The Socio-Economic-Political Crisis of the Frontier Thesis in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

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I. Introduction

Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* undeniably explores the issues concerning the cohabitation of, and indistinctiveness between humans and androids. It is precisely this ideological and ontological category that is essential for a future society that relies on a socio-economic-political division. This is a paradoxical condition required in any claim for self-identity that these critics ignore. Scholars such as Jill Galvin and Den Tandt, from an idealistic point of view, regarded the novel to be bildungsroman that envisioned a community of the posthuman. What these scholars saw in the novel, as it explored a new space frontier, in fact, was its socio-economical and technological idealism that are common in a frontier narrative. Notably, many critics rather missed the complexity of the boundaries between these two species, and in effect, missed more serious issues related to this division, which in fact belongs to a tradition of frontier narratives.

Drawing on the fact that the metaphors that are pertained to the frontier and the New World are only replaced by the signifiers for
post-apocalyptic space and cybernetic aliens, I suggest reading the novel as another variant of a frontier narrative. Diverging from these readings, Eric S. Rabkin, who views the mechanizing of people as a consequence of industrialism, suggests that Dick dramatizes the "intellectual desolation" by focusing on beings—androids—"who were themselves artificially produced" and have been "forbidden the usual habitations of humanity" in order to "labor on humanity's behalf" (163). Seconding Rabkin's idea above and providing a connection between American industrialization and frontier expansionism, Gary K. Wolfe indicates that with the closing of the western frontier, "science fiction gained popularity as a kind of literature" that "offered new frontiers" (248). Wolfe notes that science fiction not only "views the movement into space as a kind of extension of the manifest destiny myth of American expansion," but also sees "the frontier as an arena for capitalist exploration" (238). If we accept this formula, then Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? seems fitting as a frontier narrative.

Agreeing with Wolfe's view and taking on Rabkin's idea, I would like to read Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? in terms of a frontier myth because the novel dramatizes central factors of the frontier model of economy: the novel not only enacts the systemic categorization and inequality of self–other (humans vs. androids) binary latent in the frontier paradigm but also charters the position of the other (androids) as a way of defining the self (humans) for socio-economic-political purposes, closely recalling the frontier paradigm. To this line, based upon a capitalistic model of economy, both the frontier paradigm and novel treat the other as an object of dominion, subjugation, and violence.

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