Wendy Gay Pearson

Born to Be Bron: Destiny and Destinerrance in Samuel R. Delany’s Trouble on Triton

“Biology is destiny.”—anonymous

“There are certain things that just have to be done. And when you come to them, if you’re a man ... you just have to do them.”—Samuel R. Delany, Trouble on Triton (241)

What (Real) Men Do. Bron, the protagonist of Samuel R. Delany’s Trouble on Triton (1976), has, as indicated in my epigraph, quite strong feelings about what it is men do and should do. Of course, it is probably appropriate to modify this comment, which occurs at a crucial point in the narrative, with Delany’s own observation that Bron is a “hateful man,” largely because he “manufacture[s] perfectly fanciful motivations for what everyone else is doing” in order to rationalize his own behavior (Trouble 312). The question is, then, whether Bron’s statement about male obligation functions as an ideological commitment or as another fanciful motivation, this time for himself. But the answer—unsurprisingly, given the ambiguity noted in the novel’s subtitle, “An Ambiguous Heterotopia”—is that these rationales are inextricably imbricated with each other.

Bron is an immigrant to the capital city of Tethys on Triton from the relatively conservative world of Mars, where he worked as a prostitute for a clientele of older women. Bron’s story plays out against the backdrop of a (mainly economic) war of independence between the outer satellites and the inner planets (Earth and Mars), which escalates to a single day of violence in which 70% of Earth’s population is killed while a small number of Tritonians die as a result of gravity fluctuations within Tethys’s Shield. Early in the story, Bron meets and becomes infatuated with a woman named Spike, head of a theater troupe; given the opportunity, Bron joins a delegation to Earth, led by his housemate Sam, a Tritonian politician, because Spike and her troupe are performing there. Bron is briefly arrested and interrogated by Earth police; back on Triton, Bron exaggerates his experiences of the gravity fluctuation into a tale of heroism in which he rescues his boss, Audri, her coop mates, and their children. Spike’s refusal to accept Bron’s desire to be the center of her life leads him to try to remedy his unhappiness through an act of heroic self-sacrifice—by pursuing gender and sexual-orientation reassignment in order to become the kind of submissive heterosexual woman that he himself seeks. Ironically, he hopes in the process to insure the survival of the ideological principle of masculinist heterosexism he defends in the epigraph above.

Bron makes this statement about men having to do what has to be done to his friend Lawrence immediately after his sex change. As many commentators have noted, Bron is very much a misfit in the polymorphously fluid social ordering that is Triton’s version of heterotopia. Instead, he harks back to an era—one that never
existed on Triton at all and is very much a nostalgic fantasy on his part—when men were men and women were there to worship and admire them. As a heterosexual man on Triton (and it is apparent that, on Triton, “heterosexual” does not equate to heteronormative), Bron’s misfortune is that he desires a woman who will adopt this position relative to his own assumption of masculinity. Lawrence, with whom Bron lives in a non-specific all-male co-op (its lack of specificity is in contrast with co-ops that cater exclusively to heterosexuals, gay men, etc.), tells Bron that

your problem is... that essentially you are a logical pervert, looking for a woman with a mutually compatible logical perversion. The fact is, the mutual perversion you are looking for is very, very rare—if not nonexistent. You’re looking for someone who can enjoy a certain sort of logical masochism. If it were just sexual, you’d have no problem finding a partner at all. Hang them from the ceiling, burn their nipples with matches, stick pins in their buttocks and cane them bloody! There’re gaggles of women, just as there are gaggles of men, who would be delighted to have a six-foot, blond iceberg like you around to play such games with. (212-13; emphasis in original)

Having defined what Bron wants from a woman through a series of oxymorons (“run-around-in-circles-while-you-walk-a-straight-line”) and denounced it as the one thing no woman is going to put up with, “especially when it’s out of bed and simply has no hope of pleasurable feedback,” Lawrence adds that it is fortunate that Bron’s “particular perversion today is extremely rare” (213). Estimating that at most one in five thousand women would be interested in being the woman Bron wants, Lawrence notes that men with Bron’s logical perversion are perhaps one in fifty. Largely as a rhetorical flourish for the benefit of the novel’s contemporary reader, however, Lawrence then contextualizes his comments by adding that this perversion’s rarity in their era is “quite amazing, considering that it once was just about as common as the ability to grow a beard” (213). In other words, what Bron wants is what virtually every heterosexual male is assumed to want (especially when the novel was written), making his desires seem, to the contemporary reader, indistinguishable from those of the “average Joe.”

Guy Davidson has commented in a very insightful essay that the “interrelation of sexual identity, sexual desire, and statistics is a central concern of Triton” and that the multiplicity of sexual types on Triton is both an extension of contemporary statistical thinking and a refusal of the (hetero)normativity that statistics are used to justify (104).1 One of Triton’s more strikingly heterotopian aspects is its profusion of genders and sexualities; combining the predilection of statistics for the proliferation of categories with Triton’s insistence on rendering the social through logical and mathematical predictors (instanced both by Ashima Slade’s modular calculus and Bron’s work as a metalogician), the result is, as Davidson notes, an inevitable movement toward “the distinctively ‘postmodern’ fragmentation and lability of identity” (104). While this is certainly the context in which Lawrence, an older gay man, offers his insights to Bron, it is also apparent that his statistics are not altogether accurate. If indeed one man in fifty suffers from Bron’s logical perversion (that is, the desire to be a patriarchal male within a binary system in which men are human and women are not), then Bron
should have no difficulty finding a mate after her sex change. Indeed, given the rarity of women like Bron, men like Bron should be flocking to her. But instead, Bron ends up alone and possibly psychotic.

It is one thing to know that Bron’s sex change does not—and cannot—have its desired result; it is quite another to contemplate this in relation to Bron’s statement to Lawrence, immediately after the operation, that there are some things a man just has to do. Indeed, one of the novel’s major ironies is that it is Bron’s view of what men have to do that leads him to become a woman—an act that is, in his mind, the ultimate sacrifice, since he refuses to credit women as human. His sex change is significantly motivated by his insistence to Lawrence that “[w]omen don’t understand. Faggots don’t understand either” (214). Having just returned from a trip to Earth, with which Triton is at war, Bron makes it very clear through his actions that he is at once almost hysterically emotional and something of a coward, thus rendering satirical his insistence on his masculine bravery, his supposed ability to do what is necessary for the “survival of the species.” His argument with Lawrence about what it means to be Bron (i.e., a “man” from his own perspective and a “logical sadist” from Lawrence’s) finally prompts Bron into a desperate rush to the clinic where he has his physical sex changed and his desires refixed (to the “female plurality configuration” [229], which is basically female heterosexuality). He is, in his own mind, doing what is necessary for the survival of the species—not having understood, either from experience or from the conversation in which Lawrence spells it out to him, that, in fact, the human species as Bron understands it no longer exists. After the operation, Bron tells Lawrence:

> Humanity. They used to call it “mankind.” And I remember reading once that some women objected to that as too exclusive. Basically, though, it wasn’t exclusive enough! Lawrence, regardless of the human race, what gives the species the only value it has are men, and particularly those men who can do what I did.

(231)

Delany brings home the farcical nature of Bron’s ideological delusions when he has Lawrence interpret “those men who can do what I did” as, “Change sex?” (232). Of course, this is the literal truth, but Bron must now deny it because, after all, she is “not a man anymore” and so can forego a man’s natural modesty about his supposed bravery in attempting to rescue Audri and her children (232). Still, it is apparent that Bron’s insistence that men do what they have to do, what is necessary for the survival of the species, causes him to become a woman—or, in more contemporary terms, an MTF transsexual (which raises an issue I will come back to later). In Bron’s terms, the irony of being a “real man” is that his destiny is to become a “real woman.”

**Elegy for Wannabe Patriarchs.** As Davidson, Edward Chan, Tom Moylan, and others have noted, Bron’s devotion to outdated patriarchal ideologies makes it impossible for him to follow the ways of Triton; his deviation from those apparently countless possibilities lies at the heart of the novel’s critique of contemporary epistemology (particularly epistemologies of “identity” such as are subtended under the headings of “gender,” “sexuality,” and “race”). The novel
engages in a form of cultural critique that is dependent on a heterotopian dismantling of the apparent naturalness of the social ordering predominant at the time it was written (and not that much changed today). Delany himself brings the question of heterotopia into play when he uses the term in his subtitle and then quotes it in an epigraph from Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (*Les Mots et les Choses*, 1966). Chan points out that the vast majority of critics have simplified—and perhaps oversimplified—Delany’s use of the term by translating it as little more than a “contemporary or postmodern updating of the utopian impulse,” one that makes more allowance for difference than is common in utopian literature (181). Arguing that, instead of seeing Triton as a postmodern utopia, it is more productive to treat Triton as a heterotopian narrative, Chan trenchantly remarks that “utopian narratives extend the dreams of our epistemologies, while heterotopian narratives call those epistemologies into question. Utopia tries to imagine a possibility we might entertain as an ideal to which we might aspire; heterotopia hits us over the head with the shock of what we imagine as social difference” (182). Chan’s use of heterotopia agrees in many essentials with Kevin Hetherington’s discussion of the term in *The Badlands of Modernity*, where he argues that heterotopias “are spaces in which an alternative social ordering is performed. These are spaces in which a new way of ordering emerges that stands in contrast with the taken-for-granted mundane idea of social order that exists within society” (40). Most importantly, for Hetherington, heterotopias are spaces that rebalance questions of freedom and social control in ways that may be shocking, fascinating, and/or horrifying in their deviation from expected norms. One of the ambiguities of Triton is indeed that it takes advantage of both these positions, providing the reader at once with a heterotopian narrative and an encounter with a heterotopian space that may be as shocking, fascinating, confusing, and horrifying as Bron, the immigrant from Mars, often finds it.

While social order itself can refer to many things, both in Triton and on Triton it seems that the categories Bron butts up against and is unable to reorder to his satisfaction fall into two main classes: social space and questions of identity and relationship. That the social spaces of Triton are ordered in such a way as to permit a proliferation of possible identities and relationships is, in fact, a significant part of Bron’s problem. The ordering of Triton is similarly a potential problem for the reader, however, particularly given the demand to read any form of “-topia” in relationship to “utopia.” Thus one of the reasons why the reader, like Bron, may end up in a variety of possible interpretative spaces that do not seem to make sense, or which have to have a particular sense imposed upon them, is the ambivalence inherent in reading the novel and the difficulty of reaching a particular “place of reading” that locates Triton both as science fiction and as queer.\(^3\)

Epigraphs are important; they function as extradiegetic signposts, possible openings into the unfamiliar landscape laid out before the reader. Delany’s epigraphs in Triton are not, however, easy signposts on a clearly marked trail, but rather the opening up of possibilities. Delany marks these possibilities in Triton in a number of ways: through these epigraphs, especially the first, from Mary Douglas, and the last, from Michel Foucault; through the novel’s own cartography
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of Triton’s apparently heterotopian landscape; and finally through the deliberate inclusion in the text of a number of appendices that serve to remind the reader that this fiction is indeed a fiction, that we may well read Triton “as if it were some kind of science fiction” (Goldberg 545) precisely because we are constantly reminded of its science-fictional qualities. One possibility is that we might read Triton as the very particular kind of science fiction that Moylan in Demand the Impossible labels the “critical utopia”—that is, the utopia that is not a blueprint or an “awful warning,” but rather an extended critique of our contemporary and rather un-utopian lives. Another possibility is that, following Chan, we might read its heterotopian questioning of those very epistemologies that utopia expresses as a reiteration of the value of reading Triton “as if it were some kind of science fiction.”

If I then foreground practices of reading, especially those that mark a text as science-fictional—and Delany has laid out elegantly the ways in which language usage differentiates sf from “mundane” fiction (see “Semiology”)—or that mark it as queer (or both), it is precisely because reading practices so thoroughly inform the possible approaches both to sf texts and to queer ones. To read a queer text as if it were some kind of sf, or to read a science-fictional text as if it were in some way queer—these possibilities reiterate two important, but not always conjoined, possibilities for a reading of Triton outside of the modes that identify it either as straightforwardly or as critically utopian. The problematics of the former, which uncritically resignifies “heterotopia” as nothing more or less than a utopia that, instead of emphasizing sameness, makes allowance for difference, has already been dealt with in some detail by Chan, Davidson, and Neil Easterbrook. Reading Triton as a postmodern utopia not only moves away from Foucault’s formulations of heterotopia—formulations important to a reading of the novel precisely because Delany himself cites them—but also succumbs to an impoverished view of difference that, as Eve Sedgwick has pointed out, reverts to the meager axes along which Western epistemologies are able to think about and name it (22).

Chan deals with the problem of distinguishing heterotopia as a utopia-of-difference from heterotopia as an epistemological interrogation by moving away from identifying Triton as a “heterotopia” and towards identifying Triton as a heterotopian narrative. One of the consequences of this move is to eliminate some of the ambiguity about the referent for the term “heterotopia,” a strategy that enhances the clarity of Chan’s reading while losing some of the potential power of the simple fact of ambivalence. Most powerfully, it allows Chan to reinstate Delany’s use of Foucault firmly within any consideration of Triton as a narrative whose declared purpose is to question Western epistemologies, particularly those that, as Mary Douglas notes in Delany’s first epigraph, facilitate the constraint of the physical body by the social body so that “the body itself is a highly restricted medium of expression” (183). Triton juxtaposes two epistemes: one, of which Bron is the main and perhaps only proponent, in which the desired ideal is one where the “physical experience of the body ... sustains a particular view of society” (Douglas, qtd. in Delany xiv), and one, subscribed to by the majority of Tritonians, in which the physical experiences of embodiment have so multiplied and proliferated that there is little left to sustain any singular view of society, but
rather only a fragmented series of particular views. In other words, Bron’s experience of his body as masculine, which he understands in very specific ways, also sustains a very specific view of what masculinity should mean in society and what sorts of society it should, in turn, sustain. That this is heterotopian, in Foucault’s sense, is clear; but clearly it is also science-fictional, in the sense of performing a thought experiment about the effects of heterotopian narrative on Bron’s utopian view of utter consonance between his vision of gendered embodiment and the social body. Bron’s categories—which are also, of course, those of the hegemonic bodies of our own world—are revealed to be as arbitrary as those of Borges’s Chinese encyclopedia (whose links are ordered according to a system that is unfathomable and thus does not appear to be a system at all). Given Bron’s ideological experience of embodiment, of being located in a masculine body that he understands as his destiny (so much so that he gives it up in order to sustain it), the novel is certainly a critique of the idea of biology as destiny. It is also Bron’s particular logical perversion that causes him to fixate on the attempt to create consonance between his own experience (or more accurately, his interpretation of that experience) and the social order that surrounds him. In remaking himself, he expects, somehow, that he will remake the world and will, through his personal bravery and sacrifice, fulfill his ultimate destiny: not merely to provide a mate for (those like) himself but to guarantee the “survival of the species.”

**Biology as Destinerrance (Going Nowhere).** *Triton* follows approximately four “pseudomonths” in Bron’s life at a time when Triton and the other “satellite” colonies are fighting what is basically a war of independence from Earth and Mars. Triton is an essentially anarchist society that allows for a multitude of personal and familial relationships and ways of life; its spaces include the unlicensed sector (or u-l) for those who do not want to subscribe to any of the various forms of social order available to them. Neil Easterbrook has convincingly demonstrated the novel’s genealogical relationship to both Robert A. Heinlein’s *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966) and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), noting not only that all three are set on rebellious moons (respectively, Luna, Anarres, and Triton) and involve variations on anarchist societies, but that they also function as responses to and rethinkings of their predecessors, revisionings that display sf’s power as an implicitly dialectical field. Easterbrook concludes that, while Heinlein’s Luna Free State may be utopian for a very few, for most (except its author and his spokesmen/avatars) its final configuration is not rational, not anarchic, and most definitely not utopian. Anarres, however, he calls “isotopian,” meaning that what the Anarresti seek to establish is not a utopia, but “an egalitarian-universalist system where all individuals are equals” (55). Easterbrook trenchantly notes that, in a place based on multiplicity, “Bron wants to be at the center” within a culture with none” (67). Easterbrook understands Triton’s multiplicity as a function of its location as a “postmodern liberal utopia” in contradistinction to *The Dispossessed’s* “‘humanist’ liberal utopia” (70). His argument in this article, published in 1995, reiterates a reading of heterotopia as a type of utopia rather than, as in Chan’s
attempt to disambiguate heterotopia as utopia-of-difference from heterotopia as mode of interrogation or form of narrative. The insight, however, that Bron seeks a stable center within a world whose rhizomatic qualities preclude any center at all is a valuable clue to any understanding of Bron (who, unlike Shevek, does not think himself a citizen of utopia). It functions as a focal point for the science-fictional critique not of an epistemology extended to its ideal future state but of our present epistemes.

If destiny is, shall we say, a one-way road to nowhere (which we cannot forget is ou-topia [no place]), the Derridean notion of destinerrance suggests both the difficulties of staying on track and the irony that, being on track to nowhere (since ou-topia has been inherent in eu-topia [the good place] from Thomas More’s first usage of “utopia”), destinerrance may be no bad thing. The word itself functions compendiously (not unlike “utopia” itself): it implies both errancy of destination and errancy as destination. It seems to me that destinerrance, when applied to Triton, provides at least one possible way out of the difficulty of some of the more pragmatic—indeed, paradigmatic—readings of Bron in the critical literature. In other words, I want to suggest that reading Bron as the anti-hero, subjugated by his own cultural baggage, involves a kind of movement away from reading Triton “as if it were some kind of science fiction.” The landscape of Triton (that is, its hero in Delany’s terms) is heterotopia: a vast, sprawling, undidy, littered, colorful, freakish, discomforting, convivial, variegated, and ultimately chaotic and disordered mise-en-scène, one whose categories make no sense to someone like Bron, who insists on “the order of things”—“things” being, in this context, most especially those axes of difference by which the contemporary world determines social hierarchy. Triton as heterotopia is the backdrop for a society of people who have freedom both from basic scarcity and from the “order of things” as we know them: they are thus also free to make choices about their lives in ways that are not measured by economic necessity, social hierarchy, familial dynasty, or even biological imperative, as we understand these factors today. The secondary character, the episteme, is thus the social hierarchies of sex and gender—or, as Carl Freedman would have it, “the problematics of sex, gender and social marginality” (146).

Far from being, as Seth McEvoy argues, a novel that fails to engage with feminist ideas, Triton’s story is almost entirely about gender relations, sexuality, and the potential construction of alternative modes of relationship. In Triton, Delany’s most brilliant feat is, in some ways, that he actually depicts for the reader, in vivid technicolor, precisely those “as yet unforeseen kinds of relationship” that Foucault talks about as potentially arising from the gay male community and as being particularly frightening to those most committed to heteronormativity (“Sexual Choice” 153)—a group that, on Triton, appears to be limited to Bron. On Triton, both marriage and prostitution are illegal, but virtually every other possible combination of human relationship abounds: Tritonians recognize 40 or 50 genders and nine sexual orientations; they also believe that the ideal family situation for raising a child involves “at least five close adult attachments—that’s living, loving, feeding and diaper-changing attachments—preferably with five different sexes” (254). Henning Bech’s
analysis of the traditions of relationship “in the homosexual world” could very nearly be a description of life on Triton:

apart from long-term monogamous couples, there are e.g. serial monogamies; couples with institutionalised infidelity; marriages of convenience; organized ménage-à-trois set-ups; close, steady, non-sexual two-person friendships; ways of life that centre on the social life of organizations, friendship networks or pub environments; intense intercourse with pornography; and combinations of these. (147)

It is worth noting that in Stars in My Pockets Like Grains of Sand (1986), Delany constructs a protagonist who is nearly the perfect opposite of the perpetually frustrated Bron: Marq Dyeth, who finds in Rat Korga “precisely the image of [his] desire” (Roland Barthes, qtd. in Fox, Conscientious Sorcerers 115). It is this combination of the rhizomatic with the resolutely particular that characterizes Delany’s quite consistent depiction of sexuality and desire in his writing: people’s desires differ across a wide range of potentialities, including the potential for the specificity of desiring only men who wear blue running shoes or who chew their thumbnails.9 This is what Bron does not understand; his desire is for a category, not an individual (a logical consequence of binary notions of sexual orientation). As he is a heterosexual male who believes himself to be stronger, braver, more truthful than women, their lack of respect for and submission to his desires, indeed to his very being, remains incomprehensible to him. His response, as noted above, is to become what he wants: woman-as-category, someone who does not mind being treated as less than human, who can say with a straight face that “what gives the species the only value it has are men” (231).

In fact, changing sex on Triton is quite commonplace and Bron is not the only transsexual character in the novel. Delany takes some care to contrast him with Sam, a huge, jovial black man “with a large magnificent body which he always wore (rather pretentiously, Bron thought) naked” (25). Sam is the character Bron most envies and also the only one whom, after her sex change, Bron makes an attempt to approach, signifying how closely Sam seems—to Bron—to fit the category of “man.” As is his wont, however, Bron makes up an entire backstory for Sam only to have every single aspect of it disproved. Not only is Sam not some sad-sack salesman “rotten with neurosis,” as Bron assumes, he is actually a very powerful politician who mainly lives in a family commune on Iapetus with “five men, eight women and nine children” (27). Even Bron’s grinding jealousy of Sam’s physique proves ill-founded, as Sam admits that he started life as a “rather unhappy, sallow-faced, blonde, blue-eyed (and terribly myopic) waitress ... with a penchant for other sallow, blonde, blue-eyed waitresses, who, as far as the young and immature me could make out, were all just gaga over the six-foot-plus Wallunga and Katanga emigrants” (126). Making the opposite decision to Bron, Sam becomes what the women he desires want. Bron, however, is already what the women he wants are supposed to want, so that his choices remain completely solipsistic and consistently unsatisfactory. Having cast Sam in the role of “real man,” Bron first discovers that he is wrong about the “naturalness” of
Sam’s masculinity (biology, for Sam, is quite distinctly not destiny) and later that her womanliness utterly fails to attract him.

Bron is caught in the tensions between destiny, destination, and destinerrance; this, quite ironically, makes him in many ways the most utopian character in this ambiguously heterotopian world. After all, Bron has a blueprint for a better world, even if that blueprint is rooted in some nostalgic fantasy of an antiquated realm of sexual hierarchy. This is a fantasy that coruscates on every level, even the physical (a nod back to Mary Douglas): noting that women and men are the same size in the present day, Bron argues with her therapist, Brian (who is also a woman from Mars), that perhaps the depiction of women as smaller than men in Earth’s history was based on fact, not on a collective illusion brought about by patriarchal practices of sexual selection. Heterotopias, Foucault tells us, do not afford consolation, even of the chimerical variety; by contrast, they “are disturbing, probably because they make it impossible for us to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together’” (qtd in Triton 292). It is thus inevitably Bron who seeks the consolation of utopia, not the discomfort of heterotopia; it is Bron, then, who has a destination, albeit one at which he can never arrive.

Why destinerrance and what does it mean? The term, as it is most commonly used, comes to us via Derrida and a certain deconstructive tendency in postmodern philosophy. Yet, to cite destinerrance only as a tool of deconstruction is to miss the extent of its potency as an analytical implement. As indicated earlier, the term itself is a play on words, evoking both an errancy of destination and errancy as destination. We mistake the desired end, but the end we seek is also the mistake. In an interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell, Pheng Cheah asserts that “if you maintain a sharp distinction between the ideal and the real and you see the ideal as the beyond from which to critique the real, you can’t really argue how the ideal is to be connected to the real. It seems to me that is what Derrida, for instance, doesn’t do—he doesn’t separate the ideal from the real, but regards each term as the différance of the other” (Cheah and Grosz 33).

This is an important distinction, particularly when we turn again from Derrida to Delany and, via Delany, to Bron; after all, Bron’s methodology throughout is to use the ideal (his belief in a perfect, pre-Tritonian femininity counterpoised to an equally ideal masculinity that he understands as his true male self) to critique the real, which is to say the lived experiences of genders in Tritonian society—experiences that are linked to certain discourses of freedom of choice, of economic stability and accessibility, and of embodied features (such as race) that, to us, read as identities but, to Tritonians, are unstable aspects of a life that seems to be lived in a kind of permanent jouissance. It is not that everyone on Triton is reasonably happy, or happily reasonable, as Bron decrees of himself on the novel’s very first page, but rather that modes of embodied being on Triton, and thus of identity at a certain level, are inherently unstable, an instability that includes and is not diminished by the possibility of temporalities that provide the appearance of stability in certain circumstances: the u-l, or unlicensed sector,
changes, as Bron notes, all the time, yet it never changes at all. Furthermore, if we apply the idea of destinerrance to the concept of utopia more generally, it becomes clear that utopias must require this sharp distinction between the ideal and the real. In other words, utopias themselves can only be reached by a process of destinerrance, both by accidentally going the wrong way but arriving in the right place (the fate of so many travellers through strange lands, up to and including Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* [1915]) and by setting out for the wrong destination (every utopia, after all, is someone’s nightmare). And, since utopia is more a critical concept than a realizable destination, contemporary utopics have no choice but to deal with their inherent destinerrance.

Derrida himself describes destinerrance most clearly in his 1993 interview with Peter Brunette and David Wills when—responding to a question about the “relations between thought and communication, in the most basic sense” (11)—he links destinerrance to the functioning of a viral code, both within the body and within electronic circuitry:

The virus is in part a parasite that destroys, that introduces disorder into communication. Even from the biological standpoint, this is what happens with a virus; it derails a mechanism of the communicational type, its coding and decoding. On the other hand, it is something that is neither living nor nonliving; the virus is not a microbe. And if you follow these two threads, that of a parasite which disrupts destination from the communicative point of view—disrupting writing, inscription, and the coding and decoding of inscription—and which on the other hand is neither alive nor dead, you have the matrix of all that I have done since I began writing.... If we follow the intersection between AIDS and the computer virus as we now know it, we have the means to comprehend, not only from a theoretical point of view but also from the sociohistorical point of view, what amounts to a disruption of absolutely everything on the planet, including police agencies, commerce, the army, questions of strategy. All those things encounter the limits on their control, as well as the extraordinary force of those limits. It is as if all that I have been suggesting for the past twenty-five years is prescribed by the idea of destinerrance ... the supplement, the pharmakon, all the undecidables—it’s the same thing. (12)

This brings us to an interesting place: if Bron were a typical character in a traditional utopia, his role would be to function as the supplement. But *Triton* is a heterotopia; it suffers, if one can use that word, from a dearth of the ideal, even though it is factually threatened by a form of economic warfare that bears a certain resemblance to the effects of a computer virus. Thus Bron’s role is to be the one stable character in a world where everyone else is tolerant, if not desirous, of change. If we see heterotopia as “spaces of alternate ordering” in which the social order of modernity can be rethought (Hetherington vii), then it ought also to be possible to see Bron himself as a singular instance of the heterotopian. Yet he is not, precisely because social ordering requires a society to order—and Bron is a single person. Indeed, it is essential that Bron be a single person precisely because he cannot be allowed to offer an alternative social ordering to Triton within the diegesis of the novel. The only space in which he can represent that form of social ordering is within the present process of reading the narrative—
and, in turn, his heterotopian potential there is utterly derailed as the reader becomes increasingly aware that Bron represents the norm of the reader’s world, not an alternative to it. Similarly, Bron is not a virus; he is, in fact, unable to infect the world of Lawrence and Audri and Sam at all, yet the world continues to act on him and, even after her sex change, she continues to resist or is unable to find any way of becoming part of the culture in which she lives.

Despite what Bron believes about gender and about him/herself, the undecidability of life on Triton continues to refuse him the consolation of utopia. Indeed, it creates a world and a language that, in many ways, he does not understand and cannot translate. Consider the first few scenes of the novel; they are repeated instances of destinerrance at work. Describing himself as a “reasonably happy man,” Bron decides to check out five random strangers as a way of discovering “how different [his happiness] made him from those around” (1). Bron is, as Robert Fox notes, an elitist (“Politics” 46); in being different from those around him, he sees himself as better. He scorns the breast bangles on the first man he encounters; condemns the second for wasting wood at his carpentry, a hobby Bron arbitrarily endows him with; and so on. But having looked at the first four people, Bron immediately concludes, in a moment of pure destinerrance, that they “were not very good choices for a reasonable and happy man” (4). And yet they were the choices he made. Having looked at four other humans, he decides to look at himself and enters an Ego Booster Booth, where he inserts his ID card and token, only to receive three minutes of static, both visual and aural. Even his reflection is distorted by the red syrup spilled across the screen. Nothing in this scene ever reaches its “proper” end, thus reminding the reader both of its qualities of destinerrance and of heterotopia’s attack on the orderliness of obviously logical categories (Bron’s random choices are not, after all, really intended to be random: they have a clear, if impossible, goal). Indeed, Chan notes that Bron’s attempt “to measure his own individuality ... has the result of questioning the purity and sanctity of the category of the individual” (185). From the start, not only does Bron fail to get where he is going (in this case, a measure of his difference from those around him that is intended to cement his centrality within all of the “margins” that make up Triton), but his very attempt reveals the heterotopian nature of Tritonian society—precisely what he does not want to see. The five people he looks at—a handsome sixty-year-old woman with blue breast bangles, the adolescent male with her (also with blue breast bangles), a tall man in maroon coveralls with cages over his head and hands, a young female Mumbler with a cracked yellow bowl, and his distorted self in the screen of the Ego Booster Booth—are part of a syntagm (the crowd in the Plaza of Lights) and reflections of a paradigmatic failure: they have no more logical coherence, at least to the eye of the contemporary reader, than do the elements of Borges’ Chinese encyclopedia.

Leaving the booth, Bron ventures into the u-l, where he sees a woman attacked (although it appears to be part of the street theater in which he inadvertently becomes both bit player and audience) by a member of the Rampant Order of Dumb Beasts, a new sect whose goal the woman, Spike, tells him is “putting an end to meaningless communication. Or is it meaningful...? I can
never remember” (12). Bron, in other words, is surrounded from the book’s outset by disruptions of communication, problems of mistranslation and misunderstanding, destinerrance of many varieties, including his inclination, having met Spike, to wander randomly after her with, literally, no idea where he is going.

Born to be Bron? Thus, while the traditional protagonist of the utopian genre is either a committed citizen of utopia who functions as a tour guide to her own world or a naive visitor from elsewhere (or elsewhen) who must learn the ropes of the new society, Bron, as Moylan has remarked, is one of Triton’s “most unhappy and unreasonable residents” (162). Moylan explains Bron’s incommensurability in Tritonian society as Delany’s “exploration of the failure of a person socialised within the ideological web of Earth and Mars to cast off his male-supremacist, self-deluding behavior and become a new person in an emancipated society” (176). In the critical utopia Moylan understands Triton to be, Bron remains, however, “a misfit in utopia” (162). Delany himself provides an alternative view, noting that he does not think “SF can be really utopian,” but that the novel relies on a shift in the opinion of the “Common Reader,” who goes from identifying with Bron and thinking his world repressive to realizing that “Bron is a despicable man—but the society around him is actually fairly good” (“On Triton” 302; emphasis in original). Delany goes on to note, in a more general discussion of the relationship between sf and utopia, that

you may have hit upon one of the things that makes SF, or this SF novel, recalcitrant—I mean, why you have to squeeze it to fit under a utopian rubric. To have a term such as “hegemony”—not to mention the surveillance implications behind the Ego Booster Booths—right in the midst of such a “utopian” society, for me, at any rate, leaves the very notion of utopia pretty much shattered. These—and many other—linguistic turns are used in the book precisely for their negative implications. (306)

Delany asserts further that

There are two kinds of characters, I think, in most modern fiction: one is the character you’re supposed to identify with. That character is like a suit of clothes you put on in order to have the experiences the character goes through.

The other character is, rather, a case study. Though you can feel sorry for—or be amused by—this character (and even recognize aspects of yourself in the character), if you identify with her or him beyond a certain point, you’re misreading the book. (311)

Bron, to Delany at least, is the latter kind of character.

If Bron is not then the hero of Triton, is he, as McEvoy contends (and contrary to Delany’s own characterization), simply a failed hero, a confused but willing enough guy from the 1970s who fails to make the transition into life on Triton (a.k.a. the future)? Is he, as Moylan argues, the novel’s anti-hero, his primary purpose to show the need to be open to difference, to alternatives, to possibilities? Or is he, as Robert Fox suggests in Conscientious Sorcerers, a man “whose difficulties can be rooted in our current malaise, which his own twenty-second century has not resolved but merely overdetermined” (114)? Both Moylan and
Fox seem to suggest that Bron’s failings are culturally determined—that is, they appear to come down squarely on the constructivist side of the debate about what it is that makes us who we are.

Yet Davidson has recently pointed out that there are many elements of the novel that seem to contradict such a reading. Several scenes suggest that Triton is not wholly aligned with a postmodern notion of fluidity of identity, including the counsellor’s warning to the newly female Bron that she will never, in some sense, “be a ‘complete’ woman,” not having lived with that female body the whole of her life (251). Experience of embodiment, as Douglas insists, counts. Similarly, the teenaged Alfred, who is plagued by impotence, gets his desire refixed in an attempt to discover if he is “really” gay, but has it re-refixed when this does not solve his problem. Spike also has herself refixed in order to enter into a relationship with a woman, before returning to her previous desire for tall, blond men (like Bron). “With all three characters ... there is a sense in which an underlying sexual orientation remains as the essence of selfhood, no matter what pyrotechnics of libidinal reconfiguration Tritonian technology makes available” (Davidson 108). The underlying sense of selfhood exhibited by Alfred, Spike, Lawrence, and so on is not, however, contradictory to a type of ludic play with these markers of identity and is, perhaps, one of the profoundly heterotopian moments in the novel; its apparent acceptance of postmodern and constructivist positions seems not to be in consonance with its recognition that there may still be something profoundly essential about one’s desires and, indeed, one’s sense of self. It is, though, very much in contradistinction to Bron’s sense of biology as destiny, a sense that becomes stronger, not weaker, as the novel progresses, so that he moves from plaintively inquiring “what about those of us who only know what we don’t like?” (104; emphasis in original) to a perverse clarity about his role in Tritonian society and his desire for a woman who can match his patriarchal aspirations by disclaiming her own humanity. So while the novel’s heterotopian narrative wreaks havoc on the binary terms of the essentialist/constructivist debate (if only by proliferating many more terms that explode the very binarism of sex/gender), the reader’s encounters with members of Tritonian society reinforce the notion that, essential sense of sexual orientation or not, many more options are available, including the option to change.

The rest of the conversation between Brian and Bron (both of them, we should note, now female) is similarly revealing of the destination both of the society Bron lives in and of Bron him/herself. Brian and Bron argue about whether or not Bron, as a woman, is more emotional than Bron was as a man. Brian notes, caustically, that “it would just be very hard to be more emotional” than Bron was before his sex change and points out that, in any case, Bron is not like—and does not want to be like—other women. “In one sense, though you are as real a woman as possible, in another sense you are a woman created by a man—specifically by the man you were” (251; emphases in original). In this sense, McEvoy’s comparison of Triton to Joanna Russ’s The Female Man (1975) takes on a certain cogency, but in reverse: in The Female Man, by being women in a woman-only world, women become human, a commentary on the fact that, existing in dialectical tension with men, women qua women can only be women and not
humans. In *Triton*, Bron, by becoming a woman made by a man, becomes less, rather than more, human. Indeed, Bron-the-woman is specifically designed not to be human, but rather to be defined only in relation to the ideal masculinity that Bron believes himself to possess—or, rather, at this stage in the novel, to have possessed. One of the great ironies here is that Bron-the-woman (or perhaps Bron-the-MTF) arrives at the destination that Bron-the-man intends, only to find that it no more exists than it did when she was a man. In our world, where so many see biology as destiny (particularly given the popular prevalence of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology), Bron’s destiny is to demonstrate that biology has nothing to do with it. Assuming that gender/sexuality equals biology and biology equals destiny, Bron arrives—in the ultimate of ironies, given this novel’s play with the topic—at his/her utopia, which turns out of course to be “no place” at all.

If Bron is traumatized by the open-ended demands of life on Triton, this suggests perhaps that it is possible to read his failure to become a true citizen of Triton’s ambiguous heterotopia as something other than perverse. After all, from a queer perspective, the perverse is not necessarily wrong. Perhaps it is now possible to ask whether the failure is neither Bron’s nor *Triton*’s but is rooted in the very heterotopic fabric of the satellite’s social structure. Despite paying homage to Delany’s use of the term “heterotopia,” it still strikes me that critics of the novel have tended, by and large, to treat *Triton* as celebratory, as very much a utopia, even if one that demands less conformity and has more space for social variation. Freedman, for example, describes *Triton* as an outstanding example of a science-fictional utopia and even Moylan’s thorough and insightful discussion tends to slip towards the laudatory. But perhaps the ambiguous heterotopia is itself a form of destinerrance; after all, it is heterotopias that “dessicate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences” (Foucault, qtd. in *Triton* 292). The very undecidability of the heterotopian is precisely what constitutes it as a form of destinerrance: it resides in the aporia between two languages, the language of utopia and the language of modernity, whether the modernity in question is that of twentieth-century Earth or twenty-second century Triton.

Bron believes that his destiny is to be himself (or herself), yet, as the one to whom binarism is a necessary ontological condition without which life is literally unthinkable, utterly without destination, his only way to be himself is to become not himself but what he wants or what he wants to want. Bron does not, in the end, suffer from indecision, but from a surfeit of decision; his/her confusion is a product of excessive ideological certainty. Thus Bron ends up caught in a paradox: “she had no way to show she knew, because any indication of knowledge denied the knowledge’s existence in her” (263–64). Bron can neither have what he knows he wants nor become what she knows he wants her to be for him, save by admitting that there is no destination, that to journey somewhere is always to end up somewhere else; to be someone is always to become someone else. Even through Bron’s marvelously Lacanian dream of recognition and misrecognition at the end of the novel, she is still incapable of the full realization that she and he (“her old self”) are as indistinguishable as ou-topia and eu-topia.
Rather, she frames undecidability as a morass to be avoided; yet in her confusion and distress she has a final moment of destinerrance, a certainty that the dawn will not come. Both metaphorically and metonymically, Bron’s epistemological and ontological battle with certainty and uncertainty, with destination and a-destination, announces both utopia and heterotopia as destinerrance—the place (or, in the case of heterotopia, the places) that can only be arrived at by arriving somewhere else. And that somewhere else may well be, for some readers, neither utopia nor heterotopia, but “the place of reading” itself.

NOTES
1. Delany’s comment that Bron is “hateful” because he invents fanciful rationales for other people’s actions could certainly apply here, since statistics often provide the basis for fantasizing about other people’s motivations.
2. Amusingly enough, Canada’s most outspoken group of politically-reactionary women calls its members R.E.A.L. (Realistic, Equal, Active, for Life) Women (see their website at <http://www.realwomenca.com/>) They would not be the only people who embrace Bron’s standards of womanliness.
3. I was struck, while thinking about Triton, by a comment made by Jonathan Goldberg in an article on Willa Cather’s work. Goldberg says that, as an adolescent, he responded to Cather’s “Tom Outland’s Story” in The Professor’s House (1925) with a sense of inchoate recognition:

   I found the writing intense, atmospheric, heavy with something that was not said, which I nonetheless recognized. I couldn’t tell what it was, aslant the calm surface of narration, that I heard. But whatever it was spoke to me precisely along the wavelengths of a silence that I found irresistible. As if somehow, the novels were written in a language which I could not articulate and yet in which I found myself articulated…. My reading was rapt. I can still recall a kind of fevered sense that overcame me…. [I] read the story as if it were some kind of science fiction. The place was unimaginable, I could not imagine it as being real. It was the place of reading. It was where I was. (465)

This quotation resonates with a point Ann Weinstone makes when she refers to science fiction as “a young person’s first queer theory” (41). It is the very queer science-fictionality of Triton that provides this sense of finding the place where you are and, at the same time, of recognizing that place as located inside the textual.
4. Foucault cites Borges’s fictional encyclopedia, with its fantastic taxonomy that proliferates categories aimlessly (e.g., “(a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs,” etc.), in the opening page of The Order of Things (qtd. xv).
5. Easterbrook deploys Deleuze and Guattari and their work on the rhizomatic processes of becoming only for his reading of Triton, but I think one could well apply it to certain understandings—particularly Bedap’s but also, in the end, Shevek’s—of Odo’s philosophy in The Dispossessed.
6. Here I would include the readings by McEvoy, Fox (“Politics of Desire”), and, to some extent, Moylan.
7. It is almost impossible not to suggest, with a certain wistfulness, that the productive possibilities Foucault foresaw have almost entirely been diverted, if not actually cut off, by the new homonormativities of same-sex marriage and its ilk.
8. Delany himself makes a similar argument in Times Square Red, Times Square Blue (1999), where he contends that cities need to be constructed and regulated in ways that allow a maximum, rather than a minimum, of consensual erotic contacts within a
community. He follows this argument by asserting that it is irresponsible, if not immoral, to expect a positive sexual relationship with a partner without having had sufficient variety of erotic experiences to learn one's own pleasures, needs, and possibilities.

9. Men who chew their thumbnails appear with some frequency in Delany’s work: in *Stars in My Pocket*, this particularity is what makes Rat Korga the perfect image of Marq Dyeth’s desire; similarly, in “Aversion/Perversion/Diversion” (1995), Delany tells the tale of his own encounter with a man whose sexual desires centered around men who wear sneakers, preferably blue ones. Yet the context of each of these tales, both the fictional and the non-fictional, speaks to the rhizomatic proliferation of desires, practices, and relationships, including the possibility of particularizing desire in entirely unforeseen ways without necessarily reducing it to a psychoanalytic fetish.

10. For analyses—and conceptual genealogies—of Derrida’s *destinerrance*, see Leavy and Miller.

WORKS CITED


DESTINY AND DESTINERRANCE IN TRITON


ABSTRACT

Bron Helstrom, the protagonist of Samuel R. Delany’s Trouble on Triton (1976), articulates an ideology of masculinity that is deeply at odds with his society and that his friend, Lawrence, labels a “logical perversion.” Deploying Derrida’s concept of destinerrance (the notion of arriving at the wrong place, or reaching the right place only by going wrong), this article argues that Delany’s complex investigation of questions of gender, sexuality, and race in Triton exposes the extent to which such ideologies depend on irrational self-justification and outright duplicity. Bron is caught in the tensions among destiny, destination, and destinerrance; this, quite ironically, makes him in many ways the most utopian character in this ambiguously heterotopian world. Bron has a blueprint for a better society, even if that blueprint is rooted in a nostalgic fantasy of an antiquated realm of sexual hierarchy. However, because Triton’s heterotopian narrative and locale cannot be wholly dissociated from the concept of utopia, the novel also demonstrates that, since utopia is more of a critical concept than a realizable destination, contemporary utopics have no choice but to deal with their inherent destinerrance. Whether male or (after his chosen gender reassignment) female, Bron’s only possible destination is nowhere at all.