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Guy R. Davidson
University of Wollongong, guy@uow.edu.au

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Sexuality and the Statistical Imaginary in Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton*

Guy Davidson

In common with most of his work, Samuel Delany's science fiction novel *Trouble on Triton* (1976) is subscribed with a tag providing the geographical and temporal co-ordinates of its composition – in this case, 'London, Nov. '73–July '74'. Asked in an interview whether this particular tag has 'some organic significance', Delany replies: 'It's been my contention for some time that science fiction is not about the future. It works by setting up a dialogue with the here-and-now, a dialogue as intricate and rich as the writer can make it' ('Second SFS Interview' 343–44).¹ In this essay, I want to pursue some of the ways in which *Trouble on Triton* might be seen as engaging in dialogue with the here-and-now of its composition – a here-and-now that, if we accept one influential periodizing analysis of commodity culture, is also our own. *Triton* is written at that point in history in which economic stagnation in the West necessitates significant changes in the organization of capital – changes that have been collected together and described under the rubric of postmodernity. From the early 1970s – or, in David Harvey's more precise formulation, from 'around 1972' (vii) – there is a gradual and uneven, but nonetheless momentous, shift from the Fordist dispensation of the previous postwar decades, under which mass production entailed standardized products and mass consumption, to a more mobile and flexible regime of accumulation, under which economies of scope supplant economies of scale, resulting in a seemingly unrestrained proliferation of 'niche' consumer options. For many theorists of postmodernity, this increased flexibility of capital is correlated with an increased flexibility in modes of selfhood. In *Triton*, plasticity of identities and desires is also a central feature of the future world that Delany renders with characteristic vividness and intelligence.

Due to a range of fantastic technologies, citizens of Triton can transform virtually any aspect of their person that they please – including aspects that, in our own world, are generally perceived to be fixed or essential, such as gender, race, and sexual orientation. *Triton* thus suggests a hyperbolic extension of contemporary consumer capitalism, in which, it has been claimed, the notion of a core self has been discarded as postmodern subjects deliriously shop for new identities in a ‘supermarket of style’ (Polhemus). In proposing correspondences between Delany’s fiction and some of the central claims of commentaries on postmodernity, I do not mean to suggest, however, that *Triton* simply endorses the ‘schizophrenic’ tendencies of post-Fordist capitalism – tendencies often seen in postmodern theory as deleterious. Instead I suggest that in *Triton*, as in much of his other writing, Delany powerfully conveys a sense of *both* the progressive *and* the regressive possibilities inherent within contemporary commodity culture, so that this novel in particular and his work in general might be thought of as exemplifying the kind of intellectual project called for by Fredric Jameson, in which it becomes possible to grasp ‘the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism within a single thought’ (*Postmodernism* 47).²

It is primarily through its account of the multiplicity of sexual desires on Triton that the novel develops its account of the potentials of contemporary capitalism. Triton is a world relieved of ‘twentieth-century style sexual oppression’ (99), which has seemingly no taboos on consensual sexual behaviour, and which accommodates a bewildering array of sexual identity types – an exponential expansion of our own society’s division of the population into the relatively attenuated taxonomy of homosexual, heterosexual, and (perhaps) bisexual. The myriad erotic persuasions of Triton are catered to in a range of clubs, bars, and similar venues: to take just a couple of examples, there are mentions of an ‘establishment that cater[s] to under-sixteen-year-old girls and fifty-five-year-plus men’ (248) and of places where one ‘can manacle eighteen-year-old boys to the wall and pierce their nipples with red-hot needles’, or indeed ‘ice-cold ones’ (99). Though the commercial aspects of life on Triton are not foregrounded, the panoply of venues in which different erotic tastes may be pursued clearly invokes the commodified sexual culture of the postmodern Western metropolis (and here it is perhaps worth noting the near-coincidence of the advent of postmodernity ‘around 1972’ with the appearance of one of the most spectacular examples of commodified sexual culture – the vibrant and comparatively visible urban gay subculture of the post-liberation decade).

Triton’s representation of a proliferative economy of urban erotic styles

dovetails with the argument developed by a number of theorists that the formation of sexual minorities is entangled with the growth of consumer capitalism. For instance, in his influential essay ‘Capitalism and Gay Identity’, John D’Emilio contends that the changes to traditional social arrangements wrought by capitalism – importantly, increasing urbanization and a new emphasis, for both men and women, on self-determination rather than responsibility to the family – have enabled the production and increase of homosexual individuals. By implication, this argument can be extended to the formation of other sexual minorities, such as s/m practitioners. However, in invoking the work of scholars such as D’Emilio at this point, I am complicating my suggestion that Delany’s representation of sexual diversity may be correlated with the postmodern moment. For the work of D’Emilio and others pinpoints this shift in sexual identity formation at the turn of the twentieth century – the period of the early stages of commodity capitalism rather than its contemporary manifestation, that is, the period of modernity rather than postmodernity.³ The complication makes evident one of the most vexed issues associated with the periodization of capitalism. If sexual diversity can be read in one critical context as symptomatic of modernity and in another as an indication of the postmodern present, this suggests that postmodernity is in important ways continuous with modernity rather than a decisive break with it. In what follows, I maintain a sense of the heuristic usefulness of the distinctions between modernity and postmodernity, while also attempting to keep in sight some of the important continuities between these formations. I find helpful here Harvey’s argument about the ‘interpenetration of opposed tendencies in capitalism as a whole’ (342), according to which there is within both Fordist and post-Fordist capitalism ‘never one fixed configuration, but a swaying back and forth’ between ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ characteristics such as ‘centralization and decentralization, ... authority and deconstruction, ... hierarchy and anarchy, ... permanence and flexibility’ (339). If *Triton* is an exemplary postmodern document, it is so in part because it registers the interpenetration of modern and postmodern elements: at the same time that it attests to the condition of postmodernity, the book evinces the persistence of modern elements of culture and – in particular – identity.

The swaying back and forth between modern and postmodern conceptions of identity is crystallized in the novel’s connection of sexuality to what I call *the statistical imaginary*. The phrase is intended as a shorthand term for an entrenched mode of perception that is intimately related to the operations of capitalist culture, in both its modern and postmodern permutations. As theorists such as Ian Hacking and Mark Seltzer argue,

in modernity and postmodernity statistical thinking is a significant determinant of selfhood: in important respects, people understand both their own identities and those of others in terms of statistical categories or types (Hacking; Seltzer esp. 82–84 and 93–118). Collaterally, the desire of individuals, including sexual desire, is also bound up with the statistical imaginary. The interrelation of sexual identity, sexual desire, and statistics is a central concern of *Triton*. It is an advanced version of our own statistical thinking that makes possible the multiple sexual types of Triton; on Triton desire itself can be scientifically rendered as sets of figures that indicate the range of erotic preferences. By pointing up the ways in which statistical discourse facilitates the constitution of types and the fixing of desire, Triton gestures towards the role of that discourse as a technology of the disciplinary society as well as its (arguably not unrelated) role as an instrument for the analysis and promotion of consumption. However, if statistics enables the distinctively 'modern' reification of individual identity, and therefore the regulation and control of individual bodies that has been such a source of anxiety for post-Foucauldian criticism, it is also the paradoxical case that statistical thinking tends to encourage the proliferation of categories – the production of ever more refined types, preferences, and commodities that leads to the distinctively 'postmodern' fragmentation and lability of identity.

Critics have tended to read *Triton* as endorsing this postmodern libidinal play and, beyond this, a postmodern politics of difference. *Triton* is often understood as a postmodern variant of the literary genre of the utopia, in which social difference, generally flattened in the traditional examples of the genre, is incorporated and, indeed, valorized. Despite Delany's own insistence that the novel should not be seen as a utopia, the critical tendency is understandable. As Delany concedes, the social system of Triton is clearly meant to be 'an improvement on our own' (*Triton* 323). Moreover, the novel is subtitled 'An Ambiguous Heterotopia', and thereby designated as a counterpoint to Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974); Delany's use of the term *heterotopia* has usually been seen as gesturing towards the novel's distinctively postmodern emphasis upon and celebration of social difference.⁴ But *Triton* celebrates this tendency of postmodern culture only up to a point; this is, after all, an *ambiguous* heterotopia. *Triton*'s valorization of postmodern heterogeneity is complicated by several narrative and formal elements, including its reliance upon a central convention of the realist novel – that is, its focus upon what Lukács calls 'the problematic individual', who experiences himself as being at odds with his social environment (*Theory* 78). Unusually for a novel that supposedly works within the utopian tradition,

the narrative of *Triton* explores the romantic and psychic tribulations of its protagonist, Bron Helmstrom, rather than the details of the social totality; however, the novel also, as Tom Moylan points out, deploys the celebrated insight of 1970s' feminism about the connection of the personal and the political (Moylan 175), so that its account of Bron's misadventures obliquely signals the framing structures of Tritonian society. In important respects *Triton* – like much of Delany's later science fiction and consistent with the tenor of much of his critical writing – is critical of the perceived ideology of what Delany, in an appendix to the novel (as elsewhere), calls 'mundane fiction'. Indeed, *Triton*'s two auto-critical and self-reflexive appendices enable Delany to eschew the 'closing cadence' that he associates with conventional realism, as well as constituting significant expressions of the novel's ambivalent relation to the possibilities embodied within Triton society.⁵ However, it is, in my view, most importantly through its deployment of the realist novel's standard concern with – to borrow Walter Benjamin's words – the 'profound perplexity' of 'the solitary individual' (87) that this heterotopia is rendered ambiguous. A throwback to late twentieth-century male chauvinism, Bron is a misfit on feminist, non-patriarchal Triton, and it is from his jaundiced point of view that we view his adopted society's sophisticated social and sexual arrangements. Although Bron is clearly intended as an unreliable point of focalization, his centrality to the representation also has crucial countervailing implications for our understanding of the possibilities of postmodern capitalism that the novel explores. And it is in his relation to my two titular concerns that these implied criticisms of postmodern potentials are worked out: in the representations of Bron's plight we most fully discern the intersection of sexuality and statistics, and the manifold political effects that this intersection entails.

2

On Triton the 'subjective reality' of its citizens is held to be 'as politically inviolable as possible' (225–26). Consequently, Triton embraces an ultra-liberalism that, in accordance with Darko Suvin's argument about the cognitive estrangement effect of the sf utopia, has the effect of bringing into relief the limitations of the purported pluralism of early twenty-first-century democracies (see Suvin esp. 58–62). Not only is there a diversity of erotic orientation that exceeds our own, there are also 'forty or fifty different sexes and twice as many religions' (99). The individual's choice in this seeming paradise of libertarianism is promoted and enabled

by those technologies that allow quick and easy transformations of body type, gender, race, and sexual orientation. Sam, for instance, is a strapping black man who used to be a 'sallow-faced, blonde, blue-eyed...waitress' (126) attracted to other sallow, blonde, blue-eyed waitresses who (so it seemed to her) desired only black men; availing herself of the technological capabilities of satellite society Sam has become the black man desired by her own objects of desire. Bron, on the other hand, remains plagued by ineffable discontents and stubbornly resistant to the panacean possibilities of Tritonian society, asking, in 'profound perplexity': '[W]hat happens to those of us who *don't* know [what we like]? What happens to those of us who have problems and don't know *why* we have the problems we do? ... [W]hat about those of us who only know what we *don't* like?' (104). In the last third of the novel, after his girlfriend, the Spike, rejects him, Bron decides that he does know what he wants: the submissive woman who is the counterpart of his deluded macho self-image. Eventually recognizing the slim likelihood of ever finding a woman who embodies his sexist definition of proper femininity, Bron decides to become that woman himself. He also has his sexual desire 'refixed' at one of the popular clinics devoted to this purpose so that he will now desire men. These decisions paradoxically and somewhat comically exemplify Bron's devotion to masculine bravery. As he tells another of his housemates, Lawrence: 'There are certain things that have to be done. And when you come to them, if you're a man... you just have to do them' (231). In a society in which submissive women are a rarity, Bron sees his self-transformation, grandiosely, as a means 'to preserve the species' (232). But the sex change does nothing to make him (or her) feel any happier; in fact, it exacerbates Bron's isolation, so that the narrative ends with him/her in the depths of existential despair and, according to Delany's own commentary on the novel, teetering on the brink of psychosis ('Second SFS Interview' 338).

If fluidity of identity is a hallmark of postmodernity, then Tritonian society seems at first sight eminently postmodern. On Triton, the social identities of gender and race have been radically de-essentialized, decoupled from the bodies that are generally supposed visibly to indicate them. As Edward Chan notes, in the novel, gender and race are largely rendered as (one might almost say *reduced to*) 'surfaces', or configurations of 'visible markers' (Chan 190), and thereby aligned with the more obviously cosmetic, and even more easily rearranged, significations of identity such as dress and adornment. (The diversity and rapid turnover of sartorial fashion is, in an intensification of our own capitalist culture, a highly visible strand of everyday life on Triton; on a visit to the less socially progressive Earth, Bron is struck that there seem to be only 'three basic

clothing styles' [135].) However, while it is true, as Chan argues, that the account of identity and social difference in the novel works to deconstruct assumptions about the essential nature, and therefore the enduring importance of, identity categories, there are also significant aspects of the representation that qualify this account. Notably, for instance, Bron comes to realize that simply changing his gender through technological intervention can never transform him totally into a woman, in the sense of providing him/her with a feminine subject position that is grounded in a personal history. As a counsellor at the gender reassignment clinic points out to him/her after his/her transformation: '*Being* a woman is ... a complicated genetic interface. It means having that body of yours from birth, and growing up in the world, learning to do whatever you have to do...with and within that body. That body has to be yours, and yours all your life. In that sense, you will never be a "complete" woman' (251).⁶ The reference here to the significance of an underlying embodied history complicates the emphasis on the superficiality and fluidity of identity that elsewhere characterizes the novel, suggesting a continuity of the person not unlike that associated with the 'centred subject' of modernity (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 15).

The persistence of such an idea of personhood is still more strikingly apparent in the novel's representations of sexual identity – one of the aspects of individual existence, like gender and race, commonly thought to be core or essential but one, unlike them, not all that readily detectable as a set of 'visible markers' (in spite of the anxious cultural insistence that sexuality – or, more accurately, homosexuality – should be locatable in the visual register).⁷ In modernity, the invisibility of sexuality is co-implicated with its status as a secret buried within the individual, significant aspects of which (so psychoanalysis teaches) may be inaccessible even to the individual him- or herself. Arguably, it is sexuality rather than gender or race (or indeed any other class of selfhood) that is in the modern era located as the deepest substratum of the personality – which is not, of course, to say that sexuality is always or even generally the most socially or politically significant permutation of identity.

One of the pleasures of the realist novel as it has developed since the eighteenth century is that it offers us an illusory knowledge of the secret domain of sexuality within others; the capacity of the novel to give us access to the consciousness of others – that is, characters – in a way that is not possible in real life is always in some sense an access also to the mysteries of those others' erotic lives.⁸ In *Triton*, which focuses on the vicissitudes of Bron's sexual desire, Delany exploits this capacity adroitly. The pleasure of knowing another's sexual desire that the novel affords

may be given a further frisson when the protagonist (like our 'real life' selves) is ignorant of or disavows his or her own sexual feelings and their implications – when the central consciousness through which the narrative is filtered is 'unreliable', as Bron's manifestly is. Although Bron insists that he knows his own desire (for a submissive female and then, once he has changed his sex, for a macho male), the narration makes it abundantly apparent that things are not this simple, providing a complexly layered account of the self-deceptions and self-justifications that accrue around Bron's experiences of his unsuccessful pursuit of his co-worker Miriamne, his abortive relationship with the Spike, and his/her muddled attempts to pursue men once he has been transformed into a heterosexual woman. Through this detailed unfolding of Bron's erotic consciousness (or lack of erotic consciousness, or erotic bad faith) the novel creates the sense of a complicated, but internally consistent, identity.

In its representation of other characters' sexualities, as well, the novel seems almost to retreat from the radical implications of its suggestion that identities are not essences. Sam, for instance, retains his desire (for white women who desire black men) despite his change of race and gender.⁹ In the case of Alfred, Bron's adolescent housemate, there is the same hinting at an authentic erotic identity. Alfred's persistent experiences of impotence and premature ejaculation with women lead him to think that he might (really) 'be' gay, and he duly undergoes refixation. He tries on his new desire for six months, but his troubles continue, even though he is 'horny for men all right'. Eventually Alfred asks to be refixed so that he once again desires women: 'Let me at least like what I *like* liking – you know? – whether I mess up or not' (80). Even the Spike, one of the novel's most enthusiastic proponents of Triton's somatic and psychic makeovers, after being refixed so that she can reciprocate the feelings of a woman who is sexually interested in her, gets refixed again so that she can go back to her desire for 'tall, curly-haired blonds with high cheekbones' (77). With all three characters, then, there is a sense in which an underlying sexual orientation remains as the essence of selfhood, no matter what pyrotechnics of libidinal reconfiguration Tritonian technology makes available. Indeed, the scenario of sexual refixation is itself structured by a tension between fluidity and reification rather than exemplifying a straightforward expression of the former, for while the scenario suggests that desire may be easily rechannelled, it also insists that it is precisely, scientifically identifiable.

I probably need to clarify what I mean by making these observations about the tendency of the novel to adhere to a modern notion of sexuality as essence, given the prejudice within contemporary literary and cultural

theory against ideas about the fixity of identity. I do not mean to say that this aspect of the novel is in any way a 'failure', either aesthetically or politically. On the contrary, what I want to suggest is that the novel's retention of a conventional conception of sexuality is part of what makes it a compelling narrative. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work has so richly shown, in the modern era sexuality constitutes a force field within which our cognitive relations – with ourselves, with others, and with texts – are importantly organized and galvanized.¹⁰ In its insistence upon underlying sexual essences in the characters, and especially in its detailed rendering of Bron's sexual interiority, *Triton* enables possibilities of readerly recognition and identification, even though these possibilities may be, as we shall see (in critical contexts at least), disavowed.

3

Some critics have suggested that the focus on Bron's individually distinctive psyche is an appropriate means of representing a utopian world in which the individual is the primary social unit. What is seen as Bron's failure – or at best his pathos – lies in his inability to take advantage of the possibilities offered by Tritonian society to accommodate the 'subjective reality' of its citizens. For Michelle Massé, for instance, characters such as Lawrence, the Spike, and Sam, who take advantage of the multifarious choices on offer, 'stand as models of creativity and flexibility', providing an instructive contrast with Bron's increasingly rigid adherence to a mythic masculine ideal and his concomitant self-idealization ('Expectations' 61). Similarly, Tom Moylan argues that Sam is a 'counter-example' to Bron within the 'emancipatory political structure' of Triton, in which freedom, and its inherent risks, are radically guaranteed to the individual: for Moylan, Sam is a 'self-actualized person (185), the "good-looking, friendly guy" that Bron could be if he let himself develop' (186). However, as Chan points out, the characters' subjective realities are never purely individual but always fashioned in the context of their alignment with various social groups (187). *Triton* is, in fact, preoccupied with the classification of people in terms of *types*.¹¹ On Triton, the concept of the type is the primary means through which social identity and social interaction are managed; and it is primarily through his resistance to typing that Bron's discontents are manifested. Bron 'hate[s] being a type' in this society in which, as both the Spike and Lawrence assert at different points, 'everyone' is a type (5, 67, emphasis in original). His fellow citizens are happy to improvise their identities within the parameters of various

categories; as Lawrence puts it, 'The true mark of social intelligence is how unusual we can make our particular behavior for the particular type we are when we are put under particular pressure' (5). Bron, by contrast, seeks to differentiate himself from others, to mark himself out – in keeping with his investment in the ideology of stand-alone masculinity – as a unique individual. But even in his attempts to elude classification, Bron is captured within the logic of social typology. Bron tells Lawrence that 'I rather pride myself on occasionally doing things contrary to what everyone else does', to which Lawrence replies 'That's a type too' (6). Much later in the narrative, Bron's counsellor at the gender reassignment clinic tells him that 'life under our system doesn't generate that many serious sexually dissatisfied types. Though, if you've come here, I suspect you're the type who's pretty fed up with people telling you what type you aren't or are' (220). So entrenched is the idea of the type that Bron himself resorts to it in order, paradoxically, to convey his own supposed uniqueness: 'I've always prided myself on being the type who does the things no one else would be caught dead doing' (243).

For Chan, this preoccupation with the type means that the novel in fact 'subtly forecloses on the category of the individual' (190). If *Triton* depends on the realist convention of the 'problematic individual', it simultaneously undermines the ideological potency of this idea – and the form of the realist novel that depends so heavily upon this idea – by insisting on Bron's assimilation to the system of social typing. The novel's attention to social types is also the means through which it critically engages with postmodern capitalism's disposition of human experience in terms of commodified 'niches'. As in Jean Baudrillard's classic analysis of consumer society, on *Triton* individual differentiation is paradoxically only possible by identifying with a group – something alternately denied and (inadvertently) acknowledged by Bron. Analysing the ways in which the advertising of mass-produced commodities deceptively appeals to the desire for individuality, Baudrillard concludes that in consumer society the only way 'to differentiate oneself is precisely to affiliate to a model, ... to a combinatorial pattern of fashion, and therefore to relinquish any real difference, any singularity' (88). For Baudrillard, the phenomenon of defining one's identity through consumption in this way indicates the demise of the modern subject: 'The "person" as absolute value, with its indestructible features and specific force, forged by the whole of the Western tradition, as the organizing myth of the Subject – the person with its passions, its will, its character (or banality) – is absent, dead' (88).

But while Delany's rendition of the determination of individual identity by the group certainly resonates with Baudrillard's discussion of consumer

society, he does not, of course, share Baudrillard's unrelievedly lugubrious view of the implications of this phenomenon, nor does he join Baudrillard, and other critics of postmodernity such as Fredric Jameson, in a lament for the passing of 'the Subject' – for, despite Baudrillard's ironizing capitalization, and despite Jameson's careful hedging about whether the centred subject was ever a reality rather than 'an ideological mirage' (*Postmodernism* 15), nostalgia for the unified – and unique – individual clearly subtends their accounts of postmodern commodity culture. In fact, Delany has explicitly challenged Jameson's assertions on this issue, arguing 'that any time when there was such a notion of a centered subject, not only was it an ideological mirage, it was a mirage that necessarily grew up to mask the psychological, economic, and material oppression of an "other"' (qtd. in Dubey 201).

Delany is interested in *Triton*, as elsewhere, in the ways in which social categories help construct subjectivity: his often cited meditation on himself as a black man, a gay man, and a writer in *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988) could perhaps be nominated as the paradigmatic exemplification of this concern.¹² Baudrillard sees this phenomenon of the determination of the subject by categories as obviating the possibility of political action. As he puts it, the affiliation to the group encouraged by consumer society makes impossible 'concrete, conflictual relations with others and the world' (88); even more trenchantly, he claims that '[no] revolution is possible' in fully developed consumer society – or rather that 'revolutions take place every day at that level, but they are "fashion revolutions", which are harmless and foil the other kind' (94). Delany, by contrast, tends to see recognition of the role of social categories in the determination of identity as an extension of political possibilities rather than as a constraint upon them. This attitude obviously aligns Delany with the 'post-'68' orientation of postmodern theory towards the valorization of social difference. In his comments on *Triton*, Delany makes the alignment explicit, stating as justification of his opposition to the 'large-scale social engineering' of utopian thinking that '[the] "good life" simply cannot be mapped out wholly within the range traditionally described as the political. Indeed, the post-modern notion of the political has probably changed as much as anything else since 1968' ('Second SFS Interview' 331). Admittedly, when Delany makes his explicit claims about the productive effects of identity categories ('black man, gay man, writer') he does not do so with specific reference to the context of consumer culture. But if commodity logic is indeed the reigning logic of postmodern culture, then these kinds of politicized identities are never easily disentangled from the operations of consumption (though neither, of course, should the former

simply be equated with the latter). With its descriptions of the urban market of sexual niches, *Triton* makes the intersection of identity with the commodity vividly apparent.

4

Attempting once more to define his own uniqueness, and in that attempt inadvertently succumbing once more to the inexorable logic of the type, Bron declares to Lawrence: 'Maybe I'm just that odd and inexplicable point oh oh oh oh oh one percent they call an individual' (121). Bron inadvertently succumbs here because there is an obvious contradiction between his self-designation as the member of even a statistically rare class of person and the intended rhetorical effect of his use of statistics – to establish his uniqueness. Bron's very use of statistics indicates his immersion in, rather than his separateness from, the society from which he feels alienated, for statistical discourse is an integral element within the novel's representation of Triton's life-world. Statistics functions not only to define social types but also to map such phenomena as the tallies of war casualties and cultural differences across historical periods. Talk about 'figures...estimates...and...predictions' (120) is one of the chief means through which the 'science' in this science fiction novel is conveyed, as well as being seamlessly woven into the idiom of the characters (as in Bron's declaration to Lawrence).¹³ The novel's preoccupation with statistics indicates that this future society has maintained and indeed intensified what Joan Copjec, in a summary of the nineteenth-century development of statistics, calls 'the passion for counting' (169). Most significantly for my argument, though, statistics functions in the novel to define sexuality and to bring into relief the problematic nature of Bron vis-à-vis sexuality as it is disposed on Triton.

For if Bron is not unique, he is, by the statistical standards that govern Triton society, abnormal. He suffers a logical-erotic perversion – that is, male chauvinism. As Lawrence explains to him:

Fortunately, your particular perversion today is extremely rare. Oh, I would say that maybe one man out of fifty has it – quite amazing, considering that it once was about as common as the ability to grow a beard. Just compare it to some of the other major sexual types: homosexuality, one out of five; bisexuality, three out of five; sadism and masochism, one out of nine; the varieties of fetishism, one out of eight. So you see, at one out of *fifty*, you really are in a difficult situation. And what makes it more difficult – even tragic – is that the corresponding perversion

you're searching for in women...is more like one out of five thousand. (213)

The perversion is rarer in women, Lawrence asserts, because of the recentness of their emancipation from patriarchal oppression: 'Women have only been treated...as human beings for the last – oh, say sixty-five years; and then, really, only on the moons; whereas men have had the luxury of such treatment for the last four thousand. The result of this historical anomaly is simply that, on a statistical basis, women are just a little less willing to put up with certain kinds of shit than men' (212). The kind of woman that Bron thinks he desires, Lawrence declares, is 'very, very rare', maybe even 'nonexistent' (213): a woman unaffected by the nightmare of patriarchal history who can enjoy the 'logical masochism' (strictly distinguished by Lawrence from '*just sexual*' masochism [213]) of being treated as a lesser being.¹⁴

In spite of its determination to cater to the subjective realities of its citizens, then, Triton society proves unable to accommodate the freakishly outmoded reality of Bron. The lack of fit between Bron's desire and Triton's pluralism indicates the complex relations between the statistical imaginary and the simultaneously repressive and productive capacities of capitalism. Since its inception, statistics has entailed a doubled movement towards both social inclusion and exclusion, or towards normalization and diversity; a brief detour through salient aspects of the history of statistics will help bring into relief these bivalent tendencies of the statistical imaginary, which deeply inform *Triton*.

One of the foundational elements of modern statistical thinking was the work of Adolphe Quetelet on the bell-shaped curve that emerged when characteristics amongst human populations were plotted on a graph. Quetelet extrapolated from this phenomenon the famous idea of the average man, regarding deviations from the average as error. While Quetelet's concept of the average man proved to be fruitless, his work on the bell-shaped curve was ultimately scientifically productive, beginning 'the process by which error law became a distribution formula, governing variation which was itself seen to have far greater interest than any mere mean value' (Porter 7). Statistical thinking therefore is linked to an attention to heterogeneity within human populations; as François Ewald states, '[in] statistics, there are never any real constants – only differences of various sorts' (158). The dissolution of stable entities into a range of differences that statistical thinking entails is highlighted in the scene of Bron's sexual refixation, in which a numerical read-out is first made of his 'sexual deployment template' (227). A male and a female technician debate 'just how...[Bron's] basic configuration map[s] up with the rest of

the population'. 'It's the majority configuration, isn't it?', asks the male; to which the female responds, 'There is no majority configuration' (228). While the 'base pattern' of Bron's desire is 'ordinary', what the read-out shows is a superstructure of preference that is 'entirely individual': for instance, the female technician tells him there is on his print-out 'a node line...running through from small, dark women with large hips to tall fair ones, rather chesty' and that the print-out also indicates that he 'must, at one time, have had some quite statistically impressive experience with older women, that was on its way to developing into a preference' (a result of Bron's employment as a prostitute on Mars before his emigration to Triton) (228). The male technician's retrograde suggestion that there is a majority or normative sexual identity (that is, male heterosexuality) is dismissed by the female technician's citation of the ways in which Bron's base pattern has ramified into a range of micro-orientations – the kinds of micro-orientations that Tritonian society both promotes and encourages.¹⁵

This link between statistics and social diversity is also evidenced by the fact that the development of statistics was, as Joan Copjec notes, in part a 'response to the various democratic revolutions which demanded that people be counted' (169). From one analytic perspective at least, statistics is associated with some of the most positive aspects of capitalist modernity: 'The interest in numbers was part of the modern state's concern for the welfare of its population, with whose well-being the state's was now intimately linked. What statistics calculated was the "felicity" of its citizens and what they aimed at was the indemnification against every sort of infelicity, every accident and misfortune' (Copjec 170).¹⁶ The continuity between these statistically oriented democracies and Triton – perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of the Western liberal state which disinterestedly tries to provide its citizens with their own versions of the good life – is no doubt obvious.

Moreover, as Ian Hacking has demonstrated, statistics did not simply count various kinds of people, thereby enabling governments to cater to their various needs; by setting up categories it also brought classes of persons into being underneath those categories (Hacking esp. 223). Statistics does not simply attend to social diversity; it actively creates it. Here, though, the less 'felicitous' side of statistics also emerges. If Quetelet's idea of the average man had limited scientific purchase, the related conception of a statistically determined normality has proved to have far-reaching and sometimes deleterious effects. In its production of the norm, statistics is revealed as a key mechanism of Foucauldian 'discipline and punish[ment]'. (On the other hand, the creation of statistical categories

of persons – such as homosexuals or criminals – also triggers the phenomenon of the counterdiscourse, whereby those groups classed as deviant can rally under originally pathologizing rubrics on their own behalf.) The less benign aspects of the statistical imaginary are invoked by certain vaguely sinister, even vaguely dystopian elements of life on Triton – the 'computer hegemony' where Bron works with its Taylorist 'efficiency index', the 'ego booster' booths in which citizens can access random selections of the state's surveillance files pertaining to themselves, and other indications of extensive (and secretive) government monitoring and control, such as the 'hysteria index', which (wrongly) predicts the probable number of people who will go outside when the Worlds sabotage Triton's sensory shield.¹⁷

There is one further aspect of the statistical imaginary that is germane to my argument about *Triton*, and that is the way in which statistics is associated with a degradation, not simply of the idea of stable identity, but of the more historically resonant notion of the individual. The political theorist Claude Lefort notes that with the institution of universal suffrage, paradoxically, 'social interdependence breaks down... the citizen is abstracted from all the networks in which his social life develops and becomes a mere statistic. Number replaces substance' (19). There is a certain parallelism between Lefort's account of the effects of democratization and Baudrillard's account of the disappearance of 'the Subject' ('the person with its passions, its will, its character [or banality]') from postmodernity, though there are also clear and important differences between the two. Lefort's historical reference, after all, is the institution of nineteenth-century democracy rather than postmodern commodity culture; also, what is lost for Lefort under the statistical regime is a sense of social locatedness rather than monadic self-containment. However, both these accounts trace the passing away of a 'substance' pertaining to the individual – with its concomitants of complexity and depth – and the arrival of a system of enumeration and categorization that submerges or indeed determines the subject. The opposition of category and subject that underpins the arguments of Lefort and Baudrillard is consistent with the epistemological orientation of statistics itself, which was from its inception informed by a distinction between predictable populations on the one hand and inscrutable individuals on the other. As Theodore Porter explicates, in its classic form statistics assumed that 'systems consisting of numerous autonomous individuals' 'could be presumed to generate large-scale order and regularity which would be virtually unaffected by the caprice that seemed to prevail in the actions of individuals' (5); as the scientific popularizer Robert Chambers proclaimed in relation to the new

science in 1846, 'man is seen to be an enigma only as an individual, in mass, he is a mathematical problem' (qtd. in Porter 57).

Chambers's proclamation would seem to range statistics against the novel; for we have already seen that the novel derives much of its power from its access to that realm (of individual subjectivity, and, more specifically, of individual sexuality) that statistics deems an 'enigma'. In this, the novel participates in and in fact contributes to the resistance to categorization and regulation that has been a persistent countervailing impulse of the societies in which the statistical imaginary has taken hold: the cry of Patrick McGoochan's *Prisoner* – 'I am not a number' – is no doubt the most iconic expression of this impulse within the postmodern era. The realist novel might seem a particularly suitable form through which to express this resistance because of its characteristic construction of the complexity of the 'problematic individual', who is almost by definition at odds with the system of normalization that governs modernity and also postmodernity (for all its putative embrace of difference). Bron's self-proclaimed uniqueness is more delusion than reality; the novel points up the ways in which our experience of identity under statistical categories is not only unavoidable, but also may in fact be a means of achieving personal happiness. In so doing, the novel actually undermines the idea of 'the solitary individual' that sustains the classic realist novel and that Delany insists elsewhere is a pernicious ideological mirage. But in other ways, as we have seen, the novel depends upon this central convention of mundane fiction. Delany's deployment of the stock scenario of the realist novel – the tension between the individual and society – is an important means through which this ambiguous heterotopia achieves its ambiguity.

Moylan suggests that, 'by placing a twentieth-century male supremacist', the typical hero of many contemporary realist narratives, 'against the background of a society based on principles of equality and freedom', the novel 'exposes' that character type – and the political reality signified by it – under a critical light that reveals that character as no longer a 'hero' but rather a sad and fading figure of a dying social system' (190). While this is certainly how the text tends to be read by critics – and, according to Delany, principally how he intended it to be read – it is also the case, as Delany notes, that some readers (both men and women, he says) identify with this putatively despicable character ('Second *SFS* Interview' 333). While Delany seems slightly disconcerted by this reaction, it is surely not an unpredictable result of making Bron a Jamesian 'centre of consciousness'. I want to suggest here that in reading the novel, even if we do not experience the level of empathy that Delany reports in some readers, we are all required, simply because of our engagement with the

conventions of the realist novel, to identify with him to some extent. While Bron may be a statistical abnormality by the standards of Triton society, we as novel readers are accustomed to sympathize, at least partially, with the abnormal or problematic individual. The carefully rendered vagaries of his desire and his consciousness ensure that he is surely a more compelling – if also perhaps a more objectionable – character than the Spike or Sam, whose 'flexibility' and 'creativity' some critics exhort us to admire. And if Bron is objectionable, he is also the only character we see in pain; and that pain casts a shadow over the ostensibly utopian brightness of Triton.¹⁸

The representation of Bron's inner life is the primary means through which the novel achieves what might be termed, in an extension of Suvin's formulation, a 'double cognitive estrangement effect'. That is, rather than the single level of defamiliarization encountered in more conventional utopias, the novel offers us two. The novel does not simply throw into relief the shortcomings of our present social organization by presenting us with a superior one. By filtering its depiction of Triton through Bron's objections, inchoate or lumpen though they may be, the novel also prompts readers to hesitate over the possibilities that Triton offers. Two moments from towards the end of the novel in which the statistical imaginary informs Bron's consciousness provide perhaps the most striking examples of this aspect of the text. In the first, the regenerated Bron attempts to pursue her new sexual orientation at a bar, the lay-out of which is calibrated in order to cater to the different inclinations of its patrons: there are areas for those who want to approach, areas for those who want to be approached, and a 'free-range territory' (256). Bron, paralysed with indecision over what her own inclination should be, thinks to herself, 'What they need here, of course, is three counters: One for the ones who want to approach; and then one for the people who wouldn't *mind* being approached – but, no, that wasn't the answer... With a vision of the infinite regression of counters, each with fewer and fewer people at it, until she, herself and alone, stood at the last, Bron took her place at the center of free-range' (257).

Bron's vision of an infinite regression of choice indicates once more her aloneness, her inability to fit her desire even to Triton's accommodating dispensation. At the same time, though, her vision points up the tendency towards social fragmentation that is a possible effect of a culture – and an economy – based on the celebration and production of difference. It is surely not accidental that at the moment of her deepest psychic distress, which follows not long after this scene, Bron starts to obsess about the war between the Worlds and the Satellites – the large-scale, collective event

that has barely impinged upon other Tritonians' individual pursuits of happiness.¹⁹ The immeasurable pain caused by the war, which is rendered in the novel only as a statistical tally, is conflated with Bron's own pain; confusedly recalling Lawrence's estimation of the casualties on Earth, she dwells on the figures: 'hadn't [the Satellites] just killed three out of four, or five out of six' to keep the subjective politically inviolable? (277). Bron's state of mind at the closing of the narrative may, as Delany suggests, be psychotic, but the specificities of the representation here suggest the ways in which both large-scale and small-scale pain may be ignored in a society fixated on the blandishments of the immediate here-and-now. In focusing on Bron's interior erotic life, the novel meditates not only on the limitations and iniquities of our own social world but also on the shortcomings of the alternative world of Triton – an alternative world that is in fact an elaboration of the possibilities inherent in our own postmodernity.

Notes

1. As well as being one of its most eminent living practitioners, Delany is one of sf's most significant theorists, as demonstrated, for instance, in his collections of criticism, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* (1977), *Starboard Wine* (1984), and *The Straits of Messina* (1989). His influence upon contemporary sf – and particularly upon the attention to race and sexuality in the genre – is hard to overestimate. For insightful discussions of Delany's place in recent sf, see, for example, Broderick and Freedman.
2. Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* provides the key discussion of postmodernity with which this essay is in dialogue. My understanding of the related, but not identical, category of post-Fordism is indebted to Latham as well as to Harvey. For studies that relate Delany's work specifically to postmodernity/postmodernism, see Broderick, Bukatman, Dubey, and Ebert.
3. For other arguments that associate the formation of sexual minorities with turn-of-the-twentieth-century commodity capitalism, see, for instance, Birken, Floyd (esp. 175–78), Gagnier. For arguments that emphasize the relations of sexual diversity to postmodernity, see, for example, Griggers and Wiegman.
4. See especially Moylan's reading of *Triton* as a 'critical utopia'; similarly, the novel has been characterized as a 'postmodern liberal utopia' (Easterbrook) and an 'open-ended utopia' (Somay). For an attempt to differentiate Delany's use of *heterotopia* from the usual understanding of utopia, see Chan. For Delany's rejection of a utopian reading of *Triton*, see 'Second SFS Interview', esp. 323, 327–31.
5. The quoted phrase is from a letter to Greg Tate, reprinted in 1984, a selection of Delany's correspondence from that year: 'I [am] no longer interested in the closing cadence that ends so much narrative fiction' (268). The use of appendices is typical of Delany's novels from the late 1970s on and is an important enabler of the dialogism for which his fiction is well known. I

discuss the ambivalence of *Triton's* appendices in n. 18, below. The dialogical intonation of *Triton* puts it at odds with the didactic imperative of the conventional utopia.

6. The awkwardness of pronominal reference is intended to indicate the extent to which Bron's bodily transformation is not matched by a shift in subjectivity. Interestingly, critics (and Delany himself in the *Science-Fiction Studies* interview) consistently refer to the post-transformation Bron using masculine pronouns, despite the fact that feminine pronouns are used in the novel.
7. The anxiety surrounding the invisibility of (homo)sexual identity is a major focus of queer theory. For an acute discussion of how the 'vast cultural project of bringing the [male] homosexual into the realm of representation... and especially into the realm of visually recognizable representation, must be mounted strategically in order to circumscribe the dangerously indeterminate borders of "homosexual difference"', see Edelman, *Homographesis* esp. 173–241; the quotation is from 199–200.
8. On the pleasures of reading character generally, see Gallagher, 'Trouble', esp. 293–94. For a suggestive elaboration of the idea that access to characters' eroticism may itself be erotically charged, see Gallagher's 'Immanent'.
9. This point is also made by Jeffrey Allen Tucker, who notes that 'interestingly, the object of [Sam's] desire...remain[s] the same, suggesting that only an exterior, sociopolitical identity has changed' (43).
10. In a general statement of this claim, Sedgwick writes: 'In accord with Foucault's demonstration...that modern Western culture has placed what it calls sexuality in a more and more distinctively privileged relation to our most prized constructs of individual identity, truth, and knowledge, it becomes truer and truer that the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know' (3).
11. Chan provides the most substantial discussion of *Triton's* preoccupation with the type, which is also more briefly noted by Fekete (137), Massé ('Expectations' 54–55), and Somay (35).
12. Like Lawrence in *Triton*, Delany in *Motion* sees categorization not as a constraint, but as providing the opportunity for improvisation; moreover, for Delany in his memoir, as for Lawrence, subjects are not fixed within single categories but may straddle – or purposively move across – types. For an acute discussion of this aspect of *Motion*, see Tucker 191–98.
13. For examples of the deployment of statistics in the novel's scientific or pseudo-scientific passages, see, for instance, the speech of the gender reassignment counsellor: 'left-handedness...has grown from five percent of the population to an even fifty'; 'studies from those years...show that the middle-class North American father spent, on average, less than twenty-five seconds a day playing with his less-than-year-old infant' (253); 'statistics show...' (254).
14. Lawrence's speech resonates with the point that the counsellor makes to Bron about how she/he can never be a 'complete' woman due to her/his lack of an embodied history of womanhood. For gender identity, on both collective and personal scales, history counts. It also counts in relation to sexuality: as Bron's read-out at the refixation clinic indicates, his sexual identity is in part at least a sedimentation of his erotic experiences. By contrast, the novel exhibits no interest in the historicity of race, which really does seem to be only a matter of 'visible markers', to use Chan's phrase.

15. Statistically precise parsing of desire is also a feature of Delany's later novel *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984), in which Rat Korga is calculated by the Web, a hyper-sophisticated system of information gathering, to be Marq Dyeth's 'perfect erotic object – out to about seven decimal places' (179).
16. Copjec cites Hacking's 'How Should We Do the History of Statistics?' (*I & C* 8 [Spring 1981]: 25), as the source of the term 'felicity'.
17. In his interview on *Triton*, Delany states that elements like these '[leave] the very notion of utopia pretty much shattered' ('Second SFS Interview' 328).
18. See particularly the closing pages of the main narrative, in which Bron suffers through a sleepless night, sure that the dawn '[will] never come' (275). The point I make here is also congruent with the words of Ashima Slade, the scholar whose life and work is the subject of the novel's 'Appendix B'. In words directly relevant to Bron's plight, Slade states: 'Our society in the Satellites extends to its Earth and Mars emigrants, at the same time it extends instruction on how to conform, the materials with which to destroy themselves, both psychologically and physically... To the extent that they will conform to our ways, there is a subtle swing: The materials of instruction are pulled further away and the materials of destruction are pushed correspondingly closer... [We] have simply, here, overdetermined yet another way for the rest of us to remain oblivious to other people's pain. In a net of tiny worlds like ours, that professes an ideal of the primacy of the subjective reality of all its citizens, this is an appalling political crime' (303).
19. Although the war, in which millions of civilians die, nags at the consciousness of several of the characters, it remains relegated to the background. The characters' general oblivion is matched by critics, who, distracted by Bron's personal failings, have generally failed to elaborate on the significance of this massive, if entirely off-stage, violence. A notable exception here is Jameson, who suggests that the war 'could stand as a comment on the violence implicit in Utopian closure as such' (*Archaeologies* 144).