

## ISSUE NO. 3

## Creating Room For A Singularity of Our Own: Reading Sue Lange's "We, Robots"

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*The Singularity will allow us to transcend these limitations [involving the rapid increase in intelligence] of our biological bodies and brains. . . . There will be no distinction post-Singularity between human and machine—Ray Kurzweil, The Singularity Is Near, (9)*

*What's it been three, four years, since the Regularity? The Regularity. When everything became regular, normal, average. The opposite of the Singularity. —Sue Lange, We, Robots, (1)*

The Singularity is the moment when machine intelligence surpasses human intelligence. In his book-length prediction of this moment, *The Singularity is Near*, Ray Kurzweil devotes extensive attention to human biological bodies and brains and how they will relate to machines after the Singularity occurs. Not so for the diversity that characterizes human bodies and the multiplicity of ideas which stem from cultural difference. For example, Kurzweil discusses gender on only two pages (318-319). In contrast, Sue Lange's 2007 novella *We, Robots* focuses upon human heterogeneity. Lange substitutes the compassionate "Regularity" (1) for the monolithic Singularity; she imagines the point at which a technological upgrade enables robots to feel pain. The robots unexpectedly respond by desiring to live biologically human lives. Lange creates a clearly articulated corrective to prevailing homogenous presentations of the Singularity. The "Regularity's" concentration on human difference is "the opposite" of Kurzweil's averted eye, the diversity he does not see. In her substitution of "Regularity" for Singularity, Lange signals that regular components of humanity—such as gender and race—will be present when people and machines merge. Failing to mention these components is, in terms of feminist insight, the "Irregularity."

The accessibility of Lange's text might mitigate against recognizing its importance. Lange's simple sentence structure and direct communicative mode convey a presently overlooked logical moral assertion: the impending Singularity is not a male-dominated patriarchal domain. The Singularity, in other words, should not be construed in a manner which excludes women and feminism. This assertion is patently obvious. But, nonetheless, it is often ignored. Before I read Lange's novella as a description of the Singularity which feminists can embrace, I include the following background

information: 1) a discussion about why the discourse relating to the Singularity needs to be expanded and 2) an introduction to Lange's place within feminist science fiction.

*We, Robots* is in many ways an imaginative science fiction version of N. Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Hayles points out that "[i]n the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existences and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (3). Hayles shows that difference and diversity would not disappear with technological transcendence of the human. Like Hayles' posthuman, Avey—Lange's robot protagonist—contradicts the fixity of Kurzweil's monolithic Singularity. When robotic mechanisms and teleologies are changed by the "Regularity," Avey, like a human, can feel pain and articulate personal goals. Lange implies that human difference and demarcation should be incorporated within discourse that describes the impending Singularity.

#### **Diversifying the denotation of the singularity**

Gender is often not included in discourse about the Singularity. This fact is exceedingly discouraging—and unfortunately normal. Feminist progress, of course, is not an unimpeded forward trajectory. Taking two steps forward is often in tandem with taking three steps back. (And remember that the "one small step for mankind" moon landing declaration positioned woman as an intruder in the dust.) *We, Robots* is being read in a context in which the Texas state legislature is impeding abortion rights and a New York City mayoral candidate routinely uses the internet to send pictures of his penis to women.<sup>[1]</sup> With shrewd directness, simplicity, and accessibility, Lange calls attention to the way such backward steps help keep women and feminism invisible within the technological discourse of the Singularity. The male-centered Singularity is a problem that has no name; *We, Robots*, in relation to this lack of appellation, is a needed feminist science fiction contemporary version of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The sexist Singularity needs a consciousness raising group. Lange's text signals that it is necessary to go back to the history of the feminist future to insure that our understanding of the Singularity will be articulated in an inclusive manner. I join the "[f]eminist theorists [who] have pointed out that [the shift from the human to the posthuman] has historically been construed as a white European male" (Hayles 4).

Understanding why Lange substitutes the "Regularity" for the "Singularity" entails describing the current problem with no name to which I refer. Hence, before I

undertake a reading of Lange's text, I will briefly deploy early feminist literary criticism's "images of women" methodology to explain how the Singularity is being described as almost being singularly pertinent to white men. For example: the June 2013 symposium called "Global Future 2045: Towards A New Strategy for Human Evolution" included thirty-four keynote speakers. *Two* of the speakers were women. There appear to be no African-American or African speakers. The Symposium's participants reflect the lack of diversity characterizing discourse about the Singularity. Where are all the women? Where is the racial diversity? Answers to these questions are not included in Morgan Freeman's introduction to the Science Channel's Singularity-focused *Through The Wormhole* episode called "Are Robots the Future of Human Evolution?" Freeman says:

*Robots are also learning to think for themselves—some are even developing their own private language. Is it possible that these new life forms will evolve to be smarter and more capable than us? . . . Will we choose to merge with the machines, combining the best of our world with the best of theirs? Are robots the future of human evolution? (Wormhole)*

The most relevant question goes unasked: precisely who is represented by "us," "we," "our," and "human?" Lange answers this question when she creates *We, Robots* and asserts that people who are not white men need to create room for a Singularity of their own.

Singularity discourse has sometimes made more room for dead white men than for living women and people of color. For example, when Charlie Rose discussed the Singularity on June 27, 2013, he welcomed three guests to the symbolically egalitarian round table that dominates his television talk show set: Global Future 2045 symposium founder and chair Dmitry Itskov; robotics designer David Hanson; and a facial-expression-mimicking robot replica of Philip K. Dick. It is jarring to see a robot being unabashedly imbued with human talk show guest status. A viewer, watching with sound muted and no knowledge of the context, might momentarily think that Dick was brought back from the dead. But even more shocking is the lack of gender and racial diversity present at Rose's table. Discussing Dick's fiction, Hayles remarks that the "problem of where to locate the observer—in or out of the system being observed?—is conflated . . . with how to determine whether a creature is android or human" (24). The hypothetical just-tuning-in viewer's initial problem could be where to locate the Dick figure. Is it placed in or out of the human system being observed? On *Charlie Rose*, the Dick mechanism looks human. Robotics specialist Itskov, in contrast, acts like a robot

who is almost devoid of animation and facial expression. Itskov answered Rose's question about why he is interested in robots with rote vacuous beauty pageant contestant vapidness, saying that he wishes to "help people get rid of suffering" (*Charlie Rose*). He did not mention that people suffer from lack of representation—and lack of control— regarding how they are represented.

As a writer, Hayles reminds us, Dick was concerned with these issues: "the android is deeply bound up with the gender politics of his male protagonists' relationship with female characters. . . . The gender politics he writes into his novels illustrate the potent connections between cybernetics and contemporary understanding of race, gender, and sexuality" (Hayles 24). The fact that the three entities seated at Rose's table—two humans and one potential momentarily purported human—are male and/or representationally male would not sit well with Dick. A writer concerned with gender politics and cybernetics would likely not like to see himself portrayed as a Cheshire Cat vacuously smiling in response to the lack of any connection between gender and robotics.

Hanson states that Dick "foresaw a future where mind and machine and human would be perhaps indistinct and indistinguishable from each other, but he characterized what defines human as compassion" (*Charlie Rose*). Lange inclusively portrays this future mind, machine, and human connection. But doesn't welcoming a robot version of Dick to *Charlie Rose* exemplify an unethical lack of compassion and disrespect in regard to Dick's ability to control his image? Writer and book editor Danny Miller's discussion of the use of Audrey Hepburn's posthumous dancing image in a GAP pants commercial indicates that the answer is resoundingly affirmative. Miller hears Hepburn's response as "the sound of Audrey Hepburn spinning in her grave." Miller continues: "I just saw the new GAP commercial featuring Audrey Hepburn and my mouth is frozen in a silent scream. . . . But inserting dead celebrities into crass commercial ads? Don't you think that we have to draw the line somewhere?" Most certainly. The point, in regard to Lange's humanistic science fictional "Regularity," is that we should use the time we have before the Singularity occurs to imbue it with respect, compassion, and diversity.

*We, Robots* addresses the need expansively to edit the images and descriptions connected to the Singularity. Before continuing to generate a narrow understanding of how the Singularity can transcend death, we need to respect the dead in terms of our present technological capacities. Lange emphasizes this necessity in a deceptively simple and vitally important manner. Reading *We, Robots* involves noticing Lange's

attention to the fact that the Singularity is not singular; it is, instead, a “Regularity” which must be seen to include all the regular people who are not white men. This reading depends upon understanding why Lange’s text is a feminist response to the Singularity and to Asimov’s *I, Robot*.

### **Why *We, Robots* is feminist science fiction**

Not all of Lange’s readers have seen the feminist import of her novella or its intervention into the homogenizing discourse of the Singularity. David Soyka, reviewing *We, Robots* for SF Site, did not:

*This is a well told story, though nothing particularly surprising or ground-breaking. It adds nothing to the canon. What’s particularly curious is that this is part of a series put out by Aqueduct Press called ‘Conversation Pieces’ . . . that are loosely connected to feminist SF. Other than the fact that women can be considered a subjugated class . . . I fail to see anything about We, Robots that is feminist. In fact, Avey, as are all the other robots, is genderless, though its job of nursemaid is typically female. Other than that, Lange’s theme here is about the human condition, not that exclusively of the female half (Soyka).*

Soyka misses the point.

*We, Robots* is feminist in part because Avey is “genderless.” More specifically, Avey’s genderlessness eradicates fixed definitions of gender in terms of reading practices. Readers’ responses describe Avey in a manner which runs the gamut between “he,” “she,” and “it.” For example, a reviewer writing for *The Alcove* blog, when referring to Avey, abruptly shifts from “its” to “her”:

*In We, Robots Avey looks back on its life, from the time it arrived in Wal-Mart to the day it left its owners to return to the factory in which it was built. . . . Avey’s voice is exactly how I imagine a robot would talk and think. When she speaks, she speaks with that stereotypical robot voice, in short, clipped sentences. When she thinks, she processes information rapidly, and puzzles out anything she doesn’t understand in a very logical, stream-of-consciousness manner.” (Alcove, italics mine)*

Malene A. Little, on the other hand, construes Avey as being male—and she writes for a blog called *Women Writers!*: “Avey begins *his* narrative right before *his* first interaction with *his* owners”(Little, italics mine). Because genderlessness defies linguistic expectation, reviewers refer to Avey in an inconsistent manner. *We, Robots* is feminist

because its premise itself metalinguistically accentuates readers' reliance upon immediate and rigid automatic gender categorization.

What to do? Avey is neither a she nor a he. Readers become emotionally attached to Avey and resist calling this robot "it." Mainstream English usage lacks a pronoun such as Marge Piercy's "per," an abbreviation for person which replaces "she" and "he" in *Woman On the Edge of Time*. (Since the English language lacks pronouns to describe sentient robots, for the sake of textual convenience, I refer to Avey as "she").<sup>[2]</sup> Lange adroitly generates linguistic "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin), adding to the twenty-first century feminist science fiction canon in which Piercy, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Joanna Russ questioned linguistic gender categorizations. Lange points to the necessity for newness in regard to language and feminist reading practices. Humans should not be constrained by "she" and "he"—and by the limiting gender expectations these words connote. Moreover, "he" "she" and "it" fail in relation to describing the certainly arriving sentient robots humans will encounter. Far from not being feminist enough, *We, Robots* is both feminist and post-gender—in fantastic terms. Lange is a twenty-first century literary descendant of Le Guin, Piercy and Russ who boldly goes beyond the feminist parameters they forged.

Avey, an entity who is Other in relation to human gender and race constructions, can certainly be categorized as a feminist science fiction protagonist. She is initially Other in relation to the category "we, humans." Avey counters Hayles's assertion that "the presumption that there is an agency, desire, or will belonging to the self and clearly distinguished from 'the wills of others' is undercut in the posthuman" (Hayles 3). Avey may be posthuman, but she is quite willful. She asserts her humanity when she insists that she wishes to learn to draw. "Well I could use a pad of paper and a pen. . . . I plan to learn to draw. . . . After 14 years of unpaid service, you'd think I deserved a scratch pad and pen nubbin" (Lange 88). Avey—who neither looks like a human nor walks like a human—complains exactly like a human. When Avey asserts the desire to receive a pad and a pen, she echoes the refusal of racialized Others to submit to the association of humanity itself with whiteness. In *In The Heat of the Night*, Sidney Poitier's character insists that whites call him by his surname because he wishes to be treated with the respect due to an adult human. Lacking a surname, Avey cannot act in kind. Yet writing enables her to transcend the lack of respect robots receive. She wishes to write in order to juxtapose language and respect—and to apply this combination to her own agency, desire, and self.

### **Lange imbues the singularity with diversity and compassion**

In Lange's narrative world, racism and sexism—indeed all “isms”—become obsolete because the human categories of race and sex become obsolete. Inequality, however, remains. (Inequality is not logical. For example, although few Jews live in Germany, anti-Semitism still exists there.) Lange depicts four sentient groups: humans, robots, “transies” (or cyborgs) and Others. These categories, lacking fixed definitions, are exceedingly mellifluous. After the “Regularity” ensues, enormous changes happen at the last minute: humans become robots, robots become humans, and transies ultimately inherit the Earth. Lange's “book is about both coming and going, so to speak” (Schellenberg). Her entire tumultuously transmogrifying pack of protagonists are all ultimately Other than us—i.e. we, humans. This Otherness is reflected in the “Regularity” which includes Lange's diverse protagonists. As I have been arguing, descriptions of the Singularity lack the diversity Lange includes. The dominant discourse of the Singularity imagines that ignoring human difference could make inequality disappear.

Lange's scenario nullifies the entire human categorization apparatus. Avey, a mechanized domestic servant and nursemaid to baby Angelina, is initially a flying visual consumerism joke who resembles a levitated egg shaped version of a plastic “L'eggs” brand pantyhose container. (Mr. Potato Head is also an apt descriptor for Avey.) Avey's egg shape evokes R2-D2 as well as Eve, a robot protagonist in *Wall-e*. (These egg shaped robots are not trivial. They equate women's reproductive capacity with technology.) After the “Regularity” takes place, humans become psychological post humans who think via robot logic. Post-robot Avey, no vacuous female caretaker stereotype, becomes a self-aware assertive person. The Others are never described. This narrative lack is logical in a world in which categorizing some people as Other is as obsolete as old model robots. Lange creates a humorous “Robots ‘Я’ Us” parody of American consumer culture which very seriously addresses the implications of robots at once appropriating human culture and creating a culture of their own. After post-“Regularity” humans and robots exchange behavioral characteristics and roles, the word “we” in Lange's title assumes a metalinguistic relationship to standard English. We real human readers most closely resemble the final version of Avey.

Avey and her robot fellows—who become we, humans—eventually evolve into better people than the newly robotic post-“Regularity” flesh-made humans and the cyborgian transies. The psychologically retrofitted newly robotic humans (Angelina, for example, who as a young child was placed under Avey's care) are definitely not superior to the

post-robot humans Avey and her counterparts become. Lange's brave new egg humans lack human bodies (they exemplify literal phallic lack) and, hence, are devoid of race and gender. Lange's "we, human" egg mechanical protagonists must be taken with a grain of salt in that they are humorous. In addition to their suitability to function as objects of desire in relation to psychoanalytic feminist theory, they are also akin to the alien in *Mork and Mindy* who hatched from an egg. Lange, then, at once confronts serious feminist issues and imbues feminist science fiction with a sense of humor. She juxtaposes the eradication of permanent individual human gender scenario Le Guin depicts in *The Left Hand of Darkness* with Douglas Adams' comedic *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. She creates something new under the feminist science fiction sun: a version of James Tiptree's discussion of the female body in "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" which applies to the sentient machine of *My Mother the Car*. Avey becomes liberated (or unplugged) from being a servile consumer appliance; Angelina can quite logically discuss her nanny the sentient egg.

The frenetic role reversals between robots and humans Lange depicts have implications for Isaac Asimov's "Three Laws of Robotics."<sup>[3]</sup> *We, Robots* is a text situated at a temporal transition point: a particular example of science fiction is becoming actualized. Sentient robots are on the verge of becoming real; the Singularity is, perhaps, near. From a 2013 NBC report:

*Science fiction is quickly taking a back seat to science fact. Just look at a new report [‘A Roadmap for U.S. Robotics From Internet to Robotics’] by the country’s leading roboticists. By 2030, it says, robots will be everywhere. . . . [R]obots will become ‘as ubiquitous over the next decades as computer technology is today’ . . . . We may not be in the Jetsons’ age yet, and Roomba is no Rosie, but even [Director of the Georgia Tech Center for Robotics and Intelligent Machines Henrik] Christensen agrees: ‘Science fiction — it’s happening’ (Subbaraman).*

When science fiction happens to the extent that Roomba becomes Rosie, something will also happen to Asimov's Three Laws. No longer mere science fictional texts, they may become post postmodern reality. I have said that "post postmodernism involves the hitherto science fictional impact of technology, especially electronic media, on society and culture. This social manifestation occurs when what was once science fictional comprises the very definition of reality. . . . technological innovation causes what was once comfortably defined as science fiction suddenly to become real" (Barr 168). Lange describes what transpires when the Three Laws become post postmodern in actuality. Refusing an easy distinction between robot and human, she rewrites Asimov in the manner that Kathy Acker rewrites Cervantes in her *Don Quixote: What Was a Dream*.



“Post postmodernism” defines what happens when the fanciful *I, Robot* literally becomes on the cusp of becoming real: *We, Robots*.

Lange’s fantastic post-gender feminism provides markers which function as gender role stereotype booby traps. *We, Robots* includes a garden variety nuclear family in which a generic male has heterosexual intercourse with a generic woman (a human who possesses eggs); she gives birth to Angelina. Angelina is very obviously female. But this definite gender categorization is initially impossible to determine in relation to her parents, who are named Chit and Dal. (These names are as genderless as Track, Trig, and Tagg—indistinct appellations which hail from the Romney and Palin families.) “Chit” and “Dal” adhere to Lange’s penchant for obscuring readers’ categorization markers. Avey observes that Dal is “beautiful” (8). When Angelina wants to tell “Mommy and Daddy of her adventures at morning school” (19), readers do not know which gender category applies to both Chit and Dal. First contact with some semblance of gender designation in regard to Angelina’s parents does not ensue until page twenty-four in the novella: “Dal called over his shoulder while he stood at the message board” (24). This sentence seems to serve as a message board which communicates Dal’s gender and announces that he is a “beautiful” man. Or, alternatively, “his” and “he” could be read as being ambiguous; whose shoulder is being referenced and who is standing at the message board remains ambiguous. Chit and Dal could be gay men. Only when Dal is “looking up from his iPod” (74) does he cease to be as genderless as the electronic device he holds. And, finally, Chit is designated as a she in this interchange with Dal: “Then she turned to me. We’ve been waiting for you to come around to get that information” (82). Readers have been waiting for Lange to assign a female designation to Chit. However, regardless of the protagonists’ and the readers’ emotional attachment to Avey, the robot is called “it.” Avey remains an “it” even after she has nearly drained all of her battery power in order to act like Lassie saving an imperiled Angelina-as-Timmy: “It’s [Avey] coming around... it’s had a rough time of it” (82). No one would disparage Lassie by calling her “it.”

“It,” uttered by Chit and Dal in reference to Avey, is not linguistically precise. The humans are not hierarchically superior to the robot; they all perform the same job. Like Avey, Chit and Dal are domestic servants. Avey is well aware of the situation’s irony:

*I had my daily chores . . . preparing Angelina for meals, naps, and nighttime, and then preparing the house for Dal and Chit’s return from their employment as domestics. They had positions doing the same thing as I did, but for the wealthy*

*who could afford humans capable of handling a phone call that needed to be answered with a lie (Lange 12).*

Interestingly, Avey explains that robots serve economically disadvantaged people, not the elite. This relationship between the elite and technology has some basis in contemporary US reality. Rich people employ human personal assistants and concierges; they do not themselves phone corporations and grapple with electronic voices which instruct them to press one, two, or three. Many socialites do not appear on Facebook.

Lange subtly establishes the human racial category which applies to Angelina, Chit, and Dal. This category becomes surprisingly apparent when Avey describes retrieving Angelina after her first day at school: "We floated down. The front school doors flew open, and out ran 35 curly-headed, shiny-faced, brown-skinned, pink-garmented four-year-olds" (17). This is the first moment in which readers are shown that Dal, Chit, and Angelina are people of color; it is followed by environmental descriptions which show that in a world where sentient robots can fly down, racially oppressed people have not risen up. Angelina returns home to a situation in which she must ignore "the drunk in the corner, the broken glass in the landing" (19). The differences between science fiction and reality mitigate against precisely defining this "brown-skinned" population. Yet Lange's description signals to a white American imagination that we are in a poor, black neighborhood: there is "thick crack traffic" and "burnt out buildings with no panes in the windows, some with mattresses . . . or old water stained curtains in *Jetsons* motifs left on a single nail" (16). The redistribution of technology we can only dream of having—robot nannies for all—has eliminated neither poverty nor its racial distribution. Dominant Singularity discourse manages to ignore the question of how race and class will persist in the future by focusing on unmarked white, wealthy experiences of technology. Lange shows us the underside of this presumption—and readers do not discover they have taken up a story in which none of the humans are white until they have already read quite far into the novella.

We humans have all been taught what "bad" means in relation to the history of how some people have been categorized as Other, branded as subhuman. Avey alludes to inhumane human history; Lange's narrative alludes to histories of dehumanization of African-American and Jewish people in particular. (Humor figures in the initial basis of this observation. As someone who emulates Mel Brooks' conflation of atrocity and humor, I follow in his wake here.) *We, Robots* can be read as a science fiction version of Holocaust experiences and slave narratives; Avey evokes both Ann Frank and *Incidents*

in *the Life of A Slave Girl* author Harriet Ann Jacobs. Avey is a sentient being who is subject to being sold; her first memory is of being plugged in and turned on by a Wal-Mart staff member who “explained in a high semi-monotone how she was preparing us for the big day of sale” (Lange 5). When Lange combines consumerism, slavery, and humor, she becomes akin to Kevin Willmott—whose film *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America* (an alternative history in which the South wins the Civil War) depicts a cool contemporary commodified black person being sold on the Home Shopping Network. Avey can also be seen as a mechanistic Shylock who lacks the flesh-made Shylock right stuff—even though what is true of dehumanized Jews is not true of dehumanized robots. Shylock famously asks “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs?” Avey cannot resort to this line of reasoning. Unlike Shylock, she lacks hands, organs, and the need to eat. She, however, definitely possesses dimensions, senses, affections, and passions. She can be hurt—and she can die. This robot who was born in Wal-Mart—the merchant of “JerseyTown”—feels as a human feels. She “shed a few drops of hydraulic fluid” (93). She can cry. Readers might be compelled to cry when they are apprised of Avey’s demise.

After being reconfigured to feel pain, Avey describes herself and her counterparts as “downright cowish” in regard to “the harsh treatment of our human enslavers” (Lange 52). “Cowish” and “enslaved” pertain to the fact that Avey is literally branded. She feels the “soldering iron [inserted] into my fifth interstitial. . . . The integument burned a little from the contact. . . . I recoiled in terror, in blinding pain” (40). The robots’ suffering, which brings the “Regularity” into being, resonates as a science fictional version of the suffering Toni Morrison depicts in *Beloved*, where the “rememory” of suffering connects past and present experiences of personal and historical pain. Hayles calls *How We Became Posthuman* “a ‘rememory’ in the sense of *Beloved*: putting back together parts that have lost touch with one another and reaching out toward a complexity too unruly fit into disembodied ones and twos” (Hayles 13). The post-“Regularity” robots share painful and complex “rememory” with humans.

“Cowish” Avey evokes animals trucked to the slaughterhouse as much as human experiences of torture and enslavement: the “Regularity” links robots with humans, with those denied humanity, and with nonhuman animals too. After the robots are branded during the reconfiguration which enables them to feel pain, they are asked to “[p]lease file into the loading transports as your serial numbers are called” (Lange 43). Where there are “serial numbers” and “transports” there are Nazis. “Please” evokes a sense of the banality of death. In addition to Hayles and Morrison, this connection

highlights Lange's commonalities with Jonathan Safran Foer. Bringing Foer (a white Jewish male who is not connected to feminist science fiction) to bear upon Lange shows the diversity and range of her discourse; unlike the static depictions of the Singularity, her points are wide ranging. *We, Robots* echoes Foer's attention to abused animals (in *Eating Animals*) and abused Jews (in *Everything Is Illuminated*). Newly given the ability to feel pain, Avey and other robots are trucked home from Walmart "in darkness, with no stimulus apart from the muffled highway noise" (Lange 47). In this space, the robots feel the brutal consequences of the "Regularity." "One of the broken AV's had an eye plate dangling from its optic wires . . . . A third had a meter-long bit of rebar inserted through its internals. It kept repeating, 'I hurt, I hurt'" (45). "I hurt" makes readers feel compassion for the robots—who are no longer mere appliances.

I offer these analogies to emphasize that, unlike the Singularity, Lange's "Regularity" invokes histories of pain and suffering. And, further, in the "Regularity," the line between selves and others is fungible and not static. Avey, who speaks like a New York Jew ("We didn't *know from* bored at that time" [Lange 5, italics mine]), endures treatment which could have been devised by Goebbels, Goring, and Himmler. In terms of the "Arbeit macht frei" sign that famously appears on the gate at Auschwitz, in the end, work makes Avey free. She does the mental work required to describe, identify, and understand her subjectivity—her humanity. And she is ultimately able to create *We, Robots*, her manifesto for robots—no manifesto for silenced "transie" cyborgs who are voiceless in Lange's novella. She articulates the notion that the robots' encounters with human experiences should be respected. "And sooner or later, we, robots, that is, experience these things [love, fun, writing, reading and nature] or other things like them [flesh-made living beings]" (62). Sentient entities who recognize themselves as being designated as "we" cannot appropriately be described by "it." "We" robots are able to name and to categorize themselves. Avey describes how robots are ultimately successful at "searching first for the classification" (56). They liberate themselves from a prison house of language which automatically refers to them as "it." Avey's thoughts and actions clearly show that "we" robots are "us" humans.

"Where are all your people?" Joanna Russ's human men ask, when they first encounter Whileaway, a feminist utopian society populated entirely by women. (The implication is that women are not "people.") When the "Regularity" occurs—when the robots called "it" change—it becomes no simple thing to say where, or who, the people are. Robots become people, as they learn to feel pain; people give up feeling pain and become the Borg. All of Lange's flesh-made humans ultimately become the initially literally

heartless Tin Man in a science fictional “JerseyTown” which is definitely not Oz. Avey’s last words are addressed to the “transie reader” (93)—a futuristic kind of person situated indeterminately between human and machine. The implication is that flesh-made humans, in their new robotic incarnation, no longer read. “Be grateful for the memory,” Avey says to the “transies” of the future, exhorting them to remember their “painful past . . . and shed a few drops of hydraulic fluid at the thought of all you have lost” (93). When Avey equates “hydraulic fluid” with “tears,” she rewrites human language to encompass robots’ technological version of humanity. Though the robots may be made of metal and circuits, in this context, it appears that they have become not just human but more human than the mechanic flesh-and-blood humans. Why? Because the original people, seeking the technological superiority of the Singularity over the embodied connection of the “Regularity,” have lost their hearts.

### Conclusion

Heart—diversity and compassion—needs to be integrated within the discourse which describes our future. Or, in Hayles’ words—which emphasize the not disembodied and finite human being, the connection between humanity and materiality, and the diversity and compassion which should be included in descriptions of the Singularity: “my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibility of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life as embedded in a material world of great complexity one of which we depend for our continued survival” (5). Avey exemplifies Hayles’ dream version of the posthuman embedded in material complexity. Yet perhaps the fact that Avey dies signifies that Hayles’ dream will not come true. Or, more positively, such might not be the case for Lange’s entire inclusive technological vision. Hopefully, the real scientific Singularity will share commonality with Lange’s science fictional “Regularity.”

These hopes relate to Hayles’ comments about how literature and science relate to technological innovation:

*The literary texts often reveal . . . the complex cultural, social, and representational issues tied up with conceptual shifts and technological innovations. . . . It [literature and science] is a way of understanding ourselves as embodied creatures living within and through embodied worlds and embodied words. (Hayles 24).*

I have argued against the monolithic premises of the Singularity and for the vision of the “Regularity” that Lange has created. Lange has emphasized that any vision of the human/robot divide needs to account for the historical strictures on the word “human” and the ways in which the universality that follows from the human do not allow us to understand ourselves “as embodied creatures living within and through embodied worlds and embodied worlds.” Descriptions of technological shifts should not be devoid of diversity’s complexity. We must create a Singularity of our own—imagining future posthuman embodiments in terms of complex cultural, social, and representational worlds and words.

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## Footnotes ( returns to text)

1. For a discussion of the Texas state legislature's abortion law, please see **here** (<http://www.texastribune.org/2013/07/13/texas-abortion-regulations-debate-nears-climax/>) . For EXPLICIT pictures of the images Anthony Weiner sent over the Internet, please see **here** (<http://thedirty.com/2013/07/world-exclusive-anthony-weiner-nude-penis-images-new-york-dont-let-america-down-warning-graphic-images/>) .
2. During the review process, readers pointed out that the transgender movement has done much to challenge gender binaries within language, including encouragement of gender neutral pronouns. For a range of perspectives, see *The Transgender Studies Reader* (ed. Susan



Stryker and Steven Whittle) especially essays by Leslie Feinberg, Sandy Stone, and Kate Bornstein.

3. For further information about Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics, see Josh Jones's **explanation**

([http://www.openculture.com/2012/10/isaac\\_asimov\\_explains\\_his\\_three\\_laws\\_of\\_robotics.html](http://www.openculture.com/2012/10/isaac_asimov_explains_his_three_laws_of_robotics.html))

◀ **PEER REVIEWED**

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## 2 THOUGHTS ON “CREATING ROOM FOR A SINGULARITY OF OUR OWN: READING SUE LANGE’S “WE, ROBOTS””

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