

Christopher Meade
Appalachian State University

READING WORLDS LITERATURE WITH SAMUEL R. DELANY: GENERAL INFORMATION AND THE WORLDS OF OBJECTS

Abstract:

Drawing on science fiction and object-oriented ontology, this article suggests new methods for conceiving a pluralized world(s) literature, through the lens of Samuel Delaney's decades of world-making narrative. Meade offers the principle of subjunctivity and of fuzzy concepts as a means for expanding the theoretical presumptions of the World Literature debate in contemporary literature, and details the ways in which Delaney offers a narrative pedagogy of worldedness that goes on the Mercatorian confines of contemporary globalization discourses.

Keywords:

Samuel Delaney ♦ world literature ♦ science fiction ♦ object-oriented ontology ♦ untranslatability

Introduction

In this article I will analyze science-fiction author and literary theorist Samuel R. Delany's fictional practice as both worldly and other-wordly. This is only possible if one holds that many worlds exist, as Delany does. He envisions the writing and reading of fiction as a means to disorient, and thereby reorient, the reader between perceptually exclusive worlds—worlds that are “impossible,” to use Leibnitz's term. The

Meade, Christopher. “Reading Worlds Literature with Samuel R. Delany: General Information and the Worlds of Objects.” *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 4:1 (2016): pp. 71–94. ISSN 2325-2871.

reoriented reader is forced, in the mutual construction of the text, to inhabit a world other than her own and, if it functions correctly, to accept it as the real world.

This (other)worldly orientation, as I will show through an analysis of Delany's theory of the paraliterary genre of science fiction, is achieved by cultivating blindness to conventional perceptions and facilitating other perceptions. I examine how different fictional worlds arise as a result of the new objects that these new perceptions construct. Here I follow the New Materialist philosopher Levi Bryant in defining all extent beings—including human subjects—as objects. Thus, although Delany is a constructivist and believes that reality can be altered by an alteration in perception, he also remains a materialist.¹ Reading Delany in light of Bryant's philosophy allows us to integrate this materialism with his own post-structuralism.

The idea that new objects and thereby new worlds can be uncovered via the alteration of perceptual distinctions is explained using Bryant's adaptation of the information theory of Niklaus Luhman. This theory holds that information is always constructed by an object—whether a rock, a human, or a galactic federation—according to the specific manner in which that object is open to the world. Recognizing information in this way—never objective in the sense that it is always structured by the interest of another object, but also always objective because it is not merely the content of communication—allows us to think of information and translation failure in materialist terms as well. An examination of Delany's theory of the paraliterary, which holds that genre fiction exists as a reading practice among a community rather than as a canon of normative texts demonstrates an important affinity between Delany's fictional and critical writing and that of contemporary cosmopolitical thinkers, particularly the “politics of untranslatability” espoused by Emily Apter. Here Delany's pluralism with regards to types of reading is situated among other important thinkers of plurality and offers an object-oriented perspective.

The essay ends with an examination of this pluralism at work in Delany's galactic fiction *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*. The novel is structured around a great variety of translation failures, from the cultural semiotics of the body and language divergence among “monolingual” societies, to the galactic scale according to which the human individual is itself untranslatable: we find, turning philosophical idealism on its head, that it is the human subject that does not exist for the galactic Federation of Habitable Planets. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how comparatists, translation theorists and

practitioners can productively understand the complexity of worlds by viewing them as objects composed of other objects rather than viewing them as determinist totalities. Using Delany's fiction and Bryant's philosophy to think translation in material terms can focus the study of translation on those points of resistance where it is possible to induce change, even if it cannot overcome the—ontologically-grounded, rather than epistemological—untranslatable.

Delany's Fiction: Worldly Pluralism and the Distinctions Preceding Perception

During my first three years as an ID, I thought my job₁ was not to be surprised at the universe's human variety. Later I realized that it was not to be surprised that nonstop surprises would henceforth be my life.

Samuel Delany, *Stars in My Pockets like Grains of Sand* (1984)

[A] particular distinction precedes the identity of an entity, such that the identity of an entity is an effect of the distinction that allows for observation, not a substantial reality that precedes observation. [...] The point, of course, is that while distinctions or forms obey rigorous laws once made, the founding distinction itself is contingent in that other distinctions could always have been made.

Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (2011)

The realization of the character Marq Dyeth in the first quotation above, and the point that Levi Bryant makes in the second, relate in different ways to the same fact of life for those who pass regularly between multiple worlds. The first speaker relates the fact that in his work transporting technologies and materials through galactic space he can never anticipate what will surprise him about the organization of foreign worlds. Regardless of the fact that he expects to be surprised, and is therefore not surprised to be surprised, he is always surprised at what he finds. The second quotation explains why these surprises continue to surprise, even when they are expected. This is because, Bryant maintains, anything that is identified as existing is identified by another object that is only open to

its world in a particular manner—the “particular distinction” which that object makes in its world.

Complicating things is the fact that any object observing its world is necessarily unaware of the founding distinction its own perceptions are based upon. So when the young Marq Dyeth began his job₁, he could not anticipate which of the distinctions that make his observations possible would have been made differently on another world. But no matter how long he worked he would neither be able to anticipate, in a given new world, what distinction has been made differently nor how it has been made. Hence his lifetime of unforeseeable surprises, which might be splendid, miserable, or both.

In the introduction to his illustrated novel *Empire* Delany explains that a plurality of worlds is “the basic s-f construct.” (Delaney 1978, n.p.) He illustrates this point with the anecdote of a rocketship flying between two worlds. When the rocket launches, up is up and down is down. These two coordinates are metaphorically part of many systems of evaluation (“time, education, energy, intelligence, usefulness, popularity, attitude, food, shelter, and entertainment”), which are all evaluated on a scale of higher to lower (Delaney 1978, n.p.). But up and down no longer have fixed meanings once the rocketship escapes the gravity of one world. Gravity—which metaphorically structures the world for human observers—is a distinction that makes it possible for people to identify all kinds of things in the world. But even the distinction between up and down is “contingent, in that other distinctions could always have been made.” (Bryant 138) These potential distinctions open up new worlds.

Levi Bryant, an object-oriented philosopher, argues that these types of distinctions are made by all objects, not merely by humans, and that in both human and nonhuman worlds such distinctions necessarily limit how objects translate and interact with one another. This is because an object’s environment is always more complex than the object itself. It follows that any object relating to its environment will only relate to part of the environment and will remain “operationally closed,” unable to perceive or otherwise interact with myriad other objects all around it. Were an object capable of interacting with one or several of these myriad objects all around it, it would be in another world. The plurality of worlds is also basic to Bryant’s philosophy, as we see in his claim: “The second thesis of flat ontology is that the world does not exist. [...T]here is no ‘super-object,’ Whole, or totality that would gather all objects in harmonious unity.” (ibid. 32) There is a homology between what Delany practices fictionally and what Bryant studies

ontologically. Both the writer and the philosopher premise their work on the importance of thinking existence as an open process of becoming.

Returning to Delany's anecdote of the rocketship: when it approaches another world the distinctions that established the identity of what is up and down will be reversed. The ship, still traveling in the same direction—formerly up—is now headed down toward another world. Delany argues that the importance of this principle of the plurality of worlds, and hence of science fiction as he theorizes and practices it, is the demonstration of such contingencies. If there is no single value for up and down across the worlds there can be no single system to evaluate all of the highs and lowers of the worlds.

It is just that multiplicity of worlds, each careening in its particular orbit about the vast sweep of interstellar night (there is no interstellar day), which may be the subtlest, most pervasive, and finally the most valuable thing in s-f.... The whole concept of an endless, linear, vertical measure, ever mounting and with no ceiling, has given way to the concept of relative, unfixed centers, different worlds, different points of view.... (Delaney 1978, n.p.)

If the language of unfixed centers has a strong resonance with the poststructuralism that was emerging at about this time, this is no coincidence. Delany's science fiction, like all his writing, is intended to be read as "a document of its times—our times, today." (Delaney 1993, 19) The poststructuralist push for decenterings and relativity forms part of the history of that time..

Delany's fiction is other-worldly, then, but also worldly. The portrayal of multiple worlds, is meant to document Delany's times. "As a writer, I have my effect through writing books that take place in the world I live in. To read them, you have to kind of, you have to inhabit that world for the length of the book but the idea is not to unsettle you. The idea is to make you comfortable living in what I think of as the real world." (Taylor 2009, 17:03–17:25) The multiple worlds he writes of document the many worlds of his times, worlds differentiated by the fundamental distinctions made by those who perceive them. Delany is an astute observer who uses the vehicle of science fiction to demonstrate to his reader that other worlds may already surround her. In an interview for the documentary *The Polymath, or the Life and Opinions of Samuel R. Delany, Gentleman*, Fred Barney Taylor asks Delany to remark on his choice to write science fiction. Delany answers by broadening and contextualizing the question to: why do I write? He asserts that he writes because he thinks of himself as an intellectual. Writing is

what he believes intellectuals do out of responsibility to others. He then returns to address the topic at hand. He writes in different genres and modes because there are different genres and modes to write in. (Taylor 2009, 00:00–01:27)

We get a sense of Delany's commitment to plurality in this anecdote. Delany recognizes that the meaning of whatever he might write will become information for his reader in a manner that is dependent on the way they read it. Delany, the intellectual, does not write different kinds of criticism because there are different kinds of things to criticize (although he does criticize a wide variety of things, from the disappearance of Times Square porno theaters and the skewed network television coverage of United Nations proceedings in 1963, to arguments considering *Frankenstein* as science fiction).² He does not see any form of writing as the most intellectual, or essentially intellectual. Instead he recognizes the different powers of different modes of reading.

Along these lines, the novelist Jonathan Lethem has remarked of Delany that:

His essential and most singular facet is that he's multifaceted. He never saw the boundaries between, say, comic books and high art, literary criticism, autobiography, fiction[...]. He never saw the formal restrictions between narrative and radical textual innovation, typographical innovation even. He always embraced every contradiction that art offered and made it unified in his work. And his existence is equally disregarding of boundaries. He doesn't see them. And therefore he makes us see boundaries differently, he makes us question them, by his very existence. (Taylor 2009, 1:25-2:15)

Lethem is right about Delany's effect on his readers, and his statement emphasizes the affinity between Delany's writing and Bryant's philosophy. Delany's art enacts a cognitive estrangement aimed specifically at making it difficult to perceive the boundaries and distinctions we are accustomed to seeing. Delany himself makes this claim for his own work as well as for the genre of science fiction broadly, "with its overtly didactic relation to science (there's your cognition) and its insistently imaginative, alien, and un-home-like (*unheimlich*) settings and situations (there's your estrangement.)" (Delany 1990, 377). In Delany's work this is especially true of those boundaries constituting the division between the binary structures that form identities like race, sex and gender. Lethem's statements seems to imply a blindness on the part of Delany, a failure or an inability to see distinctions that have been constructed. In fact, Delany's is a consciously practiced blindness, a specifically-targeted attempt to recalibrate certain thresholds of his own perception. Only after cultivating as a style of life a blindness that

is a manner of seeing otherwise, then he proceeds to write, creating a similar experience for his readers.

Delany once remarked, for instance, that most Westerners have been conditioned to perceive equal gender distribution in spaces where that distribution might rather be 25:75 or 33:67. “Over two years,” writes Delany,

I have managed to decondition myself to the point where twenty-five/seventy-five now *looks* to me like twenty-five/seventy-five. But thirty-three/sixty-seven still looks like fifty/fifty if I don't catch myself. One hopes this will change. [...] But I must assume that it is reinforced, if not caused, by the fact that fifty/fifty social groups are so seldom encountered on the street, in trains, on buses, or in airports. (Delaney 2009, 144–145)

Clearly, Delany is not just naturally gifted with a blindness to certain boundaries, which we might be tempted to accept if we were to quickly gloss Lethem's statement. Instead, Delany's artistry begins from the other end of things: as an intellectual Delany questions boundaries, then takes sometimes onerous measures in order not to see them. Only then, not seeing them, can he join that which they divide in his art.

The fact that Delany is a polymath, then, is not an accident but the result of work on his part to “decondition” himself from a hegemonic set of distinctions and perceptions and to use his writing to give an immediate perception of the zones of proximity and of indiscernibility that the many boundaries dividing one discipline from another, one race from another, one class from another, one sex from another, et cetera, elide from perception. Delany's writing implies a multiplicity of perspective in each work and across different works (that is, different forms of writing). At the same time he posits the “impossibility” that these perspectives maintain with regard to one another. In other words, it is not possible to perceive a 33: 67 split of women to men as both 33: 67 split and a 50: 50 split. It is, however, possible to understand that both might be perceived, but such an understanding is likely to arise only after being forced out of the unthinking position, being forced to think, and perhaps to decondition as well.

Delany carries this practiced blindness into his writing because writing has the power to affect the distinctions a reader makes. In his claim that his writing forces the reader to inhabit his world, the effect is the product of an otherworldly disorientation, which then facilitates a reorientation. The erasure of a given hegemonic distinction forces the reader to distinguish different and surprising identities; it is often difficult and uncomfortable,

but sometimes wondrous. In *Stars*, for instance, he writes of a world-system where it is impossible to determine the sex of a person according to the pronoun used to describe them. In the language spoken in the novel, *Arachnia*, all sentient beings are known as women and referred to with the pronoun she. There is one exception that is common to many variants of *Arachnia*: when the woman (male or female) referred to is the object of erotic desire for the speaker, that woman is called “he.” (Delaney 1981, 78) This linguistic feature, combined with the novel’s bias for olfactory and gustatory imagery, rather than visual imagery, makes determining the sex of any figure a taxing task.

By disrupting the distinction between the sex of persons Delany demonstrates the contingency of the distinction to begin with. Delany first had the idea to write a novel in which sex and gender were imperceptible while living in a hotel frequented by transsexuals undergoing surgical transitions. While riding in the elevator with persons whose gender he could not readily distinguish, Delany had a thought: it is probably an immutable feature of all humans to wish to distinguish the gender of everyone they interact with. After only a few months, however, Delany was riding the elevator without distinguishing between cis- and transgender men and women. This prompts us to ask: why are we so keen to know the sex or gender of everyone we hear or read of? What other information might we note if we did not perceive this distinction but another instead?

Constructing worlds that propose answers to this last question and others like it—what information *might* we distinguish?—falls within the role of science fiction writing, with the plurality of worlds as its basic construct. Again we see Delany’s intellectual commitment to writing in multiple genres because each genre is a specific way to affect a readership. He writes that it is the specific domain of science fiction to cause consideration of physical possibilities the reader might not recognize as possible. An explanation of Delany’s narratology will help to make this clearer. According to Delany, as we read fiction our minds generate an image based upon the words—this image is the story.³ As the words accumulate in our visual field, each subsequent word modifies the mental image generated thus far. This process is not progressive but “corrective and revisionary”: words do not add to the story-image by aggregation but rather by forcing a reconsideration of what was already perceived. This is true for all genres of fiction, naturalistic, scientific, fantastic, fabulous and otherwise.⁴

In Delany's generic schema, science fiction is differentiated from naturalistic fiction by the "level of subjunctivity" of those words.⁵ Science fiction can be described as occurring at one level of subjunctivity—"events that have not happened"—while naturalistic fiction is restricted to another level of subjunctivity—events that could have happened. Delany writes that "as *events that have not happened* include the subgroup of *events that have not happened in the past*, they include the subgroup of *events that could have happened* with an implied *but didn't*. That is to say, the level of subjunctivity of SF [science fiction] includes the level of subjunctivity of naturalistic fiction." (Delany 2009, 4, 11, 12; emphasis in original.) The relationship between naturalistic fiction and science fiction is thus unintuitive to us: science fiction is in fact a set that contains naturalistic fiction.

The fact that science fiction, which adheres to the rule of the "did not happen," contain naturalistic fiction, which adheres to the rule of the "could happen," should not surprise us, because readers of science fiction are regularly exposed to a wider variety of events and objects than are readers of naturalistic fiction: like teleportation, time-travel or cold-fusion energy. But noting that science fiction is not a subset of naturalistic fiction does bring its specific function, cognitive estrangement, into clearer focus.

The production of other worlds in SF has a "terribly important verbal side," writes Delany. The difference distinguished between the fabulous world and the naturalistic is rooted in the introduction of fantastic objects, which force the reader to rethink the distinctions underlying large segments of her world. The science fiction author creates a neologism by combining two word roots and produces a fantastic or surreal image. The effect of such writing is to fabulate the setting within which such a fabulous object could operate: "The range of SF images is governed entirely by the sayable," Delany notes, "rather than any soft-edged concept like the scientifically-believable." (2014) As an example he offers the phrase "*winged dog*":

As naturalistic fiction it is meaningless. As fantasy it is merely a visual correction. At the subjunctive level of SF, however, one must momentarily consider, as one makes that visual correction, an entire track of evolution [...]. The visual correction must include modification of breastbone and musculature if the wings are to be functional, as well as a whole slew of other factors from hollow bones to heart rate. [...]. All of this information hovers tacitly about and between those two words. (2005, 12-13)

The different uses of language produce or comply with different perspectives insofar as each constitutes “*a way of reading*—or more accurately, as a way of organizing reading over the range of what has been written.” (2005, 338-9, emphasis in the original) Delany’s science fiction organizes reading in a manner such that readers must struggle to perceive a radically different—though not wholly different—world by correcting and modifying their understanding of the actual or naturalistic world.

Since Delany’s science fiction as a whole is the author’s effort to “decondition” himself and his readership from their habitual perceptions and to imply the existence of untranslatable, impossible perceptions, then it follows that Delany’s aims are political. James Sallis notes that the extent to which revolution truly takes place in Delany’s science fiction is exceptional in the genre. “All too often in science fiction, revolution (though a major theme) leads simply to inculcation or restoration of contemporary Western values to some land far removed in time or space. By contrast, Delany’s revolutions—galactic, societal, personal, sexual, accomplished or anticipated—like his own revolutionary work within the field, are real.” (Sallis 1996, 93) Delany’s fiction never portrays a future controlled by a single undivided culture. Instead culture is always contested, fragmented, and confusing in Delany’s work. In this way it parallels both the foreign worlds it is set within and Delany’s world that it draws upon.

In his insistence on the real plurality of complex, overlapping worlds Delany can be aligned with a number of important philosophers and scholars in diverse humanistic fields. This list includes Levi Bryant, of course, as well as Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway, Bruce Robbins, Emily Apter, and many others. For the purposes of this essay I am most interested in the affinities and incongruities between Delany and Apter, a professor of French and Comparative Literature whose writing on the untranslatable in literature, education and politics has had quite an impact on the development of comparative literature and cultural studies. Comparing Delany’s fictional practice with Apter’s critical practice demonstrates the relevance of the former. Delany’s insistence on situated complexity and the specificity with which he constructs his fictional worlds, fabulous object by fabulous object, is fully consonant with Apter’s attempts to reconstruct that complexity in her criticism. But the greater value of comparing Delany and Apter is the way in which Delany’s writing focuses us on the constructive elements in Apter’s project, bringing us to look on the untranslatable as real and forbidding us to elide its materiality into metaphor.

In her 2013 book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* Apter describes a feeling of unease with the way in which world literature as a discipline tends toward a hasty coverage of many texts, periods and regions. This haste comes at the expense of sustained analysis of the many things that do not translate from language to language, period to period, region to region et cetera. (2-11) Her argument resolves to this: World Literature has reemerged as a discipline operating on the assumption of translatability. Such an assumption might be formulated as follows: ‘what can be written in a literary form somewhere can be rendered in a literary form anywhere else.’⁶ The result, for Apter, is that many of the contextual particularities that are relevant or even crucial to the study of a text—which are, indeed, often central to the research of academics who help to introduce these texts and structure their reception—are “insufficiently built into the literary heuristic.” (Apter 2013, 3) In arguing against World Literature Apter suggests that these contextual particularities can be built into that heuristic only against the grain of world literature and the presumed right to translatability.

Apter calls these particularities the Untranslatable and situates them across a vast array of discourses: language philosophy, semiology, theology, cultural studies, area studies, property law and more (8-17). What is clear from this variety of untranslatable content is that untranslatability is not purely a linguistic concern or a concern restricted to language *tout court*. Instead untranslatability demonstrates the radical ways in which context transforms language and links it to a particular outside-of-language that allows it to function. If Apter argues against World Literature it is because the process of making one literature from languages which are so radically different, contextually, reduces the multiplicity of context to the singular manner in which texts are read in the classroom.

As I have already noted above, Delany’s theorization of the paraliterary (science fiction specifically) and his practice of writing in multiple genres embodies a pluralistic view of literature similar to Apter’s. *Against World Literature* maintains that writing cannot be homogenized; this is precisely why a heuristic that is premised on translatability and curricularization will necessarily fail. We will recall that literature does not exist merely as physical text but as an image in the reader’s mind: as much the product of a community of readers and the world they relate to as it is the substance of a text. Both literary and paraliterary genres are embodied in communities that practice varied reading protocols (for instance, reading science-fictionally, reading fantastically, etc.). In order to read world literatures, Apter writes, we must be prepared to recognize the differences

between those worlds without falling into the trap of believing we have overcome that difference.

The differences between the worlds of literature take many forms. Apter reconstructs the specific conditions under which certain world literatures became possible. In doing so she creates an archaeology of very complex situations: geopolitics, cultural imperialism in the western academe, the practices of language standardization and nonstandard language use and intra-state language discrimination (43). One chapter of *Against World Literature*, “Eurochronology and Periodicity,” 2013, 57-69), unearths some of the alternate temporalities that coexist in the literatures of our planet. In the process she leads us to recognize different temporalities than the discourse of history allows for. “These discrepant temporal measures may be defined as Untranslatables of periodicity,” (or in my terms) temporal worlds that cannot be totalized within a universal history (61). Multiplying the worlds of world literature to include different temporal worlds works against the homogenization of time to a singular (European) history.

Similarly, the chapter “Checkpoints and Sovereign Borders” (2013, 99-114) delineates a type of world that exists within nation-states but is not the world of the nation-state. Its thesis is that World Literature’s attention to the solid border between nations can leave the policing force of the state unexamined within its own borders. In the short period between the publication of *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (2006) and *Against World Literature* (2013) the theme of border-crossing in transnational literary and cultural studies became so commonplace as to lose its distinction. In order to “recall the *force de frappe* of the state in translation theory,” and as it can be deployed anywhere within the state, she focuses on the literature of the checkpoint (100). In the world where state power is executed via checkpoints:

the state is pictured as tenuous and everywhere diffused. Every person becomes a potential checkpoint in the “war on terror,” a body-scan medium, a transporter of cellular data, a first responder, a civilian backup to law enforcement. ... Border guards actively embody “check-pointilization,”... . Soldiers corporealize the checkpoint, as do agents of parastates—militias, vigilantes, warlords, guerilla armies, bandits and pirates—who enable groups with no sovereign standing to act like a state. (111–112)

Multiplying the worlds of world literature to include the worlds of the checkpoint serves as supplement and corrective. It works against the homogenization of state power in the literary imaginary and classroom by asking that we think it otherwise.

The similarities between the cosmopolitical practices of Apter and Delany are remarkable and each complements the other. Apter's criticism is a culturally informed means of historicizing literature and changing the manner in which we think about the problem of geopolitical and cultural integration. A study of the historico-material context for Delany's writings that placed it in affinity with other world writers in this style would be hugely illuminating. The advantage Delany's fictional practice offers is its emphasis on objects and the manner in which it utilizes the untranslatable in order to affect a reader directly.

I would like to focus on Delany's resistance to totalizing and normative criticism—specifically that of Frederic Jameson, now as I begin to consider his final science fiction novel, *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*. The topic of totalization provides a useful frame for examining the conversation that Delany opens with Fredric Jameson in an afterword to the third printing of *Stars*. Just as Delany resists the homogenization of reading communities into a single category, and just as he resists the flattening of many worlds into one, Delany resists any attempt to reduce the human subject to one kind of agent.

Jameson famously argued for a totalizing literary criticism in the introduction to his book *The Political Unconscious*, though he argued that this totalizing criticism was more transcendental than transcendent because it could never achieve totality (1982). In the afterword to *Stars* Delany responds to Jameson's article "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984). Delany identifies an inclination in Jameson to privilege the unified subject of High Modernism over the fragmented subject of the postmodern and cites a lengthy parenthetical aside by Jameson:

Of the two possible formulations of the notion—the historicist one, that a once-existing central subject, in the period of classical capitalism and the nuclear family, has today in the world of organizational bureaucracy dissolved; and the more radical poststructuralist position for which such a subject never existed in the first place but constituted something like an ideological mirage—I [Jameson] obviously incline toward the former [...].⁷

“The point is, of course,” Delany writes, “that I incline the *other* way.” (Delany, “Stars,” 385) While Jameson grants the unified subject a historical reality greater than its historical contingency, for Delany this is an oppressive structuration meant to reduce perspectives by marking any ‘other’ as unhealthy. Certain instrumental and rational perspectives are divided from other decentered, irrational perspectives by a boundary dividing the healthy centered subject and the unhealthy other. I should return here to my earlier point where I stressed how actively Delany seeks to decondition himself to seeing these boundaries, because this is a very good example of it and a good example of his purpose in doing so. We can observe him *in flagrante delicto* when Jameson writes, “[the postmodernist account for which the centered subject never existed in the first place] must in any case take into account something like a ‘reality of the appearance:’” Delany willfully does not take such an account into consideration. (Qtd. in Delany, “Stars,” 383).

He deconditions himself to this perception because he believes that this elision of impossible perspectives under the binary “centered/not centered” is fundamentally unhealthy and unpleasurable. By contrast he writes that “I feel that the times and places where the ‘fragmented subject’ is at its healthiest, happiest, and most creative [are] precisely at those times where society and economics contrive (1) to make questions of unity and centeredness irrelevant, and (2) to distance that subject as much as possible from such oppressions.” (Delany, “Stars,” 384) What is at stake is the health, happiness and creativity of the individual fragmented subject? These three qualities of life are reduced at those moments when the socioeconomic pressure to recenter to the subject (or in the terms I’m proposing) to reduce all embodied, impossible and therefore untranslatable perspectives to variants on a real, now alienated, healthy subject.

This concern for the reality of the centered human subject is given its most extensive treatment in *Stars*, a novel that reveals (from a limited perspective, of course) the vertiginous complexity that exists in a multi-world system spanning an entire galaxy. The novel thematizes this complexity through the continual play of information and misinformation. What can be treated as information, and what must be disregarded as misinformation, has no steady identity throughout the novel. Instead the book shows the radical contingency of all information, linguistic or otherwise.

General Information and Fuzzy Concepts in *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*

[With] the Family trying to establish the dream of a classic past as pictured on a world that may never even have existed in order to achieve cultural stability, and with the Sygn 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, a moment where either information or misinformation turns out to be harmless must bloom, when surrounded by the workings of desire and terror, into the offered sign of all about it, making and marking all about it innocent by contamination.

—Samuel R. Delany, *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*, (1984, 86)

Parts aren't parts for a whole and a whole isn't the whole for parts.
—Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, (2011, 217)

Stars in My Pockets like Grains of Sand is a novel of galactic federation set in the far future. Its backdrop is the galactic federation of some 6,000 worlds, all of which have been colonized for human settlement, industry or research. The novel is thus premised on a plurality of worlds in the most literal sense, but this plurality of worlds is also reminiscent of the “expansion of Europe” from the fifteenth century of the common era to the present (Wallerstein 1991, 80). This is because there is one recognizable group (humans) that are expanding throughout the galaxy, perpetrating the colonization of planets, but this group is also diverse. In the course of expansion through the galaxy humanity has created new forms of society and entered into complex relations with indigenous populations. Like the category ‘European’ in the modern world-system, the category ‘human’ in the novel is recognizable but porous, a fuzzy concept.

The two groups in the novel referenced in the epigraph above, the Family and the Sygn, are two civil societies struggling to establish hegemony among the humans of those 6,000

colonized planets. Due to the power either group would have to determine what is information, and what misinformation, they would radically change what objects were part of those worlds. These groups function by disciplining their members, causing them to make fundamentally different distinctions among the objects of their environment. They are also institutional embodiments of the historicist and post-structuralist tendencies that Jameson and Delany discuss above. (It is also worth noting that Delany's narrator has been raised within and finds his sympathies lie with the Sygn, the post-structuralist position.)

One of the disagreements between the Family and the Sygn deals with the nature of history. The ideology of the Family is based in the image of a past that should be reconstructed wherever humans are to live. To practitioners and evangelists of the Family, then, the history of one world should determine life on all worlds. All worlds are reduced to mere replicas of the historic world by the identity of humans (86). The ideology of the Sygn holds that "history is what is outside, in both time and space, the current moment of home. And without history, there is no home. A second tenet: . . . when you go to a new world, all you can take of your home is its history," (104). Rather than allow the reality, or the appearance of the reality of a historic world to determine what another world is, Sygn inclines toward recognizing the differences among worlds.

The Family, like the historicist thinker, must grant reality to the now-alienated human subject. Its central dogma is that all sentient beings must be raised in an Oedipal home, though Family practice also requires each new world to conform to the (mythical) home world of the human species. In a related story "Omegahelm," (1981) one character explains to another: "[A] family is a mother, a father, and a son' . . . 'It is the basic human mode of replication. Any sex can substitute for any part of it. Any part of it can be omitted. But it is the basic template in which omissions, replications, and substitutions must take place,'" (271). Among the standard religious artifacts of the Family are "the gold inch, the silver meter, the platinum centimeter bars, the vibrating quartz crystals measuring out nanosecond and Standard Years, the plastic molecular models of human DNA, all lovingly imported (supposedly) from world to world, their origin supposed to be the original Old Eyrth." (1981, 103) We could read the Frederic Jameson of Delany's afterword into the Family, making the argument that the once central human subject in the fictional galaxy of *Stars* is now alienated because it is no longer structured by the nuclear family, a world measured in meters and years, and human exceptionalism. Its

mission is to center the human subject by recreating the world of mankind on colonized planets.⁸

The Sygn, which seeks to insert itself in order to balance “stability and play,” (86) calls to mind the title of Jacques Derrida’s 1967 paper “Structure, Sign and Play,” a paper that has since been associated with the advent of post-structuralism. In that essay Derrida argues that the sign, as supplement to the structure, is also evidence that the structure was lacking in the first place: “This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions [...] One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center’s place in its absence—this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*.” (1978, 289). There is no totalization because there is no center that would, in Bryant’s words, gather all objects into harmonious unity. *The world does not exist, and the Sygn, rather than attempting to reconstruct this original world (Old Eyrth) on a new planet, is engaged in “preserving the local history of local spaces,” which often includes the Family’s mystic relics—supplements themselves—now stripped of their transcendent aura (104).*

Unlike the Family, the Sygn as a civil society is premised on accepting the multiplicity of worlds and recognizing that “development does not have any one particular attractor in the teleological sense.” (Bryant, 2011, 171) It could certainly be Dyeth’s pockets that are full of stars; he holds the position of Industrial Diplomat and as such he is one of the few individuals allowed by the Web to travel between the worlds of the federation. He is an elite.

This is a departure for Delany, whose protagonists are more often socially displaced or outcasts who offer an outsider’s perspective on the world they encounter. This move is meant to allow Delany to direct the cognitive estrangement without recourse to narrative omniscience. Marq Dyeth is the figure best suited to this task because he, unlike the vast majority of people living in the novel’s galactic federation, actually travels between planets. Jeffrey Allen Tucker argues compellingly that Delany drew on his own experience traveling from Harlem to a private school near Park Avenue in writing about the disorientation that Dyeth feels travelling between worlds. (Tucker 2010, 269-271)

Dyeth enacts an estrangement as one of the very few people (a statistical minority) who must confront the multiplicity of the galaxies’ human worlds directly. Even practitioners of the Sygn are seldom aware of the group’s diverse iterations, which is made evident to the reader when Dyeth himself recalls his own shock at encountering a Sygn ceremony

on another world for the first time: “There I’d seen rituals, cyhnks, and services so vastly different from the ones here at home as to be unrecognizable: then the return, to discover that the Sygn itself—which is only a name, pronounced a thousand different ways, spelled differently in a hundred different languages—was all it was[...].” (104).

As an industrial diplomat Dyeth’s task is to import the technologies—biological, industrial and even cultural—that enable the colonization and/or terraforming of the more than 6,000 colonized planets (70, 73). On some of these worlds, like the sandy planet Rhyonon, there is no indigenous life and human colonizers live among “genetically tailored, imported lichens” and “atmosphere-generating bacteria” (92). On many of the planets, though, human colonists do live in contact with indigenous species, as is the case on Nepiy, where humans share the planet with a race of amorphous, color-changing beings (65). In some instances, as on Dyeth’s home world of Velm, these groups live in peace and even cohabitate, forming hybrid social groups. In other instances the colonists and indigenous populations live in constant or intermittent armed conflict. The entirety of the world in which the Family and the Sygn struggle for hegemony is human-colonized.

Conversely, the hegemony that the Family and the Sygn contend to establish in the galaxy is the truth of what a human world is: neither group concerns itself with what a galaxy is, or what the universe is. The information they seek to control is always human-scaled. The split between the Family and the Sygn is essential to a reading of the politics of *Stars*, but it takes place in a very limited segment of the novel’s larger galactic expanse.⁹ While these two groups strive to determine what is ‘information’ and what is ‘misinformation’ from one planet to another, dividing the galaxy into two civil societies, all of the worlds on which these groups are present and many more are united by a structure called the Web. The Web operates a system known as General Information (GI) that spans the galaxy. The fact that GI is of an entirely different scale than either the Family or the Sygn can be glimpsed in the fact that the Web “is near to being torn apart by the fracas” between Family and Sygn (87). If the novel is set in a galaxy of connected worlds, then it is the Web, a realm of nonhuman infrastructure, and not any human social organization, that unifies that galaxy.

GI is able to do what human civil societies are not—span the vastness of human colonized space and the multiplicity of human (and human-alien hybrid) social orders without becoming incoherent. This is because GI is not meant to be experienced as a human world, but rather to inform humans about a multiplicity of local spaces. Even

though it is built and maintained by humans (humans who work for the Web are called Spiders), the sum of GI can never be experienced by, nor even translated to, a human. If humans do have an idea what absolute information looks like via a general information system, it is distorted as when someone asks a particularly large Web GI system “‘What is the exact human population of the universe?’” GI reports:

‘In a universe of c. six thousand two hundred inhabited worlds with human populations over two hundred and under five billion, ‘population’ itself becomes a fuzzy-edged concept. Over any moment there is a birth/death pulse of almost a billion. Those worlds on which humans have the legal status of the native population and little distinction is made among all these women present statistical problems from several points of view. Thus ‘exactness’ below five billion is not to be forthcoming.’ (73)

In other words, for an entity like the Web that is able to collect data at a sufficiently large scale to respond to this or many other questions, the world is not composed of the same units as it is for a human.

As a result it is revealed that population—in the human perception, an integral number of persons—is a “fuzzy-edged” or just a fuzzy concept. Fuzzy concepts refer to concepts with “a continuum of grades of membership,” rather than a clear boundary between what clearly is, and clearly is not, a true instance of the concept (Zadeh 1965, 338). Information derived from a fuzzy concept is context-dependent, not absolute. In this case, for instance, population is fuzzy because the scale at which you analyze it determines how true a figure you can compute. The population is certainly above 5 billion, the margin of error, for instance. It might be 1.24 trillion, the value of 200 million times 6,200 worlds, or 31 trillion, the value of 5 billion times 6,200 worlds. But whether or not it *is* either of those values, or any of the values in between, is probable but not certain.

The fuzzy concept was introduced by the Iranian mathematician and computer scientist L.A. Zadeh as a convenient means for computing problems “in which the source of imprecision is the absence of sharply defined criteria.” (339) Zadeh’s examples of this ambiguity include “numbers which are much greater than one,” “beautiful women” and “very tall men,” categories that simply do not quantify precisely but which can lead to meaningful information (338). When GI pronounces something a fuzzy concept, however, it is due to the ontological fact that information does not scale from the human to the galactic, or even to the planetary scale.

Thus even information is not a totality, or *the* world. The questions a human would ask of an entity the size of a galaxy take for granted that the information that is real for a human would be real for a galaxy. This is not the case, as the response of GI indicates. The Web exists at such a large extension, and such a long duration, that individual persons do not exist for it, galactically. Bryant writes that, just as there is no single spatial totality that would gather all things in harmonious unity, there is no single time that would contain all temporal rhythms. “The rate at which a machine can register inputs is also its capacity for encountering events in its environment as information. ... [Whether] or not something can function as information at all will be partially dependent on the rate at which a machine can register inputs as inputs.” (Bryant 2014, 159) As an entity expands in size beyond a certain threshold, the entities that can truly be said to form a part of its world will become qualitatively different. In a complementary fashion, the information of that system will remain diffuse, untranslatable to the perspective of a being that exists in a radically different time and space. Indeed this fact gives the lie to the title “General Information” because general information can only ever provide extremely local information to humans. General information, too, is about worlds and not *the* world.

Conclusion

In the unpublished sequel to *Stars*, Marq Dyeth transports an art installation between worlds and makes the following observation: “Art makes its entire effect by developing things from your landscape, denying other things in it, and replacing still others with the artists' vision: that means the same text must be read differently on each different world...” (Delaney 1996, 104). Worlds are different places—this statement clearly shows that—but it also shows that they are places capable of change. A reading of a text must be different on each world, but each world is also made different—at least for the reader—when art has developed, denied and replaced components of her horizon. As a demonstration of the uncanny—the “un-home-like”—this is a powerful image demonstrating the close relation of the reader's perception of her world and the development of that world and that perception.

The fictional writings of Samuel R. Delany deal with interplanetary contact and cultural exchange in a subjunctive tone, but that subjunctive writing is read in relation to the common world of its readership—Delany's critical writings make it clear to us that this is the social function of his science fiction. Utilizing subjunctivity, Delany's science fiction creates new worlds based on particular objects producing concrete differences from the

readers' world. There is no wholly other world, there are only different worlds whose differences are traceable to their parts. Both the plurality of worlds and the importance of particular objects for distinguishing those worlds are supported ontologically by the object-oriented philosophy of Levi Bryant. This demonstrates the applicability of science fiction for the worldly reader: thinking difference through science fiction does reflect reality, albeit subjunctively.

The utility of studying and understanding Delany's writing practice is even greater for comparatists and theorists and practitioners of translation. Reading with Delany demands that we think of specific differences and the alternative worlds they would produce, rather than succumbing to the conception of different worlds and languages as totally determined. While it is accurate to write that a philosophical term is untranslatable, for instance, we must also recognize the contingent nature of its development. Practice thinking specific difference and alternative worlds, like that provided by reading with Delany, offers us a path to move from this critical project of diagnosing difference in a multilingual world to composing novel solutions in one.

References

- Apter, Emily. 2013. *Against World Literature: The Politics of the Untranslatable*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.
- Bryant, Levi R. 2014. *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- . 2011. *The Democracy of Objects*. Ann Arbor: MPublishing.
- Cassin, Barbara. 2014. *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, edited by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood and translated by Steven Randall, Christian Hubert, Jeffrey Mehlman, Nathaniel Stein, and Michael Syrotinski. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 2011. *The Democracy of Objects*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press.
- Delany, Samuel R. 2005. "A Para-Doxa Interview: Inside and Outside the Canon." *About Writing: Seven Letters, Four Essays, and Five Interviews*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

- . 1978. *Empire: A Visual Novel*, illustrated by Howard V. Chaykin. New York: Berkley Windhover.
- . 2009. "Critical Methods/Speculative Fiction," *The Jewel-hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- . 1996. "from *The Splendor and Misery of Bodies, of Cities*." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 16,3. Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press.
- . 1995. "Introduction," *Paradoxa* 1.1.
- . 2009. "Letter to a Critic," *The Jewel-hinged Jaw*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- . 1981. "Omegahelm," *Distant Stars*, 263-278. New York: Bantam.
- . "On Triton and Other Matters: An Interview with Samuel R. Delany," *Science Fiction Studies* 52, no. 17 (1990), <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/delany52interview.htm> (accessed 13 Jan. 2014).
- . 1993. "Return... a preface by K. Leslie Steiner," *Tales of Nevèrÿon*. (Hanover, CT: Wesleyan University Press. [As "K. Leslie Steiner"])
- . 1999. *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*. New York: New York University Press.
- . 1990. *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*. New York: Spectrum.
- . 2009. "To Read *The Dispossessed*," *The Jewel-hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* revised edition, 144-5. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1987. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1982. "On Interpretation," *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- . 1984. "Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* No. 3.
- Kadir, Djelal. 2004. "To World, To Globalize: Comparative Literature's Crossroads." *Comparative Literature Studies* 41:1. State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Sallis, James. 1996. "Samuel R. Delany, An Introduction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 16,3. Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press.
- Taylor, Fred Barney. 2009. *The Polymath: or, the Life and Opinions of Samuel Delany, Gentleman*, DVD. NY: Maestromedia.
- Tucker, Jeffrey Allen. 2010. "The Necessity of Models, of Alternatives: Samuel R. Delany's." *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand, South Atlantic Quarterly* 109:2. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1991 [1988]. "The Construction of Peoplehood: Racism, Nationalism, Ethnicity." Balibar, Étienne and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, 71-85, translated by Chris Turner. New York: Verso Books.
- Zadeh, L.A., 1965. "Fuzzy Sets." *Information and Control* 8. Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

¹ "Some old-fashioned Marxism might be useful here: Infrastructure determines superstructure—not the other way around. And for all their stabilizing or destabilizing potential, discourse and rhetoric are superstructural phenomena." Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), 161.

² See for example, his *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue, The Motion of Light in Water* (2001 [1988]), and his editorial submission to the journal *Paradoxa* vol. 1.

³ "A story is not a replacement of one set of words by another—plot-synopsis, detailed recounting, or analysis. The story is what happens in the reader's mind as his eyes move from the first word to the second, the

second to the third, and so on to the end of the tale." Delany, "About 5,750 Words," *The Jewel-hinged Jaw* (2009), 4.

⁴ Although expressed quite differently, Delany's narratology has much in common with that of Deleuze and Guattari, wherein narrative produces a thickened present moment driven

simultaneously toward the past and the present by two narrative desires, the desire to know what happened and what will happen? The conjunction of these thinkers demonstrates a common view of literature—both science fiction and naturalistic—as a site for reconsideration of that which escapes perception in common experience. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (1987) 192-5.

⁵ “Subjunctivity is the tension on the thread of meaning that runs between (to borrow Saussure’s term for ‘word’:) sound-image and soundimage. Suppose a series of words is presented to us as a piece of reportage. A blanket indicative tension (or mood) informs the whole series: this happened. [...] the level of subjunctivity makes certain dictates and allows certain freedoms as to what word can follow another.” Delany, “About 5,750 Words,” *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* (2009), 10. NB: because English does not have a rich vocabulary for fixing different tenses to the subjunctive it might not be immediately clear that the subjunctive can refer to past, present and future events.

⁶ Though in practice, of course, this anywhere else refers almost exclusively to the United States, and largely to anthologies. See “Comparative Literature/World Literature: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Damrosch,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 48:4 (2011), 457-8.

⁷ Delany, Samuel R. “Afterword,” *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*, (New York: Spectrum, 1990), 383. Emphasis in the original. NB Delany’s response, published in the year before *Postmodernism* was released as a book, responds to the original published article of the same title.

⁸ In fairness to both Jameson and Delany I quote from Delany’s lengthy qualification of his criticism of Jameson: “Jameson (like Fiedler before him) is as sympathetic to science fiction as any major contemporary critic we have. [...] Nevertheless, when he writes [...] regardless of his intensions as a writer, the discourse (i.e. the response, the reasoning, the codes—politically conscious and unconscious—of interpretation) into which he introduces such and like phrases will largely read him as referring to...” Delany 1981, 382.

⁹ The centrality of this conflict to the novel as a whole can be gleaned from the fact that more than a decade before the novel was published by Bantam, a short story focusing on these two groups but not at all concerned with the plot of the novel was published as “From *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*.” *Beyond This Horizon: An Anthology of Science Fiction and Science Fact*, edited by Christopher Carrell (1973). 71-5.