The Expanse

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THE EXPANSE. Fergus, Mark, Hawk Ostby and Naren Shankar, creators. SyFy/Amazon Prime Video, 2015-present.

In 2016, an article I co-wrote (see McCutcheon and Barnetson) argued that contemporary SF markedly underrepresents organized labour (in contrast to business), with exceptions by writers like China Miéville, C.J. Cherryh, and Cory Doctorow. While the article was in press, this review's co-author, SFF writer Heather Clitheroe, suggested *The Expanse*, and from the first episodes I realized that our article needs a major update—or a rethink. *The Expanse* bases its finely machined world and story in working-class culture, organized labor, and the political-economic context of postcoloniality—just a few reasons *The Expanse* repays critical attention with interest.

James S.A. Corey is the *nom de plume* of co-authors Ty Franck and Daniel Abraham. *Leviathan Wakes*, the first novel in Corey's nine-volume *roman-fleuve*, was published in 2011; subsequent novels have followed almost annually. The ninth and final Expanse novel, *Leviathan Falls*, will appear in November 2021, with a final novella planned afterwards (Urrutia). *The Expanse* takes place some three hundred years from now, positing a postcolonial solar system that stretches from a climate-changed Earth and its moon, centrally governed by the United Nations, to an independent Mars, engaged in a Cold War with Earth, to the asteroid belt and gas giant moons, where "Belters," les *damnés du vide*, labor on the colonial periphery in resource extraction for "the Inners" who exploit and oppress them. Belt governance beyond corporate charters is loosely organized around the Outer Planetary Alliance, or OPA, an ambiguous collective that "had begun its life more like a labor union than a nation" (*Abaddon's Gate* 183) and parlays its organizing power into political power as the story unfolds. *The Expanse*'s interplanetary, postcolonial setting is premised on the novum of an "Epstein drive" that enables fast (but not light-speed) rocketry. To launch the plot, a second novum emerges: the "protomolecule," an artifact of a vanished alien civilization, discovered on a moon of Saturn and appropriated for research and development by private interests seeking to weaponize it. How the solar system's powers respond to the destabilizing effects of the protomolecule technology, competing to control or destroy it, drives the series' storyline over nine novels, which also work as three linked trilogies. The first sets the scene, then estranges it with the "protomolecule" novum; the second—with *Nemesis Games* as middle volume and fulcrum of the whole—recounts the political and economic fallout wrought by the protomolecule mostly within the solar system; and the third, set later, follows that fallout well beyond the solar system.

The TV series based on the novels originated with producers Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby and Naren Shankar as show-runner. Franck and Abraham signed on to write and produce. The

first three seasons aired from 2015 to 2018 on the SyFy channel, which cancelled the show in mid-May 2018. Fans campaigned to "#SaveTheExpanse" and, before that month ended, Amazon picked up the series for its Prime Video service, where it now streams. There is postmodern irony in the acquisition of such a labor-friendly show by one of the world's most notoriously exploitative corporations. Amazon aired Season 4 in 2019, and the fifth in late 2020—accompanied by Amazon's announcement that the next, sixth season will be its last.

Each season of the TV series adapts mainly one novel; however, to strengthen the adaptation, the writers take bold and shrewd creative liberties with the novels (and accompanying novellas and stories), like rearranging plot points and turning minor book characters into major screen roles. Season 5 follows the main plot of *Nemesis Games*, integrating elements of the sixth book, *Babylon's Ashes*. In purported "retribution for generations of atrocities committed by the Inners against Belters" ("Gaugamela"), a radicalized Belter faction attacks Earth with accelerated meteors (literalizing, to cataclysmic effect, the resort to rocks as the only weapons the desperate and downtrodden can wield against empire). The ensuing catastrophe embroils the series' protagonists—especially Naomi Nagata (played by Dominique Tipper) and Amos Burton (played by Wes Chatham)—in a thriller plot of terrorism, espionage, sabotage, abductions, underground trade, double-crossing, disaster survival, and daring escapes.

The Expanse's style, in print and on screen, emphasizes accessibility (Franck and Chatham, "Episode 8"): in linear plotting; realistic rendering of diverse, likeable protagonists; plain-speaking dialogue; and skilled interweaving of two familiar SF tropes with proven crossover success—first contact and Frankensteinian hubris. *The Expanse*'s accessible narrative style helps the series' representations of working-class culture reach the popular audience that relates to them. Yet *The Expanse* also harbours arch allusions, ironies, and references. The writing reworks elements from a myriad of genres such as space opera, hard SF, climate fiction, noir crime, Gothic horror, pulp Westerns, and political thrillers (the fifth instalment's title echoing Tom Clancy's *Patriot Games*). Ironies abound in the series' postcolonially informed *détournement* of Western tropes (frontier, first contact, shootouts) and Gothic tropes (hauntings, monsters, imprisonments). Sometimes both classes of tropes are brought together, as in the remark by protagonist Jim Holden (played by Steven Strait) that humankind's interstellar expansion will be "another blood-soaked gold rush" ("Abaddon's Gate"). The series also teems with literary references—often to poetry: Clarissa Mao (played by Nadine Nicole) talks about writing poetry in prison ("Tribes"); Chrisjen Avasarala (played by Shohreh Agdashloo) contemplates a line by her poet spouse ("Winnipesaukee").

The Expanse features pervasive, refreshingly sympathetic representations of organized labor as part of everyday life, in details like union representatives, dialogue about work and working conditions, enactments of democratic and community-building practices, and leftist and labor allusions (in character names like Althusser [*Nemesis* 229] and Bertold, a sixth-book character introduced in Season 5, played by Stephen Tracey). Workers facing arrest can request union representatives for defence. Basic income is standard policy on Earth. Season 5 dramatizes good-faith bargaining (in Burton's negotiation of housing for a friend, and in Mao's advocacy for

servants abandoned by their employers) and expressions of solidarity both blunt—Avasarala's call for unity among Earth, Mars, and the Belt ("Nemesis Games")—and subtle, like Belter idioms that suggest the internalization of union-inculcated collectivism. "The more you share, the more your bowl will be plentiful," says a Belter family sitting to supper ("Churn"). Formally, too, a collective tells the story, in rotating focalizations of multiple characters' viewpoints—antagonists' included. "Everybody gets a point of view that makes sense," says Franck of their writers' room ethos (Franck and Chatham, "Episode 5").

Burton and Nagata exemplify the series' valorization of labor organizing, the entrenched capitalist class striation it challenges—and the importance of higher education to mobility. The lack of socioeconomic mobility and tertiary education experienced by characters like Burton in his early life, and the exceptionality of Nagata's advanced engineering degrees (for a Belter) unnervingly reflect the real-world crisis of late capitalism's "university in ruins" (see Readings), as neoliberal governments cut education budgets, tuition fees and student debt escalate, and private capital colonizes public universities.

The Belter character Camina Drummer (played by Ojibwe actor Cara Gee) exemplifies the series' working-class grounding and how the show adapts the book to magnify that focus. In the books, Drummer is a minor character first appearing in *Nemesis Game*s (172); in the series, Gee's Drummer has been a lead role since Season 2. Season 5 also rewrites Drummer into the "polyam Belter fam" brought forward from *Babylon's Ashe*s: "It was really important to all of us," Gee reflects, "that this queer...fluid and polyamorous [family was] represented with respect" (qtd. in Franck and Chatham, "Episode 6"). Gee's Drummer exemplifies the TV series' consistently creative adaptation of the books and its brilliant casting of Indigenous and international talent in the series' many leading women protagonists, among them Nicole's Mao, the ex-Marine Draper (played by New Zealand-Samoan actor Frankie Adams), Iranian actor Aghdashloo's magisterial Avasarala, and the Dominican-British Tipper as Nagata. The Expanse far surpasses the Bechdel test's threshold.

Nagata focalizes a Season 5 subplot in which she gets abducted and imprisoned by her abusive ex; then, for several episodes, this Black woman struggles to communicate her emergency, to escape, even just to breathe: first aboard a ship whose oxygen depletes because of the way she hacks its communication tech ("Winnipesaukee"), then in a spacesuit whose oxygen runs out ("Nemesis Games"). While this subplot's context of surviving abuse and oppression is more about misogyny than racism, the season's sustained close-up on Nagata's struggle to breathe—set against a backdrop of terrorist conspiracy implicating a corrupt police force in arming Nagata's captors—argues a dialectical, intersectional synecdoche, the political in the personal. Tipper's performance of Nagata's struggle thus makes for uncanny, harrowing viewing in the wake of 2020's #BlackLivesMatter protests and ongoing violence perpetuated against BIPOC communities.

Corey's series has become a genre-culture, transmedia touchstone, orbited by a satellite belt including short fiction, graphic novels, social media, and a role-playing game. *The Expanse*

rewards science fiction studies and studies in the other aforementioned modes it reworks, as well as Cultural Studies, postcolonial and postmodern theory, socialist and labor studies, adaptation studies, and poetry. Between the latest season and whatever big finish the final novel and TV season will bring, now is the perfect time to explore *The Expanse*. Its world is not one of warp speeds or anti-gravity fields, and its attention to scientific realism, if not its vision of solidarity, may ruin other space opera for you. Don't worry. It's worth it.

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