

Technological Enchantment and Colonial Alienation: Body Politics and Critique of Anthropocentrism in John Scalzi's Six-Part Series *the Old Man's War*

Li Yun

Hunan University, China

*Corresponding Authors: Li Yun, Hunan University, China.

Abstract: John Scalzi's six-part series *The Old Man's War* (2005–2015) employs science fiction narrative to reveal the new forms of colonial violence in the era of technological capitalism, critiquing the pathological logic of anthropocentrism in interstellar expansion. This paper first analyzes how the Colonial Defense Force (CDF)'s "body replacement" technology alienates life into calculable war tools, demonstrating how biopower achieves extreme discipline through genetic modification, neural enhancement, and other technological devices. Second, it explores how the "brain companion" system and memory cloning technology internalize colonial ideology into soldiers' cognitive structures, enabling the "civilizing mission" discourse to be reproduced through neural technology. Finally, Scalzi's narrative exposes the cognitive closedness of colonial narcissism: when humans view themselves on a cosmic scale, it not only leads to systemic violence against others but also obscures the fundamental ethical dilemmas of life in the technological age. The warning of the six-part series lies in the fact that only by transcending technocentrism and reconstructing a cognitive paradigm of coexistence can we avoid the self-replication of colonial logic on an interstellar scale.

Key words: Technological capitalism, colonial narcissism, technophilia, posthumanism, postcolonialism

1. INTRODUCTION

In a post-human context, technological intermediaries are profoundly reshaping the bodily political relationships between colonizers and the colonized. John Scalzi's six-part series *Old Man's War* (2005–2015) employs a unique "body replacement" narrative framework to reveal the new forms of colonial violence in the era of technological capitalism. In the novel, the plot where 75-year-old Earth elders undergo genetic modification surgery to obtain young alien bodies and become tools for interstellar expansion not only demonstrates the systemic reliance of colonial power on biotechnology but also highlights the colonizers' "narcissistic appropriation" of the colonized body—this appropriation reflects both a pathological insistence on civilizational superiority, but also reflects the power dynamics of objectifying and dissolving the bodies of others through technological means.

This technology-enabled colonial violence transcends the traditional binary paradigm of material plunder and cultural suppression in colonialism, instead exhibiting a new form of "techno-fetishism." Specifically, through the worship and dependence on technological objects such as genetic engineering and bionic organs, colonizers not only conceal the essence of colonial plunder but also construct a power discourse system centered on technological worship. Scalzi delves into the dual functions of technology as a medium for colonizers to construct their self-identity and reproduce power in his six-part series, revealing how technological devices achieve systematic control and exploitation of the colonized.

Notably, "body replacement" not only grants colonizers enhanced physiological capabilities and extended lifespans but also fosters a blind worship of technological power at the cognitive level. This technological worship fundamentally reflects humanity's deep-seated anxiety and powerlessness in the face of the unknown cosmos. Colonizers seek to achieve absolute control over the external world through technological means, yet such control is inherently a delusional self-soothing mechanism. Through a critical analysis of "colonial narcissism" and "technological fetishism," Scalzi's work not only reveals the ethical dilemmas and cognitive limitations faced by humanity in the age of technological capitalism but also expands new research dimensions for postcolonial theory in a posthuman context, offering an insightful methodological perspective for science fiction literary criticism.

2. BIOPOWER: THE COLONIZATION OF THE BODY UNDER TECHNOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

John Scalzi's six-part series *The Old Man's War* uses the core concept of “biopower” to profoundly reveal the new forms of violence associated with the colonization of the body in the era of technological capitalism. Within the interstellar order established by the Colonial Union, the “body-swapping surgery” technology pushes Foucault's concept of “biopower” to its extreme—through the mass production and distribution of standardized clones, soldiers are systematically dehumanized into calculable, interchangeable war tools, with the value of life reduced to a utility function on the battlefield. This process perfectly illustrates Agamben's (1998) concept of “bare life” (*homo sacer*): before power, the human body is completely deconstructed into biological components, with its existence solely serving to maximize military efficacy. It is worth noting that this bodily colonization is not simply violent suppression, but is achieved through a comprehensive system of technocratic, institutionalized life management. It marks a shift in colonialism from traditional land seizure to more thorough exploitation of life resources, completing a historic transition from geographical colonization to biological colonization.

Michel Foucault argues that “the body is tamed, it can be controlled, used, transformed, and improved” (p. 146). The militarized body management system established by the CDF (Colonial Defense Forces) ostensibly operates under the guise of “human species superiority,” but in reality constructs a sophisticated body control apparatus. In the opening of *The Old Man's War*, the plot where 75-year-old John Perry joins the CDF by signing a contract to obtain a young clone (Scalzi, 2005, p. 45) symbolically illustrates the operational logic of biological discipline: the replacement of an aging body is packaged as a humanitarian “gift of new life,” but it is actually a landmark moment in the individual's integration into the genetic economic production chain. The colonial nature of this bodily transformation is not only evident in functional enhancement but also through the explicit feature of green skin, which completes the political encoding of identity—skin color change serves both as proof of technological superiority and as a visual marker of power differentiation. As Wang Min'an (2018) points out in the book *Body, Space, and Postmodernity*, the disciplining of the body by power always begins with the “insult to the body's basic premise” (p. 31), and the CDF's green bodies are the ultimate manifestation of this insult in the interstellar age: they not only negate the legitimacy of the natural body but also reconfigure the political meaning of the body at the molecular level.

Genetic engineering pushes this biological discipline to a new dimension. In *The Ghost Fleet*, soldier Martin says, “We are the first humans organically modified for poetic space life... everything about us is expressed through DNA” (Scalzi, 2013, p.164), bluntly revealing the colonial essence of genetic technology. The CDF's genetic editing-enabled “smart blood” replacement, cat-eye vision enhancement, and “super-sensory” system upgrades (Scalzi, 2019, p.84) are not neutral technological advancements but political acts that directly embed Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest logic into the genetic code. While these modifications enhance soldiers' battlefield survival capabilities and combat effectiveness, they also profoundly alter their cognitive frameworks regarding self and the external world. Soldiers' bodies are no longer merely biological entities but have become technological carriers of specific ideologies and political objectives. In this process, soldiers' agency is quietly replaced by blind faith and dependence on technological devices, and the violence of bodily colonization is obscured by the illusion of technological progress, enabling colonial power to operate in a more covert and efficient manner.

The bio-disciplinary system constructed by Scalzi forms a striking intertextual relationship with contemporary biotechnological developments. The popularization of CRISPR gene editing technology, the commercial application of brain-computer interfaces, and the advancement of consciousness digitization research—all these technological advancements are, to varying degrees, reenacting the ethical dilemmas depicted in the novel. The green soldiers of the CDF and Silicon Valley elites share the same cognitive framework regarding “bio-enhancement”: viewing the body as a technical object that can be infinitely optimized, reducing the value of life to performance parameters. The spread of this techno-fetishism has made the sci-fi imagination of *The Old Man's War* increasingly resemble a reality diagnosis. In the gene-edited baby incident and the controversy over gene sampling by multinational pharmaceutical companies, we have already seen the clear trajectory of “body colonization” moving from fiction to reality. In the face of this technologically enhanced biological discipline, Haraway (2016) proposes the “Chthulucene” survival ethics as a possible way out: “One way to live and die well as mortal critters in the Chthulucene is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to

make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition.” (p. 101). This assertion resonates deeply with the choice made by the young girl Zoe in *The Story of Zoe* to abandon her human identity and join an alien symbiotic entity (Scalzi, 2010, p. 203): only by transcending the anthropocentric cognitive framework and acknowledging the diversity and interdependence of life forms can we break the violent cycle of biological discipline. Scalzi's six-part series does not merely depict future imaginings; it serves as an urgent warning for the present: when technology grants us the ability to reshape life, what we most urgently need to reshape is our attitude toward life—not as an object to be conquered, but as a partner with whom we coexist.

3. DISCIPLINARY INTERNALIZATION: THE DISCOURSE OF THE “CIVILIZING MISSION” AND THE JUSTIFICATION OF COLONIALISM

In John Scalzi's six-part series *The Old Man's War*, the evolution of biological discipline unfolds as a complete spectrum, transitioning from physical control to the reshaping of consciousness. Within the interstellar order established by the CDF (Colonial Defense Forces), the traditional colonial discourse of the “civilizing mission” is transformed through neurotechnology, giving rise to a more covert and efficient model of power operation. This new colonial paradigm no longer satisfies itself with direct control over the body but instead uses consciousness reshaping technology to internalize colonial logic into soldiers' cognitive structures, achieving Foucault's prophesied “internalization of discipline”—power no longer acts merely on the surface of the body but penetrates neural circuits, becoming the organizing principle of thought patterns. This transformation marks a shift in colonial violence from explicit physical suppression to implicit psychological manipulation, ultimately achieving the legitimization of the “civilizing mission” discourse.

On the one hand, the CDF's biological discipline system has achieved a qualitative leap in power technology through the “BrainPal” system. This implantable neural interface is far more than a simple tactical aid; it is a comprehensive consciousness monitoring and regulation device. The system can record soldiers' physiological indicators, emotional fluctuations, and even subconscious activities in real time, micro-level data monitoring of the Panopticon prison envisioned by Bentham at the neural level. Furthermore, the “BrainPal” system can also fine-tune soldiers' cognitive patterns according to CDF instructions, ensuring their thoughts and actions remain aligned with the CDF's objectives. This psychological manipulation causes soldiers to rarely question the legitimacy of the “civilizing mission” during missions, instead viewing it as a crucial path to self-realization. In this context, the internalization of discipline reaches an unprecedented depth, with soldiers' agency completely dissolved, replaced by a collective unconscious state of loyalty and obedience. As Sagan put it, “Special Forces soldiers have no souls” (Scalzi, 2013, p. 261).

On the other hand, the Colonial Alliance reduces life to storable, replicable data packets, enabling colonial power to transcend temporal constraints. This process vividly illustrates the extreme form of biopolitics in a post-human context. Dirac, as the memory clone of the traitor Boutin, exists not merely as a science fiction plot device but as a literary interpretation of Agamben's theory of “bare life.” “When life and politics—which were originally separated—are connected through the no man's land of the state of exception, where only bare life exists—all life becomes sacred” (Giorgio Agamben, p. 200), that is, “bare life.” Dirac's “life” begins with data input in the laboratory, its existence entirely dependent on the military needs of the Colonial Alliance, representing the ultimate manifestation of “bare life” in the technological age. This process of life's objectification pushes Heidegger's critique of the “technological framework” (Gestell) to its extreme: life is no longer the blossoming of existence but becomes a pre-set, storable technological resource. The Dirac case represents a qualitative shift in disciplinary technology from bodily control to mental manipulation.

The Colonial Alliance pushes this logic to new heights through memory cloning technology—not only determining the continuation of life but also deciding which “consciousness” is worthy of replication and perpetuation. The “false memories” implanted in Dirac (i.e., the memories of Bunting's rebellion) constitute a form of reverse biopolitics: power not only produces truth but also produces specific patterns of subjectivity. This technological practice engages in dialogue with Althusser's (1971) theory of the ideological state apparatus but differs fundamentally: ideological interpellation still requires a subject's response, while memory cloning directly produces subjects that meet the required criteria. In Dirac, the “civilizing mission” is no longer an abstract concept but is concretized as an operable, replicable form of life, further reinforcing the soldiers' belief in the legitimacy of colonization.

Cultural colonization serves as a key dimension in the colonial alliance's construction of discursive hegemony. In this process, the reproduction mechanism of the "civilizing mission" discourse relies on the systematic construction of alterity. When Perry accepts the colonial alliance's mission to colonize the planet Lonox, Schirad asks him, "Do you remember the duties of the Colonial Defense Force? 'To secure humanity a place among the stars'" (Scalzi, 2013, p. 204) — successfully transforming the violent essence of colonial plunder into a survival necessity for the species. The unique aspect of this ideological operation lies in its transcendence of traditional media's one-way dissemination, instead achieving direct programming of soldiers' cognitive frameworks through the 'Brain Companion' neural interface system.

In Scalzi's portrayal, this ideological penetration is so deep that soldiers can carry out colonial tasks with almost religious devotion, even in the face of resistance from alien civilizations. The indigenous inhabitants of the planet Lonox, with their unique life forms and cultural traditions, are seen by the Colonial Alliance as nothing more than "barbaric lands" awaiting conquest, to be illuminated by the "light of civilization." While this discourse strategy essentially continues the rhetorical tradition of "civilizing" from Earth's colonial history, its technological implementation has undergone a qualitative leap: when colonial ideology is directly encoded into neural circuits, any mode of thought questioning this system is systematically excluded at the cognitive level. Ultimately, when soldiers fought and died for the fictional "alien threat," colonial violence achieved its most thoroughly alienated form—victims were not only forced to participate in the violence but also fully internalized the ideological justification of violence at the cognitive level.

4. COLONIAL NARCISSISM: THE PATHOLOGICAL OBSESSION WITH ANTHROPOCENTRISM

In John Scalzi's six-part series *The Old Man's War*, colonial narcissism serves as a systemic pathology that drives humanity's interstellar expansion. This pathological obsession not only perpetuates the anthropocentric tradition of Earth's colonial era but, through the enhancement of biotechnology, evolves into a more refined form of self-worship. The entire operational framework of the CDF (Colonial Defense Forces) is built upon a fundamental cognitive fallacy: that humans are not only the sole intelligent life form in the universe but also the perfect model toward which all life should evolve.

In the six-part series *The Old Man's War*, the CDF's intelligence department systematically produces and disseminates knowledge about extraterrestrial life. This knowledge is less an objective description than a necessary narrative to maintain the illusion of human superiority. Extraterrestrial beings are depicted as oddly shaped, intellectually inferior, or dangerously threatening entities—either posing a direct threat to humanity or regarded as inferior life forms awaiting human "civilization." This narrative strategy not only reinforces the illusion of humanity's centrality in the universe but also provides a so-called "justified" basis for CDF military actions. In CDF propaganda, every conquest of an alien civilization is portrayed as a victory of human intelligence and courage, an expansion of the boundaries of human civilization. However, behind this victory lies the disregard for the uniqueness and value of alien life, as well as blind arrogance toward humanity's own limitations.

What is even more ironic is that the CDF's understanding of alien life is often based on the collection and analysis of alien biological samples. These samples are displayed as trophies, serving as evidence of human technological achievements. However, this objectification and exploitation of life forms not only violates the basic principles of bioethics but also exposes humanity's fear and anxiety when faced with unknown life forms. By dehumanizing extraterrestrial life as "the other," the CDF maintains internal unity and consistency of action while concealing the violent nature of its colonial behavior.

Another manifestation of colonial narcissism is the extreme confidence in human biotechnology. The "gene optimization" program promoted by the CDF is ostensibly to enhance human survival ability, but in essence it is a crazy attempt to write anthropocentrism into the DNA sequence. In the genetic laboratory described in the ghost brigades, scientists systematically eliminate the possibility of mutation in human genes in the name of "removing weaknesses" in an attempt to create the so-called "perfect human template". The logic behind this technical practice is in line with the eugenics movement of the 20th century, the only difference being that its tools are packaged in molecular biology. It ignores the value of human diversity and complexity and attempts to simplify humans into an optimizable and controllable biological entity. In CDF propaganda, gene optimization is seen as the inevitable path of

human evolution and the key to cosmic hegemony. However, this extreme worship of biotechnology not only deprives humans of the dignity and diversity they deserve as natural life, but may also lead to the alienation and decline of humans themselves, making humans more vulnerable and powerless when facing unknown challenges in the universe.

The deepest crisis of colonial narcissism lies in the cognitive closure it induces, “leading us to become pathologically entrenched in our own narrow world, immersed in our internal issues, and increasingly isolated from the outside world, unable to achieve perfect communication. This means that ultimately, we will have nothing to think about besides our own collective banality” (quoted from David Steins, translated by Ding Leping, p. 34). In several key plot points across the six-part series, humanity pays a heavy price for clinging to its delusions of superiority. The battle on the Whaidian planet depicted in *The Old Man's War* is a prime example: the CDF commander underestimates the tactical wisdom of the alien civilization, leading the entire fleet into an ambush. Even more ironic is the ending of *Colonies of the Dead*, where humans finally discover the legendary “Old Architects” race, only to find that they have already uploaded their consciousness into the quantum network. To them, humans, who cling to physical existence, are nothing more than “pitiful biological relics.” This plot twist completely deconstructs the epistemological foundation of anthropocentrism, suggesting that there may be entirely different evolutionary paths in the universe. Through these narrative designs, Scalzi is actually posing a fundamental question: when humans view themselves as the measure of the universe, are we truly understanding the universe, or are we merely replicating our own reflection?

The critique of colonial narcissism in *The Old Man's War* series engages in a profound dialogue with contemporary discussions of the Anthropocene. As Klaus (2017) notes, “The Anthropocene is a new anthropogenic rift in the natural history of planet Earth rather than the further development of an anthropocentric biosphere.” (Hamilton, C., & Grinevald, J., p.9) CDF reenacts Earth's ecological violence on an interstellar scale: treating alien ecosystems as objects to be arbitrarily modified and viewing other intelligent life forms as quantifiable threat indices.

This persistent mindset explains why, even in a technologically advanced future, humanity has not yet shed its most basic colonial impulses. At the conclusion of *The Story of Zoe*, when 15-year-old Zoe chooses to abandon her human identity and join an alien symbiotic entity, this decision is not only a choice about her personal fate but also a rejection of the entire anthropocentric paradigm. The truth she ultimately comprehends may be precisely the core message Scalzi sought to convey: in the vast cosmos, true wisdom lies not in clinging to one's own superiority but in acknowledging one's limitations; true progress is not about outward expansion but inward self-reflection. When technology grants humanity the ability to transform others, what may require the most transformation is how humanity perceives others.

5. CONCLUSION

The six-part series *The Old Man's War* critiques colonial narcissism and technological violence, ultimately pointing to a more fundamental ethical question: in an era where technological mediation increasingly penetrates the essence of life, how can we avoid the self-destruction of anthropocentrism? Scalzi demonstrates through the failure of the CDF that colonial narcissism is not merely a moral flaw but a fatal cognitive blind spot—when humanity regards itself as the absolute standard of the universe, it has already lost the ability to understand others and, consequently, to understand itself. The six-part series *The Old Man's War* prompts critical reflection on current technological developments through its portrayal of colonial narcissism—in an era where gene editing has become routine and tech giants monopolize biological data, we need to be more vigilant than ever against the colonial logic disguised as technology. How to safeguard the dignity and diversity of life in the technological age. This is both the ultimate question posed by the six-part series *The Old Man's War* and the existential challenge every person in the Anthropocene must confront.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is supported by Hunan Provincial Innovation Foundation for Postgraduate (CX20230402)

REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. (2016). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (G. Wu, Trans.). Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press. (Original work published 1995)
- Foucault, M. (2019). *Discipline and punish* (B. Liu & Y. Yang, Trans.). Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company.

(Original work published 1975)

Hamilton, C., & Grinevald, J. (2015). Was the Anthropocene anticipated? *The Anthropocene Review*, 2(1), 1-14. DOI: 10.1177/2053019614567155

Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

Scalzi, J. (2016). *The disappearing colony planet* (Y. Xianghui, Trans.). Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Literature & Art Publishing House. (Original work published 2007)

Scalzi, J. (2013). *The ghost brigades* (Yao Xianghui, Trans.). Nanjing: Jiangsu Literature & Art Publishing House. (Original work published 2006)

Scalzi, J. (2019). *Old man's war* (Yao Xianghui, Trans.). Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Literature & Art Publishing House. (Original work published 2005)

Staines, D. (2005). The invisible cave: Postcolonial self in Canadian literature (L. Ding, Trans.). *Foreign Literature*, (4), 27-35. <https://doi.org/10.16345/j.cnki.cn11-1562/i.2005.04.004>

Wang, M. A. (2015). *Body, space and postmodernity*. Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House.

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY

Li Yun, PhD student at Hunan University, research interests include science fiction literature and literary ethics criticism.

Citation: Li Yun. "Technological Enchantment and Colonial Alienation: Body Politics and Critique of Anthropocentrism in John Scalzi's Six-Part Series the Old Man's War", *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, vol. 13, no.6, pp. 17-22, 2025. Available: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1306003>.

Copyright: © 2025 Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.