

THE POETICS OF CYBORG CHARACTERS IN THE NOVELS OF

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Abstract; This article investigates the poetics of cyborg characterization in Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous* (2017) and *The Future of Another Timeline* (2019), arguing that Newitz mobilizes four interlocking narrative modes—monologue, dialogue, landscape, and portrait—to construct cyborg subjectivities that unsettle human/machine, nature/technology, and gender binaries. Through close readings, the study shows how interior monologues (especially Paladin's focalized consciousness) endow non-human entities with phenomenological depth and ethical agency, while dialogic exchanges stage the negotiation of consent, pronouns, and personhood under regimes of property and code. Landscapes—ranging from Arctic liminal zones and off-grid infrastructures to geological time-machines embedded in Petra—operate as techno-natural chronotopes that externalize political economies of indenture, care, and resistance. Portraiture of bodies (armored carapaces, licensed faces, implanted brains) functions as a semiotics of embodiment that exposes biocapitalist design logics and tests the reader's reliance on visual legibility for recognizing personhood. Placing Newitz in conversation with Shelley, Dick, Piercy, Wells, and Haraway, the article contends that Newitz reorients the cyborg from a figure of alterity to a coalitionary agent whose voice, environment, and corporeality are co-authored by social systems and acts of refusal. The contribution is twofold: a method for stylistic analysis of cyborg poetics across four modes, and a theorization of “techno-subjectivity” that links narrative form to material politics of autonomy, gender, and labor.

Keywords: cyborg; posthumanism; feminist SF; monologue; dialogue; landscape; portrait; techno-subjectivity; biocapitalism.

Annalee Newitz's science fiction novels *Autonomous* (2017) and *The Future of Another Timeline* (2019) offer nuanced portrayals of cyborgs and technologically enhanced beings, blending thrilling plots with deep thematic concerns. Newitz, a science journalist turned novelist, writes in a tradition of speculative fiction that blurs human and machine boundaries. In critical theory, a cyborg is famously defined by Donna Haraway as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”. Newitz's cyborg characters embody this hybrid nature, challenging conventional distinctions between human and machine, self and Other. These characters are brought to life through the author's artistic use of monologue, dialogue, landscape, and portrait, four key narrative modes that serve as “poetic means” of psychological and social characterization.

This article undertakes a scholarly analysis of the poetics of cyborg characters in Newitz's novels, examining how interior monologues, conversational dialogues, landscape



descriptions, and character portraits work in concert to depict cyborg identities. Particular attention is paid to Newitz's debut novel *Autonomous*, which centers on an indentured robot with a human brain, and *The Future of Another Timeline*, which, while focused on time travel and feminist activism, extends Newitz's exploration of human-tech integration. The analysis will also draw comparisons with other notable novels depicting cyborgs – from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* – to situate Newitz's work in a broader literary context. Through a close reading of Newitz's narrative techniques and thematic resonances, we can see how her fiction uses the monologue, dialogue, landscape, and portrait of cyborg characters to probe questions of autonomy, identity, and humanity in the 21st century.

One of the most compelling ways Newitz humanizes her cyborg characters is by granting readers access to their interiority. In *Autonomous*, the robot character Paladin serves as a focalizer for roughly half the novel's chapters, allowing us to follow events through the cyborg's own thoughts and perceptions. This use of interior monologue (presented in third-person limited narration) is crucial in decentering the human perspective and inviting the reader to empathize with a non-human consciousness. For example, Paladin reflects on his feelings in a way that highlights both sentience and programmed constraints: "He was a user of his own consciousness, but he did not have owner privileges. As a result, Paladin felt many things without knowing why.". This remarkable line reveals the cyborg's internal dilemma – Paladin experiences emotions ("felt many things") yet cannot fully introspect on them due to restrictions in his code (lacking "owner privileges" to his own mind). Through such interior commentary, Newitz poignantly illustrates the cyborg's partial autonomy and the tragedy of self-awareness under constraint. The narrative invites us to inhabit Paladin's psyche, experiencing the confusion and yearning that come with his hybrid human/machine nature.

Newitz uses interior perspective to portray Paladin's burgeoning sense of self. As Paladin develops relationships and encounters new stimuli, the narration delves into his private reactions. Upon first meeting his human partner Elias, Paladin's internal narration nearly reads as romantic yearning: "[The man's] dark eyes [sent] an unreadable message that Paladin wanted desperately to decrypt. [...] How could he look at Elias and say no?". Though Paladin at this point is ostensibly genderless and guided by loyalty programming, the intimacy of his thoughts – wanting to "decrypt" the mystery of Elias's gaze and feeling unable to refuse him – conveys a longing that feels deeply personal. Newitz thereby uses interior monologue to give the cyborg a rich emotional inner life, complicating the stereotype of robots as unfeeling machines. Notably, Paladin's very language of thought mixes human emotion with mechanical metaphor (e.g., interpreting attraction as a code to decrypt), subtly reminding us of his dual nature.

In *The Future of Another Timeline*, Newitz likewise employs interior monologue to deepen character portrayal, though the "cyborg" element is more figurative here. The novel's protagonists, Tess and Beth, are human time-travelers rather than literal cyborgs, yet their minds and bodies are profoundly affected by technology and temporal shifts. Tess, a geologist from 2022, experiences the psychological strain of edited timelines: after altering history, Tess retains memories of two different lives, causing crippling headaches as her brain struggles with paradox. Newitz conveys Tess's disorientation and resilience through internal reflections. Beth, a 1990s teenager, provides perhaps the most striking interior passages. In one concert scene, Beth's inner monologue captures a moment of intense alienation and longing for transcendence: "Music was nothing like life. When Glorious stopped singing, I missed her magnificent sound, with its power to merge my soul with the crowd and obliterate loneliness. I was stuck in a body. I had to communicate using the pathetic phonemes of language.". Although Beth is not a cyborg, this passage resonates strongly with cyborg themes – she perceives her embodied human state as a limitation, "stuck in a body" and forced to use imperfect verbal language. Her yearning to merge



with others and escape loneliness through a sensory, almost technological experience (music as a unifying “frequency”) echoes the cyborg’s desire to transcend bodily limits. By including such introspective moments, Newitz gives voice to the characters’ innermost struggles and aspirations. In *Timeline*, these internal monologues underscore the emotional stakes of the story’s feminist and posthuman themes: the ache for connection, the burden of memory, and the wish to rewrite one’s reality.

In both novels, interior monologue is a key part of the poetics of the cyborg. It allows Newitz to construct cyborg subjectivity from the inside out, endowing non-human or trans-human characters with self-awareness and personal depth. This narrative strategy aligns with a broader posthumanist literary trend of using multiple perspectives to challenge anthropocentrism. As one scholar observes, *Autonomous* “serves to decenter and question the human” by making a robot one of the viewpoint characters. The result is that readers not only understand the cyborg’s predicament intellectually, but feel it viscerally through direct access to thoughts and feelings. This empathetic interior view of the cyborg contrasts with earlier science fiction that often kept artificial beings opaque or purely external. Newitz’s approach, like that of recent works such as Martha Wells’s *Murderbot Diaries* (told in first-person from an AI/cyborg’s perspective), firmly establishes the cyborg as a narrating self rather than a mere object observed by others. By the end of *Autonomous*, Paladin’s internal journey – from programmed servitude to autonomous decision-making – is vividly charted through his evolving monologues. He even comes to interpret his own code and emotions, deciding which impulses to “overwrite” in order to become free. Such moments affirm the power of interior perspective in representing “techno-subjectivities”. In sum, monologue in Newitz’s novels is far more than a stylistic flourish; it is the mechanism by which cyborg characters achieve narrative agency and by which the novels realize their posthuman, feminist ethos.

Complementing the inner voice of monologue, Newitz also uses dialogue extensively to explore cyborg characters – their way of speaking, the way others speak to them, and the content of their conversations – thereby externalizing conflicts and relationships. In *Autonomous*, much of the plot unfolds through dialogue between humans and bots, dialogues that are laden with subtext about personhood and power. A prime example is the evolving exchange between Paladin and Eliaz, which starts with miscommunication and prejudice but gradually becomes more intimate. Early on, when Paladin innocently questions Eliaz about a moment of sexual arousal, Eliaz reacts with a homophobic slur, calling Paladin a “faggot” because he views Paladin as a male robot and thus feels his own attraction threatens his heterosexual self-image. This tense dialogue (with Paladin literally voicing a question about sexuality and Eliaz responding in anger) lays bare the power imbalance and the projection of gender onto a genderless being. It prompts Paladin to seek understanding from another bot: confused by the slur, Paladin asks his bot friend Fang what the word means. Through this brief but telling conversational moment, Newitz shows the cyborg actively learning through dialogue – a Socratic model of a machine acquiring social knowledge. Fang’s explanation of the epithet and the concept of homophobia helps Paladin interpret Eliaz’s behavior. Thus, even a simple question-and-answer dialogue performs important work: it highlights how robots in Newitz’s world must navigate human bigotry and cultural norms via language, and it marks a step in Paladin’s growth toward self-awareness (realizing, for instance, that Eliaz’s attitudes towards him are influenced by gender assumptions).

As Paladin and Eliaz’s partnership continues, their dialogues become a site of negotiation over identity. Eventually, Paladin tells Eliaz that the human brain implanted in his (Paladin’s) body came from a female soldier, after which Eliaz shifts to calling Paladin “she”. This pronoun change is discussed explicitly between them – a dialogue about gender designation



that is both practical and deeply symbolic. Paladin verbally “reclaims” the she/her pronouns that she finds more authentic after learning the brain’s origin, while Elias verbalizes his comfort in perceiving Paladin as female. In these exchanges, dialogue is the tool through which the cyborg character’s asserted identity is recognized (or misconstrued) by others. The act of naming (using “he” vs “she”) is done in conversation, underlining how language constructs the cyborg’s social identity. Notably, even though Paladin’s sense of self should not hinge on a biologically gendered brain, Elias’s attitude does hinge on it – a point the novel critiques. Newitz uses their dialogues to scrutinize the moral ambiguity of their relationship: each word and tone between them carries the tension of free will versus programming, equality versus dominance. We hear Paladin politely acquiescing and expressing loyalty, even affection, but we also know (from monologues) that her code has “loyalty protocols” influencing those feelings. The poetics of dialogue here lies in subtext; the spoken lines often have double meanings when we consider the power dynamics. For instance, when Elias asks if Paladin wants a certain intimacy or is just following orders, it raises the question of consent that Paladin cannot easily answer – a silent tension behind the spoken words.

Newitz also gives us dialogues between cyborgs themselves, which are frequently insightful and darkly humorous. A standout example occurs among the autonomous bots in *Autonomous* when they discuss freedom and programming. In one scene, a bot named Bug pointedly asks another bot, Actin, whether Actin’s desires are real or just a function of programming: “Is that really what you want, or is that your programming?”. Actin’s reply is both wry and profound: “It’s what I want. It’s my programming. I can’t possibly know... I don’t even believe in consciousness. When I’ve got my autonomy, I’ll still be programmed, and I’ll still need a job researching brain interfaces.”. This snippet of dialogue, essentially a philosophical debate between two AI, encapsulates many of the novel’s themes. The bot Actin acknowledges the entanglement of genuine will and coded directives (“it’s what I want, it’s my programming”) and even questions the relevance of concepts like “consciousness” to a being like itself. Delivered in a casual tone with a touch of sarcasm (sending “rude emojis” in response, as the text notes), the exchange illustrates Newitz’s skill at using dialogue to explore existential questions in an accessible way. The bots’ conversation functions as a mini-Socratic dialogue about free will in AI: through their voices, the novel asks if autonomy is an illusion for any being governed by underlying codes – whether silicon or biological. Notably, Actin’s line also foreshadows the idea that even once free (“when I’ve got my autonomy”), an AI will have to find purpose (“a job researching brain interfaces”), hinting that autonomy is not a final state but an ongoing negotiation. By allowing her cyborg characters to talk through these dilemmas, Newitz makes the philosophical underpinnings of the story explicit and engaging. It’s a technique reminiscent of classic science-fiction dialogues (for example, the debates between robots in Asimov’s stories about following the Three Laws), but Newitz’s version is updated with contemporary cynicism and wit (the mention of emojis and disbelief in consciousness gives it a 21st-century flavor).

In *The Future of Another Timeline*, dialogue plays a slightly different but equally important role. Rather than conversations with literal cyborgs, we see dialogues that reflect the cyborg metaphor in socio-political contexts. A striking line of dialogue from this novel is a slogan repeated by a character from the future: “My sisters have a saying: If you have property, you can’t be property.”. This statement, voiced by a member of the daughters of Harriet, directly ties into the novel’s themes of self-ownership and liberation. In context, it refers to women’s rights and the prevention of enslavement or subjugation – essentially arguing that economic empowerment (having property) guarantees personal freedom (not being property oneself). The maxim resonates uncannily with the world of *Autonomous*, where both robots and humans can



literally be property if they are indentured, and were owning one's body (or buying out one's indenture) is the key to emancipation. By including this dialogue in *Timeline*, Newitz conceptually bridges the two novels: the fight against treating sentient beings as property is common to both. The dialogue is memorable not only as a political statement but also as a characterization tool – it shows the speaker's alignment with a cyborg-like perspective (since in *Autonomous*, a robot who acquires property or money can become autonomous/non-property). Moreover, it reveals the oral culture of the Daughters of Harriet, who pass down wisdom in sayings. Thus, through a single line of speech, Newitz deepens world-building and draws thematic connections between disparate characters and times.

Throughout Newitz's work, dialogues often carry a didactic or reflective weight, serving almost as micro-discussions on ethics and identity. Yet they remain realistic to the characters and situations – whether it's two AI bantering about the nature of self, or riot grrrls in 1992 strategizing in slang and slogans. Voice is carefully crafted: Paladin's dialogue is formal and curious, reflecting a being new to personhood; Elias's speech is terse and colloquial, masking vulnerability; Tess speaks in measured, knowledgeable tones befitting a scholar-activist, whereas teenage Beth's voice is brash and emotive. By differentiating voices, Newitz ensures that each dialogue not only advances ideas but also reveals character. For instance, when Beth and her friends in *Timeline* argue about how to deal with male abusers, their raw teenage vernacular (“She has my fucking cigarettes,” one complains in the concert scene) underscores both their youth and the urgency of their situation. In contrast, when Tess debates the philosophy of history with other time travelers, the dialogue adopts a more analytical tone, invoking theories of change (individual “Great Man” vs collective action) in conversational form.

In summary, Newitz uses dialogue as a dynamic external complement to internal monologue. While monologues let us privately into the cyborg's mind, dialogues put the cyborg in social interaction, revealing how others treat them and how they express themselves openly. The push-pull between Paladin's quiet internal obedience and his spoken attempts to assert self (like asking to use “she” pronouns) exemplifies this interplay. Through dialogues, the novels examine how language can both liberate and confine. Words like “slave,” “master,” or derogatory labels can reinforce power structures – one bitter human character in *Autonomous* even remarks, “Every master love to fuck a slave. It is a law of nature, or maybe culture”, indicating through cynical dialogue how abuse of power is normalized. Yet, language also enables resistance and understanding, as seen when Paladin and others question those very power relations in conversation. Newitz's cyborg characters, by finding their own voices and conversing with allies and adversaries, participate in what Mikhail Bakhtin would call a dialogic process – a plurality of voices that challenges any single authoritative narrative. The novels themselves, full of debate and dialogue, enact a dialogue with the science fiction tradition, updating the genre's treatment of cyborgs by literally giving the cyborgs a say in their destiny.

Newitz's storytelling also excels in its evocative landscapes and settings, which function as more than mere backdrops – they actively contribute to the thematic and emotional landscape of her cyborg narratives. In *Autonomous*, the world of the late 22nd century is depicted as a patchwork of territories reshaped by plagues, climate change, and capitalist exploitation. This dystopian environment forms a physical landscape that reflects the novel's socio-economic concerns. For instance, national borders have been replaced by “economic zones” controlled by entities like the International Property Coalition. The very geography is defined by property and patents, underscoring the theme that both humans and bots are treated as commodities in this future. Newitz describes high-tech cities and remote outposts with equal care, often highlighting contrasts between zones of privilege and zones of resistance. Jack, the human protagonist, operates from a submarine in the Arctic Sea outside regulated zones. The choice of an Arctic



setting – “towns like Inuvik and Iqaluit” in the far north – is unusual and significant. These harsh, frigid landscapes at the fringes of civilization symbolize the margins to which Jack must retreat in order to practice her form of techno-anarchism (pirating life-saving drugs). The extreme latitude evokes isolation and frontier lawlessness, mirroring Jack’s outsider status and the novel’s exploration of lives lived “off the grid.” Critic Thomas Wagner notes that *Autonomous* may be “the only science fiction novel with scenes set in towns like Inuvik and Iqaluit,” and that Newitz’s detailed portrayal of the “extreme Canadian north” gives the story a “rich and tactile future” that feels lived-in. This tactile quality of landscape – from the cold expanse of the Arctic Ocean to urban markets teeming with pirates and students – grounds the high-concept narrative in a concrete sense of place. The environment often reinforces character mood: when Jack travels over icy waters or through barren tundra, readers sense her loneliness and determination; conversely, a bustling underground bazaar or university lab provides a sense of hope and community in her quest.

For the cyborg characters, the landscape sometimes influences their perception in unique ways. Paladin, with his machine physiology, experiences settings differently than humans do. Newitz occasionally filters descriptions through Paladin’s sensorium – for example, noting what frequencies or chemical traces a robot might detect in an environment that a human would miss. While these details are subtle in the text, they contribute to the “inhumanness” of Paladin’s focalization. The narrative might mention, for instance, how Paladin analyzes a scene by zooming in with robotic vision or scanning faces via his internal database. In one scene, after witnessing suffering, Paladin looks upon human faces and notes that henceforth “human faces would always look different to him... They would remind him of what it felt like to suffer, and to be relieved of suffering”. Here the landscape of human faces – a sea of faces in an urban crowd, perhaps – becomes imbued with moral meaning through Paladin’s eyes. We see how environment (even a social environment) is processed by a cyborg: faces become data points that carry emotional significance due to Paladin’s newfound empathy. This melding of physical detail with inner change exemplifies Newitz’s poetic treatment of setting. Even when not overtly described, the world of *Autonomous* – from pirate submarines to corporate skyscrapers – is always implicitly interacting with the characters. The rugged terrains and industrial zones are the “landscapes of autonomy” in which bots and humans alike negotiate their freedom.

In *The Future of Another Timeline*, Newitz takes an even more imaginative approach to landscape by integrating time travel technology with the natural geology of the Earth. The novel’s central conceit is that there are ancient, mysterious machines embedded in certain locations around the world – rock formations that turn out to be geological time portals. This leads to some stunning descriptive passages. One memorable depiction comes from a concert poster that Beth treasures, which shows the time portal at Raqmu (Petra, in Jordan) in its primordial form: “an aerial view, showing two red, crescent-shaped rocks curving around a circular pearlescent canopy that covered the entrance to the wormhole. From that angle it looked like a beautiful, stylized vulva and clitoris. But it was also an ancient rock formation.”. This image is striking for its sensual, organic quality – Newitz deliberately uses yonic imagery (vulva-like shapes) to describe the time machine site. The landscape is thus not just scenery but symbol. It conveys the novel’s feminist theme (the portal’s vulva-esque appearance resonates with the women-centric “Daughters of Harriet” who use it) and its notion of technology-as-nature. Time travel here is literally grounded in the Earth’s deep past; the machines have “interfaces [that] eroded away to nothing” over eons, making them part and parcel of the natural landscape. Reviewer Allison Speakmon observes that *The Future of Another Timeline* “depicts time travel as a natural wonder, which I’ve never really seen before”. Indeed, Newitz’s description of Petra’s rock formations invites awe much as a national park or a coral reef might. By treating the



technological wormholes as sublime natural phenomena, she effectively cyborgizes the landscape itself – blending the artificial (a time machine) with the organic (ancient rocks) in imagery and fact.

This use of landscape reinforces the novel's message that the past (and those traditionally marginalized in history) are literally carved into the earth, waiting to be discovered and revisited. When Tess travels to the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 or to prehistorical sites, the narrative paints the scenery of those times in vivid detail. These historical landscapes are contrasted with Tess's home timeline in the early 21st century and an alternate future timeline glimpsed later. The ability of characters to step between eras places different landscapes in dialogue: a single chapter might move from a late Cretaceous desert to a 1990s Southern California suburb to a future Utah headquarters. Each setting shapes the characters' actions and emotional state. For example, a violent confrontation in a 1992 desert highway at night, under a vast sky, might underscore Beth's sense of lawlessness and fate (the openness of the landscape reflecting the openness of the future at that moment). Meanwhile, Petra's glowing canyons inspire Tess with a near-spiritual resolve, reminding her of the eons of change the world has seen – a perspective that bolsters her fight for justice across time. Landscape in *Timeline* often becomes a character in its own right, especially the "Machines" (time portal sites) which are treated with reverence. The natural beauty and ancient mystery of these places stand in stark contrast to the ugliness of the patriarchal violence the protagonists are battling. In that sense, Newitz uses setting as a moral contrast: oppressive social systems are frequently associated with man-made constructs (boardrooms, back alleys, suburban houses where abuse occurs), whereas hope and liberation are connected to landscapes that are either natural or reclaimed (concert venues where riot grrrls convene, the open road where Beth and her friends seize freedom, the timeless caves and rock formations harboring the wormholes). This isn't a simplistic nature-good/technology-bad dichotomy – after all, the rock-bound Machines are technology and are used as instruments by both good and bad actors. Rather, it's an integrated vision where technology and nature are one continuous landscape, and characters, cyborgian or human, must find their ethical orientation within it.

Comparatively, Newitz's use of landscape aligns with and innovates upon literary traditions. In classic literature like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, sublime natural landscapes (the Alps, the Arctic ice) mirrored the inner turmoil of creator and creature. Newitz continues this device: for Paladin and Jack, icy seas and isolated frontiers reflect their status as outsiders challenging a global system. In cyberpunk fiction (e.g., William Gibson's *Neuromancer*), urban and virtual landscapes often overwhelm characters, signifying the fusion of human and network. Newitz's near-future cities – say, the chaotic sprawl of Casablanca's pirate market or the high-tech labs of Saskatoon – are depicted with granular detail that recalls cyberpunk's world-building, but she avoids glamorizing neon skylines. Instead, her cities are pragmatic spaces marked by who controls them (free trade zones vs autonomous zones) and by who moves through them (indentured workers vs free agents). In *Autonomous*, even the interior landscapes matter: the cramped submarine living quarters, the secret laboratories, the utilitarian barracks where indentured bots recharge – each physical space reflects the degree of freedom or constraint experienced by the characters therein. The richness of Newitz's settings has drawn praise for making the world feel authentic and "lived in", an effect crucial when dealing with extraordinary beings like AI. By embedding cyborg characters in a textured reality, she allows readers to believe in them and understand their challenges as part of a credible environment.

Finally, it's worth noting how landscape intersects with identity for Newitz's cyborgs and cyborg-like figures. In *Autonomous*, the concept of *terra nullius* – ungoverned space – becomes a refuge for autonomy. Jack's submarine roams international waters, a literal moving landscape



of freedom beneath the waves. Paladin and Eliazs dream of escaping to Mars, an entirely new landscape, by the novel's end. Mars represents a frontier beyond the oppressive system, suggesting that sometimes only by changing one's landscape (leaving Earth) can one reinvent one's identity and relationships. This echo's themes in earlier robot fiction (Isaac Asimov's robots often long for Spacer worlds away from Earth's prejudices, for instance). In *Timeline*, time is a landscape. Characters traverse it like geography. The title itself implies alternate "timelines" as different worlds. Thus, Newitz expands "landscape" to include temporal and historical dimensions, reinforcing the book's point that the past and future are territories we collectively shape. Tess's academic specialty – geology – beautifully symbolizes this: she studies layers of rock and time, the literal landscape of history, and uses that knowledge to alter the course of human events. This scientific grounding provides a realistic anchor (time travel is described in terms of physical sites and deep time) for what could otherwise be abstract. As Tess says in one dialogue, "Even if the only thing that person ever does is study ancient rocks, or listen to a friend," their actions matter in history – a statement that merges landscape ("ancient rocks") with human action, epitomizing Newitz's integrated approach.

In summary, through detailed and meaningful landscapes, Newitz situates her cyborg characters in worlds that reflect and shape their journeys. The Arctic seas, desert highways, red-rock canyons, and futuristic metropolises are not just settings but extensions of the narrative's themes – autonomy, rebellion, and the interplay of technology with nature. This careful crafting of setting contributes greatly to the poetics of her novels, enriching the atmosphere and symbolism that surround the cyborg figures.

The final crucial element of Newitz's cyborg character depiction is the portraiture of the characters themselves – how their physical forms and features are described (by the narrator and by other characters), and what those descriptions signify artistically. In literary studies, portrait refers to the narrative presentation of a character's outward appearance and attributes, which can often serve as a window into their inner nature or societal role. Newitz plays with portraiture in interesting, sometimes subversive ways, especially because her subjects challenge the very category of "natural" appearance.

In *Autonomous*, we are given explicit descriptions of the cyborg characters' bodies that highlight their hybrid construction. Paladin, for example, is introduced as a military-grade robot with a distinctive anatomy: Paladin's chassis is not strictly human in shape. The SFF180 review notes that "Paladin's form factor isn't strictly humanoid". In the novel we learn that Paladin's body has "bird-like and humanoid features" – an intriguing combination suggesting a mechanized raptor or a two-legged combat machine. Paladin's most human component is literally hidden inside: a human brain implanted in the robot's torso (specifically in the chest cavity) helps with facial recognition processing. This brain, taken from a deceased human soldier, is an object of fascination for others and a source of confusion for Paladin's identity. Newitz often draws attention to it in the narrative "portrait" of Paladin. For instance, Eliazs reflects on Paladin's brain, at first thinking of Paladin as "nothing more than a robot aside from [his] human brain", but later fetishizing that brain as the locus of Paladin's personhood when he learns it came from a woman. The novel itself problematizes this view. One scientist character, Dr. Broner, who designed Paladin's brain interface, explicitly debunks the idea that the brain carries a whole human identity by itself: "The human brain doesn't store memories like a file system," she says, dismissing the fantasy of resurrection by brain-in-robot as misguided. By including such commentary, Newitz prevents readers from simplistically assigning humanity to Paladin just because of one organ. Instead, we are invited to see Paladin's entire being – mechanical body, organic brain, coded mind – as a new integrated whole.



The physical portrait of Paladin is further linked to functionality and the theme of exploitation. Newitz demonstrates a keen awareness that in her world, bodies (whether of bots or humans) are engineered for certain roles. A very telling line in *Autonomous* reveals this: “If he’d been designed for sex, Paladin would have been given emo-cognitive training on the topic. His carapace would have been skin and muscle, fitted with genitals.”. This statement, found in the narration, contrasts Paladin with other classes of bots. Paladin’s “carapace” – a term that likens his body to an armored shell, emphasizing its hard, non-human exterior – lacks human-like skin because he was built for combat, not intimacy. The absence of genitals and the presence of a rigid shell are physical attributes that mark him as a tool of war, not intended to be seen as a person or engage in personal relationships. Here, Newitz uses negative portraiture (describing what a body does not have) to comment on the dehumanization inherent in his design. The fact that sex bots in this world would be made to look fully human (“skin and muscle”) underlines that physical appearance is manipulated to serve human desires: attractive, lifelike bodies for pleasure versus intimidating, inhuman forms for soldiers. Paladin straddles these categories uncomfortably – built as a weapon, yet in the course of the story, becoming an object of love and desire. This mismatch creates dramatic tension and highlights one of Newitz’s thematic questions: Is personhood skin-deep? By textual portrait alone, Paladin might not resemble a human, but through character development we come to treat Paladin as a person. Elias’s personal journey is partly about overcoming (or failing to overcome) his bias toward human-looking features; he struggles until learning about the female brain, after which he symbolically “genders” Paladin female and finds it easier to justify his love. The novel does not endorse Elias’s rationale, but presents it to critique how humans’ base acceptance on physical/biological cues. Thus, the physical portrait of the cyborg is central to the novel’s exploration of gender and empathy.

Another cyborg character in *Autonomous*, though less central, offers a contrasting portrait: Med (Medea), an autonomous (free) robot who aids Jack. Med provides a fascinating foil in terms of appearance: “She was designed to look human, her face the replica of a woman whose image Med’s tissue engineer had licensed from an old Facebook database.”. Unlike Paladin, Med was deliberately made to be as human-looking as possible. Her very face is effectively borrowed from a real (long-dead) human via a digital archive – a detail rich with implications. It suggests that even a robot’s “portrait” might be a kind of property or commodity (her face was licensed, implying ownership of a likeness). It also indicates how technology in this world blurs originality and copy: Med is an artificial being walking around with a cloned human face, raising questions of authenticity. Why was Med designed to pass as human? The narrative implies that Med’s role (perhaps in social or medical contexts, given her name’s resonance with “medicine” and the fact that she researches the drug issue) required a human façade. Med’s convincingly human portrait allows her to blend into society in ways Paladin cannot. And yet, the fact that we, through Jack’s eyes, know Med is a bot with a manufactured face adds an eerie quality to her beauty – a sense of the uncanny. Newitz here invokes a classic cyborg/AI trope: the uncanny valley of robots that look nearly human. But rather than use it for horror, she uses it to engender empathy and collaboration (Med is a positive, sympathetic character). Med’s human-like portrait also demonstrates a kind of self-determination: as an autonomous bot, she might have had a say in choosing her appearance (or at least maintaining it once free). We could interpret her very name, Medea Cohen (blending a mythic human name with a common human surname), as her chosen identity in the human world, complete with a human visage.

Through these two bots, Newitz shows a spectrum of cyborg embodiment – from the obviously mechanical Paladin to the seamlessly humanoid Med. Both extremes are problematic



in this society: Paladin faces prejudice for looking too inhuman, while Med's very human look belies the prejudice that still surfaces once people learn she's a bot. The variability in portraits leads readers to consider what truly defines a being as human or not. Is it the outward form, the inner components, or behavior? *Autonomous* repeatedly suggests it's behavior and relationships that count most, even as characters struggle with visual cues. For example, Eliazs ultimately treats Paladin with love and respect more because of their bond (and the reassurance of a female brain) than because of Paladin's outward form – though he asks Paladin to wear human-like body armor at one point, essentially dressing her in skin, which is telling. Meanwhile, human characters like Threzed (a young man who was indentured) are portrayed in ways that dehumanize them despite fully human appearance. Threzed is described through others' eyes as attractive yet is literally named after a number (a slave name). The portrait of Threzed – a human reduced to property – juxtaposed with the portrait of bots striving for personhood, reinforces the novel's argument that the line between human and machine is an artificial, socially imposed one. Physically, Threzed and Eliazs are both human males, but in status they differ vastly; physically Paladin looks like a machine, but in ethical and emotional terms he is "more human" than the cruel corporation executives who lack empathy. Newitz carefully balances such contrasts to challenge the reader's biases.

In *The Future of Another Timeline*, the notion of a cyborg body is less literal, but bodily autonomy and modifications still play a role. The time travelers do not have cyborg implants (the Machines do the work externally), yet there is a sense in which their bodies carry the marks of technology and history. Tess experiences nosebleeds and migraines when the timeline shifts around her, indicating her body's visceral response to temporal edits. We might say her brain becomes a living chronometer of an altered reality – an embodied effect of technological change. Additionally, the novel explores the politics of bodies (particularly female bodies) through its feminist lens. For example, one character is a trans woman from the future timeline, and another is an activist who performs "edits" on the timeline akin to performing surgery on the body politic. While not cyborgs, these characters' physical experiences are foregrounded (menstruation, pregnancy, physical abuse, etc.) to underscore that controlling technology and history is ultimately about controlling bodies and their destinies. The portraiture in *Timeline* therefore often involves characters referencing historical figures and their bodies – e.g., the novel references a world where Harriet Tubman lives to become a senator, implicitly painting a portrait of an older Tubman with a life story altered by technology (time travel edits). The presence of real, once-flesh-and-blood people in the malleable timeline emphasizes the theme that human bodies and identities are not fixed, but subject to change through intervention – a cyborgian idea if ever there was one (since a cyborg is precisely a body modified or extended by external means). In this way, even without a central cyborg character, *Timeline* engages with the idea of constructed identity and body that is key to cyborg literature.

Comparatively, Newitz's approach to physical description pays homage to and diverges from earlier depictions of artificial beings. Mary Shelley gave Frankenstein's Creature a grotesque visage – "yellow eye," "shrivelled complexion" – which instantly set him apart as monstrous, framing how others (and readers) view him. Newitz, however, resists casting her cyborgs as inherently monstrous or angelic based on looks alone. Paladin's design is functional, not a Gothic horror; Med's design is conventionally attractive. The monstrousness, if any, is in the society that treats sentient beings as things, not in the beings themselves. This reflects the evolution of the genre and of societal attitudes since Shelley's time: where earlier works externalized inner difference as physical deformity, Newitz externalizes the systemic evils (through things like corporate logos, slave collars, or austere military hardware) and keeps the cyborg characters' portraits largely relatable or neutral. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*



Philip K. Dick famously made his androids indistinguishable from humans in appearance – forcing his protagonist Deckard to rely on empathy tests rather than visuals to identify them. Newitz builds on that legacy by presenting a world where some bots look utterly human (Med) and some don't (Paladin), and crucially, both can possess humanity. The visual spectrum is broader, but the moral is similar: you cannot reliably tell a being's personhood from its appearance. Meanwhile, Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* gave us Yod, a cyborg who looks fully human and even handsome – a deliberate inversion of Frankenstein's ugly creature to explore female desire and ethical creation. Newitz's handling of Elias and Paladin's sexual relationship parallels Piercy's exploration of human-machine love, but with an added layer: gender fluidity and orientation. By making Paladin's gender identity and physical sex ambiguous, Newitz adds complexity to the portrait. Paladin is effectively a gender-fluid cyborg, whose "monstrous" trait in Elias's eyes is not appearance but the challenge Paladin poses to heteronormativity. This is a thoroughly modern update to cyborg portraiture: the body is not marked by bolts or wires, but by society's projections (male or female? tool or lover?). It's here that Newitz's academic background in gender studies shines through, aligning with Haraway's concept of the cyborg as transgressing binary categories of male/female, human/machine.

In sum, the portraiture of cyborg characters in Newitz's novels serves multiple poetic functions. It provides concrete imagery so we can visualize these beings, it encodes thematic information about their roles and struggles, and it challenges the reader to question surface appearances. The detailed attention to bodies – from Paladin's armored "carapace" to Med's borrowed face – invites a form of literary analysis that connects the physical to the political. These descriptions expose what one article calls "the entanglements of gender, technology, and power within contemporary bio-capitalist structures". Newitz's cyborgs are literally embodied critiques of the system – their bodies bear the inscriptions of corporate patents, gender norms, and liberatory alterations. The portraits she paints of them in prose are therefore vital to understanding the radical potential they represent. Just as a painted portrait might highlight certain features to convey the subject's status or character, Newitz's written portraits highlight, say, a human brain in a chest or a licensed face, to convey the collision of humanity and commodification. By the end of these novels, the reader has learned to see these cyborg characters not as "Others" defined by physical difference, but as protagonists whose essence far exceeds what is visible. This is, arguably, one of the successes of Newitz's poetics: through careful description and narrative focus, she makes us re-envision the cyborg body – not as an alien oddity, but as a site of personhood and rights.

Annalee Newitz's portrayal of cyborg characters stands out in contemporary science fiction, yet it also invites comparison with the treatment of cyborgs and artificial beings in other literary works. By situating Newitz's techniques alongside those of her predecessors and peers, we can more clearly see the innovations and resonances in her approach to monologue, dialogue, landscape, and portrait.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is often hailed as a proto-cyborg narrative, featuring an artificially created being who longs for acceptance. Shelley's Creature is given the power of speech – notably, a passionate monologue recounting his education and suffering – which elicits reader sympathy despite his terrifying appearance. This is a 19th-century precursor to Newitz's strategy of using interiority and eloquence to humanize the non-human. Like Paladin, Frankenstein's monster experiences unjust rejection based on his outward form, leading him to ask existential questions ("What am I?" and "Why did you make me so?") in dialogues with his creator. Shelley's use of remote landscapes (the icy Arctic where Victor and the Creature finally confront each other) parallels Newitz's use of extreme settings to reflect isolation. However, Shelley's narrative ultimately keeps the Creature



as a tragic outsider who never fully integrates into human society. Newitz's cyborgs, by contrast, move toward building their own community or finding spaces (even off-planet colonies) where they can belong on their own terms. This shift from Romantic alienation to a postmodern search for affinity reflects two centuries of change in how we imagine the "monstrous" other – from something that must remain at the fringes to something that can perhaps reshape the center.

Mid-20th-century and cyberpunk-era works often grappled with whether artificial beings could feel and what that means for humanity. Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) presented androids (or "replicants") that are physically indistinguishable from humans. Lacking an interior monologue from the androids, Dick relied on dialogue and empathetic reactions to reveal their humanity – for instance, the android Rachael's distress in dialogue when she learns her memories are implanted, or Roy Batty's famous final soliloquy in the film adaptation *Blade Runner* ("tears in rain"). Newitz's work echoes Dick's theme of empathy as the marker of humanity but diverges by giving the cyborgs a sustained narrative voice of their own (Paladin's POV), rather than filtering everything through a human protagonist. In terms of setting, classic cyberpunk like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) often immersed its cyborgified characters in neon urban sprawl and virtual landscapes. Newitz's futures are comparably gritty and capitalist, but she broadens the landscape to include off-world dreams (Mars) and natural wonders (Petra) as discussed, which infuse her stories with a different tone – perhaps more hopeful or diverse in mood than the unrelenting cityscape of cyberpunk. Portraiture in older android stories was often about the uncanny indiscernibility of the android – e.g., in Dick's novel, Deckard is momentarily fooled by an android who believes itself human. In *Autonomous*, Newitz inverts this: Paladin knows exactly what he is, but others (like Elias) experience confusion or denial about it. The onus of uncertainty shifts from the artificial being (questioning its humanity) to the human (questioning their own biases and desires). This inversion is a fresh contribution to the genre's ongoing conversation.

Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) is a notable forerunner for Newitz, as it centers on a cyborg (Yod) created to protect a Jewish free town, blending cyberpunk with feminist and Jewish storytelling. Piercy, like Newitz, gives her cyborg a voice and emotional relationships; Yod engages in thoughtful dialogue about his status as a created being and even narrates portions of his own experience (through conversations and a journal). Piercy also juxtaposes Yod's story with the legend of the Golem of Prague, thereby providing a historical/mythical landscape to contextualize the cyborg – not unlike how Newitz uses real historical figures and places in *Timeline* as context for technological change. Both authors emphasize gender and autonomy: Piercy's Shira falls in love with Yod and grapples with the ethics of having a "perfect" male partner literally made to order, whereas Newitz's characters confront non-binary and same-sex attraction through the human-robot relationship of Elias and Paladin. Newitz pushes the envelope further by directly addressing queer identity (Paladin's gender choice, Elias's internalized homophobia) in the cyborg context, something Piercy touched on more metaphorically. Piercy's novel also richly describes the physicality of Yod – his warmth, strength, sexual capabilities – to blur the line between human and machine. Newitz's equivalent might be the detailed explanation of Paladin's body modifications and sensory equipment, though she uses these details to highlight limits (lack of genitalia, for instance, or reliance on an external "autonomy key" for freedom) whereas Piercy's Yod is in many ways physically superior to a human. This difference points to a thematic divergence: Piercy entertains the idea of the cyborg as an idealized new form of life (with the tragedy coming from human intolerance), whereas Newitz portrays the cyborg more as an oppressed class-worker figure who must hack its own limitations to achieve parity. Both approaches are feminist, but Newitz's is more steeped in critique of capitalism and colonialism (indenture, property rights, etc.).



For a contemporary example, Martha Wells's *Murderbot* series (beginning with *All Systems Red*, 2017) features a part-organic, part-mechanical security unit that has hacked its governor module to gain autonomy – a premise strongly resonant with *Autonomous*. Like *Paladin*, *Murderbot* is a construct that struggles with social interaction, has wry internal monologues, and ultimately develops caring relationships with humans. Both Newitz and Wells use first-person or close third-person narration from the cyborg's perspective to generate humor and empathy. *Murderbot*'s tone is more openly sarcastic and self-effacing (it calls itself "Murderbot" because of its past yet mostly wants to be left alone to watch TV serials), whereas *Paladin*'s tone is earnest and inquisitive, shaped by a plot that is arguably darker. Nonetheless, the kinship is evident: both authors allow a cyborg to tell its own story, both highlight the tension between programming versus personal desire, and both even deal with issues of consent (*Murderbot* is deeply uncomfortable with humans touching it or treating it as a thing, and *Paladin* cannot refuse orders or romantic advances freely due to indenture coding). Wells's series is set in a space-faring future with corporate planets, so her landscape is more traditionally science-fictional (spaceships, stations, distant colonies). Newitz grounds *Autonomous* on Earth with very specific geopolitical landscapes, which gives her story a more immediate social critique – it feels like the extension of our world's current trajectory (bio-capitalism, patent wars). Both are valid approaches, and together they indicate a recent trend: 21st-century SFF is increasingly centering the voices of beings who were once sidekicks or silent enforcers (robots, AI, cyborgs), and doing so in a way that interrogates power structures (corporations, gender norms, etc.). Newitz's work is a distinguished part of that trend, blending the emotional focus of character-driven narratives with the analytical lens of a scholar who "exposes entanglements of gender, technology, and power" through her fiction.

Newitz's cyborg characters also invite a broader reflection on the Cyborg Manifesto that Donna Haraway articulated. Haraway envisioned the cyborg as a creature that breaks down binaries – human/machine, male/female, natural/artificial – and serves as a metaphor for feminist, collective identity. In many ways, *Autonomous* and *The Future of Another Timeline* fictionalize this vision. Jack, *Paladin*, Med, and even the Daughters of Harriet in *Timeline* all exemplify "creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted". The novels' depiction of people chemically augmenting themselves, robots with human brains, and geological machines for time travel all blur those lines. By comparing these works to others, we see Newitz is distinct in bringing the cyborg closer to home. Instead of far-future androids or purely virtual AI, she gives us cyborgs entangled with issues we recognize – gig economy labor, intellectual property, feminist uprisings. In contrast, earlier cyborg tales often externalized the conflict (human vs. robot in physical battles, etc.), whereas Newitz internalizes it: the real fight is within societal systems and within characters' own code/psyche. Dialogue in her books is not about "us vs. them" threats as much as it is about understanding and solidarity (the Daughters of Harriet collaborating, bots helping bots, humans and bots teaming up). This is a notable expansion of the cyborg's narrative role from a figure of conflict to a figure of coalition.

Through these comparative lenses, it's evident that Annalee Newitz contributes a highly original yet richly intertextual voice to the literature of cyborgs. She synthesizes the empathetic character focus of Mary Shelley, the ethical ambiguity of Philip K. Dick, the feminist and queer liberation themes of Piercy and Haraway, and the snark and sensibility of modern sci-fi like Wells – all while maintaining her own style and commitments. Her cyborgs are not just plot devices or allegories; they are fully-realized characters who drive their stories. This is the crux of the "poetics" of her approach: every narrative element, from inner monologue to scenic backdrop to physical description, is employed to deepen our connection to these characters and to underscore the narratives' critique of oppression and hope for transformation.



In conclusion, Annalee Newitz's novels *Autonomous* and *The Future of Another Timeline* offer a profound literary exploration of cyborg characters, distinguished by the deliberate and artful use of monologue, dialogue, landscape, and portrait. Through interior monologues, Newitz grants cyborgs like Paladin a subjective voice, allowing readers to inhabit the consciousness of the "Other" and thereby eroding the boundary between human and machine from within. Through dialogues, she brings cyborg and human characters into direct conversation, making their struggles and connections explicit in spoken language – whether it's debating free will in a bot-driven heart-to-heart or rallying allies with radical slogans across time. Her evocative landscapes and settings situate these cyborg narratives in worlds that reflect their themes: dystopian terrains scarred by capitalism, natural wonders entwined with technology, and liminal spaces of freedom at society's edges. These settings act almost as extensions of the cyborgs themselves, reinforcing feelings of alienation or unity. Finally, Newitz's nuanced portraits of cyborg bodies – detailing physical form and design purpose – serve as visual metaphors for how society defines (and confines) personhood, all while challenging readers to look beyond the surface. Physical descriptors like armored carapaces, licensed faces, or implanted brains are not merely sci-fi ornaments; they are narrative signals of constraint or autonomy, gender or its subversion, property or liberation.

Taken together, these techniques compose a poetics of the cyborg that is as politically charged as it is emotionally resonant. Newitz invites us to empathize with her cyborg characters not by making them magically human, but by showing the complexity of their non-human condition in human terms. We feel Paladin's confusion and desire, we cheer for Med's competence and compassion, and we understand Tess and Beth's cyborg-like fight to re-engineer society. In doing so, we confront the broader questions that these novels pose: What does it mean to be autonomous in a world that seeks to program us – whether with software or social norms? How do we assert our identity when others define us by our bodies or origins? Can technology be a tool of liberation rather than oppression, and who gets to decide?

Newitz's cyborg characters resonate with the legacy of science fiction's artificial beings while marking a clear evolution of the trope into the 21st century. They are not tragic monsters doomed by their difference, nor cold machines to be feared; instead, they are agents and victims of the systems we humans have created, from patent law to patriarchy, and thus their stories hold up a mirror to ourselves. In *Autonomous*, the journey of a robot gaining freedom runs parallel to a human learning the limits of freedom under capitalism, illustrating (as one character cynically quips) that "bots...required a period of indenture... No such incentive was required for humans to make other humans". In *Timeline*, the blending of flesh and stone in time machines hints that our future is inextricable from our past, and that perhaps we – as individuals and societies – are already cyborgian palimpsests of biology, history, and technology combined.

With academic rigor and creative flair, Newitz's work embodies Donna Haraway's observation that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion". The cyborgs in these novels are at once literal science-fiction creations and potent symbols of contemporary social realities (labor exploitation, gender fluidity, collective resistance). Newitz's literary craft, employing monologue, dialogue, landscape, and portrait in concert, ensures that these symbols are also believable people whom we care about. The result is fiction that not only entertains but also engages in a "conversation" with readers about ethics and empathy – a dialogue as urgent as those between her characters.

In conclusion, the poetics of Newitz's cyborg characters lie in this harmonious melding of form and theme. By using narrative techniques to bridge the gap between human readers and non-human characters, Newitz effectively dissolves that gap – fulfilling the cyborg's promise to be a creature of "both fiction and lived social reality". Her novels suggest that the cyborg's story



is ultimately a human story, one of striving for autonomy, understanding one's programming, and redefining what it means to belong in a world of change. As we move further into an age of AI and biotechnology, such stories feel increasingly pertinent. Newitz has given us a blueprint – and a beautifully told one – for imagining futures where even the most unconventional consciousness can speak, be heard, and perhaps write its own narrative of freedom.

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