

### The Reclamation of McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*: Irony as Resistance to Utopian Ableist Narratives



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The future of the bodymind and the emergence of the posthuman remains one of the most ethically charged points of social discourses concerning medical and technological advancements, especially those that affect disabled people. Alison Kafer argues that social discourses concerning the future often erase or discount disabled bodyminds, excluding them from the fantastic or imagined futures: “if disability is conceptualized as a terrible unending tragedy, then any future that includes disability can only be a future to avoid” (259). Utopian narratives often include these “cured” futures as a natural part of human evolution or as a sign of progress. Over the past decade, criticism of Anne McCaffrey’s science fiction novel *The Ship Who Sang* (1969) has focused on a perceived erasure of disability from its imagined future. This presentation invites a reconsideration of criticisms of McCaffrey’s novel, presenting an alternate reading of the text as an ironic critique of utopian narratives.

The main character of *The Ship Who Sang* is a disabled woman, Helva, whose body is encased in a spaceship. The text positions Helva as disabled in the opening lines of the novel: “She was born a thing and as such would be condemned if she failed to pass the encephalograph test required of all newborn babies” (McCaffrey 1). Here is a government, Central Worlds, that has seized complete control over medical institutions and is concerned intimately with the bodies of its citizens, but styles itself as a place-based utopia that cares about the happiness and wellbeing of all its citizens. Helva is positioned as labor for Central Worlds: she is a cargo ship, a diplomat, an artist, a scout ship, and an informational processing machine, amongst other roles. Due to the nature of its origins as a series of published stories, the novel functions episodically, with the first story establishing Helva’s origins as a shell-person (a human encased inside a metal shell) and the loss of her first partner (a “brawn”), with subsequent chapters recounting adventures while dealing with issues of grief, trauma, sexuality, privilege, ableism, and gaslighting.

The controversy surrounding the novel stems in part from a misreading of the text by Donna Haraway. In her “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway briefly references Helva as an example of how people with prosthetics might pose a challenge to organic integrity: “Anne McCaffrey’s pre-feminist *The Ship Who Sang* (1969) explored the consciousness of a cyborg, hybrid of girl’s brain and complex machinery, formed after the birth of a severely handicapped child. Gender, sexuality, embodiment, skill: all were reconstituted in the story. Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” (25). Kafer criticizes Haraway’s use of this example:

It is useful to note that the one example Haraway gives of such “severely handicapped people” is not a real person but a fictional character from Anne McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who Sang*: a “severely handicapped child” who was so physically disabled that her only hope of survival was to have her brain removed from her body and placed inside a machine (the spaceship of the title). (112)

Although Sami Schalk does not mention Haraway’s reading of the novel, she echoes Kafer’s criticism by positioning *The Ship Who Sang* in the tradition of speculative “cure” narratives, “all of which represent disabled people significantly enhanced—and essentially erased as visible figures—through technology in the future” (2117). In her blog post “The Future Imperfect,” disability activist Sarah Einstein reacted to reading the first lines of the novel with horror at the thought of a future where “disability is so depersonalizing that the very promising are rewarded with slavery and disembodiment; those who don’t pass the test for these rewards are put to death” (Einstein). These readings are supported by the paratext surrounding the novel. After all, the back cover of the Del Rey collection of these stories includes the rather dramatic description “Helva Had Been Born Human... but only her brain had been saved—saved to be schooled, programmed and implanted in the sleek titanium body of an intergalactic scout ship” (*Ship*). This is inconsistent with the novel, which insists again and again that Helva and the other shell-people are not disembodied brains but are bodyminds whose nervous systems have been connected to a ship as an advanced form of prostheses. It is easy to see how Haraway may have misread the text through the lens of this framing, and it is furthermore understandable why many crip theorists and disabled readers have dismissed the novel as ableist based on Haraway and these paratextual readings.

What McCaffrey’s novel does is explore the ironic relationship between utopia and cheerful affect. Place-based utopias often posit general happiness or cheerful affect as an end goal. Many have argued that science fiction has the unique potential of allowing writers and readers to imagine *otherwise*, making an ideal conveyance for utopian discourse; however, unstated in this claim is that science fiction also has the power to allow writers and readers to imagine *the same*. This double-vision of *the same* and *otherwise* within the same temporal space destabilizes utopian narratives through irony: “Utopia’s critical edge requires irony’s edge to sustain its challenge to, rather than its endorsement of, ideologies of all stripes” (Wagnor-Lawlor 6). In *The Ship Who Sang*, the cheerfulness of these characters, a signifier of utopia, is deliberately juxtaposed with darker signaling of dystopia to create that double-vision of *the same* and *otherwise*. Helva is Le Guin’s “child in the basement”<sup>1</sup> that allows the Central Worlds to thrive; she exists in a dystopia within the same spatial plain as utopia, a utopia that relies on her very existence. Hutcheon asserts that this kind of irony gets its “edge” from having “two or more meanings being played off, one against another. It [irony] plays between meanings, in a space that is always affectively charged, that always has a critical edge” (72). McCaffrey’s novel’s critique comes from this space: the physical and discursive space that must contain both the utopia of the abled characters of Central Worlds and the dystopia of disabled characters within itself, creating an affective charge between optimism and debilitation.<sup>2</sup>

Helva's affect is cheerful and matter-of-fact, but her affect is the result of early childhood brainwashing. Early on in the novel, the narrator describes the education of shell-people to be "balanced properly between optimism and practicality" with a "non-defeatist attitude" (6). The novel explores how the Central Worlds uses this conditioning through Kira, a temporary brawn. Kira reveals to Helva that she has attempted suicide in the past but has been subjected to heavy conditioning to avoid it (67). Kira is highly suspicious of Helva at first because she believes that Helva is either participating in Kira's conditioning or is monitoring Kira for signs of conditioning failure. Helva assures Kira that neither is true but then gives the reader some insight into why the conditioning occurs: "And they can't allow you to suicide because the ethos of Central Worlds is dedicated to extending life and propagating it wherever and whenever possible. I'm a living example of the extremes to which they are willing to go to sustain a human life" (67). The mission of sustaining and saving life is equated with absolute control over the bodyminds of the citizens of Central Worlds. This control is justified through the utopian "ethos" but the unspoken question here is what kind of lives are valued and why are they valued? Central Worlds is clearly not interested in the kind of life Helva may have had as a disabled person at the beginning of the novel. Yet Helva insists in the above passage that she is proof that the "ethos" is real, that Central Worlds has gone "to extremes" to sustain her life (67). The irony here comes in the affective charge between the two statements: Central Worlds values a certain kind of life, a life they can control through a "cure." Conditioning in this novel, then, signifies the debilitating discourse that forces citizens to participate in the capitalist systems of this utopia as biopower.<sup>3</sup>

Helva's bodymind as a person/ship is positioned from the very beginning of the text as biopower for Central Worlds. Shell-people are expected to work for Central Worlds in whatever capacity deemed necessary until they pay off "the massive debt of early care, surgical adaptation, and maintenance charges" (10). Central Worlds is a "company store" model: the shell-person must rely on the government for all resources, medical or otherwise, until they have paid off their debt. While this arrangement may seem like a natural extension of a capitalist system that requires payment for services, it also blurs the boundaries between national and corporate entities. Central Worlds values Helva as biopower, which gives them a vested interest in continuing to debilitate her. By using utopian language—"Helva would live a rewarding, rich, and unusual life, a far cry from what she would have faced as an ordinary, 'normal' being" (1)—to describe the value of disabled bodyminds (provided they are not too disabled), Central Worlds simultaneously erases and debilitates Helva's body into biopower that is used for the good of the corporation-state.

When Helva does "pay off" by the final chapter, she realizes that although she yearns for companionship from someone who sees her as a human being, anyone qualified to be her partner would have gone through conditioning by Central Worlds, which she has begun to distrust. She is free to choose, but her choices are limited. While she contemplates this dilemma, another shell-person, Silvia, recommends that she get legal representation from some activist groups for minorities and then tells her to contact another shell-person to ask about other employment options (203). This advice suggests that the shell-people have formed both formal and informal

networks designed to resist the debilitation by Central Worlds. Faced with the possible threat of forced service, Helva realizes the extent of control Central Worlds has over shell-people:

Now Helva could see that the subtle, massive conditioning she'd received in her formative years was double-edged. It made her happy as a shell-person, it had dedicated her to her life in Service, and it made her Pay-off a mockery. What else could a BB ship do but continue as she had started... in Service? The same must apply to other shell-people trained to manage ships, mining planets or industrial complexes. (205)

The conditioning made Helva "happy" in her role as biopower and obscured the inability for Helva or any of the other shell-people to opt out. The last sentence especially highlights the irony: Central Worlds contends that the compensation the shell-people receive prevents them from becoming slaves, but ultimately, what does that compensation mean if the shell-people must give it back to Central Worlds in the end?

I am currently writing a chapter of my dissertation on this reading of McCaffrey's novel: there is simply too much material here for a short presentation like this one. I certainly do not intend to argue that *The Ship Who Sang* should be immune to criticism; McCaffrey's inattention to race and her positionality as a straight white seemingly abled woman perhaps brings into question her motives for writing this novel. However, I think this study of the novel as an ironic examination of utopian narratives through the lens of a disabled character, one who learns to recognize and resist the debilitation of those narratives, can help us understand feminist science fiction of the 1960's. After all, renowned science fiction texts such as *Star Trek* (1966-1969) posit utopias much like Central Worlds, but lack the ironic critique that McCaffrey's novel poses.

## Notes

1. A reference to Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", in which Omelas is a utopia that exists only so long as a child is tortured in a basement.
2. I use Jasbir Puar's definition of debilitation as the way in which social, political, and geographical forces slowly create populations as biopower for late capitalism (Puar xiii-xiv).
3. Robert McRuer connects the capitalist construction of disability with social constructions of heteronormativity in a theory he calls "compulsory abled-bodiness," meaning, "free to sell one's labor but not free to do anything else effectively meant free to have an able body but not particularly free to have anything else" (8). He goes on to connect the social model of disability to the idea that normalcy does not just create disability, but that it compels citizens to perform ability in order to participate in capitalistic discourses (or risk being excluded) (8). Although Helva performs super-abled-bodiness instead of abled-bodiness, she still must perform to participate in the capitalist system.

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