



COLECCIÓN CONOCIMIENTO CONTEMPORÁNEO

Feminismo, educación y diversidad en el siglo XXI: retos y oportunidades para la transformación social

Coord.
Elena Bandrés Goldáraz

Dykinson, S.L.

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RETOS Y OPORTUNIDADES PARA
LA TRANSFORMACIÓN SOCIAL



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ELENA BANDRÉS GOLDÁRAZ

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2025



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FEMINISMO, EDUCACIÓN Y DIVERSIDAD EN EL SIGLO XXI:

RETOS Y OPORTUNIDADES PARA LA TRANSFORMACIÓN SOCIAL

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ÍNDICE

INTRODUCCIÓN	9
CAPÍTULO 1. LA PARTICIPACIÓN DE LA MUJER EN EL DISEÑO CURRICULAR EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR.....	15
SILVIA AMALÍN KURI CASCO	
CAPÍTULO 2. APORTACIONES A PARTIR DE LAS CONTRIBUCIONES DE LOS TRABAJOS ACADÉMICOS GALARDONADOS EN MATERIA DE IGUALDAD DE LA UNIVERSIDAD DE SEVILLA (US).....	36
LUCIA ALCÁNTARA RUBIO	
JORGE RUIZ MORALES	
CAPÍTULO 3. ROMPIENDO MIRADAS ANDROCÉNTRICAS DESDE UNA INNOVACIÓN DOCENTE DINÁMICA Y FLEXIBLE: LA GENERACIÓN DE MATERIALES AUDIOVISUALES PARA LA DIVULGACIÓN CIENTÍFICA DE LAS APORTACIONES FEMENINAS A LA CIENCIA A TRAVÉS DEL APRENDIZAJE BASADO EN PROYECTOS (ABP)	57
LAURA SÁNCHEZ PÉREZ	
VIVIAN PAULINA ROSADO CÁRDENAS	
CAPÍTULO 4. EXPERIENCIAS DOCENTES PARA LA RECONSTRUCCIÓN EN FEMENINO DEL CANON DISCIPLINAR EN ETNOMUSICOLOGÍA.....	79
MARÍA JESÚS PENA CASTRO	
AARÓN PÉREZ BORRAJO	
CAPÍTULO 5. GÉNERO E HISTORIA EN EL AULA: PERCEPCIÓN DEL ALUMNADO DE BACHILLERATO	93
JOSÉ MANUEL LLORIS CARRERES	
ROCÍO DIEZ ROS	
CAPÍTULO 6. LAS MUJERES INVISIBILIZADAS Y SU PRÁCTICA DE ACTIVIDAD FÍSICA DESDE LA ANTIGÜEDAD AL SIGLO XX	125
CRISTINA MENESCARDI	
CAPÍTULO 7. COEDUCACIÓN EN LOS PLANES DE LECTURA ESCOLARES.	146
MARÍA CARMEN FERNÁNDEZ TIJERO	
MARÍA ARACELI ALONSO CAMPO	
CAPÍTULO 8. RELACIÓN ENTRE LA UTILIDAD Y EL MODO DE USO DE LAS REDES SOCIALES Y LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA AUTOESTIMA FEMENINA EN EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR.....	158
GRACIA CRISTINA VILLODRES	
JOSÉ ANTONIO MARTÍNEZ DOMINGO	

CAPÍTULO 9. ARQUETIPOS FEMENINOS EN LA LITERATURA INFANTIL Y JUVENIL ACTUAL.....	175
CRISTINA GABRIELA CHIRILA MARÍA CARMEN FERNÁNDEZ TIJERO	
CAPÍTULO 10. LA IMAGEN ANIMAL DEL MALTRATADOR EN CAMPAÑAS DE VIOLENCIA DE GÉNERO	193
IRENE LÓPEZ-RODRÍGUEZ	
CAPÍTULO 11. VIOLENCIA SEXUAL EN LA INFANCIA: UNA APROXIMACIÓN A SUS CARACTERÍSTICAS Y CONSECUENCIAS...	216
DÉBORA ESTEFANÍA HERNÁNDEZ LORENZO	
CAPÍTULO 12. MARINA/MALINCHE: LA HEROÍNA MALTRATADA...	233
MARÍA ROCÍO RUIZ PLEGUEZUELOS	
CAPÍTULO 13. PROBLEMÁTICAS DE LA MODALIDAD ALIMENTARIA EN NIÑAS PÚBERES USUARIAS DEL SISTEMA DE SALUD PÚBLICO ARGENTINO. APROXIMACIONES DESDE EL ENFOQUE DE GÉNERO EN SALUD MENTAL	248
MARÍA MANUELA KREIS	
CAPÍTULO 14. ENTRE LA FICCIÓN Y LA REALIDAD: FEMINISMO Y REPRESENTACIÓN EN <i>SKY ROJO</i>	269
LÚA RODRÍGUEZ ALEGRE GRACIELA PADILLA CASTILLO	
CAPÍTULO 15. BITS Y CUERPOS: LA DIGITALIZACIÓN DE LA EXPLOTACIÓN SEXUAL EN PONTEVEDRA A TRAVÉS DE ANUNCIOS DE 'CONTACTOS'	286
LAURA M. CASTRO-SOUTO XABIER MARTÍNEZ ROLÁN GRACIELA PADILLA CASTILLO	
CAPÍTULO 16. GÉNEROS EN TRÁNSITO: FILOSOFÍA, PERFORMATIVIDAD Y POSTHUMANISMO	304
ABRAHAM RUBÍN ÁLVAREZ	
CAPÍTULO 17. FORMACIÓN EN DIVERSIDADES SEXO GENÉRICAS EN SECUNDARIA: PERSPECTIVAS DEL ALUMNADO LGTBIQ+	320
DAVID CARRASCO ORTIZ SONIA RENOVELL-RICO	
CAPÍTULO 18. ¿MASCULINIDADES DISIDENTES? TRANSFORMISMO EN VALLADOLID A COMIENZOS DEL SIGLO XX..	341
ANA CALONGE CONDE	
CAPÍTULO 19. EL PRIMER BARROCO MUSICAL EN ITALIA: LA COMPOSITORA Y CANTANTE VENECIANA BARBARA STROZZI (1619-1677).....	356
CECILIA CAPDEPÓN PÉREZ CARMEN CAPDEPÓN PÉREZ PAULINO CAPDEPÓN VERDÚ	

CAPÍTULO 20. LAS POSIBILIDADES LABORALES DE LA MUJER A FINALES DEL SIGLO XIX. UN ESTUDIO CULTURAL A TRAVÉS DEL GÉNERO CHICO (1874-1902)	374
SARA PÉREZ MARTÍNEZ	
CAPÍTULO 21. EVOLUCIÓN HISTÓRICA DE LA PERSPECTIVA DE GÉNERO EN LA LABOR EDUCATIVA DE LOS MUSEOS	389
EVA VIVAR GARCÍA	
ANA REYES PÉREZ	
ALBERTO MARTÍNEZ RAMÍREZ	
TERESA LÓPEZ MARTÍNEZ	
CAPÍTULO 22. PROFESORAS Y ALUMNAS: LAS MUJERES EN LOS ESTUDIOS UNIVERSITARIOS EN MUSICOLOGÍA EN ESPAÑA. TESTIMONIOS Y UN ESTUDIO DE CASO	412
JUDITH HELVIA GARCÍA MARTÍN	
CAPÍTULO 23. PARTICIPACIÓN DE LA MUJER EMPRESARIA EN LA POLÍTICA: BARRERAS Y OPORTUNIDADES	434
PATRICIA CARMINA INZUNZA-MEJÍA	
ROSALINDA GÁMEZ-GASTELUM	
CAPÍTULO 24. HETEROTOPIA AS RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORAR Y SCIENCE FICTION TV: <i>THE EXPANSE</i> (2015-2022)	464
ROCÍO CARRASCO-CARRASCO	
CAPÍTULO 25. MUJERES Y TRANSMISIÓN DE BIENES EN CASTELLÓN: UN ESTUDIO EXPLORATORIO DE TESTAMENTOS FEMENINOS DE LA SEGUNDA MITAD DEL SIGLO XVIII.....	477
GEMA BARREDA-ASENJO	
CAPÍTULO 26. FORTALECIMIENTO PSICOLÓGICO DE LA AUTOESTIMA Y AUTOEFICACIA A TRAVÉS DE LOS DEPORTES DE COMBATE: UN ESTUDIO EN MUJERES JÓVENES.....	498
MARÍA MERINO FERNÁNDEZ	
CAPÍTULO 27. EN MI FLOR ME HE ESCONDIDO: LA NATURALEZA COMO ICONOGRAFÍA EN OBRA DE ARTISTAS CONTEMPORÁNEAS.....	515
ÁGUEDA ASENJO BEJARANO	
CAPÍTULO 28. IMPLICACIONES BIOÉTICAS DE LA LEY TRANS ESPAÑOLA PARA LOS MENORES.....	537
MANUEL DELGADO-MEROÑO	
TASIA ARÁNGUEZ	
CAPÍTULO 29. IMPLICACIONES DE LA CUESTIÓN TRANS EN EL DEPORTE FEMENINO	563
TASIA ARÁNGUEZ	
MANUEL DELGADO-MEROÑO	

CAPÍTULO 30. CUERPOS EN RESISTENCIA: JUNG KANG-JA LA DISRUPCIÓN DEL GÉNERO EN EL ARTE DE VANGUARDIA SURCOREANO	590
BÁRBARA SARMENTERA VÁZQUEZ	
CAPÍTULO 31. SINAPSIS SESGADAS, MENTES EN FORMACIÓN: DESAFÍOS EN LA ENSEÑANZA UNIVERSITARIA ANTE LOS SESGOS DE LA INTELIGENCIA ARTIFICIAL SOBRE LA HISTORIA DEL TRABAJO FEMENINO	607
TAMARA GONZÁLEZ LÓPEZ	

HETEROTOPIA AS RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION TV: *THE EXPANSE* (2015-2022)

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1. INTRODUCTION

TV series *The Expanse* (SyFi, 2015-2017; Prime Video, 2017-2022) proposes other ways of imagining and structuring future worlds that, while echoing contemporary concerns over neocolonization, conflicting politics, environmental and economic tensions, rivalries and systemic inequities, still succeeds in offering us hope. This is mainly achieved by the series' focus on the value of a community, the crew aboard the *Rocinante*, that works as a kind of heterotopia. This ship portrays healthy relationships among the members of this interracial and diverse family and their actions and decisions concerning external conflicts are mainly moved by equality solidarity, social justice and co-operation.

The *Roci*, a direct allusion to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, stands as a place of feminist resistance in Foucault's terms, a ship that moves continuously among the solar system (formed by the Earth, Mars, the Outer Planets and the Asteroid Belt) and defies certain injustices. It stands as a valid example of how inclusive societies can deal with differences in a constructive way, overcoming political, racial, social, gender and other differences. Power imbalances are somehow neutralized in this community (composed of Earthers, Martians and Belters) offering spectators with an alternative framework in which to engage in practices of freedom, not possible in other spaces depicted in the series. The protagonist, James Holden (Steven Strait) stands as an idealist, a kind of Don Quixote trying to defy the (imaginary) monsters and stand outside oppressing power structures in a search for a better future.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This contribution aims at analyzing TV series *The Expanse* from a feminist lens to argue how spaces of resistance are needed in order to fight structures of power. The *Rocinante* in the series stands as a heterotopia that allows audiences to understand, criticize and reflect on our present social and political structures by imagining more inclusive ways of structuring the world. Speculative TV opens, then, a path to think in terms of what we want or desire for our future by analyzing critically what we see in our present.

3. SCIENCE FICTION TV AS PUBLIC PEDAGOGY

Margaret Atwood (2011) describes speculative fiction as stories that imagine “other worlds located somewhere apart from our everyday one” in order to “free the human imagination” and push it to its limits (8, 41, 62). As many critics have noted, through the construction of possible future worlds, such fictionalized texts can enable imaginative responses to current crises and provide a valuable resource for critical inquiry and theory-making. As popular products that reach large audiences, contemporary speculative TV stands as a powerful tool for critically engaging with current concerns by portraying desires, dreams, nightmares and/or fantasies about the future and the present. As Herbrechter contends, science fiction is becoming “science faction”, a kind of “new hybrid media genre” (Herchercher 2013). Indeed, the “what if” scenario performed by science fiction reflects many concerns regarding our times:

Since science fiction is such an integral part of the contemporary human imagination, technological and scientific developments are increasingly being ‘explained to’, or are being made explicit for, the public through analogies with well-known science fiction scenarios or topoi. (Herbrechter, 113)

Speculative fiction is, then, a commentary of our current concerns. Its power does not reside in its ‘truth’ telling abilities or meaning, but rather in the affects, interconnections, and disruptions that such stories enable, as part of the thinking process. Speculative TV stands, then, as

a powerful tool from where to analyze societies and provide responses for our convulsed times. It stands as the ideal forum from where to rethink the structures of power that have governed –and still do—our worlds and offer more inclusive alternatives.

Set several centuries in the future, *The Expanse* delivers an imaginative and evolved human society that has expanded throughout the solar system. Three distinct societies inhabit different parts of this fictional universe: the Belters, the Martians, and the Earthers. Each of these communities are depicted as having their own unique cultures, values, and customs and are generally confronted against each other. Space travel and terraforming have become commonplace, and politics and corporations play a significant role in shaping the lives of individuals and communities. The series focuses on how James Holden and his crew on board the *Roci* face the threat posed by the protomolecule, a dangerous weapon engineered by an extinct alien civilization and eventually possessed by villains who want to govern the world.

The show tackles, then, with some of the current challenges of humanity by setting the story in a plausible future

where resources are scarce, politics are convulsed, the environment is fragile and power imbalances are present. In this sense, *The Expanse* presents us with a clear socio-political commentary, providing viewers with a glimpse into humanity's possible future in the universe. As this science fiction text shows, by speculating about the future, it is possible to address contemporary issues that require solution in our present societies. In *Programming the Future: Politics, Resistance, and Utopia*, Vint and Alexander argue that science fiction TV works as a productive space for public pedagogy concerning governance (4). The authors analyze contemporary speculative TV (including *The Expanse*) to argue that these cultural products “negotiate, interrogate and work through the contradictions of living in this neoliberal order, making visible what might be hard to see as one lives through it” (3). This idea of dealing with current contradictions is achieved, they argue, “at times naturalizing the status quo and at times offering visions of alternative possibilities” (Vint and Alexander 3).

The series portrays different planetary colonies and space stations. Each of these locations exists outside the Earth-dominated civilization known as the United Nations, which further resonates with the history of colonization. Hence, these colonies are mainly established to provide resources to Earth, Mars, and the Belt, although they eventually create their own unique cultures and political systems. *The Expanse* stands, then, as a productive space for reflecting on our present social and political structures by imagining other ways of structuring the world that have, nevertheless, clear parallels in the context of contemporary globalization, especially in terms of how colonialism shapes current global inequality (Vint and Alexander 142).

In the 24th century, the United Nations globally govern the known universe, with Chrisjen Avasarala (Shohreh Aghdashloo) as a dominant figure leading this socioeconomic structure. The different conditions derived from gravity (or the lack of it) explain many inequalities in the show. People living on Earth enjoy the privileging conditions of gravity, which provide them with wellbeing, as opposed to people living in Mars, who suffer from malnutrition, and especially to Belters, who need to survive with scarce resources. This system inevitably resonates with the unequal access of resources in our global capitalist world, with the Global South at the bottom of these inequalities.

By adopting this seemingly strange but recognizable context, the series delves on contemporary issues that need urgent remediation in our societies: the environment, capitalist economies, social injustice, the commodification of human like, corrupted governance, and global inequalities, among others. Additionally, the series also echoes, according to Vint and Alexander, the shift of neoliberalism from the margins (as it was in the 1980s) to the center of Western democratic politics as we are experiencing today. Hence, viewers are encouraged to reflect upon these issues: what kind of social structures and relations do we desire for the future? Are inclusive modes of governing and structuring social order possible? When democratic values are under attack, what is to be done? What is the future of democracy?

In short, science fiction TV serves as a space for projecting cultural anxieties and preoccupations, activating critical mechanisms on

viewers that desire other futures for our planet. The hostile alien species and the male villains who illegally deal with the protomolecule work then, as threats to a system that proves unable to evolve while these negative forces exist. This mechanism of fantasizing with other alternatives can be related to what Vint and Alexander refer to as public pedagogy concerning governance. They suggest that speculative TV's capacity to displace cultural anxieties and preoccupations in time or to project them onto alien figures (the villains and the protomolecule in *The Expanse*) allows for a more open and explicit expressions of those anxieties that realist genres allow (4). This fusion of the political with the familiar acts as public pedagogy since we are taught to conceive, imagine and hope for the future (5). In other words, our desire is educated while watching.

4. THE *ROCI* AS A PLACE OF (FEMINIST) RESISTANCE

As argued before, the series shows constant political and socioeconomic tensions among the different communities depicted in it. These places are confronted on many occasions over the unequal distribution of resources and are threatened by alien forces. As it will be illustrated in this section, the *Roci*, a direct allusion to Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, works as a place of (feminist) resistance amid interplanetary confrontations and struggles. The crew aboard this ship is regarded as a family with extreme sense of community and democratic values, yet with troubled pasts and different origins. *The Roci* becomes, then, the home of an alternative family whose internal problems and personal differences are normally solved in collectivist ways. Its members function as a mirror of how they as a team can successfully deal with interplanetary troubles. This community offers safety—and ultimately hope—in a universe where power imbalances seem difficult to resolve, at least in collaborative ways.

The first direct reference to Cervantes' work appears in episode 3, season 1, when the crew needs to find a name for the spaceship that will be their home from this moment onwards. Quite spontaneously, Holden proposes *Rocinante*, or *Roci*, which is the name of Don Quixote's horse

in Cervantes's work, to what everybody else agrees. Significantly, as viewers discover in episode 7, season I, titled "Windmills", Holden has a personal relation to Cervantes's work as he has a manuscript of it in his house on Earth, a place where books are a scarcity. As his mother explains, Holden "fancied himself as a knight" when he was a child. The crew aboard the *Roci* are a group of disparate individuals who come together through complex circumstances with the desire to make things differently and fight for a common cause. Like Don Quixote's quest to achieve justice and honor, the crew of the *Roci* strive to do what is right in the midst of political intrigue and interplanetary conflicts.

The name Rocinante comes from the Spanish name "Rocín" which means a workhorse, normally an old worn-out horse. Don Quixote wanted a special name for his Rocín and called him Rocinante, elevating this category to a superior stanza, a name that sounds grandiose and important, according to him. Indeed, the horse is always depicted in the novel as a thin and bony animal, unattractive in appearance, yet resilient and loyal, becoming a symbol of endurance, a faithfully companion of Don Quixote on his various adventures. Similarly, the ship *Roci* stands for endurance and resistance, a space in which its members share experiences while confronting the constant dangers from the outside. Holden, echoing Don Quixote, is an idealist who wishes to stand outside any planetary rules to achieve independence and freedom for him and his crew. Holden's fascination with Cervantes' work can be further read as a reflection of his own struggles with identity and morality, as well as his determination to fight against injustice in a seemingly hopeless world.

Both Holden and Don Quixote fight for what they believe is right, no matter what the consequences may be. As Sara Martín argues regarding this evident connection with Cervantes' work, "the other members of the original crew (the Martian pilot Alex, the Belter XO Naomi) and Burton himself (another Earthman like Holden) play collectively the role of Sancho Panza, above all Nagata (2023). This is especially significant if we consider the importance of loyalty and camaraderie for the members of the *Roci*. Sancho Panza unconditionally supports the

idealistic knight on his quest, even when facing incredibly impossible missions, and so do the crew aboard the ship. To Naomi's question about the significance of *Rocinante*, Holden answers: "It means we need to go find some windmills", which Don Quixote fights because he believes them to be giant monsters in the novel.

As suggested above, the *Roci* works as a kind of heterotopia in the sense that it portrays healthy relationships among the members of this interracial and diverse family and whose decisions are taken cooperatively. The term heterotopia is a concept first developed by philosopher Michel Foucault in the preface to his work *The Order of Things* (1966, 2008), to refer to spaces or places that exist outside of social norms and cultural expectations. Heterotopias are worlds within worlds which disturb, question, invert or negate what lies outside of them. Heterotopia should be understood in relation to utopia, a term created by Thomas More in his work *Utopia* (1551). While utopias are imaginary and perfect spaces, heterotopias invert dominant structures. These alternate spaces, while often overlooked or underestimated, can reveal valuable insights into the society that creates them.

As opposed to utopia, heterotopia has a basis in reality:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places — places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society — which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (Foucault 2008)

Hence, through the depiction of this heterotopic site, *The Expanse* encourages viewers to consider how societal norms and power structures are shaped by the dominant culture and how spaces of resistance outside such rules are necessary and hoped for. Hence, the portrayal of heterotopia in the show makes viewers aware about the construction of oppressive systems and the challenges of overcoming cultural hegemony and subverting rules. This heterotopia provides peace, a refuge from the convulsive politics and deathly attacks from the exterior world.

The crew of the *Roci* is regarded as family, a healthy community that, despite their differences, contributes to the creation of a space of freedom and safety. All together resist power from within, operating as a strong and independent sphere with their own values and rules. Although often torn between their complicated pasts and their current compromises as a group, they end up solving such inner conflicts, normally privileging the ship's interest over their own's.

As suggested before, the ship's captain, James Holden, has a strong sense of justice and is deeply devoted to his crew. As a leader of this independent community, he needs to take risks and difficult decisions that affect them all, yet he acts following his principles of equality and cooperation in order to keep the ship's integrity. He proves to be empathetic and just with the rest of the crew. Despite not having much knowledge of the obstacles that lay ahead of him, he embarks on a brave quest to right the wrongs of the world, in a similar way that Don Quixote did in Cervantes' work when fighting his imaginary enemies. Both characters confront the dangers and mysteries that await them and fight against the "monsters" that threaten their belief systems and values. Loyalty, camaraderie, and compromise are the main principles both Holden and Don Quixote follow when facing the threats from the outside. Holden's relation to Cervantes and his work in *The Expanse* is a testament to the cultural importance of iconic figures such as Miguel de Cervantes. Through their connection, we are reminded of the human desire to fight for what we believe in, even in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Holden is a young white man that positions himself against the alien forces that threaten the universe, and yet he is not depicted as the hard-boiled hero found in other science fiction shows (*Altered Carbon*, the Marvel products, etc). He is not "strong enough" and shows debilities at times. This is part, Martín argues, because "male sf authors lack a clear anti-patriarchal agenda (...)" and because "of white male authors' inability to shift the role of the hero onto women or a community of diverse persons (Martín 2023). Indeed, the narrative hints that the real hero is Naomai Nagata (Dominique Tipper), a strong black woman who shows to be intelligent, caring, powerful and just. Besides, Martín continues that "unlike what might be expected, Holden is not the classic macho space

captain but a vulnerable man constantly doubting himself, who pursues his heroic mission out of stubbornness rather than any patriarchal principles” (2023). Holden embodies, then, a new type of hero, “a caring lover of Nagata, being in a relationship with her for decades” (2023).

As suggested before, the narrative projects current fears present in our societies onto alien figures and oppressive villains. As Martín argues, the very idea of Holden defeating this global enemy is enjoyable as a consolatory fantasy. These evil forces are easily compared to current political leaders who somehow threaten the world’s stability, so the idea of defeating them and reaching a peaceful and free world is appealing for audiences. These villains make use of alien technology to enhance them and become transhuman characters capable of anything to reach their evil goals. As Martín argues, “If even being just plain human, Trump (or Putin) are patriarchal monsters, imagine what they could be like if they were further empowered in ways that could make them posthuman or transhuman” (Martín 2023).

Naomi Nagata is the *Roci*’s chief engineer and a brilliant strategist. She is a resourceful and intelligent woman with a complicated past that starts a new life in the ship. Naomi is key for the family aboard the ship, proving to be imaginative, honest, caring, resourceful and always attempting to solve problems democratically. She is the ultimate referent for this heterotopic site, counteracting Holden’s sometime idealism and being aware of the real dangers outside. Her actions are motivated by common sense, love and fairness, and she is equally respected and loved by all the members of the crew. Hence, her presence reminds viewers of the need of having healthy relations in order to resist the nihilism and selfish individuality that characterizes present worlds. She shows compassion for others, suggesting that other alternatives and ways of communication are possible.

Alex Kamal (Cas Anvar) is the ship’s pilot, a skilled and experienced space navigator originally from Mars who shows love for the ship and its members. Like the rest of the members aboard, he shows acts of generosity and respect for his companions. Amos Burton (Wes Chatham) is the mechanic and muscle of the ship that, nevertheless, turns out to be extremely sensible. Amos is honest, obsessive, and often

unpredictable with a complicated past and rather contradictory motivations. As Martín notes “In the end Duarte and Holden come across as reckless, thoughtless men and it is apparent that Naomi and, secondarily, Amos, are the sensible characters whose opinions we should heed as the authorial delegates in the series (Martín 2023). Despite his rough exterior, Amos has a deep love for his chosen family, and he will stop at nothing to protect them. His hardness is ultimately effective and useful for the group in the sense that he becomes a protector of them all in dangerous situations.

The origins and pasts of these characters, as well as their personalities and life experiences, are very different and complicated, yet they share a common cause that makes them act and behave in benefit of the group. In relation to the *Roci*’s crew, Vint and Alexander argue that “their former nations see them as traitors, but their mutual commitment suggests that it is possible to overcome political divisions and work for mutual benefit” (161). These authors talk about “unity across differences” which, I believe, is main message the show aims at evoking, materialized through the community aboard the ship. The crew of the *Roci* share a space of respect and all of them, considered kind of traitors by their homes, start a new life as a chosen family. Together, they show a different way of understanding social relations and contest oppressive structures and threats from the outside world.

In relation to the way contemporary science fiction imagines the future, Vint and Alexander argue that it pays attention to the quotidian (in this case family issues aboard the *Roci*) and larger social structures (the interplanetary conflicts and the fight against the villain) and the intertwining of both. This is partly achieved because viewers reflect on what they see and recognize as personal changes that might affect larger structures: “personal changes that might affect larger structures, invite viewers to consider multiple ways that communities of care and intimacy might reactivate more sustainable and hopeful social structures” (22). That is why I consider it is important to analyze personal relations among characters and the way quotidian acts like having a relaxed conversation, offering the other a cup of coffee or respecting each other’s intimacy and sexuality affect the way we understand the planet as a

whole. These small acts of democracy and justice that are found in the ship are further projected into the outside world and contribute somehow to change it, a feminist tenet that is taken up by the series' creator to suggest hope for the future.

The ship stands, then, as a transformative space for gender and social relations. This idea of understanding and proposing new ethical practices is developed by Lindemann in *An Invitation to Feminist Ethics*, a discipline that aims “to understand, criticize, and correct” how gender operates within our moral beliefs and practices (Lindemann 2005, 11). Ultimately, the show suggests that affirmative relations and healthy interactions are needed to build a better (posthuman) future. The members of the crew struggle within their differences to construct affective interpersonal relations aboard the *Roci* that will ultimately allow them to build a more sustainable present (and future, by extension). In this sense, the ship becomes a transformative space that contests power by focusing on interpersonal relations.

The series emphasizes, then, the need of affirmative relations. There are moments in the narrative that involve a specific engagement with ethical issues. The series emphasizes scenes where characters develop affirmative relations that allow them to resist within their vulnerability. This resonates with Butler *et al*'s concept of “vulnerability in resistance” (2016) which emphasizes the active role of vulnerability in practices of resistance to oppressing power structures. The characters aboard the *Roci* are vulnerable as a consequence of their convulsed pasts which, nevertheless, make them strong and responsible to change the future for the better. In relation to this issue, Braidotti argues “We need to find out by embracing an ethics of community-based experiments, which have to start with the careful composition of the transversal subjects that ‘we’ are, to ground and operationalize the project” (2023: 142).

In short, the *Roci* family, understood here as an inclusive space of resistance and positive transformation, extends to interpersonal relationships, a combination of genetic and chosen relations that work together to help and benefit each other and the whole group. The family becomes a safe space that allows its members to resist and further become active subjects “constituted in and by multiplicity” (Braidotti 2002, 49). The

members of this family establish deep interdependences among them, which contributes to their transformation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In short, I believe the series offers spectators the possibility to reflect on certain issues that trouble us, contributing likewise to activate critical mechanisms to denounce certain discriminatory practices at work in our contemporary societies and to find more sustainable ways of understanding the world. This is, I believe, the power of science fiction, the possibility to offer hope by imagining change.

The Expanse offers us this hope by portraying a heterotopic space that works as resistance to hegemonic power structures. The *Roci* and its crew consider kinship as a new way of understanding social and personal relations working together and collaboratively against oppressive systems of power. *The Expanse* offers us a space for imagining, reflecting, experiencing and, ultimately, learning and desiring differently.

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