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A Celebration of Mature Love: Posthuman Sexuality, Gender, and Romance in Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312*

Narrating Climate Change through Romance: A Genesis of *2312*. Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312* (2012) narrates the establishment of an interplanetary political alliance among Mercury, the Saturn League, and Mars aimed, apart from other mutual benefits, at the regeneration of backward Earth, almost irreversibly altered by the effect of human-caused climate change. Earth is in a catastrophic situation:

> It was almost an ice-free planet now, with only Antarctica and Greenland holding on to much, and Greenland going fast. Sea level was therefore eleven meters higher than it had been before the changes. This inundation of the coastline was one of the main drivers of the human disaster on Earth. (90)

Ninety-two percent of all mammal species survive only thanks to the thousands of terraria carved out of asteroids; seventy percent of these "function as zoo worlds, either dedicated to sustaining an eco-region's suite of animals and plants, or else to creating new combinations of suites, called Ascensions" (211). This is a novel, then, that should certainly be read from the perspective of environmental fragility. "By positioning the contemporary climate crisis as the historical backdrop to the societies of the accelerando," Chris Pak argues, "the communities depicted in *2312* function as instances of societies informed by the failure to ground societal configurations in relation to the fragility or otherwise of the planetary environments in which they are embedded" (508).[1] Pak's point is valuable, but it does not take into account the manner in which the story unfolds—nor the individual human beings whose actions drive the plot. Robinson's novel is not narrated through the clash of these communities but through the interactions of the two main characters, Swan Er Hong and Fitz Wahram, who gradually fall in love with each other as the narrative progresses.

This is in part a matter of narrative convenience. Robinson himself has stated in relation to his SCIENCE IN THE CAPITAL trilogy (*Forty Signs of Rain* [2004], *Fifty Degrees Below* [2005], and *Sixty Days and Counting* [2007]) and *2312* that "It seemed as if the story of climate change was going to have to be told as some kind of daily life, which in narrative terms meant it could not be a thriller" because "when you shrink the novel to the thriller then you run into problems in representing ordinary realities" (Canavan and Robinson 245).[2] Attempting, then, to depict ordinary life as the background to his political plot, Robinson wrote *2312* as romance. In this essay, I unpack the fuller ramifications of reading this novel within that genre, in contrast to most prior criticism, arguing that *2312* is more remarkable for its love story than for its sf themes. Its protagonists, Swan and Wahram, are mature individuals, not

particularly attractive or likeable, but singular in their anatomical and psychological characterization. Robinson takes narrative risks with their romance that not all critics and readers have welcomed but that, as I propose here, result in an intriguing novel and an unhurried, serene love story deserving more appreciation than they have so far received.

The author declared in an interview that *2312* did begin "with the idea of the romance at the center of the novel, between two people from Mercury and Saturn who were (surprise!) mercurial and saturnine in character, and thus a real odd couple" (De Guardiola 54). For their love story to work, Robinson fills in their home planets and the whole solar system with a complex post-apocalyptic, diasporic human interplanetary society set in the early twenty-fourth century. "The project of describing this high-tech future civilization," he insists, "became a major component of the novel, but it all began by trying to give the central romance its proper setting" (54). At the same time, the three centuries between the present and that future forced Robinson to consider which changes in sexuality and gender could have been implemented by then and how they would affect the love story. "I wanted the estrangement effect … to be strong," Robinson explains, "but also based in things we are already seeing, so it seemed natural to play with gender, along with size, longevity, and so on" (Wark).[3] Being familiar with the tradition of feminist and utopian science fiction thanks to reading authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, Geoff Ryman, Carol Emshwiller, and others, Robinson proposes in *2312* alternatives to current notions of gender that are worth examining, particularly because he links them to a love story that considers not only sexuality and gender but also the meaning of marriage in the posthuman future of our species.

The reception of Robinson's reflection on these issues has been, nonetheless, far from unanimous. On the negative side, reviewer Bryan Cebulski protests that *2312* "collapses and confuses gender and sexuality" and is "for all its starry-eyed optimism about human progress, surprisingly conservative about pronouns" (online). This refers to the use of he/him/his and she/her/hers for Wahram and Swan, respectively, even though they are described as intersexual (I offer a more nuanced discussion of their anatomy in the next section). The harshest critique of *2312* comes from Robinson's admirer and fellow sf writer Vandana Singh. Apart from decrying Robinson's approach to the Earth's regeneration as blatantly colonialist, Singh complains that "despite its apparent imaginativeness on the subject of human sexuality, gender and variations thereof, the book seems to idealize heterosexual mating, although between hermaphroditic beings. (Come on!)." In Singh's view, beyond the questionable approach to sexuality, the romance between Swan and Wahram "does not come across as believable" because there is "no fire between them." Hannes Bergthaller finds that the novel's conclusion with the main couple's wedding "dramatizes the synthesis of immunity and community, sublating the conflicting principles in a unity of opposites" (10). He remains skeptical, nonetheless, noting that "Surely, the real biopolitical challenges of

the Anthropocene cannot be resolved with such allegorical neatness" (10), no matter how helpful the novel's "conceptual map" (10) can be for that task.

These negative opinions contrast with the positive appreciation of Claire P. Curtis, author of two articles discussing the representation of love in *2312*. Curtis argues in the more recent article (2017) that the romance is made attractive by Wahram's respect for Swan's extreme bodily experimentation. Although genital modification, hormonal therapies, and longevity treatments are common among the posthuman citizens of Robinson's solar system, Swan has gone further than most; her body includes lark and warbler song cluster implants, feline purr vocal cords, a subdural quantum computer (nicknamed Pauline) and even a suite of tiny aliens from Saturn's moon Enceladus, which she has ingested for the sake of bodily experimentation. When her former lover Zasha chides Swan for having become "some kind of post-human thing. Or at least a different person" (99)—possibly, this is one of the causes of their break-up—Swan defends herself, arguing that "Every thing I've done to myself I consider part of being a human being. I mean, who wouldn't do it if they could? I would be ashamed not to! It isn't being *post* human, it's being *fully* human. It would be stupid not to do the good things when you can, it would be *anti*human" (99; emphasis in original). Unlike Zasha, Curtis observes, Wahram "does not use Swan's 'strangeness' against her. Nor is he attracted to her through that strangeness; he does not fetishize her. Instead her changes are simply fodder for conversation. Wahram is not surprised by the fact of Swan's bodily differences: he is simply interested (and this may be the initial interest of their love relationship)" (22). Theirs is not, in any case, a sudden romantic passion but a slow process of mutual recognition taking several years in which their personal strangeness (for Wahram is certainly a peculiar man) becomes a source of attraction and the foundation for what might be if not ever-lasting love, at least a long-lasting union.[4]

In her other article Curtis follows the work of philosopher Martha Nussbaum in *Political Emotions* (2013) to argue that the main value of love in *2312* and in the other two novels she analyses—Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1992) and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents* (1998)—is that "the love the characters in these works have for their own communities, illustrated in their personal love relationships, awakens in the reader a sense of possibility for how we might live together" (5). Curtis traces thus a direct connection between each love story and communal justice, claiming that the love stories help to present the protagonists' communities "as hospitable places; as places that we, as readers, would want to love" (9). It seems correct to assume in the case of *2312* that Swan's eventual acceptance of Wahram's marriage proposal connects their two planetary communities, since they are both involved in the political efforts to form a new alliance between them and Mars, the planet where they marry in the novel's epilogue. Since, however, Swan and Wahram are mostly presented in scenes of interpersonal interaction[5] and hardly ever, if ever, in the context of larger communal interplay, the connection between romantic love and civic love is not as apparent as Curtis argues. I am not suggesting that there is not a larger communal dimension in Swan and

Wahram's love, since their wedding does seem to have a symbolic value, but I am remarking that both the communal dimension and the symbolic value are either insufficiently stressed or less significant in their relationship than Curtis maintains.

In what follows I would like to reconsider the negative criticism to argue that Robinson's *2312* is a unique instance of the representation of mature romantic love in science fiction—beyond Robinson's alleged mismanagement of sexuality and gender and beyond Curtis's view of romance as a symbolic communal celebration. Apart from analyzing in more detail how Robinson characterizes the sexual anatomy and the gendered identity of Swan and Wahram, I would like to consider, using Judith Butler's notion of the heterosexual matrix in *Bodies That Matter* (1994), to what extent Vandana Singh's claim that the couple are just thinly disguised heterosexuals is accurate. In my view, Robinson's treatment of sexuality in this couple's romance is notably progressive, much more so than Singh's critique suggests, though it is no doubt problematic. On the other hand, I use French philosopher Alain Badiou's influential volume *In Praise of Love* (2009) to argue that Robinson is resisting in *2312* Zygmunt Bauman's view of liquid love as part of liquid modernity, by focusing on love, in Badiou's terms, as a long-lasting "quest for truth" (22). Swan's and Wahram's longevity, with both past the century and likely candidates to live perhaps hundreds of years more, is an essential factor in the slowing down of the tempo of romance in *2312* and in Robinson's vindication of a type of love that points back to a time when marriage was mostly a union for life but also to the future, when "for life" might mean an extended posthuman timespan we can hardly imagine today.

Posthuman Anatomy, Sexuality, and Gender: Queering the Future. I will begin with the question of whether Swan and Wahram are queer at all—in the sense of non-normative—or, as Vandana Singh complains, a gimmicky, hypocritical representation of heteronormative sexuality. Wendy Gay Pearson has explained that "the purpose of applying queer theory to sf is not primarily to recuperate a gay and lesbian history of the field … [so much] as to examine the conceptual bases of all possible depictions of sexualities within sf" (157). The problem, however, is that, as Veronica Hollinger warns, "heterosexuality as an institutionalized nexus of human activity remains stubbornly resistant to defamiliarization" ("(Re)Reading Queerly" 24). It is quite possible indeed to see gynandromorph Swan and androgyn[6] Wahram as just Robinson's clumsy attempt to defamiliarize heterosexuality, but they can also be read more productively as the opposite: as a bold attempt at defusing heterosexuality itself and at disrupting what Judith Butler calls the heterosexual matrix.

As Butler argues, this template is maintained following the "logic" by which "he" is the penetrator and "she" the penetrated: "As a consequence, then, without this heterosexual *matrix*, as it were, it appears that the stability of these gendered positions would be called into question" (51; emphasis in original). To be specific about the anatomical details, gynandromorph Swan

possesses, apart from a functioning uterus, "a small penis and testicles, about where her clitoris might have been, or just above" (166), whereas androgyn (or wombman) Wahram possesses, apart from regular-size male genitalia, a vagina and female organs of reproduction. Leaving aside any considerations of sexual preference for later comment, this is what happens in the only sex scene which Robinson describes in *2312*:

> Now it was said that their particular combination of genders was the perfect match, a complete experience, "the double lock and key," all possible pleasures at once; but Wahram had always found it rather complicated. As with most wombmen, his little vagina was located far enough down in his pubic hair that his own erection blocked access to it; the best way to engage there once he was aroused was for the one with the big vagina to slide down onto the big penis most of the way, then lean out but also back in, in a somewhat acrobatic move for both partners. Then with luck the little join could be made, and the double lock and key accomplished, after which the usual movements would work perfectly well, and some fancier back-and-forths also. Swan turned out to be perfectly adept at the join, and after that she laughed and kissed him again. They warmed up pretty fast. (424)

Of course, this is not a "particular combination of genders" but of matching genitalia. As the sex scene shows, in Swan and Wahram's case penetration is mutual and simultaneous, so that the heterosexual matrix is indeed disrupted even though a penis penetrates and a vagina is penetrated. Butler notes that "The heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire be mutually exclusive is one of the most reductive of heterosexism's psychological instruments: if one identifies *as* a given gender, one must desire a different gender" (239; emphasis in original). Nonetheless, although Robinson's use of pronouns can be said to be traditionally binary (a point to which I will return), Swan and Wahram's intercourse is significantly different from heterosexuality. Furthermore, the previous sexual activity they comment on is not all limited to the type described above. Both have had sexual relationships with diversely gendered persons and there is enough reason to call them pansexual.

The negative reviews, nevertheless, indicate that *2312* fails to meet current expectations about how gender and sexuality should be represented in progressive sf. It is implicitly understood that sf authors describing the future must imagine it from a queer, inclusive point of view on the assumption that the current struggle to redefine gender and sexuality will bear its fruits in the following centuries. Yet as Kilgore observes, "The central problem … is not in imagining what a queer future would look like but how we might get there from where we are" (235). In *2312* and other novels, Robinson, therefore, presents human gendered identity as work in progress because, Hollinger observes, "Becoming-posthuman necessarily remains an unfinished project: in Robinson's universe, 'we' are always becoming other to ourselves" ("Humanity 2.0" 278).

Citing imaginary anonymous academic sources, as he does in several sections of the novel describing twenty-fourth-century civilization, Robinson writes that "principal categories of self-image for gender include feminine,

masculine, androgynous, gynandromorphous, hermaphroditic, ambisexual, bisexual, intersex, neuter, eunuch, nonsexual, undifferentiated, gay, lesbian, queer, invert, homosexual, polymorphous, poly, labile, berdache, hijra, two-spirit" (205). Hollinger stresses how "Robinson imagines that, given the choice, most humans will value some kind of multisexed and imaginatively enhanced embodiment, but he does not naively assume that everyone will welcome such heterogeneity" ("'Strangers to Ourselves'" 554) or the intensive focus on gender. In a veiled, playful allusion to Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), in which Gethenians remain genderless and sexless except for the periods when they are sexually active, Robinson writes that "cultures deemphasizing gender are sometimes referred to as ursuline cultures, origin of term unknown, perhaps referring to the difficulty there can be in determining the gender of bears" (205).

Fredric Jameson observes in "The Future as Disruption" (2005) that in the search for utopia, including sex and gender utopia, "we have been plagued by … our discovery that our most energetic imaginative leaps into radical alternatives were little more than projections of our own social moment and historical or subjective situation" (211). He refers here to the posthuman in general, but the observation is valid for how sexuality and gender are represented in *2312*, since in this novel human beings are imagined as the posthuman products of choices that we are considering in the present, specifically in connection to the aspiration to prolong longevity. Robinson supposes that the future research on the extension of human life finds a direct link between biological sex and an extended lifespan. This results in "sophisticated surgical and hormonal treatments for interventions in utero, in puberty, and during adulthood" (204) that, while maintaining the XX/XY dichotomy have transformed it in depth. Intersexuality prolongs life, so parents may choose to turn their fetuses into androgyns or gynandromorphs; individuals born with unmodified genitalia and reproductive organs can also transform their bodies once past childhood. As Robinson writes, "XX humans with conserved Wolffian ducts are gynandromorphs; XY humans with conserved Müllerian ducts are androgyns" (205); hormonal treatments and surgical procedures allow both types of intersexual persons to be mothers and fathers, although "gynandromorphs can ordinarily father only daughters, as the construction of a Y chromosome from an X chromosome" is "problematic" (205). Swan has parented two daughters, one as a father and one as a mother, and Wahram has given birth as a mother to a child, whose sex is not mentioned, being himself the son of two androgyns, one of whom acted as a mother.

Robinson's description of Swan and Wahram's genitalia as double-sexed rather than ambiguously sexed, however, does complicate matters. On the one hand, the list I have previously cited of "principal categories of self-image for gender" does mix sexuality and gender, so that androgynous and gynandromorphous, which are anatomical intersex categories, wrongly appear as gender categories. On the other hand, the words hermaphroditic and intersexual also appear on this list, and this confounds matters from another

angle. "Hermaphrodite" is a term that ceased being used in medical literature after the publication in 2005 of a key article by Dreger et al. asking for a new system of intersex nomenclature and taxonomy. The term "hermaphrodite" is anatomically incongruous, since no individuals can be simultaneously fully male and fully female. Intersex persons have, instead, mixed anatomies in which the genitalia might not correspond to the chromosomes or the gonads, or in which the genitalia appear to be ambiguous (not double). As Sytsma stresses, "There are many different kinds of intersexuality, and many different degrees of each" (xvii).[7] It might appear, though, that Swan and Wahram are intersexual but also impossibly hermaphroditic and, in addition, clearly gendered as feminine and masculine respectively.

Biological sex, however, is not an indicator of sexual preference nor of gendered identity. Swan and Wahram could have been indeed heterosexual (or gay, or bisexual) but, supposing my assumption that Swan and Wahram are pansexual is correct, this still leaves open the question of their gendered identity. They, by the way, do not refer to themselves as a woman or a man, though this is how they are identified by others, including the author. This does not mean, in any case, that the gendered identities "woman" and "man" correspond to current twenty-first-century categories. Gender labels are currently in flux with constant debate about their meaning among gender activists. Richards, Bouman, and Barker write in their introduction to their edited volume *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders* (2017) that "In general, non-binary or genderqueer refers to people's identity, rather than physicality at birth; but it does not exclude people who are intersex or have a diversity/disorder of sexual development who also identify in this way" (5). Furthermore, they note, some individuals may reject all references to gender and identify as genderless, gender-free, non-gendered, or ungendered. Swan's and Wahram's fantastic double-sexed posthuman bodies in conjunction with their gendered binary identities may thus be used both to affirm and deny Jenny Wolmark's view that the posthuman subject can "be envisaged within a frame of reference that enables bodies to escape categorization in terms of familiar binaries" (77).

On the other hand, androgyny, a category that used to be more present in gender discourse and that might be relevant to a reading of *2312*, seems to be disappearing from current debates. Androgyny, Tracy Hargreaves writes, "is not a stable or a transcendent category, but is subject to historical and cultural change" (3); today, androgyny, understood as the mixture of feminine and masculine features either in endosex anatomy (excluding intersex) or in gendered self-presentation, is rejected as supportive of the essentialist gender binary. This stance neglects the fact that, as Shaheen notes, beyond physiology "androgyny is and always has been a concept that reaches far beyond the genitalia, bespeaking a sense of masculine-feminine duality beyond mere anatomy" (11). Virginia Woolf—author of the classic *Orlando: A Biography* (1928)—praises the "androgynous mind" in *A Room's of One's Own* (1929) as an intellect that "is resonant and porous," that "transmits emotion without impediment," and that is "naturally creative, incandescent and undivided"

(97). Nevertheless, in her recent article "The (Ir)Relevance of Science Fiction to Non-Binary and Genderqueer Readers" (2018), Anamarija Šporčič calls for a replacement of the old-fashioned androgynous characters appearing in late 1960s and 1970s sf, which "owe their existence to the binary division" (60), by non-binary characters that can help non-binary readers to connect with relatable representations (it is implied that there are no androgynous readers). In view of this, it appears that Robinson's lovers are framed by outdated references to androgyny coming from twentieth-century sf rather than by the up-to-date urgent discussions about how to escape the binary that should be present in twenty-first-century sf.

The matter of the pronouns is, likewise, double-edged. What Helen Krauthamer has called the Great Pronoun Shift is now in its third phase in a process started in the early 1970s and that has consisted so far of "(1) the loss of generic *he*, (2) the 'workarounds' that included the adoption of strategies to avoid using a singular generic pronoun, and (3) the eventual acceptance, even in formal academic writing, of singular *they*" (22; emphasis in original). Science fiction has distinguished itself by being a major source of neopronouns, defined as "any set of singular third-person pronouns that are not officially recognized in the language they are used in, typically created with the intent of being a gender neutral pronoun set" (*LGTBA Wiki* online). The analysis of the fiction by Dorothy Bryant, June Arnold, Marge Piercy, and Ursula K. Le Guin in Anna Livia's ironically titled volume *Pronoun Envy: Literary Uses of Linguistic Gender* indicates that women authors have on the whole invested much more energy in creating neopronouns than male authors (though some, like Greg Egan, have made significant contributions). This view seems confirmed by the lists of pronoun-progressive recommended science fiction and fantasy that can be found online (such as Huff's). Robinson's choice of "he" and "she" can be, therefore, read as a conservative option and, in the worst case scenario, a frontal challenge to the Great Pronoun Shift. It is also possible to argue, however, that in the twenty-fourth century "he" and "she" could be neopronouns, taking into account Swan's and Wahram's anatomies and gendered identities, and also the author's confirmed gender awareness. After all, Robinson makes in *2312* other significant choices as regards pronouns, completely avoiding them in relation to Swan's former partner Zasha and using for this character an epicene name—a choice which calls readers' attention to how personal names are mostly discounted in the debate on gender-neutral self-presentation.

The provisional conclusion, in any case, is that Robinson has put himself in a no-win situation. Swan and Wahram can be read both as innovative and clichéd characters, queer and heteronormative constructions, a sincere and a hypocritical contribution to a differently-gendered posthuman future. My view is that they do disrupt intersexuality, heterosexuality, and how we may understand femininity and masculinity from a progressive point of view, but also that in *2312* anatomy, sexuality, and gender are less relevant issues than love, to which I turn in the next section.

Posthuman Romance: Reformulating Love and Marriage. In his philosophical novel *On Love* (1993), Alain de Botton argues that those thinkers who have considered love distinguish between "immature" and "mature" love (5). These categories, he adds, have nothing to do with age but with other factors: whereas immature love is focused on desire, "the philosophy of mature love is marked by an active awareness of the good and bad within each person, it is full of temperance, it resists idealization, it is free of jealousy, masochism, or obsession, it is a form of friendship with a sexual dimension, it is pleasant, peaceful, and reciprocated" (5). Persons who enjoy representations of passionate love (to give immature love a less censorious label) may even deny that mature love is romantic love at all. Swan and Wahram *are* a perfect example of de Botton's mature love, which is why some readers may resist the idea that *2312* is a fulfilling romance, as I am defending here.

Alain Badiou's conversation with Nicholas Truong, published as the volume *In Praise of Love* (original publication 2009)—a title inspired by Jean-Luc Godard's film *Éloge de l'amour* (2001)—is particularly appropriate to analyze Robinson's view of romance. Badiou's volume appeared six years after Zygmunt Bauman's extremely influential *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (2003), a volume in which the Polish philosopher discussed how "An unprecedented fluidity, fragility and in-built transience (the famed 'flexibility') mark all sorts of social bonds which but a few dozen years ago combined into a durable, reliable framework inside which a web of human interactions could be securely woven" (91). Trapped by this fluidity, all bonds including love "need to be only loosely tied, so that they can be untied again, with little delay, when the settings change—as in liquid modernity they surely will, over and over again" (vii). Love in particular, Bauman explains, is viewed as a "yearning for the security of togetherness" (viii), but also as a burden that limits personal freedom, even though having no relationship is as anxiety-inducing as being in one. In long-lasting, committed relationships, "There is always a suspicion," Bauman notes, that "a vital obligation to one's own authentic self has not been met, or that some chances of unknown happiness completely different from any happiness experienced before have not been taken up in time and are bound to be lost forever if they continue to be neglected" (55). The diagnosis is impeccable but offers no comfort, whereas Badiou defends a radically different perspective. In his transcendental view, love "takes us into key areas of the experience of what is difference and, essentially, leads to the idea that you can experience the world from the perspective of difference" (17). This opposes not only the classic R/romantic view of love as the fusion of two different persons into one single unit but also Bauman's insolvable liquid solipsism. Badiou sees love as the bridging of the difference separating two individuals and the construction of a new mutually sustained "truth procedure" (38), and so does Robinson. Love—what Badiou calls the "Two scene" (38)—that "embraces this experience of the world from the perspective of difference produces in its way a new truth about difference" (39). In this context, selfishness is "love's enemy" (60).

Love, Badiou notes, "always starts with an encounter" which takes on "the quasi-metaphysical status of an *event*, namely of something that doesn't enter into the immediate order of things" (28; emphasis in original). In *2312* Robinson delays the introduction of the "event" for as long as he can, using the first quarter of his romance to establish how unlikely it is that polar opposites Swan and Wahram should be interested in each other. Besides, he makes a point of eschewing romantic convention by making "good-looking" (11) Swan quite cantankerous and not particularly likeable, and Wahram far from attractive in an almost parodic way. Using free indirect style, Robinson reports Swan's negative impressions when she first meets him: "Prognathous, callipygous, steatopygous, exophthalmos—toad, newt, frog—even the very words were ugly" (15). Considering, besides, that she is a Mercury-based nomadic landscape artist and he the Iapetus-based ambassador of the Saturn league, there seem to be few chances for any relationship, even a friendship, to progress at such enormous distance. Robinson nonetheless ignites their love story with an unusually extended chapter (129-84) during which Swan and Wahram are trapped in an underground set of tunnels in her home planet Mercury, following a terrorist attack against her city, Terminator, and a solar flare that leaves her severely poisoned by radiation. The twenty-four days they spend surviving together give Swan and Wahram time enough to know their weaknesses and strengths though, once they are rescued, neither sees the other as a love interest yet. In a second episode of survival against all odds, placed much later in the novel after other encounters scattered over about three years (including sex), Swan and Wahram are stranded in outer space protected only by their suits for twenty long hours. Facing death, they realize that, as Swan says, "Ever since the tunnel … we've had a relationship" (493). This prompts Wahram to declare his love.

As Badiou notes, "To make a declaration of love is to move on from the event-encounter to embark on a construction of truth" (42). The declaration "marks the transition from chance to destiny, and that's why it is so perilous and so burdened with a kind of horrifying stage fright" (43), particularly when the other person, as happens with Swan, has not reached the same stage even though she is on the same path. Thinking of his words, Swan reflects that "He interested her. She was drawn to him as to a work of art or a landscape. He had a sense of his actions that was sure; he drew a clean line. He showed her new things, but also new feelings. Oh to be calm! Oh to pay attention! He amazed her with these qualities" (495). Although she recognizes this as love, Swan is not sure it is of the same type that Wahram professes for her. As Badiou explains, love is a "construction" (31) and one of its main "enigmas" is "the duration of time necessary for it to flourish" (32). Calling it a "tenacious adventure" (32), Badiou claims that "Real love is one that triumphs lastingly, sometimes painfully, over the hurdles erected by time, space and the world" (32). In *2312* there is no immediate obstacle beyond Swan's insecurities, but this is a hurdle real enough for Wahram to require immense tenacity. Self-confident but also self-hating, Swan feels that "It was hard for her not to feel that a person loving her was making a big mistake. Because she

knew herself better than they did, so knew their love was given in error" (499); she, however, does crave for "Someone who likes you despite yourself, someone more generous to you than you are" (499). Wahram is certainly that person, but for love to function Swan must also become generous towards him, and it takes her a mighty effort to leave her intense individualism behind.

Michael Gratzke makes three basic claims about love: "Firstly, that we cannot grasp its full potentiality (it is always yet to come); secondly, that it is performative (it needs to come into being in individual occurrences of love); and thirdly, that changes to the ways in which people experience and represent love happen through countless iterations of what I will call 'love acts'" (2). Saying "I love you" is one of those love acts, but before he first declares his love, Wahram performs love by other means that connect with the political core of the novel, though in ways far more personal than Curtis has suggested. Swan and Wahram first meet when he visits Mercury to attend the funeral of her grandmother Alex, a person she defines as "my everything" (8). Replacing Swan's dead parents, "Alex had been her friend, protector, teacher, step-grandmother, surrogate mother, all that—but also, a way to laugh. A source of joy" (12). Alex was also the main elected officer of her planet and as the Lion of Mercury she had been developing plans to regenerate Earth. As a key politician, Wahram was part of Alex's closest circle of interplanetary allies (the Mondragon Accord), of which Swan knew nothing because she is artistically, not politically, inclined. Before they meet, Wahram already admires Swan through the portrait Alex has drawn of her beloved granddaughter. Understanding that Alex is the main person in Swan's life, as the alliance to implement Alex's plans progresses, Wahram makes a crucial decision which can be read as possibly the most spectacular act of love ever: he starts the animal repopulation of Earth that Alex dreamed of, and that results in the rewilding by which extinct species preserved in thousands of hollowed-out zoological asteroids are returned to Earth.[8] When Swan sees the creatures descending from the sky, she feels this is "the most beautiful thing she had ever seen"; she muses "'I love you. You have done a great thing.' Whether she was talking to Alex, or Wahram, or the world, she couldn't say" (397). When later in the novel Swan ponders how to reply to Wahram's declaration, she considers that the key "philosophical" questions are "how to be? What to care about? And how to become a little less solitary?" (542). Badiou declares that "To love is to struggle, beyond solitude, with everything in the world that can animate existence" (104). Swan concludes that "with Alex gone, though she talked to many people, in the end she was missing someone to tell things to in the way she had always told Alex" (542). This is the gap Wahram can fill in with his love.

Patricia Monk appears to be the only scholar to have considered marriage in science fiction, in an article published in 1984. She prefers using the word "gamos," meaning generically a committed long-lasting union, to avoid being more specific about the legal and social strictures binding marriage in each novel's imagined universe. Monk divides the authors she analyzes into conservatives (Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Larry Niven, and John

Brunner), radicals (C.J. Cherryh, Anne McCaffrey, Frank Herbert, and M.A. Foster), and mixed (Marion Zimmer Bradley, Robert Heinlein), offering the following conclusions:

> On the one hand, the conservatives, if they see problems with the traditional gamos at all, see the resolution of them in terms of change (whether technological, or psychological, or social) in the environment of the gamos. On the other hand, the radicals see the resolution of the problems of the traditional gamos in terms of change in the human beings themselves. What is not fully concealed by this fundamental difference of approach to the resolution of problems, however, is the shared pessimism about the future of the gamos. (221)

This future, Monk concludes, "remains imperfect" (221). The historian of marriage Stephanie Coontz maintains that, paradoxically, "Marriage has become more joyful, more loving, and more satisfactory than ever before in history. At the same time it has become optional and more brittle. These two strands of change cannot be disentangled" (306). Nor will they be presumably in the centuries to come, though it seems likely that marriage will survive as an institution, accommodating changes in sexuality and gender. As Coontz argues, marriage "remains the highest expression of commitment" (309) and might remain so for as long as humanity lasts in whatever form gamos takes.

When Wahram proposes marriage to Swan, he is 113 and she 135, though their posthuman bodies look and feel much younger. Neither has been married. Yet, unlike Swan, who has been in open relationships with individual partners (and declares herself not monogamous), Wahram has been for many years part of a crèche, consisting of six parents and eight children. This is an option among the ones Robinson lists for cohabitation: "traditional marriage, line marriage, group marriage, polygamy, polyandry, panmixia, timed contracts, crèches, roommates, sexual friendships, friends, pseudosiblings, fellow travelers, soloists" (431). As Wahram tells Swan, crèches were formed in the planets of the Saturn league, including his native Titan, for the sake of the children:

> Almost everyone thought of it as a child-raising method and not a lifelong arrangement. Thus the name crèche. Eventually there were a lot of hurt feelings involved. But if you're lucky, it can be good for a while, and you just have to take that and move on when the time comes. I still stay in touch with them; we're even still a crèche. But the kids are grown, and we very rarely see each other. (172)

His marriage proposal emerges, thus, from the realization that while he need not abandon the crèche, part of its function is over and he needs, like Swan, to feel less lonely. His wording is quite pragmatic, not particularly romantic: "So I have been thinking that we ought to get married, in the Saturnian crèche I am already part of. It would solve so many problems more than it would create that I really think it is the best thing for both of us. For me, certainly. So I am hoping you will marry me, and that's the long and short of it" (515). It is, however, hard to think of Swan entering the crèche for his sake.

Marriage, besides, is for her "a concept from the Middle Ages, from old Earth—an idea with a strong whiff of patriarchy and property. Not meant for space, not meant for longevity" (544) and to cap this, an impossible "promise somehow not to change" (544).

Swan eventually realizes that Wahram is not proposing that kind of obsolete union and that she does need someone "you could depend on, someone who was steady, reliable, predictable, resolute; decisive after due thought; generous; kind" (546). The tipping point comes for her when she discusses Wahram's proposal with her grandfather Mqaret, who married Alex when he was already 130 and enjoyed 70 years of happy marriage with her.[9] When he asks Swan what happened in the tunnels, the "event" that started her romance with Wahram, she reminisces about their whistling together for hours and Mqaret suggests that "Maybe that's what a marriage is.… Whistling together. Some kind of performance. I mean, not just a conversation, but a performance" (544). Funnily, when Wahram repeats his proposal he does not ask Swan but Pauline, the AI embedded in her brain. Pauline's eager response irritates Swan but she ultimately realizes that Wahram's recognition of her AI is proof of his full acceptance of her strangeness, as Curtis notes; having herself accepted "the saturnine person" (546), as she jokingly calls Wahram, their wedding soon follows. Their friend Inspector Genette marries them on Mount Olympus, simply asking them to affirm that they "have decided to marry and become life partners, for as long as you both shall live" (560), quoting a poem by Emily Dickinson to celebrate their "symbiogenesis" (560), and declaring them "married" (not husband and wife), once they reply in the affirmative.[10] The words that close the novel, Swan's "This is for life," can be read both as a declaration that only death can separate them or that they have married to celebrate life, a time longer than ever for Robinson's posthumans in *2312*.

Conclusion. The reading I have offered here does not contradict other interpretations of *2312* as relevant climate change sf, but aims at calling attention to the fact that this novel is also classifiable as romance. Against negative criticism, I have tried to demonstrate that Kim Stanley Robinson has put much care into the representation of posthuman sexuality, gender, and love in *2312*, and that the effort he has made is progressive, despite his not always coherent incursions into the debates surrounding these categories. It has been my aim to persuade readers that the central love story is unusual, even unique, and that Robinson succeeds in presenting an excellent example of what Alain de Bottom calls mature love in the relationship involving Swan Er Hong and Fitz Wahram.[11] In the view I have defended, Swan and Wahram's search for what Alain Badiou calls a "truth procedure" (38) celebrates love with a depth that is hardly found in sf, and this is a solid argument to call *2312* an exceptional achievement. Its love story resists Zygmunt Bauman's view of human bonds as frail ties that cannot endure the push of individualism, and denies that romantic love must be always liquid, now or in the future. As regards the analysis of gender issues, it has been my aim, following what

Robinson does in *2312*, to stress that the emphasis on sexuality and on identity is becoming too narrow and quite limited for the interpretation of the emotions attached to romance. Who Swan and Wahram are anatomically and in their sexual choices matters far less, as I have tried to show, than how and why they love each other, and their capacity to bridge significant personal differences and interplanetary distances—no mean feat in their circumstances. Robinson believes in Swan and Wahram's commitment to each other and invites readers to share that belief, taking considerable risks as regards the reception of his novel. This has not been as positive as *2312* deserves, but it is my hope that this situation can be reversed and that Robinson's romantic philosophy can be better appreciated.

NOTES

1. Patrick Murphy also reads *2312* from this perspective, focusing on whether this is a dystopian or a utopian novel: "In sum, a reader finds increasing pessimism about curbing global warming before disaster, but glimmers of optimism remain that humanity will eventually experience a sufficient catalyst to assume responsibility for the damage it has done to the biosphere" (162). Ursula K. Heise notes that Robinson's Earth in *2312* is "just as dystopian as Bacigalupi's world" in *The Windup Girl* (2009), though the diasporic spacers visiting the planet feel both "bewildered, frustrated, or put off by the difficulties of life on Earth" and "intrigued, fascinated, and delighted by what they find" (18).

2. Robinson incorporates, nonetheless, a low-key thriller subplot dealing with Inspector Genette's pursuit of the elusive qubanoids, the humaniform avatars of the quantum computers that have started self-programming and threaten to end human dominance in the solar system.

3. Humans are divided in the novel into the smalls, the talls, and the average. Inspector Genette is a small. They are the result of genetic engineering, following the realization that smaller sizes help to prolong human life. No small has died yet of natural causes, and they are expected to live for hundreds of years.

4. Autistic blogger Ada Hoffman reads Wahram as an autistic character on the grounds that the word "autistic" is used twice to describe him and because he behaves in what she calls a "believable autistic way." Hoffman praises Robinson for neither flagging his character's behavior as autistic nor othering him: "Wahram is just Wahram; Wahram's actions are Wahram's actions." Hoffman may be right, but the sentence in which Swan defines Wahram as autistic, denying that she likes him, is far from positive: "He's slow, he's rude, he's autistic. He's boring" (30). My own view is that Robinson simply sees Wahram as a person of saturnine temperament, as the declaration I have quoted indicates.

5. The chapter titles are mostly those of the main characters involved: "Wahram and Swan," "Swan and Zasha," and so on.

6. Robinson prefers this spelling to the more habitual androgyne, which means that in the context of *2312* the two categories are different.

7. The MedilinePlus article "Intersex" speaks, however, of four main categories: 46, XX intersex; 46, XY intersex; true gonadal intersex and complex or undetermined intersex. In true gonadal intersex, "The person must have both ovarian and testicular tissue.… The external genitals may be ambiguous or may appear to be female or male" (online). This is quite different from what Robinson imagines for Swan and Wahram.

8. This is the action that Vandana Singh has read as colonialist, since Earth's inhabitants are not consulted in this decision: "It turns out that not all natives appreciate the return of the animals—Swan feels the need to lecture to Earthlings about animals being our 'horizontal brothers and sisters.' An admirable sentiment, which I share, but again it speaks to a colonialist 'let me tell you what's good for you' spiel that I find I am unable to stomach."

9. The Worldwide Marriage Encounter website honored Californian married couple Ralph and Dorothy Kohler as the winners of its 2020 Longest Married Couple Project. The Kohlers have been married for 86 years now. There are in the early twenty-first century many couples who have been married for more than 50 years but what seems unlikely is that there will be many in the early twenty-second century as marriage for life seems to have lost its appeal.

10. The choice of the poem, "Forever at His Side to walk" (1861), is problematic considering it begins with the lines "Forever at His side to walk—/The smaller of the two!", lines which Genette does not quote. The ones he quotes are: "Brain of His Brain—/Blood of His Blood—/Two lives—One Being—now—/ … All life—to know each other—/Whom we can never learn—/ … Just finding out—what puzzled us—/Without the lexicon!"

11. Brian White called my attention in a personal e-mail communication (February 2021) to *The Cage of Zeus* (2004) by Japanese author Sayuri Ueda, a novel in which a new posthuman species of hermaphrodites is created to prevent the binary divide to interfere in space exploration. The review by Alex MacFarlane of the 2014 English translation notes that the new division between hermaphroditic Rounds and the normative Monaurals results in yet another binary divide, showing that Ueda approaches gender with counterproductive "rigidity," ultimately concluding that "humans are unaccepting of gender variance, perhaps indefinitely." This is, of course, very different from Robinson's optimistic approach.

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ABSTRACT
Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *2312* (2012) has been mainly approached from an ecocritical perspective. I focus here, however, on the love story between its protagonists, Swan Er Hong and Fitz Wahram. Robinson considers posthuman sexuality and gender, and the meaning of marriage in the posthuman future of our species. Swan and Wahram disrupt intersexuality, heterosexuality, femininity, and masculinity from a progressive perspective, but Robinson's main challenge to his readers is his focus on love. Relying mainly on Alain Badiou's *In Praise of Love*, I argue that, beyond the freedom which humans enjoy regarding sex and gender in Robinson's twenty-fourth-century solar system, in *2312* he is specifically celebrating mature love beyond superficial passion. Robinson considers, besides, how posthumans aspiring to extreme longevity may see marriage from an angle that defies Zygmunt Bauman's views about the ephemerality of romantic relationships and the current questioning of marriage itself.