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## **Do Bounty Hunters Dream of Black Sheep?: Reading Race into Philip K. Dick**

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The TV set shouted, ‘ – duplicates the halcyon days of the pre-Civil War Southern states! Either as body servants or tireless field hands.... [a] loyal, trouble-free companion’ for all settlers.

‘I think what I and my family of three noticed most of all was the dignity... Having a servant you can depend on... I find it reassuring.’ (Dick 1999: 16-17)

No, not a neo-Confederate promise to secessionists fleeing a multicultural United States and a testimony from a happy slave-owner, but a fictional advert promising a robot slave to any human prepared to abandon a post-apocalyptic America for a new settlement on Mars, backed up with a Martian emigrant extolling the virtues of her robot factotum. Like many of Philip K. Dick’s novels, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) offers a philosophical exploration of such themes as consciousness, emotion and the nature of humanity. As important, it operates as a commentary on the response of slaves to servitude and as a quasi-slave narrative that sheds light on race relations in the United States.

Thanks in part to its film adaptation as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Androids* has received reams of critical analysis. It has been read variously as a ‘meditation on the presence of evil in the world’ (Rossi 2011: 170), a defence of empathy (Rhee 2013), an allegory for autism (Morton 2015), an interface between humanity and technology (Sims 2009), a study in entropy (Palmer 2003) or posthumanity (Galvin 1997), and a critique of either scientific racism (McNamara 1997) or ‘speciesism’ (Barr 1997). Yet, despite Darko Suvin’s observation that Dick ‘always speaks directly out of and to the American experience of his

generation' (Suvin 1975), few have examined *Androids* through the prism of contemporary American race relations. Peter Fitting briefly mentions the possibility that the androids might be black (Fitting 1987: 343-4) while Christopher Palmer touches on the novel's relationship with the American Civil War Centennial and the civil rights movement (Palmer 2003: viii). This oversight may be because none of the characters are explicitly black, as for example in *Counter-Clock World* (1967) (see also Jakaitis 1995), but it is even more surprising when one considers that the novel yokes the condition of the androids to the historical legacy of slavery. This reading becomes more complicated if readers also consider the book's relationship with the African American presence in the San Francisco Bay Area, the setting for the novel's action. The specificity of both geographical location and temporal proximity to the lives of its readers (the novel is set in a near-future 1992) encourages consideration of the novel's interrogation of contemporary race relations in the city, which itself deepens the novel's construction of space and its presentation of the role of the suburbs amid periods of racial turmoil.

As Gregory Rutledge observes, the science fiction ghetto in which Dick wrote suffered from white normative assumptions about society: the futures it imagined reflected the predominance of white authors and readers within sf of the 1960s. African Americans, meanwhile, were 'akin to *aliens*' (Rutledge 2000: 130). With the exception of the renegade leader, Baty, who possesses 'Mongolian features which gave him a brutal look' (Dick 1999: 130), Dick offers no racial description of the androids. Dick plays upon the assumptions of his predominantly white readers that the Nexus-6 androids are also white since, on the most simplistic level, they look like everybody else. He suggests that market competition for androids among settlers led to the creation of the Nexus-6, hinting that human settlers desired androids that looked indistinguishable from themselves (Dick 1999: 15; 26). Metonymically speaking, however, the androids are black but 'pass' for white.<sup>1</sup>

In order to uphold this argument and to understand Dick's relationship with the racial politics of his time, his own history prior to the novel's completion needs evaluation. This opens up discussion of the novel's depiction of racialized characters and race relations, leading to the suggestion that the novel renders the reader complicit in the crimes committed in the defence of human (white) supremacy. Although *Androids* is not a 'civil rights novel', it plays on three themes in African American history. The first is the role of slave insurrections in white psychology and the fear of almost superhuman, hyper-violent black men in leading such rebellions. Baty can be viewed as a simulacrum of an African American radical leader, thus presenting the novel as an expression of white fears of African American insurrection. The second stems from the post-bellum period through to the early twentieth century, when light-skinned African Americans were able to 'pass' as white. The androids' attempts to pass as human underscore the book's presentation of white fears of black infiltration and of the androids' humanity. The third – the acceleration of urban racial integration in the 1960s – is mediated through the novel's use of physical and colonial spaces that again articulate white concerns over integration and collapsing racial boundaries. Here, the novel's racial subtext implicitly questions whether the civil rights legislation of the 1960s offered any changes to the material circumstances experienced by African American people. However, like Donna Haraway's cyborgs that break down gendered and human-robot boundaries (Haraway 1991: 150-1), Dick's androids break down boundaries between the races. Haunted by their proximity to but also their distance from humans, they are harbingers of a new, integrated future.

### **Dick and Civil Rights in the 1960s**

Dick wrote the novel in one of his fevered rushes during 1966 while living in San Rafael, Marin County, fifteen miles north of San Francisco (A. Dick 1995: 132; Sutin 1994: 149,

307). It is inconceivable that Dick would have been ignorant of the contemporaneous African American civil rights movement. Two years earlier, in 'Nazism and the High Castle' (1964), he had written of the men who bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, which left the fourteen-year-olds Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley and Carole Robertson, and the eleven-year-old Carol Denise McNair dead: 'If we, you and I, could catch the white bastards – or rather just plain bastards – who did it, we would work just as much and quick vengeance on them as any Negro mob would or could' (Dick 1995: 116). Dick's use of the superannuated word 'Negro' firmly positions him within the liberal racial ideology of the early- and mid-1960s, backed up with his then wife's insistence that he nominated Martin Luther King as a write-in candidate for the 1960 presidential election (A. Dick 1995: 62, 67).

The broad contours of the civil rights movement are familiar enough not to need recapitulation here. Three key issues are germane to *Androids*, however. First, following the massive gains of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, civil rights activists increasingly turned their focus to issues beyond the legal segregation of African American citizens. The Watts Rebellion of August 1965 focused the nation's minds on the failures of civil rights legislation to alleviate the poverty, social exclusion and other ills that faced inner-city residents. It was followed by a major campaign by King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to protest urban housing and employment discrimination. This placed the focus of civil rights activism on northern urban centres, encouraging white residents of these areas to stop considering racism as purely a southern phenomenon and prepare themselves to integrate. Second, Malcolm X's assassination in February 1965 and a major civil rights campaign in Alabama during summer 1966 brought Black Power to the nation's attention. Soon afterward, the Black Panther Party formed in Oakland and began to garner attention. Black Power activists offered a sterner vision of white

America's failings than King and the SCLC. Following Malcolm X, they were less likely to advocate non-violence as a core strategy and instead asserted their rights to self-defence in order to protect themselves from white violence. This more assertive stance unsettled white liberals (see, for example, Roberts 1966). The national prominence of the Alabama Governor, George Wallace, forms the third issue. His ability to tap into many white Americans' sense of betrayal was rooted in racism and the seething resentment of whites towards the fact that black Americans were moving beyond the ghettos into 'white' streets, schools and neighbourhoods. He appealed to Americans who lived close to the inner cities, on integration's frontline. Such whites felt threatened by open housing, and thought that an influx of black neighbours would debase the neighbourhood and depress housing prices (Carter 1995: 208-15). In September 1966, soon after Dick completed *Androids*, these influences coalesced. Police officer Alvin Johnson shot a teenager, Matthew Johnson, in Hunters Point, San Francisco's predominantly African American area, killing him. Local residents expressed their anger over subsequent days, damaging property, looting and injuring various people in the surrounding area. Officer Johnson was never prosecuted (Agee 2014: 169-71).

Preoccupied with the Vietnam War, Dick recalled that in 1966 he was 'revolutionary and existential enough to believe that these android personalities were so lethal, so dangerous to human beings, that it ultimately might be necessary to fight them. The problem in killing them would then be: "Would we not become like the androids in our very effort to wipe them out?"' (qtd Sammon 1996: 16-17). Whilst Dick's opinion superficially presents *Androids* as an anti-war statement, beneath this lies a more profound engagement with race. As the Black Panther Party noted soon after Dick completed his novel, white racism was at the heart of the Vietnam War; white America treated both the Vietnamese and black Americans as second-class humans, ripe for exploitation or destruction (Anon 1967: 3). Yet the mere fact that he

lived during a period of racial tumult, both locally and nationally, should lead readers to wonder about the extent to which such events fed his unconscious imagination. As Fredric Jameson suggests, writers often express the inexpressible using aesthetic methods such as science fiction (Buchanan 2006: 16-17); the same might be said of the relationship between their unconscious and their work.

Due to their mass production, the androids appear interchangeable to the humans. Once they become aware of the androids' origins, they tend to measure them against what it means to be human, which is to say, a predominantly white, male, heterosexual conception of humanity. On Earth, the androids are not even elevated to second-class citizen status, and are beneath even sub-optimal humans such as J.R. Isidore: 'we're not even considered animals [...] every worm and wood louse is considered more desirable' (Dick 1999: 105). The othering of the androids serves to unify human society against them: even Isidore comes to side with his material oppressors, even though Deckard represents but one arm of a vestigial society that denigrates him as a so-called 'chickenhead'. Isidore's circumstances echo those of poor whites in the antebellum period, encouraged by an appeal to shared phenotypes to defend a social, legal and political apparatus that did little to benefit their material condition.

The androids occupy a liminal position on Earth, both visibly 'alive' and politically and legally 'dead,' because they are not an official form of life. This renders their existence akin to that of African Americans, who lived in a white supremacist society reliant on a heavily policed division between white and black. In order to reinforce a psychological distancing from his task, Deckard and his fellow humans talk of 'retiring' androids rather than killing them. Because their lives comprise only work, their retirement equals death; yet as not-quite-humans who do not 'live,' they cannot 'die'. This opens up a moral ambiguity that firmly indicts the reader in reconfiguring the white hero of the novel's killing spree as a peaceful ushering towards a relaxing superannuation. Deckard, like the vast majority of white

murderers of African Americans, may kill freely without fear of punishment. His state-sanctioned, religiously approved power over life and death renders him an embodiment of what Achille Mbembe terms ‘necropolitics’: he possesses the ability to define who lives and who dies as the ultimate expression of sovereignty (Mbembe 2003).

### **Slave Insurrections and the Android Nat Turner**

Dick’s racializing of Baty as a brutal Mongolian, coupled with his leadership of a murderous group of mutineers, encourages the reader to engage in a form of racial profiling, further cementing him as a threat to white society. His is a racialized condition, one that maps the policing of racial identity (in the world of the reader) onto political and philosophical conceptions of life itself (in the storyworld of the novel).

Since Baty is the leader of a revolutionary group and an escaped slave, comparisons with a series of African American leaders are unavoidable. Most obviously, Baty is suggestive of Malcolm X. In his willingness to use violence in order to protect himself and his comrades, Baty reflects Malcolm X’s insistence on the right to self-defence. Like Malcolm X, he possesses a single-minded focus on android (black) life, even if it leads to an indifference towards human (white) life. On a more philosophical level, Baty’s worldview reflects one of the key ambitions of African American activists of the 1960s: to convince white America of their shared humanity. Civil rights protesters were encouraged to look assailants in the eye should they find themselves under physical attack from segregationists, a tactic designed to force the racists to accept the protesters’ humanity (see, for example, Hogan 2007). Baty’s leadership of the androids is predicated on similar grounds: by entering the home of (white) humanity, they assert their right to life rather than mindless automata or second-class citizens. As important, each look Deckard directly in the eye before he kills them. Yet this notion of android humanity is always precarious. Their occupation of a liminal



life – almost but not quite human, subject to but not protected by human laws, given memories of an early life but not physically born – exacerbates this precarity. As Deckard's occupation reveals, they are subject to extrajudicial death at the hands of a human who will suffer no consequences for they exist outside the political sphere.

At a deeper historical level, Deckard himself identifies Baty in terms associated with slavery. Reading his case record, he notes Baty's occupation: a pharmacist. Deckard finds this unlikely, surmising that somebody as powerful as Baty was much more likely to be a 'field hand' who dreamed of a 'better life, without servitude' (Dick 1999: 157-8). Baty, then, recalls Nat Turner, who led a slave revolt in Virginia during 1831, thus embodying white fears of the black male revolutionary. Turner claimed to have had visions of the world before he was born and that he knew he was destined for greatness from an early age. 'Wrapp[ing him]self in mystery' (Turner 1831), he professed to periodic visions of God's spirit urging him towards his destiny as a revolutionary leader in a coming war for the soul of America. His *Confessions*, dictated to the white attorney Thomas Gray, presented the revolutionary as a multifaceted 'griot [...] orator, folklorist, preacher, and militant' (qtd Bernier 2012: 106). Even the nineteenth-century white historian William Drewry commented on Turner's 'considerable mental ability and wide information,' suggesting that his intelligence was as significant as his mysticism (95). Like Turner, Baty gathers a group of slaves, kills some settlers and escapes their plantation. Similarly, he has 'mystical preoccupations,' and according to his police file, an ideology centred on 'the sacredness of so-called android "life"' (Dick 1999: 157-8). He becomes adroit at turning the violence he experienced as a slave onto his oppressors, and like Turner, possesses an uncannily powerful intelligence. Although identified as East Asian, Baty's features are not clearly described; like Turner, his face remains mysterious, ambiguous; even unknowable. Both embody a new model of (black) humanity that (white) humans are unable to comprehend, let alone condone.

Like Turner though, Baty fails but his attempted insurrection exposes the racist structures of (white) human society. Consequently, even though he leads a group of only eight, and will expire within only four years of his construction, Baty must be executed as quickly and as covertly as possible. *Androids'* policing draws on long-term trends in white responses to African American resistance and power. As Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton observe, 'the foundations of US white supremacy are far from stable. Owing to the instability of white supremacy, the social structures of whiteness must ever be re-secured in an obsessive fashion' (Martinot and Sexton 2003: 179). Read this way, Deckard can only be viewed as a slave-catcher, although Dick invites his readers to identify and sympathize with him despite his ennui, cynicism and rampant consumerism. The (white) reader's identification with Deckard works to indict him/her in supporting the ethnic cleansing of the androids, of a campaign designed to rid society of folks unlike themselves. The novel thus challenges its readership's preconceptions of integration, racism and race.

### **Android Humanity and 'Passing'**

The androids' attempts to blend into white society add a further dimension to the novel's racial subtext. Taking advantage of their phenotypes, they attempt to 'pass' as human on Earth, befriending Isidore and taking on regular jobs. 'Passing' was a late nineteenth/early twentieth-century tactic in which light-skinned black men and women attempted to blend into white US society, a place where white people were not judged by their skin colour but rather by the content of their character, achievements and intelligence. In many ways, passing constituted an attempt by people whose humanity was denied to appropriate their own human right via a public performance of whiteness. As Werner Sollors points out, in segregated America, passing was considered a threat to social order, not least because those who passed destroyed any notion that race had any biological meaning (Sollors 1997: 247-55).

On Mars, the androids are a slave population. Their ability to respond to humans as if they were themselves human is a major asset, enabling a human settler to settle into a life far away from Earth, whilst also ensuring their continued subjugation. Their life spans are kept short for two reasons: first, to manufacture demand for new product and keep the Rosen Corporation profitable, which is so enmeshed in the colonization project that the fate of one is dependent upon the other. Second, their short lives theoretically ensure that they don't learn enough self-awareness and cunning in order to resist their servitude. In practice though, the androids suffer very real human emotions such as loneliness (Dick 1999: 128). Their quest for freedom is also a quest for real, meaningful contact amid their growing awareness of the artificiality and meaninglessness of their lives. Thus, even as their experiences make them more human as they age, they remain haunted by their artificial conception and the knowledge that any skills they possess are programmed rather than acquired: hence their preparedness to risk early termination in order to pass as human.

This is heartbreakingly detailed in the fate of Luba Luft who uses her vocal skills to become a German opera singer. Before meeting her, Deckard boasts to himself that his appreciation of opera elevates him above his colleagues. A rehearsal of *The Magic Flute* moves him to tears before he reflects on an android becoming the opera's Pamina, the daughter of the Queen of the Night whose union with the opera's hero, Tamino, heralds a new age of harmony: 'A little ironic, the sentiment her role calls for. However vital, active, and nice-looking, an escaped android could hardly tell the truth' (84). Even though Deckard knows Luft is a fake human, his affect – dictated by his eyes and ears – initially overwhelms his cognizance. Such a response, acknowledging the emotions generated by her singing while remaining steadfast on her inferiority, echoes the white response to another arena in which African Americans were implicitly encouraged to demonstrate their humanity: popular song (Hall 1992: 27). This expression, however, surely converted some listeners' attitudes, as the

former slave Frederick Douglass noted: 'I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those [slave] songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do' (Douglass 1997: 18-19). Only Deckard's prior awareness of Luft's android status prevents him making a similar acceptance. Without it, her singing voice would have enabled her to pass as human.

After escaping from Deckard, Luft heads to a museum, where she is apprehended at an Edvard Munch exhibition. Deckard and his temporary companion, Phil Resch, ponder Munch's *The Scream* (1893), with Resch observing that an android must feel a little of the existential horror of the painting's subject. As an expressionist painter, however, Munch suggests that the entire world is saturated with the emotions of the subject. Resch fails to comprehend the significance of Munch's artwork: the protagonist's horror overcomes the entire world. In this, the painting operates metonymically, as a reflection of the androids' lives and of their threat to Earth society should they remain. Deckard and Resch apprehend Luft in front of *Puberty* (1894), another Munchian investigation into the anxiety inherent in human existence. Like the painting's subject, Luft is exposed to the male gaze, fragile and defenceless, the shadow of death looming over her. She requests a copy of the painting: another signifier of her developing humanity. Her identification with Munch's dread is at once a reminder that her whole existence is dictated by her status as *homo sacer*, and an articulation of her humanity, since she desires a permanent reminder of an artwork that possesses emotional resonance. Yet, adding to the sad irony and pathos of this moment, everybody knows that this is a copy, albeit one that, unlike the android simulacra, is based on a real original. Significantly, Resch kills Luft soon after Deckard gifts her a book of Munch's collected works in a gesture of kindness and empathy that Resch cannot comprehend. She dies screaming, reminding Deckard of Munch's masterpiece, and readers of Munch's suggestion that the individual's internal horror will poison the rest of the world.

Before her death, Luft goads Resch, angrily lamenting that she spent her entire time on Earth ‘imitating the human [...] acting as if I had the thoughts and impulses a human would have. Imitating, as far as I’m concerned, a superior life form’ (Dick 1999: 115). Here she touches on one of the core psychological problems of the person who passes. The entire process is predicated on the overarching assertion of the equality of black and white within a world that insists on the inferiority of the former (the identity given to them) and the superiority of latter (the identity they adopt). Such a complex psychological state inevitably creates its own burdens, which partially explains why so many androids meet their fate with resignation and relief. Luft’s lament, however, reflects debates within the civil rights movement, namely whether its strategy should be to integrate into (white) America or move along its own path, aware that they would be integrating, as James Boggs wrote in 1969, into a ‘burning house’ (Boggs 2011: 207). The increasingly blurred boundaries between human and android (white and black) – a consequence of the Rosen Corporation’s fidelity to capitalist impulses without regard to the human consequences – render her murder essential, even though Deckard complains, ‘I don’t get it; how can a talent like that be a liability to our society?’ [...] She was a wonderful singer. The planet could have used her. This is insane’ (Dick 1999: 117).

### **Race and Affect in the Voigt-Kampff Test**

As Deckard tells Resch, the Voigt-Kampff test – the method for determining android from human – relies on unconscious human responses to provocative stimuli: ‘Reaction time is a factor’ (120). The testing equipment senses the speed of capillary dilation on the face – in simple terms, blushing – a reaction that cannot be controlled consciously. Android technology has not yet matched the speed of this affective response; the gap between human (unconscious) and android (conscious) reactions enables Deckard to differentiate between the

two. In this, Dick anticipates the affective turn that accompanied neoliberalism: the neoliberal subject must not only think, it must *feel* (Gill and Kanai 2018: 320-1). Suffering from a ‘flattening of affect’ (Dick 1999: 33), the androids cannot emote quickly enough to be considered human; they are thus relegated to the status of disposable workers for neoliberal capitalism. Affect thus elevates the human above the slave, and offers the potential for a life without work; meanwhile the slave’s failure to match their epistemological understanding of experience with an ontological feeling supposedly demonstrates their inhumanity. They might consider themselves human but their delayed feelings betray them. Conversely, to Deckard, they might appear human but the Voigt-Kampff test gives him the intellectual awareness that they are not.

However, as the death of George Floyd has confirmed, police officers reflect the tendency of white people to see black faces through racist prisms, including misidentifying items held in their hands as weapons. This is particularly prevalent when they only have a short period of time in which to make the decision (see, for example, Payne et al 2002). This inability to comprehend the outward display of android (black) emotions necessitates a technological solution in order to police the boundary between human (white) and android (black). The Voigt-Kampff test thus racializes its subjects, affording the bounty hunters the power to classify (racial) categories *and* determine who is criminal simply through the terms of their existence: ‘blackness has become an ontological crime, a crime of *being*’ (Torres et al 2017: 1120). The bounty hunter determines the boundaries between the races including the potential for accidentally, or indeed deliberately, exterminating those considered sub-standard. Earth’s population must therefore trust in the incorruptibility of the bounty hunter, and his willingness to subsume his subjectivity within the test’s objective findings about the androids’ subjective responses.

As Douglass bitterly noted, slave-owners became excellent students of human nature:

They have to deal not with earth, wood, or stone, but with *men*; and, by every regard they have for their safety and prosperity, they must study to know the material on which they are to work. So much intellect as the slaveholder has around him, requires watching. Their safety depends upon their vigilance [...] They watch, therefore, with skilled and practiced eyes, and have learned to read, with great accuracy, the state of mind and heart of the slave, through his sable face. (Douglass 2003: 202)

Douglass thus reminds us of the slave-owners' tacit acceptance of their chattel's humanity even as they denied it to them through the institution of slavery. This knowledge of the slaves' human nature was essential in the pursuit of escapees, and similarly implied acceptance of the slaves as human beings. In the novel, without the ability to 'read' android faces, bounty hunters must rely on the test in order to understand the inner life of the android. As important, Deckard must appreciate the humanity of the androids in order to track them successfully; hence, his success connotes acceptance of their human qualities irrespective of the test's findings.

Resch suggests to Deckard that he cauterize his burgeoning empathy for androids by sleeping with Rachael Rosen, mistaking this empathy for mere lust. His updating of the callous attitude towards female slaves by white male owners, who would use their power to rape with impunity and treat such assaults as a perk of ownership, leads Deckard only to wonder if Resch is the more effective bounty hunter. Following Resch's urging, Deckard manufactures a situation in which he and Rachael might have sex, despite such congress being illegal. Deckard's mastery though, indicated by his objectification of Rachael's physical appearance, is countered by her sexual agency, in which she orders him to bed. It transpires that Rachael has been programmed to seduce the bounty hunters, prompting enough psychological torment that they are unable to kill the androids before being killed

themselves (Resch being the sole exception). In advising Deckard not to consider his actions, Rachael performs another act of passing, encouraging him to rely on only his senses: she looks, sounds and feels human; only his intellectual awareness of her fabrication prevents him accepting her as such. Rachael not only imitates the human but also prompts the human to accept this imitation, reiterating the novel's suggestion that feeling is superior to thinking. Numerous problems emerge here, not least the racist assumption of black hyper-sexuality and the allusion to the anti-miscegenation laws that were designed as a 'founding gesture of whiteness' and a component feature of white supremacist dialogue (Sexton 2003: 246).

In transgressing this boundary, however, Deckard is not merely breaking down human-android barriers or, in dialectical terms, creating a new synthesis of human-android. As these episodes suggest, the androids' passing proves profoundly destabilizing for Deckard, charged as he is with defending the (racial) purity of humanity. It reinforces the novel's irony in that what made the androids so successful necessitates their ultimate destruction. This irony is intensified by Deckard's increasing awareness that the process of hunting fundamentally alters the androids' behaviour, much like George Zimmerman's stalking of Trayvon Martin prompted an entirely understandable response that Zimmerman used as a pretext for killing the younger man (Torres et al 2017: 1117-19). The androids exhibit a painfully natural, flight-or-flight response to their predicament. So, even as the Voigt-Kampff test supposedly reveals their lack of humanity, their very humane response to the existential threat to their own lives undermines the test's findings. They might not possess true empathy for living beings but their behaviour is ultimately very human.

### **The Spatial *Androids***

Reading the androids as slaves also begs consideration of the novel's relationship with colonialism and the concept of physical space. This adds extra depth to the novel, first in



terms of the imperial relationship between Earth and Mars, and second in its presentation of the frontline of integration between these two locations. These spaces have been produced by social and political action; the former in the novel's diegetic world and the latter both in *Androids* and Dick's real-life world. In transgressing the boundaries between the imperial centre and the periphery, the androids threaten to bring Mars's social structure (defined by slavery) to Earth, forcing its residents to come to terms with the moral and ethical implications of the imperialist-capitalist project.

As important, the San Francisco of the novel is much like the San Francisco of 1966, facing integration at the hands of agents who have no faith in the willingness of the current residents to comply. As Luft suggests, Baty's group is not concerned with destroying human society as they see it. Instead, they merely want to fit into Earth life before they expire. Their destruction serves as a powerful reminder of white American attitudes towards integration, echoing the violence meted out to civil rights marchers in Chicago during 1966 or George Wallace's promise to bring Alabama law to the nation and put 'a bullet in the brain' of anybody prepared to engage in urban unrest (Carter 1995: 367). The novel thus reflects the fears of many northern whites who saw the Watts Rebellion symbolically bring the racial violence and strife of the civil rights movement into northern urban centres.

Yet these were not generalized fears. In 1963, soon after 30,000 people marched through San Francisco to declare their support for civil rights, James Baldwin visited to film a documentary about the city's racial tinderbox. First broadcast on February 4, 1964, *Take This Hammer* included a series of discussions between Baldwin, his hosts and residents of the predominantly African American Bayview-Hunters Point area. The local activist Orville Luster stated that African American San Franciscans were 'trying to find [their] place... This is one of the problems... What place is there for me?': a statement that Dick's androids might themselves have made. Meanwhile, one resident put his fellow San Franciscans' situation in

starker terms by suggesting that only violent revolution could bring change: ‘Let everybody bleed a bit.’

Deckard, meanwhile, is told by a fellow bounty hunter that ‘we stand between the Nexus-6 and mankind, a barrier which keeps the two distinct’ (Dick 1999: 121). His role in policing this frontline of integration is to confront (black) androids heading into (white) northern urban centres, and in line with the prevailing sociological assumptions, prevent them degrading white society. Detaching himself from his emotions, he objectifies the androids, focusing on their crimes and failure to empathize with living beings, rather than the potential that these crimes constituted the agonized last resort of an oppressed race. Read alongside the extra-legal killing of Matthew Johnson, this again racializes the androids, reminding readers of the dehumanization central to American policing of the inner cities.

*Androids*’s spatial qualities manifest themselves best in its treatment of an android ghetto within San Francisco and its representation of suburbia. This ghetto exists in an anomalous space: ‘a closed loop, cut off from the rest of San Francisco. We know about them but they don’t know about us’ (106). Notwithstanding the practical questions generated by the ghetto’s existence, it symbolically parallels the physically and psychologically excluded Bayview-Hunters Point. Bounded by Highways 101 and 280, Bayview-Hunters Point was dominated by shipyards until deindustrialization took hold after World War II. Federal policy facilitated white flight from the area, which was roughly balanced between black and white residents in 1960, but became almost 75% African American by the end of the decade, with an unemployment rate three times higher than the wider Bay Area. During the mid-1960s, ‘dominant representations of Bayview-Hunters Point, in official reports, news media and popular culture, depicted the area as isolated from the rest of the city, not as a result of economic or political inequalities as Bayview activists were arguing, *but due to its perceived cultural and racial difference*’ (Dillon 2011: 18; emphasis added). Such representations

posited a close relationship between the area's social problems and the race of its residents, othering and objectifying black San Franciscans because they supposedly lacked the moral and social qualities of white Americans. This reinforced both the isolation of Bayview-Hunters Point that Baldwin observed and the refusal of whites to acknowledge the existence, let alone the humanity, of their fellow residents.

Consequently, Deckard's surprise at discovering this ghetto reflects that of many San Franciscans who watched *Take This Hammer* or who remained ignorant of black San Francisco until the Hunters Point uprising. Analogous to real-life suburbanites, Deckard robotically drives his (hover)car into the city, heads home exhausted at day's end, while his wife's social isolation is alleviated only by the opiates of the novel's ersatz religion, Mercerism, and a mood manipulation organ. Like all the remaining humans, they compulsively watch *Buster Friendly*, the one surviving TV programme that acts as a further reminder of their uniformity, meaninglessness and failure to escape. Deckard envies the riches that come to his immediate superior, who lives in an upscale area of San Francisco, and casts envious eyes at his neighbour's horse, much like 1960s suburban men might covet a new car. Eternally desirous of a real animal to supplant their electric sheep, the pair are caught in the 'bland ritual of competitive spending' (Mumford 1961: 494), facilitated only by Deckard's skill at killing androids. Yet Deckard's occupation itself thwarts their greatest desire – that of escape to Mars – and thus ironically binds them to their unfulfilling suburban life; indeed, their consumerist ecstasy comes to an abrupt end when they comprehend the burden of the repayment schedule.

In 1960s America, suburbia represented a location for middle-class whites to group together, a place to reassert individual property rights, privacy and the right not to engage with social undesirables, notably the poor and the black. The Baty group hides in a suburban building that, due to radioactivity, has been abandoned by all its human inhabitants except

Isidore. The impact of this plot development operates primarily at a non-diegetic level. Thus, this depopulated suburbia of the future is metonymically the suburbia of the 1960s, integrated by a group of (black) sub-humans; the androids' invasion is hugely disturbing because it constitutes a subversion of and challenge to suburbia's homogeneity, demolishing the physical, economic and psychological barriers established by suburbanites to separate themselves from the urban world that they wished to leave behind.

As a private space, Isidore's building occupies an even more problematic position than public spaces in terms of the androids' incursion into white society. As civil rights activists discovered, desegregating public accommodations involved major struggles at national, local and state levels; desegregating housing proved even more difficult (see, for example, Cook 1998). The ease with which the androids insert themselves into a private housing development, meanwhile, portends wider patterns of integration. The androids even threaten a further, double transgression. In setting up camp in Isidore's conapt, they recreate a family unit. Baty is the masculine head of the household; Irmgard very much plays his wife. Pris, meanwhile, acts like a curious and unworldly daughter in her attempts to manipulate Isidore. While Isidore accepts them into his house, he is clearly the junior partner: the androids have adopted him. Deckard must ensure that this nuclear family never settles into domestic life; that a (white) human never becomes subordinate to a (black) android, let alone be 'adopted' by a (black) android family. Deckard must consequently reassert (white) human superiority by destroying an incipient integrated family.

Yet, ironically, the androids find suburbia a suffocating trap. The places where the androids search for freedom in fact become their coffins: Garland is killed at work; Luft in the museum where she seeks succour; Polokov on his apartment roof; and the others in their suburban refuge. As sub-humans, their privacy rights do not exist; as terrorists, they must be destroyed. Their attempt to become suburbanites fails due to the panoptic surveillance and

overwhelming power of white supremacy. What began as a new way of life, freed from the drudgery of work, became a fight to the death. Lewis Mumford's argument that the suburbs constituted 'what was properly a beginning was treated as an end' never appears as poignant as when applied to the androids (Mumford 1961: 494).

### **The Final Reckoning**

As ever, Dick has a final trick up his sleeve. Luft upbraids Deckard for his failure to betray any emotion at her impending demise. Logically, she argues, this lack of empathy for another living being suggests that he is an android himself. Taken aback at this extraordinary assertion of android humanity, Deckard descends into an existential crisis. He eventually concludes that the androids possess the right to life, a decision that confirms the meaninglessness of his job. He understands that, as living beings, the androids were compelled to escape Mars and belatedly embraces Isidore's willingness to accept the androids as humans and openness to their plight, despite their (computer-driven) flaws. After all, any enslaved human would wish to do the same.

When told that they took 'unlawful flight,' he thinks to himself: 'To save their lives' (Dick 1999: 151). He eventually accepts that Baty led the androids to Earth because, like him, they had dreams of the future. He realizes that his job 'require[s him] to violate his own identity' and that he must reach out to other beings in order to become truly empathetic (152). Deckard concludes that his success in killing all the androids is a defeat, which prompts him to declare his retirement amid the triumph of his anomie: 'Where I go the ancient curse follows [...] I am required to do wrong' (193-4).

Deckard experiences a final revelation when he heads into the Oregon wastelands, far away from the integrating city. Buster Friendly has revealed that Mercerism is a swindle, symbolically shattering the boundaries between human and android. Deckard needs the

distance from the troubles to accept this new future and come to an appreciation that all living beings possess a soul. Sleep-deprived, he thinks he has become Mercer and believes that he has found a live toad, despite knowing that they became extinct years ago. Even his wife's discovery that it is indeed a fake fails to thwart his devotion to it, and this to a new understanding of humanity: 'The electric things have their lives, too' (208).

Dick's novel ends on this transcendent note: even artificial life is life itself. A racial reading of *Androids* similarly prompts readers to accept African American equality and worry less about the impact that integration might have on their lives than the impact their racism might have on themselves and the world around them. Baty and his friends have essentially sacrificed themselves in order to bring about a new post-human (or post-racial) era. This racial reading therefore intensifies one of Dick's signature themes – the nature of humanity – to the extent that the novel becomes more humanist even as it anticipates a post-human future. At the political level, it reveals the psychological damage that racial categorization does both to the oppressor and the oppressed, suggesting at its end that a race war offers no true resolution: only accepting human equality will enable white Americans to sleep peacefully. It is as if Dick echoes Baldwin in revealing that, by degrading the androids, humans succeed only in debasing themselves; that Deckard – and hence all his fellow humans – can only liberate themselves by liberating the androids. The androids forced Deckard to look them in the eye to prove their humanity, prompting him to look into himself and question why he is policing this boundary so violently. By erasing the boundaries between slavery and freedom, and by confronting (white) human supremacy at its source, the androids fulfil Baldwin's maxim that 'the power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world's definitions' (Baldwin 1998: 326). To paraphrase Baldwin, they force Deckard to comprehend that they were not the androids, but him, that the

boundaries between human and android, black and white, were artificially constructed in order to uphold a profoundly inhumane social system.

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### **Endnote**

<sup>1</sup> I use 'black' in the sense in that it is a socio-political construct, 'created as a political category in a certain historical moment,' namely the 1960s. As Stuart Hall remarked to his son, 'I'm not talking about your paintbox, I'm talking about [inside] your head' (Hall 2019: 75-6). I flip this to signify that the androids are 'black' in other peoples' heads.

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