



## Research article

# Troping Identity in Arkady Martine's Space Opera: From Historical Realism to Quantum Anthropomorphization

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### Abstract

Rosi Braidotti's theory of "nomadic subject" (2011) has shifted the focus from traveller in the literal sense of the word to subject as a process; becoming subject entails a denial of universals in the construction of identity which is redefined as situated embodiment in the world, open to the heteronormativity of changing social codes and accepted modes of living or of conceiving otherness. Nevertheless, travel has always been associated with an explicit ethos, whether as a pious pilgrimage, educational world tour or the grand narrative of civilizing mission. Located on various maps, real or imaginary, civilizations are brought into contact by the huge number of migrants, the problems they raise including the relationship between third worlds and metropolitan cities/ countries, the migrants' othering by mainstream populations, the migrants' desire to be naturalised and the estrangement from their true selves as a result. By building simulation models, speculative fiction probes deeply into underground concerns which well up to the surface in postcolonial literature, being expected to produce cognitive enlightenment. Relieved from the material deprivations of the colonial past, the postcolonial subject is now caught in the process of identitarian reconstruction.

**Keywords:** self-construal, deconstruction of presence, world-building, cultural narratives, multiculturalism



[Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions](#)

With a historian's sense of the past, Arkady Martine dedicates *A Memory Called Empire* (2019) to Grigor Pahlavuni and Petros Getadarj – two historical figures who experienced what the author intends to serve as an object lesson: "to anyone who has ever fallen in love with a culture that was devouring their own." Mahit Dzmare, a native from the periphery of the imaginary Teixcalaanli Empire, studies its culture hoping to be naturalized someday as its citizen. Being sent as an ambassador of her Lsel Station to this metropolitan centre, she experiences the frustration of being treated as a barbarian which lands her in the inbetweenness of asymmetrical civilizations. Disillusionment with the object of desire does not however make her hark back to her own

**Article History:** Received: 15 November 2023. Revised: 10 December 2023. Accepted: 11 December 2023. Published: 24 December 2023

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**Citation:** Tupan, M. (2023). Troping Identity in Arkady Martine's Space Opera: From Historical Realism to Quantum Anthropomorphization. *Rupkatha Journal* 15:5. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n5.13>

civilization, which is a symbolically shaped torus (generated by revolving a circle in three-dimensional space), that is, a closed in world which rejects any interaction with outsiders.

Mahit belongs to a gallery of subalterns or racial others placed in the position of negotiating their subjectivity with hegemonic power systems. Martine's heroine, Mahit, is, for instance, the SF foil of Cambridge, the black slave in Caryl Phillips's homonymous novel (1991), who is mockingly allowed to believe that he can become an equal of his masters through education, an illusion which costs him his life.

Troping on death, Jim Crace opens his *Continent* (1986)– a book of linked stories which parodies Plato's Atlantis story – with "Talking Skull," as an emblem of a third world misunderstood and patronized by citizens of advanced civilizations, caught in a game of mutual deception. Treating natives condescendingly, visitors from developed countries in search of local colour and primitive customs are outwitted by aboriginals who make money feigning the naivety stereotypically attributed to them. Well-educated in the civilization of the imperial Jewel of the World, Mahit accumulates sufficient cunning and power to intervene in the games of power and succession to the throne.

Finally, Agnieszka Smoczynska's movie, *The Lure* (2015), places the eastern migrant heading for America, according to the director's own confession, in the subhuman world. The two protagonists, two mermaids, eat humans, one of them trying and significantly failing to get into their world. The mermaids' songs are tuned to elementary lyrics, consisting of very few words, repeated until they lose their meaning. Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid aspires to a human condition defined by the possession of a soul and her wish is fulfilled as they always are in fairy tales. On the contrary, in Agnieszka Smoczynska's movie, neither the creatures of the watery elements nor humans in a Polish city of the 80's have a soul any more. Robert Bolesto, the author of the script, has named the two mermaids Gold and Silver, ironically alluding to the alchemical wedding and revelation of the spirit which now is dead. Falling under the influence of an implanted memory unit of a dead man, Mahit owes her regained sense of personhood to the ontology of the writing scene where she exercises her free subjectivity.

Despite the futuristic setting and technology, the novel which brought Martine the Hugo Award in 2020, as did its sequel, *A Desolation Called Peace*, in 2022, is closer to an allegory of the present world faced with two fundamental threats of alienation: posthuman body engineering and the supranational corporative control as empires in disguise. The identity of self and of the nation are thus associated and rendered mutually dependent.

The postcolonial condition raises doubts over the possibility for individuals undergoing intragroup marginalisation to engage in self-determined action or to give uninhibited expression to their private thoughts and feelings. Self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) is seen as culture-dependent, the major divide being that between individualist Western and collectivist non-Western communities:

There are two dimensions of cultural self-views namely: independent and interdependent self-construals. Independent self-construal is a view of self which is more common for people in the Western and individualist cultures. People who engender this self-construal tend to place higher value on taking actions that reflect their dispositions and values.

Interdependent self-construal, on the other hand, is a view of self which is more typical for individuals who are embedded in the non-Western collectivist settings. For individuals who espouse an interdependent construal of self, most of the actions or behaviors are predicated on forming and maintaining sound relationships with others. (Datu & Salanga 2018, web)

It is difficult, however, to work with cultural divisions in a world that no longer stays confined within traditional borders. The subject has become much more complicated with the rise of transnational communities of academics, international writers, and biculturalism. Unlike assimilation, acculturation creates a hybrid sense of selfhood: otherness makes room for relational interdependence and for the newcomers' creative contribution to mainstream culture. Nevertheless, even if the emerging planetary consciousness has smoothed over the old diasporic inequities, self-construal still faces new threats from the IT technology of optimization models. A sense of identity erosion is generated by Artificial intelligence with its ChatGPT programs - an AI instrument created by Google to help journalists write articles (deep fake).

Arkady Martine's novels, *A Memory Called Empire* (2019), and its sequel, *A Desolation Called Peace* (2021), link the anxiety of depersonalization on the one hand to AI technology promising mental enhancement, and, on the other, to the politics of supranational control in the name of evolutionary optimization techniques. The Imperialist Competitive model is such an optimizing algorithm for the building of new worlds (Saini 2017). Imperialism is seen as a high level of social evolution which, by mathematically modelling its political and historical process, can serve other states as a tool for evolutionary optimization. Nation-centred utopia is replaced by the international bodies offering recommender systems, conciliation or optimal control for industrial and chemical processes legitimated by their success.

The creation of the Teixcalaanli Empire is depicted in a language which echoes Conrad's subversive opening of *Heart of Darkness*. By analogy with the historical adventures of European colonizers, the Teixcalaanli ships extend their power in the universe, turning each planet into a dot on the Empire's holographic map. Colonization is spectralization:

Here is all of Teixcalaanli space spread out in holograph above the strategy table on the warship Ascension's Red Harvest, five jump gates and two weeks' sublight travel away from Teixcalaan's city-planet capital, about to turn around and come home. The holograph is a cartographer's version of serenity: all these glitter-pricked lights are planetary systems, and all of them are ours. This scene—some captain staring out at the holograph recreation of empire, past the demarcated edge of the world—pick a border, pick a spoke of that great wheel that is Teixcalaan's vision of itself, and find it repeated: a hundred such captains, a hundred such holographs. And each and every one of those captains has led troops down into a new system, carrying all the poison gifts she can muster: trade agreements and poetry, taxes and the promise of protection, black-muzzled energy weapons and the sweeping architecture of a new governor's palace built around the open many-rayed heart of a sun temple. Each and every one of those captains will do it again, render one more system into a brilliantine dot on a star-chart holograph. (Martine 2019, p. 5)

The name of the empire seems to accentuate the above suggestion of colonialization as an offering of poisonous gifts, *teixo* meaning "yew tree" in Portuguese –the language of famous *conquistadores*. This tree, bearing poisonous fruit, is a symbol of endurance through time, of eternal death and revival, its outspreading roots and branches being an appropriate visual emblem of colonial expansion. Relationships with the colonies are characterised by hypocritical diplomacy.

In the beginning of the novel, the warship Ascension's Red Harvest is carrying on board the new ambassador of Lsel Station to the Teixcalaan City of Emperor Six Direction - a figure of the absolutist Sun King. At the beginning of diplomacy – around 1600 -, this dignity meant more than one's autonomous self. The ambassador was a stand-in for the head of the represented state: John Donne's ambassador carries letters of empowerment, and is invested with the king's authority:

AFTER those reverend papers, whose soul is  
Our good and great king's loved hand and fear'd name:  
By which to you he derives much of his,  
And, how he may, makes you almost the same  
A taper of his torch, a copy writ  
From his original, and a fair beam  
Of the same warm and dazzling sun, though it  
Must in another sphere his virtue stream"

(John Donne: "To Sir Henry Wotton at His Going Ambassador to Venice").

Martine's ambassador is divested of self-identity by her own countrymen. Mahit Dzmare undergoes an inner split of her selfhood through the Lsel implant technology. Even if she is spatially in her place of origin, she is colonised, changed into the host, not of some tribal consciousness, but of an embassy's heritage, a saga of spying and political subversion of Empire expansionism ending up with Yskandr Aghavn, her predecessor, whose consciousness had been copied over to an imago machine (a memory unit), subsequently implanted in her skull. It is only that Yskandr had stopped reporting back to Lsel fifteen years before his death, which means that Mahit has to retrieve the information missing from his imago-machine to survive in the metropolitan city of the Empire.

The imperial saga is woven between two extremes. If the logic of the Teixcalaan Empire is uninterrupted conquest, Station Lsel is the opposite example of resistance to any outside contacts, the implant of memory from previous generations to present minds turning it into one of those closed systems which recycle both bodies and memory. The six councilors who manage the station carry memories of predecessors from fourteen past generations as implants to their brains.

### **Translatio imperii**

The Teixcalaan Empire is analogous to contemporary sites of power, the diegetic indexing being the familiar third-world citizen travelling to metropolitan centres of civilization. The visa requests betray the big powers' apprehensions over visits from low-income countries. They are opportunities for exercising power and colonizing imperial subjects. Except for the futuristic technology of crossover events, the impositions sound as familiar as the present formalities:

visitors are not to come over with their networks of information and national commitments. They take tests of their knowledgeability of the guest countries' culture. They are believed to be poor and a virtual economic burden, so they are asked to present invitations from citizens of the host country, work permit, or some other proof of their capacity to earn their living. Medical certificates are requested from visitors seen as potentially diseased or carrying property suspected of spreading contagion. Such passages reveal the author's ideological agenda, her involvement in cross-cultural relationships and international politics, and the poetics of SF being abandoned in favour of realistic representation almost of zero degree defamiliarization or estrangement.

## World-building through quantum analogy

The dehumanization and depersonalization of the citizens, both in the centre of the Empire and in the colonies, are conveyed in the language of mathematics and physics, usually associated with a world of objects rather than subjects. The fictional worlds are based on algorithms, for instance, Teixcalaanlitzlims are named through a number and a noun (Six Direction, Three Seagrass etc.), which is a model of complexity, a combination of order and randomness, the closed system of figures governing the open series of nouns.

More sophisticated is the construction of the Empire's foil, Lsel Station, in the language of quantum physics. The Station is placed in equilibrium on an orbit and has a Torus shape (a topological space which preserves certain parameters under deformation, generated by a revolving circle in three-dimensional space). The isolationist politics of the six councillors governing it is reflected by the station's immunity to change. The novelist plays upon scientific notions used as figures of discourse. Thus, the name Lsel may come from  $L_{cc}$ , a collective collapse operator, and from cell unit, which describes the exchange of energy between two sublattices of the same quantum system (See the dashed box in Fig. 1 below). When the exchange of energy between sublattice A and sublattice B is blocked, there is a collapse of energy to the A sublattice which turns it into a dark state (isolated state). Collapse is decoherence, exit from connectivity (interaction), and the end of the exchange of energy between sublattices.

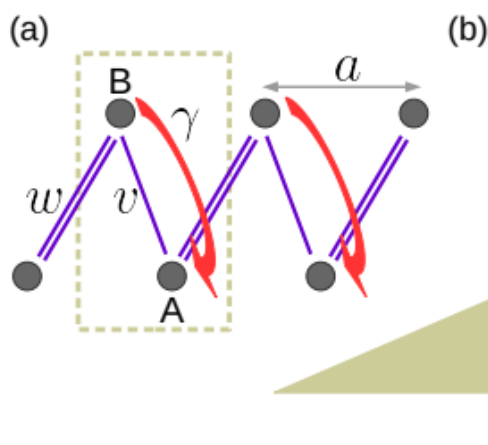


Fig. 1. Dark state-induced topology.

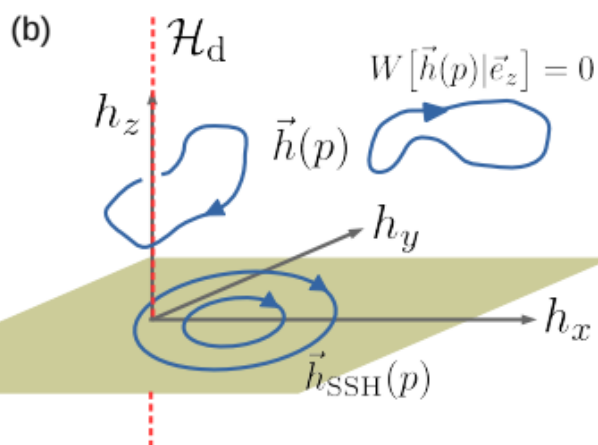


Fig. 2. Topological space under deformations.

This interstellar Station exists in a state of stasis, nothing changes. It is said to be very cold, its vegetation being the polar tundra. This may be an allusion to the absence of entropy at the Kelvin zero absolute temperature. The function which describes such a process represented in the bidimensional space is a closed curve within a topological space which conserves its parameters (essential characteristics) under deformations (Fig. 2) (Gneiting 2022, p. 3)

### **Embassy as a deconstruction of presence.**

Mahit Dzmare is a parody of an ambassador supposed to mediate understanding between nations, as she is not anchored in either. The home civilization of the Lsel Island is anxious about her admiration for the more refined culture of the City-Planet. This is the symptom of the all too common bitterness of third worlds against the cultural enhancement which allows their citizens through education to migrate. Cultural affiliation is perceived as being as dangerous as terroristic acts, Yskandr being compared to an "arsonist" who wants to place a bomb and blow up the Lsel Station.

The Councillor for Heritage is therefore sending Mahit away carrying the Yskandr memory of similar attachment hoping the whole line of xenophiles will get lost. At the same time, Mahit's embassy to the metropolitan civilization is exposed to arrogant treatment, surveillance and the terroristic attacks that attend high politics and fight over power in high places.

Teixcalaan culture alienates her from her own, postfigurative and isolationist society. Uprooted from her original space and stranded in one which differs from what she had imagined back home, Mahit has to negotiate her identity with the host culture. Her first move is wrong. Resymbolization of stereotypes ("going native" as the reverse of the descent to a barbarian state since she is aping the natives of a higher culture) shows her attempting to simulate an imperial citizen conduct. In time the word "native" will appear to be justified, as the empire is not free from signs of primitivism. The city-planet capital, the centre of the universe, is ruled by barbarian values, such as warlike temperament (the first emperor had been a "female born to the horse and to the spade"), and ancestral belief in the necessity of sacrificing the leader in order to save the community. The imaginary is that of absolutist monarchy embodied by the sun Emperor Six Direction, seated on a throne surrounded by spikes of light and dreaming of perennial dynastic rule. He had negotiated the acquisition of a memory-machine from Yskandr in exchange of independence for Lsel which would have permitted his ailing body to be replaced with a fresh one but possessed of his memory. He would have been assured of immortality. The Emperor patronizes competitions of minnesänger, and recitals of poetry, which, in that highly technicalized civilization look as archaic and odd as the fake court of King Ludwig the Second of Bavaria in the later nineteenth century. Both imperial and isolationist politics are exposed as self-centred. The desire for power over others as well as the fear of others make abstraction of a virtual otherness which alone makes possible the ontology of identity. Equally distinct from personhood is the Swarm intelligence (SI) algorithm which incorporates mathematical models that describe the motion of a group of creatures in nature (swarms, schools, flocks, and herds) based on their collective and social behavior. Such are in *A Desolation Called Peace* the rebellious aliens who

partake of a beehive collective consciousness without any notion of individuality or distinct personhood. (Kennedy & Eberhart 1995, pp. 1942-1943)

Mahit can only call "you" those who had attended the same courses as herself – the self being here located within intersubjectivity. E. H. Erikson defines identity as consistency of self over time, and the recognition of this consistency by others:

The conscious feeling of having a *personal identity* is based on two simultaneous observations: the immediate perception of one's self-sameness and continuity in time; and the simultaneous perception of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity. (Erikson 1980, p. 22)

In this case, Mahit's identity is not jeopardized by body engineering in which she sees only cerebral enhancement. Whereas Teixcalaanlitzlims see in her a sort of passive container of their former acquaintance, Yskandr, asking her to allow them to talk to him through some form of ventriloquism, she feels that she can trust her memory and that memory comes with personality. Education is the birth of personality. It is only the moment she combines her ethnic and host cultures evolving toward integrationalist acculturation that she recovers control of her life and personality. Not only does she gain recognition from others but she manages to manipulate the Emperor himself and save the Empire.

### **Quantum definition of personality**

In the age of New Physics, Martine takes a quantum view of human nature. The individual's original state is that of a body without organs, a bundle or quanta of personality, "memory points" and unarticulated voices:

*To think fractal scatter-song an inclusion like a garnet in the matrix of a stone crystal language like the mouth-cries of unpersons, made singable lodges we singing harmonic variance.* (Martine 2021, web)

Star-charts divide the universe into empire and otherwise, into the world and not the world. The subjected individuals are denied the freedom of self-fashioning, their passive selves receiving names like plants and animals in the Garden of Eden: *scatter of images memory points, reassembled, we are known we are named*. Expelled from logos, they feel alienated from their own imprisoned bodies: "We did not name this body, the unfamiliar body sings, we were named we were known". The Teixcalaan body belongs to "a person-not-a-person, singing the inside of a Teixcalaanli ship" (probably an allusion to the slave ships which carried Africans to the New World). Inclusion into a matrix (*like a garnet in the matrix of a stone crystal language*), being-with-one-another opens the way to codified forms of identity.

By writing a Postlude to this second novel, instead of an epilogue, Martine replicates Simon Frith's idea of music as shaper of personality:

"[...] my argument . . . rests on two premises: 1st, that identity is mobile, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being; 2nd, that our experience of music—of music making and music listening—is best understood as an experience of this self-in-process [...] if music is a metaphor for identity, then, . . . the self is always an imagined self but can only be

imagined as a particular organization of social, physical and material forces. Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives.(Frith 1996, p. 124).

The myth of the Double in the Cyber Age takes the form of mind copying and perilous border crossing as a test and initiation. Mahit will leave both conflicting worlds taking refuge in an outpost of the Empire wherefrom she sends letters – her own credentials - and poems. She escapes the prison world of expansionism and isolationism through memory (vanquishing time) and letter writing (vanquishing space), representing herself, yet as an other-oriented intentional subject in an order of intersubjectivity.

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