



UTS  
ePRESS

PORTAL Journal of  
Multidisciplinary  
International Studies

Vol. 20, No. 1/2  
December 2024



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**Citation:** Pratt, M. 2024. “不要回答” (‘Bu Yao Hui Da’, “Do Not Answer”): Reflections on Global Citizenship and Cheddar Swirlies in the Three ‘Three-Body Problem’ Problem, A Mini-Series. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 20:1/2, 28–35. <https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v20i1-2.9426>

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published by  
UTS ePRESS | <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal>

ESSAY

## “不要回答” (‘Bu Yao Hui Da’, “Do Not Answer”): Reflections on Global Citizenship and Cheddar Swirlies in the Three ‘Three-Body Problem’ Problem, A Mini-Series

**Murray Pratt**

University of Edinburgh, University of Amsterdam

**Corresponding author:** Professor Murray Pratt (University of Edinburgh, University of Amsterdam), [murraypratt@hotmail.com](mailto:murraypratt@hotmail.com)

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v20i1-2.9426>

**Article History:** Received 31/10/2024; Accepted 30/04/2025; Published 08/09/2025

### Abstract

This essay is written in a hybrid and subjective form, combining elements of pop culture, a ficto-critical tone and unstable voice, with the structure of the mini-series format, in order to bring into play personal reflections, more conventional academic criticality and fan fiction inspired riffing on the notion of response. In doing so, the intention is to experiment with and perhaps respond to questions about the nature of global and planetary citizenship across three different versions of the Three Body Problem story. In specific, it situates Liu Cixin’s original trilogy of novels, *Three-Body Problem*, alongside two television series adaptations, one (predominantly in Chinese) produced and distributed in China, the other a (predominantly English language) Netflix production. By engaging across media and geographies, with a focus on one human’s affective consideration of the ethical, philosophical, and aesthetic implications of belonging to a planet, the affordances of the pre-post-Anthropocenic imaginaries of Liu’s text and its adaptations are brought into communication with each other and the geocritical realities and anxieties they raise.

### Keywords

**Three Body; Cultural Studies; Pre-post-Anthropocene**

**DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST** The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Prologue

Here on pre-post-human Earth, the species presumed dominant might best be characterised in two ways. First, it has developed the capacity to destroy its home planet. Indeed, all it takes to do so is the touch of a button, the gentlest of caresses perhaps, by an orange septuagenarian, say, and Boom! ‘We are stardust.’<sup>1</sup> Not that nuclear annihilation is the only option, far from it, just, illustratively, the most sudden and total. Second, ‘in their minds,’ members of the species ‘have capacities’ to communicate imagined information—that is, various forms of information which does not (necessarily) correspond to physical realities and is therefore not, in the strictest of senses, true. Think stories, movies, or novels and TV series. Think too fake news, perhaps also, for Humanists, religion. It gets called fiction in the first instance, and a whole lot of other stuff in the second that we won’t get into here, with or without a ‘god on our side’ ([Dylan 1964](#)) but, in each case, the species expends a lot of time and energy on such fictions, investing in alternate realities to the extent that it drifts further and further away from authentic relations with nature; disregarding, re-ascribing, reshaping, ultimately exploiting and extracting the planet whence, howsoever much they, we, may have forgotten so, they/we arose. I can’t speak for how these things pan out on the other trillion/infinity planets, but I ‘think it’s kinda funny.’ And ‘kinda sad’ ([Tears for Fears 1982](#)).

For some reason, and this may or may not be interesting, but I’m just putting it out there, into the ether, someone might pick it up somewhere if you catch my drift—these two characteristics sometimes interact. For example, the reasons why the species values and pours effort into planetary destruction are often justified—ironically enough—by support for, or antipathy toward, certain fabulations. I won’t dignify the elaborate fictional coding system they use to quantify that value—at the cost of wanton extraction and collateral—by naming it. Let’s just say it ‘makes the world go round’ ([Kander & Ebb 1966](#)).

In more conventionally academic terms, as Nandita Biswas Mellamphy explains in an essay in *Technophany*, the Anthropocene reveals and situates human-centrism in relation to the non-human, be this, one might add, terrestrial or extra-terrestrial:

The onto-politics of ‘centring the human’ represents the prevalent view that humans possess unique capacities that make them exceptional... putting humans ‘in the loop’ of control over all other species and expressions of intelligence... treating non-human intelligences as means to achieve human ends. The onto-politics of human-centrism prioritises human oversight and conceptualises humans as beings governed by nomos or law... to achieve desired outcomes. Within this mastery-driven model, humans govern unpredictability through the instrumentalisation of their rationality and their normative and norm-making capacities. By contrast, the onto-politics of de-centring human-centrism focus on taking the human out of the centre and on to the ontological loop of control with other species... ([2023: 3](#))

And this is all played out in human terms, our fictions, the narratives we weave and the tales they tell, the ones we enjoy the most at any rate, often spiral around annihilation, of each other as murder, of selves, themselves, lost in love or lust, of varied and various smittings by some imaginary gods or others, and

1 [Mitchell, J. 1970](#), ‘Woodstock’, A&M Records. Launched in 1977, the Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 space probes carried a gold-plated record of selected music, intended to convey aspects of human culture to any alien species who might encounter them. In this mini-series/essay, I proceed by analogy. I consider how musical references are often used to locate a speaker’s context in human-to-human communication, tentatively opening a self-reflective and reflexive signal that may or may not generate a response (from other humans). The Voyager disk followed the 1972 launches of Pioneer 10 and Pioneer 11, which carried plaques engraved with a map of our solar system. In Liu’s *The Three-Body Problem*, Ye Wenjie responds to the Trisolarans’ message, which reveals Earth’s approximate coordinates. [Liu, C. 2015](#), *The Three-Body Problem*, trans. K. Liu, Head of Zeus, London. First published as 三体 (*San ti*, “Three Body”). Netflix’s 2024 German mini-series, *The Signal*, ends with the revelation that a mystery communication Paula, the programme’s protagonist, received in space was not from an alien species, but rather a distorted signal from the Voyager disk. [The Signal 2024](#), Netflix, Germany [*Das Signal*].

increasingly, monsters, be they of the mind or in the mind. And so, if you're sitting comfortably, then let us begin....

## Episode 1

If you do  $x$ , then  $y$  will happen. Cause, consequence.  $Y$  could be awful, or maybe not so bad, or maybe even just what we need, you have no way of knowing, really you don't. Maybe it won't even happen, and if it does, not for generations, but there's a chance that it might. Go on, do it ... but stay, hang on just a sec, what if I know more than you about  $y$ , more about its outcomes and their likelihood, know that they will be beyond awful, and I warn you, in no uncertain terms, *not* to do  $x$ ? If  $x$  is replying to a message, a signal, I inform you, "do not reply", don't do it. And still you do.

This, in abstract, formulaic and reductionist form, is the ethical dilemma (although perhaps this term imputes too much rationality, deliberation, disregards the instinctive, the moment, the gut) that Ye Wenjie (an astrophysicist based at a Chinese satellite broadcasting facility known as The Red Base, back in the day, acting as a lone, perhaps rogue, operative) confronts, when she receives proof of extra-terrestrial intelligence. This happens, not once, but three times: first, in the first novel of Liu Cixin's 'Three Body' trilogy, *The Three-Body Problem*; and again in the Tencent television series *Three-Body*; and then again in the Netflix one, *3 Body Problem*.<sup>2</sup>

Spoiler alert—she replies.

And in each version of the story (for fiction it is), the consequences, the  $y$ , unfold in relatively similar ways, albeit with quite different spins. In brief, said alien civilisation (referred to in the *Netflix* series as the San Ti, and in the translation of Liu Cixin's novel as Trisolarans) becomes aware of Earth's existence (and, importantly, coordinates), enters into communication with our planet, and heads towards it with nefarious (from a human perspective) intent.

So much for the  $x$  and  $y$ , but what of the why and the wherefore? The answer to these questions, or rather the answers, differ, significantly in each of the three versions. As one would expect: after all, a novel in a trilogy, far less its translation into English, and television series produced (for entertainment? profit? propaganda? 'proprofitainment'?, in China and 'the West' respectively), are not, primarily, exercises in logic capable of formulating a conclusive solution to a puzzle, not least an abstract fictional, indeed *science* fictional one, since the puzzle involves imagined paradigms based on contemporary dilemmas.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the quandary around which they revolve is a powerful one, perhaps powerful enough to break through its platform-specific sugar coatings, telling of how humans construct futures and fates, and as such it entails notions such as responsibility, for ourselves, our descendants, our species, and for the planet that nurtures life, that we once nurtured. A sense of global citizenship, after all, ultimately, perhaps only, makes sense at the point of environmental (and incidentally civilisational) collapse when it is extended to the fate of the planet itself.<sup>4</sup>

2 The trilogy is collectively known as 地球往事 ('Diqu Wangshi', *Earth's Past*, or *The Remembrance of Earth's Past*) and more often referred to as *Three-Body*. The television series are, respectively, 三体 ('San Ti', *Three-Body*) (Tencent, 2023) and *3 Body Problem* (Netflix, 2024). Other versions and adaptations are available, including an innovative Minecraft version from 2014—initiated by a student, Li Zhenyi, and available on YouTube—and a 2022 animated film based on the second volume of the trilogy, *The Dark Forest*—not to mention an extensive fan fiction base.

3 I have written elsewhere about the ways in which science fiction imagines potential scenarios based on current dilemmas, the ethics of reading science fiction in translation, and 'the arbitrariness and transience of the quests we initiate to imbue meaning, always at the risk of wrongness' (86) in post-pre-Anthropocenic fiction. See: Pratt, Murray, "What If?": Reading Replacing in/as (Contemporary, Chinese, Science) Fiction', in Martin, Niall & Willemars, Ilios (eds) 2024, *The Replaceability Paradigm: Replacement and Irreplaceability from Dante to Deepdream*, De Gruyter, Berlin & Boston: 69–90.

4 I have written elsewhere, drawing on the work of Yuk Hui, Tim Ingold and Achille Mbembe, about how education for global citizenship and hope in the pre-post-Anthropocene requires us 'to talk about values, perhaps even recalibrate values, since the current emphases in formal education persist in valuing what we have always valued [capital] and doing

## Episode 2

In Liu's book, when Ye Wenjie responds to the signal from Trisolaris, she goes one step further than her original solar-amplified broadcast into the ether. No longer an anonymous message in a bottle, pressing the button the second time, despite the injunction, advertises the existence and location of Earth to an alien civilisation. Why she does so is not directly revealed. Indeed, the recounting of this episode is delayed until towards the end of the novel, by which time many of its repercussions have already taken place. Rather, the passages describing the causation are complex, interwoven with themes of humanity's vulnerability, ignorance and immersion in antipathy that have taken root in preceding pages, their seeds sown in her illicit reading of Rachel Carson's environmental warning, *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962), years before in a work camp during the Cultural Revolution. Liu describes how Carson's exposure of the harm of pesticides led Ye to wonder whether:

*the relationship between humanity and evil is similar to the relationship between the ocean and an iceberg floating on its surface[.] Both the ocean and the iceberg are made of the same material. That the iceberg seems separate is only because it is in a different form. In reality, it is but a part of the vast ocean ...*

*It was impossible to expect a moral awakening from humankind itself, just like it was impossible to expect humans to lift off the earth by pulling up on their own hair. To achieve moral awakening required a force outside the human race. (original italics, Liu 2015: 24).*

This message, unfolding together with a sense that the planet needs saving from humans, permeates much of Liu's trilogy but without detracting from the care we have for our own species. As such, it is not dissimilar to the warning at the heart of another science fiction classic, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, both in its original 1951 version and the 1988 remake starring Keanu Reeves,<sup>5</sup> and comes from a perspective on the brink of despair. As with Carson's 1962 treatise, in each of these science fiction experiments, a scenario is set up according to which the devastation for which we are responsible is complete and irrevocable, if, for no other reason than for the fiction to serve as one final warning. For Ye herself, though, that point has been passed, and her recourse to the Trisolaran civilisation is the culmination of her 'rational gaze on the madness and hatred,' (2015: 292) expressed in the personal horrors she had endured, but also the ongoing ravage of the planet she sees all around, the 'deranged logging' resulting in the expansion of bare patches where the mountain's skin seemed torn off, and the 'sorrowful cries of birds with singed feathers' (2015: 293). Her reflections also extend to The Cold War, and our capacity to annihilate the entire human race. Responding is logical, but rather than cold logic, it also comes from a place of care. A song from 1976 by a Canadian band called *Klaatu* (the name of the alien in *The Day after Tomorrow*), covered a year later by *The Carpenters*, retransmits the sentiment, 'sending out an SOS' (The Police 1979), beyond the world:

Please come in peace we beseech you  
– Only a landing will teach them! –  
Our earth may never survive  
So do come we beg you

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what we always have done (growing profit, competing for resources), which, there's no surprise, will give us what we always got (exploitation of the environment, the extraction and exhaustion of materials, and disregard for the biosphere)'. See: Pratt, Murray 2023, 'Utopia in the Anthropocene', in van der Laan, Gerwin, Leesen, Tessa, Bot, Michiel, Dreezens, Ellen, Lakhani, Vikas, Loos, Martijn J., Shekiladze, Anna, Spoormans, Geno & Willems, Tom (eds), *Educational Utopias: Liber Amicorum Alkeline van Lenning*, Open Press Tilburg University, available: <https://openpresstiu.pubpub.org/pub/educational-utopias-utopia-anthropocene/release/1?readingCollection=7e474a56> [accessed 28 June 2025].

5 *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1951]. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2008]. Interestingly, the original features an attempt to solve the three body problem in physics on a blackboard.

Please interstellar policemen  
 Won't you give us a sign (give us a sign)  
 That we've reached you?

### Episode 3

There's a group of friends. Like a group of *Friends*. They went to uni together. So they are smart and funny. And, for the most part, highly telegenic. They do not exist. They do not exist in Liu Cixin's universe, that is, but they do in the Netflix series. They say things like 'Let's go to the marshes and drop acid.' As in a serious suggestion. It's the kind of thing they do, as part of their 'lifestyle,' which also involves love, usually unrequited, a goldfish, and sitting by the iconic white cliffs that feature in 78%<sup>6</sup> of internationally disseminated television series set in Britain that require a beach scene. One of them Jack Rooney, has made a large fortune inventing snacks that seem to combine ridiculous, possibly disgusting, flavours and textures. I have not found any reference to such a character, nor to Cheddar Swirlies, in the original 'Three-Body' trilogy, but perhaps I just need to look harder. The series was widely feted and has been nominated for and won awards.

Reading Liu Cixin's trilogy of novels, which I did, in translation, during holidays spent by a pool on an island in the eastern Mediterranean, over the course of a couple of summers, a few years back before the end times had really begun, was a remarkable experience. I would often read a page or two, and have to catch my breath, pause and wonder. What struck me was the avoidance of easy formulae, the nuanced and considered extrapolations of future scientific advances anchored in current knowledge and parsed alongside the breadth and depth of human vulnerability and folly, an attention to psychology and sociology confounded with mind-expanding spatial and chronological perspectives. It was akin to the effect of gazing into a night sky, only to see a shooting star, or even three, but rendered in translucent, compelling narrative prose. This, in translation, and written by a guy who claims to be average at doing literature. The novels are peopled, but it was an everyday kind of habitation, where motives and ruses, etched traumas, saids and unsaid, might perhaps be partially grasped, would perhaps be partially missed, where words shared and signals given may, or may not, hit their marks, or deflect, ricochet, reappear, where it made more sense to watch, read on, than ever to pin down far less formulate a response.

Characters were there for a reason rather than a rating. Da Shi, in Liu's *The Three-Body Problem*, is big, blunt and bluff, as indeed are each of his television series avatars. Tencent's Da channels for its own audience an everyman Beijing taxi driver with a partiality for noodle soup and a heart of gold, whereas Clarence in the Netflix series tags along with the 'friendship group,' filling them in with plot nuggets as they swoosh past. 'There's nothing connecting her to all this since the funeral,' he observes, of Ye Wenjie, at one point (in the fourth episode), only to be countered with 'Nothing that we've seen or heard'. Well, precisely, for in the super-condensed, fast-paced diegesis of Oxbridgedon-by-the-sea of Netflix's US/UK/International-friendly mishmash, that's kind of how it goes. In Liu's novel though, Da Shi is mercurial, both as character and function. He's a genre-bending detective, a readerly cypher. He encourages (rather than prompts) us to 'join the dots,' meaning that he's not there to fill gaps, like Polyfilla, but rather to (help to) make connections while blending into the plot, to *correspond* (rather than respond).

After Wang Miao has observed signals coming from the universe, in the novel and to a large extent replicated in the Tencent series, Da Shi whisks him away in his black Volkswagen Santana for food and drink, and they talk. Many of his phrases are picked up in either or both of the television series—unusually, given that the Netflix version has expunged whole tropes from the original trilogy, such as the novel's structuring analogy depicting humans as turkeys, innocent of their fate yet waiting to be farmed. His lines are catchy ones, like 'I'm a simple man without a lot of complicated twists and turns. Look down my throat

6 It should come as no surprise that this figure is entirely invented.

and you can see out my ass.’ Or useful crystallisations, like his ‘ultimate rule’: ‘Anything sufficiently weird must be fishy.’ (Liu 2015: 142) The Tencent version succeeds remarkably well in rounding out Da Shi as a humorous, battered, cajoling and consoling catalyst for good. Neither version, however, really captures the spirit of his part in the novel’s extended dialogues, which is to suggest and model explanations, trace findings and subtly match fragments, to proceed, as it were, by induction and care. ‘What does that last bit,’ Wang asks him, ‘have to do with everything you mentioned before?’ Da Shi’s response is measured, elaborated over four more pages in a conversation that starts to unveil and contextualise some of the components of the extra-terrestrials’ potential strategies: the anti-science prohibition, particularly the mistrust of Earth’s advances in nanomaterials, and the purpose of the countdowns being to create confusion, or misdirect, and the fact that the game is ‘definitely connected’ (2015: 148).

## Concluding Episode

In a 2024 interview (Beulchan 2024) during which Liu Cixin does indeed provide his own modest assessment of his literary merits and also bemoans the Netflix series’ assumption that a group of classmates, rather than the combined forces of global cooperation, might be capable of combatting an alien invasion, the author explains: ‘I want to shock readers with my imagination of the future universe. I want to show that humans are tiny in the universe. However, the power of science and knowledge will make humanity as vast as the universe in 100 to 200 million years.’ Liu’s comments chime with the jolts of wonder, the sense of a planetary citizenship, I experienced reading the trilogy, or indeed immersing myself in the 30-episode-long unfolding of the Tencent series, as part of my late-life bid to try and learn a bit of Mandarin. The Chinese series is paced so as to afford distant gazes and unthinkable chronologies—conveying scale, potential, vulnerability. Perhaps, so-called AI, which ‘relies on data-driven probabilities rather than logical reasoning to make decisions,’ Liu further contemplates, is the only force that stands out as threatening human advancement.

Integral to Liu’s project is a strong sense—and defence—of scientism, not only in his engagement with and extrapolation from the dilemmas of contemporary physics, but just as much through a demonstration of human responsibility, logic, cause and effect, that takes the planet and observable universe as its current base of the known. Global citizenship, it might be argued, is only an option when premised on these shared acknowledgements. In times such as either China’s Cultural Revolution or the post-truth dystopia of the impending second ‘season’ of *Trump, the nightmare*, due to ‘drop’ in less than a week as I write, of epidemic misinformation and mismanagement, of justifying mass infanticide, starvation and slaughter for the sake of, if never explicitly in the name of, extractive reterritorialisation, only a few miles further east across the Mediterranean from my sun lounger, being jolted and shocked about the future we make today is perhaps sorely needed.

Netflix is a platform that hosts and promotes films and series, driven, at least in part, by data, and calibrated on predicting and replicating viewer preferences. Among its offer, swash-buckling and formulaic sci-fi behemoths such as *Moonfall* (2022) or *Geostorm* (2017) provide welcome entertainment (*divertissement*) in uncertain times. The first series (season) of its adaptation of *The Three-Body Problem* mines (extracts?) ideas from across all three volumes of Liu Cixin’s trilogy and retrofits these into existing formulae, onto the drama hooks on familiar characterisations, assimilable romantic sub-plots, and absorbable televisual moments are easily draped.

Nur Özgenalp (2012: 4–5) introduces the ‘neo-televisual-image’ as a millennial force that ‘encompasses novel mental forces and actively comments on contemporary neoliberalist politics through fictional storytelling.’ ‘The politics of the neo-televisual-image,’ she continues, ‘operates in proximity to people-at-large instead of prevailing hegemonic power. It practices minoritarian politics, which opposes conventional and majoritarian politics.’ The relevance of her research to which types and uses of global citizenship televisual production advances stands out. Moreover, the key to differentiating radical television from more

conventional formats is perhaps in the world ‘actively,’ or to put it another way, productions facilitating response. Reading and viewing experiences are not uniform, nor uniformisable, but rather writing and producing are processes that entail choices whether (or not) to engage, connect, activate global, and sometimes, planetary, citizenship.

## Out Takes

And yet, and yet, and yet. ‘Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps’ ([Farrés 1947](#)). I recognise (sometimes) that I’m a stickler and a purist. I’m an avid reader, a passionate bibliophile, a bit of a Sci Fi geek on the side, have been fortunate enough to visit China (before end times) and a recent Mandarin learner, as well as teaching and writing about literature for many decades, most recently Chinese Science Fiction. Of course I’m gonna love the trilogy, bore friends, even random acquaintances, about it, begin to think of it, prompted by the trilogy’s title, as the Twenty-first century equivalent to *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Of course I’m gonna have the patience, time and possibly foolhardiness to sit and sift through 30 episodes of the Tencent series on YouTube, putting up with endless adverts for noodle brands (series-specific) or something nonsensical called Grammarly (platform-specific) and scouting out new search terms to keep up with the episodes liable to disappear for days on end during an international internet wall-spat, and even to use them to practice my listening and borrow colloquialisms for my assignments.

Many of the viewers of the Netflix series, however, will have been less familiar with Liu Cixin, purists and sticklers (or not) in other ways, often considerably younger and with different references, viewing practices, perhaps though with similar concerns. With an international (global) release, this series will have introduced telecitizens to quite an unusual universe indeed! One where the game is raised for the gamers to the extent that play and ‘reality’ intersect, mutually determine each other’s parameters; a world where the Chinese intellectual diaspora is engaged across frontiers; where protagonists unfold in ways that upset gender conventions; and where historical dimensions and future technologies conspire to redirect the boundaries of knowledge and science. So what if it’s cosily candy-wrapped up as a telegenetic Cheddar Swirly, if they miss out key stuff (like the turkeys) and mix up the storyline willy-nilly? In fact, for a ‘people-at-large’ inhabiting the same game-world where friendship groups may well go drop acid on the marshes (or equivalent), and Clarence’s fathering skills are relatable as they amount to the odd grunt in response to his queer kid’s digital fixations, then this is a series that, just perhaps, zaps all the right neo-televisual-image neurons, sparks an active interest, a mobilisation, a global citizens’ interest in astronomy, science, the planet, the humans, the locusts, the fictions, or whatever orbits their viewing takes them to. If there can be no solution to the three body problem in physics, then, be the era stable or unstable, who am I to even attempt to solve the three ‘Three-Body Problem’ problem? (Don’t answer that question).

Whichever version of Three-Body readers or viewers encounter, the stickler in me grumpily concedes, a portal opens. In the pre-post-Anthropocene, citizenship is global and universe-al, and to mobilise the care and imagination required to reverse (if last chance there still is) ecocide, planetary. It requires cooperation across borders (as even the protagonists of *Geostorm* and *Moonstorm* hammer home despite the movie’s rotten ratings on Earth); the capacity to situate one small sphere in the vastness of space, even if only to (re-)inculcate a sense of its fragility and worth; and, more than all of this, the imagination, the correspondence, that comes from fiction. What, for instance, might it mean to conceive of humans as the/another of aliens, or merely as bugs; to fabulate and distil wonder and worth in ways that activate radical new perspectives of change; or to entertain, in terrestrial/extra-terrestrial relations, a global citizenship informed by Mellamphy’s concluding proposal, whereby:

Non-standard post-humanisms would focus on refusing personalism and relationism by abolishing the human/non-human conceptual connection/divide. In disconnecting from and conceptually

eliminating human/non-human relationalities, the starting point of non-standard post-humanisms is the end of the human as we know it. (2023: 19)

(You may now respond.)

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