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Discourse, Desire, Diaphanous Skins:

Reflections and Refractions of an SF Masculine in Two Novels by Samuel R. Delany

By

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ABSTRACT

Writing from the fringes of what was once assumed to be “everyman’s” experience, Samuel Delany has long interrogated a discourse anchored by the myth of a universal masculine that has only begun to be questioned in feminist criticism and explored through the informed perspectives of an emerging Queer Theory.

This thesis examines how, through the operation of what I call SF Gothic, Delany re-presents a reconceptualised male subject as a Cyborg identity that straddles the borders that define and prop up the illusion of the universalized subject. Through the inscription of a dynamic arc that describes the reappraisal of bodies and of language systems previously associated with death and degeneration, Delany achieves no less than a recuperation of the abject Other and a new Science Fiction aesthetics that identifies the monstrous, the disordered and the impure as erotic and hopeful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval Page	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	iv
CHAPTER ONE: OF THE WORLD BUT NOT IN IT	1
Notes	18
CHAPTER TWO: DANGEROUS BODIES; DIAPHANOUS SKINS	22
The Cyborg As A Science Fiction Vampire	22
Toward An SF Gothic	24
The Cyborg As Science Fiction Monster	34
Cyborg Bodies And Cyborg Minds	44
Notes	54
CHAPTER THREE: LONGING AND METAMORPHOSIS	58
Orpheus Agonistes	61
“The Torment that Confusion May Generate”	67
A “romance of ugliness, deformity, and mutilation”	77
Notes	93
CHAPTER FOUR: A FABULOUS, FORMLESS DARKNESS	96
Notes	117
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED	120

CHAPTER ONE: OF THE WORLD BUT NOT IN IT

Criticism of science fiction cannot possibly look like the criticism we are used to. It will—perforce—employ an aesthetic in which the elegance, rigorousness, and systematic coherence of explicit ideas is of great importance. It will therefore appear to stray into all sorts of extra-literary fields, metaphysics, politics, philosophy, physics, biology, psychology, topology, mathematics, history, and so on. The relation of foreground and background that we are used to after a century and a half of realism will not obtain. Indeed they may be reversed. Science-fiction criticism will discover themes and structures...which may seem recondite, extra-literary, or plain ridiculous. Themes we customarily regard as emotionally neutral will be charged with emotion. (Joanna Russ, 117-118)

Science Fiction or, if you will, Speculative Fiction - I will compromise and call it "SF" - comprises a field long disparaged by "serious" critics and mainstream writers and readers as what might be called a "despised genre".¹ Overstuffed with images of rocket jocks, bug-eyed monsters, and damsels in distress, the genre would seem at first glance to offer little more than vicarious sensation for escapists and the very young. As such, SF hardly seems to contend for the kind of sober appreciation that we would bring to a discussion of *Ulysses*, or even *Lolita*. How, then, and why contemplate directing what presumes to be a serious and relevant theoretical inquiry at SF?

In fact, it is the genre's very unreality that makes it only too perfect as the subject-matter at which to direct a series of inquiries. SF is independent of the constraints of Western culture's proprietary rules of novelistic realism that presumptively dictate the structure of experience itself. When a writer of SF abandons the laws of man or of gravity, she is in effect picking up her reader and launching him into the great hypothetical. And that is the crux of the matter. SF does not constrain itself to exploring the variation of human behaviours or social potentials within the parameters of the status quo. SF is about potentialities themselves, and this makes it a perfect medium for theorising about those topics that lie on the other side of what is acceptable or "done." Samuel Delany points out that the purview of "proper" literature has always been a critical exploration of the subject that largely remained wilfully blind to the excluding boundaries that defined that same subject (*Silent Interviews* 31).² However, the prioritization of the subject is a practice that excludes as a matter of course the anomalous identities of whole categories of experience - belonging to men and women of colour, of alternate sexuality - that have been consigned to the margins of articulable experience.

Because SF itself developed in the literary margins - as what Delany calls a "paraliterature"³ - it escapes the prescriptive obligation to represent subjectivity within the parameters of the prioritized subject. "At the level where the distinction between it and paraliterature is meaningful," Delany suggests,

literature is a representation of, among other things, a complex codic system by which the codic system we call the "subject" (with which, in any given culture, literature must overlap) can be richly criticized. By

virtue of the same distinction, SF is a representation of, among other things, a complex codic system by which the codic system we call the “object” (which, in those cultures that have SF, SF must ditto) can be richly criticized—unto its overlap with the subject. (Interviews, 31-32)

Consequently, inquiries about gender and identity that remain problematical for the “realist” genres - if only because of the conventions that code them - and remain therefore constrained to abstract speculation and theory, may be indulged in these other worlds, wherein alterity is sought and rewarded. The extremities and alterities of marginalised genres are apt vehicles for the expression of marginalised identities.

Despite the stubborn tendency of a public imagination that associates SF with a particular species of philosophically conservative escapism, typified for the layman by pulp magazine covers of the fifties that boasted threatening monsters and robust young women with flared nostrils and conical breasts⁴, it can be argued that there has also thrived a subgenre in which writers marginalized according to gender or colour are more proportionately represented and through which they persistently explore questions of identity and cultural bias that have powerful implications for the future and the future of change in their own culture. Represented across two centuries by various titles that include Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915),⁵ and others, a thematic strain of writing in SF can be reasonably identified as feminist, distinguishing itself against the more mundane “beefcake” fantasies of conventional writers. Feminist forays into the science fiction field in the 1970s, like Marge Piercy’s *Dance the Eagle to Sleep*, stake out a didactic ground that was perhaps prepared by *Herland*.

Of course, the generic realms of SF and mainstream literature have never been entirely divorced from each other. The evidence of cross pollination and a general drifting back and forth across the boundaries of reality and Science Fiction is overwhelming: books like *Frankenstein* and *War of the Worlds* codify modern scientific and sociological debates in the real world,⁶ while the grim, putative realism of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* inspires multiple instances of space explorers "going native" and guileless alien cultures embracing their invaders as prophets. As partaking of the *fantastic*, a domain which Linda Badley identifies as a kind of "super genre" of experience, SF becomes a particular optic intersecting the Real. Referring to her own critical project,⁷ Badley talks of horror-as-a-genre as

a fantastic 'body language' for our culture in which a person's self-concept has been increasingly constituted in images of the body. In the ongoing crisis of identity in which the gendered, binary subject of Eurocentric bourgeois patriarchy (in particular, the Freudian psychoanalytical model of the self) is undergoing deconstruction, horror joined with other discourses of the body to provide a language for imagining the self in transformation, re-gendered, ungendered, and regenerated, or even as an absence or a lack. (3)

As one of the "other discourses of the body" referred to by Badley, SF joins with Horror as a fantastic paraliterary discourse produced in a critical relation to the subject in and of literature.

... Traditionally human concerns will be absent; protagonists may be all but unrecognizable as such. What in other fiction would be marvelous will here be merely accurate or plain; what in other fiction would be ordinary or mundane will here be astonishing, complex, wonderful. (Russ, 118)

Like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, SF as a genre presents itself as a sketchbook for wonderful ideas, but it is also a forum for social and philosophical engagement. The rich intertexts that inform Shelley's novel allowed her to explore and experiment in a soup that tasted of the commanding ontological and epistemological issues of her day, questioning modern era assumptions about subjectivity, theology, genre, propriety, and progress. As to whether her enquiries were germane to society in Shelley's time or our own, it remains for us in our post-Romantic culture that is saturated with references to Frankenstein and his dilemmas to decide. Badley claims that *Frankenstein* "seems to have been written for our time—to articulate (or rather, embody) areas of crisis in bioethics, identity, gender, and even politics" (66). She reminds us that the monster's body is "the site for mythologies of self-creation and transcendence" (68).

Shelley explored the identity of the dispossessed and the Other, the extinctions of females and their implicit correspondence with the redemptive principles of domesticity. The problematization of the female role in procreation – and, hence, creation – along with division along lines of colonization and autonomy, make this a text with implications for gender and identity. Not entirely mystifying is it that the dispossessed Other is eventually bereft of his voice in early cinematic versions of the novel.⁸

In their introduction to the 1994 Broadview edition of the 1818 text of *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*, D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf observe that “*Frankenstein* is a book whose roots go deep into the psyche. ... They also go deep into the culture” (11), noting that the text of *Frankenstein* is itself a monstrous hybrid, as was the body of Victor Frankenstein’s creature. A romance of science and ideas, *Frankenstein* is also a tragedy of alienation that probes the extremities of social and civic responsibility and the construction of identity in and by the socius. But identity also includes gender. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have identified the feminine in Shelley’s despised creature (237), leading them to suggest, as Macdonald and Scherf put it, that the creature dramatized the “monstrousness of womanhood” (30). For their part, Macdonald and Scherf suggest a bifurcated identity for the monster, one that partakes of both Adam and Eve (30). They aver that Mary Shelley would know that “gender was socially constructed, not biologically predetermined” (29).

In 1994, John Clute applauded the advent of the “competent female protagonist” as a revolution in SF and implied that the work of gender was done (Clute, 85). Ironically he overlooked that the feminist work of gender was still underway in the masculinized bodies of *Terminator 2*’s Sarah Connor and John Varley’s “Sirocco Jones” and in the *Alien* series’ Ellen Ripley. While they partake of an imagistic masculinity, the women are not men. They remain palpably female in their humanity. Moreover, Ripley is a hybrid of the first order, less androgyne than hermaphrodite, and the work of gender evolves in these works from oppositional politics to an open exploration of gendered identities.

When *Alien Resurrection's* reanimated, *transgenic* clone, Ripley, lies with an alien monster that is her genetic “daughter,” it is impossible to characterise or define the sexuality involved within the terms available in the Western humanist lexicon. Not Ripley but the alien is impregnated in the exchange. Rather than give up her sexual identity as is suggested by Louise White’s accusation that the cyborg is “another woman with her cunt cut out” (qtd. in *Longer Views*, 103),⁹ Ripley does something manifestly more threatening: she assumes a non-oppositional, non-gendered, open sexuality, a sex without defining limits.

The *Alien* series traces its own mythos as an anonymous woman metamorphoses through the ordeal of psychological dismantling – and, ultimately, death—into someone else, a survivor, a hero, a martyr and, finally, a hybrid, cyborg Other, reasserting her humanity and subjective identity once more as mother to a woman who is - naturally - constructed, an android, a “made” thing. Travelling at the same time through ignorance to self-knowledge, Ripley ultimately passes beyond even that, embracing an existentialized un-knowing. In her complex and unknowable subjectivity, Ripley epitomizes the cyborg body as theoretical enigma for gender and identity.

Donna Haraway traces the constructedness of identity and epistemology in her landmark works “Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s” and the aptly named *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. Femaleman^c_Meets_OncoMouseTM*. I will frequently turn to Haraway for a language with which to interrogate the Orphic re-inventor of language: Samuel Delany.¹⁰ Haraway is especially crucial for her recuperation of the fragmented and inhuman body of the cyborg as an icon

for our time and our selves. However, in her arguments to prove that the hybrid “made” thing is antithetical to the bourgeois and patriarchal older, entrenched, and value-laden models of the self, Haraway posits an Amazon android, a feminist patchwork capable of overturning the Law of the Father and saving woman or at least representing her. Delany himself engages Haraway’s optimism and argues that the cyborg body is no more a solution to patriarchy than it is an embodiment of it. Perhaps evoking more than a little of Linda Badley’s particular embrace of the body fantastic as both sacred and profane, Delany argues that the cyborg is both beautiful in its intractability and dangerous in its ambiguity. From Delany’s engagement with Haraway, it is possible for me to proceed into a consideration of the bodies of Delany’s own cyborg entities, the constructions of body and self in *Triton* and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*.

Delany, then writing as a “young turk” - a phenomenally gifted prodigy - knocked the spheres of SF on their axes with his skilful, rhapsodic and deft handling of myth, discourse and theory in such award-winning experiments as *The Einstein Intersection* (1967), “Aye, and Gomorrah” (1970), “Time considered as a helix of semi-precious stones” (1972), and *Dhalgren* (1976).¹¹ Despite his public identity as a gay black man, Delany is still widely referenced as a feminist writer,¹² perhaps partly owing to the effect of his radical representations of non-patriarchal worlds, identities and experience. Perhaps this is also because “feminist” is today a comfortable and accepted designation for writing that is alternative in the house of SF, where a paradigmatic lantern-jawed manliness seems still to define convention. While the ladies have been admitted to the saloon, the “queers” are still not welcome.

The suggestion of a subdued but lingering bias is borne out by a tacit subtext in the criticism that SF directs at itself. John Clute has observed of an earlier era in SF that “certainly no one who looks at the world depicted in SF writing before about 1960 could have any doubt that the genre was simply not designed to be written or read by the dispossessed” (189). The reigning sensibilities of those earlier decades have not altogether faded. Significantly, while recognizing authors like Octavia Butler and Delany as breaking important ground for marginalized writers, Clute refers to the “inherent strength of the genre” that has made it possible for Butler and Delany to write science fiction “that did not constantly refer to the fact that both were black” (189). Clute’s reader may look in vain for a wink. Perhaps their early successes might have been compromised or, at best, qualified had a Delany or Butler protagonist been conspicuously black. Eventually an ambiguous identity that entrenched xenophobes could once comfortably presume to interpret as “universal” was transformed from implicit whiteness into a black or gay specificity¹³. As Delany became less circumspect about who was at the centre of his stories, more conservative readers may have waned or at least relaxed in their enthusiasm. How else to make sense of the fact that, after two decades of celebration for his groundbreaking vision, Delany’s stock with his public should have begun to change in the late eighties. Devoted fans of an earlier Delany began to founder in his more recent offerings, looking, as one reader put it, for the story¹⁴. Clute frets that “the knotted intensity of some of his earlier work began to seem clotted and self-consciously insistent in later novels like *Trouble on Triton* and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*” (169).

The shift may be more explicable if we consider that the stalwart body of his fandom was shaken in the late seventies and early eighties by his growing attentiveness and attention to themes of identity that incorporated marginalized genders and sexualities. Moreover, it is tempting to wonder whether Clute's pointed mention of the latter novels as weakening Delany's urgent narrative thrust is only coincidentally linked to the fact that both texts foreground radically non-heterosexual and non-white (in the case of *Stars*) identities. Although *queer* identities and sexualities were not at all new in Delany's fiction, the experience of being *queer* achieved a new centrality and urgency in *Triton* and was exquisitely explored in *Stars*. While not wishing to change his epithet in a given context - to be called a feminist should hardly be excluding or limiting - I argue that it is time to recognize Delany's contribution as a *queer* writer and critic to the understanding of gendered identities. In an exploration of the intersecting axes of sexuality and society in *Trouble on Triton*, and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, I will track Delany's challenge to both "mundane" (mainstream) fiction and conventional SF as he works to metamorphose the entrenched paradigms that dominate Western ontology. The *subject* in both *Triton* and *Stars* is denuded and dismantled as a discrete actor/agent and recuperated as Frankenstein's monster, a "made" thing and a collection of things. Hybridity and artificiality come to define identity and gender in Delany's universe. The subject as cyborg is monster in Delany's lexicon, and with all its obscure etymological pedigree intact. Delany stages a "showing forth" of a terrible and wonderful person that is neither the indebted scion of the Law of the Father nor a convenient feminist avatar. There are more perverse axes, or axial perversities, on this matrix than are represented by the

binarism that grounds opposition.

Erotics will be intercranial, mechanical (literally), and moving. (Russ 118)

In this essay, I will use and argue against the following premise: that subjectivity in the twentieth-century is still organized by the palimpsest of a presumptively universal, characteristically masculine identity that is active, reflective, and possessed of a conceptual integrity that presupposes the *Other*, the not-self that may include the so-called marginalized categories of non-masculine, non-white, and non-heterosexual. While I concede that it continues to operate as an ordering principle, I propose to extend Kaja Silverman's proposition that the tacit presumption of a monolithic male subjectivity is in crisis. The consolidation of people under a monolithic sign that excludes anomalous identities from its boundaries is questioned and refuted by the same argument that Donna Haraway applies to the category of women:

There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class-consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. (155)

The same mechanisms of cultural production that collectively enslave women are those that manufacture the male through the narratives of a "dominant fiction." These

mechanisms are identified by Kaja Silverman as a syncretization of the patriarchal narratives that circulate through scientific discourses as much as they inform religious faith.¹⁵ While the burgeoning enterprise of feminist writing has led critics like Judith Butler to deconstruct categories of women, it yet remains for that work to be carried into the realm of the masculine, although important seminal work is being done by Silverman, Eve Sedgwick, and others.

Cultural experience is organised by certain dramatic motifs that are embedded as narratives in western culture and which code for a particular universal male subject. We may call this entity a mythologized subject, because it seems to be largely constructed according to Christian/humanist scripts implicit in those cultural stories. The universal subject is represented by the protagonist of our archetypal narratives, figured variously by Prometheus, Adam, Christ and Oedipus. Significantly, this mythologized subject is tacitly presented throughout the cultural media as both absolute and prior to any other conception of self. Thus, these stories may circulate through cultural experience initially and collectively as the founding legend of the prodigal child, the heroic protagonist, the tragic hero in classical myth and scripture, but ultimately they describe a collective figure that tacitly underpins identity itself, and that is coded to exclude alternative identities from articulation and validation through articulation. In this way the narrative figures that code the mythologized subject represent the influences of a dominant ideology that shapes the construction of subjectivity along the axes of history, language, and desire, while identities and categories of experience that exceed the narrative margins of the mythologized subject and the ideology that generates it remain unarticulated because they

are excluded by the codes that constitute these narratives. Essentially, the mythologized subject is possessed of an integrity that presupposes the other, the not-self that may include the so-called marginalized categories of non-masculine, non-white, non-heterosexual and passive. In effect, the narratives cited above function as instruments of ideology in serving to organise cultural experience around a few specific identities while precluding those that cannot readily be fit into the mould. Many or most of these narrative motifs remain implicit and tacitly accepted or unexamined.

Delany points out that the narrative codes embedded in our cultural discourse are *themselves* coded to exclude certain kinds of experience that must remain “outside of language” (“Aversion/Perversion/Diversion” 138-40). *Trouble on Triton* and *Stars in My Pocket* are texts written at the margins of articulable experience, both in the sense of what identities and sexualities they frame, and in what they question in doing so. Writing as an iconoclast, Delany recuperates the unspeakable and unknowable through the subversion of the same embedded narratives that exclude them. By deconstructing his subject, Delany dismantles the codes that exclude the abject, and in doing so, sabotages their power to prohibit. The seminal figure of the mythologized male subject surfaces in Delany only to be violated and re-enacted and ultimately traded in for newer and more transgressive models, more dangerous bodies that validate the unspeakable selves at the margins of experience. Eschewing the discrete and inviolate figures of Adam and Christ as representative of a marginal identity, Delany prefers the ambiguous and provocative orphan, the cyborg, as a fit icon for these reconstructed and dirty subjects.

My discussion in the following chapters traces the reconceptualization of human

identity by Delany through the paradoxically high-tech and arcane figuration of the cyborg. Since it is difficult to get anywhere without knowing where one *is* in the first place, Chapter Two will attempt to situate Delany's characters historically in the broader domains of science fiction and Gothic writing. I characterize the cyborg as a twentieth-century Gothic figure because of obvious links to what may be aptly described – if I paraphrase Linda Badley's description of writing practices that produce the body in horror writing and cinema - as the de-mystifying and re-mythologizing tendencies of that genre. Kelly Hurley considers the evolution of Gothic literature in the last century as a project engaged in exploring and reconceptualizing a sense of selfhood that was being ravaged by the reductionist scrutinies of modern science.¹⁶ So, too, is the mission of the science fictional cyborg the recuperation of an identity that is fractured and tainted by the revelations of its partisan rootedness in the dominant fictions of a patriarchal humanism.

Chapter Three will view the usurping displacement in Delany's fiction of a sexually differentiated subject by the cyborg body. The constructed identity of Bron Helstrom in *Trouble on Triton* and the particular constitution of erotic desire in *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* explore the question: what possible sexualities are precluded and hence foreclosed by conventional Western subjectivities? Here, I will suggest that a patriarchally sexualized body of the male subject is explored and exchanged for the electric and inelegant figure of the sexually problematic, constructed, and hybrid body of Frankenstein's creation. I will show that in the work-in-progress of *Triton's* protagonist, Delany questions the association of sex and gender both in Helstrom's tortured interactions with an ambiguously heterotopian (and heterotropic)

society, and in his struggle to realise a stable sexual identity of his own. Judith Butler has argued that, once sex and gender are understood to be non-commensurate and mutually distinct, it is unreasonable to assume that only males can be men or that only females can be women (Butler 6). Delany takes Butler's assertion beyond the "logical limit" she proposes to its veritable realisation in *Stars In My Pocket*. In a motley society that embraces as many sexualities as there are individuals to embrace one another, gender is fluid. Social complexes in both *Triton* and *Stars* do not refer to the "natural," but are carefully drawn to model the orthodox. I will also argue that Delany explores the role that desire plays in constituting subjecthood through a displacement which defines the borders of a subject by what he is not, and which is expressed and remade in the shape of the Other and Object. Thus desire constitutes both subject and object by delineating between substance - and selfhood - and absence. While it is true that the possible, uncoded identities that are foreclosed in representations of the Western subject are oppressed by histories that do not acknowledge them and repressed by language that will not represent them, they are implicated by the lack that informs desire. *Triton's* protagonist's calamitous courtship of a reluctant lover and his subsequent transition to womanhood act out the contingent nature of selfhood as it is described by what it is not. In exploring the displacement of lack from Helstrom onto his erotic object, the Spike, and his capitulation to assimilate that lack onto himself, Delany questions the integrity of the borders of discrete identity. In *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, Delany completes the dismantling of a white male subjectivity that is predicated upon the disparagement of a cultural Other by exploring the degradation of the abject and

reconstituting him as the erotic object, Rat Korga. In the deconstruction of Helstrom and the reconstitution of Korga as erotic object, I wish to show Delany completing a strategic shift that transforms the aesthetics that Western discourses bring to bear against the cultural Other.

Finally, Delany problematizes the construction of gendered identity along the axis of language by demonstrating the constructedness and inflected nature of discourse and offering a “monstrous” discourse that eschews the gendered organisation of Western languages. Delany is a language critic who experiments with signifying systems in diverse modes in his fiction. In *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* and *Triton*, language, like the body, is corrupt and hybrid, as constructed as the monster and as empowered with the signifying potential to articulate and thus bring into being those excluded subjectivities.

I think it only appropriate to make the turn from the Gothic discourse of psychoanalysis to the Gothic flesh of the bricolage bodies of Shelley’s and Delany’s monsters. Indeed, in light of the discovery that the former creature owned, if not a soul, a rage and an angst that were perhaps even more human, it does not strike me as entirely apropos to sustain the old epithet: monster. I persist, however, in recognition of its etymological aptness. Reaching back to the implicit imperative to “show forth”, I baptise anew both of these cyborg monsters, with the prayer that they will shine a light on the dark.

Although I will attempt to discuss each of my compass points as a discrete topic, there is no getting away from the fact that they are transgressive topics and will insist on

sabotaging the borderlines of what seem more and more to be merely arbitrary limits of chapter headings. Language codes history just as desire codes language.

Notes:

1. For instance, in her prefatory remarks at a 1996 panel featuring Ursula LeGuin as Guest of Honour at, at the University of Calgary, Dr. Adrienne Kertzer used the term to describe the relative neglect and condescension that have marked the response to Science Fiction of so-called “serious scholars” of literature.
2. Delany’s comments engage Russ’ observation that the relation of foreground to background is radically changed in the SF text.
3. In *Silent Interviews: On Language, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics*, Delany describes “paraliterature” as “the graphic flood from which most of the texts each of us encounters over any day come” – a grouping that includes comic books, pornography, film and song lyrics; in short just about every text that seems to be excluded by the category called “Literature”.
4. Examples of typical magazine titles include popular periodicals like *Planet Stories* (1939-1955), *Startling Stories* (1939-1955), *A. Merritt's Fantasy Magazine* (1949-1950).
5. Originally published in serial form in *Forerunner Magazine*, 6 (1915).
6. Some contemporary themes taken up in Shelley’s text include her engagement with the radical politics of her father, William Godwin, the early feminist writings of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as the nineteenth-century debate between scientific *vitalists* and *mechanists*. Macdonald and Scherf enumerate the varied influences that may have fuelled the philosophical and social debates that Shelley staged in her novel (30-31).

7. Badley explores the evolution of twentieth-century angst and reconceptualizations of the body through horror-genre film in a text that combines several modern critical theories with an impressive background scholarship in film and gothic and SF genres in published fiction.
8. Still the classic film version, James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* starred Boris Karloff as the monster, who was reduced to guttural communication. Later film versions mostly repeat the theme of an inarticulate monster. Kenneth Branagh's 1994 film, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, was an experiment that restored the monster's voice along with some of Shelley's novel's original tone of debate, although Branagh took much license with Shelley's original text in his final film version.
9. At a 1975 Symposium titled *Women in Science Fiction*, historian White described Anne McCaffrey's character of Helga from *The Ship Who Sang* as "another woman with her cunt cut out." Helga, with most of her body, including genitals, excised, becomes the organic half of an intelligent cyborg spaceship, falls fruitlessly in love and helplessly watches the love object die, accepts her particular lot in life, and finds happiness. Referring to White's comments, Delany's observation that "even in this most heterosexually sobriest tale – as, hopefully, we have seen by now in all our others, however troubling – there is something missing" – gestures at the implication that to be a cyborg, to have promise in a cyborg reality, something must always be missing.
10. Kathy Acker sees Delany's ficto-critical explorations of love and language as an Orphic journey.

11. All these texts explore unconventional subjectivities. *The Einstein Intersection* (1967) questions the construction of discrete identity and questions what it means to be “human,” “Aye, and Gomorrah” (1967) questions desire and sexual perversion, “Time considered as a helix of semi-precious stones” (1968) and *Dhalgren* (1976) both explore the subjectivity of the artist as outside of society.
12. Donna Haraway, for instance, includes Delany in her catalogue of favoured feminist writers, citing his “outpouring of innovative investigations of language technologies that craft what gets to count as nature, freedom, and sex” (*Modest Witness* 285 n.31).
13. *Trouble on Triton* foregrounds the inadequacy of a white, male subjectivity as personified by Helstrom, and *Stars*’ characters are racialized in one way or another, as dark-skinned beasts or, in the case of Rat Korga, through associations with disenfranchisement and slavery on one hand, and his height and mental inadequacy on the other, all of which are markers for/of social and political inferiority.
14. From a conversation between myself and a bookseller that took place sometime circa 1991 or 1992, in which it was suggested of *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* that the story “lacked a point,” and failed in any of the normal “criteria” for a fiction plot. This was offered as an explanation for what he considered a relative diminishment of Delany’s popularity at the time.
15. Silverman discusses the constitution of a “dominant fiction” in western culture as an accretion of patriarchal value-messages that represent an ideological intervention and sustain the link between masculinity and phallic authority. Similarly, in *Modest Witness*, Haraway rather more loosely cites the same forces as authoring an

- Althusserian interpellation that binds twentieth-century technology to seventeenth-century value-systems that are implicit in our material culture.
16. Hurley describes the “Gothicity’ of a range of scientific discourses” in the nineteenth-century that together had the effect of problematizing long-treasured assumptions about the centrality of Man in Creation and about the primacy of Man over Nature (5-7).

CHAPTER TWO: DANGEROUS BODIES; DIAPHANOUS SKINS

The Cyborg as a Science Fiction Vampire

In the recuperative SF Gothic of Delany's *Trouble on Triton* and *Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand*, a male subjectivity which would be constructed in most mainstream fictions as white, heterosexual, and discrete is re/presented as Other and "transgressed" through a cyborg politics that reappraises the situation of identity along the triple axes of experience, language and the body. I offer this cyborg as both *antithetical* and *antidotal* to the atrophies suggested by overwrought and obsolete paradigms of masculine subjectivity as represented by the chiselled bodies and minds of twentieth-century icons of hyper-manhood like Flash Gordon and Superman. Delany brings into play a liberatory politics that will embrace those categories made abject by the masculine: embodiedness, specificity and excess¹. As Donna Haraway has pointed out, the benighted conceptual offspring of Mary Shelley's imagination, the cyborg, is the site of a corrupt and body-based subjectivity; basically hybrid, its patchwork constitution destabilizes the boundaries formally posited between what Haraway has identified as ontological regimes in her "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1985). Indeed, reaffirming my insistence that the cyborg intersects the generic borders of both science fiction and the Gothic, and again echoing Haraway, I must point out that, in its links to technology and the uncanny, the cyborg is conceptually a cross between an adding machine and a vampire.

In her critical exploration of masculinity in western culture, *Male Subjectivity at*

the Margins, Kaja Silverman declares that male subjectivity in the twentieth-century is in crisis. Founded on the “dominant fiction” of the commensurability of penis and phallus, masculine identity has depended upon illusions of the authority and integrity of a discrete subject (42-48). Both defining and confining a universalized or mythologized masculine subject, the *dominant fiction* that Silverman critiques rests on a general presumption of difference and deferral that distinguishes self from other and finds articulation in Silverman’s assertion that “the defining conditions of all subjectivity [are] lack, specularity, and alterity” (51). These conditions mark the vulnerability of the Other while they form the limits against which the masculine defines itself as substantial, spectator and self. Silverman proposes that those illusions have been challenged and undermined increasingly by both the historical traumas of twentieth-century wars and by liberatory feminist and gay politics that serve to displace the phallus from an alignment with the penis.

My discussion rests on the proposition that the consequent decline of inflexible and patriarchal paradigms of an absolute subject has opened the way for a re-conceptualisation of a social- and body-centred subjectivity that eschews the dichotomies that presumptively anchor humanist discourse. This movement, in turn, finds its expression in the enigmatic figure of the cyborg as a historically specific construct of nature- and culture-based identity. The cyborg is the science fiction avatar of a post-modernist impulse to dismantle and remodel human identity at the *fin de millennium* of the twentieth-century. This movement resonates with the literary spirit of a century past that sought to give shape and voice to a general sense of rupture and panic arising from

the displacement by reductive scientific discourses of the entrenched authorities of an integrated, universalized male subject (Hurley 5-7). Heir to the rhetoric and anxiety of the nineteenth-century, the modality of SF that finds its representative in the cyborg is what I am moved to call *Science Fiction Gothic*.

Toward an SF Gothic

Let me make a distinction right away between the liberatory and destabilising genre that takes as its icon a permanently vexed identity, and an older, more staid, and simply escapist genre that Donald Lawlor has theorised as *Gothic science fiction*. Lawlor saw the gradual merger of scientific discourse and Gothic horror as producing a “hybrid genre” that operates as

a progressive vehicle of expression for humanizing, however erratically and grotesquely, the unrepresented in nature, as implied in the scientific concepts of devolution, randomness, indeterminacy, and the rest of the new ideas that enthralled the nineteenth-century mind to powerful metaphors of despair. (257)

Kelly Hurley, who effects a reappraisal of the Gothic as an expression of nineteenth-century cultural angst, allows the claim that H.G. Wells’ 1898 *War of the Worlds* marked the transformation of Victorian Gothic into a Victorian science fiction (16). However, Hurley complains about the failure of science fiction to represent identities outside of the parameters of the dominant culture, pointing to the transition between genres as a moment of foreclosure that signalled an end for the promise of Gothic representation.

Echoing Darko Suvin's insistence that the science fiction text is dominated by a reality-based (if extrapolative) logical premise², Hurley avers that the signifying capacity of SF is therefore bounded by the perceived "reality" of the status quo dominating its historical moment and falls short when called upon to represent experience outside of what is commonly recognized or understood at that time. Extrapolating from Darko Suvin's discussion of the *novum*, she suggests that

though the science-fiction text depicts fantastic events...these do not violate the precepts of reality, however defined within its host-culture.

Rather, the science-fiction text represents extraordinary possibilities that are consistent with, and may be logically derived from, the knowledge systems of the culture in which it was written. (16)

In response to what I take as a hasty dismissal on Hurley's part, I suggest that SF's unique signifying capacity does indeed enable it to stage a fruitful confrontation between the familiar and the strange. Owing to the extrapolation of associations that both Delany and Haraway track in their discussions of the cyborg³, as well as SF's unique contraposition to the subject's centrality by virtue of SF's status as what Delany calls a "paraliterature", SF is a genre uniquely positioned to cross the boundaries of "the knowledge systems" of its own originating culture. Moreover, the adjectival shift from *Gothic science fiction* to *Science Fiction Gothic* that I propose reflects no mere difference of degree or emphasis. In Lawlor's humanizing operations, I read the subsuming of the "unnatural" under the normalizing sign of a universalized male subject, as he proposes that the monstrous that is revealed in works like Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Robert Louis

Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde* represents an anthropomorphized Freudian repression of psychosocial impulses⁴. While Lawlor recognizes the assimilation of nineteenth-century scientific discourse into the Gothic narrative, he claims that the monster that is revealed through these operations is none other than the sexually repressed subject. This claim is refuted, or at least complicated, by Hurley, who discovers in the Gothic monster a racialized and sexualised Other. She finds in the *abhuman* of Gothic fiction a demonization of the array of feminine and non-white ethnic attributes that nineteenth-century criminologist Cesare Lombroso had identified as atavistic.⁵ While Hurley argues that the Gothic Other is more a representation of the sexual and racial Other, she recognizes that the effect of the Gothic narrative tradition was ultimately an exorcism of the threat posed by that Other.

In *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, materialism and degeneration at the fin de siecle*, Hurley refers to the Gothic as a response to Victorian and Edwardian anxieties about identity and what it means to be human in the face of burgeoning scientific discourses that effectively disarticulate the body.⁶ Hurley links the development of the Gothic as a nineteenth-century literary genre to a crisis of identity as, in the age of Darwinism and Freud, the “‘structurality’ - the arbitrary, provisional nature – of structure [became] visible” (26). The Victorian angst growing out of the displacement of a humanist anthropocentrism by scientific reductionism was a terror anticipated by the dialogic staging of the debate between eighteenth-century theories of vitalism and mechanism in the pre-Victorian *Frankenstein* (Macdonald and Scherf, 30-31). The shockingly dismantled and reassembled human body subverts humanist ideals of an integrated

subjectivity that is bracketed and reinforced by the boundaries of an inviolable bodily envelope. This scientifically constructed human is even modular; while the text of *Frankenstein* never explicitly names the materials used in the assembly of the intrepid doctor's creature, it has normally been understood that the creature is an ad hoc reconstitution of pieces from diverse human bodies. At once, science is credited with the creation of an unnatural monstrosity in place of the human, while the lack of a unified pedigree hints at the potential to transgress boundaries of self. This earlier Gothic, replete with its traumatic figurations of loss and recovery,

provided a space wherein to explore phenomena at the borders of human identity and culture—insanity, criminality, barbarity, sexual perversion—precisely these phenomena that would come under the purview of social medicine in later decades. (Hurley, 6)

Moreover, the pre-Victorian Gothic established the apparatus for *fin-de-siecle Gothic*, which would combine its concerns with identity and bodily integrity with what Hurley identifies as its imbrication with the reductive discourses of science and medicine (5). As part of their dismantling of the essential humanist paradigms of subjectivity, evolutionism and psychoanalysis established an uncomfortable “too intimate continuity between humans and the ‘lower’ species” (10). Hurley notes the frightening proliferation of threateningly ambiguous bodies, figurations of the abominable kinship between human and animal, in SF texts by writers like William Hope Hodgson and H.G. Wells,⁷ who described the monster in scientific terms as a product of the unholy and unsanctified operations of either science or nature. In its response to the desacralization of the subject,

the Gothic genre appropriated the language of science to figure the “*abhuman*.”

Adopted from a work by Hodgson, “abhuman” is a chimerical label: the prefix, “ab”, a Latin root that means both “from” and “away”, implicates both a movement both *from origin and toward something other*, a glance both back at and away from. The abhuman is not quite human and is almost human. Resonating with the nervous oscillation inherent in Julia Kristeva’s discussion of the abject as an object both of revulsion and of intimacy (1), the abhuman characterises the intrinsically conflicted nature of identities straddling two orders of being.

In proposing the Gothic as a “productive” genre, Hurley acknowledges its tendency to renege on its own premises, turning back to reinforce the very organization it challenges: “the gothic frequently concludes by checking its own movement towards innovation—its vampires staked, its beetle-women squashed, its anthropophagous trees dynamited” (7). However, she avers that this tendency to self-negation “need not, I think, argue against its role as a fundamentally speculative, even theoretical genre” (7). Nevertheless, the tendency to qualify its representation of the abhuman is a normalizing one. It is called for by the basic movement of the abhuman toward an entropy of sorts. Perhaps in association with a barely apprehended death drive, Gothic configurations of anomalous identity insist on its nature as waste. It follows that Frankenstein’s monster will die. The abhuman as abject is bespoken, directed toward extinction. It represents a dead end rather than a becoming. In referring, now, to the Gothic as an attenuated genre, Hurley implies that it was both a historically specific and a historically bound project that expired with the Edwardian era. However, the particular explorations of aberrant

identities through the mechanisms of reconceptualizing the abject continue in the anxiety underpinning the Modernist poetry of T.S. Eliot and others, as well as the haunted Southern Gothic of William Faulkner. These genres agonize over nostalgia for a lost identity, representing the present identity as monstrous and traumatized.

The psychasthenia accompanying modern automation and the displacement of the worker permeate modern art forms, such as Hannah Höch's 1920 photomontage, "Das schöne Mädchen" ("The Beautiful Girl"), a fragmented dis/re/assembly of machine and body parts centred in the image of a woman's body supporting a blind light bulb in place of a head. Intuiting the montage as "an allegory of modernization", Jennifer Gonzales identifies the dispersion of consciousness across the array of soulless artifacts of the motor-age and the loss of subjectivity to an agency that inheres in the machine as cultural detritus. As Gonzalez reads it,

here, existence as a self-contained humanist subject is overcome by an experience of the body in pieces—a visual representation of an unconscious state of being that exceeds the space of the human body. Perception is aligned to coincide with the machine... The attempt to represent and reassemble—but not to repair—the multiple scraps of body and mind that are scattered at such historical junctures has, in fact, been a central activity of modernism. (271)

This bespeaks an early twentieth-century body-centred terror for the soul that Haraway reiterates for the latter half of the century:

late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the

difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert. (152)

At the *fin de millennium*, “the dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically” (163) as part of a generalized uncertainty about the mythic fixity of sexual identity in the midst of recurring crises of Christian mores that coalesce around the absurdity of a president caught with his pants down.

If anything, the syncretizing impulse of the modern humanist era has operated to consolidate further the tendency to experience subjectivity along unitary lines. However, as Haraway admonishes us, “the global and the universal are not pre-existing empirical qualities; they are deeply fraught, dangerous, and inescapable inventions” (“Cyborgs and Symbionts” xix). Silverman claims that the dominant fiction of the masculine as a monolithic paradigm of dualism dependent on difference *from* alterity, castration and specularly has been in crisis since the post-war assimilation of soldiers (those avatars of patriarchy and the hypermasculine) into domestic society. In her examination of post-war cinema, Silverman traces the subversion of tacit signs of masculinity as a response to the castrations of historical trauma.

Symptomatic of the vexation of masculine subjectivity is an ongoing proliferation of “masculinities whose defining desires and identifications are ‘perverse’” (reminiscent of Gothic “perversions” of identity) in that they function as affronts to the phallic

standard underwriting the dominant fiction (Silverman 1). These identities find their venues diversely: in the gay pride movement since Stonewall, in modern popular and alternative cinema that isolate the male as sexual object and as sexually conflicted,⁸ in both the science fiction feminism of writers like Joanna Russ and Marge Piercy and the critical theorizing of Judith Butler that all question and trouble the alignment of sex and gender, and in the paraliterary science fiction and pornography of Delany himself wherein the author explores and celebrates the extremities of sexuality and identity from the specific positions of homosexual and non-white. Silverman suggests that such so-called deviant masculinities “represent a tacit challenge not only to conventional male subjectivity, but to the whole of our ‘world’” (1) and to “reality.” Her claim is that a radical subjectivity that refuses the mirror image of the white male must upset *both* ontological regimes *and* the epistemologies that are grounded on them.

As Hurley notes, Gothic discourse at the turn of the century increasingly appropriated the terms and motifs of scientific discourse to stage its enquiry. In an ironically fitting turnabout, the cyborg is a product of twentieth-century scientification who quietly becomes a Gothic figure in correspondence with her characterisation of the Gothic as a “productive genre, one part of whose cultural work is the invention of new representational strategies by which to imagine human (or not so human) realities” (6). According to Hurley, scientific inquiry (when it is understood as “culturally embedded”) has been inflected by the Gothic – thus it is possible, even easy, to move from this proposition to the identification of the cyborg (science fiction made fact) with the Gothic—as a strange birth fathered by science and grown to maturity in the belly of the

Gothic. I propose that, far from merely reiterating the paranoiac catharsis that Hurley identifies in *fin de siecle* Gothic writing, SF has produced a specific modality of its own, one that endeavours both to dismantle an entrenched hegemonic ontology, and to make way for a radically redefined, reconsidered, and deregulated twentieth-century humanism. Hence my claim that Delany is doing Gothic work in his project to explore identities outside the parameters of the universalized subject.

Finally, it remains for me to point out that in Gothic literature the transgression that troubles the integrity of an absolute subject is tested variously as encoded incestuous and homosexual unions and through the poisonous encroachment of the Vampire. Following Haraway's lead - she links cyborg identities to the Vampire as a symbol for transgression and infection against "pure" blood (*Modest Witness* 214) - my choice of the vampire as one modality of the cyborg identity is neither careless nor incidental. The recurrent possibility and repudiation of transgressive identities are ultimately demonized in the Gothic tradition under the sign of the Vampire. Expressly drawing a connection between the bodies of manmade strains of laboratory mice and the vampire, Haraway observes,

Vampires are narrative figures with specific category-crossing work to do. The essence of vampires, who, like Victor Frankenstein's monster, normally do their definitive labor on wedding nights, is the pollution of natural kinds. The existence of vampires tropes⁹ the purity of lineage, certainty of kind, boundary of community, order of sex, closure of race,

inertness of objects, liveliness of subjects, and clarity of gender. (*Modest Witness* 79)

The putative antagonist of *Frankenstein* asserted a place for SF and the figure of the cyborg as subversive of the twin propositions that identity is discrete and universalized. Just as significant is the infectious and corrupt nature of subversion itself. Thus, the cyborg is fundamentally a Gothic figure, basically corrupt, material and excessive, spreading infection as it passes for us.

Ironically, the danger of cyborg identities is conversely their promise: they infest an as yet unmapped conceptual space that resists definition. Haraway reminds us of the ontological opacity of anomalous identities when she declares that “the ubiquity and invisibility of cyborgs is precisely why these sunshinebelt machines are so deadly. They are as hard to see politically as materially” (“Manifesto for Cyborgs” 153). In the dominant fiction at the *fin de millennium*, their narratives have yet to be written, or, written, have yet to be read. Like the cyborg “FemaleMan” of Haraway’s contemplations - herself an “enterprised up” version of Joanna Russ’ *Female Man* (*Modest Witness* 74) - the stubbornly transgressive citizens that populate Delany’s post-modern and post-apocalyptic worlds of *Triton* and *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand* are the infectious undead, vampires turned out upon the landscape of twentieth-century Christian patriarchal ontologies with a mission to take life and taint life with the transfused too dark and too sweet blood of the Other.

As the vampiric cyborg recuperates the marginalized identities of race and gender, the change from *fin de siecle* nineteenth-century Gothic to SF Gothic signals a

corresponding movement from the conceptualization of the abject identity as the site of entropy and abjection to one of supplementarity and excess. Haraway identifies the ontologies that define Western thinking as the product of a *grand narrative* that typically inflects cultural experience with constituent archetypal narratives built around a tacit Christian humanism. In turn, this humanism partakes of the framing motifs of a unitary identity, as typical of classical figures such as Prometheus and Orpheus as of Christ. These transgressions begin with the repudiation by the cyborg of the historical boundaries that distinguished the subject as an absolute, as it insistently acts out the inadequacy of archetypal narrative to signify.

The Cyborg as Science Fiction Monster

In a survey of Orphic themes in modern literature, Walter Strauss suggests that most if not all western narrative roughly models representations of the human subject on one or the other of the integral figures of Prometheus and Orpheus. In the polarization between figurations of the rebel and the poet, I suggest that we may situate the struggle of a subject to maintain itself as discrete and bounded, and to resist the threat of disintegration, either through assimilation into an extrinsic social order or through fragmentation of the subject's internal order, or psyche. The response formed by SF to these narrative predilections may be addressed from either of two perspectives. In claiming that SF takes as its central interest the idea, or *novum*, rather than the psychological experience of the subject, Suvin implies the great difference between SF and the conventional genres, one that seems relatively consistent with the spirit of the

Gothic. Delany has put it most succinctly with his claim that SF as a genre abandons or even subverts mainstream Literature's prioritization of and preoccupation with the subject by taking as its central concern the Object. That is, the idea of futuristic migration, the issue of overpopulation, the dynamics of the city, or of scientific ethics and enterprise, become the "protagonist" of the SF narrative while the characters of the text are representatives of either the *socius* or the idea.

While the argument that there is no conventional subject at the centre of the SF text may account in one way for the work SF has done in discommoding the universalized subject, I prefer, at this point, to track the ways in which the subject is further dismantled and reinvented (pun fully intended) by SF's implicit distrust and critique of unity and origin. Here I turn to the cyborg as a subject, as the most thoroughly native - and thus the most debt-free - product of SF. In its modality as artifact, the cyborg tests the constitutive powers of myth that Strauss attributes to the make-up of the literary subject. And like its Gothic great-aunt, the nineteenth-century vampire, the cyborg, too, has a troubled relationship with its reflection. Both have a need to be wary of mirrors.

The first cyborg to break with the implicit origins of the universalized subject was the enigmatic creation of Victor Frankenstein. Shelley borrows and critiques the Romantic practice of infusing myth into poetry and literature so as to illuminate and valorise the individual subject. Her use of mythic elements in *Frankenstein* represents a cyborg synthesis that is at once subversive and devoted as she traces for her reader the constructedness of her characters around the constitutive shape of the archetypal narrative in the figures of Prometheus and Orpheus. Victor's account of his formative years as a

bookish student of arcane histories and eccentric practices demonstrates his adoption of the Promethean identities of alchemist and adventurer as templates for his own identity. Even more significant is the creature's development, because his influences are both Orphic and Promethean—he is exposed to the Promethean Victor, and to the members of the De Lacey family, who are, collectively, Orphic in their connections to discourse through the ritual of story-telling that inculcates in the eavesdropping monster a critical appreciation for family and community¹⁰ and that suggests associations with the mythic figure whose song served to enlighten and unite listeners in community. Similarly, he is educated through reading Volney's histories, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which together stage a dialogue between the interests of the individual and of society (Macdonald and Scherf 24-32).

Shelley's attention to the way mythic components constitute these characters thus enables her to present myth as coding the vicissitudes of her characters' subjectivity. However, she also hints at the presence of an excess of identity that remains unaccounted for by these constituent elements when she exhibits the process of construction in the creature. By acknowledging the bounded specificity of the materials that constitute the creature's identity, she exposes their gaps and seams, implicating the excess of identity that is not "covered" by these materials. Despite his choice to identify himself with Satan, the creature still fails to find a representative archetypal identity that can contain the reality of his subjective experience. He is something other, an assembly of parts of other bodies, other identities - he literally represents the constructedness that underlies the Promethean Victor - and his agonies to come to terms with and reconcile his alienation

and need for humanity express not so much an identity that is Promethean as one that is *assembled*.

Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, Macdonald and Scherf point out that both Shelley's monster and Milton's "Eve" encounter a pivotal choice between specularity and discourse, and both, subsequently, choose in favour of the discursive (30), as standing for agency. When Eve, in a narcissistic moment, is captivated by the first sight of her reflection in a pool of water, she is transfixed by the recognition of her own image until distracted and called away by the sound of Adam's voice. The monster, horrified by his own reflection in a pool, resolves to overcome his disadvantage by mastering language so as to reach beyond his ugliness to other people. As Macdonald and Scherf note, "both cases oppose language to vision" (30). Linking discourse to masculine agency and specularity to the Other in a moment of difference that underscores the subversive charters of Gothic representation, *Paradise Lost* evidences the woman's recognition of and deferral to the agency of man as possessor of discourse, while Shelley's monster covets discursive agency for himself. The cyborg is a transgressor who not only seeks to appropriate the political agency of the Father in the Freudian sense, but who would carry that agency into the perilous domain of a compromised bodily integrity. Moreover, throughout the text of *Frankenstein*, the monster's compelling and eloquent discourse continues to mitigate against the effects of his repulsive countenance. Despite the negative valence of physical descriptions of the creature - his "dull yellow eye", the convulsive motions accompanying his awakening, and "his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips" (85-86), his own narrative force exhorts the listener to compassion

and identify with his suffering - and attempts to compete with Victor Frankenstein's own biased narratives. Nevertheless, the condemnatory sanctions linked to the creature's physical appearance consistently hold sway, as he is driven from the hearth of the De Laceys - from whom he has learned both civility and language - and rejected again by Frankenstein. In the novel, as a competition between mythic implications, discourse is held out as a potentially harmonizing and healing instrument, albeit one that is rightfully associated with the master. At the same time it is seen to fail in competition with specularly as the domain of the oppressed, the Other. A second subtext reinforces the general refusal of the text to successfully challenge the dominant orders of Shelley's culture. While the author consciously draws attention to the constructedness of identity, she hesitates before the prospect of exploring those alternate identities hinted at through the metaphor of incest. Victor Frankenstein's love interest, Elizabeth, who has been raised as Victor's surrogate sister, dies before the couple can consummate their relationship (220) while the female creature, who is figuratively the monster's "sister" by virtue of her relationship to their mutual creator - must die before she can be "born" (193).

As interested as Shelley in the constitutive power of myths, Delany is particularly self-consciously concerned with the business of myth and myth making. *The Einstein Intersection* (1967) is a story of quest and lost love and so it is ostensibly a retelling of the Orpheus myth. However, it is at the same time a critical examination of myth because as the story unfolds the failure of myth to account for identity proves to be more and more problematical. While *Intersection* does not take the cyborg as its subject-matter, it is a text conspicuously about the construction of identity and the roles of myth in that

construction. In the novel, the earth has long since been abandoned by humankind, and after millennia has become the home of another race of people, initially bodiless, ambiguously sexed, and desirous (for reasons of which we cannot be certain) of becoming human. This new race of johnny-come-latelies is attempting to step into humanity's footsteps - to fit our mould - by mimicking human genotypes and human cultural experience. Among the novel's characters there is a conscious recognition that, to arrive at humanity, the people have to live out human narratives - walk in our shoes. This is a people only too conscious of the constitutive power/function of myth. As one character puts it, "we have to exhaust the past before we can finish with the present" (78).

Ultimately, the problem that characters really have to wrestle with is that identity exceeds by far the constitutive potentials of the mythic archetypes they have inherited from us. A typical problem that the new race has to face has to do with their efforts to produce human men and women. Their careful manipulations of leftover human genetic material and ambient radioactivity frequently throw unwelcome mutations into their midst. Initially, only "normals"—that is purely (or very nearly) human genotypes—can qualify for the honorific "Lo" and "La," that designate a human of one or the other gender. However, with the passage of time, it seems that experience and compelling pragmatism force them to loosen the standard enough to extend the honorific to "functionals". The functionals may not be human normal - but how can you deny citizenship to somebody who can lend not just *a* hand but four or six of them to help a task? Functionals are adept at making a living and many of the wilder shapes may even

represent the more viable genotype. Moreover, since many functionals are neither man nor woman, a third honorific, "Le," seems to designate the functional who is androgyne or hermaphrodite.

The acknowledgement of "Le" and the deterioration of rigid rules for determining human-ness are the material evidence of the failure of outdated stereotypes to represent identity in this tale. But *Intersection* is also a story about myth. In their anxiety to "exhaust the past" in the quest to fully represent and realize a human identity, individuals play out multiple archetypal identities in turn. It becomes apparent that no single individual can be fully realised in a single archetypal role – so that it is necessary instead to act out a myriad of mythic identities that inter-illuminate and change each other. The protagonist, Lobey, travels in his identification from Orpheus in search of dead Eurydice to the soldier who killed Christ on Golgotha with a spear-thrust. In this manner, archetypal identities are tried, used, and exchanged, as if they were accessories being modeled in front of a looking glass. Excess is also expressed in the incompatibility of the third pronoun, "Le," that necessitates awkward compromise and more often assimilation - the "Le" is grudgingly commuted either to "Lo" or "La" or dropped altogether lest the culture have to depart from its mould in recognizing the validity of a third alternative, another gendered identity.

The themes of myth and identity that feature prominently in *Intersection* prepared the way for Delany's somewhat edgier critique of the illusion of Western masculinity in *Trouble on Triton*. As Kathy Acker has pointed out in her unabashedly celebratory introduction to the novel, *Triton* stages an Orphic descent and search for love, as well as a

post-modern dismemberment of the hero. Also like *Intersection*, the later novel experiments with the exchange of a variety of mythic identities to account for the vagaries of a character's subjectivity. *Triton's* Helstrom, blinded as he is to his own boorishness and folly, in electing to have his sex and gender changed, becomes Tiresias, the blind sage who was changed into a woman. He is also Narcissus - who committed the sin of loving himself, desiring himself - or desiring the same as himself. Yet, there are still dimensions of identity and experience that are left over and are not coded by any of the identities mentioned. When Helstrom begins painfully exploring his new subjectivity as a female, while failing to realise - as Kathy Acker has noted - that he lacks the necessary referential framework to be a woman, he enters a *terra incognita* that stretches beyond conventions of representation.

Acker aptly described *Triton* as following a trajectory "from 'unknown' to 'unknowable'" (x) - in mythic terms, from loss into the impossibility of recuperation or, in the terms of a science fiction identity, from dismemberment of subjectivity into the impossibility of re-assimilating the fragments of the old identity. The culmination of the Orphic experience is a symbolic unification of self and a triumph over death and nothingness - but Helstrom triumphs over nothing. Rather, he seems to be trolling for a stable identity, posing in turn as a rejected Orphic hero, an alienated Promethean hero, and even a woman. Unfortunately, as no-one is willing to affirm his choices by responding to them as he would expect them to, or as myth or tradition would dictate, he discovers that these masks are just that and - just as we see when Helstrom decides to affect a fashionably rakish black mask for a day - the damn things keep slipping over his eyes. Unlike Orpheus,

Helstrom dismembers himself. His is the Orphic lament of T.S. Eliot's "Prufrock" as he figures for us the struggle to come to terms with a subjectivity selectively made out of fragments.

This same figure is effective in rendering comprehensible the subjectivity of Rat Korga in *Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand*. When the mutilated and clinically dead Rat is rescued and resurrected from the charred remains of his sterilized planet, he can be interpreted variously as a Christ arisen from his tomb, or Eurydice climbing out of Hell. Ultimately, however, these archetypal figures fail to account for the subjectivity of the mutilated intellect and cybernetically re-constructed body. As Rat emerges with his prosthetic eyes and technologically augmented - that is to say, not so free - will from the lifesaving amniotic vats that his rescuers use to heal him, the interpenetration of these motifs creates a new paradigm: identity as "made" and sacred at once, or the "made" identity as mystic and sacred. In other words, the creature.

The death *without* resurrection of Green Eye, whose task it is to figure Christ in *The Einstein Intersection*, foreshadows the failure or obsolescence of the archetypal associations that have been mobilized in the aliens' script. At a crucial point they fail to signify the Real - but it is becoming evident that these patterns lack any real significance beyond their function of providing points of departure - they are simply re-enactments of old stories and if anything they imprison the subject in the repetitive limbo of a traumatic nostalgia such as that described by Cathy Caruth as a compulsive re-enactment of the moment of loss¹¹. At one point, one of humanity's left-over computers tells Lobey, "You're a bunch of psychic manifestations, multi-sexed and incorporeal, and you—

you're all trying to put on the limiting mask of humanity. - Seek somewhere outside the frame of the mirror" (140). The mirror in this case is the repertoire of mythic narratives that organize humanity's, and thus the aliens', discourse. Outside the frame of the mirror is the real of the unrepresentable margin - which is neither mediated nor organised by static mythic terms.

Delany chooses an excerpt from W.B. Yeats' "Two Songs from a Play" as an epigraph that creates an intertext with *The Einstein Intersection's* final chapter that forces an engagement with the ideal of Christian redemption. While the lines were devoted to the resurrection of Christ, serving to herald both the death of classical mythology and the birth of Christianity, in the context of this juxtaposition with Delany's critique of myth, they also seem to suggest that the figure of Christ is that of yet another dying god in a long tradition of doomed or dying gods. The "fabulous, formless darkness" that produces Yeats' Saviour is a primordial place that exists before story, and from which myth starts in answer to man's need or man's desire. But the poet's final stanza insists that man's desire exceeds, exhausts, and consumes his myths, his gods, and his saviors. Accordingly, the ultimate crisis confronting the subject in *The Einstein Intersection* is the exhaustion of myth's constitutive potential and the necessary task of representing identity in the absence of signifying language.

Delany seems to suggest that identity is a Yeatsian chaos. But in that chaos we discover the corollary of "the centre [that] will not hold", and that is the "fabulous, formless darkness" of unmapped identity, where the unlimited and as yet undefined potentialities of human identity wait for discovery. The question confronting us in the end

is whether we can possibly negotiate that darkness without returning to a recycled myth to do so. While the trajectory of nineteenth-century Gothic writing enabled an encouraging recognition of identities outside the borders of the universalized subject, it was at best a wistful recognition. The revelation of the part of human subjectivity that exceeds circumscription by myth is qualified by the creature's ultimate doom, at best a qualified repudiation by the text of the marginalized identity. At its worst, the Gothic science fiction of Shelley's *Frankenstein* was, like so much of the Gothic genre, reactionary and proscriptive, a subversive condemnation of alterity that presented itself as exploration. In the late twentieth-century, however, the SF Gothic populated by Delany's cyborg identities subverts and repudiates the self-negating tendencies of the Gothic. In Delany's cyborg identities, SF Gothic recuperates Hurley's initial claims of a revolutionary function for Gothic re-presentations of identity. The excess that marks the cyborg is explored not as the failure of constitutive myth, but as its own *telos*. Replacing entropy and extinction with supplementarity, these identities promise to endure.

Cyborg Bodies and Cyborg Minds

The study of the science-fiction to facticity of the cyborg, "cyborgology," has already been proposed as a site of contestation with paradigmatic regimes of patriarchy and control in numerous writings dating from Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" to Chris Hables Gray's *The Cyborg Handbook* (1995). As well, this enigmatic figuration of modern identity is frequently and increasingly the site of an area of cinematic *jouissance* that problematizes as it plays with the parameters and possibilities of futuristic

consciousness even if it does not consistently theorize in a formal sense. Borrowing the particular language that Barbara Ehrenreich uses to suggest that contemporary anxieties surrounding the “bourgeois-patriarchal ego” inform a generalised alienation from the flesh, Badley observes that filmic “bodies fantastic” like *The Terminator* (1984) and *Robocop* (1987) also “[transcend] the human condition in a fantasy of replication ‘in whom all soft, unreliable tissue has been replaced by metal alloys’” (Ehrenreich, qtd. in Badley 29). While apparently appropriated simply for its sheer value as melodramatic entertainment, the spectacle of the human body conjoined to hardware infuses - or, in Haraway’s words, *tropes* - modern science-fiction film with an ecstasy of metaphor, both sexual and psychosocial.

However, despite its inherent excitement and promise as a locus and a focus of study, the cyborg is only beginning to be recognised as such by scholars and critics outside the genre of SF. As Gray notes, while it has become a central figure in the bourgeois “technoculture” of the twentieth-century, the majority of theorizing around the figure of the cyborg has taken place “until very recently” only in the generic domain of science fiction (8). Notwithstanding the significant and seminal contributions of nineteenth-century writers like Mary Shelley and Jules Verne, no other narrative practice is more truly the genre of the twentieth-century.

Despite the proliferation of writing about the cyborg, however, a satisfyingly monolithic definition is not easily forthcoming. Descriptions range from the rather purist insistence that a cyborg has to be a cybernetic organism incorporating proportionate parts of human and machine to abstract theories that model particular modes of deconstructive

writing as cyborg.

Best or most commonly understood as a hybrid entity of human organic and machine origin, the cyborg is a ubiquitous figure both in the melodramatic narratives of the films mentioned above and in generations of adventure stories. The first and perhaps still the most famous cyborg is the ambivalent antagonist of *Frankenstein*. Assembled by a man in his own image, Shelley's creature qualifies as a putative cyborg by virtue of his association with technology through the scientific labour of Victor Frankenstein, even though the actual materials of his body are never completely revealed as other than organic¹². Moreover, the manufacture of the creature cynically figures the appropriation of the divine by modern science as transgressive and disastrous. Similar images of the human/machine, such as the sinister imposture of the "robot-Maria" of Fritz Lang's early cinematic masterpiece, *Metropolis* (1926), - in which the saint-like heroine is kidnapped and replaced by an evil look-alike automaton with human skin - are ultimately figures inciting pathos and human indignation. In the representation of flesh and metal, the western viewer is frequently inclined to see the former as beleaguered by the latter. Shelley's monster presents a human sensibility and sensitivity corrupted by scientific intervention, which - through its pointed representation in terms of death and decay - is identified as unholy. When the cyborg imposter's human flesh is seared away from its steel frame in *Metropolis*, the transformation is understood as appropriative, revealing the rape of the female body by a cold, man-made facsimile of life, a predatory technology seeking to colonize and replace humanity.

Later representations of the cyborg body offer it as comedic and benevolent. *Star*

Wars' C3PO and *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* Data are examples of “user-friendly” androids (albeit only problematically achieving cyborg status, as they are identified as complete machines, only sharing a human-like shape and intelligence) that are humanized by their Pinocchio-like desire for “boyhood” - that is to say, for validation as a human subject. Notwithstanding the seeming concessions inherent in the android-as-man-Friday, the body of the cyborg persists as a threat, a figure for the human body wounded by technology. For every image of the constructed person as friend, reiterations of the rampaging, evil-eyed “Terminator” proliferate. Significantly, it is when the cyborg has had its human flesh excised, burned off, dissolved, that it is revealed as being at its most hostile to life—or to be more specific and suggestive—its most misanthropic. It is a reminder of the sympathetic revulsion shared by the spectator who is compelled both to stare and to avert the glance from the grotesque spectacle of the smooth prosthetic limb and the rubbery flesh of the stump beneath.

At the same time, the seemingly rigid definition of the cyborg as machine/organism populates our world with bodies of questionable origin along with intimations of a precarious redemption. Haraway stipulates that the

cyborg exists when two kinds of boundaries are simultaneously problematic: 1) that between animals (or other organisms) and humans, and 2) that between self-controlled, self-governing machines (automatons) and organisms, especially humans (models of autonomy). (qtd. in Gray 1)

Far from serving to exclude, Haraway’s qualification extends membership to a plethora of entities in the twentieth-century. Accordingly, the cyborg forges kinship between the

unlikeliest cousins: the vegetable kingdom and the fish who donated its genetic material to provision future generations of disease resistant tomatoes (*Modest Witness* 56); the schoolchild who has had her immune system reprogrammed by a polio inoculation (Gray 3) is a not so distant sister to DuPont's patented "OncoMouse" whose own genetic make-up now includes a human gene¹³. It is clear that technology has effected a successful siege of the human body and in doing so has destabilized the borders between species, and between life and death. In the twentieth-century, the biochemical penetrations of scientific intervention[ism] have yielded a hidden army of cyborgs.

If only by virtue of its very physicality, then, the cyborg is a terrifying enigma. A chimera, it is neither human nor machine and cannot be merely both. Prosthetics and mutilation mark the body of the cyborg - boundaries of selfhood: powerlessness, artificiality, construction, and ownership. The cyborg embodies a paranoia made comprehensible by its cousin, the protean alien. From the "face dancers" of Frank Herbert's *Dune Messiah* (1969), to *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine's* "changelings"¹⁴, the shape changer is a deceiver. It can masquerade as us, but it is not us - "us" being the normative subject of literary and extradiegetical domains that obtain in a particular social context. In the terminology of gender and race, "us" is the heterosexual, white male author/protagonist/reader - and the android is always villainous. Hence the cyborg who is neither or both is suspect. As Badley observes, the cyborg's problematic relationship with itself "is analogous to female subjectivity" (131). In *The Fly* (1958, Kurt Neumann; 1986, David Cronenberg), the protagonist, blended with equal parts insect - and, in the climax of the 1986 remake, machine - exhibits a female, cyborg consciousness as he

“identifies doubly as subject and object, body invader and colonized victim, norm and monster” (Badley, 131). In light of such an overstated dilemma over identity one can only be amazed at the obstinacy with which even modern chroniclers¹⁵ interpreting the text within the omnipresent culture of AIDS simply refuse to “get it.”

It is as members of this first order of cyborg bodies that the protagonists of Delany’s *Trouble on Triton* and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* initially make themselves recognizable. Helstrom, the Woody Allen-esque anti-hero of *Triton*, enters the narrative as a cyborg only on a technicality: he has a cosmetic implant, an obscurely racy gold fillet that replaces one eyebrow (*Triton* 7). However, increasingly conflicted by insecurities regarding his own subjectivity as a man, Helstrom ultimately turns to technology to solve his problems by transforming body and mind. Similarly, Rat Korga, non-hero of *Stars*, is a not-quite survivor of an apocalyptic holocaust. With much of his body destroyed, Rat is resuscitated and refitted with prosthetic eyes. Again personifying a particularly twentieth-century angst, Rat has previously addressed his own social dysfunctionality by having his brain re-wired—that is to say, effectively lobotomized. As part of his re-birth, he is outfitted with a prosthetic intelligence, in the form of a selection of cybernetic rings that can be mixed and matched at will.

Notwithstanding the force of implications of the machine/human hybrid, what is equally critically fecund in these figures extends beyond the basic definition of “what a cyborg *is*” to “what it really *means* to be a cyborg.” In this, it is not Helstrom’s physical transformation but the psychological befuddlement that accompanies it that matters. Similarly, while Rat Korga inhabits a body reconstituted as invention, it is not the nature

but the fact of his embodiedness that makes his experience as a cyborg relevant. In short, what is at issue here is not so much the cyborg but the implications of a cyborg *identity*. The cyborg represents, among other relationships, the union of machine and mind, perceived in the humanist and patriarchal imagination as the penetration of mind by machine. In other words, it represents the colonization of subject by the domains of the Other, the negation of which is so necessary to maintaining a stable subjecthood. This provokes what may be almost distinctively a Western protest. Even while insisting on the physicality of the cyborg, Haraway qualifies the apparently not-so-intractable terms of her own definition,

Linguistically and materially a hybrid of cybernetic device and organism, a cyborg is a science fiction chimera [...] but a cyborg is also a powerful social and scientific reality in the same historical period. Like any important technology, a cyborg is *simultaneously a myth and a tool, a representation and an instrument, a frozen moment and a motor of social and imaginative reality*. [Italics mine](Haraway, qtd. in Gray 1)

Accordingly, the cyborg is, variously, both hybrid and negational: anti-romantic, anti-foundational, at once transgressive/transgressed. “Cyborg Manifesto” ultimately concerns itself more with the politics of identity than the constitution of body. Finding in the cyborg a symbol for problematizing the authority of the male subject, Haraway seems to embrace it as an *anti-salvatory* salvation figure (150-51), a non-creation capable of refuting the historical claims of male subjectivity to own and order human experience through the tyrannies of originary fictions. Her embrace of the cyborg in the seminal

1985 essay is unabashedly optimistic and hopeful.

However, the cyborg offers to do more than merely re-situate the power of the Father in the lived experience of women. While Haraway has defined the cyborg as the product of organism and technology, or of two different organisms, even this minimal insistence on categories is troubled by the contingency of signification - technology becomes increasingly soft in the twentieth-century. Haraway opens up the definition of the cyborg to include constituting elements such as modern cultural formative processes in place of material technology, and specific categories of identity in place of the discrete organism. Following such an arc of piercing association, it is possible to extend the cyborg as a bar over whole categories of identity in the twentieth-century:

'women of colour' might be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities and in the complex political-historical layerings of her bio-mythography. ("Cyborg Manifesto" 174)

Ultimately, then, the cyborg forces us to reconsider the claims of human subjects to discrete identities, because the cyborg is itself an indiscretion in both the denotative and suggestively *social* connotative sense of what it means to be indiscrete. We remember that Haraway theorizes the cyborg as interstitial, liminal: impure, excessive, without telos; it figures modalities that are transgressive, liminal, dangerously hybrid. Hence, acting to cross borders and nullify prohibition, cyborgs are about kinship, the intimate, the immediate, and the rough, messy and imprudent mixing of bodies and of selves.

Delany, in a critical response to Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," is attracted to

these models of cyborg implications as an operating principle for deconstruction and reconceptualization. Insisting on the double resonance of Haraway's language, Delany opens the artifactual nature of the cyborg *as construct* to include "to build, to create from former materials" and "to construe, to understand, to analyze, to tear down into its constituent parts" (98), thereby recuperating cyborg identity from foreclosure by the rigid categories that are implicated and enforced by the oppositional terms of the "standard" definition. He legitimizes the associative theorizing of both Haraway and himself by tracking the cyborg's identification with "construction" through material to conceptual construction. Both, as Delany insists, share a border that is

nowhere near as clear as even a first deconstruction would have had us suppose: it is a truly dangerous one, and must be negotiated with great vigilance.

It is a boundary line.

It is an abyss.

Over it let us place the cyborg. ("Reading at Work" 100)

In *Triton* (1976), Delany anticipates Haraway's questioning of the precarious relation between the cyborg and any kind of stable identity, as the protagonist's dilemma consists in his own confusion over boundaries. In his later essay on "Manifesto," Delany counters Haraway's optimism by identifying the cyborg as post-feminist, post-modern, conflictual, anti-oppositional, chaotic, heterodox and both extrinsic to and estranged from categorization. Like some innocent tribes encountered by anthropologists earlier in this century, cyborgs occupy a dangerously, wonderfully compromised subject position: one

that will have no truck with the privileged, alienating “I”. But unlike the unhappy tribesmen, who were to be bowled over by television, Nikes, and the avaricious “moi”, the cyborg is “post-moi”, absolutely corrupted, immune to the seductions of the unassailable ego or the privileges of subjecthood.

This body provokes the questions explored by all the romantics through Shelley, is exemplified by the strange nativity and “coming out” of Frankenstein’s creature as the first cyborg, and achieves its fruition as “post-human” in the transsexual, transgenic bodies of Delany’s post-masculine characters. The artifactual product of old religions of humanist discourse, the universalized human subject was constructed as transcendent. The cyborg’s twentieth-century identity is hopelessly mired in its specificity. It recalls Hurley’s claim for the Gothic, that it is about exploring and responding to a generalised anxiety linked to a crisis of integrated subjectivity growing out of the reductive narratives of scientific discourse. Through its imbrication in a crisis of identity, replete with anomalous figurations of transgressive selves, the Gothic operates through an abject association with non-self through specificity, body, and excess, and hence through troubling social taboos against incest, miscegenation, and homosexuality - all essentially modalities of transgression. It is significant, then, that Linda Badley sees the cyborg body as enacting contemporary post-modern angst over identity, in effect a *Science Fiction Gothic*, oozing the psychasthenia of the post-modern as post-human.

Notes:

1. Both Silverman and Haraway (*Modest Witness*) have offered examples of a paradigmatic masculine subjectivity that is founded upon a triumvirate of assumptions ranging from associations with the mind (as opposed to the gross body), and universality (as opposed to *situatedness*, in a limited cultural or racial experience), and the discrete (as opposed to the indiscrete, with its connotations of *impurity*).
2. Suvin argues, in "Science Fiction and the Novum," that "*SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional novum (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic.*" In the narrative emphasis that Suvin seems to remove from the human subject as centre of the mainstream literary text and re-situate in the *novum* in the SF text, his discussion resonates with the comments of Delany and Russ (already noted in my Chapter One). 141-158.
3. Both Delany and Haraway go beyond discussion of the cyborg as a "human/machine" and track its implications for human subjectivity: Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs" identifies the cyborg as a problematic albeit promising feminist icon, while the engagement with Haraway's essay that Delany stages in "Reading at Work" suggests for the cyborg rather a more ambiguous significance based on his argument that the cyborg will always represent incompleteness.
4. According to Lawlor, "Freud could well have used either novel to supplement his remarks on *Oedipus the King* as an illustration of repressed infant sexuality and its consequences." (249)

5. Hurley notes that Lombroso's standardized model of a "fully human" subject "was the white European Adult Male". (94)
6. Hurley refers to "the Victorian impulse toward classification and a subsequent normalization of the possibilities – bodily, subjective, sexual – of human identity" that had the effect of undermining the ideologically entrenched model of Man as substantially and spiritually separate from and superior to nature. (8)
7. Hurley's uses Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and Hodgson's *The Crew of the Lansing* to exemplify the "abhuman" as "interstitial", crossing the categories of human and animal. Interestingly, both situations present the liminal figure of the "abhuman" as an anomaly that is bounded and contained geographically, by the sea. (24)
8. Silverman traces the history of post-World War II films which examined the returning soldier as the site of displaced authority/political castration, with the recent example of German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder who presents the male subject as stripped of agency and objectified under the female gaze; perhaps not coincidentally, in one film the subject thus disenfranchised is a man of colour, and the double displacement into the historical position of woman as object of the sexually interested gaze approximates the historical Other as victim of a colonizing Western subject. (52 – 156)
9. Haraway adopts the "trope" to describe concepts that function as figures that operate on literal levels at the same time that they inflect discussion and discourse with a wide range of associations; "figures must involve at least some kind of displacement that

- can trouble identifications and certainties”. (*Modest Witness* 11)
10. Incidentally, Macdonald and Scherf link the close family unit with a “more egalitarian and less bourgeois” reading of the domestic ideal presented by Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. (16)
 11. Calling on Freud’s theory that trauma consists of the mind’s inability to deal with events that interrupt coherent experience, Caruth describes the individual’s fixation on the traumatic moment as the result of the mind’s abrupt exposure to an unassimilable experience, “a break in the mind’s experience of time.” (57-72)
 12. Shelley offers her reader few details of the actual assembly of Frankenstein’s project, other than to intimate that he “collected bones from charnel houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame”. (83)
 13. In a fine example of the associative arcs that mark Haraway’s text, and the operation of *tropes* in her text, Haraway identifies the transgenic mouse, which is genetically tailored to develop human breast cancer, and so play a role in cancer research, as both her sibling – a kind of half (-human) sister – and a Christ-figure, owing to the laboratory destiny for which it has been created. (*Modest Witness* 79)
 14. Both aliens possessed of a protean ability to metamorphose into what they are not, their association with ambiguity and threat has persisted across the years separating publication of Herbert’s classic series and the airing of the television series.
 15. Applauding Cronenberg’s film as an entertaining rendition of an otherwise “hoary theme” John Clute seems to overlook the implicit links between deadly infection and boundaries of the body/ blood, etc. that proliferate through the text of *The Fly* as well

as other films that problematize the human body as grotesque and ultimately vulnerable to invasion and corruption. What seems like blatant allegory to Linda Badley (128) is opaque to Clute (7).

CHAPTER THREE: LONGING AND METAMORPHOSIS

In its preoccupation with the inner life of the subject, Western literature tacitly enforces the epistemological dichotomies that subsume racialized, feminized identity into and under the subordinate term of the body. According to Delany, the “interpretive conventions” of Western literature have been historically “organized, tyrannized even, by what, in philosophical jargon, you could call ‘the priority of the subject’. Everything is taken to be about mind, about psychology” (*Silent Interviews* 31). Literary tradition thus reinforces patterns of secretion and exclusion that trope Gothic representation and seem to anticipate as much as they might even be said to necessitate the particular compass of SF - *in its representations of nonhumans and abhumans* - as a response. While it remains the purpose of mainstream literature to portray a subjectivity that - like Cesare Lombroso’s ideal human subject (Hurley 94) - takes as its standard the European white male, it falls to SF (among other paraliteratures) to explore the orders of experience and identity implicitly and commonly excluded from and by that same subject. As a “paraliterature,” SF is generically similar to Gothic fiction. When Delany suggests that SF, as distinct from Western literary traditions, “is a representation of ... a complex codic system by which the codic system we call “object” [...] can be richly criticized --- unto its overlap with the subject” (32), he sets up SF as a venue where the white male subject is displaced as *the* site of critical attention, and other, contending subjectivities may be explored in its place. If mainstream literature is dedicated to portraying the *interiority* of the subject, then the representation of *exteriority* – the object, the Other, the *gross matter*

of bodies – must be consigned to the outside margins of literary representation. As an area of *Gothic* alterity, the margins include the categories of race and gender as they have been sloughed onto a particular body, one that is diseased, infectious and corrupt: the *abhuman* of the Victorian Gothic, the cyborg of SF Gothic. In the cyborg, selfhood is an effect of constructedness, the corruption of “natural” boundaries of the human body. As far as questions of a cyborg subjectivity go, then, interiority becomes a question of matter over mind.

Recent critical discussion surrounding the body is *troped* - that is to say, informed and inflected - by a dynamic, even aggressive, principle of ambiguity that further unites the idea of self and corporeality. This takes the form of a “torsion” in Elizabeth Grosz’ figurations of the body. Situating identity *in* the body rather than maintaining a dualistic opposition between the two, she adopts the model of the Möbius strip to figure a subjectivity that

[shows] inflection of mind into body and body into mind, the ways in which, through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another....the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside. (xii)

In this model, identity is not arranged along one side of an intersection of dichotomous values. Rather, the historical polarities of mind and body become aspects of the same continuous substance of being. A similar tortuous movement describes Julia Kristeva’s reaction to the *abject* as an oscillating action. Kristeva’s unsettling movement between fascination and dread in response to abject (1) echoes Grosz’ description of an

“uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside.” Like the intimations of corruption that inhere in the SF Gothic figure of the cyborg as vampire-like, Kristeva’s oscillation and Grosz’ torsion seem to insist on a vexing of human boundaries. This figural motion associated with being-in-the-body helps illuminate the body in two modes: as transgressive and transgressed, and as in flux. Rather than the indeterminacy of irresolution, I believe this vacillation indicates a more fluid dynamism that insists on constant play between positions. As such, the trope supplies a critical frame for discussing the movement of the cyborg body from “degradation to splendor,” a movement in Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* that Russell Blackford has questioned as highly suspect, but which I wish to identify as hopeful, describing an arc that carries the Gothic *abhuman* from Freudian associations with the death drive to a rebirth of sorts, as erotic.

Delany’s work, in part, consists of refiguring maleness/the masculine within the terms of female knowledge, a “body criticism” that is also engaged in by feminist critics such as Kristeva and Grosz and—more recently—Deborah Covino.¹ The reconsideration of the body in this way enables a confrontation with a patriarchal order; according to Grosz,

[while] one body (in the West, the white, youthful, able, male body) takes on the function of model or ideal, the human body, for all other types of body, its domination may be undermined through a defiant affirmation of a multiplicity, a field of differences, of other kinds of bodies and subjectivities. (19)

The subjectivity of the Other that has been consigned to *abjection* through being subsumed in the body is recuperated and revalued in the violated and reconstituted person of *Rat Korga*.

Drawing on Kristeva's theory of the *abject*, Deborah Covino suggests an aesthetics of repulsion. Through disengagement and revisioning, the *abject* and repulsive become sublime. Before starting the recuperative work of reconceptualizing the body of the *abject*, however, it is necessary to deal with the body ideal of the white male subject that defines the Other through negation. The project of exploring and dismantling the particular subjectivity of the heterosexual white male lies at the centre of *Trouble on Triton*, where, according to Delany,

a certain masculine psychology, treated as a social object, is analyzed down into its conflicting elements until it can no longer be radically distinguished from a certain "femininity" that men begin by defining and distinguishing as wholly apart from and supplementary to the masculine.

(*Silent Interviews* 214)

Triton figures a distinctively twentieth-century masculinity in crisis. Through the dismantling of Helstrom, whom Kathy Acker has likened to a modern Orpheus, Delany addresses and deconstructs the "tyranny" of the "universalized" Western white male subject along with the order of the dominant fiction that underwrites it.

Orpheus Agonistes

Kaja Silverman links a crisis of masculinity in the twentieth-century to the

disruption of the “dominant fiction” that underpins the masculine subject by a cultural trauma:

The notion of historical trauma represents ... an attempt to conceptualize how history sometimes manages to *interrupt* or even *deconstitute* what a society assumes to be its master narratives and immanent Necessity... (55)

Starting with the traumatic experience of World War II, Silverman cites the subsequent recovery period as one in which the serial assumptions underwriting the paradigm of male subjectivity began to collapse. At the centre of this crisis is the destabilizing effect of a historical trauma that

brings a large group of male subjects into such an intimate relation with lack that they are at least for the moment unable to sustain an imaginary relation with the phallus, and so withdraw their belief from the dominant fiction. Suddenly the latter is radically de-realized, and the social formation finds itself without a mechanism for achieving consensus. (55)

Tracing a film tradition of the late forties and fifties that demonstrates symbolic castration as shaping a particular post-war male subjectivity, Silverman claims that the traumatic experience of the homecoming soldier dislodges the premises of coherence and control upon which the commensurability of phallus and penis are founded. Moreover, she refers to the “physical or psychic wound” that marks the homecoming soldier after the experience of war (52). In the aftermath of war trauma, the veteran is figured as the site of loss and lack. Into this breach can be factored the continuing stresses attributable to liberatory movements (feminist, gay, non-white) that seek to displace further the

historical link between penis and phallus. The hero of postwar cinema that Silverman examines is “dislodged from the narratives and subject positions which make up the dominant fiction, and he returns to them only under duress” (53). Nevertheless, the cinematic tradition Silverman cites does effect, by and large, a return, albeit one that qualifies the subject as dependent on the supporting fiction².

According to Silverman, the war also transforms the security of the familiar, as she notes that soldiers return home to find their remembered environments somehow altered, and their niches filled or missing altogether: “sometimes the veteran also finds himself strangely superfluous to the society he ostensibly protected during the war” (53). The effect is thus doubly one of castration: the soldier is removed from his alignment with phallic authority, and his place in the dominant fiction of society is marked by an absence.

The portrayal of a white male subject framed by war in *Trouble on Triton* pits itself against the qualified recuperation of the phallus that is usually allowed in the post-war film. When Helstrom struggles to restore the coherence of his own dominant fiction, striving to recast the events of his short participation in conflict so that the alignment of penis and phallus is recuperated (so that he is revealed as a hero rather than a passive bystander), the absolute contingency of a white male subjectivity on the narrative of the hero is revealed through a merciless process of dismantling.

The idea of war - also central to twentieth-century narratives - as critical and decisive is undermined in *Triton* as war is reduced to its abstract parts. There are no weapons or sweeping armies in evidence in the story, and prolonged battles that provide

the discourses of war with its vocabulary of sacrifice and heroism are edited. In a telling correspondence with twentieth-century experience, the War between planets and moons is condensed to war's lasting effect in the information age: an ultimately annoying proliferation of clichéd and urgently pointless propaganda (60-61) mixed with infrequent over-intellectualizing rationalisations on the part of bored spectators. This is one of the faces of war in the technologized latter twentieth-century that is casually effaced by more historically eloquent representations of the soldier as somehow sole actor and participant. In contrast to the figure of the "universal soldier" is the anonymous spectator: televised war is simultaneously omnipresent and abolished from Western life. It occupies the centre of the living room at suppertime. At the same time, the candid, live shots of death and dying, human mixed with architectural debris, constitutes only the rumour of war for the average North American viewer. A different face of war is more intimate and, in the discourse of the dominant fiction itself, more legitimate in the novel. The experience of war as in-the-Real is explored when the artificial gravity that supports the city of Tethys is sabotaged and the resulting ballooning collapse of gravity crushes buildings and bodies indiscriminately (194-196).

Silverman cites Freud's "fort-da" example in which a child assumes mastery over trauma by changing his role from passive to active (57)³. The "instinct for mastery" is played out by Helstrom as he tries to reconstitute the penis/phallus correspondence through re-ordering events, and later through his decision to remake his body. As I will note later, Helstrom's actions are compulsive, each act (with its concomitant failure) leading him to dismantle more of himself in an increasingly delirious quest for an

essential selfhood that eludes him. Paradoxically, this is not to be perceived as a surrender of agency, inasmuch as the “woman” authored by Helstrom can never be more than a fiction. Ironically, Helstrom’s “transsexualization” of himself represents a radical attempt at owning the other through mastery, this time through appropriation and assimilation.

The wounding affect of war on the white male subject that Silverman alleges is also exemplified as Helstrom is traumatized by his arrest and interrogation on Earth (135-140) and the rescue of Audri from the ruins of her commune on Triton (207-210). Helstrom’s response is to revise the circumstances of each incident in his imagination so that they become examples of a solitary and exclusively masculine heroism, despite the fact that he has been a passive - even remarkably clueless - victim in the first instance, and more of a coward and a hindrance than anything else in the second. Helstrom is not a participant in his own life but a victim. However, in an attempt to recuperate the “manly script” that is necessary to his own identity, he is forced to straddle the truth of the situation as he experiences it, and to re-order it.

In his efforts to escape harm, he blunders into an elderly gay friend who is, himself, a testament to the unbinding of the terms of the dominant fiction through his role – whether or not Helstrom chooses to acknowledge it – as advisor to Helstrom and independent agent. Rather than admit to his panic and cowardice, however, Helstrom insists that he had been looking for the old man, Lawrence, all along, in order to ensure his safety. The presumption that the elderly homosexual must need to be rescued by the patriarchal agency of the white male subject is implicit in Helstrom’s behaviour.

However – while Lawrence readily expresses his anxiety – the illusion of mastery that Helstrom seeks to maintain is undermined when it becomes obvious that of the two men, Helstrom is the more shaken and unreliable. When Lawrence dawdles in his exit from the ruined building that is his home, Helstrom – far from feeling heroic -- would readily abandon him and only hesitates out of fear for himself and “the growing realization that, despite his desire to be somewhere else, he had nowhere to go” (204). It is Lawrence who insists on looking for Helstrom’s boss, Audri, and her family (205). Helstrom is press-ganged into activity by the older man, and his subsequent role in discovering and “rescuing” the woman and her children and friends is accidental. In the aftermath of the conflict, however, faced with his own inadequacy, Helstrom insists on manufacturing for himself a heroic role: he rescripts the entire episode. Re-casting himself as initiator of the rescue, he tells Lawrence,

I don’t want to make a big thing of it; but, well, when I wanted to come back here, to check out you, and Audri and the kids.... I’m not saying it took a *lot* of ingenuity; but it took some. And in a time of social crisis, somebody’s got to have that kind of ingenuity, if just to protect the species, the women, the children—yes, even the aged. And that ingenuity comes out of the aloneness, that particular male aloneness. (216)

So saying, Helstrom seeks both to perpetuate the dominant fiction in which a “manly” white male subject proves his masculinity by risking sacrifice for the good of the community and to secure his own role in that fiction. While reluctantly conceding the wound enforced by historical trauma, Kaja Silverman reiterates the necessity of that

castration as a male sacrifice.⁴ Castration is a Christlike wound, and Helstrom is castrated by war and by himself — we could say that he demands castration as a necessary badge of the fiction of war and of the hero. Notwithstanding his efforts to recuperate masculinity, the harder Helstrom tries to reconceptualize his role to assume a centrality for the male, the more he discloses the gap around which male subjectivity is organized.

Freud associated the death drive with the helpless compulsion to repeat that stigmatizes the victim of trauma.⁵ Silverman agrees, maintaining,

male mastery rests upon an abyss, and ... the repetition through which it is consolidated is radically and ceaselessly undermined by a very different and much more primordial kind of repetition - by that insistence within the present of earlier traumas that I have associated with the death drive. (65)

In *Triton*, the compulsion to recoup a subjectivity that is white, male, and autonomous, through mastery, results in what Silverman calls “psychic disintegration - the disintegration, that is, of a bound and armored ego, predicated upon the illusion of coherence and control” in war (62), and is therefore revealed finally as thanotic.

“the torment that confusion may generate amid a plenitude of possibilities”

In the prelude to and aftermath of war in *Trouble on Triton*, Delany explores the illusion of masculinity based on phallogocentric paradigms of subjectivity through the tensions generated between Helstrom’s increasingly fragile white male subjectivity and the constructedness of identity that he strives to deny. This is basically a tale of love lost; Kathy Acker calls it a “conversation about the possibilities of being human” (xii). It is a

conversation that circles questions of identity. Different conceptualisations of identity in the novel are organized according to whether one lives on a planet or a moon. On the planets of Earth and Mars, society is organised along the lines of gender. Perhaps because the planets were the first to support permanent urban populations, they adhere to more traditional, oppositional ontologies that originate in Western history. Perhaps also, owing to the fact that they are peopled by pioneers and the descendents of pioneers who have voluntarily relinquished their planetary origins along with their citizenship, lunar societies are more egalitarian, even unto the point of a controlled political anarchy.

Coming from a planet, Helstrom clings to blanket assumptions about sex and gender that reflect a history of patriarchally inflected humanism. His life experiences include his past career as a prostitute on a world where only men are legally permitted to sell their bodies, so that his particular subjectivity has been shaped by the experience of having been the sexual object and “boy-toy” of legions of predatory older women known as “roaring-girls.” Even though society on Mars seems to subvert the patriarchal power structures that seem to linger either in practice or in the remnants of labels and gender roles on Earth, the asymmetries of Martian power which are still based on gender and wealth seem merely to resituate the phallus, not efface it. Inasmuch as the phallus as a signifier of power orders the politics of opposition that rule the societies of Earth and Mars, Helstrom personifies a phallogentric male subjectivity. Having thus been shaped by hierarchical economies of sexual commodification and gender-based power inequities, Helstrom requires difference and, more pointedly, a *power differential* to affirm his sense of masculine identity. As the product of a sexual economy founded on opposition and

asymmetrical power, Helstrom structures identity and measures worth along the axes of difference and power. His own identity has to be arranged along these axes just as his desire to affirm his freedom necessarily demands a reversal of the subordinate role he once occupied. Subjecthood for Helstrom absolutely requires sexual power over an opposite. Hence, he is attracted to women under his power, strives to exercise power over women he is attracted to, defines himself by subtle attempts at sexual subjugation of the other, and has no capacity to relate to the gay or the lesbian because neither one of those identities can be placed in that special relationship to himself of oppositional gender and power. Even though, as a citizen of Tethys, Helstrom is absolutely free to be anyone he wants to be, he is chained by a needy insecurity that insists upon being propped in its illusory authority by the presence of the Other.

In Triton's lunar city of Tethys, gender is fluid and conditional, and woman is not conceptualised as the opposite of man. Tethys' society represents a diffuse and prolific sexual economy that is not organised around binary opposition, sex, or gender. Of the "forty or fifty basic sexes, falling loosely into nine categories" (*Triton*, 99) that make up this hybrid society, Robert Elliot Fox has counted "four homophilic and five heterophilic, and individuals can, if they so choose, alter their race, gender, and sexual preferences through surgery" (43). Significantly, in Tethys, relatively few surgeries are performed with the purpose of changing a person's physical sex and the complex operation required to give a man functioning vagina, clitoris and womb is categorised as cosmetic (220). Somewhat ahead of time, Delany seems to be mindful of Judith Butler's proposition that

Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction [which presumes the

intractability of sex and the constructedness of gender] suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders.

Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that “women” will interpret only female bodies. ...*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (6)

Tritonian gender does not follow from sex. Sex is not a given. In Tethys, only 70 percent of babies born are borne by women (*Triton* 209). Perhaps the reason that most of the people who elect to undergo a sex change are from Earth or Mars is that on the relatively egalitarian moons, where there is no normative link between sex and gender, there is no wrong configuration of sex and gender (220).

Helstrom is thrown into a crisis because he doesn't really have an opposite of any kind against which to measure himself. The largely egalitarian and relatively benign heterotopia of Tethys doesn't respond to his attempts to make himself legible according to his native grammar. In the midst of a society in which every individual is supposedly free to explore any predilection, where men can be women and women can be men, where there are places for jaded children whose sexual preferences run to middle aged and elderly partners and places for masochists who need to meet sadists - in short, where status is assumed and always in flux rather than assigned and fixed - he is conspicuously out of place. Owing to the irreconcilability of his rigid expectations and Tethys' myriad possibilities, Helstrom's particular trouble must consist in his not understanding what

constitutes a “readable gender” on Triton. In this respect, *Trouble on Triton* is frequently “a comedy of manners.” According to Fox, “One of *Triton*’s persistent themes...is the torment that confusion may generate amid a plenitude of possibilities” (44). Such is the dilemma that plagues Helstrom.

Against the backdrop of Helstrom’s fumbling attempts to assert his authority, Delany enriches the dialectical play in the text through the use of structuring chronotopes that mirror the confrontation of the two economies of gender and sexuality. Where Mikhail Bakhtin claimed for the chronotope a diagetically organising function arrayed along the neatly intersecting axes of space and time in the generic novel (84), Delany borrows and uses the chronotope as one axis of identity in *Triton*. The motifs of metamorphosis and longing in the novel provide the point of departure for an examination of both the body *of* the text and the bodies in it.

Metamorphosis, as it describes Helstrom’s transformation into a woman, ironically seems to reinforce the assumptions of phallogentrism. In his essay on chronotope, Bakhtin frequently links the trope of metamorphosis to telic themes of retribution and redemption or crisis and rebirth (115-119). The reader will recognize in Helstrom’s decision to change his sex an attempt to contest the authority of the so-called natural and to appropriate *telic* agency for himself. However, when a frustrated and forlorn Helstrom subjects his body and mind to the radical procedures that will make him a woman, trading testes for ovaries, he enters into the realm of real trouble on Triton. The boundaries of gender are transgressed and blurred not because Helstrom has become a woman, *but because he can’t*. Despite the profundity of this transformation, we never

lose our sense of Helstrom as a man, and neither, we suspect, does s/he. As Helstrom's counsellor warns her/him, the identity of a woman is founded on having owned a woman's body and the concomitant experience of being a woman from birth: "we cannot make you have been a woman for all the time you were a man" (251). Regardless of his/her refixations, the remnants of Helstrom's old identifications and Helstrom's new body suggest an imperfect blending of the material and the immaterial.

Hence, significantly, the role of technology in facilitating this rebirth is a cyborg transgression. The cyborg is initially reflected in Delany's novel in bodies that are rearranged, changed, and enhanced *by* technology. Members of a religious cult systematically perfect and then mortify their flesh through carefully maintained disease and voluntary mutilation (95). A severely retarded man attains functionality through the addition of cybernetic prostheses that augment his mental capacities (24). Individuals who wish to explore and transform friendships may have their sexual orientation readjusted if they wish to, and reversed if they lose interest. Men can modify their breasts to produce milk if they want to nurse children. These are all offered both as images of constructedness and of freedom. In the heterotopia, we are reminded that "the subjective is held politically inviolable" (277).

Eventually and essentially, as all of these examples point to a transformed subjectivity, it becomes apparent that the real cyborg is not the body, but the identity that is constructed by culture. In a phallogentric economy such as that represented by Helstrom, this results in the wrapping up of woman in a question. According to Simone de Beauvoir, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman...It is civilisation as a whole

that produces this creature... which is described as feminine” (267). Accordingly, in Butler’s words, “only the feminine gender is marked [and] the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated, thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendent personhood” (9). This would seem to describe Helstrom’s own alienation-inflected ontology - especially when both before and after her/his physical transformation, s/he extols the idea of a particular “male aloneness” that gives rise to ingenuity and the perfection of the species (216) - and her/his concomitant conviction that life must have been simpler and humanity better off when it was just plain old “mankind.”

While Helstrom’s performance as/of woman seems to exemplify the idea that “women are the negative of men and the lack against which masculine identity differentiates itself” (Butler 9-10), his attempt to realise a feminine subjectivity suggests that, in his system of conceptualising women’s difference, there is no room for feminine identity at all other than as an illusion constituted by the masculine subject. As his counsellor reminds him, “you were a woman made *by* a man. You are also a woman made *for* a man” (254). The subjectivity of woman not only *is not*, but *cannot be* conceptualised by Helstrom. We need to remember Kathy Acker’s claim that the narrative of *Trouble on Triton* follows a “trajectory from ‘unknown’ to ‘unknowable’” (x). As a woman, Helstrom experiences a psychological turmoil, finding her(him)self constantly in a muddle. Significantly, s/he finally acknowledges her/his proclivity for lying or, if you will, for re-ordering events to privilege her/his own place in them, but instead of recognizing it as a lifelong practice, s/he blames it on her/his new-found

gender:

Were women just less truthful than men? All right: Was *she* less truthful as a woman than she had been as a man? Very well, then that's just one more thing I need a man to do—to tell the truth for me! (277)

S/he interprets her/his emotionalism as a weakness that s/he in turn attributes to the fact that s/he is now a woman. But *women* - and most particularly women in Tethys - do not share these attributes. The behaviours that Helstrom ascribes to *her* gender are, ironically, perfectly attributable to *his* gender, as his past attempts to revise his status as victim and bystander indicate. As Helstrom's counsellor suggests, Helstrom - as a man - has supplied the female Helstrom with an identity that was conceived and constructed by a man (*Triton* 251). Moreover, when Helstrom assumes a cyborg body *she* must confront the truth of *his* subjectivity - that being that s/he is entirely made. With that truth comes the realisation that s/he does not know how to unmake her(him)self.

Ultimately, Helstrom realises the truth and the paradox of a cyborg identity: longing. Although s/he can assume the physical body of woman, s/he cannot appropriate an identity that is shaped by a lifetime s/he has not experienced. S/he cannot be, wholly, woman. As Acker points out, although Helstrom can assume the body of a female, s/he cannot have a history s/he has not lived (xii). This precipitates a crisis that implicates again Helstrom's male-centred conceptions of identity and of the lack of subjectivity of the "Other." Helstrom assumes that to be a woman is merely to be the female sex. In lieu of a woman's subjectivity, s/he finds her(him)self struggling with one that is constituted of all the masculine expectations s/he carries with her/him. In this sense, perhaps

Helstrom does indeed succeed. S/he conjoins woman as sex, as material body, with a subjectivity that is entirely fictitious - constructed by the phallogocentric economy that the old Helstrom represents. In this respect, the reader witnesses the making of a perfect woman by the male subject. Thus Helstrom inherits from her(him)self an identity that is made by culture, made by man. Ironically, Helstrom as woman is conceptualised not only as opposite, but as opposite *to Helstrom* – s/he is doubly unviable in Tethys.

As Helstrom discovers, while the body has been remade as female, its experience cannot be unmade as male - in the same way that Helstrom cannot assume a history s/he has never lived, s/he cannot efface the history s/he now owns. The body that has been reconstructed is cyborg and conundrum, as much a product of technology as of man's desire, and so, again, is doubly not-woman. The interruption of transformation attendant on Helstrom's discovery of the instability of his cyborg identity represents a permanent displacement of identity. The possibility of metamorphosis, with its Bakhtinian cachet of teleological rebirth and closure, is itself permanently foreclosed. Longing displaces any hope of restoration or wholeness of the masculine subject.

The subversive action of longing in Triton is tracked/articulated by Acker's claim about the trajectory of this story and its Orphic descent from the "unknown to the unknowable." It is heartbreaking action. It describes the movement of desire toward a perpetually deferred object: In the novel, the character of Sam is a large, black man who used to be a petite blonde waitress who was attracted to other blonde waitresses who were attracted to large black men. Helstrom covets Sam's identity as much as he covets Sam's body even before discovering Sam's past, and certainly before Helstrom's own

metamorphosis into a blonde woman. Similarly, Helstrom is attracted to Gene Trimbell (alias “the Spike,” an epithet that further plunders the Male subject of his phallic identity) who is a statuesque blonde woman and whose rejection of him precipitates his decision to become a statuesque blonde woman. Again: *Failing to find his ideal love object, Helstrom becomes her.*

With the movement of desire toward the absence that fuels it, and the erosion of rigid differences and exclusive categories of self that is intrinsic to the hybrid body of the cyborg, I note a backward turning cycle in the movement of desire. In a narcissistic collapse of discrete boundaries of identity, the borders separating lover and beloved, desire and its object, self and other, collapse/conflate into each other. This seems to be another one of the troubles confronting this cyborg on Triton.

The figure of the cyborg in *Triton* is the penetrated white male body that Cynthia J. Fuchs interprets as a particularly sexualized assault on the white male. Typically, according to Fuchs, the technology that forms a part of the cyborg pierces the body ideal of the historical subject in a feminizing gesture that turns inside out the orders of binary structures of authority. The cyborg body is colonizer and colonized, both hypermasculine phallus and penetrated body. Enigmatically signalling what Fuchs identifies as “a crisis of white masculine subjectivity,”

...The cyborg is a paradox of penetrability and reproduction, visible in the simultaneously pierced and projected [body] ... It offers an alternative, nonbinary model of subjectivity, one that allows self-relation and self-transgression in the creation of a new, incongruous, and multiple subjectivity. (282)

While allowing for the possibility of an “alternative, nonbinary model of subjectivity,” Fuchs nevertheless links the cyborg’s hybrid, self-penetrating embodiedness to male hysteria and the hysteric’s fear of loss of the body’s boundaries (285). This seems to aptly describe Helstrom’s Orphic dismantling of himself. However, Delany also fulfils the promise of a subjectivity of the cyborg body through the *abject*. Significantly, a decade after the deconstruction of a beleaguered white male subject in *Trouble on Triton*, Delany refigures the penetrated body of the cyborg as supplementarity,⁶ and retheorizes the subject as Rat Korga, in a movement that arcs away from the thanotic to the erotic. If, as Elizabeth Grosz insists, the body’s “orifices and surfaces can represent the sites of cultural marginality, places of social entry and exit, regions of confrontation or compromise,” (193) then Korga’s chewed and scarred, begrimed and oozing body is the radicalization of the male body in *Stars*, staging a response and a revolt against the body dismantled in *Trouble on Triton*. The death drive, as the spiral of aging, decay, decomposition, what Grosz refers to as the body’s “liability to collapse into ... outside” (193), is reversed, inverted through the figuration of the *abject* as abhuman as cyborg supplementarity, to become the erotic, a figuration of fluidity and mixing that reinvents life.

A “romance of ugliness, deformity and mutilation”⁷ and Covino’s Aesthetics of Repulsion

Like *Trouble on Triton*, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* is a love story. The survivor of a catastrophic planetwide holocaust, Rat Korga is rescued from the ruins

of his culture, miraculously repaired, and delivered into a strange new society where he is encountered by Marq Dyeth (pronounced “death”), an industrial diplomat who happens to be his perfect erotic match. However, Korga represents the cultural refuse of his own world, and through him Delany explores the marginal identities consigned to alterity as *abject*. Through his passage from the oppressive regimes of patriarchal Rhyonon in “A World Apart” to the distinctly gothicised warrens of Dyethshome on Morgre, the body of Korga is re-visioned in a movement that resonates with the oscillation that Julia Kristeva associates with the *abject*.

The world of Rhyonon (so similar to our own) is Victorian in its biases and in the operation of its biases. Consequently, Delany is Gothic in his strategies of representing the *abject*, and the culture of the *abject*. The “very beneficent” society’s hypocritical capacity for false compassion is evidenced by the “humane” systematization of slavery that recalls the “charitable” work houses of Dickensian London. A likewise Victorian fear of degeneracy and deviance is obvious in the despatch with which the social *abject* Korga is processed through *Radical Anxiety Termination*.⁸ Again, resonating with a Victorian moral empiricism, the practice of eugenics is routine: the ugly misfit Korga has been sterilized as an orphan (6-7). Enlightened professionals of either gender, and women in general, respond to their beneficent society by exercising a suicidal self-castration of identity. The alignment of self-annihilation with castration links volitional agency with ontological survival. Ultimately, the suicide that removes putative humanity from the subject is “therapeutic.” *Radical Anxiety Termination* removes pain not by locating and addressing its cause, but by excising the sensitive part of the subject that registers pain for

the individual and by excising the sensitive subject that represents pain for the society. While consigning the individual to refuse, the social organ remains inviolate.

Radical Anxiety Termination (the *RAT process*) manifests what Mary Kay Bray calls an “extreme capacity for dehumanization” (20), forcing the subject to lose social and bodily integrity, identity’s borders, by making the social *object* literally *object*. The *rat* becomes *abhuman* in the sense proffered by Kelly Hurley, and castrated through a penetration described by Fuchs. Because the individual has been biomedically altered from what was once a presumably normative subjectivity and because as a result of that intervention, s/he falls short of the autonomy that defines the normative subject, *man*, the rat is both *post-* and *not quite* “human”. Appropriately enough, the rat is re-marked as *abhuman* by a new epithet that acknowledges the conflation of the depersonalized human and the animal as both an object of contempt and as an instrument of industry. In the history of Gothic representation, the *abhuman* - through its very attenuated relation to the subject, is the animal; Korga is repeatedly associated with the animal - through his “horse-boned jaw” (4), and his atavistic ugliness. Delany balances a description of Korga’s ravaged hands against the prim reminder that the “technology of that world” includes lasers with its lathes (4) in a strategy that shows the organic *rat* to be intrinsically inferior to, and of lesser value than, the machine.

The very process through which Korga becomes a *rat* is chilling in its efficiency, from the press gang of the innocent into subjugation to the easy exploitation with which the new *rat* is immediately and casually consigned to slavery. After having rendered the boy inadequate to exercise authority over himself, the *RAT* Institute interviewer directs

him to consent to indenture by supplying his thumb print (6) - the legal guarantor of his free will and election, of the individual's authority and exercise of civil enfranchisement. This is a travesty in light of the fact that he can no longer form the intent necessary to surrender that authority nor the understanding to comprehend the action.

Interestingly, Delany's puts an ironic spin on Korga's treatment. His transformation is negligible - "he had never been much for denying what was told him with sufficient authority" (7) and "they hadn't changed who he was" (8). In this sense, again, the text throws the *teleological* nature that Bakhtin assigns to transformation into question as Korga metamorphoses into something ultimately not unlike himself. The product of change, in Rhyonon, is, if anything, a loss and a diminishment. The degeneration of the rat's lifestyle is immediate. Despite having lived in filthy conditions as a beggar and incompetent thief, now that he is a slave, his existence is significantly worse. At his most dissolute, in the past he was capable of responding to his body's demands for food or elimination. As a *rat*, he may languish in starvation, but cannot form the desire for food, and will not eat unless fed. The *rat's* state as refuse is accentuated by the comparative descriptions of Korga's extremity and of his man-made environment: shoeless, Korga leaves bare foot prints in the frost coating the decks of the installation where he works, although the pouch he is sometimes enlisted to carry is obviously an object of value (9). Here the slick machinery and apparatus of industry and commerce warrant careful maintenance while the devalued outcast of society is permitted to rot.

Delany's alignment of Korga with the cultural Other is carefully understated.

Rather than openly cite gender or race, Delany deftly suggests or establishes correlatives. The experience of women in Rhyonon's society is never explicitly commented on. Korga hears, without reflection, that women consign themselves more frequently to the oblivion of the *RAT* process, terminating their anxiety by terminating their ability to care (5), that women are mostly objects of resentment and contempt, that women who endure the hierarchised ranks of industry deconstruct their own successes by failing to perform convincingly as the Male Subject.

Moreover, while *rats* are rarely afforded the dignity of gender, when the text does occasion that they are described by sex, it turns out that most are women. When two *rat* trainers at the industrial complex called "Muct" are discussing *rats*, the default gender is feminine:

you tell a rat to take a shit, you gotta remember to tell 'er to pull her pants down first and then pull 'em up afterwards. Or you gonna have a rat with shitty pants.

... Man, I can get these damned rats to do anything a damned man can do. I can even get them to do things you wouldn't think a damned bitch could do. (15)

The repeated association of *rats* with filth is conflated with links that bind the woman and feces. Thus the *rat* is the doubly *abject* cultural Other. The tacit division of people into subject and Other along the lines of human and animal is both unquestioned and explicit:

Rat was what you called someone who'd been to the Institute: man was what you called someone who hadn't...Bitch, on that world, was what men

called women they were extremely fond of or extremely displeased with when the woman was not there. (10)

Korga is firmly situated in the margin that remains feminized and racialized, although the familiar markers of race are effaced and redrawn in the text of *Stars*. While there is no explicit link between skin colour and power - indeed, colour is so irrelevant as a marker of identity that - barring infrequent oblique asides - the reader rarely knows for sure what colour a character's skin is. Delany approximates race by offering as a correlative height rather than colour. Both are inheritable biological attributes. The issues of control and exclusion inhering in racial identities in Delany's day are here given expression through the correlative of the division of power and prestige on Rhyonon according to physical stature. Grotesquely tall in a world where small is beautiful - the majority of celebrity and power resides in short, compact bodies (7) - Korga is a member of a permanent underclass. Moreover, his refusal to confine himself to his own kind - he is a *microphile*, sexually aroused by people smaller than himself - is perceived as threateningly perverse. Small wonder that the young man should find himself sterilized with the onset of adolescence. And greater the irony, as the threat constituted by his miscegenistic impulses is mitigated at least in part by his homosexuality.

In another association that resonates with the epistemology of the Victorian era and gestures at the Victorian Gothic, *Rat* Korga is also explicitly the product of degeneration and disease: retarded as he is by pre-natal brain damage and scarred by a mutated herpes virus (3-4). Particularly in the context of the 1980s, Delany's choice of the latter signals the *abject's* link to sexual degeneracy and excess in a gesture echoing

the racialized paranoia of the 1880s that explicitly linked the other with atavism and corruption,⁹ and the homophobic panic surrounding the Aids epidemic of the 1980s. The paranoid buttress of the self against contagion or threat from outside is signified by - among other things - the fabulous masks that not only obscure the human features underneath but confront the viewer with an abstract spectacle of parts that remove any imagining of a coherent face underneath. The subject is doubly protected by refusing the viewer an opportunity to visualize a person. The *rats*, with their bare faces are at once unclothed in a manner that resonates with the degrading tactics of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave institutions, and unprotected from too close contact with contagion. Castrated by the technological intervention of the *RAT* process, Korga crosses two boundary lines, that dividing subject and object, and that dividing object and tool.

The insistence on subjectivity's integrity is ironic. While it is acceptable to expel Korga from the order of the subject altogether, his handlers will not consider an alternative process that would supply him with the mental acuity that he lacks, because—as his interviewer insists—“if we did, then you wouldn't really *be* you anymore, now would you” (4). The implicit white male subject would have been appropriated by another identity. It is better to annihilate the subject than to demonstrate its lack of fixity.

This fixity of the subject is a distinguishing characteristic of Rhyonon society. Social relations are organized by a rigid infrastructure of class and propriety that affords the privilege of full citizenship to men, grudgingly gives agency to women, places tall people in a subclass and punishes defectives through eugenics and the castration of the *rat* process. This fixity has been identified by Mary Kay Bray as static in both the

oppressive social structure of Rhyonon and of “the Family”, the one of two competing social orders in Marq Dyeth’s milieu that “leans toward stasis, the end of dynamic possibility, [and] ultimately death” in its rigid and exclusionary hierarchical structure (20). The failure to grow, or to accommodate change, has tragic consequences for the population of Rhyonon. Apparently suffering from the mysterious condition known as “Cultural Fugue,” the planet dooms itself.

In its stubborn spiral into planetary death, Rhyonon seems to consummate an entropic pattern that informs every aspect of its culture. Statistically, the death-by-rewiring that ends anxiety and the misery of social alienation in Rhyonon’s “pretty beneficent” society is more attractive to women, perhaps suggesting that the benefits of Rhyonon’s social congress are not appreciated by women to the same degree as by men. Ultimately, however, the ranks of people who resolve to opt out of society in this - ultimately self-destructive (or boundary-destructive) - manner are significant: “artists, scientists, politicians, [and] well-respected philosophical thinkers” (5). All creative professions, through their implied social productivity they are linked, along with women’s specific association with maternity, with the life instinct, *eros*. Ironically, they are all identities that seem to find themselves ill-fitted to appreciate the benefits of Rhyonon’s exploitative, hierarchical society. Through the implicit oppression of these identities, and its own identification with stasis, Rhyonon becomes ruled by the sign of death, *thanatos*. Thus, despite the explicit expulsion of the social misfit into the non-identity of the *rat*, the *rat*, *in turn*, through its association with entropic death as *abjection*, becomes the sign of Rhyonon.

The recuperation of the body that Delany stages in the movement from the social economy of Rhyonon to Morgre hinges on the dynamic principle mentioned earlier, in which an entropic tendency toward decay and death is exchanged for the self-perpetuating play of eroticism. This is marked by an oscillation between affects that provoke Russell Blackford's rather interesting claim that the credibility of the text is undermined by its moral ambiguity. In a commentary that seems to tacitly mirror the normalising subjectivity in opposition to which Delany's novel positions itself,¹⁰ Blackford questions the logic and morality that enable a refiguring of the degraded figure of Korga as erotic object.

In light of the easy acceptance of an excessively and impersonally brutal social order, the personal brutality of an enraged woman is condemned as excessive. Blackford seems to echo the consternation that the men of Rhyonon bring to exhibitions of female excess when he complains that, while the systemic brutality of Korga's existence in slavery provides "one version of degradation, or one touchstone for it" (28), what he really objects to is the activity of a sadistic woman, "the main action in this part of the novel" (28). Not unduly shocked by a society that consigns its misfits to starvation and deadly labour and that values their lives less than it values the canvas pouch that might carry something interesting (9), Blackford is offended by a scene in which a woman "wishes to be able to spit upon a man who has read all the books she has not" and finds that this represents the infliction of "what we might consider the most degrading experiences of all upon him" (29). For Blackford, the explicitly self-interested actions of a renegade woman - an apologetic sadist at that - are more objectionable than men's tacit

acceptance of institutionalized inhumanity, even when the latter is the more likely to result in nightmarish suffering and mortality. Moreover, Blackford takes umbrage at Delany's tactic of showing the moral ambiguity of the woman's actions. In exchange for her own pleasures, she offers Korga a device that enables him to read, to absorb a canon of literary works, it so happening that, as a result of the *RAT* operation, he lacks the filtering mechanisms that in another would hamper the speed and completeness with which he absorbs the information. Blackford's umbrage seems to take three points in this exchange, each serving to shed light on what seems to be a paranoia about boundaries that Delany is trying to make evident while illuminating the dynamic ambiguity that marks recuperative process in the text.

Beyond a general dissatisfaction with the portrayal of the sadistic woman, Blackford also finds problematic the premise of exchange under which the woman stages her activities. Troubled by the alignment of sexual predation with the suggestion of mitigating recompense, Blackford nonetheless seems only too willing to dismiss as negligible the pleasures of Korga's experience under the unstable logic of the rubric that if the end should not justify the means, then it follows that the woman must not be permitted (by Delany, by the logic of the text) to offer Korga anything resembling comfort, that Korga should not be allowed to enjoy or derive pleasure from the woman's action. Blackford's insistence on the unchangeability of the white and black hats in this scene denies Delany's equally obvious bid to show the autonomy of sexual desire from predefining moral character or to separate the politics of sexual desire from a colonizing morality. Interestingly, the sadistic woman is not the only such example in this part of the

text. At one point, Korga is confronted by an anonymous master who, sharing the rat's sexual affinity for men of a different physical stature, investigates the potential for a dalliance. Even though he is subsequently rejected for his height and ugliness, Korga is still rewarded with a gentleness and civility to which he is unaccustomed as the man addresses Korga directly and courteously (12, 13). The sexual predator is, paradoxically at least in the eyes of a moral sensibility such as Blackford's, capable of compassion unexampled elsewhere in the "very beneficent" social structure of Rhyonon.

Finally, Blackford complains that the science that both robs Korga of his volition and facilitates an enhanced learning ability must, by virtue of its ambiguity, be improbable: "Delany has so stipulated the technology, though it is all suspiciously convenient to his thematic purpose" (29). Notwithstanding that the whole idea of plot in Western literature to the twentieth-century tends to be convenient to a thematic purpose, Blackford's notion that technology must make possible only good or bad consequences but not both, particularly in light of the developments that produced agent orange and cancer research in the twentieth-century, is jejune. Blackford's position seems almost to typify the epistemological insistence on simple dichotomies that Delany targets.

Ultimately, ambiguity in *Stars* underscores the contingency (provisionality) of conditions of the subject. The *RAT* process that Korga experiences is described as "a total surround revealed -- or removed" (6), as a mechanism for filtering or discrimination is eliminated. The extinction of this barrier marks the collapse in Korga of the boundaries that buttress the integrity of the subject in the midst of the Other.

Abjection in "A World Apart" is a condition that signals the movement to death

of the dissolute subject, but what is degrading in the context of Rhyonon's exploitations becomes beneficent on Morgre. In Morgre's society all of the same attributes that marked decay become illuminated as an erotic and life-affirming exchange between subjects. The ambiguity between death and life, represented in the scenes that seem to knot around Korga's kidnapping in the desert, suggest the oscillation that Julia Kristeva assigns to the experience of contemplating abjection. The good/evil paradox that destabilizes our reception/understanding of the abuse of the slave by a sadistic woman (doubly Other), and the dubious technology of the *RAT* process is a correlative preparing the way for Delany's more daring proposition: that the loss of self is a recuperation of the identities demonized under the sign of the other. In a destabilizing tactic similar to that of the desert scene, Delany inverts the markers of degradation that he has set up in the first section of *Stars* to show that degradation wears the face of Janus. What is *abject*, when viewed from the other side repulsion, is revealed as sublime.

The *abject* body is reconceptualized in "Monologues" in a manner which recuperates the rat identity associated with waste. In a strategic movement which might suggest the *aversio*¹¹ in Deborah Covino's recuperation of the repulsive, as much as it resonates with a Kristevan oscillation between dread and fascination, this di(re)version of emphasis involves a simultaneous turning that is both away from, and toward. On Rhyonon, as we have seen, the *rat* is associated with the *abject* in several ways: as cultural *abject*, social *abject* and bodily *abject*. The *rat* is associated with bodily waste because she or he sleeps in his or her own excrement. Associated with disease and filth, excrement is the body's detritus shed and passing into death. Moreover, *Rat* Korga is

continually described in terms of detrital matter and waste. His clothing wears to rags and falls away from his body like dead skin. His fingers are gnawed to the quick, the dead matter of finger nail and cuticle torn away by his own teeth in an implied action that combines the shedding or excretion of dead matter and the implied spectacle of the *rat* eating (or at least masticating) his own body's refuse. The pits of his acne scars communicate the memory of pustules and corruption while the idea of damaged skin reinforces images of degeneration and detrital waste.

This is an image of the *abject* informed by the death drive, as the body loses itself in increments to death. The association of the *abject* with death is one that provokes uneasiness in the spectator. Linda F. Hogle has documented the operation of reconceptualizing identity through the – physical and conceptual – dismantling of an organ donor in a process that involves the deconstruction and reconstitution of the patient into “the production unit” in a “recasting of the death experience” (206). Hogle poses a troubling question: is this identity of the body as harvest an end to or a transformation of the subject who died? The degeneration of the body's integrity through death confers the same association on the blurring of the boundary of self with other. Susan Stewart describes the body's liminal edges of anus and mouth as borders between the social, or visible, exterior, and the unknowable interior (Stewart 104) just as Grosz suggests that interior and exterior represent the serpentine play of a single surface of the body. *Abject* materials like blood, feces, phlegm, etc. represent border crossings, “products of great cultural attention” (104).

While the difference between sexes and genders is drawn very clearly on

Rhyonon, among *rats* there is no explicit recognition of gender. In an ironic prefiguring of the insignificance of gender among people on Morgre, the *Rats* do not seem to possess a gender unless called upon to perform sexually, to be the objects of sexual desire. It becomes apparent that circumstances governing Korga's existence on Morgre are more than similar to those on Rhyonon. Delany presents Korga in both environments as *abject* and as erotic object. The recuperation of the Other in Korga depends upon the particular valence that transforms from the thanotic to the erotic.

Blackford refers to a paradoxical movement in *Stars* from "degradation to splendor" (40). What he decries as a suspiciously convenient wrinkle in the *RAT* process in fact implicates the ambiguity that Freud wrestled with when seeking to differentiate the death instinct from the life instinct. While the *rat* on Rhyonon sleeps in his own filth and this is evidence of his degradation, he is beatified through his association with waste on Morgre. The scars and bitten nails that had represented a damaged and decaying body are fetishized by Marq as erotic desiderata. After lovemaking, Korga's urine stains both lovers' hands as proof of the sharing of his body, of the recognition and negation of his body's boundaries (261). The crossing of the body's boundaries, a compromise of bodily integrity that corresponds with death in Rhyonon, is here an erotic exchange.

The transformation of cultural values that enables an exaltation of the *abject* is figured by the custom, on Morgre, of eating cloned human and Evelm flesh as a way of cultural sharing. In the twentieth-century cannibalism is prohibited by a cultural taboo that approaches claims to universality more nearly than any other prohibition; the ingestion of *abject* matter is as unacceptable as eating another person's feces. An unlikely

and elegant arc of associations that begins with cannibalism wends its way through the lesser “perversions” of coprophagia and coprophilia to the eroticisation of Korga’s urine and the exchange and consumption of bodily detritus as a ritual mainstay of polite conversation. Early in “Monologues”, Marq’s employer offers part of herself to Marq in case he is hungry, and politely inquires whether he can offer any bodily detritus in return - but her offer is a gesture of courtesy:

“If you’re hungry,” my employer¹ said, “I’d be highly complimented if you’d eat some of me. Indeed, if there’s any of you you can spare: body hair, nail parings, excrement, dried skin...” (69)

This expression of the *abject* is ultimately productive (inclusive) as opposed to entropic (excluding) and so promotes the substitution of life-related associations in the *abject* for death-related ones. Representations of the *abject* as part of an erotic economy gesture toward the loss-of-self as supplementarity, and the mixing of selves, of genes, and of material in the cyborg.

The arc through which Delany moves from dismantling Helstrom’s desperate fiction of a heroic masculine identity to reconceiving the abject Korga as beautiful involves an aesthetic revolution or, as Covino has named her own project in body criticism, an *aesthetics of repulsion*. The celebration of life and community that finds expression in acts of coprophagia and coprophilia as ultimately *sharing* may be no less shocking in their implications for the recuperation of whole categories of experience than they are as plot devices in what is unmistakably a less-than-common romance. More than this, what the deconstruction of the valorised masculine, and the transformation of a

demonized grotesque to beatification insists upon is a reconsideration of the assumptions that align phallic authority with hope and degradation of the abject with waste and death.

As Delany demonstrates the emptiness that underwrites presumptions of mastery and control he indicts the conservative impulse to stability as static and ultimately thanotic, an action the implications of which are as critical for language as a signifying system for representing bodies and selves as they are for the body itself.

Notes:

1. **Body criticism takes as one term of its enquiry the identification of the body as gross materiality. Covino explores this aspect of embodiedness through questioning representations of Christ as sexual and mortal, particularly in Hans Holbein's portrait of the dead Christ in his tomb.**
2. **Silverman notes that the return of the hero who has been symbolically castrated by war-related trauma is achieved at the cost of ignoring the lack that takes the place of phallic agency; the amputee is treated like a whole man; the wife of the emotionally crippled veteran pretends that he has not been emasculated (87). This is a development that underscores the power of dominant orders - even if that is somewhat qualified - and it conspicuously mirrors the capitulation of the Gothic mentioned above.**
3. **Freud tentatively interpreted the child's game of throwing away and retrieving his small toy as an example of the child's learning mastery over an unpleasant experience both banishing its control over him and affording him the pleasure of control over it. (285-6).**
4. **In each of the films that Silverman examines the protagonist has been wounded as a result of performing according to the script of the dominant fiction. Despite the loss of authority that accompanies crippling, the wounded hero is understood at a level that is commensurate with his re-assimilation into culture as having surrendered what he lost in an exchange that perpetuates the dominant fiction.**
5. **Freud traces the compulsion to repeat exhibited by sufferers of "traumatic neuroses,"**

in particular the “war neuroses,” to a compulsion to mastery that shares as its ultimate aim a conservative desire for inertia that Freud associates with the death instinct (303-11). However, as Silverman notes, Freud does not explicitly align the death drive with mastery, and the two impulses would seem to be opposed to each other. Silverman argues that attempts to mastery through repetition such as is exemplified by the “fort - da” story border traumatic repetition closely: “Since the kind of traumatic neurosis which is typified by war trauma can only be bound through repetition, yet is itself nothing more than the imperative to repeat unpleasure, disintegration constantly haunts the subject’s attempts to effect a psychic synthesis” (61).

6. I choose a term that is fraught with complex meanings in feminist and gender discussions: here, I use *supplementarity* to refer to the identity that is complicated by and consciously reformatted by augmentation, as distinct from the equally significant effect of impurity that is inherent in the hybrid.
7. (Blackford 39)
8. The *RAT* process resonates with suggestions of 19th and 20th century practices associated with quackery and repressive institutions built around mental control which masqueraded as proponents of mental health: the forced lobotomies of mental patients and the voluntary, self-annihilating lobotomies of depressives.
9. Kelly Hurley discusses the sublimation of a generalized fear of non-whites in the nineteenth-century study of Criminal Anthropology (95-97). See also Sander L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender*. Princeton, Princeton UP: 1993, for his discussion

of nineteenth-century associations between the racialized Other and disease.

10. Blackford frequently implies that Delany is cheating when he assigns beneficial effects to supposedly bad situations, rightly accusing Delany of “an attack on notions that there is an accumulated traditional wisdom about these things” (29).
11. Covino describes the rhetorical *aversio* as a “performance strategy” that “designates the re-direction of the speaker’s attention from one object of address to another” without in fact abandoning the original object of the address (38).

CHAPTER FOUR: A FABULOUS, FORMLESS DARKNESS¹

A conclusion might conjecture around the deferred promise of the second in what was supposed to have been a diptych that began with *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand. The Splendor and Misery of Bodies, of Cities* (the promised second novel - a promise that was for me as red and substantial and bright edged as a package sitting under the tree with my name on it) – must surely intersect with my project at so many points along so many trajectories of discussion, and ultimately of hope, that in my imagination it took the form of a grail. What unimagined possibility for love and self knowledge was Delany going to reveal for Korga and Dyeth that would change the way I understood myself and experienced the world I live in? Usually, when I come away from a good SF read, I am like a returning time-traveller. I have to look around me to discover what in my world has been changed by my experience of reading. How appropriate to the genre that a mysterious change suffuses the reader's world while scant feet away the guy waiting for a bus, the lady scanning her newspaper, notice nothing. Their worlds have not changed, and mine has irretrievably. We inhabit alternate worlds.

In my introduction to this discussion I suggested that Delany represents a subversive kind of SF author – a kind of trickster or saboteur, if you will -- one who takes issue with stagnant conventions of representing the white male subject as a universalized identity in literature. Pointing to various examples in SF cinema as well as a counter-culture of SF feminist writers, I included Delany in a feminist tradition of exploring issues of gender and identity in his fictions, and I suggested that Delany must also be appreciated as a *queer* writer and critic – in the only relatively recently recuperated and

non-pejorative sense of “queer” both as signalling a gay awareness and as a defamiliarizing, or destabilizing agent – owing to the critical implications of his experiments with gender and identity in his writing. The explorations of the masculine that Delany has staged in *Trouble on Triton* and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* mark a timely intervention both in the development of critical SF and in the history of gender criticism. When Kaja Silverman described the crisis of male subjectivity in the twentieth-century, Delany had already staged that moment in Helstrom’s self-destruction, and had begun to explore and critique the possibilities of recuperating a post-masculine identity that Judith Butler would begin to theorize around in her own gender-related inquiries in a later decade.

Delany’s later works have been the site of an unfocussed controversy, filled with contention over whether he had not abandoned the SF project of exploring new worlds altogether in favour of exploring social and narrative perversity. As John Clute has recorded in the *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, “[Delany’s] career in fiction faltered somewhat”². Many readers may have turned away from Delany, disaffected and alienated by his movement into representations of unconventional sexualities and subjectivities in texts that seem to abandon the familiar unities of character, time, and story. Even more dramatic breaks with convention have been evident in Delany’s lesser known *oeuvre*: texts like *Equinox/Tides of Lust*, *Hogg*, and *Mad Man* are unabashedly pornographic, depicting behaviours that clearly cross the boundaries of what is considered literature at all by many readers. At least one of these titles, *Hogg*, languished for nearly two decades as it was considered to be unpublishable.³ Because they explore the extreme fringes of

sexuality and desire, the above-noted works deserve, even demand, a sustained critical examination that has only been gestured at so far by the welcome but sketchy attentions of Ray Davis and others. My decision to examine *Trouble on Triton* and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* rather than one of these arguably more controversial texts has to do with the fact that *Triton* and *Stars* exemplify the mechanisms that enable the riskier and more eclectic experiments in *Hogg* and the other texts. There is also the question of accessibility: *Hogg*, while it plumbs the nether extremes of sexual identities, is pointedly narrow in its address. As such, I consider the novel to be a discussion – albeit an important and controversial one – directed by Delany to a smaller, very specific audience. By contrast, *Trouble on Triton* and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* demonstrate the operation of those mechanisms of representation peculiar to SF that make Delany’s experiments in other genres both possible and viable.

Joanna Russ cautioned that the criticism of SF would be one in which “the relation of foreground and background that we are used to after a century and a half of realism will not obtain” (117), and Delany was not the first to suggest that the traditional relationship between text and subject that historically governed Western Literature is vexed and usurped in the SF work. At the centre of the SF novel is not the psychological journey of the subject, but the *novum*⁴. As Delany put it, the text displaces subject for object. This is a crucial distinction, because historical conventions of Western literature have relegated the experience of whole categories of individuals *to* the domain of the object.

Early on, I endeavoured to show that science fiction is a hybrid genre, inflected by

the Gothic tradition as much as by futurist fantasies. Unlike Donald Lawlor, who had previously declared “Gothic SF” to be a temporary collaboration between two defined genres possessing sometimes compatible but nevertheless mutually exclusive attributes, I maintain that SF is not so much compatible with but infused by the Gothic so that SF Gothic describes a particular thematic strain that is completely consistent with the SF genre’s aspirations. In the operations of SF Gothic, there is evidence that Gothic fiction and SF share a philosophy, a relationship of the text to subject, that suggests they are in fact historical manifestations of a single movement.

The nineteenth-century Gothic sought to give a voice to cultural paranoia and afforded a body to the cultural Other even as it maintained the grim association of the Other – the female, the homosexual, the person of colour – with unclean substances, chaos, and death. As Kelly Hurley has argued, even though the vampires *were* staked in the end, the orderly, pristine world of the dominant Victorian culture was forever tainted and troubled by the proof that other identities existed and might compete for space. While the monster of Gothic literature may have been doomed to live and die in the dark, the primordial ooze, or the grave itself, the Other had been given a form and a voice that was not in any way predicated upon the dominant subject. If this meant that the body of the monster was unstable and frequently indescribable, it also meant that the Other was freed of the normative constraints of language that rendered bodies and identities recognizable only insofar as they could be framed with reference to a universalized Western subject.

With the cyborg of SF narrative, the Gothic monster achieves an agency that

finally brings the experience of despised identities into visibility in a new register. The cyborg is a hybrid, and as Haraway has noted, it exists as an affront to the myth of purity of lineage and to the possibility of salvation achieved through a return to origins, because its origins are immediate and as cluttered and dubious as its body. In this sense, the cyborg carries no debt to the past and is free to invent the future in a way that is not possible for the Western subject who is bound by the imperative to redeem himself through perfection and return to the garden ("Manifesto", 150-51). Because, also, the cyborg emerges as a reflection of generalized Western experience in the proliferation of culture and biotechnologies in the twentieth-century, it straddles the domains of both Western subject and Other, thus refuting much of the difference that has resulted in marginalization. I find in Delany's specific portrait of Helstrom as a vexed cyborg identity a reconsideration of the Western Male subject that demolishes the boundaries between subjectivities and opens a path for reconceptualizing and recuperating the monstrous identities that the illusory mythologized Western subject seems to guard against.

Barely scrutable and as enigmatic as a Zen riddle, a shadowy entity known as the *Sygn* haunts the narrative backgrounds of both *Trouble on Triton* and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*. The question of what relationship at all between *Triton* and *Stars* may be represented by the *Sygn* extends a bar over both texts, uniting them at least by virtue of its enigmatic presence. However, in what it represents, this *Sygn/sign* is mystifying, its two narrative manifestations -- one a fringe sect reminiscent of the American Shakers and the other a political agency affiliated with vast informational

networks – seem to be diametrically opposed in their associations and implications for language. The *Sygn* that oversees widespread use of the informational net called “General Information” in *Stars* is closely associated with language and the proliferation of the social through its links with information and the user community. Vigorously opposed to the almost draconian model of patriarchy manifested by a political order called the *Family*, the *Sygn* of *Stars* is a vaguely political, informational entity that brings together and administers galactic cultures in a vast play of trade and information. As opposed to its adversary, the *Family*, which devotes *its* resources to recuperating a mythic social system based upon a harsh ideal of rigid class and gender structures, the *Sygn* is

committed to the living interaction and difference between each woman and each world from which the right stability and play may flower, in a universe where both information and misinformation are constantly suspect, reviewed and drifting as they must be (constantly) by and between the two. (*Stars* 86)

This *Sygn* seems radically different from its shadowy namesake that is reported only tentatively in the Appendix of *Triton*. In a biographical note dealing with the life of the enigmatic “father” of “metalogic,” Ashima Slade, the *Sygn* is portrayed as a death-oriented mystery sect of uncertain origin (298). Eschewing all forms of information/proliferation – writing, speech, sex⁵ – the Tritonian *Sygn* represents at first consideration an antithesis to its counterpart in *Stars*. Just how the self-doomed sect that disappears in the war between *Triton's* societies ultimately reappears as a controller of knowledge and perpetuator of culture⁶ in *Stars* is a mystery. But that this enigmatic

entity features in both texts, in roles that bear a rough similarity to each other – even in their opposition – is sufficient evidence to argue against mere coincidence or authorial whimsy. Inasmuch as the two novels seem to offer instalments of a developing contemplation, the author brings them together under a common sign, the *Sygn*, which is moved from its alignment with death in *Triton*, to a correspondence with the galaxy-wide civilization in *Stars*, itself in competition with the thanotic influence of the *Family*. The correspondence of character issues and their relationship to language systems in these two most critically inflected of Delany's recent SF novels is a key to understanding the *Sygn*/sign as shaping a dialectic strategy that bridges the decade and the (real world) ideological backdrops separating publication of both texts.

The *Sygn* of *Stars in My Pocket* is aligned with a language system that discards familiar markers of sex and gender. Here, language, like the body, is corrupt and hybrid, as constructed as the monster and as empowered with the signifying potential to articulate and thus bring into being subjectivities otherwise tacitly excluded by language conventions. Gender and sex *have* no fixed alignment in the *Sygn*-ordered universe. Sex is treated as incidental and never closely examined while gender is fluid and highly contingent. To articulate a truly alien social landscape where the modes of common interaction are sharply different from his reader's own experience, Delany eschews the freighted gender identifications of the readers' typical twentieth-century Western discourse and innovates a language in which gender is never permanently ascribed. All persons referred to in the language of the *Sygn*-held universe of *Stars* are women unless they become the object of a speaker's sexual interest. At that point, the sexual object is

referred to as he. Whether a person is a biologically male or female human being, or another species for whom male and female may be entirely meaningless designations, “she” is a subject, only becoming an object in language for as long as “he” sustains the sexual interest of someone else.

Russell Blackford notes the transformative value of this language in which markers that are crucial for the reader have been removed. Pointing to the difficulty a reader encounters when trying to construct images of characters, Blackford reminds us that “language, as well as shaping, or at least reinforcing, cultural attitudes also manifests them” (34). Blackford’s point seems to be, simply, that the difficulties *Stars’* discourse inflicts upon him enable him to see the values coded into his own language in a new light. By substituting details such as “veins, scars, calluses, and fingertips” for “hair, breasts, facial features and other characteristics which we are more used to when visualizing people” (34), Delany forces the reader to adopt a new frame of reference for visualizing and evaluating the Other. Blackford recognizes the effect on Delany’s reader as novel and enlightening, allowing that “this is an interesting experiment in the area on Delany’s part” (34). In fact, by forcing the reader to adopt a new discursive frame of reference, Delany forces the reader’s entry into a new aesthetic register. Deprived of familiar criteria against which to weigh the comparative beauty or ugliness of a given character, at length a reader is *conditioned* by the repetition of unfamiliar descriptions in the text to judge comeliness as a “green and glimmering head” with a “bony arch of [the] upper jaw” (199), a “beardless and cratered face”, or a “small, rough triangle of drier skin that humans, male and female, develop after age thirty-five a centimeter below the

patella”(227). In either instance, the new criteria represent normally distasteful physical details that are invested with a new aesthetic value even as they displace old standards of beauty. This is an operation that is critical to the recuperation of the abject as beatific. By removing all the terms that form standards for beauty and ugliness in the reader’s experience, Delany effects a transfer of value from one kind of body to another. The repulsion ordinarily occasioned by decay and waste is replaced by attraction in a turn of signification that dismantles the norms of language and belief that framed the reader’s perceptions until this point.

It follows that both of these texts linked by the *Sygn* are deeply interested in the operations of language and meaning, both that of a distinctly SF discourse that can be identified and analysed as a modern signifying system, and that of a twentieth-century discourse that is founded on Romantic conceptions of the subject and that, by virtue of framing the language of science fiction in the reader’s consciousness, is taken up in a critical dialogue with the signification of any SF novel. At the same time, the operations of language reveal in stable signification a Utopian impulse to achieve stability that is ultimately antithetical to the experience of living in future societies. The *Sygn* is, ultimately, a *sign* for science fiction discourse. It becomes apparent, in light of a critical sensibility shaped by the metalogic⁷ of Ashima Slade that what counts is not what the sign means, but rather, the parameters crossed in its failure to precisely mean: the relations between words and worlds of the particular modalities of science fiction discourse.

It turns out that the discourse of Tritonian society is not English - it is, rather, a

hybrid language constituted of two tongues that are, neither of them, the tongue of the colonizer or, in all probability, of the reader. This revelation can only disrupt the reader's experience, forcing the reading operation to assume an oscillation that marks the movement from thanotic modalities to erotic ones in both novels. If the operation is not activated until relatively late in the reader's journey through the text – in the Appendix, to be precise – then, more radical is the experience of having the story she has just finished reading upset and rewritten through the revelation of this new information. The oscillation between present and past and present and future gestures at an upset of the hegemony of linear orders that in turn promises to sorely vex the reader's existing subjective point of view. (In a moment that forges an identification between character and reader, the fact that Helstrom's native tongue is itself a chimera fused from the remnants of non-Western discourse, reflecting in its very existence hybridity and the non-WASP perspective, sheds an even greater emphasis on his alienation, since his own outlook is decidedly chauvinistic⁸ and incongruent with the politics of the language that surrounds him on Triton. It may be imagined that his difficulty is inherent in the language that frames his attempts at self-actualization.)

A similar pattern of oscillations marks the ideological depositioning of the reader of *Stars*. In a movement reminiscent of Elisabeth Grosz' example of the Möbius strip, *Stars* concerns itself with the conversion or transmutation of inside to outside and outside to inside. The text first models a phallogentric social order in a way that makes it both familiar and reasonable and then proceeds to defamiliarize the reader from language's signifying conventions through a series of oscillating re-turns that shake the reader's

complacency by forcing a pattern of re-appraisals and re-visions.

In "Debased and Lascivious? *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*", Russell Blackford complains bitterly about the "trickery" of Delany's defamiliarizing strategies in an essay that seems to record the struggles of a reader wrestling first hand with the demands of the text. In a typical example, the canon of "classic" prose and poetry that Korga encounters and that frames his precarious and tenuous re-entry into discourse (*Stars*, 43-49) turns out to be composed almost exclusively of women's literature (Blackford, 31). The reader, having formed an expectation that this writing represents all that may be said about life on Rhyonon, must now come to terms with the fact that it represents female experience, on a planet where the female is denigrated. Both Korga and Delany's reader re-awaken into a position framed by the experience of the excluded. Fortunately for another reader -- if not for Blackford, who, while he may recognize it, apparently fails to enjoy Delany's clever *mise en abyme* -- the author has implanted in this scene a strategic blueprint for reading SF. Delany's rich description of the reading process that Korga practices seems to detail the agency required of a SF reader;

Delany describes the patterns which the different books form in Korga's mind, each throwing the ones before into a different series of relationships and significances, each enriched by the patterns which Korga has already built up. (Blackford 31)

However, while Blackford recognises the practice as defining Korga's reading agency, he fails to make the reach to his own:

This is a very acceptable sf technique, extrapolating from the process of

literary growth that we all know so well, but presenting a version of the experience far beyond the edges of what we can ever go through -- but not what can be imagined. (31)

Ironically, the critic's discomfiture with the text may be attributable to his own lack of preparedness in the face of the radicalization of the reading protocols demanded by the text.

In a tactical flourish, Delany only reveals in passing that a female character's skin colour is dark (*Stars* 29), and this is long after the reader will have constructed a face for her, thus potentially necessitating a revision in which the reader, again, backtracks. References like this provoke the reader to wonder what other characters look like, and to recognize that not knowing has either caused her to assume a particular colour - prompting recognition of the reader's own preconceptions -- or to discover that the characters were satisfying in their representation even though that particular marker - appearance - was missing. Notably, even though race is not one of the markers of difference and powerlessness in this novel, it turns out that that particular bias has simply been resituated in the prejudice against tall people and in the condemnation of sexual congress between tall and short people as unnatural. Later in the text, it is the desire of the intelligent and informationally enfranchised Dyeth for the intellectually and informationally crippled Korga that is held to be perverse, even if it is not openly condemned.

Teresa De Lauretis describes the reader's forced transition as a drastic re-positioning, as

Displaced from the central position of the knowledgeable observer, the reader stands on constantly shifting ground, on the margins of understanding, at the periphery of vision. (165)

The defamiliarizing operation forces the reader's dislocation from the seat of passive arrogance made familiar in the person of a "subject presum/ed/ing to know"⁹. With the destabilization of the reader's fixed and familiar references, the discourse of *Stars* is thus revealed as critically queer. In the context of this discourse masculinity is not so much deconstructed as re-interpreted, the convention of man as the subject of history and desire is queered by the discursive insistence that the "universal subject" of *Stars* is feminine, regardless of sex, and the object of sexual desire is masculinized only insofar as that desire is active. In such a moment, indeterminacy that seems to comfortably surround the subject in *Stars* is briefly replaced with the clarity of exact correspondence between sign and meaning. However, perhaps essential to this culture's survival is the insistence on a play of open signification that forecloses stagnation of meaning.

Indeed, language may be so subjective that it is essentially arbitrary: when Dyeth the diplomat encounters a foreign woman at a conference, the honorifics used by the stranger to designate the object of her own romantic interest change according to rapid and unrecognizable cues in her conversation:

'Skri Marq, have you seen Skina Clym? ... I really must find Skon Clym. She's such a fascinating woman. I *am* totally fascinated by her, you know. I only hope she is as fascinated with me.' (98)

At the same time, the objectification of the Other into sexual object is signalled - here,

and throughout the text of *Stars in my Pocket* by re-assignment of gender:

'Oh, Skyla Marq!'(Apparently my status had changed; perhaps after one has answered a question...?) 'Do you think ...*he* really might...that someone like Skoi Clym might even...!' And the star-flung night alone (and maybe a population of sixty or seventy million) knows what a *Skoi* might be. ...'to think that someone like Skyotchet Clym might even be interested in...' (98)

When Dyeth himself desires Clym, he perceives Clym as masculine: "Clym's hand suddenly came forward to touch my neck. His voice dropped"(97). But with the instant of Dyeth's realisation that Clym's particular sexual appetites alienate his own, Clym's gender is permanently changed: "She moved one and another finger (and from then on, "she" was the only way I could think of her)..." (97). Ironically, in a moment that recalls Delany's remarks in the margins of *Triton*, absolute understanding between Dyeth and the character in the red dress sinks in the midst of profusion of qualifiers, testifying to the opacity of precision.

Just as defamiliarizing strategies forcibly free the reader from indebtedness to the assumptions entrenched in the language she is accustomed to, Delany employs synaesthesia as a related tactic to further confuse the formal relations between words and to force the reader's surrender to her own agency. Delany insists that

whatever the inspiration or vision, whether it arrives in a flash or has been miraculously worked out over years, the only way a writer can present it is by what he can make happen in the reader's mind between one word and another, by the way he can manoeuvre the existing tensions between

words and associated images. (JHJ 47)

Describing synaesthesia in Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* as a tool for bringing about a sort of mystical unhinging, Delany acknowledges the catalytic effect of sensory destabilization. He cites Arthur Rimbaud's use of a "systematic derangement of the senses to achieve the unknown" (47). Delany frequently uses sheer physical description of sexuality and violence to disengage the reader's tendency to interpret meaning from a less visceral experience of the text; perhaps the better example of synaesthesia rests in the person of Korga. The end product of an institutionalized lobotomy that robs the subject of the ability to discriminate or form volition, Korga is a totally sensuous being. He does not determine or desire, but rather experiences. Ironically, Korga emerges as an ideal reader whose surrender to the oscillating currents of unstable signification can be evaluated against Blackford's failure to accept the greater agency offered him by the SF text.

In making the transition from Rhyonon to Morgre, Korga, notwithstanding his lack, has an easy time of accepting his new culture, just as he was uniquely better suited to absorb the information in the book units that his erstwhile owner made available to him. As a result of the RAT procedure, Korga lacks the associative structures that might otherwise impede his assimilation of new information. In terms of Langer's dictum that "I" marks entry into the symbolic order and codes the whole process by which the symbol stands between consciousness and the real¹⁰, Korga has in every significant way lost the symbolic "I" so that he does not struggle with the desire to understand where the subject is located. In Morgre, "I" is vexed and displaced from the privileged place the reader has understood it to occupy. The first person subject is similarly besieged by Delany's use of

subscript to signify the nature of occupation in a tactic that may seem very gimmicky, albeit futuristic, but which serves to destabilize the sanctity of the subject as a discrete entity that originates apart from culture and environment. The use of subscripts seems to imply the interrelationship between individual and production as intrinsic. Work is entrenched but subordinate to selfhood— and this implies a more fully comprehended relationship between the worker and production. In this post-Marxist culture, the worker and production are inextricably bound, a tacit indictment of twentieth-century alienation as it seems manifest in the bitter resentment of Rhyonon's workers toward its despised slaves.

Let me reconsider the enigmatic *Sygn*. In the context of a radical SF language theory, Delany's use of the *Sygn* in association with two very different language economies represents a critical exploration of two modalities for the signifier in discourse: one that is inherent in the established language practices that dominate mainstream literatures of the twentieth century, and one that emerges in an SF text as indeterminate and invested with a signifying freedom of its own. The Tritonian *Sygn* is thanotic, dooming itself through non-production to death and marked by an inertia that can only spiral into extinction, or would, that is, if this *Sygn* were not already doomed, its adherents casualties of the war that devastates the population of Iapetus as well the planets of Mars and Earth, themselves bastions of stagnating or inertial social economies. In *Triton*, Delany stages what Robert Elliot Fox has identified as "an interplanetary extrapolation of the present-day neocolonial struggle between the center and the periphery" (44). The conflict that arises between the societies on planets and those on

colonized satellites is a re-staging of the struggles of historical cultures to wrest independence from the imperialist. However, the same dramatic conflict is manifest in the dialectic of the text, in the confrontation between what, according to Barbour, appears to be basically a twentieth-century epistème derived from the phallogentrism of nineteenth century imperialism, and a more pluralistic social structure, the heterotopia of the novel's subtitle. This is an engagement that occurs at various levels in the text as tension between planets and between sexed identities and between individual and socius. Initially, this seems to entail the confrontation between a social organization that tacitly models a twentieth-century consciousness and one that is more liberal and pluralistic.

Where Triton's Helstrom exemplifies the fixity of signification as stagnation and a kind of social death for the inept, the failure (*closure*) of play in signification in *Stars* dooms a society to "Cultural Fugue", or extinction. The thanotic *Sygn* that was associated with closure and stagnation in *Triton* has in *Stars* transmogrified into an erotic agency that is associated with language and knowledge and community. This version of the signifier, explored in *Stars* as open-ended, is aligned with life and growth. Within *Stars*' signifying economy meaning remains plastic and indeterminate, and the margins that describe the formal relations between words are where meaning is continually renegotiated.

As if to underscore the relationship between stable meaning and extinction, *Stars* makes it clear that lack of desire is the same as desire satisfied: both conditions imply the same fatal absence *of* absence, and carry the same potential for stagnation and death. The relationship between Dyeth and Korga becomes ultimately utopian, an attraction that

eschews the necessity for communication and nullifies desire through satisfaction. *Nothing is missing*: as Korga does not form desire, he does not experience want, and Dyeth wants for nothing as long as he can possess Korga. Language is erased along with the absence that produces desire and this failure of the imperative to speech is a capitulation from the Symbolic to an unrepresentable Real that, along with the elimination of indeterminacy and play, threatens to destroy the fabric of social relations in *Velm*. Delany has pointed out the imperative to discourse that absence provides. *Something needs to be missing*: language requires, is driven by, lack, while happiness dooms discursivity to stagnation in the text. Delany goes so far as to link the death drive with a utopian impulse in both *Stars* and *Triton*. Ever mindful of Foucault's suggestion that heterotopias are subversive of language Delany answers that language in utopia is doomed to stagnation by atrophied margins in the relations between meanings and words.

In her examination of post-WW II masculinities, Kaja Silverman has claimed for the Western male a lasting condition of castration, as the war- and post-war-related traumas forced a recognition of the inequation between phallic authority and maleness. Anticipating the dilemmas that Silverman would assign to the Western male, Delany stages Helstrom's masculine deconstruction as the dismantling of one awkward social construction that necessitates the fumbling process of rebuilding another. Ultimately, the reconsideration of the masculine as illusory that Delany posits in *Trouble on Triton* leads to the recuperation of the body in *Stars* as the devalued term in humanist dichotomies that identify it as waste. The racialized and feminized body of the Other as it is figured in Korga's wasted and ruined flesh is beatified through rebirth in Dyeth's desire, and

through the recuperation of desire itself. A *desideratum* is, by definition, a thing that is desired, needed, and missing. Such is the constitution of desire that it requires lack. As Delany has pointedly demonstrated in his critical dialogue with Donna Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs," absence is what impels critical growth and discovery. "*Something is missing*" becomes a hopeful signal in critical thought, and the figure of Orpheus, forever bereaved and seeking through Hell, is an icon for the quest for identity.

Naming, Delany reminds us -- wants us *always* to remember -- "is always a metonymic process". *Rat Korga*, who carries his misery, his abjection, like a standard for the dispossessed, like a Shaman carries a skin. Marq Dyeth (*mark: death*), who, inhabiting the Gothic warren of Dyethshome carries the comfort of the familial, the maternal, into that place beyond the boundaries (*here be dragons: the Evelmi*) of decent propriety, of the Law of the Father. And language is parametal. Because, however reconsidered, this is *still* a place of death (*death's home*), Dyeth's sanctuary is underground, submerged, in a sense, *underwater*. The monsters in *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* are the monsters that lurk along the unwritten, *unmarked* edges of the map, and that inhabit deep, dark places. *Unknowable*, as Kathy Acker warned us, as Orpheus discovered, who continues his Gothic quest (Gothic because it is a descent into the earth, into death, into dissolution and ultimately into the sea, and Acker *warned* us that there will always be water¹¹). And isn't it true that the sea holds all of her secrets, giving back little that is unchanged: Orpheus was dismembered and cast up finally, in pieces, on the sand. They found his head there, beautiful and dead, singing, charged/changed by the Gothic element. His was a sea change, and the sea is the great

mother and a great devourer of fathers, *vagina dentata*. The sand and the coral and the barnacles presume, assume, reclaim our inner spaces, have eaten, have become, our bones, our home. Language is parametal, and the arc that describes entropy, the plunge from life into death, is parabolic. Delany carries death into life, the ruin of the flesh into recuperative desire.

I began to say that a conclusion might speculate about the novel that was to follow *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, the novel that has not been written. After dismantling the illusion of masculinity that seemed to underpin Western subjectivity and suggesting the want and rejection that forever impelled desire as the only answer to stagnation, Delany has promised, and has yet to deliver, his own response to what might be a dilemma gesturing at despair: if indeterminacy and open/unstable signification are necessary for recuperating and ensuring the survival of identity, must desire ever be sustained by never being satisfied? Must the star-crossed lovers of Delany's tragedies be permanently separated on pain of death, or – worse yet -- silence?

The Splendor and Misery of Bodies, of Cities was to have been the concluding instalment of the narrative that began with *Stars*. I suggest that the text formed by *Stars* and the as yet unrealized *Splendor* is one that actually begins with *Triton*. While I could argue that the enigmatic recurrence of the *Sygn* in Delany's two novels might simply evidence his pleasure in playing with the term, and that the issues of gender that dominate both texts are merely part of a larger critical preoccupation, the fact remains that points of engagement between the texts arrayed along the axes of language and desire and the body indicate a purposeful dialectic shaped by the author. Both the *Sygn* and the *Cyborg* (and

the cyborg as a sign) straddle both texts as the Western subject and the identities that occupy the margins of Western literature are brought together and reconceived as monstrous and unstable and remarkable in their promise.

Notes:

1. From Yeats' "Two Songs from a Play", discussed in Chapter Two. I follow Delany by appropriating Yeats' wellspring of story and identity as a sign for the unmapped identities that become possible through the operations of a new aesthetics of the monstrous that inspires subjectivities and signification in Delany's discourse.
2. Clute seems circumspect in assigning cause, but the reader understands that Delany is felt to have strayed too far from a dedication to the right kind of SF into a "knotted intensity" and experimentation that seem to provoke the encyclopedist's disapproval.
3. *Hogg*. Reported by Ray Davis in "Delany's Dirt."
4. See Darko Suvin, "Science Fiction and the Novum". (*The Technological Imagination: Theories and Fictions*. eds. Teresa de Lauretis, et al. Madison, Wis.: Coda, 1980. 141-158)
5. Thus ensuring its historical obscurity: "this [the renunciation of all forms of communication and congress] makes ascertaining its fundamental tenets during these years only slightly more difficult than ascertaining the letter of Slade's philosophy." (*Triton*, 299).
6. Significantly, the Sygn of *Stars* achieves these life-oriented roles through its custodial connection with the "General Information Web"(67). While the Tritonian Sygn's only connection with "GI" seems to be through its association with Ashima Slade (294), the appearance of "General Information" in both texts is another indicator that the correspondences between them are deliberate and carefully considered.
7. Helstrom's "summary" description of Metalogic and the fragmentary descriptions that

appear in the biographical section on Ashima Slade (*Trouble on Triton*, 49 – 56, 299-312) indicate a system that functions along lines similar to Delany's language and signification theories in *Jewel-hinged Jaw* and other writings. Where Helstrom insists that the "significance of 'white'" is "like the significance of any other word...a range of possibilities" including, but not confined to, white (*Triton* 50), he suggests the range of signification that denotation affords to words in a "literalized" language system like SF. See Delany, "About 5,750 Words." *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*. Elizabethtown: Dragon Press, 1977. 33 – 49. A related example of parametal signification can be found in *Stars In My Pocket Like Grains Of Sand*: When the world of Rhyonon is destroyed, characters in the text haggle over the precision of the concept of "survivor" for determining who or how many escaped the cataclysm (*Stars* 147 – 149). The refusal to assume unqualified parameters to what only seems like a straightforward question is an example of "fuzzy logic" that suggests the signifying potential of language and the inherent difficulties in tapping that potential.

8. Aside from his frequent sexist statements about the relative roles of men and women, Helstrom is conspicuous when he makes a distinction between people on the basis of colour or belief. In the midst of all of Triton's eclectic society, Helstrom alone refers to "niggers", Christians, and Jews (210) so that his tendency to judge against others (the Other) on the basis of these features seems as incongruous as the words he uses.
9. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981. 230 - 243.

10. Quoted in Barbour, in his discussion of language barriers in *Babel 17*. See Suzanne K. Langer. *Philosophy in a New Key*. New York: New American Library, 1958.
11. Orpheus' dismembered body was thrown into a river that swept the remains out to sea until his head was cast up on a beach. Acker, adopting the imagery of the Orphic legend as a code for Delany's story telling and his quest for language, uses the water, the feminine element, for its associations with sexuality and disorder and as a signifier for profound and transformative mystery.

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