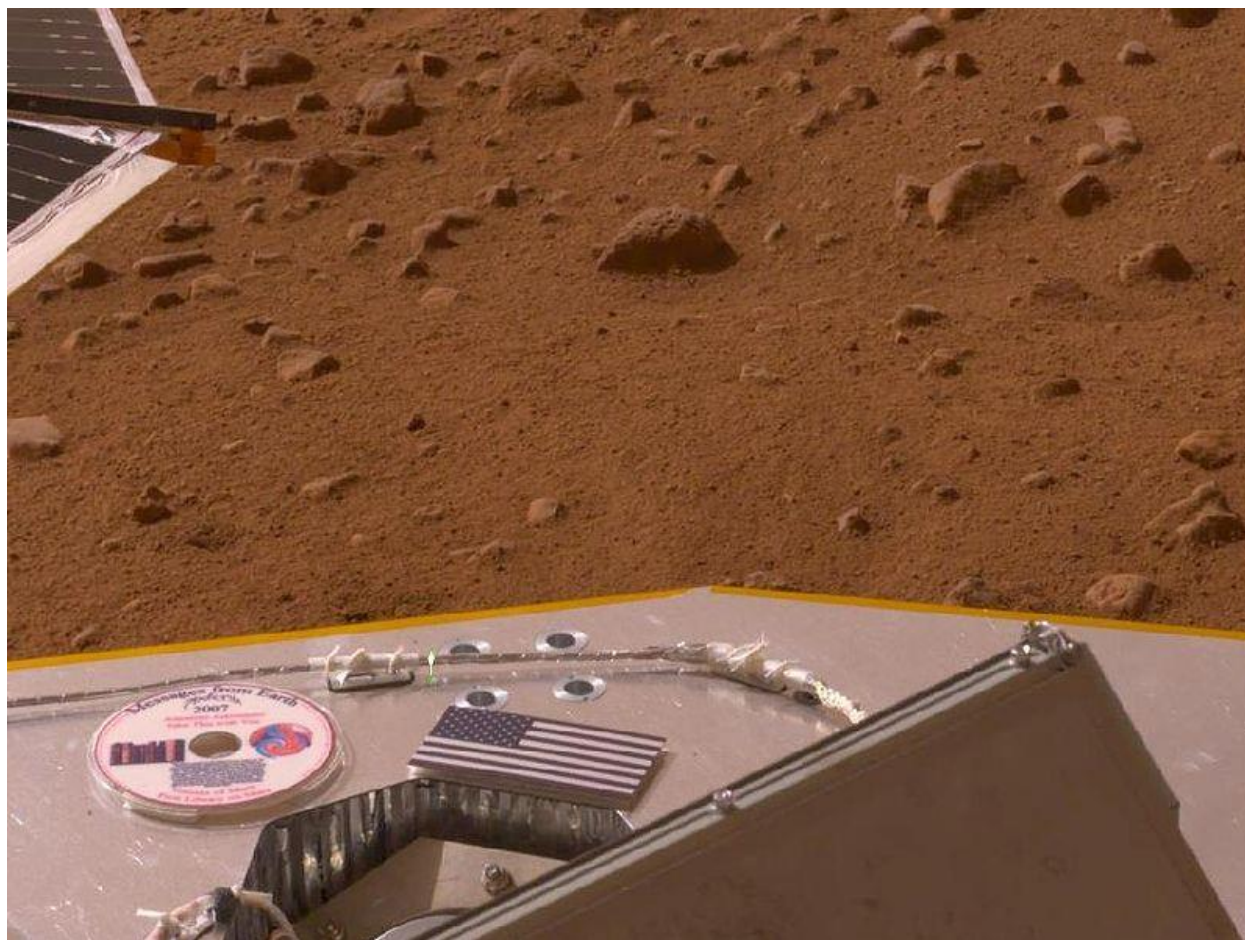


Do These Rockets Look Like Wagons?
Deconstructing Frontier Mythology in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*



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The Martian Chronicles

At 10:30 p.m. on May 25, 2008, a small spacecraft pierced the atmosphere of Mars at 11,000 miles an hour. Over the next seven minutes the spacecraft deployed a parachute and fired rocket thrusters to slow its descent to five miles an hour before landing at its destination: an empty plain 800 miles south of the planet's north pole. The landing area, nicknamed "Green Valley" by the spacecraft's engineers, contained one of Mars' largest concentrations of water ice. The spacecraft's purpose there was to research the history of water on the planet and to search for environments suitable for microbial life. The three-legged, table shaped spacecraft waited fifteen minutes for the Martian dust to settle before finally opening its twin six-foot wide solar panels and sending a signal to its engineers confirming it had landed (Wikinews). 422 million miles away in Pasadena, California, those engineers, flight controllers and astronomers responsible for building and guiding the spacecraft on its ten-month journey cheered and congratulated each other upon receiving radio confirmation that their Phoenix lander had safely touched down and was ready to begin its mission. Oddly enough, that mission began with Phoenix photographing itself (Associated Press). Using the camera mounted atop its eight-foot long robotic arm, the spacecraft snapped a picture of its equipment-bearing octagonal deck. Between the electrical conductivity probe, the atomic force microscope, the surface stereo imager and countless other sophisticated instruments rested a simple disc bolted to the deck (NASA). Against the desolate rust-red background of the flat Martian landscape, the disc--a time capsule for future astronauts to discover--was mounted next to an American flag. Encoded within the disc were the names of 250,000 people from 70 nations, and the works of notable science fiction authors including Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury, whose 1950 novel *The Martian Chronicles* is the subject of this thesis.

It is strange that *The Martian Chronicles* was among the few science fiction (SF) texts chosen to precede human beings themselves in their quest to explore Mars. When the novel was first released to great commercial success and critical praise, many of Bradbury's contemporaries criticized it for violating "their basic premise that good science fiction is based on knowledgeable scientific extrapolation and cannot be inconsistent with known science" (Mogen 14-9). While science fiction inevitably must depart from 'known science,' to account for inexplicable technological advances, the most glaring inconsistency with such science in *The Martian Chronicles* is its premise that Mars has enough oxygen to support human and alien life, unencumbered by the space suits and sealed bunkers featured in most other SF depictions of the planet. As for technological advances, the only major instance of such are the rockets which ferry American colonists between Earth and Mars. However, the appearance and inner functions of the rockets are hardly described by the narrator. Instead, they are left amorphous and mysterious. They function less like Asimov's robots or Clarke's spaceships--whose inner workings are described in nuts-and-bolts detail and are central to the plots of their stories--and more like stage props left to gather dust in the corner. The role of the rocket will be discussed in greater detail later on, but for now the combination of the oxygenated Martian landscape and the lack of advanced technology (besides the mystical rockets) seems to undermine the pretense that *The Martian Chronicles* can be considered a work of science fiction. In fact, the above description of the 2008 Phoenix landing more closely resembles a conventional science fiction text than does any page of *The Martian Chronicles*. With its everyman characters and its repeated references to contemporary American culture, the novel reads more like an explicit reflection of a 1950s America caught between a mythos of pilgrims and cowboys and a reality of

highways and nuclear payloads. Bradbury himself addressed the mythological emphasis of *The Martian Chronicles* in his 1997 introduction to the novel.

If it had been practical technologically efficient science fiction, it would have long since fallen to rust by the road. But since it is a self-separating fable, even the most deeply rooted physicists at Cal-Tech accept breathing the fraudulent atmosphere I have loosed on Mars. Science and machines can kill each other off or be replaced. Myth, seen in mirrors, incapable of being touched, stays on. (p.xi)

The purpose of my thesis is to address the role of American frontier mythology in *The Martian Chronicles*. Does the text critique the role mythology plays in masking power dynamics, particularly in regards to gender? What does the text achieve by placing those mythologies in a Martian setting? How is an audience supposed to read a text that reinterprets a country's past, critiques its present, and predicts its future all at once? Is its treatment of mythology the reason why *The Martian Chronicles* today is considered a classic American science fictional text?

First, a summary of *The Martian Chronicles*. The novel is a collection of short stories loosely strung together by a broad narrative of Americans exploring, colonizing, and eventually leaving Mars. The novel's early chapters describe the Martians who already live there, in cities and neighborhoods that--if not for the exotic houses "of crystal pillars" and their flying chariots propelled by "flame birds"--would strongly resemble the towns of Earth (2-7). As strange as they are, these technologies perform the same functions of a suburban ranch house or a Cadillac. Like the mysterious rockets and the oxygen on Mars, the familiarity of the Martian lifestyle makes the text seem less like a typical work of science fiction and more like an explicit commentary on contemporary American culture. The first story is about a Martian couple, Mr. and Mrs. K, living in a suburb. "Mrs. K cleaned the house...Mr. K read from a book... 'let's take the flame birds into town to see an entertainment'...They were not happy now..." (2, 7, 3).¹ The suffocating

¹ The chapter ends with a rocket landing in 'Green Valley,' which bears the same name as Phoenix' landing area. Though the shared name is merely coincidental it seemed too interesting to not mention.

domesticity of this first chapter was recognizable to an American audience, who by the early 1950s were already dealing with the environmental degradation and social stratification inherent in highway construction and suburban development (Oakland Museum of California). As will be discussed later on, the domesticity of the suburb stands in direct contrast to the rugged, wild frontier mythology of America's past, and the emergence of the former also coincided with the Cold War and the global rise of American military and economic dominance. That dominance is represented in the text, where only Americans are capable of building rockets and flying them to Mars, starting in January 2030². Despite that dominance, we learn through an omniscient, disembodied narrator that colonization efforts are motivated by "a big atomic war on Earth in about two years," and by "censorship and statism and conscription and government control of this and that, of art and science!" (42). The first three expeditions are met with hostility from the Martians, who use psychic tricks to kill "the rocket men" almost as soon as they land (45). However, almost all of the Martians have been wiped out by Earth-borne chickenpox by the arrival of the fourth expedition in June, 2032, allowing for unimpeded colonization. The first settlers are few in number, and exclusively male; "The first wave carried men accustomed to spaces...the coyote and cattlemen, eyes like nailheads, and hands like the material of old gloves" (119). It should be noted that the early colonization efforts are marked by set gender roles. One chapter called "August 2032: The Settlers," describes "The men of Earth" coming to Mars "because they were leaving bad wives or bad jobs or bad towns" (99). In the novel's first chapter, "Rocket Summer," Earth is associated with housewives and children, while Mars is associated with "rocket men" and the possibility of exploration and redemption. The phallic

² In the novel's original 1950 edition, the expeditions to Mars start in January 1999. All the dates were pushed back 31 years when the novel was re-released in 1997. Many stories were also exchanged in the 1997 release. The 1950 story about racial prejudice "Way in the Middle of the Air" was replaced with the gender-concerned story "The Wilderness" and the religiously-minded "The Fire Balloons." The choices behind the 1997 updates are a worthy subject for further inquiry, but they are not the prime concern of this thesis.

rockets give men an opportunity to leave the domestic entrapments of Earth society and start a new, more free society on Mars. Trees planted in December 2032 by Benjamin Driscoll--a self-proclaimed Johnny Appleseed in space--supplement the planet's thin oxygen supply and symbolize how this network of masculine frontier mythology begins to take root on the new world. Soon, thousands of settlers descend on the vacant expanses of Mars, importing their American way of life onto the planet. "It was as if a whirlwind twister of Oz-like proportions had carried an entire Iowa town off to Mars and set it down without a bump..." (144). As those towns grow, so too do the rules and regulations governing the people who live there. "But after everything was pinned down and neat and in its place, when everything was safe...then the sophisticates came in from Earth...on little shopping trips for trinkets and photographs...bringing some of the red tape that had crawled across Earth like an alien weed" (160-161). The shopping trips and trinkets make the sophisticates seem like tourists, alienated from the lonely, robust labor of "the first men" in the wilderness (119). This feminized domesticity, which eroded Martian society in the novel's early chapters, re-enters the new American society on Mars, but not long before a nuclear war breaks out on Earth and compels the people on Mars to return to their home planet.³ "There was Earth and there was the coming war, and there hundreds of thousands of mothers or grandmothers or fathers or brothers....COME HOME. COME HOME" (217-9). The war on Earth kills all who return, leaving vacant towns and suburbs on Mars, similar to how the planet looked after the Martians died from chickenpox. War between nations, motivated by the petty clash of national mythologies, is therefore portrayed to be just as crippling as an infectious disease. Two American families, one with three sons and the other with four daughters, fly to Mars on the last rockets left intact. The old Earth way of life, one of the fathers

³ It is never clarified which nation started the nuclear war, which is particularly striking considering the novel's Cold War historical context. Rather than any specific party, it appears the clash and collapse of aggressive national mythologies are to blame for the fall of civilizations.

says, “never amounted to anything very good...people got lost in a mechanical wilderness, gadgets, helicopters, rockets, emphasizing machines instead of how to run the machines. Wars got bigger and bigger and finally killed Earth” (267). The families task themselves with rebuilding the human race on Mars; “to strike out a new line...to live and form our own standard of living” (267-8). The novel ends with one of the families looking at their reflections in a canal. “The Martians stared back up at them for a long, long silent time from the rippling water...”

I have spoken about the difficulty of classifying *The Martian Chronicles* as a work of science fiction, since it lacks many of the genre’s stereotypical characteristics. The question of genre shaped early criticism to the novel, which would not have attracted attention from the non-SF world had not Bradbury run into English novelist Christopher Isherwood in a bookstore in Santa Monica, shoved a copy of the newly-published book into his hands and begged him to read it (Weller 164). Days later Isherwood released a glowing review of the novel in the magazine *Tomorrow*, leading the way for a host of well-regarded mainstream critics including Orville Prescott, who described Bradbury in *The New York Times* as “the uncrowned king of science fiction writers” and Sir Kingsley Amis, who called Bradbury “The Louis Armstrong of science fiction,” (Mogen 16). While it was critical for the field of science fiction to finally receive serious attention from the mainstream world, it was also problematic for outsiders to usurp the throne of science fiction and award it “uncrowned” to Bradbury on the grounds that he “should not be classified simply as a science-fiction writer” (Mogen 16). While science fiction writers have finally received praise for being themselves (i.e. Ursula LeGuin, *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984)), Bradbury was among the first to pave the way for such attention. These critics largely praised Bradbury for the strength of his prose, which conveyed great emotional depth, “sensitive and intelligent” and perception “rendering even the

most dreadful subjects beautiful” in very few words (Mogen 16). However, few critics have spent any serious amount of time analyzing *The Martian Chronicles* for its themes on American myth and history. Even today, when *Fahrenheit 451* is among the most popular books on high school reading lists and after Bradbury received a National Medal of the Arts in 2004, few literary critics have paid as close attention to his works as they have to his contemporaries such as Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke. This absence is curious and surprising given Bradbury’s explicit stance against McCarthyism and entertainment culture in *Fahrenheit 451*. Despite all this, there are few critics who recognize what *The Martian Chronicles* accomplishes towards deconstructing frontier mythologies. That, at least, is the purpose of my thesis. Like the Phoenix lander, science fiction allows an audience to travel to other worlds and photograph themselves within (as well as gawk at) that new setting of imagination and technology. *The Martian Chronicles* is unique in that, after landing, the audience looks around to see that Mars looks exactly like Earth. It seems to me a crucial point of the novel that the reason we find Mars such a doppelganger to Earth is because of the mythology that we take with us to any new world, regardless of technology or oxygen. As embodied by the rockets, mythology acts as a technology itself, one that possesses an awesome power which is both creative and destructive, the workings of which are ambiguous just as much as they are apparent. I will argue that the text ultimately deconstructs the power-masking effect of American Dream mythology by exposing the history that lies beneath it; a history of women suppressed into subservience, of warfare between nations, and of an never-ending cycle of redemption and destruction.

History, Mythology and Science Fiction

The Martian Chronicles maps American frontier myths onto an imagined future of space rockets and extraplanetary colonization. The text does so explicitly and without much

modification to those original myths. What do we gain from this translation, which flies America into space but changes little about its culture? Frederic Jameson explains in his book

Archaeologies of the Future:

Science fiction is the exploration of all the constraints thrown up by history itself...that unique air from other planets, that signals some momentary release from the force of gravity of this one. So also our own genres -- modernism in one way, SF in another -- struggle desperately to escape our force field and the force of gravity of our historical moment (66, 71)

In attempting to flee the reality of history, most science fiction struggles against and is inevitably restrained by that history. Many science fiction works are restrained implicitly by familiar historical structures such as those Jameson lists; “galactic Roman empires, Orientalist fantasmagorias, medieval-corporate Foundations” (59). These familiar components enforce the fact that--despite the exotic worlds, species and technologies of an SF text--the narrative of that text is essentially familiar and Earth-bound. *The Martian Chronicles*, however, is explicitly self-aware both of its historical structure and of the network of mythology which works to disguise that structure. For example, we have seen Benjamin Driscoll re-enact Johnny Appleseed by planting fruit trees on Mars. But we have also seen the Martian population be wiped out by Earth men, similar to how Native Americans were eradicated by smallpox epidemics after the arrival of Europeans. *The Martian Chronicles* works to deconstruct the shroud of frontier mythologies by exposing the historical structures which lay behind them. “The Settlers,” includes the line “because they felt like Pilgrims or did not feel like Pilgrims,” in regards to what motivated the men of Earth to come to Mars (99). On either side of that line is a list of motivations, “because they were afraid or unafraid, happy or unhappy...There was a reason for each man...a government finger pointed THERE’S WORK FOR YOU IN THE SKY: SEE MARS! and the men shuffled forward” (99). The popular Thanksgiving mythology is of unified Pilgrims bravely crossing the Atlantic to establish a home in the New World. By showing a fragmented, fearful

group of men shuffling towards Mars for economic wellbeing, the text encourages readers to reconsider the “Pilgrims” to be just as human and flawed as these historical men of August, 2032. The title word “Chronicles” thereby fulfills its promise of providing a factually-accurate, narrative of American colonization, unobscured by the masking effects of frontier mythology. Other self-aware historical references throughout the text include ““Do you remember what happened when Cortez and his very fine good friends arrived from Spain? A whole civilization destroyed by greedy, righteous bigots. History will never forgive Cortez,” and, “My grandfather told me lots of things about Oklahoma Territory. If there’s a Martian around, I’m all for him” (81,88). However, the deconstruction of mythology through the exposition of history is most pronounced in “May 2034: The Wilderness,” one of the few chapters told from a female perspective. Two women named Janice and Leonora meet in Independence, Missouri, where “Long, long ago, 1849,” previous generations of pioneers gathered to prepare for the journey westward (147). As they prepare to take a rocket to join their husbands on Mars, Janice shows Leonora a picture her husband Will sent her:

““But...This is a picture of your house, here on Earth, here on Elm street!”

‘No. Look close.’

And they looked again, together, and on both sides of the comfortable dark house and behind it was scenery that was not Earth scenery. The soil was a strange color of violet, and the grass was the faintest bit red...They both gazed at the dark, comfortable house sixty million miles away, familiar but unfamiliar, old but new.

‘That man Will,’ said Leonora, nodding her head, ‘knows just what he’s doing.’” (153)

And so the entire “house” of American history -- genocide, mythology and westward expansion -- has been space-lifted onto Mars via the rocket of the text. It was built and placed there by a man, Will, far far away from the nearest feminized society and all its entrapments. The house is “new” in that it now rests upon a new world. But the house is also “old” in that its foundation and ceiling, its leaks and creaks are all exactly the same as they were on Earth. Does this text, so explicitly self-aware of its historical situation and active in its portrayal of that

situation, qualify as science fiction? Carl Freedman argues that in both science fiction and the historical novel, “the empirical present of the reader and the text’s own production is put into contrast with an alternative significantly different from the former, yet different in a way that remains rationally accountable” (54). Novels which take place either in imagined futures or imagined pasts both serve to ‘historicize’ --to treat or represent as historical--the present. In doing so, those novels destabilize the present by making it susceptible to the same changes and accidents which affect the novel’s characters (p. 55-6). For example, a reader might gain a new appreciation for the seemingly stable fact that civilization thrives today after reading a historical novel about the Cuban missile crisis, where that civilization came close to being annihilated through mutually-assured nuclear destruction. Likewise, an SF text that features hyperdrives and post-gender societies serves to historicize the present by making our internal combustion engines and gender politics appear clumsy and outdated. Freedman argues that the advantage of science fiction is its ability to “keep alive critical historical consciousness as the historical novel proper becomes increasingly problematic” (p. 57-8). As representations of the past are ever more questioned for their factual accuracy⁴, science fiction is better able to capture the historical present in a way that is true just as much as it is counterfactual⁵. Science fiction, in dealing with realities that are factually severed but fictitiously fused to the historical present, provides a fertile proving ground for experiments that propose alternatives to that increasingly destabilized and fickle present. As Freedman describes it:

The future is crucial to science fiction not as a specific chronological register but as a locus of *radical alterity to the mundane status quo*, which is thus estranged and historicized as the

⁴ For example, was British mathematician Alan Turing *that* antisocial while inventing the modern computer for the Allies in *The Imitation Game* (2014)?

⁵ For example, post-Apartheid discrimination towards alien refugees squatting in Johannesburg is portrayed in *District 9* (2009) and the violent enforcement of income inequality by the wealthiest 1% is depicted in *Snowpiercer* (2013). These themes resonates as true with the audience even if its settings are completely fictitious.

concrete past of potential future. The potential future in science fiction exists, one might say, primarily for the sake of the actual present; in this sense all science fiction is covered by J.G. Ballard's wonderful maxim that the future in his work has never been more than five minutes away. (55, emph. added)

By depicting 'radical alterities' to the present, SF becomes an ideal vehicle for providing social critiques or proposing models for change. It thus has the power to effect and displace the present. This makes the present not "concrete" as Freedman describes, but rather it becomes increasingly difficult for the audience to differentiate the text from reality. In *The Martian Chronicles*, the line between ancient frontier myths, contemporary post-War American culture, and future space exploration become very blurred. The Mars of the text plays host to Old West cowboys, vacant suburbs, and Puritan settlers all at once. A hodge-podge of historical allusions and space rockets, the text provides history lessons about colonization and American frontier expansion just as much as it places those history lessons in space. The novel thus falls under a hybrid category that Freedman calls "the science-fictional historical novel...[where] historical knowledge is shown to be, for determinate ideological and political reasons, deeply problematic and the reverse of transparent or metaphysically sanctioned." (60). Like applying x-ray vision to a human limb, science fiction applies to the body of contemporary society a frequency of light that exposes the bony structure of hierarchies and power dynamics hidden within it. That skeleton of society goes largely unnoticed in everyday life. But in most works of science fiction, an overwhelmingly unfamiliar array of spacesuits, lasers and robots serves to highlight and expose their underlying power structures as familiar. Thus the American house, awkwardly out-of-place on the violet soil and red grass of Mars, looks all the more "familiar but unfamiliar" and--as its flaws are highlighted by their awkward placement--even a bit "dark" on Earth.

Many different elements mask society's power structures, but most central among them is a tangled network of national and cultural mythologies. As Barthes explains, myth "transforms

history into nature...gives things an eternal and natural justification...a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (115). Whereas ‘the facts’ of history are constantly destabilized, myths are constructed to hold those facts as constant and make them appear to be the way things have always been. Barthes discusses an image he found on the cover of a magazine of a young black soldier in a French uniform saluting the French flag. “...whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag” (115). Such a signification, seen at a glance in a barbershop, immediately conveys a myth to Barthes; a myth of French unity and pride which supersedes historical allegations of imperial brutality and racial oppression. The image works to obscure and forget that history. Schoolchildren in the United States grow up surrounded by similar history-obscuring mythology. For example, the Pilgrims and Wampanoag tribe shared a feast to celebrate their successful harvest and new friendship. Cowboys were not ruthless drifters, they were ideal models of self-reliant masculine strength. *The Martian Chronicles* works largely to expose how historically fraudulent those mythologies are by enacting their histories on Mars. American frontier mythology is portrayed in the novel as a journey towards masculine self-redemption, of men leaving the oppressive “bad wives” of Earth to start a New, better World for themselves on Mars, to ultimately achieve the American dream of self-liberation. The problem with that mythology is that it excludes women from escaping oppression and finding their own self-liberation. The fact that not everyone can achieve the American dream comes as a surprise to nobody. Minorities in the U.S. have been enslaved and persecuted in the U.S. for centuries, the wellbeing of the poor have long been ignored by the interests of the rich, and women are still treated unfairly across all layers of American society.

By replaying those histories, *The Martian Chronicles* exposes the fraudulence of frontier mythologies. Why not just write a history of the American west then? Freedman argues that--by playing out these historical facts in an alternative science fiction setting--the text destabilizes the notion that such facts are constant and immovable. For example, contemporary environmental policies are portrayed and critiqued on Mars in "April 2036: Usher II:"

"You notice, it's always twilight here, this land, always October, barren, sterile, dead. It took a bit of doing. We killed everything. Ten thousands of tons of DDT. Not a snake, frog, or Martian fly left! Twilight always, Mr. Stendahl; I'm proud of that. There are machines, hidden, which blot out the sun. It's always properly 'dreary.'" (162)

The audience recognizes DDT and its accompanying attitude of environmental degradation in its own society. After seeing the damages those attitudes inflict on future society, the audience might then seek to change their own.⁶ Nowhere in *The Martian Chronicles* is that interplay between historical facts and the 'radical alterity' of science fiction more apparent than in "The Wilderness." As stated earlier, this chapter is one of the few in the novel that are told from a female perspective, in this case from the point of view of Janice and Leonora, two close friends preparing to board rockets that will take them towards their husbands on Mars and away from their lives on Earth forever.

Janice is panicking. Not only does she have to leave everything she knows behind, she also has to confront her deepest fear, darkness. There are (according to the text) sixty million miles of darkness in between her and Will, and after being locked in a closet and falling down a basement stairway in her childhood Janice is not looking forward to the trip:

"She screamed. None of it came out of her mouth. It collided upon itself in her chest and head. She screamed... She stood there a long time, watching Leonora work. And the hysteria, thus ignored, drained away and away, and at last was gone. A wristwatch ticked, with a clean sound of normality, in the room." (149).

⁶ Note that biologist Rachel Carson did not write *Silent Spring*, the book which led to popular disapproval and disuse of the pesticide DDT, until 1962.

Freedman argues that science fiction is unique in its ability “to reconfigure in time the surrounding world of the novel, to turn apparent present into potential future” (49). One thing that stands out in this passage--along with the societal expectations of women to be hysterical, be silent, and to follow their husbands--is time. Time here seems to fold in on itself, past and present overlap more closely than usual. The chapter starts out with Janice hearing “A sound like a steamboat down the river, but it was a rocket in the sky,” before she adapts an ““Old Wyoming song”” to the year 2034 (147-8). There is a confluence of ancient frontier myths and future technology; “food pills...that fit a wristwatch fed you not from Fort Laramie to Hangtown, but all across a wilderness of stars” (148). The ticking wristwatch, the ‘clean sound of normality,’ insists that this narrative, of panicked women following their men across hundreds of miles, escaping from collapsed civilization to collapsed civilization, is a rhythm that has persisted unchanged for eternity. Women have no part in leading the way and no independence to choose when or where they want to move:

They were leaving the town of Independence...Leonora took hold of her [Janice’s] shoulders and held her close, rocking her. *It’s a New World. It’s like the old days.* The men first and the women following.’

‘Why, why should I go, tell me!’

‘Because,’ said Leonora, at last, quietly, seating her on the bed, ‘Will is up there.’

His name was good to hear, Janice quieted.

‘These men make it so hard,’ said Leonora. ‘Used to be if a woman ran two hundred miles after a man it was something. Then they made it a thousand miles. And now they put a whole universe between us. But that can’t stop us, can it?’ (150-1, *emph added*).

‘It’s a New World. It’s like the old days.’ The location may have changed but time has not; it may as well be 1849 as 2034. Leonora insists that she and Janice will blindly follow their wayward husbands as they always have in the past, squandering the chance for revised, more egalitarian gender roles on Mars. Her argument is tautological; ‘you should go follow your man up there because your man is up there,’ and she pretends that the distance men put between

themselves and women is like a lovers' chase; 'but that can't stop us, can it?' Leonora's words illustrate the cyclical nature of the masculinist self-redemption narrative. It seems men cannot put enough distance; 'two hundred miles, a thousand, a universe' between themselves and the entrapping, domesticating clutches of feminine society in order to build a new identity. Society inevitably catches up with them, and the process starts all over again. Leonora's use of the word "a whole universe" is particularly telling. By its definition there is only one 'universe,' and the apparent fact that men and women can no longer inhabit the same one further proves how divisive gender politics have been in American mythology and social structures. Would a similar metaphor have been as literally effective in any genre besides science fiction? "They [Janice and Leonora] blew as leaves must blow before the threat of a fire-wind" (154). The violent regeneration required for masculine self-redemption to occur ensures that new worlds will keep being found and old ones destroyed for the rest of time. Perhaps this habit for regeneration lies somewhere deep in human nature, but when only men can lead the way towards that regeneration they prevent women from building an "Independence, Missouri," of their own. Instead, women are treated as second class humans, to be shipped as freight with the "bacons, hams, chickens hysterical, and dogs running...fearful" (159). Strangely enough, it is Leonora who explicitly mentions the consistently subservient role women have played throughout time; "'1492? 1612?' Leonora sighed... 'It's always Columbus Day or Plymouth Rock Day and I'll be darned if I know what we women can do about it'" (156). Leonora's dates stand out when each chapter in *The Martian Chronicles* has a corresponding year affixed to it. Will the role of women as camp-followers persist into the future? Will the Leonoras of 2034 count 2015 in their numbers? The prospect looks particularly bleak when one realizes that those dates in the novel used to be thirty years earlier until the 1997 edition. As Freedman argues, Leonora's female perspective

destabilizes the hallowed dates of male-dominated American mythology (Columbus sailed the ocean blue, pilgrims landed at Plymouth) with the disgruntled sigh of a woman constantly having to follow along. Leonora's perspective makes those events no longer appear heroic or noble. Instead, they become boyish and juvenile, like school children hanging a 'No Gurls Allowed' sign over history.

Leonora cuts right to the heart of gendered power structures by saying "I'll be darned." If Leonora knew how to liberate women from their subservience, she and Janice would be cast out by society as rabble-rousers, feminists, or--as Janice proposes--"old maids" (156). Women in Janice and Leonora's situation cannot protest their subservience without sacrificing their (hetero-) sexuality. They must either conform or become spinsters. 'Darned' is especially telling as a euphemism for the word 'damned,' as in Leonora would face eternal damnation for resisting subservience, a fear no doubt instilled in her by a male-dominated religious institution. But why 'darned' and not 'damned'? 'Darned' suggests the kind of family-friendly language and slapstick humor which pervades children's history textbooks and television shows⁷, the very texts most rife with national mythologies that mask and enforce societal power dynamics. 'Darned' therefore focuses the novel's critique on those mythologies by using their slapstick tone to voice an argument for how those mythologies ostracize women.

As Freedman describes, "the crucial temporal dimension of science fiction is finally made explicit." By recounting historical facts from a woman's point of view, the text exposes American frontier mythology as oppressive towards women. By juxtaposing it with an exciting future of technology and progress, the text makes those facts and that mythology appear antiquated, faulty, and smelling like excrement; "In their time the smell of buffalo, and in our

⁷ For example, lessons in white suburban family lifestyles were distributed through the TV show *Leave It to Beaver*.

time the smell of the Rocket” (159). By allowing for scientific imagination and historical hypotheticals, science fiction enables these comparisons and experiments where most other genres cannot. Therefore it is not without a hint of satire that Janice thinks:

On the rim of the precipice, on the edge of the cliff of stars...Is this then how it was?...yes, yes indeed, very much so, irrevocably, this was as it had always been and would forever continue to be” when she falls asleep at the end of the chapter (159).

Janice describes westward/spaceward expansion as a journey off a cliff, “irrevocably,” as in not able to be reversed or recovered, as if the whole process was a big mistake. Something about the way men use mythology to justify female subservience strikes Janice as very rotten. It is so rotten that Janice must fall asleep, lose her grasp on reality, to accept it. ‘Is this then how it was?’ On a grammatical level the conflation of present “is...this” and past “then...was” makes hardly any sense, and yet it also reflects the temporal conflation of past mythologies, present 1950s gender politics, and ‘future’ science fiction hypotheticals all in one moment within the text. Society is based on conceptions of time that, when considered for long enough, are as much a man-made technology as wagons, rockets, or mythology. When time itself becomes convoluted and unstable as it is in this passage, is it not too far a stretch to consider gendered mythologies as unstable, too? What would happen if all those constructs like time and mythology were unhinged? Janice and Leonora at one point fly above Independence “like two white paper lanterns...over the meadows and highways.” In this surreal suspension of time and myth (which apparently are as firm and heavy within society as the laws of physics) women can finally be free to fly amongst the stars.

But it is only for a moment. “...it didn’t seem fair,” Janice thinks, “on nights as soft as that, that I was alive. I was guilty of living. And now here, tonight, I feel they have taken me from the graveyard...to see what it is like to be living...before they slam the black door shut on me again” (155).

Nina Baym and ‘The Epigraph’

In her essay, “Melodramas of Beset Manhood,” Nina Baym investigates “My concern...with the fact that the theories controlling our reading of American literature have led to the exclusion of women authors from the canon.” Baym blames critics for including in their list of essential American literature only work written by people who are “white, middle class, male, of Anglo-Saxon derivation,” despite the multitude of American female writers whose work has been widely read since before the 18th century. Baym then explains how those female writers were confined to a category that the critic Leslie Fielder called “the flagrantly bad best-seller.” The female writer is thus perceived by critics as an antagonized, hostile character in the history of American literature. Baym continues, “The certainty here that stories about women could not contain the essence of American culture means that the matter of American experience is inherently male.” Baym’s theory that the American experience is an exclusively masculine one is particularly relevant to *The Martian Chronicles*. The twenty-seven stories within the novel draw heavily from American themes of exploration, redemption and self-discovery, but only two of those stories feature prominent female characters. In the rest of the stories, women act as peripheral characters, accessories to the plot action which is driven by male protagonists. For example, in “September 2036: The Martian,” the character Anna is very rarely referred to by her first name. Instead, the narrator simply calls her “his wife,” in reference to the story’s main character, LaFarge. Anna is thus left mostly anonymous, virtually nonexistent save for her role in relation to--and almost in the possession of-- LaFarge as “*his* wife.” If we are to accept Baym’s characterization of canonical American literature as masculinist, then the majority of *The Martian Chronicles* most definitely fits within that canon. The reason why that canon is so male-centric can be explained by Baym’s concept of the ‘American Dream’ as the following:

The myth narrates a confrontation of the American individual, the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America. This promise is a deeply romantic one that in this new land, untrammelled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition. (131-2)

Notably, Baym used the word “Divorced” to describe the separation of the “pure” self from the “trammelled,” restrictive accident of social circumstances, as if the union between pure self and impure society was a marriage. Since the canonical writers of American myth were all presumably heterosexual males, then the impure society from which those men sought to divorce themselves must be coded as female. Baym explains that women are usually charged with the task of raising children to behave respectably within society. From the young male’s perspective, the women who raise them are perceived as “entrappers and domesticators,” they restrict that male’s progress towards self-discovery. The women whom heterosexual men are attracted to are portrayed as temptresses and antagonists who also distract from that all-important process. The disadvantage of this gendered coding of independence is that it is inaccessible to women. While female characters can also choose to rebel against society, the language that they use to describe society and the landscapes of freedom would not match the gendered language used by early colonists in America. Annette Kolodny cites Captain John Smith writing about the New England landscape in 1616; “her treasures hauing yet neuer beene opened, nor her originals wasted, consumed, nor abused.” Thomas Morton wrote in 1632 of New England “Like a faire virgin, longing to be sped, And meete her lover in a Nuptial bed,” (11-12). As Baym describes, these landscapes become the subjects of male sexual fantasies which, far away from home, “...become more and more fantastic. The fantasies are infantile, concerned with power, mastery and total gratification: the alluring mother, the all-passive bride.” As men traveled farther from the entrapments of feminine society, their concept of themselves and of their own powers over the similarly feminine but compliant landscape became narcissistic and inflated. It is with this

misogynist coding of exploration that the American myth of self-discovery and independence first began.

The vast, relatively unoccupied spaces of The New World allowed religious minorities like the Puritans and the Quakers to escape religious persecution and establish themselves as independent entities in America. But as the original colonies stretched across the continent and left railroads and then highways in their wake, it became increasingly difficult for people to access those “tracts of wilderness” where self-discovery could occur (Baym 132). These are the historical circumstances in which *The Martian Chronicles* was written in 1950. The Great Plains had become dotted with cities, and the bounteous forests of the Pacific Northwest had been almost completely clear-cut for industries which fed a burgeoning society that was quickly building vast expanses of identical suburbs. According to masculinist mythology, this situation of a worn-out landscape and a domesticated nation was much like the oppressive society which the Puritans fled three hundred years earlier. Without any more wilderness to explore, the American dream of self-invention was in jeopardy. At this time, the dawn of the Space Race presented outer space as a competitive field to which the United States could take in order to assert the superiority of everything American over everything Soviet; meaning everything collectivist and allegedly anti-individual, as well as Eastern and old world. As I have noted earlier, the domesticized landscape of 1950s America and the old world represent the “trammeled social circumstances” which Baym argues have been coded as feminine by canonical American literature. Under these circumstances, space became a new frontier where masculine Americans could redefine themselves, far above the oppressive feminine society into which they were born. The newfound sense of wonder that accompanied this frontier is captured by *The Martian Chronicles*’ epigraph; “‘It is good to renew one’s wonder,’ said the philosopher. ‘Space

travel has again made children of us all.” The philosopher refers not to space itself, but to space *travel*, the ability of humans to penetrate and access space with their own bodies. The epigraph sets a potentially dangerous tone for the rest of the novel, especially when read with Baym’s theory of infantilized frontier misogyny in mind. While ‘children,’ are usually associated with innocence and inquisitiveness, we have seen from Baym’s infantilized men that they can also be inexperienced, sexually immature, and prone to make mistakes at great cost to themselves and others. If “us all,”--all of us--are children again, then who will protect us from destroying ourselves? There are no qualifiers to “us all,” but in the text “Wonder,” like the opportunity for self-discovery offered by the American dream, is limited to white, male, American characters. “Us all” is therefore as empty a promise as “all men are created equal,” which still blatantly leaves out women. It seems every word of this epigraph has a double meaning. It can be interpreted as a positive in that “space travel,” allows for “us all” to look upon ourselves and our environment with newfound curiosity and respect. Or it can be interpreted as a negative, where the masking power of mythology allows a deceptively small group of men to realize their childhood fantasies of domination over yet another world. Regardless of which interpretation is chosen, when the philosopher says to “renew” one’s wonder, because space travel has “again” made children of us all, it implies that the process of seeking fulfillment through the unknown is of a recurring, cyclical nature. The events of the novel appear to have happened before, and are scheduled to happen again by an urge for one to “renew” one’s wonder periodically. The events of the novel, which begin in oppression, progress into exploration and colonization, and end with oppression, annihilation, and rebirth, follow a similar cyclical process. As Richard Slotkin describes early American colonies in *Gunfighter Nation*:

Colonies would expand by reproducing themselves...into a further and more primitive wilderness. Thus the process of American development in the colonies were linked from the beginning to a

historical narrative in which repeated cycles of *separation* and *regression* were necessary preludes to an improvement in life and fortune. (11).

The constant historical allusions in *The Martian Chronicles* make the colonization process on Mars appear to be the latest in an endless series of expansions and destruction. Violence, as in the extinction of the Martians and the transformation of the Martian landscape, plays a large role in that expansion, much as it has in American history. A reading of the novel cannot be completed without first addressing the role of violence, particularly in regards to its symbolic manifestation that is ubiquitous in the text. That symbol is the rocket.

The Rocket

Our first encounter with the rocket is in the novel's first chapter; "January 2030: Rocket Summer." The chapter begins with a scene of "Ohio winter...doors closed, windows locked, frost, icicles...children skiing on slopes, housewives lumbering like great black bears in their furs" (1). Only women and children are visible in this shut-in, frozen suburb. Women appear clumsy and animal-like, children are playing. The men are totally absent, and finally the rocket appears:

The rocket lay on the launching field, blowing out pink clouds of fire and oven heat. The rocket stood in the cold winter morning, making summer with every breath of its mighty exhausts. The rocket made climates, and summer lay for a brief moment upon the land... (2)

At first, the rocket seems restorative; it brings the warmth of summer to a cold, shut-in land. Perhaps this warm feeling is what the philosopher refers to when he advises to renew one's sense of wonder. However, the rocket's restorative aura is complicated by its disruptive side effects. By suddenly introducing summer onto the land, the rocket breaks the natural cycle of the seasons. Its "clouds of fire and oven heat...its mighty exhausts," are as destructive as they are restorative. It is this double-edged, destructive-restorative essence of rockets which leads me to

connect them with the larger theme of masculine self-redemption. That process, which involves abandoning old worlds to create new ones far away, is similarly destructive and restorative. The ‘male’-ness of the rocket is emphasized by the lack of men in the Ohio winter neighborhood scene (they must be on the rocket!), the blatantly phallic image of the rocket, its throbbing exhausts, and the sexually-tinged phrase ‘making summer.’ It seems this Rocket Summer is wonderfully titillating in the way any rocket launch is at the same time both awe-inspiring and sexually charged. That last line carries a weight of its own. ‘Summer’ is a season freighted with nostalgia, with myths of childhood and of fleeting passion. The fact that summer will lay only ‘for a brief moment’ implies that the fond ‘sense of wonder’ praised by the narrator will not last forever, and that the happy frontier mythology of childhood will not survive in these pages. Surely, as the first expeditions are wiped out and the colonies eventually become as oppressive as they were on Earth, it does not. Rockets are in many ways the perfect symbol of that lost childhood innocence, because while they do inspire children to reach for the stars, they are essentially the product of war technology. Rockets were first invented by medieval Chinese engineers, but they were not perfected until Nazi scientists used V2 rockets to bombard and terrify Allied cities during World War II. After the war, many of those Nazi scientists emigrated to the United States, where they worked for the North American Space Agency (NASA) and helped design and construct the rockets that no doubt inspired *The Martian Chronicles*.⁸ Since rockets are used exclusively by the United States in the novel, “the rocket” also represents the country’s emerging military-industrial complex, which after World War II and in response to the

⁸ Wernher von Braun was one such scientist who dramatically achieved the dream of re-inventing himself in America. After designing the V2 rocket, von Braun was captured by the Allies in 1945. He abandoned his past life as a member of the SS and an alleged war criminal and worked with NASA to design the Saturn V rockets that carried astronauts to the moon. He met Walt Disney, advised President Kennedy, converted to evangelical Christianity, was awarded The National Medal of Science, and was buried in Arlington, Virginia in 1977. Many of the slave laborers who allegedly starved to death while building his V2 rockets were lost in mass graves (Wikipedia).

Cold War had created remarkable technological advances like the supersonic fighter jet, the helicopter, and the hydrogen bomb. These technologies, both marvelous and destructive, gave the U.S. near-complete global military supremacy, and evoked the same sense of deluded childlike excitement in young males that Baym describes in her treatment of American frontier mythology and which Kolodny samples in her quotations from John Smith and Thomas Morton. While space age technology helped advance society, in 1950 that same technology was also used to wage a war in Korea. The destructive use of rockets comes into focus very quickly in “February 2033: The Locusts:”

The rockets set the bony meadows afire...turned wood to charcoal, transmuted water to steam, made sand and silica into green glass which lay like shattered mirrors, reflecting the invasion...The rockets came like locusts, swarming in blooms of rosy smoke. And from the rockets ran men with hammers in their hands to beat the strange world into a shape that was familiar to the eye, their mouths fringed with nails...steel-toothed carnivores...In six months a dozen small towns had been laid down (106).

In comparison to the dreamy, romanticized description of the rocket in ‘Rocket Summer,’ this passage is nightmarish. The rockets’ “oven heat” burns the planet, vaporizing its natural landscape into a moonscape. It torches Mars into a smoking ashtray. Yet this destruction is still strangely creative, for the ‘pink clouds of fire’ from ‘Rocket Summer’ are now ‘blooms of rosy smoke.’ A flower is growing as the ‘men with hammers’ build “a dozen small towns” out of the ashes of the old world. Raised amidst a network of frontier mythology, those ‘men with hammers’ know the destruction necessary in order to ‘reproduce themselves in a primitive wilderness,’ as Slotkin says. The men of Earth came to Mars following in the footsteps of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone, heroes of frontier mythology who nonetheless acquired much of their fame from the number of buffaloes and Native Americans lying dead at their feet. In this sense, frontier mythology is just as destructive as rocket technology. To quote Slotkin again:

Violence is central to both the historical development of the frontier and its mythic representation. The Anglo-American colonies grew by displacing Amerindian societies and

enslaving Africans to advance the fortunes of White colonists. As a result, the ‘savage war’ became a characteristic episode of each phase of westward expansion...the Myth represented the redemption of American spirit as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or ‘natural’ state, and *regeneration through violence*.(Slotkin, 11-2).

As schoolchildren growing up amidst pioneer mythology, we forget the horror of violence implicated in every stage of American ‘progress.’ Mythology serves to sanctify such violence as godly and patriotic, a ‘manifest destiny’ for the nation. *The Martian Chronicles* critiques that mythology by replaying the savagery of the men of Earth’s ‘invasion.’ The ‘shattered mirror’ in “Locusts” turns the reader’s gaze onto itself, seeing for the first time those mythological figures as ‘steel-toothed carnivores’ beating the landscape into submission.

At the moment *The Martian Chronicles* was released, the United States was on the verge of another great leap in violent progress. As Steffen Hantke describes in his chapter on “Military Culture;” “...the moment when World War II ended and the Cold War began, also marked the transition of SF as a fully self-aware genre from the cultural margins to the cultural mainstream” (p. 329). Hantke notes that the military science fiction of the 1950s and 1960s was influenced by three transitions in U.S. foreign policy which occurred during that period; the shift from isolationism to global engagement, from demobilization to a global military presence, and from a reliance on conventional military assets to an arsenal of nuclear weaponry⁹. The path towards global military hegemony was accelerated by the arms race against the Soviet Union. As weapons research expanded, so too did the imagination of SF writers and their market of readers. “...from the polar regions to outer space, military SF launched futuristic technologies that would lay claim to far regions around the globe” (345). When ‘The Rocket,’ enters in *The Martian Chronicles* under these historical circumstances it becomes a symbol of America’s growing

⁹ i.e., the swashbuckling space marines of the novel *Starship Troopers* (1959) and the galaxy-spanning display of naval might portrayed in the TV show *Star Trek* (1967) through the starship Enterprise (also the name of a supercarrier in the U.S. Navy that was put in service in 1962)

technological prowess, and its nearly ubiquitous military presence. The rocket's inner machinations, its capabilities and even its appearance are unknown, but its outer implications for American expansion and mobilization are unmistakable. Thus, while *The Martian Chronicles* is not a work of military science fiction, the fact that most of the early chapters are about armed Americans landing on foreign soil provides a familiar setting which most American readers would recognize as a reflection of their own history and present. The 'critical historical consciousness,' is alive and well, as Carl Freedman would say. The more explicitly the text emulates its surrounding reality, the more openly it critiques that reality.

Against these historical circumstances, it becomes even easier to see how prevalent frontier mythologies still operate within the national consciousness. Like the rocket itself, those mythologies can be used for discovering new worlds and destroying old ones. The risk of the latter becomes apparent in the last chapters of *The Martian Chronicles*; "November 2036: The Watchers:"

They all came out and looked at the sky at night. They left their suppers or their washing up...There was Earth and there the coming war...and there hundreds of thousands of mothers and grand-mothers...At nine o'clock Earth seemed to explode, catch fire, and burn. (218).

This is where the novel ends, in nuclear annihilation caused partly by those very same rockets which bore the settlers to Mars. Are acts of regeneration through violence and acts of nuclear annihilation triggered by the same frontier mythology? As the last two human families fly to Mars and prepare to begin anew, they unwittingly enact that same 'scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state,' that Slotkin describes. As the text draws to a close, it becomes difficult to avoid the sense that the cycle of expansion and destruction will only reappear again and again into eternity, with potentially world-ending consequences.

Exit the Lander

The Phoenix lander was only expected to operate for 90 days, but it kept functioning for another two months. It scooped up samples of Martian soil and baked it in an on-board oven, and then tested the emitted gases with a microscopic imager and a wet chemistry lab. From those tests Phoenix found in the Martian earth a concentration of perchlorate, which can be used as rocket fuel or as a source of oxygen for future colonists. And all the while Benjamin Driscoll looked on from his perch in the *Visions of Mars* disc, built out of a silica glass designed to withstand the Martian environment for hundreds, possibly thousands of years. Phoenix watched dust devils spin on the endless Martian tundra, and it discovered snowflakes falling from cirrus clouds in the dull orange sky. As winter approached, Phoenix did not receive enough sunlight to power its array of instruments, and on November 10, 2008, Mission Control reported loss of radio contact with the spacecraft, but not before it sent one final message; ‘Triumph’ in binary code.

Phoenix now sits still, a frozen artifact much like the Martian and human ruins portrayed in the very text within the lander’s silica disc. Perhaps a human visitor from the far future will stumble upon that text. Perhaps they will chuckle curiously at the mythology that guided its characters and pre-settled the planet before any human ever set foot on it. If we make it that far.

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