Lioi, Anthony. "Conclusion: *Mutatis Mutandis*: A Manifesto for Metahumans." *Nerd Ecology: Defending the Earth with Unpopular Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 197–206. Environmental Cultures. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474219730.ch-008>>.

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Conclusion

Mutatis Mutandis: A Manifesto for Metahumans

In their graphic novel *Promethea*, Alan Moore and J. H. Williams tell the story of Sophie Bangs, a college student researching a comic book character named “Promethea.” As she learns more and writes with abandon, Sophie finds that she has *become* Promethea, the eternal embodiment of Story, who is also a little girl from Alexandria who fled from a Christian mob on its way to murder the philosopher Hypatia. Promethea is the history of the Promethea character, the community composed of all the artists who have ever been Promethea. Sophie embarks on a career as a superhero in New York, which includes numerous adventures involving villains, demons, corrupt politicians, unreliable sidekicks, and the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. While communing with the God(dess)head, Sophie discovers that she will become the Promethea of the Apocalypse, and swears to prevent the destruction of the world by never becoming Promethea again. In Book V, the end of the story, Sophie is cornered by government agents who force her to become Promethea in self-defense. In this form she does, indeed, bring on the end of the world, but with a clever twist: it is a eucatastrophe. New York, and then the entire planet, is overcome by a vision of the eternal moment of synchrony, when all the characters and plots of the cosmos coexist, and the illusion of separate, small, meaningless lives disappears. The esoteric ground of meaning becomes exoteric and available to all. The world as we know it ends, to be replaced by another world, that is, the same world perceived as cosmopolis, in which all persons and creatures—whales, Tyrannosaurs, stars—are citizens of the Tree of Life. Though this is a comic, not a tragic apocalypse, there is still violence: some people were more ready than others to accept this vision, better able to cope with the altered consciousness it produced (Garrard 85–107). The underprepared go crazy, the somewhat-prepared adapt, and the fully prepared still wonder at

the new world where everyone is their own superhero. Williams represents this as the transformation of Gothic New Yorkers into cosmopolitans clothed in beautiful costumes supersaturated with color, a kind of *Yellow Submarine* city that everyone can see, a place that reveals everyone's secret skin. The world is saved, and the world is a comic book, an album cover, an esoteric treatise on the power of culture to avert catastrophe.

In many ways, *Promethea* constitutes exemplary metahumanist art. It employs an illegitimate medium to tell a story of apparently ordinary people moving beyond their limitations to save the world. It affirms cosmopolis as a multinational, multispecies polity. It represents the formation of local communities as refuge and refugia. It deconstructs the opposition between Earth and the Immateria (Moore's term for the realm of ideas); it narrates a counter-apocalypse by affirming the value of Secondary Worlds of art; it takes seriously the existence of corrupt institutions, and our complicity in their destruction of the world. It understands the discourse of superheroism as an enchanted instrument of self-transformation for meeting the perils of modernity with hope and resilience. If you do not go crazy first, you find your very own secret skin. So far, so good?

Though Moore affirms a comic apocalypse, not a campaign of redemptive violence, the revelation of *Promethea* still occurs through the effort of a small group of artists mediating the metahuman realm to mortals. Read with a hermeneutic of trust, one might understand this as the classic nerd trope of alliance, the hope that a group of dedicated friends can avert the Big Bad. Read with a hermeneutic of suspicion, however, one might understand this trope as a reversion to vanguardism, the notion that a small group of revolutionaries must lead the masses to enlightenment by force. The unwilling and the mad are collateral damage. The problem of compensatory elitism pervades many of the artifacts of nerd culture this book has examined. It manifests as the utopianism of the Federation in *Star Trek*; the conservatism of the Council of Zion in the *Matrix*; the militarism of District 13 in *The Hunger Games*; the discourse of hidden royalty in *The Lord of the Rings*; the supercilious manner of the Watchers' Council in *Buffy*; the arrogance of the Guardians of the Universe in *Green Lantern: Blackest Night*; and the charisma of Magneto in the *X-Men* films. These serve as warnings that nerds must not "get high on their own supply," as Biggie Smalls would say. They must guard against the

reversal of eugenics into narratives of revenge and supersession, the illusion that marginalization is, in itself, enlightenment. This glitch becomes more than an internal matter of concern now that nerd culture is moving into the mainstream, its signal boosted by the powers of global capitalism spreading nerd tropes into popular culture.

Buffy explores the tragic results of nerd complicity in the structures of marginalization in “Out of Mind, Out of Sight.” This episode examines the life of Marcie Ross, a classmate of the Scoobies who has gained the power of physical invisibility because of her extreme social invisibility. Xander and Willow have trouble remembering her; Marcie seems to be disappearing altogether from the social fabric of Sunnydale High. Through this discovery, the Scoobies realize that there are students far lower than them in the social hierarchy, the ignored of the ignored. Their epiphany comes too late, and the episode ends in a class called “Infiltration and Assassination,” taught by the FBI to Marcie and students like her. There is a lesson for aspiring metahumans here: leave no people, no species, no world behind. Villainy is the unfinished business of heroism. Whatever *meta-* means, it must not mean that some people are disposable, that sacrifice zones just happen, and that Earth gets left behind in one’s plans for immortality.

If we are to inhabit our favorite stories in order to defend the world, it might be helpful to make a list of first principles, an enchiridion for enchanters, a Mystery Machine to get the Scooby Gang to the scene of the crime. With irony, in order to remember our own capacity for villainy, let us call our list:

A Prolegomenon to an Evil Plan for Doing Good

1. Metahumanism arises at the intersection of nerd culture and environmental culture in order to defend the world from the powers of destruction.
2. As an avatar of nerd culture, metahumanism embraces the Matter of Nerdland, the unpopular materials loved by generations of fans despite derision from the arbiters of culture. It asks who and what are being excluded, since when, and for what reason.
3. Metahumanism affirms the Matter of Nerdland as the ground of an ethos of planetary defense, worthy of interpretation, commentary, and transmission into the future.

4. Metahumanists read nerd culture like a Thermian, moving beyond the literal meaning of the text to moral, allegorical, and anagogical meanings.
5. Metahumanists resist the forces that created the nerd: eugenics, the anticulture of waste, and the fear of the machine. They know that the disconsolate white boy is not the center of history, even if representations of the “nerd” take this for granted. They remember that the history of the nerd has yet to be written. They ally with the degenerate, the swarm, and the cyborg. They embrace the aesthetics of the queer, the monstrous, and the uncanny as harbingers of a sensorium beyond the normal.
6. Metahumanism constructs utopias out of styrofoam. In space. It approaches eco-cosmopolitanism nerdily, wary of world-cities that exclude the country, the suburbs, and the ghettos of the poor as unworthy or uncool. Metahumans search for the right ship to go where no one has gone before. Metahumans strive for a multispecies polity in dialogue with alliances made before and outside their own. They favor telepathic diplomacy. They defy tyrants. They make contact with rocks and their children. They listen for whalesong. When tempted to the life of disembodied intelligence, they watch the Historical Documents again.
7. Metahumanism rejects metaphysical dualisms that oppose a perfect, immaterial world to a corrupt, material world in order to escape the latter through the former. It understands virtual worlds as aspects of an augmented “Real Life (RL).” It rejects the destruction of the sky as a means of denying refuge to aspiring citizens, be they coders, robots, or coal miners. It affirms the creation of refuge for such persons and refugia for endangered species. Paradoxically—given the love of Secondary Worlds—it accepts the truth of climate activism, that “There Is No Planet B.”
8. Metahumanism embraces the trope of the world-as-art insofar as it affirms creation as good and beautiful. It understands Secondary Worlds as critical spaces of refuge for the healing of a broken reality (cf. Jane McGonigal). It resists totalizing narratives of historical decline by looking for eucatastrophes and enacting them whenever possible. It constructs counter-apocalyptic narratives of ecological restoration. It does not surrender to Sauron.

9. Metahumanists slay the powers of undeath. They recognize Slayage-in-community as the care and feeding of Scooby Gangs, which unite against the Big Bads of corrupt social institutions. They look for the next apocalypse, do the research, and “save the world a lot.” They cultivate the combo-Buffyism of individual gifts. They share power through insurgent institutions that resist hell-on-earth. They remember that there is always a “last surprise,” a hidden sororal history that judges the Shadow Men. They close hellmouths by giving them the axe.
10. Metahumanists admit that humanity must get over itself in order to defend the planet. They read superhero comics as a nerdonomicon for saving the world. They recognize that some heroes are chosen for iconic virtues, while others are born with the powers of change, but all must develop the habits of planetary defense. Powers must be employed in an ethos of care: “With great power comes great responsibility”—the Spider-Man Principle. Metahumanists look for the light of queer lanterns. They wonder when Professor X will invite them to school. If they see an evil bro in the Black Vortex, they renounce him. No matter how cosmic they become, they return to their friends. They promise to guard the galaxy.

Shiny? I’ll take questions now.

Q. Isn’t metahumanism a comic-book version of Nietzsche’s übermensch?

A. No. The vocabulary of metahumanism bears some resemblance to Nietzsche’s philosophy, but that is because nerd culture has struggled to overcome the Nazi appropriation of the superman since Superman. Nietzsche believed that the will to power was the central motivation of all living things, and that “higher men” would manifest this will in acts of self-overcoming, developing their particular virtues. For instance, Beethoven worked to overcome himself with every new symphony, and Nietzsche worked to do so with every new book. Though this scheme bears a resemblance to metahumanism, there are crucial differences. First, Nietzsche’s ethos is individualistic, whereas the works in this book are communitarian. The Slayer gives way to the Slayers, Frodo to the Fellowship, the Green Lantern to the Green Lantern Corps or the Justice League. Though “will” and “power” are important concepts where superheroes are concerned, they are put in the service of a greater good, which Nietzsche would see as slave

morality. The self-overcoming of the higher men concerns *men* in an exclusive way that neither River Tam nor Gracie the Humpback whale would approve, not to speak of Ororo Munro or G. Willow Wilson. Finally, metahumanism has an end, planetary defense, while Nietzschean self-cultivation centers on the higher man. Superman was crafted by Jewish artists during World War II to repudiate the Nazi appropriation of the *übermensch*. Nerds are the *untermenschen* in the Nazi scheme. Nerd ecology, therefore, cannot involve a blood-and-soil ideology or an attempt to found a fascist state.

Q. What about the “humanism” in metahumanism? Is this supposed to be a movement beyond the humanities?

A. Ecocriticism has recently incorporated the “turn to the posthuman” that has occupied literary and cultural theory in the last decade. In this turn, humanism is commonly understood as Enlightenment humanism, focusing on the autonomous, bourgeois subject as the agent of world history. (Nietzsche rebelled against this very concept.) So, when Bruno Latour claims that “we have never been modern” and Donna Haraway writes a manifesto for cyborgs, they are trying to overcome this atomized individual bent on the mastery of nature. These are worthy goals. The category of the posthuman is meant to further them, but as N. Katherine Hayles points out, “Although in many ways the posthuman deconstructs the liberal humanist subject, it thus shares with its predecessor an emphasis on cognition rather than embodiment” (Hayles 5). In nerd-ecological terms, posthumanist discourses of cybernetics, virtual bodies, and information flow tend to have a Matrix problem. Transhumanism, as a movement that advocates the preservation of human minds in immortal robot bodies, exemplifies the dualism explored in Chapter 3. Metahumans do not revert to antihumanism in their search for a multispecies cosmopolis. With Cary Wolfe, I affirm that any posthumanism must confront the way we *think* human-animal-machine being in a biotechnosphere (Wolfe xvi). In this sense, metahumanism participates in the formation of a matrix of disciplines, “the environmental humanities,” that seek to reassemble academic knowledge across traditional boundaries of sciences and the humanities.

Metahumanism recovers the cosmic dimension of Renaissance humanism apparent in Pico della Mirandola’s “Oration on the Dignity of Man.” For Pico, the dignity of man [*sic*] rests on our capacity to change at will, to self-fashion,

in a manner he contrasted with the beasts and the angels. The metahumanism discourse of mutation descends from the *Oration*, but it turns the medieval scala naturae into a web. (Perhaps the web of Spider-Man.) In doing so, we initiate a trophic cascade, where the reintroduction of cosmos limits the *meta-*, the beyond, to a material network of “vibrant matter,” to use Jane Bennett’s term. The capacity of humans to change culturally inheres in a larger matrix that shares those capacities. The vector of the aesthetic reappears, the question of beauty and ugliness in the metahuman way of life. Here, the disciplines considered the “humanities,” including literature, music, history, religious studies, and philosophy, may play a distinct role. In the work of building cosmopolis through ecological restoration and planetary defense, how are aesthetics and ethics related? Is a cosmopolis that is beautiful to humans also good for other species? When do the ugly and the good go together? What role does beauty or eloquence play in persuading others to engage in planetary defense? These are metahumanist questions that must involve the humanities.

Q. That’s nice. Can you give a concrete example of the way students can engage these questions?

A. Yes. In 2013, I participated in a professional mentoring group at the Juilliard School in New York. The group was convened to assist four undergraduates in their long-term project of creating a “superhero opera” that could serve as an arts outreach program for school children. The project would be called “Operation Superpower” (<http://www.operationsuperpower.com>). The core group included Armand Ranjbaran, the composer; Peter Dugan, the collaborative pianist; and Tobias Greenhalgh and John Brancy, baritones. The mentoring group consisted of performance faculty, entrepreneurs, and arts administrators, who had experience in creating productions from the ground up. I provided a grounding in comics history and the rhetoric of the superhero. Though the plan for the opera and the outreach program evolved in discussion, the students made it clear that they understood “superhero” in the iconic terms of the DC tradition discussed in Chapter 6. They believed that each hero represented a particular kind of excellence that could be communicated to the audience in performance. They critiqued the metamorphic tradition of Marvel Comics as too somber and lacking in a hopeful metanarrative of political progress. (Mutants: always feared and hated by a world they have

sworn to protect.) The decision to work with the iconic tradition led to certain ends: the plot would emphasize origin myths; the costumes would feature bright, primary colors; the music would draw from the tradition of Romantic quest narratives and science fiction soundtracks; and the story would end with the formation of an alliance. The structure of the opera informed the strategy of the outreach program, designed as an event that could be held in a school auditorium and in local opera houses with children's programs. The conceit of the outreach considered the development of gifts as "superpowers." Each performer would tell the story of his artistic gifts, the obstacles that had to be overcome to develop them, and the practice necessary to cultivate them. Audience members would be invited to share their superpowers—artistic, athletic, academic, and so on—and their plans to develop them. By connecting origin stories to a sharing of virtue in the context of community, Operation Superpower is able to cultivate a sense that everyone has a gift to share that will make the world better. The manifestation of virtue in live performance adds a dynamic of embodiment unavailable through films or comic books. By showcasing the gifts of young, world-class musicians, Operation Superpower helps students to imagine themselves into their heroic future, represented by performers only a few steps ahead of them in the drama of cultivation. The ethos of sharing gifts in community service extends beyond the performance space into cosmopolis. Related work includes sustainable food production and climate activism. The metaphor of superheroic power as artistic virtue sponsors the first move into metahumanist pedagogy and practice.

Q. Sounds like the next generation of popular culture to me. What are the implications of metahumanism for the culture industry?

A. Metahumanism would encourage creators of literary, cinematic, video, graphic, and musical arts to engage questions of planetary defense and the creation of environmental cultures. We see this already in the profusion of climate fiction or "cli-fi" narratives in literary genres such as science fiction (Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Wind up Girl*), Hollywood blockbusters (*Interstellar*), and independent features (*Snowpiercer*, first a graphic novel and then a film). Activist theater has entered the fray, including Karen Malpede's *Extreme Whether*, Steven Cosson and Michael Friedman's *The Great Immensity*, and Bruno Latour's *Gaia Global Circus*. These incunabula of metahumanist art

raise important questions about the function of popular, high, and avant-garde culture in advancing metahumanism. Must citizens be addressed in cultural registers and genres typical of their class? What effects are produced by art that puts audiences in the traditional role of reader and spectator? What happens when kinesthetic participation is added, as in the case of video games? For instance, in 2006, Clover Studio developed a game called *Ōkami*. Players engage in environmental remediation in the person of a white wolf, the avatar of the Japanese sun goddess Amaterasu. Drawing on folktales that tell of Amaterasu saving the people from darkness, the game pits players against a dragon of pollution who cannot be defeated by violent means. Players operate a digital sumi-e brush to redraw the world, represented in the classical style of Japanese scroll-work. Using the brush, one revives a cherry tree that remediates its environment after the dragon pollutes it. Does this kind of play create a different sense of environmental agency relative to spectatorship and reading? What might be the relationship between the digital-aesthetic activism of *Ōkami* and activism in RL? Metahumanist scholarship should address such questions, beginning with the scholarship on fan communities pioneered by Henry Jenkins. Jenkins's notion of the "prosumer," the fan as consumer and producer, whose participation influences the culture industries, is especially relevant.

Q. Great, but what about nerd culture itself?

A. The project of metahumanism inspires a critique of nerd culture, especially the story that "nerds have won" popular culture, now saturated with nerd tropes. Metahumanists should question what it means for nerds to "win" when eugenic racism still terrorizes children in school and adults on the streets. If nerds are the product of biopolitical ideologies, is it possible to contest social-Darwinian competition, the practices of conspicuous consumption, and the demonization of intelligent machines as threats to the planet? Nerd culture must also go meta-. As Megan Condis points out in her critique of the "fake geek girl" meme, "I understand the instinct to protect our space; I get the fear that, as geekdom changes and expands, it might not protect us in quite the same way. But the solution is not to push people away and turn into the same kind of exclusive, snobby, cruel kids' club that we fled into fandom to escape in the first place" (Condis 15). Nerdist, heal thyself. How can we resist eugenics but treasure compensatory narratives of our own superiority? How

can the racism and misogyny of Gamergate and the trolling of Ellen Pao be addressed honestly? Can we love alliance but remain suspicious of institutions larger than our friendship groups? The powerful streak of Libertarianism in nerd culture must address the question of counter-institutions constructed with nerd knowledge. We know from the San Diego Comic-Con International that we are capable of building large-scale events that suit our habits of consumption. Can the Con, and the hundreds of events like it, become centers of metahumanist activity? What would it mean for traditional practices of cosplay (costume play), pageants, and gaming to link nerd creativity with metahumanist activism? What if we all appeared in public in our secret skin?

Q. *That's a lot of think about. Are we done?*

A. We are not done. This book has barely scratched the surface of nerd ecology. The elements chosen as subjects of each chapter can be understood differently, connected in other ways to each other, and replaced by elements of nerd culture of similar importance. A metahumanist treatment of *Star Wars* instead of *Star Trek*, Ursula Le Guin rather than Tolkien, the fantastic beasts of *Harry Potter*, Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, the vitalism of Jes Grew in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, the cosmic satire of the Church of the Subgenius, the ecology of *Dungeons & Dragons*, Afrofuturism, the ecosexuality of vampires and werewolves, the films of Sing-Chi Stephen Chow (*Kung Fu Hustle*, *Shaolin Soccer*), the anime of Studio Ghibli, the virtual animals of *Pokemon*... the list of nerd artifacts is endless. Add to these the cultures of the Japanese *otaku* and the English boffin, the prehistory of the egghead, the deep origins of the nerd in the Industrial Revolution, the question of Second World nerds during the Cold War, and a vast space opens, vaster than Middle-earth, better hidden than Miranda.

Can the powers of unpopular cultures across the globe be harnessed to defend the world? Let's find out.

You can't stop the signal.