exploitative relationships of the solar system are thrown into disarray by the protomolecule. The long-gone civilization is reshaping humanity. There are similarities here with the destruction of Earth in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. The Vogons destroy the planet to make way for an intergalactic bypass. However, in this case, bureaucratic

¹²⁷ Corey, *Leviathan Wakes*, 344.

¹²⁸ Corey, *Tiamat’s Wrath*.

¹²⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 495.

explanations are given for why this has to happen.¹³⁰

Vampires in fiction have long represented the fear of capitalism. Marx argued that, ‘capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.’¹³¹ Zombies have played a similar role in fiction, although they can also be a stand-in for a working class set on revenge. What then does the fear of the automated technology of the protomolecule tell us? The themes of climate change are clear in *The Expanse*, both with the development of Earth and after the attacks. However, a much bigger threat comes to face the universe: the Ring Entities. The use of the ring gates triggers an ancient conflict that threatens to destroy humanity. This is an existential horror beyond the protomolecule hybrids, zombies, or even vampires. The intergalactic road building machines continue to plough ahead, driving humanity into a conflict beyond what could have been thought possible.

The only solution is to reject the technology of the Ring Builders, breaking the connections between the gates and falling back into individual systems. There is no collective solution to this existential challenge.

The contradictions of *The Expanse*

The combination of science fiction and horror in *The Expanse* both drives the story, but is also a source of contradictions that runs through the series. These genre choices give *The Expanse* its unique features. As discussed, the representation of work strengthens the story, providing the ‘lived-in’ parts of the speculative fiction. It is a source of richness and texture. Building on this, the existential horror from the protomolecule drives the plot forward from crisis to crisis.

While *The Expanse* may feature strong themes of work and the transformation of the social relations of the solar system, the horror of the story wins out, instead of following these themes to a conclusion. Work is in the background

¹³⁰Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (New York, Harmony Books, 1979).

¹³¹Marx, *Capital*, 342.

throughout and provides the story with a richness and context, but in the end it is only an accessory to the horror. *The Expanse* has a pessimistic vision of the future – one in which collective action has little space.

The themes of work ground the horror of *The Expanse*. After all, as Emily Hughes reminds us, this is ‘the basic premise of cosmic horror: space is unknown, unknowable, indifferent, and exists on a scale that’s incomprehensible to humans.’¹³² Yet, the core of the plot revolves around a small group of lively characters – Holden, Naomi, Amos, and Alex. They go from hiding on a lowly ice hauler eking out a living to travelling the universe fighting an existential horror. We see glimpses of collective struggles, from the Belt to the settlements on the new worlds. It is here in *The Expanse* that the roots in a tabletop roleplaying game (albeit one originally played asynchronously online) become apparent. There are some excellent NPCs¹³³ who feature along the way, of course, as well as a wide range of different locations. However, the Rocinante crew (and particularly Holden) are consistently at the centre of the universe-wide crisis. It is by its very nature an individual quest for change, instead of a collective one.

This is similar to many stories told in fiction. We can relate to a smaller group of characters, rather than trying to comprehend wider social changes undertaken by the collective, even if *The Expanse* weaves these together at points. As Nanni Balestrini, the Italian Marxist author, explained when discussing character in *We Want Everything*:

[It] is the story of a real person, Alfonso; he told me everything that’s in the book. He is a collective character, in the sense that in those years, thousands of people like him experienced the same things and had the same ideas and the same behaviors. It’s for this reason that he has no name in the book. I am interested in collective characters like the protagonist in The Unseen. I think that unlike what happens in the

¹³²Emily Hughes, “Every Space Story Is a Horror Story,” TOR, 2023, <https://www.tor.com/2023/02/06/space-opera-horror-and-the-endless-void-of-space>.

¹³³NPC stands for Non-Playable Characters.

*bourgeois novel – which is based on the individual and his personal struggle within a society – the collective character struggles politically, together with others like him, in order to transform society. Thus his own story becomes an epic story.*¹³⁴

The powerful worldbuilding of *The Expanse* ultimately narrows down to a story that focuses on a few protagonists. There are no collective solutions to the problems of first the solar system and then the universe. We do not get to hear more about the politics of the factions in the Belt, what kinds of societies are being established through the ring gates, or what the political dynamics and struggles look like. Instead the focus is on the heroism of a few characters.

From our glimpse of the inners creating their own gravediggers in the Belt in the first episode, we do not get to see revolutionary change in *The Expanse*. Instead, the ghosts and dead labour of an extinct civilization threaten humanity. There are some important warnings about technology here, particularly the way in which we are becoming increasingly alienated from it, let alone the potential effects it could have. However, the horror of *The Expanse* cuts across these themes. We find no collective solutions from any of the struggles that came before. While we cannot all salvage a Rocinante and try to change the universe, there are important lessons in *The Expanse* about what the future could – and should not – look like. This, like with many other science fiction series, is a reason to dig into the details.

¹³⁴Rachel Kushner, “I Am Interested in Collective Characters’: An Interview With Nanni Balestrini,” *The Nation*, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/i-am-interested-in-collective-characters-an-interview-with-nanni-balestrini>.

