

Liminality and Decolonization: Discourse Evolution in Robert A. Heinlein's Trilogy of Liberty and Self-responsibility

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the mutation of Robert A. Heinlein's (1907-1988) discourse on the question of colonialism and decolonization. The aim is to analyze his discourse evolution. In his 'trilogy of liberty and self-responsibility' (Starship Troopers, 1959; A Stranger in a Strange Land, 1961, and The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, 1966). The American science fiction writer has delivered perturbing statements on the notion of freedom. Often labeled as a decadent or fascistic storyteller, Heinlein is equally acknowledged for the audacity of craftsmanship. When intersected with postcolonial studies, his narratives offer an oblique optics to the understanding of the evolution of imperialistic discourse: from unashamed colonialism to apologetic decolonization. Located between science fiction studies (SF) and postcolonial theory, the issue was addressed through the theories of Homi Bhabha, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Arnold Van Gennep. These tools were used to substantiate the claim that Robert A. Heinlein's fiction has incorporated liminalities to sustain the decolonization process of its protagonists. The study revealed a logical continuum along the three novels: the narratives correspond to the three levels of liminality. In other words, the writer's discourse has evolved from a conservative into a progressive view of decolonization.

Keywords: Decolonization, discourse evolution, imperialism, liminality, postcolonial theory, Robert A. Heinlein, science fiction

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Introduction

The American writer Robert A. Heinlein (1907-1988) is a pioneer of the Golden Age of science fiction (1930s-1940s). He contributed to the making of a comprehensive narrative proposition of what he called 'Future History'. As a renowned writer, he explored a plethora of themes related to his vision of mankind's future: technology, race, and gender, to name a few. In addition, Heinlein has had strong ideological and political standpoints that challenged the dominant discourse of his epoch. The publication of *Starship Troopers* (1961) provoked a wave of indignation in regard to its militaristic apology of war and expansionism. Addressed to Heinlein's young readership, this novel is one of his *Juveniles* which are serialized narratives that explore themes of the coming of age, rites of passage, and being in a futuristic world.

Then, some readers confined the writer in the sphere of reactionary writers whose theses were close to right-wing ideas and authoritarianism. Heinlein has acquired a reputation that would define his persona for decades: he was seen as a crypto-fascist. Nevertheless, he disclaimed the ascertainment with two libertarian novels: *A Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) and the *Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966). The first is considered as the pillow book of the Hippie Movement, while the second is seen as a retelling of the American Revolution.

The authors of this paper attempt to show the evolution of the colonial discourse in Heinlein's trilogy through the prism of postcolonial theory. Heinlein's supposed inconsistency stands for a global process of liminality. Hence, a reference to the segments of critical theory is made to explain the mechanisms and discourse of colonialism and decolonization and how they impact the understanding of Heinlein's trilogy. Furthermore, there will be an attempt to establish a narrative and thematic logic (or coherence) in the trilogy by highlighting the elements of this evolution.

1. Theoretical Framework: Colonizing Spaces, a science fiction tradition

Science Fiction writers often hesitated about the color of the future: despotic, imperialist, or libertarian. While scientists affirm that technology would insure progress and emancipation, notorious SF writers (George Orwell,ⁱ Aldous Huxleyⁱⁱ, Stanislaw Lemⁱⁱⁱ) dwell on more skeptical positions, such as obscurantism, enslavement and oppression. The question of colonizing space has been a constant fantasy of man and an inspirational topic for SF writers. The utopian and dystopian designs are the common depictions of individual or collective quests for self-fulfillment and bliss. The two World Wars and their tragic weight on the value of mankind brought forward a wave of decolonization predicated on the desires of the ex-colonies for freedom and self-determination.

The stretching scope of postcolonial theory debunked the discipline from exclusive socio-historical perspectives and dragged it into unusual epistemic areas. In her seminal work *Science Fiction and Empire*, Kerslake (2007) reasons that SF is liable for the study of imperialism and decolonization from the original angle of fantasy and futurism:

While conventional postcolonial theory engages with specific historical references and geo-political situations, this text looks at and beyond the constructs of history, to extrapolate postcolonial paradigms and to examine new values of centre and periphery as humanity begins seriously to look at the colonisation of our Sun's planets (p. 3-4).

The scholar argues that postcolonial paradigms of center vs. periphery; self vs. other, and imperialism can be analyzed via the examination of fictive projections and anticipation.

In *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, Rieder (2008) endorses Edward Said's^{iv} belief that the novel (including SF) is a bourgeois product that perpetrates imperialistic foundations (3). Rieder attests of the seniority of the genre and its stereotypical mode of representation:

...early science fiction seems merely to transpose and revivify colonial ideologies, the invention of other worlds very often originates in a satirical impulse to turn things upside down and inside out. A satirical reversal of hierarchies generates the comparison of extraterrestrials to colonialists... (p. 4).

Rieder extrapolates the established ascertainment to cover the most recent forms of the genre. Traditionally, SF glorified men's superpower and their imperialistic impulses. The figures include the pacification of the savages (aliens) and their reconstruction in a human mold, with utter denial of their specificities and singularities. Old school SF is analogous to imperial expeditions and ethnographic accounts^v in the sense that it places the humans in spiciest^{vi} configuration, where there are depicted as superior to the aliens. King (1998) validates this argument in *Bug Planet: Frontier myth in Starship Troopers*. The author enlists an ethnographic tradition in the 20th century SF accounts:

As the narrative on Mars unfolds, Burroughs offers an ethnography of alien culture which readily invokes the terms of frontier narratives and colonial expansion, wherein the indigenous race, 'green men', are portrayed, like native American Indians for European pioneers, as warlike, primitive and intellectually inferior. (p. 1020)

King links his statement on Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Under the Moon of Mars* (1912) to Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (1959) and its film adaptation^{vii}. For him, SF has established a fact consisting in the belief that frontiers are expandable and that all the beings that live beyond these borders are potential slaves.

Langer (2011) sums the concerns of postcolonial sciences fiction by using Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* as illustration of the canons of imperialistic fiction:

These two signifiers are, in fact, the very same twin myths of colonialism. The Stranger, or the Other, and the Strange Land –whether actually empty or filled with those Others,

savages whose lives are considered forfeit and whose culture is seen as abbreviated and misshapen but who are nevertheless compelling in their very strangeness – are at the very heart of the colonial project, and their dispelling is at the heart of the postcolonial one (p. 3-4).

The approach of Langer invokes the works of Homi Bhabah (*The Location of Culture*, 1994), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (*Decolonizing the Mind*, 1986), and Bill Ashcroft (*Empire Writes Back*, 1989). The plausible combination of postcolonial theory with science fiction studies is, thereby, founded and justified in the study of Heinlein's Trilogy.

2. Heinlein and (de)Colonization

Heinlein witnessed the imperialism-related historical changes which were echoed in his fiction critical in the understanding of the movement of decolonization. The writer penned a plethora of novels and short stories that tackled the themes of invasion, alienation, and rebellion, all of which address the dialects of war and perpetual peace. David Seed's *Constructing America's Enemies: The Invasions of the USA* (2007) explains Heinlein's obsession with hostile enemies that menace the American Nation. Seed cites *The Day After Tomorrow* (1949) which pleads for the implementation of the Manifest Destiny, and *The Sixth Column* (1941) which expressed his alert to the Yellow Peril. Heinlein narrative scaffolding culminated in the writing of *The Puppet Masters* (1951) and more especially *Starship Troopers* (p.78). This time, it was the potential Soviet invasion that prompted Heinlein to make his most controversial statement about imperialism. Surreptitiously, Heinlein constructs an ideological apology for preventive war and expansionism.

2.1. Starship Troopers: Glory to the Empire

The novel recounts the coming of age of Johnny Rico and his training and missions in the mobile infantry. Earth is administrated by a Federation which existence is legitimated by the war against the 'Bugs'. The succession of battles and philosophical theories on the importance of the military in the protection of democracy constitute the core of the plot. The analogy between the 'other' as insects is a typical mode of the representation of the enemy.

The imperialistic stance is perceptible in the narrative organization of the events: chronologically, it was the Terrans who invaded the Arachnids' land and the insects retaliated to the human aggression. Heinlein's narrative artifacts drag readers into a deceptive appraisal on the actual aggressor. Once convinced, the characters and the readers justify the ethnocentric conception of the world and the Bugs-oriented inferiorizing discourse. Seed analyzes this discourse by stating that the enemies (aliens) force humans (the Americans) to challenge their knowledge of evolution:

Narratives that cast America's enemies as bugs at one and the same time privilege the USA as a representation of humanity itself, and also pose a special problem for those being invaded. If the enemy is some kind of subhuman creature, that might carry an evolutionary consolation (p. 83)

Colonialism in SF is often grounded on a Darwinist belief. The empathic humans fight for their survival in a world order that is predicated on force and violence. Heinlein highlights this belief in a dialogue between the teacher Mr. Dubois and his student Carmen: “Violence, naked force, has settled more issues in history than has any other factor” (1959, p.32). *Starship Troopers* reproduces the colonialist measures of pacification through violence and the obliteration of ‘the other’ for the sake of consolidating the myth of superiority and endorsing the heroic figure.

In *Space: the Final Frontier*, Teo (1994) points to the narrative horizon of that type of heroism which is tainted by nationalism:

American science fiction of the 'Golden Age' was influenced by American nationalism in several obvious ways. Firstly, science fiction writers reworked aspects of the national myth, such as the Puritan exodus from the corrupted Old World in order to establish a free society in a new land. In Paul Dennis Lavond's 'Exiles of New Planet', an imperialistic, authoritarian government rules Earth and the Solar System. A group which seeks freedom decides to migrate to a new planet. (p. 29).

For Teo, imperialism is linked to a liable utopian principle of exile and self-renewal. The fiction of Heinlein confirms these tendencies in unlimited expansionism and the confiscation of the bugs' lands. The Terrans do not solely fight off the bugs but they intend to invade Klendathu (the bugs' planet). The colonized are either exterminated or submitted to a subaltern condition. The US regional identities are melted into a national identity and extrapolated to the neighboring spaces^{viii}. King (1998) notes that Heinlein's novel is connected with the historical and political context of the 1950s (*Bug Planet: Frontier Myth in Starship Troopers*, (p. 1018). In his view, the narrative is more concerned with the present more than what the future would look like. The end of WWII and the advent of the Cold War have forced the imperialistic powers to abandon their colonies. Subsequently, decolonization has been established as the ultimate objective by the oppressed. The outcomes of the Cold War and the decolonization process were meant to create a new world order which is ruled by a super-powerful nation.

Heinlein translated the historical fluctuations into a personal comment on the endangered democracies that need to go for conquest and not remain in inertness and wait-and-see policy. Klendathu is not an especially rich place and it does not have a strategic value. Yet, its invasion would enable the humans to assert their authority on the universe and subject the ‘other’ to the supremacy of mankind. Heinlein portrayed a quintessential concern of post-imperialist powers: the regeneration of the myth of epic territorial conquests to federate people around neo-nationalist doctrines. This posture attracted the wrath of the 1950s critics who disapproved Heinlein's fascist-friendly^{ix} discourse. Nevertheless, some contemporary scholars have transcended the fascistic lenses and deal with the novel from a neo-imperialistic perspective.

2.2. A Stranger in a Strange Land, the U-turn

Unfairly and prematurely condemned, Heinlein would deliver two years later his most read novel: *a Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) which was immediately hailed as the Cult book of the

counter culture. Heinlein operates a discursive shift on the questions of liberty and emancipation. The plot revolves around Michael Valentine Smith a man on Mars and raised by the Martians. He is repatriated to Earth and soon started to be coveted by governmental agencies, religious organizations, and the media. Smith discovers the terrestrial costumes and assimilates language and culture through ‘grokking’^x. Smith’s dissatisfaction with his new environment promoted him to establish a new cult: ‘The Church of all Worlds’. Heinlein’s narrative is a virulent criticism of the capitalist values of money, consumerism, and opportunism. The writer instituted his discourse mutation with what Higgins^{xi} (2013) names psychic decolonization. The idea of Mind decolonization is assumed as the most significant form of emancipation. In Ngugi’s words, the process of decolonization passes by the understanding of the colonial condition and its unwholesome alienation strategies:

Colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with .that which is most external to one's environment. It starts with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualisation, of thinking, of formal education; of mental development, from the language of daily interaction is the home and in the community (p. 28).

Smith landed on Earth with an assembled identity that was menaced by the Terrans and their imperialistic drifts. His indigenous language did not allow him to understand the culture of the Terrans, and he was, therefore, initiated to the local language. Smith was disappointed by the values and ethics of the world. The central Federation - guarantor of peace and prosperity - appeared to be a corrupted system based on delusions, money and religious bigotry. Hence, Smith decided to create a utopian alternative embodied in his ‘Church of all Worlds’. Higgins (2013) explains that Heinlein’s protagonist incarnates a tendency in the 1960s counter culture which consists in fulfilling mental emancipation through artificial paradises:

Iconic 1960s sf texts, such as Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965), and Arthur C. Clarke’s novelization of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) offer striking variations on Zieger’s model; each novel centers upon a hallucinogenic exploration of inner space, but these narratives, written within a historical context framed by Western European decolonization and an ascendant Cold War American neo-imperialism, explicitly criticize territorial colonialism and posit inner space as a landscape colonized by social norms and unconscious psychological urges. (p. 228).

Higgins synthesizes the essence of N’gugi’s theories on the priority of cognitive emancipation over territorial recovery. *Servitude*, in the novel, concerns the Terrans who melted within a corporatist and neo-imperialist system that estranged its adepts. Smith acts as a decolonization catalyst that shatters the linguistic and cultural codes of the oppressive Federation by introducing an alternative utopian model. Heinlein introduced the theme of free sexuality and alternative mysticism to assert the belief that utopianism cannot be through imperialist expeditions but rather through spiritual completion. Thus, decolonization is envisaged within inward change of beliefs and mind liberation.

The voice of Heinlein is assumedly expressed through Jubal's daring statements. Thus, on servitude and disillusionment, Jubal explains to Jill one of his greatest illusions:

My dear, I used to think I was serving humanity . . . and I pleased in the thought. Then I discovered that humanity does not want to be served; on the contrary it resents any attempt to serve it. So now I do what pleases myself (p. 116).

On the question of language and cultural hegemony, Jubal admits that English (as a global language) is a tool of cultural oppression and identity suppression:

English is the largest of human tongues, with several times the vocabulary of the second largest language -- this alone made it inevitable that English would eventually become, as it did, the lingua franca of this planet, for it is thereby the richest and most flexible -- despite its barbaric accretions . . . or, I should say, because of its barbaric accretions. English swallows up anything that comes its way, makes English out of it (p. 286).

When this linguistic hegemony is contended, in the exchange between Jubal and Mahmoud, Heinlein reaffirms the imperialist stance. When Mahmoud intends to rehabilitate Arabic, as another expressive language, Jubal's deflective statement eschews the comparison:

[Mahmoud] "But there are things which can be said in Arabic that cannot be said in English."

Jubal nodded. "That's why I've kept up my reading" (p.286).

Heinlein's novel offered an insightful conception on language that matched the social and cultural turmoil of the 1960s. Incidentally, Heinlein's novel was adopted by the Hippies within the era of the Civil Rights Movement. The novel addressed a generation's aspiration to end imperialistic doctrines and especially those which are located within the same nation. Heinlein's novel contributed to challenge the canons of hegemonic culture and linguistic subservience. Smith, guided by Jubal^{xii}, understands that mankind is servile to a corrupt system in which freedom is interstitial. The incisiveness of the statement lies in the annihilation of the hegemonic discourse and the establishment of a counter-cultural proposal.

2.3. The Moon is a Harsh Mistress: Voices of the Oppressed

Published in 1966, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* takes Heinlein previous statement beyond psychological reconstruction: this narrative is a call for rebellion and anarchism. The novel accounts for the insurrection of the Loonies^{xiii} against the Terran authority and their abusive administration of the colony. Heinlein illustrates the early stages of the revolution – organized by MIKE^{xiv}, Mannie, and Professor de la Paz. The germinating insurrection turned soon into a total war, where both battlefield action and international diplomacy were used to settle the conflict. The obstinacy of the Terran authority to suppress the revolt comforted their self-deception in not seeing the scope of the insurrection. After a sustained rhythm of struggle, the Loonies wrested their

independence and the joy of victory was tarnished by the premises of the rise of a dictatorial authority within the ex-colony.

Encompassing the revolution, the narrative allows the discovery of life on Luna, the Loonies are gender and race progressive. Like in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* emphasizes self-actualization through the exaltation of difference and variety. The liberation of morals announced in *Stranger* is achieved and fully assumed. Moreover, the deportees and their descendents have developed their own dialect which is an omniscient form of cognitive autonomy. Their life mode is a gallery of idealist anarchism and a permanent revolt against the gentrification of their existence: as ‘untouchables’ victims of caste-discrimination, they subsumed themselves to the reality of their condition, and organized their lives in a singular manner. Undisputedly, Heinlein relayed the ideas of Jubal, in *Stranger*, and reshaped them in Professor de la Paz’s most explicit statement on freedom:

I will accept any rules that you feel necessary to your freedom. I am free, no matter what rules surround me. If I find them tolerable, I tolerate them; if I find them too obnoxious, I break them. I am free because I know that I alone am morally responsible for everything I do (p. 65).

To the Loonies, liberty became accessible and inevitable because they were firmly convinced that despite their efforts, they would neither improve their condition nor change their status as sub-humans. Heinlein outlines the fracture between the Terran elite and the Loonies in a historical reference to the American Revolution (1776-1783). Another contextual reference is the Latin American resonance of proper names (Luna, Terra, Mannie, and Bernardo de la Paz). Heinlein seems to have been inspired by the revolutionary trends in South America and their emblematic figures: Ché Guevara, Simon Bolivar, and Fidel Castro. Both the American Revolution and the Latin American revolutions were historical instances of anti-imperialism. Although theorized by artificial intelligence and a group of agitators, the novel’s discourse is explicitly an anarchist discourse grounded on popular uprising. The revolution is not elitist; it is rather a popular and egalitarian upheaval of the oppressed against the establishment.

3. A Comment on the Trilogy

Robert A. Heinlein’s trilogy explored inconsistently the themes of liberty and self responsibility. Often considered as an elusive writer, he confuses the issue by multiplying the authorial outlooks on servitude and emancipation. Nevertheless, there is a discrete nexus between the three novels which may be viewed as logical continuum and an evolution on the questions of imperialism and decolonization. In the trilogy, authority and power are recurrent motives. In all the novels, there is a Terran Federation that rules the world. In *Starship Troopers*, the Federation is blindly trusted as the warrantor of the world’s peace and stability. It employs belligerent and jingoistic means to prevent the world from alien attacks. In *Stranger in a Strange Land*, the established Federation does comfort the system in a illusory state of stability. Yet, the world order is shaken by the arrival of a mystical Martian who unveils the flaws of the Terrans: money, religious bigotry, media, and morals. Smith contends the prevailing brainwashing and institutes a

mental decolonization via his Church. Finally, the Terran Federation, in *the Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, is depicted as a quasi-tyrannical structure that sustained imperialism as an operating mode. Segregationist and unegalitarian, the Terran Federation maltreats the Loonies and ultimately urges them to revolt.

Heinlein's imperialist discourse in *Starship Troopers* vanished gradually in the next novels. Beyond his distrust of kingly authority, the advent of emancipation movements (Hippies, Civil Rights Movement, and decolonization) comforted his belief in the end of servility and expansionism. Heinlein used outer space as a metaphor to mirror his ideological concerns at the scale of the world. In addition, his perceptions were captured by the readers of the 1960s who made of *Stranger in a Strange Land* an emblem of their blueprint.

The trilogy of the 'Dean of Science Fiction' features a charismatic leader who ensures transmission of knowledge and values to a younger disciple: Dubois and Rico; Jubal and Smith; De la Paz and Mannie. This Jungian figure evokes Heinlein's attachment to juvenile education and his attachment to the universality of this theme. His characters are interchangeable and follow the rites of initiation pattern: young men born and raised in exotic locations are trained to reach their emancipation from a neocolonial or imperialistic project. Emancipation is achieved by verbalization and then by action.

4. Postcolonial Discourse Markers: the Emergence of Liminality

In his ideological mutation, Heinlein has disseminated a series of discourse markers that echo his concerns about colonialism and its decline. The postcolonial perspective is illustrated through the relics of imperialist discourse and their incidences on the colonized. Thus, the imperialistic unrequited vision of otherness urged the colonized to question their human condition and the circumstances of their servility. While *Starship Troopers* incarnates the magnificence of the imperialist project, the two other narratives reversed the foundations of hegemonic colonialism.

Awareness was the triggering factor that enabled the protagonists of the *Moon in a Harsh Mistress* to devise and stage riots, insurrection, and revolution. This consciousness was achieved by Smith and his cult in a *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The negotiation from the state of colonized to emancipated included liminalities^{xv} in which language serves as a tool of passage from an imposed to a fulfilled indigenous identity.

Preliminal	Liminal	Postliminal
Starship	Stranger	The Moon
Imperialism	Awareness	Emancipation
English	Creole	Pidgin

Heinlein himself changed his conception of otherness: first, an alien (non-human), then a freak (a spectacular attraction), and finally a group of oppressed (rebels). Without excessively victimizing the oppressed, he offered an alternative outlook on the ineluctability of decolonization as part of a biological and anthropological evolution of world order. Therein dwells Heinlein's progressive discourse: the reinvention of utopian ideals from ruthless mercantilism to libertarianism and egalitarianism.

Conclusion

The examination of Robert A. Heinlein's 'Trilogy of Liberty and Self-responsibility' permitted the disintegration of the preconceived notion that the SF writer was a reactionary. Heinlein appears to be more progressive, on the question of decolonization, than suggested by his reputation. The review of the postcolonial SF theoretical contributions grounded the study on the issues of otherness, imperialism, decolonization and liminality. The works of Bhabha, Ngugi, and Arnold Van Gennep constituted an ideological substratum that addressed the unreciprocated dialogue between the tenants of colonialism and decolonization. Through the prism of a colonial vs. postcolonial reading, Heinlein displayed a verifiable discursive evolution on decolonization. The three novels mirror a possible change of posture regarding freedom and otherness: First, neocolonialism, then mind decolonization, and finally, plain insurrection. Hence, the trilogy enacted a mutation that is similar the anthropological rites of passage: preliminality, liminality, and postliminality.

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Notes

ⁱ *Nineteen Eighty-four*. 1949

ⁱⁱ *A Brave New World* (1932) and *Brave New World, Revisited* (1958).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Solaris*, 1972.

^{iv} *In Culture and Imperialism* (1993).

^v The most notorious accounts being Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1899); see Mary Louise Pratt *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992).

^{vi} Discrimination form grounded on the belief in some species' superiority over others.

^{vii} *Starship Troopers* (1997). Directed by Paul Verhoeven, Written by Ed Neumeier.

^{viii} See Carl Abott's *Rocky Mountain Refuge* (2012) where he refers to Heinlein's *Sixth Column*: The scholar explains Heinlein's adoration for regional identities (p221).

^{ix} Reference to Bertham Gross concept. In 1980, Gross published *Friendly Fascism*, in which he described the post-democratic mutations of Western countries.

^x A neologism coined by Heinlein which refers to the assimilation and understanding of complex concepts.

^{xi} David M. Higgins. *Psychic Decolonization in the 1960s*. 2013.

^{xii} An eccentric and iconoclastic philosopher who became the mentor and protector of Smith during his escape.

^{xiii} The inhabitants of Luna (the Moon), a colony of the Terran Federation populated by the 'rejects' of the society and the leftovers.

^{xiv} The Lunar Colony's Computer in charge of the management of the land and its people.

^{xv} A term coined by Arnold Van Gennep in his book *Rites de Passage* (1909). It refers to the transition stage in the rites of passage. Therein, individuals are tentatively stranded between their former and new spiritual identity.