

Schwab's *Imaginary Ethnographies*: Inspiring a Student's Wanderings through Familiar Literary Texts and the Development of New Subjectivities

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Reading, because we control it, is adaptable to our needs and rhythms. We are free to indulge our subjective associative impulse; the term I coin for this is deep reading: the slow and meditative possession of a book. We don't just read the words, we dream our lives in their vicinity. The printed page becomes a kind of wrought-iron fence we crawl through, returning, once we have wandered, to the very place we started.

(Sven Birkerts)

When I first read the proposed theme for this issue and thought about Schwab's *Imaginary Ethnographies*, I was struck by the similarity between Schwab's realizations about reading, and my own recent, driven rereading of Steven Brust's Vlad Taltos science fiction/fantasy series¹, set in the semi-fictional world of Dragaera. The questions that Schwab poses, and Schwab's experiences reading Buck's *Peony*, had me focused more than I normally would on why Brust's series is such a touchstone for me as a reader. Then, looking back outward to other readers, I wondered, how does reading, as a kind of dreaming, potentially change our views of self, and perhaps change how we interact with our "reality", our lived world, and what that could be?² I have chosen to discuss the works of Steven Brust, who has not yet been a part of academic conversation, in the hopes of opening up those existing conversations to the many other creative works of speculative fiction.

Keywords: autoethnography; imaginary ethnography; language and Reader Response Multiculturalism; reading and identity; speculative fiction; student engagement.

¹ Brust's next book in this series, *Vallista*, will be released October 2017. Brust is an American author best known for *The New York Times*-bestselling Vlad Taltos series (1983-current), which incorporates a wide variety of storytelling styles and genres. He is also the author of a second series of novels set in the world of the Vlad books, the Khaavren Romances, narrated by a mixed species historian in a style which strongly resembles that of the popular works of Alexandre Dumas. Other novels by Brust include *To Reign in Hell* (1984), *Brokedown Palace* (1986), *The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars* (1987), *The Gypsy* (1992, with Megan Lindholm), *Freedom and Necessity* (1997, with Emma Bull), and new *The Incrementalists* series (2013, 2017, with Skylar White). Brust has a new standalone novel, tentatively titled *Good Guys*, with a potential release date of March 2018.

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While literary criticism has very old roots, arguably, at least back to Plato and current research is often engaged with why people write³, why people read, and what happens when they read is a field of study that is much more recent. As such, it is an area that could have great potential for enabling researchers to develop new understanding of the importance of reading in how each of us is drawn to reading as a way of renegotiating our world and our identity within that world. In 2007, cognitive neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf published a provocative work on the history of the reading brain, and what happens in the brain when people read. Wolf, like Schwab, sees a need for further discussion on the topic⁴. One of Wolf's points is that reading changes the individual brain, both neurologically and intellectually (2007: 5), which supports the saying that writing can potentially change the world, one brain at a time. If so, doesn't that possibility make it even more important to understand what happens when people read and what draws readers to works of speculative fiction, a genre that is today enjoying an unprecedented renaissance⁵?

In reading Schwab, I realized that I am drawn to reading fantastic fiction because that reading creates a unique space for me to not just enjoy a story but also engage with concerns about who I am, plus reexamine the world outside myself. Speculative fiction, commonly known as the genre of "what if?" is uniquely suited to this quest. In the fantastical world, the reader is invited to engage with the possibility that the impossible could also become real. Within the pages of a book, we can explore the meaning of alien/human connection, or the othered, examine the possibilities of engagement with the alien inside, and extend that examination to the differences of those around ourselves. This may change the way we look at not just others, but the way we interpret our own stories. We can also wonder how the discoveries made within the dream space of reading might become actualized in our lived lives, or what we might term "the real", how we are changed by reading and then how we can create change⁶.

In light of the connection between genre, Schwab and theme, I have chosen to discuss the works of Steven Brust, who has not yet been a part of academic conversation, in the hopes of opening up those existing conversations to the many other creative works of speculative fiction.

² In the past, I have engaged with texts in a variety of periods and genres, most often using a postmodernist approach based in the works of Lyotard, Baudrillard, Hutcheon and Klein. More recently, I've explored narrative theory using the work of researchers like McAdams and McClean, along with the autoethnographic work of Carolyn Ellis, and others in this field, connecting those theories to my own experiences of writing and teaching. This essay is a new departure for me as a researcher. I hope it is interesting to readers and I am very grateful to the journal for suggesting such an evocative theme in tandem with Schwab's book, which encouraged me to explore what happens when we read.

³ In terms of the importance of writing to individuals, see, for example, McAdams and McLean, who state that "narrative (written) identity is a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose. In recent studies on narrative identity, researchers have paid a great deal of attention to psychological adaptation and (further) development" of personal identity, and the role that writing plays in this process (2013: 233).

⁴ Wolf says, "I have lived my life in the service of words: finding where they hide in the convoluted recesses of the brain, studying their layers of meaning and form, and teaching their mysteries to the young. In these pages, I invite you to ponder the profoundly creative quality at the heart of reading words" (2007: IX). Wolf is also concerned with questions about enabling reading for brains that are wired differently for language, along with questions about what the growth and effects of reading digital communication. The latter point connects her work to that of Birketts. Both issues are important to be aware of, but beyond the scope of this essay.

⁵ Although this paper examines reading novels, the renaissance itself includes responses like fan fiction and crosses the borders between written media and other forms of story, including TV series, movies and game playing.

⁶ According to Wolf, "...the reading brain is part of highly successful two-way dynamics. Reading can be learned only because of the brain's plastic (evolving) design, and when reading takes place, that individual brain is forever changed, both physiologically and intellectually" (2007: 5). Implied, is that this change is ongoing.

What follows looks at three ways that Brust's novels impel the creation of Schwab's unique dream space: use of "alien" cultures, historical reassessment and the impact of language on a reader's interaction with text. This essay examines Brust's science fiction/fantasy Dragaera series, with particular focus on the back story trilogy that engages with the novels of Pèrè Dumas⁷. Like Schwab's *Imaginary Ethnographies*, what follows will include an auto-ethnographic approach. Birketts says that, after reading, we return to the same place. But when Birketts says that we "dream our lives in their [stories] vicinity", implied is that we return changed in how we view ourselves within our place of reality and the potential for our reading dream to change what our world's reality could become (Schwab, 1997: 108-109). As Eller notes in a review of *Imaginary Ethnographies*, Schwab:

...insists, rightly I believe, that the ultimate or most important function of both (genres of writing) is 'transformational', consisting "less in providing information than in facilitating the emergence of new forms of being in language, thought, emotion, and ultimately life, including the emergence of new subjectivities, socialities, communalities, and relationalities" [Schwab, 2012:] (5). In short, then, Schwab is "interested in *how* literature records, translates, and (re)shapes the internal processing of culture", a process that she links to "perturbation" or the challenging of pre-existing thoughts and feelings through exposure to the "new, strange, or incommensurable" [Schwab, 2012:] (7). (Eller, 2013: No page)

Brust's Dragaera series is a bit unusual even in the realm of science fiction and fantasy literature, because the series blends both⁸, breaking into a liminal space between perceived genres. This is one "perturbation" of perceived realities. But the series also constantly either alludes to or reexamines an older history, engages with what it means to be human or alien or both and additionally, shifts the reader out of our normal way of being by the use of an older mode of speech hybridized with modern language. In doing these three things together, Brust destabilizes our preconceptions of culture, history, language and our preconceived bases of humanity. The result of this reshaping, for the reader, is to facilitate a new way of looking at the world. Let's begin by looking first at Brust's consideration of what it means to be alien, as a transformational tool in creating the dream space of the "new, strange or incommensurable" (Schwab, 2012: 7), by considering an even older subject, the dissolved border space between human and animal.

What Do We Dream About When We Dream About Being Alien?

um dich zu sehen: hingetragen, als
wäre mit Sprüngen jeder Lauf geladen
und schösse nur nicht ab, solange der Hals

das Haupt im Horchen hält: wie wenn beim Baden
im Wald die Badende sich unterbricht:

⁷ *The Pheonix Guards* is, in part, a reengagement with Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*. As noted, for this essay, I have consciously chosen primary works which are not considered within the academic community but rather exist without, having captured the popular imagination. Brust's books have made The New York Times Best Seller's list twice. *The Three Musketeers*, while rarely read today in the original translation, is one of the most frequently re-envisioned texts in other forms of media, initially in plays and then later, movies, TV series, children's cartoons, anime and comics.

⁸ This is not entirely unprecedented, but unusual. Most modern fantasy draws on older stories, such as myth, fairy or folk tales set in the present. Most SF, while it may contain the motifs of fantasy or myth (George Lucas's *Star Wars* series, influenced by Joseph Campbell), may be the most popularly known of these, and is generally set in a fictional future. Brust's trilogy engages with a seminal period in the history of his larger future set series, prompted by a work easily recognized by his readers in our world, Dumas's Musketeers trilogy. While unusual, this isn't entirely unknown; Neil Gaiman incorporated many historical referents in his *The Sandman* graphic novels and Kim Newman engaged with a somewhat similar concept in his alternate history, *Anno Dracula* series. One outcome of this is a referent to older works of SF, some of which explored the discovery of civilizations that had ceased to exist. Andre Norton's work come to mind but there are many others.

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den Waldsee im gewendeten Gesicht⁹.
(Rainer Maria Rilke, “Die Gazelle”)

Rilke’s poem asks that we consider the interplay between what it means to be human, and what it means to be other. The gazelle¹⁰ is all potential of action yet deeply connected to the natural world. Her slender legs of running represent not just physicality but the element of choice. In the choice of whether to run away from the other or seek connection, her potential actions are not unlike our own. At the end, the natural world is reflected back into her own face, and she, now perceived as having a face, then turns to meet our own human eyes. In this dream space of the fantasy encounter, we become her and are asked what that means. Likewise, much of traditional science fiction and fantasy involves contact with another species, another potential way of being, in which we’re often asked to consider what it means to be human.

Brust’s series raises this important question, too. Dragaera is a fictional world, possibly set in an alternate human future, in which a more scientifically advanced alien species (AAS) has experimented with blending human genes perhaps with those of the AAS, and the native Dragaeran race, with native Dragaeran animal genes (Brust, 1999: Ch. 9). What exactly was done by the AAS, and how, are questions that remain unresolved because the reader’s knowledge is limited by that of the characters, much like our own knowledge is limited by experience). The new Dragaeran species calls itself “human”, while the remaining race is seen as “othered”. The “others” are what we recognize as the descendants of the human settlers. Dragaerans call the humans “Easterners”, and the Easterners’ position within the Dragaeran society is ironically below that of the lowest Dragaeran genetic family groups (Teckla, which are native Dragaeran field rodents). Dragaerans in this series view humans as the sub-human other.

Like the iconic taboo of cannibalism, in which human flesh is consumed and then becomes sustenance material incorporated into the consumer¹¹, genetic intermingling also has a history of being taboo. While an argument could be made that the resulting Dragaeran species is obviously stronger, it may be more interesting to look at the psychic components. The Dragaerans represent a deeper penetration and intermingling, affecting not just the body, but the nature of the resulting individual, which also resonates with talismanic ideas of communion, seen such classic works of science fiction as Robert Heinlein’s *A Stranger in a Strange Land*. Dragaerans not only self-identify as families with their genetically infused and totem animals, but display characteristics associated with those animals. When characters asked as individuals to identify when they are happiest, the character associated with Yendi identifies those moments when crafty plans bear fruit; the Dzur, battle against overwhelming odds; the Lyorn, moments of husbandry and duty fulfilled (Brust, 2011).

In my own not unemotional rereading of this series, I was connected to my deepest, sheltered place of fear, that of my own nature (Schwab, 1997: 116, 118). While I wish to identify with the most dutiful of Lyorn, most brave of Dragons and most noble of Phoenixes, my fear is that my nature is that of Athyra, who pursue knowledge at the expense of other individuals (Brust; Whyland, 2017; Kay, 2015). Or as Neil Gaiman puts the thought in the Afterword of *Setbra Lavode*, paraphrasing, that my studies have caused me to live in the aether of the attic of a broke down house, away from other people, hoping that the “bats will teach me how to fly” (Brust, 2011: Location 6617). While this may not be an earth shattering realization, it was for me. The crawling back through the fence from reading dream space into the real world, changed, is one that would

⁹ So that he may see you: carried about as if/each slender leg were charged with leaps,/not to be fired as long as the neck/ holds the head high in listening: as when, while/ bathing in a dark forest, the bather interrupts herself:/ the forest pool still reflected in her turning face (trans. Cliff Crego).

¹⁰ Without knowing if Rilke was familiar with Sir Thomas Wyatt’s “Whoso List to Hunt”, for a literary scholar it is hard not to draw a connection with this older poem. In both cases, in terms of this essay, the question becomes who is the deer, and what does that mean in our own quest for identity.

¹¹ This could lead to some interesting political and Marxist arguments for future researchers, which are beyond the scope of this essay.

not have occurred without the exposure to Schwab's writing, which then permeated my reading of *The Phoenix Guards, 500 Years After* and *The Viscount of Adrilankha*. Now, I recognize that I am drawn to a variety of texts which allow me to explore, and renegotiate my own fears of being both self and othered.

What Do We Dream About When We Re-Dream Our History?

Schwab, scrutinizes throughout *Imaginary Ethnographies* how we, as readers within the liminal space of a fictional text, are encouraged to think about what it means to be self and other/alien. Next, I'd like to mention, briefly, the cultural implications of Schwab's discussion of Butler, as that pertains to reconsideration of human history, and human failure as genetically predisposed, along with her discussion of children as representative of future. I'd like to suggest that the hidden, feared, sheltered kernel of self, that reading allows us to enter into the border diffused space of reading is also the child self. I'd also like to ask if that kernel isn't the place where we first found ourselves in conflict with the external world. As a student, this leads to consideration of how my child self may influence my actions and also how children represent the potential for a different future. But another effect of reading, is how I might now look beyond self to the larger world around me, not solely in my relationship of self to others, but to human culture and perceptions of history.

Brust wrote of history that, "... my memory differs from the legends, and I am not certain that the legends are not more accurate" (*Brokedown Palace*, 1986: 37). Each time we read a text, we engage with our historical understanding of that text, our history. In my renegotiation with self through the mediation of the text, I am better able to understand how the text becomes part of the new construction which I take into the world. I am also then able to see that Brust's imagined ethnography creates this fantasy place which fulfills a creative impulse of self which is then transferred into my new self in the world. I can also see this effect propagated many times, in many other readers, becoming a social and cultural force (Schwab, 2012: 56, 46). There is a tendency to then wish to apply this realization to my understanding of received history and story, as that attracts others to popular fiction. From there, Brust's reflection on Dumas's work, a work which was, itself, a translated and rewritten popular story, provides this ground directly.

The trilogy becomes a back story written for Brust's main Vlad Taltos Dragaeran series, which we, readers, experience as an imaginary ethnography occurring in our present, although possibly set in the future, a destabilization of the boundary of time. Since the blended human/alien race in this series lives for thousands of years, older characters, and – by implication – their story lines influence the current time/emerging history both by how their stories are perceived by younger characters and also through their concurrent appearance in the fuller series which is written as if it were happening today. So, the main Vlad Taltos series contains within itself a destabilization of the sense of self within history and a destabilization of an individual's sense of culture and history as transferred from other chosen cultural objects¹².

Whereas the history captured in objects in a museum, a written history, or external meta-narratives are usually static, the experience of reading a fantastic fiction becomes a creative

¹² In conversation with Brust on the genetic traits of the house of Athyra, for example, as listed on the excellent website about the series by Kay, I questioned the house trait of being willing to use others for personal gain. Brust's reply that the trait captured was Vlad's point of view, which was limited, led in part to this line of thinking. The shifts in Vlad's perceptions of this trait, of course, are a central point in *Athyra* (1993). But the entire Vlad series plays around with perceptions of history and knowledge. The books, if read in publication order, jump back and forth within the temporality of Vlad's life, as experienced by the character. Further, the reader knows from the first book published in the series, *Jherog* (1984) that Vlad's soul is a reincarnation of Dolivar, the rebel brother of the Dragaeran Empire's founder. Ironically, given this paper, I just discovered that Vlad's discovery of his past occurs during a discussion of the relationship between genetics and soul (Ch. 9, np).

process. A colleague of Brust, John M. Ford suggests in fantasy poems such as “Troy: The Movie”¹³, that what we know of human history is often those parts that resonate personally with our internalized stories and which are mediated by cultural objects. In Ford’s case, the object is a fictional modern movie on the fall of Troy, another popular subject for reinterpretation, like the popularity of the many renditions of Dumas’s musketeers. These two fictional subjects, conjoined, yield a consideration of the historical fall of human cultures, the place of the individual within the history and the created place of story in mediating our perceptions. Brust suggests that our creation of truth is as an ongoing process, in which we continually re-evaluate history and legend and potentially determine a new subjectivity.

Brust’s consideration of a past historical imaginary ethnography for Dragaera, which begins in *The Phoenix Guards*, is focused on four main characters, recognizable as iconic reiterations of Dumas’s musketeers, yet these heroes are the quasi-alien Dragaerans. Porthos is the brave Dzur, Tazendra¹⁴; Athos is the honorable Lyorn, Aerich; Aramis is the crafty Yendi, Pell and D’Artangan, the initially youthful Tiassa, Khavren¹⁵. So while reminding the reader of the question of alien and human, Brust blends this question into the now iconic three musketeers’ story. The reader is simultaneously in his/her own real time and yet, is taken back in time, through the story, into dream space, to an experience in which characters both resonate with the iconic figures and yet live a narrative that is altered from Dumas’s story, in terms of actual events. From this position of both the recognized and the destabilized, it is difficult to return from the imaginary world that Brust develops and not begin to re-examine our history, chosen cultural objects and ask if events are truly inevitable. Although the events of the series do lead to a cataclysmic disaster, that disaster is mitigated, and the question of what the future holds for the remaining characters, and their children, is left open. Within Brust’s imagined world, the reader is first asked to consider what is alien and then, how our conceptions of history inform our consideration of alien and what is truth.

What Effect Can Language Play in Developing an Imaginary Ethnography

Within the science fiction and fantasy genres, the contact with an alien culture often includes the development of fictional languages. But what happens when the alien language is our own, and it is alien to us only because it is a form of language that might, otherwise, be lost in history. This subject came up unexpectedly in email interviews with the author, done as a part of researching this paper. Part of that conversation, used with permission of the author, and which demonstrates an effect of reading that lives beyond the reading itself, is below:

Whyland: Why did you think no one would want to read it [The Phoenix Guards]?

Brust: Writing styles change with time, and with developments in the world. The style of the 19th Century romantics is out of fashion; literature has moved on. That’s why I was surprised anyone else wanted to read it.

Whyland: [But] in terms of that writing style, didn’t the narrator’s [Parfi’s] voice, then get picked up by others to play around with in conversation?

Brust: Yeah, I think voice is the right term. And, yeah, I notice other people

¹³ From the lines, “History is the draping of the layers/Into a Time that makes some human sense:/Troy is a hill built on seven cities, The flies in amber are taxonomized./ The past is the interleave of Time and History,/ A garment woven for the muse to dance in;/ Now modestly drawn close, now flashing us a view/ Of something secret that inflames the senses” Ford, “Troy: The Movie”).

¹⁴ It is a hallmark of Brust’s series that another cultural stereotype that is frequently destabilized is gender. So, the brawny Porthos is rendered here, as the name suggests, as a woman.

¹⁵ Khavren is the main viewpoint character of the history and ages within the course of the trilogy. The character, and his son, the Viscount of Adrilankha, also appear later, and interact directly with Vlad, which makes permeable concepts of linear time.

picking it up in conversation. Me too. It's delightful. (Brust and Gustafsson Whyland, 2017)

Schwab states that “[Writing] uses language to explore, shape, and generate emergent forms of subjectivity, culture, and life in processes of dialogical exchange with its readers” (2012: 2). While it may seem obvious that stories must use language to dialogue with readers, Schwab’s statement implies the possibility that changing the expected language of the dialogue used in the story, might be a way to create unique imaginary ethnographies, which create, in turn, unique effects on the reader. Brust uses a blend of dialogue style which mixes modern English with an older period form of polite language play, common to Dumas’s 19th century trilogy. In many dialogues between Brust’s characters, and usually when there is important information to be conveyed (that may be known to the reader, but is unknown to one of the dialogue partners), the characters become involved in an exchange that slows the pace and builds the tension while we wait. In my own words, the conversation might run like this:

I have a message for you from Khavren.
 What a message, you say?
 Yes, a message.
 Well, what is the message?
 What, you want to know the message?
 By the horse! I have been asking for nothing else for over an hour.
 Well, it is my pleasure to do so.
 Please do.
 And here, then, it is.
 (Hands over the message.)

In addition to slowing the reader, and placing him/her in an older form of dialogue blended with modern speech patterns, fixity of language, too, becomes semi-permeable. Further, this type of dialogue, as you might note, has a sing-songy rhythm that is in itself seductive, much like one cannot get a catchy tune out of one’s head. While Brust may have been surprised about his writing’s popularity, the mode or mood developed is one that stays with the reader after the story is finished.

Along with supporting Schwab’s realizations about the importance of imaginary ethnographies, hopefully this paper has, while being extremely far from definitive, peeked reader’s interest about the possibilities of reading non-traditional texts. This paper has wandered through other writing, than just Brust’s and Schwab’s, showing how conjoining a new (to me) literary theory with a very familiar popular story series can inspire students to make new connections. I, too, have crawled back through the fence of reading both Schwab and Brust, to find myself slipping into this other language as a mode of occasionally being, and during those times remembering other parts of the story, coming to new realizations about the story within the real world space of my own lived experiences and new realizations about my experiences. The story, through its play with the alien, the reconsideration of history and new modes of expression, has dissolved boundaries between preconceived form, identity, the other, history, truth and subjectivity of experience, to make the dream space of story live outside of the object.

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