

The Expanse Expanded

Red Futures

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

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

after work we succumbed
headlong in effusive rooms

to the science-fiction tales of democracy
and to their songs
—Dionne Brand⁴⁰

The Expanse extrapolates a postcolonial future of interplanetary capitalist extractivism and exoplanetary colonisation.⁴¹ In its setting, Earth acts as the imperial centre of governance and business, from which colonists and corporations radiate to the moon (Luna), Mars, and the gas giants’ moons. Corey’s meticulously realised ‘transform[ation of] our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come,’ as Fredric Jameson theorises SF,⁴² envisions its future as one to the building of which both postsecondary education and organised labour are integral. *The Expanse*’s capitalist Sol system thus gets built on a postcolonially extrapolated ‘capitalist realism’⁴³—complete with its systemic forms of exploitation, discrimination, class conflict, and other violence, all vividly summed up by the

⁴⁰ Dionne Brand (2001) *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Doubleday. p.8.

⁴¹ For Extractivism in *The Expanse*, see Emma Johanna Puranen (2022) ‘The Ethics of Extractivism in Science Fiction’, *Strange Horizons*, 26.

<http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/the-ethics-of-extractivism-in-science-fiction/>. Some sources grounding our postcolonial and Marxist theorising, as settler scholars in organised postsecondary workplaces, include Lazarus 1999; Acoose 2001; Brand 2001 and 2020; Sugars 2004; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004, and 2009; Bould and Miéville 2009; Devadas and Prentice 2010; Baldy 2014; Atia and Houlden 2019; and Salvage Collective 2021.

⁴² Fredric Jameson (1982) ‘Progress versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 9(2): p.152.

⁴³ Mark Fisher (2009) *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books.

Belter antagonist Marco Inaros as the Inner's 'crimes of economy.'⁴⁴ The franchise frequently, critically comments on 'the history of colonialism'⁴⁵ and 'that frontier shit.'⁴⁶

The series' near-future, postcolonial 'capitalist realism' is not just plausibly realistic but even eerily familiar in its setting and premises; the plotting of the series both adapts well established devices and tropes (e.g. the classic science fiction tropes of first contact and of Frankensteinian hubris; the focalization of narrative according to both protagonists and antagonists; and of course the development of compelling, relatable characters) and also makes some critical innovations in plotting that challenge some of the tacit ideological underpinnings of science fiction and the novel more generally. Two prominent plotting patterns based in the series' political-economic premises are, first, the bringing together of proverbially strange bedfellows (sometimes in pragmatic alliances, sometimes in principled solidarity), and, second and relatedly, the making of often incremental decisions that cumulatively bring about progressive social change. *The Expanse's* labour- and education-emphasising settings and openly anti-colonial plots thus narrate alternative plot forms that model praxis (on the need for which, see Brand). *The Expanse's* stories feature (among other things) personal transformations and rehabilitations achieved through community and solidarity building as well as anti-fascist resistance, and plots that pointedly de-escalate violence and centre issues of economic and restorative justice.

Moreover, and more unusually for science fiction, *The Expanse's* take on capitalist realism capaciously encompasses sympathetic and detailed representations of workers' organisations like unions, and integrates these details of setting (which is one definition of working conditions) in many ways throughout the story, sometimes as crucial plot points.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ James S A Corey (2015) *Nemesis Games*, New York: Orbit. p.390.

⁴⁵ James S A Corey (2014) *Cibola Burn*, New York: Orbit. p.53.

⁴⁶ *Nemesis Games*, p.14.

⁴⁷This is to say, *The Expanse* brings to mainstream popularity a labour-left tradition in science fiction that has developed in the shadow of the genre's more famous ideological affinities with conservatism and fascism that make antagonists of labour interests (see Barnetson and McCutcheon). In this left-labour SFF lineage, unions and workers' interests figure conspicuously—and sympathetically; Corey often cites Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) in this connection, and some novels in this tradition recommended for *Expanse* fans are Melissa Scott's *Night Sky Mine* (1996); Eric Flint's and Cory Doctorow's open-access novels, respectively, *1632* (2000) and *For The Win* (2010); John Wyndham's *Stowaway to Mars* (1935); Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* (1956); a source Corey acknowledges [*Wakes* x]; and M.J. Locke (a.k.a. Laura Mixon)'s *Up Against It* (which Corey also acknowledges [qtd. in Mixon v]). Relatedly, Corey's *Star Wars* novel, *Honour Among Thieves* (2011), contributes a sly and enjoyable chapter to the franchise, with spot-on character dialogue, easter eggs for *Expanse* fans, and signature attention to working conditions and class conflict (as well as exobiology). *The Expanse's* influences also resonate in new *Star Wars* TV series like *Andor* (2022-) and *The Mandalorian* (2019-), as well as other series like *For All Mankind* (2019-).

The fictional world's focus for organised labour is the asteroid belt, a network of inner planets' corporate concerns, with their attendant security, and the diasporic population of the 'Belters' who live and work among the asteroids and gas giant moons. In this vast system, higher education is fiercely competitive to gain access to and narrowly instrumentalized to serve the interplanetary building and colonising economy (i.e. the STEM disciplines drive the system-building economy, enjoying and so enjoy pronounced social privilege over the arts). In contrast, organised labour is ubiquitous, accessible, and broadly empowered to legally represent and protect workers' rights, even in criminal cases. The competition for access to education contrasts with the series' emphasis on access in several key narrative contexts like plot and character development (for instance, Holden and his ethos of openness); and the diegetic science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) slant in dialogue and banter contrasts archly with the novels' constant references to and quotations of literature and culture, especially poetry. The beloved ship Rocinante, the crew's 'legitimately salvaged'⁴⁸ Martian frigate turned home and workplace to Holden and his crew, is named after the 'work horse' in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.⁴⁹

Our analysis of these issues builds on issues we've raised in our prior publications on *The Expanse* and shuttles dialectically between the novel series and the television series, and between details of narrative content and elements of textual and filmic form, in analysing pertinent print or film evidence. We focus especially on the series' detailed world-building in the suggestively interrelated contexts of higher education and skilled work. From the Rocinante's relatable rogues' gallery of a crew, to Ganymede scientists like Praxidike Meng (*Caliban's War*, *Babylon's Ashes*), to the ticketed dock and ship workers, characters such as 'Melba' (the disguised Clarissa Mao), her supervisor Ren, or Jakulski (in *Babylon's Ashes*); and from individuals like these to organisations, such as Cortazar's research team of unbothered sociopaths, or such as the OPA, which as ex-UN Colonel Fred Johnson (played by Chad L. Coleman) insists 'is only interested in human rights and good jobs for Belters' (S1E4, "CQB"): such individuals and groups represent different labour forces, and thus symptoms of class conflict, but they also represent potential allies and coalitions, which are

⁴⁸ James S A Corey (2012) *Caliban's War*, New York: Orbit. p.427.

⁴⁹ Coyly, the aforementioned Rocinante reference, for instance, also echoes Rush's 1977 song 'Cygnus X-1 Book I: The Voyage': 'I set a course just east of Lyra / and northwest of Pegasus / flew into the light of Deneb / sailed across the Milky Way / on my ship / the 'Rocinante' / wheeling through the galaxies / headed for the heart of Cygnus / headlong into mystery.' *The Expanse* varies and modulates the Quixote reference throughout, mainly to develop Holden's essentially Quixotic character; In "Dandelion Sky" (S3E10) the Investigator (played by Thomas Jane) says to Holden, 'You're the patron saint of lost causes, kid.' After Avasarala's fashion, we might summarize Holden's problem-solving method as *Fuck around and find out—then fix it*. 'James Holden and a bunch of Belters are fucking up our first exploration of an alien world,' Avasarala rants in "Oppressor" (S4E5).

often articulated in relation to *The Expanse's* settings and premises in higher education, advanced research, and expert labour.

Higher education can be understood in historical materialist terms as an institution for the reproduction of dominant social relations; as a set of copying and modelling practices⁵⁰ or 'to produce layers of managers of capital.'⁵¹ But the contemporary 'university in ruins' (a critical theory of the corporatising university that has held up all too well since Readings posited it in 1996) also, dialectically, harbours a repertoire of oppositional ideas and works, of counter-discourses, ancient and suppressed ways of knowing and being. As Jeannette Winterson reminds us, art predates capitalism and will outlast it;⁵² and art's long ambivalence toward capital has proven as much a thorn in the side of postsecondary education's corporate managers who fiscally punish the arts programs they can't just kill as much as arts curriculum remains in strong demand among students and sometimes even employers (e.g. Google sometimes earns headlines for prioritising the hiring of arts graduates proficient in so-called "soft" skills like creative problem solving). The troubling and widespread subjection of arts production and arts education to disinvestment, destruction, and denigration (as widely demonstrated by UK and Australian demoting of arts and Humanities programs and, closer to home, by provincial government efforts, especially in Alberta, to reduce higher education to tar sands labour training) reproduces a riven collegium of two scholarly cultures. STEM ascends over the stubbornly un-useful arts, and the rift (in funding allocations, institution-building investments, etc.) breeds dissent among disciplines and faculties, dissent sometimes deliberately fomented by administrations on the divide-and-conquer model. The varied and widespread forms of attack on the arts in and beyond postsecondary settings are arguably symptoms of weakened organisations of academic labour (e.g. in the university's increasing employment of contractually limited, precarious teaching labour) and hence of corresponding compromises for academic freedom and fair, equitable scholarly labour, imperilled on a global basis by these intramural conflicts and corporate colonisations, set against the wider background of widening wealth disparity and the correspondingly opportunistic ascendance of fascism. Arts, on this account, harbours imaginative and radical practices in not just social reproduction, but social reproduction with a critical difference.

⁵⁰ See: Marcus Boon (2013) *In Praise of Copying*. Harvard, Harvard University Press.
<https://www.hup.harvard.edu/features/boon>

⁵¹ Dionne Brand (2020) *Theory*. New York: Knopf. p.174.

⁵² Jeannette Winterson (2002) 'The secret life of us', *The Guardian*,
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2002/nov/25/art.artsfeatures1>

Higher education in *The Expanse* is often depicted as a commodity to be bought and sold, most emphatically on Earth. In *Leviathan Falls*, Holden recalls a tuition fund-raising *quinceñera* held for him as a youth.⁵³ It's implied that the Earth's huge population makes access to higher education scarce and competitive where available at all, but the political decisions behind maintaining such scarcity, rather than investing in and expanding its accessibility, go unmentioned. As for offworld living in a future where both life and livelihood hang in the precious balance of pressure and hull against the vacuum of space, STEM education is a practicality. Ship's engineers are an essential necessity—Naomi Nagata, for example, is frequently portrayed as Holden's partner and executive officer but arguably holds the most critical role aboard the *Rocinante*. All other tasks—Holden's efforts to broker peace, Alex's passion for flight, Amos' attempt to build a new life for himself—exist because Nagata keeps the ship running, repairs its damage, and tinkers with it to improve efficiency. The engineers and technicians of *The Expanse* hold themselves—and are held—apart. They are a quietly efficient, almost mystical group: they know and understand their world in a way that other characters, such as Holden, don't. This quiet narrative of the critical centrality of STEM pervades the series, setting STEM apart from literature and culture to create the kind of complete cultural divide posited by C. S. Snow and that exists today in the kind of national funding schemes for research in Canada: the so-called Tri-Council, which keeps the social sciences and humanities distinct and separate from science and engineering, and from health.⁵⁴ If this divide is presented as canon in science fiction, it is because it is a convention required by the genre...but also the understanding of the aloof separate-ness of science from the hoi polloi.

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

LOPEZ: Your educational history is quite impressive.

NAGATA: I took free tutorials and tested through.

⁵³ James S A Corey (2021) *Leviathan Falls*, New York: Orbit. p.159.

⁵⁴ C.S. Snow (1961) *The Two Cultures and The Scientific Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

While not specifically noted, the assumption is that she learns in English and not Belter creole—a reasonable assumption, since as a Belter, she lives in the periphery as a colonised person, adapting to the system of coloniser. The type of training she seeks is simply not available to her in the Belt, and the books imply a loss of culture as she embarks on her professional career, evidenced by her code-switch to mask her Belter language when mixing with Inners, only returning to her heritage language in the company of other Belters. It stands in sharp contrast to the experiences of Martian youth, where the best and brightest study at lower and upper universities. Mars, a breakaway republic, demonstrates its STEM legitimacy by creating its own system of education, ostensibly to supply highly-educated personnel to sustain Martian generational terraforming ambitions and make other meaningful contributions. Both Martian protagonists, Draper and Kamal, served in the Martian military and presumably accessed higher education on the military service model. Corey's stories "Drive" and "Gods of Risk" detail Mars' education system and research culture. When Draper's nephew David gets his admission news, money goes unmentioned.⁵⁵ Other Martians talk about university this way: all about academic struggle and achievement, nothing about tuition: 'Kit is doing great. Picked planetary engineering as his major at Mariner Tech,' Kamal shares in *Persepolis Rising*.⁵⁶ This and other MCR setting details—compulsory military service, the omnipresent educational exercises and recruitment posters in public spaces in the Mars settings of Season 4—all strongly suggest that tuition is free on Mars; that the MCR publicly funds citizens' education costs as a public investment in skilled labour for militant nation-building.

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

DRAPER: So you're a doctor?

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

And in "Subduction" (S4E3), UN Secretary General Avasarala (played by Shohreh Aghdashloo), trailing in polls to her competitor Nancy Gao (played by Lily Gao), gets critical dirt on the that competition: she learns that Gao 'jumped the line' and exploited personal connections to gain post-secondary admission 'one week after she applied. No one's that lucky,' Avasarala speculates; 'some people wait decades.' For literary purposes, the figure of

⁵⁵ James S A Corey (2022) *Memory's Legion*. New York: Orbit. p.86.

⁵⁶ James S A Corey (2017) *Persepolis Rising*. New York: Orbit. p.26.

an exhausted, decadent, apathetic Earth—with its biosphere propped up by extraterrestrially imported resources and its billions of poor, huddled masses—well serves the fictional world's postcolonial dispensation as its imperial centre. We note, in passing, that *The Expanse's* consistently negative depictions of Universal Basic Income (UBI) policy suggest that its implementation on Earth is not a victory achieved from below by the working class but a top-down imposition by the United Nations government. Right-wing arguments in favour of UBI posit the income citizens get from it as their means to pay for state services posited as fully privatised and commercial. The inaccessibility of both education and health care on Earth worsens, in the story, when the rocks start falling, but even before then this inaccessibility seems a result of a hyper-competitiveness structured and stimulated by the state.

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

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

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

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

Other post-secondary institutions and industrial research complexes are referenced in *The Expanse*—including Earth-based institutions, those at Luna, and the extensive medical and agricultural systems on Ganymede. The higher education system in the Belt seems largely polarised between Ganymede as the 'breadbasket' of the outer satellites and Ceres as a cosmopolitan centre and a contested territory, whether between the Earth corporations that dominate its industry and the Belters who work for them, or between rival factions of the Outer Planets Alliance vying for its control. Ceres hosts a university that the young Belter refugee Felcia, in *Cibola Burn*, dreams of attending. In Felcia's story, access to university seems blocked mainly by her parents, who want her to stay and work with them on founding

a sovereign Belter exoplanetary settlement. Accessibility in terms of tuition or financing goes unmentioned in the TV version. It's a conspicuous omission for a family, indeed a community, portrayed as poor refugees from Ganymede, for whom the affordability of education would be top of mind.

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

Where Mars makes education accessible to train citizens for war and civil infrastructure systems to enable terraforming, the Belt's educational institutions evidently also emphasise STEM excellence—interestingly, not for just utilitarian or instrumental ends but for imaginative, aesthetic, even spiritual purposes. The quality of their work is essential to Belter pride as a testament to 'the pinnacle of creativity...the impossible made real',⁵⁷ as the LDSS Nauvoo is described before it gets repurposed, salvaged, and repurposed again.

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

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

In the TV series we first meet Clarissa (aka 'Melba,' played by Nadine Nicole) listening to her flask-sipping supervisor Ren's 'secret teachings, hidden wisdom' on getting the most for

⁵⁷ James S A Corey (2011) *Leviathan Wakes*. New York: Orbit. p.344.

one's work: 'You should clock in before you shower,' he says, 'log it as decontamination and,' as he sips, 'tool check time' (S3E7, "Delta-V").

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

Throughout the novels and shows, characters play mentor and role model to one another, teach one another, and even run private "simulations" of other characters, somewhat like the protomolecule establishes echoes and repetitions among those exposed to it: first, visions of Julie haunt Miller; then visions of Miller haunt Holden. Before the Investigator leaves, Holden learns that the Investigator too has been haunted: by the collective dead of Eros. Holden's "simulation" of Avasarala, though, is not like the Investigator that hounds Holden; his private Avasarala is an imagined advisor, not a neurological intrusion. In *Tiamat's Wrath*, Nagata thinks, echoing Holden in *Wakes*: 'Give the people enough information, and they'd be able to make the right decisions on their own.'⁵⁸ *The Expanse's* circular subplot patterns constantly have characters mimicking and role-modelling for each other, trading places, training protégés, undergoing profound reversals, and otherwise sustaining interpersonal resonance frequencies with one another. As Season 6 draws to a close, Amos and Draper sing along with Hank Williams Jr., echoing the late pilot Kamal, who also sang along while aboard.

The Expanse's motifs and devices of repetition, variation, citation, and modelling warrant something of a detour into poetry: specifically, into why there's just so much of it in this hard SF series. *The Expanse* plays with and playfully comments on citation practices, in keeping with the series' consistent references to intellectual property (references that are self-reflexive, since *The Expanse* itself is intellectual property). *Tiamat's Wrath* alludes to *Leviathan Wakes*, in a scene where the imprisoned Holden reads 'an old murder mystery set on an ice hauler in the Belt before the gates opened.'⁵⁹ In particular, poetry references and quotations recur prominently throughout the novels. These references include citations of or allusions to historical authors (e.g. Shakespeare,⁶⁰ Pope and HD⁶¹), alongside references to fictional writers in *The Expanse's* culture (e.g. Alonzo Guzman, the 'famous poet' aboard the

⁵⁸ *Leviathan Wakes*, p.510.

⁵⁹ James S A Corey (2019) *Tiamat's Wrath*. New York: Orbit. p.256.

⁶⁰ James S A Corey (2013) *Abbadon's Gate*. New York: Orbit. P.266; *Tiamat's Wrath*, p.302.

⁶¹ James S A Corey (2016) *Babylon's Ashes*. New York: Orbit. p.71.

UN mission to the Ring⁶²); these references range from a nod to Daniel Abraham's college mentor Vincent Barrett Price, whose poem 'The Death-Self' Miller remembers having read,⁶³ to familiar lines from well known works.

Avasarala's husband, Arjun, an English professor, sometimes appears as a comic foil, enthusiast of an esoteric and useless field of writing and study, and other times as the guardian and emissary of a precious, precarious cultural tradition; as Winterson suggests, a tradition beyond the interest but also the reach of capital: 'Arjun's dissenting voice murmured in her mind, "There will always be poetry".'⁶⁴ Avasarala and Arjun often talk about how different are the 'worlds' they work in. 'What can I do?' he asks rhetorically, helplessly, while discussing cataclysmic events with her; 'I teach poetry to graduate students.'⁶⁵

'If life transcends death, then I will seek for you there. If not, then there too,' she [Avasarala] said. 'It's a fucking haiku. The man has a one-track mind and one train on it. Poetry. Save me from poetry.'⁶⁶

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

Similarly, Clarissa's participation 'in a poetry writing course that the prison chaplain had put together'⁶⁷ is retrospectively recounted by Clarissa with an eyeroll or two, but she nevertheless produces in the course a short original work she uses as a mantra, to steady her mind in troubled times (as Drummer repeats what Ashford says of his singing).

The *Expanse* novels narrate the misquoting and misremembering of lines of poetry as often as their citation *verbatim*. These touches of character subtly build the setting, with its cultural touchstones' attributions decayed by the lapse of centuries and the vicissitudes of taste, canon, tradition, and teaching. 'There was a thing you read me one time, About jack pines,' she [Avasarala] said. [...] 'Do you remember it? All I have is that it ended 'da-DAH, da-DAH, da-DAH, da-DAH, and paved the way to Paradise.'⁶⁸ Cognizant that this well might be a single reference we just haven't found yet, we read this passage instead as a misremembered mash-up of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Joni Mitchell: the line 'They paved

⁶² *Abaddon's Gate*, p.251.

⁶³ *Leviathan Wakes*, p.294.

⁶⁴ *Babylon's Ashes*, p.103.

⁶⁵ *Caliban's War*, p.494.

⁶⁶ *Caliban's War*, p.494.

⁶⁷ *Babylon's Ashes*, p.71.

⁶⁸ *Babylon's Ashes*, p.102.

Paradise' from Mitchell's 1970 song 'Big Yellow Taxi' and a rhythmic fragment from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1816 'fragment' poem, 'Kubla Khan': 'Weave a circle round him thrice, / And close your eyes with holy dread, / For he on honey-dew hath fed / And drunk the milk of Paradise.'⁶⁹

In *Leviathan Falls*, Tanaka 'remembered something she'd heard once: I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. She didn't know where the line came from. It didn't matter. She had a hunt to complete.'⁷⁰ The word 'hunt' in the context of this novel's plot signals the quotation's source, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. In *Tiamat's Wrath*, Holden reads the epitaph on Avasarala's tomb (Arjun's 'fucking haiku') but he can't place it: 'It's an interesting quote,' he said. 'I feel like I should recognize it.'⁷¹

In *Leviathan Wakes*, Miller's transformation into the Investigator gives him, or it, a more literary turn of mind, recounted in a poetic, stream-of-AI processing and defragmenting of data amidst which references swirl and surface: '*Till human voices wake us*, he thought, without quite being able to recall where the phrase came from.'⁷² Hardly random access, this line about 'voices waking,' quoted from T.S. Eliot's 1915 poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' foreshadows and resonates with several key points along the roman-fleuve's main plot, not least the rude awakening to voices in *Leviathan Falls*' 'hive-mind' scenes. And Miller's misremembering of the line amplifies his character; as mentioned above, elsewhere in *Wakes*, Miller half-recollects 'The Death-Self' (a clause that also summarises this character's prognosis. True to form then, in *Cibola Burn*, the Investigator misquotes William Blake's 'The Lamb': 'Did He who made the lamb make thee?'.⁷³

Beyond texturing the setting and developing characters, poetry does other work in *The Expanse*. The recurring references to poetry, poems, and poets complement the patterns of variation, iteration, and repetition—poetic forms—that infuse the prose with lyricism and, what's more, structure and scaffold key plot points across the series' arc. One obvious early example is *Leviathan Wakes*' almost farcical conceit of the asteroid Eros, occupied by the star-crossed couple, Miller and Julie, flying, as if driven by desire not physics, to Venus, there to implant itself and gestate some rough new beast. The sequel alludes in its very title to Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, whose antagonist, the enslaved Caliban, has

⁶⁹ Quoted in Jerome McGann (ed.) (1994) *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.395.

⁷⁰ *Leviathan Falls*, p.167.

⁷¹ *Tiamat's Wrath*, p.5.

⁷² *Leviathan Wakes*, p.520.

⁷³ *Cibola Burn*, p.453.

re-centred anti- and postcolonial literary adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare, like Aimé Césaire's play *Un Tempête* and Marina Warner's novel *Indigo*. *Cibola Burn's* 'interludes' with the Investigator figure a kind of machine learning poetics of conflict and contradiction between 'the machine for finding lost things' and Miller as a machine-copied, individual sentience, raging against the protomolecule machine that incessantly erases and remakes the Investigator in its continual attempt to phone home to its vanished Builders. In *Leviathan Falls*, the 'Dreamer' interludes sketch the plot's deep back story via Cara's impressionistic retelling of 'the stories that grandmothers told' about 'a time before minds' amidst 'black oceans the size of everything.'⁷⁴ And poetry offers, too, a precedent for the invasive 'hive mind' phenomenon integral to *Leviathan Falls's* plot; nothing short of Romantic poetry as such was famously defined by Wordsworth and Coleridge, in their 1801 *Lyrical Ballads*, as 'the spontaneous overflowing of powerful feelings.' *Leviathan Falls's* 'hive mind' experience somewhat literalizes this definition; and what puts it in a different light is the inability of the subject suffering it to know *whose* feelings so overflow.

While poetry is alternately played for laughs against STEM and an integral formal element of the text, the protomolecule's forms of learning and building 'the Work' look, from the outside, like grotesque or surreal acts (or crimes) of poetry. The horror on Eros in *Leviathan Wakes* emits an audible 'feed' in which some Belters hear sufficient music to sample and remix it. *Cibola Burn's* repeatedly replicated Investigator itself repeats lines like 'Gonna need a ride' and, with eminent lyricism, 'I wonder what that rain tastes like.' And those scenes in the novels where a human encounters the lethal ring entities become markedly more lyrical in style, as in Inaros' apprehension of himself as 'the vibration of a string on a nonexistent guitar.'⁷⁵

The poetic speech of those humans, like the Laconian children, who get 'fixed' by protomolecular means, together with the novels' 'Interlude' chapters, offers a further clue to the series' leftist leanings—and teachability. From Miller to Cara, these entities repeatedly articulate puzzlement and awe at the fact of matter: 'substrate' as Xan calls it.⁷⁶ As Miller explains, a few times, to Holden, it is precisely because the human species takes a material form (in contrast to the immateriality of the vanished Builders) that humans are at all resistant to Ring entities; it's because Holden is made of meat that he can act on protomolecular prompts (to 'flip switches,' as the Investigator says) and get tangible results. *The Expanse's* thematic imagery of 'matter' and 'substrate' thus accords a certain valour and

⁷⁴ *Leviathan Falls*, p.81.

⁷⁵ *Babylon's Ashes*, p.509.

⁷⁶ *Babylon's Ashes*.

power to the material, and, as such, can be read—and taught—as a way to understand a foundational idea in Marxist theory, the distinction between base and superstructure:

The *building*-like metaphor of base and superstructure is used by Marx and Engels to propound the idea that the economic structure of society (the base) conditions the existence and forms of the state and social consciousness (the superstructure).⁷⁷

This theoretical model privileges the material as that which precedes and shapes the spiritual, but is also more complicated than reductive: ‘the superstructure of ideas is not conceived as a mere passive reflection but it is capable of some effectivity.’⁷⁸

Poetry, then, suffuses the settings and speech in *The Expanse* as texture that also primes the reader to engage with the protomolecule and its activities on poetic grounds since scientific grounds so often seem inadequate to its unpredictable changing of the laws of physics, never mind the axioms of political economy. As Fayeze says to Elvi in *Leviathan Falls*, while trying to interpret what the protomolecule subject Cara is telling them about the Builders’ history: ‘Seriously, I feel like we should have brought a poetry grad student along. This is bullshit as data.’⁷⁹ STEM holds sway where capital governs, but out on the peripheries, in the void between gate-linked stars and the darkness of dead planets, the remains of the Builders that characters encounter everywhere in *The Expanse* keep defying scientific knowledge and so demand other ways of knowing for when the going gets weird. Poetry, perhaps surprisingly, provides one such other way.

The protomolecule’s forms of learning and of ‘building the Work’ become legible, in different ways, as lyrical and poetic forms integral to the work (meaning Corey’s). Consider the scenes in which the protomolecular powers dismantle something and itemise its minute components: the deconstruction of the Arbogast, and Katoa’s dissection of the nurse, in *Caliban’s War*, and in *Abaddon’s Gate*, the ring station’s dismemberment and absorption of the Martian Marine Lt Paolo Mayer (played by Simu Liu in S3E10, “Dandelion Sky”). These protomolecular, autodidactic practices of inventorying not only find their narrative counterpart in protagonist Naomi’s practices of inventorying; both practices also resonate generatively with the poetics of ‘inventory’ that have come to characterise the work of the Black queer radical poet Dionne Brand, past poet laureate of Toronto. Reading Brand’s work in relation to *The Expanse* dialectically brings into dialogue divergent texts, genres, and careers, because

⁷⁷ Tom Bottomore et al. (1983) *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. Harvard: Harvard University Press. p.42., *emphasis added*.

⁷⁸ *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, p.43.

⁷⁹ *Leviathan Falls*, p.88.

of their shared base of operations in Toronto, their work's similar labour affinities and interests, and the unexpected resonance frequency to be heard between these very different works' uses 'inventory.' Brand's acclaimed 2006 book *Inventory* documents a wrenching, unflinching catalogue of a post-millennial world ablaze with Big Oil's imperialist wars, body counts, and biosphere destruction; yet at the same time a world awash in intrinsic, irresistible gorgeousness, from hummingbirds to the farthest stars.⁸⁰

As Christina Sharpe writes, introducing Brand's collected poetry, Brand's 'labours of witness and imagination' produce 'a poetics of liberation; she does not "write toward anything called justice, but against tyranny."⁸¹ And increasingly central to Brand's work—in which "the aesthetic and the political are inseparable"⁸² —is:

a kind of attentive gathering for which 'inventory' is simultaneously one name and also form, mode of inquiry, politics, and method. Collecting is accounting, and this method is not for reconciling. ... The poet's task is to try to hold all of this and to work toward some pellucid understanding of those materials that others might want to forget, or have to forget, or put aside. The poet works memory, she works the news, she works the everyday—violence, sunsets, sirens, sidewalks, and oceans—and returns them to the reader utterly transformed by her lapidary attention.⁸³

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

In the TV series, an establishing shot in "Doors and Corners" (S2E2) shows Naomi tallying the Rocinante's ordnance: 'Inventory says we have 7,200 out of 10,000 rounds.' In *Nemesis Games*, Naomi, captive aboard her abusive ex's ship, seeks refuge or at least distraction in work like 'checking inventories',⁸⁴ an activity she repeats throughout the book.⁸⁵ As the author Brand's poetry and the character Naomi's demonstrate, inventory can mean or cover many other forms of work: the clarity and nerve to to tell it like it is—with attention to detail; the routine maintenance that allows one's mind to drift, to plot; the accounting with an eye to

⁸⁰ Dionne Brand (2006) *Inventory*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.

⁸¹ Dionne Brand (2022) *Nomenclature: New and Collected Poems*. Introduced by Christina Sharpe. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart. p.xviii.

⁸² *Nomenclature*, p.xii.

⁸³ *Nomenclature*, p.xix.

⁸⁴ *Nemesis Games*, p.302.

⁸⁵ *Nemesis Games*, p.368, 403, 421.

outcomes other than reconciliation. 'Her lists are *bristling*,' writes Sharpe of Brand's poetic method,⁸⁶ using language that cites Brand; language that also echoes maritime military descriptions of ships or soldiers 'bristling' with munitions.

Brand's poetry shares several other formal and thematic similarities and resonances with Corey's novels. The present study hasn't scope to delve into them all,⁸⁷ but one is worth noting: the way both Brand and Corey name and centre Eros in their work. Brand's poetic-political project deals in complex uncertainties, hard questions, and concrete things, but in dialogue and interview she's long shown a knack for dropping one-liner mantras and manifestoes, as in this comment from around Y2K: 'I think Eros is ultimately what we have been fighting for.'⁸⁸ With similar emphasis but in a quite different context, in *The Expanse*, OPA leader Johnson recognizes, in the events that befall Eros, a strategic opportunity to change the system's balance of power: 'Eros changed everything,' he says (S2E6, "Paradigm Shift").

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

The daisy chain of simulations and ghosts with which the main characters consistently haunt or channel one another across the series become likewise legible as figures of superstructure *affecting* base (pun intended). Miller hallucinates Julie, Holden hallucinates Miller, everybody hallucinates Duarte; Avasarala hears Arjun in her head, Holden hears Avasarala. Analogously, many characters teach and learn from one another, and so change: at the outset Amos calls Naomi boss, so then does Prax (who holds a doctorate, we should

⁸⁶ *Nomenclature*, p.xix, emphasis in original.

⁸⁷ See Mark A. McCutcheon (2022) 'Field testing a sampladelic sound jamming countermeasure against copyright bots', Listening In on Literature: A Soundtable on Power and Surveillance, ACCUTE Conference, Montréal, 13 May 2022, rpt. in Spoken Web, <https://spokenweb.ca/accute-2022-soundtable/>

⁸⁸ Quoted in Nuzhat Abbas (1999) 'An Interview with Dionne Brand and Nuzhat Abbas', *Herizons*, 13(3), p.6.

note) recognize Amos' expertise by complimenting how well Amos has taught him; and by the end of *Babylon's Ashes* Clarissa is calling Amos a good teacher too, and boss besides. Bobbie's and Amos' mis-sung lyrics of a song their dead friend loved further suggest how profoundly important modelling, iterating, repeating, and varying are, both as ways characters learn and grow and as foundational formal elements in Corey's writing.

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

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

If these horrible bosses in different ways reproduce a certain type, so too do the women to whom they offer violence tend to vary a certain tactical opposition to and survival of such violence characterised, first, by imaginatively applying their own learning and, second, by building coalitions and alliances based on genuine understanding and genuinely shared interests.⁸⁹

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

⁸⁹ Beyond the discussion here, readers interested in how *The Expanse* handles storylines involving abuse and trauma might read Rebecca Long's review of Season 5.

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

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

HOLDEN: It's complicated.

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

In season 4, Murtry also violently persecutes Lucia (played by Rosa Gilmore), the Belter mother whose botched anti-colonial plot imperils her family and triggers her suicidal depression. Lucia's daughter Felcia, dreaming of fleeing her family's hardscrabble subsistence for postsecondary pursuits in the Belt, also faces exceptional hazard and violence: stuck aboard a ship falling out of orbit, Felcia gets tutored remotely by Nagata (who here pays forward the open education ethos of which she's a beneficiary) to 'deconstruct' a net, unravelling its knots and reweaving it differently, to make it a tow cable.⁹⁰ In season 5, the Nagata is abducted and imprisoned by her abusive, manipulative ex-boyfriend; her escape amounts to an allegorical story centring the struggle of a Black body simply to breathe.⁹¹ In season 6, Julie's sister Clarissa suffers chronically deteriorating health from the side effects of an illegal elective surgery while also assuming proficiency and leadership in ship mechanics; meanwhile, Avasarala's grief over overwhelming personal loss and depression over the catastrophic damage to Earth are exacerbated when she travels to space. Avasarala, we know from season 2, vocally hates space travel but has had to learn the hard way (in escape) how to cope with it. As the TV series winds up, that unwillingly earned learning empowers her to succeed in an astonishing mission of interplanetary diplomacy and coalition-building, led by visible-minority persons identifying as women,

⁹⁰ As literary critics, we're contractually obliged to note the correct, literal precision with which the word "deconstruction" is scripted into this scene: too often a misconstrued synonym for "destruction" or "dismantling," deconstruction is a literary-philosophical reading procedure developed by Jacques Derrida to identify a text's internal contradictions and reproductions of social power structures, in order to reconstruct the text through an oppositional or otherwise critical interpretation of it, or sometimes to illuminate how the text argues with or undoes itself; for examples, see books like Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy* and *Spectres of Marx*.

⁹¹ See Heather Clitheroe and Mark A. McCutcheon (2022) 'Review of The Expanse Season 6', *Foundation*, 51(3), pp. 128-30.

against the megalomaniac trumpery of Marco Inaros. And, continuing with the novels, *Leviathan Falls*' Colonel Tanaka suffers the extraordinary violence of 'ongoing, intimate assault,' unpredictably at that, as a *side effect* of her boss' hubristic work, from which only Tanaka's specialised skill set may disentangle her.

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

The co-authors have discussed how they rewrote and combined several novel characters to produce what Cara Gee, the actor who plays Drummer, the Belter captain turned pirate turned union boss, calls a 'Frankenstein' version of this character,⁹² like and unlike their counterpart in the novels. The books' Drummer debuts in the sixth volume; TV Drummer, early in season 2; the show also rewrites Bull's spinal injury as Drummer's instead, and rewrites and recasts Michio Pa's polyamorous family crew as Drummer's too. This attentive adaptation process affords Gee, who is Ojibwe (Chippewa), to deliver some dialogue lines (in a production made in Toronto) that are drenched in the historical ironies of Canada as a state based on and still committing colonial violence against the Indigenous peoples whose land the state occupies, and, furthermore, that connect these ironies to both work and learning. In "Fight or Flight" (S3E1) Drummer, while drinking with Fred Johnson, describes the Behemoth this way:

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

⁹² Quoted in Ty Franck and Wes Chatham (2021) 'Episode 6', The Expanse Aftershow, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yntyCMXijTig>

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

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

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

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

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

In these ways, *The Expanse* TV series dramatises the complexities of intersectionally fraught workplaces in ways the source novels don't, on account of elements of film production—like casting, dialogue, cinematography, and mise en scène, for instance—whereby the portrayals and conflicts of certain characters ground them in and signify on specific visible and audible details of cultural difference. These 'warmly' rendered and specifically embodied characters⁹³ solicit our sympathy and ask us to witness the systemic and insidious forms of violence visited on them and other equity-deserving persons and groups by the rule of rich, entitled men, the hegemonic establishment of 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,'⁹⁴ an establishment that depends on postsecondary education's gatekeeping of knowledge for its reproduction and legitimacy, and that is somewhat checked if not balanced by ubiquitously organised labour.

⁹³ See Constance Rooke (1989) *Fear of the Open Heart: Essays on Contemporary Canadian Writing*. Toronto: Coach House Press.

⁹⁴ bell hooks (2000) *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press. p.46

Where the evidence of one's senses doesn't prompt one to reach for an estranging epistemology like poetry, survival in space still apparently demands STEM excellence and expert labour, mutually constitutive institutions contextualised by the Belt's ubiquitously organised work forces: from Ceres' 'union' brothels that Amos extols (in S6E3, "Force Projection") to the TV series' denouement in the founding of the 'Transport Union' and the appointment of Drummer as its first president.

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

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