



Why Do The Heavens Beckon Us?
Revisiting Constructions of Home and Identity in Ray Bradbury's
The Martian Chronicles

Christian Ylagan

Abstract: Scholarship on Ray Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles, and science fiction in general, have hitherto been focused on binary accounts of human colonization and imperialism. This article seeks to complement existing research by instead providing an intervention that focuses on the hybridizing dynamic of space travel and encounters with alien races. Specifically, this article problematizes notions of home and identity from both ontological and ethical perspectives that subvert canonical ways of reading science fiction narratives, especially those from the genre's Golden Age. Emblematic of these canonical readings is the insistence on the grand narrative of man as galactic colonizer whose culture and identity is considered stable and imposable on alien populations. This article seeks to invert such a narrative by reading Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles using a postcolonial framework, specifically by viewing the dynamic of human space travel in terms of the ontological and ethical ambiguities that parallel the historical movement of diaspora and decolonization. Drawing primarily on Emmanuel Levinas' notion of encountering the Other-as-Subject and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus as both abstract and material space where these encounters can happen, this article argues that while the ontological problem of the self-construction of identity is indeed largely influenced by the space that one inhabits, the violent imperialistic ethos of refashioning home as introduced in traditional readings of The Martian Chronicles must give way to an ethical ability to imagine the possibility of a non-violent confrontation with the Other, especially when such contact takes place in fluid, unstable, and imbricated spaces.

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Biography and contact info: Christian Ylagan is a third year PhD student in the Comparative Literature program at Western University in London, ON, Canada. His research lies in the intersection of queer theory and postcolonial literature, specifically constructions of queer identities in popular Philippine streetprint. He also serves as Editor-in-Chief of The Scattered Pelican, the new graduate journal of Comparative Literature at Western.

Originally published in 1950, Ray Bradbury's short story collection *The Martian Chronicles* has long been conceived as a seminal work of science fiction insofar as it presents a vision of the future that is rooted in its creative reimagining of notions of space-as-home. While some critics have

negatively received Bradbury's notion of a "new Earth" as being sentimental and anti-technology in its insistence on nostalgia and nature, others have lauded him for presenting a very human take on the futuristic problems of space travel: fundamental to Bradbury's work is his treatment of the twin predicaments of physical and sociocultural alienation as man struggles to find his place in the universe.

This article reconsiders Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* by reframing the questions of home and identity as both ontological and ethical problems, especially when set against the backdrop of modern-day issues of diaspora, decolonization, and globalization. Whereas the world of Bradbury's time was still largely preoccupied with a static idea of home, as manifested for example in the strong political desire to maintain and defend borders, such borders have become more fluid and porous in today's world. Current perceptions of notions of identity and selfhood, usually collocated and developed within the habitus of space, are thus more ambiguous. By recontextualizing Bradbury's work along these axes, this article argues that while the ontological problem of the self-construction of identity is indeed largely influenced by the space that one inhabits, the violent imperialistic ethos of refashioning home as introduced in traditional readings of *The Martian Chronicles* must give way to an ethical ability to imagine the possibility of a non-violent confrontation with the Other, especially when such contact takes place in fluid, unstable, and imbricated spaces.

Since its earliest days, science fiction has always been a vehicle where notions of home and homecoming were portrayed and problematized. From classical Greek texts by Aristophanes that depict air travel to fantastic worlds, to modern-day television series such as BBC's *Doctor Who* or films such as Ridley Scott's *The Martian*, these themes of homelessness, homecomings, threats to and invasions of home, and journeys to and from it have been foundational to the genre. The concept of home is also a key narrative element in establishing the spatial and temporal locus of the audience member or reader, whose identification with such enables the very possibilities of an alien encounter or a glimpse into future or alternate worlds.

The term "home," broadly conceived, denotes a variety of localized and domesticated spaces: houses, villages, towns, homelands, home planets, to name a few. Such spaces serve an important ontological function, in that the situatedness of home – with all of its sociocultural or, in the case of science fiction, temporal-geographic trappings – serves as an important existential fulcrum that helps people organize their identities. For example, 19th century Victorian conceptions of home that were hinged on stable notions of domesticity have given way to the 21st century preoccupation with uprootedness and displacement, phenomena brought about by massive advances in technology, globalization, and diaspora that have steadily rendered the home ideal ambivalent. This shift coincides with the postmodern ideas of self-construction and the philosophical contingencies of home-making in general, as manifested in contemporary literature across genres. For example, while not a work of science fiction, Salman Rushdie's 1999 novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* clearly illustrates this turn in current understanding of the notion of home. Rushdie plays on multiple iterations of the word "ground": be it "ground" from an ontological point of view, as in the terrain by which home, solidity, and even geology are set upon; or "ground" from an epistemological perspective, wherein notions of belonging and memory are predicated. Rushdie tries to encapsulate the provisionality and contingency of the human experience in these lines: "There. Now I've removed my mask, and you can see what I really am. In this quaking unreliable time, I have built my house – morally speaking – upon shifting sands. *Terra infirma*" (244). Madelena Gonzalez notes how "organized around a syntax of disorientation, impermanence, evanescence and inmixing ..., [the] universe is a world where ... homelessness [is] the norm" (qtd. in Frank 260), and where visualizing a perpetual reconstruction of home is necessary and perhaps even inevitable. This postmodern turn in the understanding of home, thematized by Rushdie but already predated as a recurring motif in Ray Bradbury's science fiction narratives, reveals how its

contingent and precarious constructions are “nevertheless presented as ‘real’ and something generally achievable to strive for and treasure” (Stierstorfer ix).

Many science fiction texts operate within this same trajectory of constantly re-conceptualizing and reconstructing home, and architecture plays a significant role in science fiction by facilitating the establishment of this plausibility of homeness through familiarity and technological imagery, while also evoking unknown frontiers and otherness through an attitude of deliberate estrangement. Central to this function is the notion of home as “zero world,” a concept introduced by noted science fiction theorist Darko Suvin. Suvin defines the “zero world” as the world of the audience of the science fiction text, which has “empirically verifiable properties around the author” (11) and whose familiarity forms the counterpoint to the “fictional *novum* (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic” (63). Science fiction helps us maneuver the dynamic between the concept of the “zero world” as *Gemütlichkeit*, which connotes coziness and a sense of protection, and what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls *Fremdheit*, the condition of being alienated or no longer at home in the world. Science fiction achieves this through a mechanism of projection, whereby the cathected *Fremdheit* is relocated to “another time and space distinct from one’s home through a myriad of [possible] futures ... and estranged environments. [The result is that] one’s sense of place, origin, or home is reinforced as that which is not estranged” (Fortin 22). By seeking to familiarize the unfamiliar through a sustained practice of deliberate estrangement, science fiction thus functions akin to retracing nostalgia, reconstructing memory, and regenerating identity in its pursuit and practice of world building.

As social geographers and sociologists have pointed out, space and geography are significant elements in the construction of social groups and their identity, and places are seen “not just as passive backdrops to social process but [as] actively involved in the constitution and construction of ... identities” (qtd. in Deane and Schuch 83). Ray Bradbury’s short story collection *The Martian Chronicles* attempts to reconcile the *Gemütlichkeit* with the *Fremdheit* by presenting the value of space, whether natural landscapes or built architectural zones, in establishing and reinforcing human identity. Within its twenty six largely standalone short stories, *The Martian Chronicles* demonstrates not just the technology-mania that has slowly but steadily gripped humanity, but also the contemporary impetus – brought about in an increasingly mobile, industrial, and multicultural world that has given rise to countless interpretations of home – to make sense of the steady erosion of the ideals of stable home-ness and belonging. By projecting nostalgic elements into the refashioning of an unfamiliar landscape, *The Martian Chronicles* (re)frames the practice of place-making – and consequently, home-building – in science fiction as both ontological and ethical pursuits within an unstable postmodern context.

Constructions of Self in *The Martian Chronicles*

Early scholarship about *The Martian Chronicles* focuses much on a nostalgic yearning for bygone days of innocence and for an idyllic return to an almost Eden-like agrarian settlement era, or otherwise the allegorization of Mars as Bradbury’s Midwestern hometown (for more recent studies, see Darling; Rabkin; Cryer). This nostalgia is played out as an organic result of the tension between two seemingly opposing paradigms that are competing for primacy: the Earthling’s colonial agenda vis-à-vis Martian indigeneity. Bradbury’s stories are rife with characters that represent polar aspects of the spectrum, from people like Sam Parkhill (“And the Moon Be Still as Bright”) who clearly identify the colonization of Mars as an inevitable part of Earth’s celestial travels, to others like Jeff Spender (“And the Moon Be Still as Bright”) who actively condemn these colonial impulses, and Tomas Gomez (“Night Meeting”) who opens himself to the experience of Martian alterity. The possibility of maintaining identity in an alien land, therefore, seems possible only “through the firm grasp of the land, yet it is precisely the failure to grasp that Bradbury seeks to underscore”

(Lawrence 73). In his article “Being Martian: Spatiotemporal Self in Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*,” Walter Mucher observes that the text “reflects...the incursion into a psychological and phenomenological humanism in which, in their search for a new self, the protagonists re-create a world of multiple readings which re-trace their exploits, moving forward while continuously looking back over their own experiential shoulders” (171). Throughout much of Bradbury’s text, the characters reflect this paradoxical desire to establish home while in exile. Upon landing in Mars, for example, the astronaut Biggs takes six empty wine bottles to the rim of a Martian canal and drops them in the canal waters while chanting, “I christen thee, I christen thee, I christen thee ... I christen thee Biggs, Biggs, Biggs Canal ... ,” an act that earns the ire of resident archeologist Spender, who laments: “We’ll call the canal Rockefeller Canal and the mountain King George Mountain, and the sea the Dupont Sea, and there’ll be Roosevelt and Lincoln and Coolidge cities ...” (“And the Moon” 72). Even on a subconscious level, however, Bradbury depicts the men who come to Mars as longing to establish home. In “The Third Expedition,” Martians are able to turn human memories and desires, through telepathy, against the ship’s crew. The Mars that the Third Expedition finds is a nostalgic, pretechnological, small town that has shades of the American Midwest and Bradbury’s hometown of “Green Town” (Waukegan), Illinois. Among other familiar things, the Third Expedition rocket lands close to a

Victorian house, quiet in the sunlight, all covered with scrolls and rococo, its windows made of blue and pink and yellow and green colored glass. Upon the porch were hairy geraniums and an old swing which was hooked into the porch ceiling and which now swung back and forth, back and forth, in a little breeze. At the summit of the house was a cupola with diamond leaded-glass windows and a dunce-cap roof! ... Around the rocket in four directions spread the little town, green and motionless in the Martian spring. There were white houses and red brick ones, and tall elm trees blowing in the wind, and tall maples and horse chestnuts. And church steeples with golden bells silent in them. (“The Third Expedition” 49-50)

The projection of the human desire for the familiar, embodied in the architectural landscape of Mars, disarms the crew members of the Third Expedition long enough for the Martians, who were distrustful of Earthlings based on their experiences with the previous expeditions, to murder them. Edward Gallagher observes that “in a time of exciting yet threatening and disruptive progress and change, [humans] are attracted to the security of an idealized, timeless, and static past; and they make the fatal mistake of trying to re-create Earth rather than accepting the fact that Mars is different” (62), as evidenced by the pompous hubris displayed by humans who demanded that they be welcomed upon their arrival (“The Earth Men”). And so the Third Expedition, unable to see the alterity of Mars and its inhabitants, fails as it falls victim to emotion and longing for the past. Bradbury’s narrativization of mankind in “The Third Expedition” belies an uncritical indulgence in many science fiction texts, that is, that there are ultimately no true aliens: only a rehashing of our own history caused either by a simple lack of imagination or an unconscious need always to return, narcissistically, to oneself.

The desire by man to refashion Mars extends to reworking the very landscape and geography of the planet itself to suit one’s physical and emotional needs. In “The Taxpayer” (47), Pritchard, the eponymous taxpayer, demands that he be allowed to ride the next rocket out to Mars as he thinks that it is going to be a utopian land compared to Earth, which is on the brink of a nuclear apocalypse. Pervaded by a strong sense of alienation brought about by the estrangement of what was once familiar – in essence, by the perceived unfitness of Earth to fulfill basic human needs for survival – the promise of Mars is to bring people together in a shared experience of community through a return to the familiar. Yet the topography of Mars itself is unfamiliar, and it must be reworked to make this communalization to happen. Thus, in “The Green Morning” (96), Benjamin Driscoll sets out to domesticate the harsh Martian land by planting trees in hopes of

changing the barren topography and improving the thin, oxygen-deprived air in the atmosphere. Driscoll compares himself to a “Johnny Appleseed [figure] walking across America planting apple trees ... [he will be] planting oaks, elms, and maples, every kind of tree, aspens and deodars and chestnuts. Instead of making just fruit for the stomach, [he will be] making air for the lungs” (“The Green Morning 97). While the story is written in quite an optimistic and even heroic tone, the mythic resonance and the underlying sinister colonial overtones are undeniable:

And he turned his head to look across the Martian fields and hills. He brought them to focus, and the first thing he noticed was that there were no trees, no trees at all, as far as you could look in any direction. The land was down upon itself, a land of black loam, but nothing on it, not even grass ... Of course! He felt the answer came not from his mind, but his lungs and throat ... He would plant trees and grass. That would be his job, fighting against the very thing that might prevent his staying here. *He would have a private horticultural war with Mars ...* (98, italics mine)

In desiring to transform the harsh Martian landscape into a fruitful garden and a possible source of hidden wealth under the earth, Driscoll desires to re-colonize Mars in the same way that humans have colonized Earth. He plants thousands of seeds for thirty days straight, and after a night of miraculous Martian rain, Driscoll wakes up to a green morning, where

as far as he could see, the trees were standing up against the sky. Not one, not two, not a dozen, but the thousands he had planted in seed and sprout. And not little trees, no, not saplings, not little tender shoots, but great trees, huge trees, trees as tall as ten men, green and green and huge and round and full, trees shimmering their metallic leaves, trees whispering, trees in a line over hills, lemon trees, lime trees, redwoods and mimosas and oaks and elms and aspens, cheery, maple, ash, apple, orange, eucalyptus, stung by tumultuous rain, nourished by alien and magical soil, and even as he watched, throwing out new branches, popping open new buds. (100)

Driscoll represents not just the Johnny Appleseed figure that helps make the unfamiliar land familiar, but he is also “Jack, of ‘Jack and the Beanstalk,’ forging a link to the land of hostile giants, [and] although he builds trees instead of domes, the result is the same: the technological onslaught [and colonization by Earthlings that follow]” (Gallagher 66). Thus, while heroic in scope and intent, Driscoll’s act is still a way of terraforming Mars to fit his planetary ideal. Now that the Martian atmosphere has been refashioned to be habitable for humans, Driscoll’s pseudo-benevolent act of creation paves the way for an even greater degree of domestication; in the following story, “The Locusts,” we are told about how

the rockets came like locusts, swarming and settling in blooms of rosy smoke. And from the rockets ran men with hammers in their hands to beat the strange world into a shape that was familiar to the eye, to bludgeon away all the strangeness, their mouths fringed with nails so they resembled steel-toothed carnivores, spitting them into their swift hands as they hammered up frame cottages and scuttled over roofs with shingles to blot out eerie stars, and for green shades to pull against the night. And when the carpenters had hurried on, the women came in with flowerpots and chintz and pans and set up a kitchen clamor to cover the silence that Mars made waiting outside the door and the shaded window. (101)

Finally, the widespread refashioning of Mars in the aforementioned stories is juxtaposed with the perceived Earthly habitus itself. This habitus, which Pierre Bourdieu describes as the “durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations” that informs a “particular but constant way of entering into a relationship with the world” (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 78; *Pascalian Meditations* 142), are values and dispositions gained from our cultural history that are immediately present and are generally durable and transposable, and which in turn allow us to engage non-native sociocultural rules and contexts. Habitus refers at once to how individuals develop their attitudes

and dispositions, as well as the ways in which such individuals engage in practices and relate with other entities (or “agents”). It is important to note, however, the dialectical nature of the habitus as it relates to the individual: as agents move through and across various fields of interactions, they tend to incorporate into their habitus the values and imperatives of those fields while imprinting some of their own dispositions onto those same fields. The habitus thus has an important relationship with the *habitat*, if we take the habitat as both the abstract and material space where these various horizons of values, dispositions, histories, and cultures all converge and intersect. *The Martian Chronicles* problematizes this dynamic by presenting humankind as seemingly intractable and uncompromising in their colonizing intent, disavowing any kind of cultural symbiosis with the external ecosystem and choosing instead to impose their habitus to transform and assimilate it.

In “There Will Come Soft Rains,” Bradbury provides us with a vision of a technologically advanced house that exists in post-apocalyptic Earth after it had been ravaged by nuclear war. By taking human characters out of the equation, Bradbury invites us to reflect on our relationship with our environment, and how the dynamics of such a relationship define who we are as a people. The house itself is described in human terms, what with its electric eyes, memory tapes, vocal capabilities, and attic brain. It is a domestic utopia, fulfilling every familiar human function: it wakes you up, prepares your meals, reminds you of appointments, and even reads you poetry. The house is an “altar with ten thousand attendants... [where] the gods had gone away, and [where] the ritual of religion continued senselessly, uselessly” (“There Will Come Soft Rains” 207). It is nothing more than a “mechanical wilderness, a symbol of a civilization which destroys itself in its own sophistication” (Gallagher 79).

The story begins with the house fulfilling its day-to-day functions and tasks with the expectation of life, but because the family that owns it had been obliterated by nuclear fallout (as evidenced by scorch marks and outlines of human figures on the house’s outside walls), the humanness of the house serves as an ominous backdrop for death and destruction. At ten in the evening, a fiery branch crashes through one of the windows, which none of the house’s defense mechanisms could extinguish. The house burns down throughout the night, and as dawn breaks, a disembodied voice rises through the ashes and repeats the date endlessly over the rubble and the ruins. The destruction of the house reflects the human impetus to destroy, and to be destroyed in carrying out such destruction. The full mechanization of the house appears as a travesty of humanity, and since technology is meant to serve, without humans it has no function. By employing advanced technology in automating the house, the text reveals the human need not just to make life easier, but to make it as close an approximation of the banalities of human existence as possible. Thus, what is foreign, strange, and advanced is reduced to something handy, like mechanical rats that clean the house or humanoid voices that resemble family: all in an effort to avoid making the experience *unheimlich*, literally “un-homely,” which refers to the eerie discomfort when faced with the uncanny.

By framing the open plausibility of projecting the familiar into the unfamiliar through a systematic scientific speculation, usually through a sustained practice of world-building, narratives such as *The Martian Chronicles* impel us to reflect on the constantly moving framework of knowledge, both of the world around us and of our inner selves. The *novum* or novelty in science fiction, usually contextualized within notions of domesticating the uncanny, goes beyond the transgression of cultural norms in naturalistic or realistic texts; instead, “the *novum* of science fiction is ... more than merely cultural, it is ontological, brought about by an ontic change in a character’s reality either because of displacement in space and/or time or because the reality around him is [unfamiliar]” (Touponce 57). *The Martian Chronicles*, and perhaps science fiction texts in general, allows us to confront the imaginary through an

existential encounter with primal realities ... [through the interplay of what] Gaston Bachelard calls resonance (*résonance*), the plane of our existence in the world, our personal associations to the portrayed world (memories, affects, etc.), and reverberation (*retentissement*), an ontological plane of discovery in which we become aware of certain possibilities of our being as the foundation of [our] responses ... This brings about a *virement d'être*, a swerve in being, which reveals possibilities that pervade humane existence, offering transcendence, [and thus satisfying] our recessive desires to know and linger in a fantastic world and at the same time provides the possibility for a critique of the real. (Touponce 13)

Science fiction narratives, and *The Martian Chronicles* in particular, essentially highlight the postmodern impetus of creating simulacrum-literature wherein foundation and collapse, Earth and Mars, territorialization and deterritorialization are engaged in a constant dynamic. Such narratives are both “form and vitalism, it is vitalistic form, in constant movement and without any stable centre or central perspective” (Frank 255). *The Martian Chronicles* may be viewed as a critique of the centrist, hegemonic, and essentially colonial view of imposing one’s paradigm upon a Subjective Other, a dynamic that Emmanuel Levinas would call an act of violence. Thus, in presenting us ways with which to problematize the ontology, science fiction also surfaces possibilities in investigating the way that we construct and employ ethical norms.

Constructions of Ethical Norms in *The Martian Chronicles*

As previously discussed in this article, the practice of building a familiar or homey space is an integral corollary to identity construction because such spaces is where everyday life takes place. Home spaces, typically including expanded spaces from cities to planets, enable or disable what Philip Sheldrake calls “place identity,” citing how place involves human narrative and memory embedded within spatial contexts (50-51). According to the French Marxist thinker Henry Lefebvre, these spatial contexts are always historically conditioned, not just in a physical sense (i.e., as in topography or architecture) but also socially, culturally, and politically. In a postmodern context where power is designated by the ability to define or construct, the “meta-narratives of the people who hold power take over the public places they control ... [and] the notion that place relates to issues of empowerment and disempowerment forces us to think of multilocalities (locations are different “places” simultaneously) and multivocalities (different voices are heard in each place)” (Sheldrake 51). Given this, there is a dialectical relationship between environment and identity, for physical spaces provide venues where identity can be contested and (re)formed, while concurrently our understanding of who we are affects the way that we sculpt the physical spaces that we inhabit.

This tension between “inner” and “outer” spaces figures prominently in Michel de Certeau’s analysis of the modern city, where he focuses on a critique of modernist urban planning and design as embodied, for example, by figures such as Le Corbusier who espouse the totalization and depersonalization of living spaces. Le Corbusier’s key design tenets are especially problematic because they are founded on a tendency to create or support architectural designs that seek to erase the past by subordinating the realities of the occupant population’s lives to abstract concepts of space that dichotomize public and private lives along the axes of public and private spaces. His is a design philosophy rooted in a kind of matter-spirit dualism that privileges the inner realm as the horizon of self-actualization while simultaneously demonizes the outer realm as *negative* space – one where such things as knowledge, meaning, or identity cannot be adequately formed or cultivated. Such a design philosophy – one that seeks to subvert the lived experience – translates to austere architecture that debar human interaction, and thus minimizes any aspect of public participation that reinforces public life as a determining factor in establishing social identity. De Certeau asserts that contrary to the modernist paradigm that dissociates people from (especially

public) spaces, it is the very particularities of everyday life in such spaces that give them their definition, and consequently, their power. De Certeau's counter-argument is to emphasize the individual narratives of the very people who inhabit such spaces, a point that runs against the Corbusian view that it is the city itself, rather than its inhabitants, that functions as Temple. The value of telling a narrative is thus an essential element in building communitarian interests that enable a space to transcend mere physicality; De Certeau's understanding of narrative "embraced the history of 'place' because without respecting the past, a city would become dysfunctional and dangerous" (Sheldrake 61). In short, any attempt at building a habitus, from the level of a private home to the planetary scale and beyond, must negotiate a shared vision of a common good that respects diversity, contextualizes historicity, and espouses solidarity. Bradbury presents a commentary on the ethical impact of technology on the lived experience within such spaces; because technology connotes an application of science to aspects of everyday life, *The Martian Chronicles* shows how technology enables one to see how such frontiers can be maneuvered, challenged, or even transgressed. Because such spaces always function as fields of contestation among human and/or alien beings, narrativizing in Bradbury's text, and perhaps science fiction in general, becomes an inherently ethical practice characterized by relationships among agents, and the relationship of such agents with their environment.

Consider for example the strong colonial undertones thematized in science fiction, especially those written during its Golden Age (1940s-1950s). Authors such as Isaac Asimov (the *Foundation* trilogy), Robert Heinlein (*Tomorrow, the Stars*), Philip K. Dick (*The Cosmic Puppets*), and Bradbury himself all dealt with the theme of colonization as the inevitable next part in the expansion of contemporary society. In a number of science fiction texts written during this period, mankind is portrayed as a race that has mastered interplanetary travel and/or colonized distant worlds. In *The Martian Chronicles*, Bradbury very clearly presents the dual opposition between landscape and settlers, and between natives and settlers. Gary Wolfe invokes Frederick Jackson Turner, whose studies of the American frontier experience closely parallel Bradbury's own project. Wolfe notes how the emergence of a frontier society is portrayed in a series of distinct stages:

first, there is the initial exploratory stage in which the inhabitants of the frontier environment are encountered and subdued. In the second stage the environment masters the colonist, transforming him into a kind of native with new values. Third is the successive waves of subsequent settlers who begin to develop towns and commerce. Finally there are those who see in the frontier an opportunity to correct the mistakes of the past and escape the oppression of the urbanized environment they have left behind. (43)

While Turner assumes that frontier encounters are between civilized humans and barbaric aliens, Bradbury interestingly does not begin *The Martian Chronicles* with such stereotypical conquest narratives; instead, we are offered a view of Martians as being very similar to humans: with similar domestic sensibilities, desires, and even fears and insecurities. In "Ylla," we are presented with a strange Martian caricature of a middle class human couple:

They had a house of crystal pillars on the planet Mars by the edge of an empty sea, and every morning you could see Mrs. K eating the golden fruits that grew from the crystal walls, or cleaning the house with handfuls of magnetic dust which, taking all the dirt with it, blew away on the hot wind. Afternoons, when the fossil sea was warm and motionless ... you could see Mr. K himself in his room, reading from a metal book with raised hieroglyphs over which he brushed his hand, as one might play a harp ... Mr. and Mrs. K had lived by the dead sea for twenty years, and their ancestors had lived in the same house, which turned and followed the sun, flower-like, for ten centuries. ("Ylla" 14)

Through some form of Martian telepathy, Mrs. K is able to pick up the thoughts of the Earthmen in the First Expedition to Mars, incurring the jealousy and wrath of Mr. K, who takes it upon himself

to kill the men as soon as they land on the planet. Similarly, in “The Earth Men,” we find the members of the Second Expedition incarcerated in an asylum for their persistent incursion into the lives of many Martian families in hopes of being acknowledged and celebrated for their astounding feat of interplanetary travel. In both these instances we find that ethical norms that govern movement and interaction within social spaces are breached and undermined; indeed, these are “not stories of adventure in unknown realms, much as we might expect in a story of the exploration of Mars, but rather are stories of outside interlopers disturbing the placidity of a stable, conservative society” (Wolfe 43). This also parallels an earlier point in this article: that Martians are compelled to fight back – engaging in psychic warfare against the Earthmen in “Third Expedition” for example – due to the perceived external threats to their native space, and so it is this persistence to impose their own agenda into the alien landscape that leads to the downfall of the explorers.

The second stage is when the environment begins to transform the settler into a kind of native, and this is illustrated well in the character of Spender from the “And the Moon Be Still as Bright.” Spender is an archeologist who, upon discovering the relics of the Martian civilization (the Martians were all but gone at this point, having been wiped out by chickenpox brought about unwittingly by the previous expeditions), begins to appropriate the alien culture to the point that he even considers himself the “last Martian.” Spender compares the impending migration of Earthlings to Mars to the Mexican invasion led by Cortez, an invasion that destroyed the native civilization. Spender believes that the Americans who will migrate to Mars, as will the rest of the Earthlings that will follow, will carry out the same pattern, because “anything that’s strange is no good to the average American. If it doesn’t have Chicago plumbing, it’s nonsense ... If things work out they hope to establish three atomic research and atom bomb depots on Mars. That means Mars is finished; all this wonderful stuff gone” (“And the Moon” 84). Spender sees the inherent, and perhaps to our eyes somewhat pagan, ability of Martians not just to acknowledge the alterity in what is Other, but to be able to co-exist alongside such Otherness. This is in stark contrast to the human impetus to domesticate (violently, as Levinas would say) the Other to fit into categories or forms of convenience. Spender, realizing that the Martian way is better, is in awe of how

[t]hey knew how to live with nature and get along with nature. They didn’t try too hard to be all men and no animal. That’s the mistake we made when Darwin showed up. We embraced him and Huxley and Freud, all smiles. And then we discovered that Darwin and our religions don’t mix ... so, like idiots, we tried knocking down religion. We lost our faith and went around wondering what life was for ... The Martians discovered the secret of life among animals ... Its very reason for living is life; it enjoys and relishes life. You see – the statuary, the animal symbols, again and again ... They never let science crush the aesthetic and the beautiful. (“And the Moon” 86-87)

However, Spender is unsuccessful in convincing the rest of the crew to see his point about Mars, and instead they hunt him down across the Martian wilderness and take him down. This paves the way for the crew to submit a positive report back home to Earth, which then impels people to move to Mars, occupying it and re-establishing a second Earth, as it were, across its alien landscape. As Spender is rendered transformed by the overpowering beauty and the fantasy environment of Mars and the freedom that such an environment represents, the crew also transforms to co-inhabit the mindset of interplanetary conquistadors who are continually moving beyond into still more distant frontiers.

Finally, while *The Martian Chronicles* presents us with the traditional colonial dynamic of subjugation and abuse, it also positions within its text some possible counterpoints to such an imperialist discourse. Bradbury’s text can also be read from a decidedly postcolonial point of view, that is, to go beyond the determinism of colonial discourse and move towards “the process by which a decolonizing society negotiates its identity apart from that of its colonizer, and apart from its

identity as a colonized place or people, within the context of both colonial history and decolonized future” (Langer 8). While colonial discourses are predominantly seen as unidirectional (characterized by an imposition of one culture over another), postcolonial discourse foregrounds the contestatory and dialectical relationship between colonizer and colonized. Indeed, by historicizing the struggle for identity within fields of contestation (as opposed to social or cultural genocide), a postcolonial critique of science fiction reveals that in the encounter between Earthlings and aliens, there is a mutual re-formation of roles and identities.

A postcolonial reading of *The Martian Chronicles* might posit, for example, that instead of being mere interplanetary colonizers, Earthlings are victims of diaspora that is clearly physical, geographical, and even emotional, hence their need to refashion the Martian landscape to assuage the negative affect of their displacement. Indian thinker Vijay Mishra notes how “diaspora is some sense of loss, a constant dissonance, a permanent wound or scar that disfigures in some the experience of a diasporic people..., an ‘impossible mourning’ [that inspires] a longing for a pure, unhyphenated identity, a desire for concord between where one is from and where one is” (Langer 57). Hence, diasporic communities have an inherent need to self-define along cultural poles, and this is manifested in the creation of landmarks, symbols of public history and memory, the vernacular. The need to domesticate the landscape, typically achieved through architecture, is a way to reconcile the nostalgia for home with an alien topography. Of course, this entails that diasporic communities define themselves always in dynamic interrelation with the nation/native state in which they live against the grain, creating “turbulations in the fabric of the nation that are both of the nation and not of it, simultaneously foreign and native in both directions” (Langer 57).

Tied closely to this dynamic of self-definition, the concept of alterity is often depicted corporeally as a physical difference between two species that reverts back to an essence difference, whereby while “this concept of alienness does not always signify a colonial relationship, it often dovetails with the colonial discourse of the Other” (Langer 82). It is precisely our response to this alterity that Bradbury invites us to examine; instead of focusing on what Ursula LeGuin criticizes as “the White Man’s Burden all over again” (Langer 83), *The Martian Chronicles* presents a view of encounters with the Other as encounters among beings-in-the-world whose historical and mortal existence converge and become the very ground of Being itself. Because ethics precedes metaphysics, as Levinas notes, an ethical reading *The Martian Chronicles* means that “when we encounter alterity, the ‘otherwise than being’ through the appearance of the face of another, we experience a precognitive call, an appeal whose response is none other than a responsibility toward, if not sacrifice for, the vulnerability of the other as Other (Caicco 14). Such encounters with the Other can only happen within a horizon or a space, and in the dynamics of this discourse both humans and Martians form their subjectivities and are actualized. This is because the notion of the individual, self-contained body is also a product of the habitus and the encounters that happen within such fields of contact: as Bourdieu notes, the body of the Subject, while “indisputably function[ing] as the principle of individuation ... [is also] open to the world, and therefore exposed to the world, and so capable of being conditioned by the world, shaped by the material and cultural conditions of existence in which it is placed from the beginning” (*Pascalian Meditations* 133-134).

A nuanced reading of *The Martian Chronicles* requires a certain ability to imagine the possibility of a non-violent confrontation with the Other, one that refuses to reduce or objectify alterity into convenient centripetal categories of perception. Instead, it necessitates an imaginative conceptualization of the Other as another Subject, whose unique subjectivity demands a face-to-face encounter. When confronted by the Other, Levinas says we are impelled by a metaphysical desire that “tends towards something else entirely, toward the absolutely other: this is a desire that does not attempt to absorb the other but, in turning towards it, turns away from the self, from the enjoyment of totality” (Levinas 33). This view is embodied in the tension between seeking to familiarize the unfamiliar and waiting patiently and openly for the possibility of contact.

In the story “Night Meeting,” Bradbury presents us with a narrative that illustrates the very tension that Levinas introduces. The story is about the encounter between a young “colonist” from Earth named Tomas and a Martian named Muhe Ca. Each of them can see the Mars that they know in their respective times: Muhe Ca sees a sprawling Martian city where Tomas sees ruins, and Muhe Ca sees the ominous Martian ocean where Tomas points to a manmade settlement. Each appears to the other as a translucent phantom, and each argue his own presence, reality, and substance. Bradbury constructs a poignant scene where two strangers try to engage each other, but cannot actually physically connect, and therefore struggle in their trans-action. In this scene, it can be observed that like Levinas, Bradbury is emphasizing that “one’s selfhood is only confirmed by an Other’s presence, and that confirmation does not establish, legitimize, or prioritize the self but on the contrary, puts its authority into question” (Lawrence 79). Tomas and Muhe Ca engage in a thoughtful debate that leads to a mutual disillusionment about each person’s primacy, and Muhe Ca’s words underscore the adequacy of a “mere” encounter between two Subjects:

“Let us agree to disagree,” said the Martian. “What does it matter who is Past or Future, if we are both alive, for what follows will follow, tomorrow or in ten thousand years. How do you know that those temples are not the temples of your own civilization one hundred centuries from now, tumbled and broken? You do not know. Then don’t ask. But the night is very short. There go the festival fires in the sky, and the birds.” (“Night Meeting” 110)

When they “agree to disagree,” the remark is not a surrender or acknowledgment of inferiority, but a concession of the irreconcilable schism between them; paradoxically, while the encounter with the Other is estranging, it is this very experience that binds them as two Subjects in a common encounter. Walter Mucher notes that “it is not the Martian who is the Other, as Earth would have us believe. Rather, it is the intruding Earthness, which shows its otherness previously concealed by imperialistic superiority” (Mucher 182).

The book’s final story, “The Million-Year Picnic,” rounds out this shift from radical imperialism towards a more tempered view of the human experience in Mars. The story is about a family that salvages a rocket ship and escapes to Mars on a “fishing trip.” Earth at this point has been totally razed by nuclear war, and all human settlers to Mars returned to Earth for their families, eventually perishing in a nuclear holocaust. It is implied that the family, alongside one other family that is still on its way to Mars, are the only survivors of the human race. The family picks a city to live in, and while they pass numerous cities that used to be human settlements in Mars, the family picks a decidedly Martian city where “fifty or sixty huge structures [were] still standing, streets were dusty but paved, and [one] could see one or two centrifugal fountains still pulsing wetly in the plazas. That was the only life – water leaping in the late sunlight” (“The Million-Year Picnic” 218). In an almost ritualistic scene, the Father begins to burn documents from Earth that symbolized their previous lives, culminating in the burning of a world map. Later, he introduces his sons to the Martians: their own reflections in canal water. This scene stands to bookend the other burial scene that happens earlier in the book in “Third Expedition,” where the Martians hold a funeral for the crewmembers of the expedition that they presumably kill after emulating the human forms of their loved ones, revealed to them through a telepathic process, and becoming their surrogates. The Martian’s burial of the men may be seen symbolically as a ritual of Oedipal significance: the child, given form by the parent, seeks to subvert and supplant them in order to individuate himself, only to discover that the alterity coexists and is inevitably linked with their progenitors. Through such violent means, one is introduced into the realm of symbolic order, where one is able to discover oneself and one’s capacity to interact with others – and thus engage with one’s habitus.

In this story, what was once considered frontier land transforms into a new Eden, an imperfect yet real space that can give birth to a new human civilization out of the ashes of two great ones. The story appears to end on a hopeful note as it underscores the human colonists’ realization

of the essential hybridity of their identities, manifested in their abandonment of the “fetishistic or imperialist intention to overcome the landscape, consume it, and to take pleasure from its exotic qualities” (Lawrence 85). This intention, which hitherto had been represented as a desire to impose Earthness upon Mars, has been replaced by the understanding that identity is defined and redefined around the interplay of alterity and subjectivity. The ethical imperative that we find therefore at the end of the story (and the book) is based around the dynamics of hospitality and immersion: to welcome and be welcomed, to embrace and be embraced.

Conclusion

Six decades after it was first published, Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* continue to delight us and impel us to consider the possibilities of defining ourselves as we encounter Others in the spaces we inhabit. As we continue to grapple with the increasing complexities of existing within spaces that continue to shift, Bradbury invites us to position our own narratives and our own identities as pliable constructs determined by our openness to what is Not-Us. Science fiction, through its incursion into worlds of possibility, helps us see that hegemonic views of self, home, and culture are dangerous in their totalizing agenda – a truth that is even more relevant in today’s globalized context. By showing us that refashioning unfamiliar spaces or subjugating alien natures in order to assert our own supposed superiority are non-viable means of human encounters because of their inherent violence, *The Martian Chronicles* compels us to re-examine the very reasons that motivated the human race to look out to the heavens and travel there in the first place.

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