

Transcript of “The Enemy's Gate is Down:

Orientation in *Ender's Game* and the Relationship Between the Oceanic and the Spaced”

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Presented at UNCC’s 22nd Annual English Graduate Student Association Conference (virtual)

Friday, February 18th, 2022

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Orientation is a loaded word. Throughout much of history, the word simply meant "a person or object’s relative position in space" ("Orientation"). However, in recent times, it has also come to mean a person’s tastes regarding the gender(s) of potential sexual partners ("Orientation"). In her book *Wild Blue Media*, Melody Jue upsets the horizontal orientation brought on by humanity’s primarily land-based habitat. Furthermore, she challenged her readers to imagine what the disruption caused by thinking within the oceanic milieu could mean for future societies and technologies. In her book *The Black Shoals*, Tiffany King expands on the idea of reading a text in an oceanic way by focusing on the shoals, the shallows along a coast that create a liminal space between the terrestrial and oceanic. While the oceanic milieu offers much inspiration for social activists, scientists, and theorists, suppose the theories developed by Jue and King are taken another step away from the terrestrial (Jue 22). In exploring the spaced milieu as an expansion of the shoaled oceanic, this presentation will show the inherent queerness of a spaced—that is, volumetric and unfixed—physical and social geography using examples from Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game*.

The choice of *Ender's Game* for this presentation was purposeful. Not only is it a text that is literally and figuratively spaced, but also, one of the most famous lines from the book, "the enemy's gate is down", is explicitly about physical orientation. In terms of theory, the science-fictional setting and Card's position as an "anti-homosexual activist" combined with the almost entirely male cast of characters in the book charges the narrative with the potential for spacing as a queer study (Campbell 490).

The choice of framing the spaced milieu—texts either set in outer space or that think in an unfixed and volumetric way—as an extension of the oceanic was equally purposeful. Jue lists three aspects of the ocean that give rise to its usefulness as a milieu, orientation, mediation and its properties as a medium. While spaced literature deals with all of these aspects, this presentation focuses on orientation.

Jue points out, "terrestrial habits of movement and orientation are so ingrained as to be virtually invisible, unless one experiences their interruption through a change in body state...or a change in milieu (parachuting, swimming, diving)" (2). Although spacing is not included on Jue's list—and understandably so, very few non-fictional humans have experienced spacing—it is a change in milieu very similar to the ones she does list since both the oceanic and spaced milieux "[add] a [vertical] Z axis to the X and Y axes we are familiar with on [the surface of] Earth" (Brooks et al. 416).

Additionally, a vertical requires consideration of depth as a part of the setting. Shoals, a shallower part of the ocean near the shore, such as a sandbar, provide a way of thinking about depth as a necessary dimension of physical and social setting as well as provide time to consider a situation and allow new thoughts, strategies, and structures "to form, coalesce, [and] emerge" (King 1, 11). However, spacing a text expands on the oceanic, as diving, swimming, and

parachuting—all of which require an understanding of depth—maintain a fixed orientation of there being an up and a down—a surface and an ocean floor—spacing unfixes orientations in a way that further subjects the terrestrial mind to "conceptual displacement" (Jue 17).

Ender's Game gives vivid examples of the unfixedness of spaced orientation. Early in the novel, as six-year-old Ender is in a shuttle, on his way to Battle School, having just left Earth's gravity for the first time:

He was not surprised when Graff came up the ladder backward, as if he were climbing down to the front of the shuttle...Graff hooked his feet under a rung and pushed off with his hands, so that suddenly he swung upright, as if this were an ordinary airplane...[Ender] carried it further, imagining that Graff was actually hanging upside down from the center aisle, and then picturing him sticking straight out from a side wall. (22)

Graff confirms Ender's thinking, "in null gravity directions are whatever you conceive them to be" (23). This spaced epistemology calls into question much of the directional thinking done by terrestrial minds. How do you describe how to get from one place to another in a milieu that fosters this type of thinking? What does this mean for directional metaphors?

This scene, set in a small shuttle, is comparable to King's much more familiar image of a small boat taking people back and forth between a large boat and the shore (9). However, the shuttle is not just the vessel; it is also a shoal. King's shoals are a place of respite—an "in-between space [on which] to temporarily squat and reassemble the self on new terms"—and one of danger, "a place that caused unsteady sea legs to slip beneath themselves into a tumble and tangle" (King 9). This is evidenced in how Ender is alone among the students to be able to take advantage of this situation. When the other new battle school students are faced with Graff's

null gravity acrobatics cited above, "the reorientations were too much for some. One boy gagged" (Card 22). Moreover, when the unfixeness of null gravity is explained, the other passengers are unable to understand, the shuttle taking Ender and his fellow students to Battle School is both a place to reorient themselves and a reminder of the captivity that the children of Battle School face, both physically and socially. The medium of the void as well as Graff's authority keeps them from being able to escape the space station or each other.

Such shifts in orientation, though rare in the real world, are not mere fiction. On April 24, 2021, a crew of astronauts arrived at the International Space Station (ISS). On a video posted to The Guardian's youtube page, viewers can see astronauts hugging as they greet each other. A seemingly ordinary occurrence, except that some astronauts end up hugging at angles not possible in Earth gravity. As one pair hugs at right angles to each other, another pair hugs as they are upside-down relative to each other (Guardian). In both cases, the lack of gravity allowed for spatial orientations that would feel entirely unnatural to a terrestrial mind. This social shoal allows both the newcomers and the people already residing there to reorient themselves to each other socially and to their physical surroundings. It also calls into question what terrestrial—largely uniform and vertical—human orientation has made seem natural. In Jue's words, "How would ways of speaking about (x) change if you were to displace or transport it to [space]?" (6). While *Ender's Game* explicitly calls epistemology and, later, military strategy into a spaced milieu, this video spaces bodies and relationships.

Spacing bodies and relationships is inherently queer. Allowing unfixeness of conceptual orientations to exist goes expressly against the enforced orthodoxy required in a heteronormative society. Although *Ender's Game* does not portray a hopeful future for LGBT people, it does show that the spaced milieu is aligned with queerness. The invisible antagonists and MacGuffin

of *Ender's Game* are a race of insectoid creatures known formally as Formics. However, most people call them "buggers". Outside of the novel, this term is used in British English as slang for gay men, a fact likely known by Card (Campbell 490). The reader's introduction to the term occurs on the first page of the book when two faceless voices are discussing Ender, "If the buggers get him, they'll make me look like his favorite uncle," says one. This language immediately villainized the Formics, as the same voice had also just advocated for surrounding Ender with enemies. Later, when Ender is contemplating the consequences of the removal of his monitor—a device that allowed the military to panoptically see his life and analyze it to see if he was suitable for Battle School—he refers to a game of "buggers and astronauts" calling to mind games of Cops and Robbers (2). Shortly afterward, a classmate calls him "bugger-lover," which equates the phrase with epitaphs for people who treat racialized others with respect (4). Finally, when Ender's brother Peter wants to play "buggers and astronauts," the game is used as an excuse to beat up Ender—who is wearing a Formic mask—bringing to mind violent hate crimes against members of the LGBT community and racial groups. The fact that the moniker "bugger" racializes, sexualizes, criminalizes, and queers the Formics, queers the (outer)space from which they come. This queerness extends beyond the beings that come from that space to the people who leave Earth to live and fight there.

The queerness of space is particularly noticeable among the homosocial dynamics at the Battle School. It is most prevalent when Ender decides to make a power play. He sends an anonymous message, telling the other students to "cover your butt" because his rival, Bernard, is watching (37). This goading is immediately preceded by Bernard making fun of a smaller boy by calling him Worm "because he *wiggles*. Look how he shimmies his butt when he walks." (Card 36, emphasis in original). Here Ender plays with unfixedness in another way. Rather than

standing on a shoal, he creates one. He interrupts the flow of power among the battle school children and gives them a social and conceptual place to stand and examine their situation.

The literal truth that Bernard had been watching a smaller boy's butt combined with the metaphorical warning to "cover your butt" thinly veils the accusation that the rival was watching butts for a reason the boys think is more sinister. Ender's ploy caused "Bernard's attempt to be ruler of the room [to be] broken" as it cements him as queer in a homophobic environment (38). Furthermore, Ender's plan—enacted via spaced thinking that orients Ender differently from his peers and superiors—simultaneously upends the system and increases his status within it.

The differences in how—upright and uniformly oriented—terrestrial minds and spaced minds see the world and the benefits of thinking within a spaced milieu are also evident in how *Ender's Game* treats physical space, especially during battles between the armies of the Battle School. These bouts occur in a zero-gravity arena in the middle of the Battle School space station, known as the battle room.

Before Ender's arrival, these skirmishes would maintain a terrestrial orientation. In Ender's first battle, his commander, Bonzo, gives the orders for his soldiers to split into four groups as they enter. One was to go "up," another "left," a third "right," and the fourth "down." Meanwhile, he tells Ender to "wait four minutes, then come just inside the door. Don't even take your gun off your suit" (Card 64). Bonzo's orders reveal his mindset. For him, "down" stays "down," even when gravity is not present. When faced with conceptual displacement, Bonzo and his soldiers tried to maintain a terrestrial orientation despite an "interruption through...a change in milieu" (Jue 2).

Bonzo's final order is meant to punish Ender. However, when he enters the battle room, he can use it as a shoal—to make time and space to reorient himself to his new situation, just as he had in the shuttle:

In [null gravity], there was no reason to stay oriented the way he had been in the corridor. It was impossible to tell...which way had been up. And it didn't matter. For now Ender had found the orientation that made sense. The enemy's gate was down. The object of the game was to fall toward the enemy's home. (64)

When orientation is inherently unfixed, correctness is determined by usefulness, not orientation. Ender's spaced mind can immediately question his previously mandatory orientation. He analyzes the situation and determines the proper orientation based not on orthodoxy but the situation. In this situation, the best way to think about the space was to orient both physically and mentally as though the enemy's gate—the goal—was "down." In another situation, it is entirely possible and natural to make any other direction, any other goal, down.

So far, a spaced milieu has provided an extension of the shoaled oceanic and interesting reading of events in *Ender's Game*. But of what use is it? What does spaced thinking do? What does it provide? For one thing, it engages with an intelligence that is often disregarded, existential intelligence. Existential intelligence, as defined by Howard Gardner, is the ability to orient oneself within the cosmological and the social. Unfixing spatial and social orientations and engaging existential intelligence allow for innovation and creativity along axes previously unutilized.

Ender's ability and penchant for existential intelligence are what make him a hero. This ability comes from Ender's deep empathy and understanding of others, another trait of spaced thinking. An unfixed orientation also lends itself to shifting perspective to the space behind

someone else's eyes. From the beginning, the reader is aware that Ender can quickly, easily, and correctly guess what others are thinking and feeling and, consequently, what they will do and what he should do to achieve his desired effect. In the first chapter of the book, Ender demonstrates this skill twice. First, while his monitor is being removed, he correctly predicts how his brother will react to the news, and second, he uses this skill to manipulate and defeat classmates who are bullying him (2, 4-5).

In short, the ability to orient oneself in an unfixed social environment is the ability to empathize. In spacing texts, the reader must also space their thoughts, which unfixes them in geographical and conceptual space. However, once things are deoriented, they require reorienting—at least temporarily. The ability to pull others into the existential orientation Ender sees as most useful is his power. In some ways the ability to convince others to see things from a certain orientation is itself power. This is the power that has formed the heteronormative matrix in which we now live. From antiquity on, certain groups have been more focused and rigorous about pulling other groups into seeing the world their way. The ability to realign how others think about the world was usurped throughout history by white, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical men. It is my hope that further study of the spaced milieu by myself and others will help to create shoals of realignment on the edges of worlds, milieux, oceans, and atmospheres.

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