DOCUMENT

UFD035 Kristen Alvanson, Robin Mackay

Dreams and Fabrications

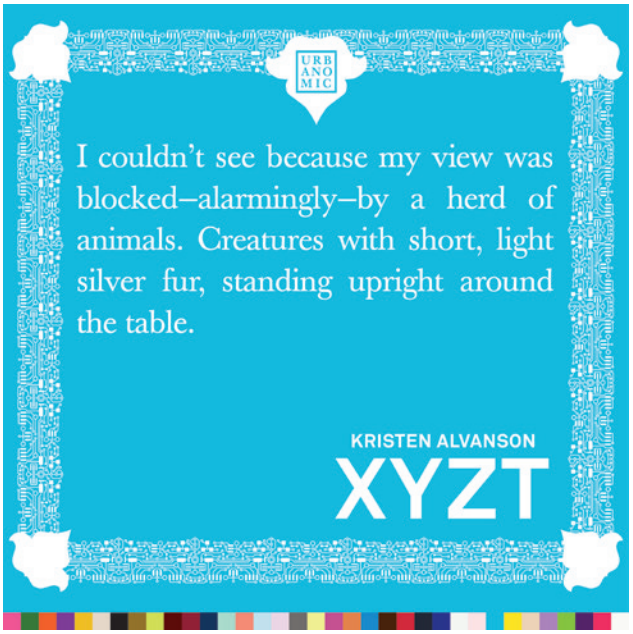
Kristen Alvanson's XYZT is a genre-busting collection of tales probing the complex relationship and cultural differences between the US and Iran, threaded together with a speculative science fiction thriller plotline. Much of the novel is based on Alvanson's years living in Iran, but in XYZT she reworks her experiences into myriad different styles, perspectives and genres ranging from the quotidian to the fabulous. In this interview with the author we talk to her about her time in Iran, the unconventional structure of XYZT, and the common threads between the novel and her work as a visual artist.

ROBIN MACKAY: For how long have you been working on *XYZT*?

KRISTEN ALVANSON: I started in 2008 after having lived in Iran for a couple years, and worked on it pretty consistently while I was living there and then subsequently in Malaysia. By the time I returned to the States in 2013 most of it was complete, but I continued to fine tune the book. To have come back and for the work not to have been shared with anyone was frustrating for me, so it feels great that it's finally out there.

RM: Legends, mythical creatures and folk tales, both Iranian and American, are very prominent in *XYZT*.

KA: I was looking at a lot of Persian tales, myths, and nightmares while in Iran. The ones that I've retold in alternate versions in *XYZT*, I took not from any text but from my memory of the verbal telling, and then altered or bastardized them in various ways. These stories that have been around for centuries, and people continue to share them and have a real



appreciation for them. But folk tales aren't just fantastical demonstrations of the richness of a culture, they're also apparently innocuous forms that can harbour social and political satire and criticism. The older the culture, the better equipped it is to convey these hidden messages unnoticed. And one of the

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things I realised when I went to Iran is what a young country the US is. Experiencing Persian myths and this strong thread of history, I started to look at what I had read as a child and the kinds of stories we have in the US, and I soon came to realise that any fairy tales I had read as a child were not American but European, with a few exceptions such as L. Frank Baum's *Oz* books. But from my childhood in the seventies what we did have growing up were things like the McDonaldland characters and other kinds of popular culture, these were my 'fairy tales', so I started to incorporate those too. But I also wanted to make my own. For example, in 'Perth Amboy: Fresh Kills' I create a new myth using parts of Raritan history from the Staten Island area. And in the Bigfoot story, 'Mount St. Helens: Leiurus-Gigantopithecus' I incorporated new elements to create my own take on an existing myth.

RM: *XYZT* is a fractured, kaleidoscopic set of tales, with each episode told from a different point of view; what led you to make that decision, or did the book always have this kind of form?

KA: I worked on various artistic projects when I was in Iran, but I was also doing a lot of reading, I started to read huge amounts of fiction, and I was also watching a lot of movies at that time, which I had never had the time to do in the States because I was working a full time job. One day in Iran seemed to last 48 hours, and suddenly I had all the time in the world. So that intense period of encountering so many fictions and films ended up meshing with what I was experiencing over there. I had wanted to do some writing in the form of travelogues, documenting the things I was seeing, but when I started to do that, those other elements began to take over.

RM: So there was a flood of new sensory experience and information from arriving in a new country, and you were encountering the historical tales there—but you were also getting *more* access to modern and contemporary fiction and to film in Iran than you were in the States?

KA: Ironically, yes. While most film and transgressive literature is banned in Iran, it's available on the black market, and is more accessible and sought after in Iran than in the United States. And as I started to write, experimenting with all those components, at that stage they were stand-alone stories, but I soon started to think about how I could put them together. I was writing multiple stories at different times and trying to relay these different things I was experiencing, but assembling them together was more difficult. What I really wanted to do was to write it in different voices, with different types of narrations, so that I could relay things from multiple perspectives—that's why some of the stories are written in the first person, some second person, some in the third person, first person plural, and in past, present, or future tenses, and so on. I was also curious about various techniques such as embedding stories within stories, incorporating existing fictions, parallel novels, using characters from other works, using formats like 'notes to self', for example.

RM: Was that to escape your own perspective, or as a way to add texture to the book?

KA: When I arrived in Iran, in the course of a couple of weeks, I noticed a strange phenomenon that began to reshape my experience. I was starting to see things from an Iranian perspective and the individuals I interacted with were seeing things in their own country from my perspective. Because of the disturbance of my presence there, both my Iranian hosts

and myself were looking at the experience of living in Iran differently. Of course, this was no smooth process, there were sometimes frictions, but we were all willing to try to suspend our habitual perspectives. So yes, this personal experience of changing perspective informed the book a great deal. But in terms of writing, it was more about understanding how writers create different voices and use different techniques, and challenging myself to create my own stories in these different styles. When I realised that I wanted the stories to move back and forth from Iran to the US one thing was that I wanted to reader not to know where they were going to be when the chapter began, to just drop them in. Like you don't know where you are, you could be in Iran or in US and at first there might be no way to tell them apart. Utilising these different registers gave me more opportunity to disorient the reader.

RM: And when did the connecting narrative come in, with the XYZT device, the electronic bracelet that enables characters to move instantaneously between the two countries?

KA: I had to come up with something in order to bring the stories together because I wanted them all to happen simultaneously so that, again, you wouldn't know where you were, I wanted to try and have all of these experiences happening at once. But the bracelet is more than just a literary device. Yes, it's something that allows me to structure those stories and bring them together, but it's also an element in the *XYZT* narrative itself, which is a science fiction plot featuring its own characters and its own dynamic.

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RM: That narrative also contributes toward suggesting the model of reality—time, space, and difference—we are dealing with in *XYZT*.

KA: The real theme of that whole narrative, which is also a story about relationships, about love, about betrayal, is the relationship between the people of the US and Iran. One of the students conducting the trials of the XYZT technology has a very optimistic, almost naively optimistic, point of view about bringing cultures together through democracy and dialogue, the other is more cynical and recognizes that certain parties will always benefit from maintaining hostilities. Against these two over-simplistic narratives about the relationship between the two countries, Estella, the heroine, has a far less fixed and judgmental understanding of the situation, which corresponds more closely to what the XYZT experiment itself starts to reveal to the reader.

RM: You are primarily a visual artist. Was this the first time you'd used writing as a medium, and if so, why did you turn to the written word at this point?

KA: I had actually been doing a lot of writing in the US in the years prior to moving to Iran, working on my project *Lessons in Schizophrenia*, but that was a far more experimental work bringing together different authors, so it was something very different to thinking through how to construct a solid 'book', a more traditional novel—or, at least something that, even though you could call it an experimental novel, has the facade of streamlined narration.

RM: Relatively speaking...although *XYZT* has a far more adventurous structure than much 'contemporary literature'. What kind of book is it, in fact? What other works were inspirational when you were writing?

XYZT should be read as a pulpy version of Giambattista Basile's *Tale of Tales* or *One Thousand and One Nights* synced with where we find ourselves today, and expanded by experiments in genre fiction

KA: It's a novel, I guess that's what we should say! But when you ask that question it doesn't surprise me, because for all these years I've been saying I'm writing fiction, and people say, well, what's it about? And I say SF, but not really...it's very hard for me to explain what exactly it is in a short description.

But I always wanted it to be a novel, that was my aim. *Lessons in Schizophrenia* was a 5000-page piece of writing that is extremely experimental, and my aim here was to try and make something that was more contained and accessible.

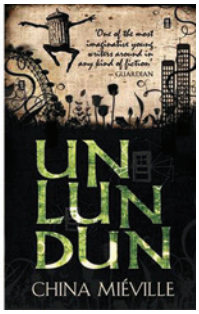
As I said, I was reading a lot of different types of fiction. I've never been one to worry about respectability, so I was looking at vampire books, whatever stuff was around in current pop culture and a lot of contemporary fiction. Neil Gaiman's work mixed with classics like Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Ray Carver, John Barth, Houshang Golshiri. In Iran, many nights I fell asleep to the reading of Trakl or Lautréamont. I was also watching a lot of films, which were just as inspirational—I wanted to also incorporate aspects of horror movies into the book for example, that's something I've always been interested in. When I was still in the US I did a film at the Hotel Chelsea that involved a murder, which formed part of *Lessons In Schizophrenia*. At the time I was into the concept of hyperstition and making fictions real—and I mistakenly took that too literally... let's just say I almost gave 'someone' a heart attack.

So, as well as mixing in those old myths—and in fact, some of the Persian bedtime stories that are told to children are really graphic too—I also wanted the book to feel contemporary, of the time and of our current situation. As a whole, you can read XYZT as a pulpy version of Giambattista Basile's *Tale of Tales* or *One Thousand and One Nights* synced with where we find ourselves today, and expanded by experiments in genre fiction.

RM: *XYZT* is the second book in the K-Pulp imprint, following *Applied Ballardianism*, and when I talked with Simon Sellars about *AB* I was reflecting on whether attaching the term 'theory-fiction' to the series was a mistake or not, whether it was too constraining and raised very particular expectations. But one way of thinking about it, loosening up the term a little, could be that if any theory is a model of reality, here we're dealing with fictions that imply models of the universe that don't conform to that of consensual reality, conventional models of time, space, memory, information transfer. At one point in *XYZT* Kade's and Amir's conceptions of the US/Iran relation are referred to as two countries 'dreaming each other'. And rather than confirming their dreams, *XYZT* proposes a different model of how cultures connect each other's worlds, how different realities are bridged, connected, and cross-contaminate one another, and how escapist dreams or models of elsewhere have effects.

Behind any supposedly escapist move, there is really a genuine idea of desire for change

KA: Yes, each of these dreams brings desires into play—in the case of the US and Iran particularly, the desire for a dreamed outside—and those desires also have effects. I wouldn't call it 'escapism' though—whenever there is a desire to escape, we should recognize it and understand its specific features, rather than just deriding it as a fantasy. Behind any supposedly escapist move, there is really a genuine idea of desire for change.



For that aspect of the book—the XYZT device itself and the transit between different realities—besides Wells's *Time Machine*, China Miéville had sent all of his books over to us in Iran, and what I liked about *UnLundun*, even though it's meant to be a childrens' or 'young adults' book, was that the characters literally take a bridge to move from place to place and experience these kinds of unreal situations.

RM: Right, the bridge revolves to connect them to different realities. I actually remember talking to China at the time I read *UnLundun* and mentioning that it strongly reminded me of one of my childhood favourites, Enid Blyton's *Magic Faraway Tree* books, in which the children climb a gigantic tree whose topmost branch reaches right into the clouds, and above the clouds there are a series of different lands that revolve periodically. You never know which land you'll emerge into, and there is a constant threat that you could get trapped somewhere strange and hostile forever when the land leaves the top of the tree. It seems like there's a whole lineage of interworld topologies here!

I wonder if part of the appeal for us now is that they reflect a post-internet mentality: our brains have been so altered by continual hyperlinking and jump-cutting from one context to another that a book with one scenario and one context would seem implausibly monotonous.... *XYZT* isn't overtly a technological fiction, and the narrative doesn't particularly depend on the presence of internet technologies. But perhaps, in that sense, the book belongs to a post-internet world.

KA: Fiction, current writing, is maybe going in that direction. Definitely the kind of TV series that I'm enjoying now don't have straightforward linear time and narrative structures. I wonder whether something has changed fundamentally in human tastes for narrative. These days people are more willing to read or watch materials which would have been categorized as 'fringe' works in the eighties or nineties.

The SF aspect is only one component in the book, to get us to where we're going. The real stories are about the characters and the fabric of society in which they are enfolded

XYZT takes place in 2008 and it's interesting to see where we were with tech at that time, and what has changed. But one thing about technology and the SF aspect of *XYZT* is that I'm not a hard SF writer, so when I was approaching this and realised that the mechanism to utilise was this technology that allows characters to move between the US and Iran, I knew I wouldn't be capable of giving that kind of technical detail. The SF aspect is only one component in the book, to get us to where we're going. The real stories are about the characters and the fabric of society in which they are enfolded, and I wanted to include many kinds of stories: there are horror stories, weird tales, love stories, comedies....

RM: There is one particularly important chapter in the book entitled 'Nomadic Fabric: Post-Dashtanistan', but the theme of fabric is something that features throughout the book, and garments and fabric are evidently a language that you relate to strongly and as a mode of experience and of making—material, colour and folds.

KA: Yes, it's something that's a constant interest. I owned a fashion store in New York in the nineties called HOUSE. I designed and produced the clothing—I mean I cut patterns and used a sewing machine and did a lot of silkscreen printing on fabrics, all of which I view as skills used for creating art. HOUSE sold dance music too, and mixtapes, and catered to a wide range of people from the bridge and tunnel crowd to club kids.

Fabric is very important in Middle Eastern cultures. Writing about fabric and what it can do is another skill entirely. In *XYZT* I was exploring how writing about fabric differed from using it physically. How do you describe it, bring it to life via words?

RM: Was HOUSE what you were doing before you moved to Iran?

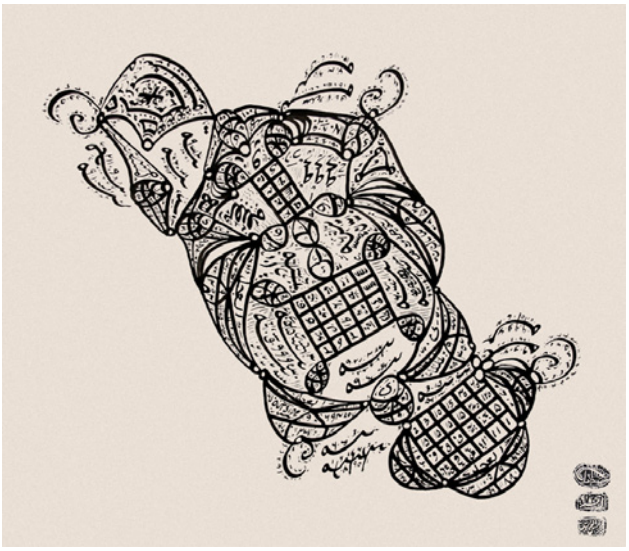
KA: No, I had the store in the East Village for seven years and, you know, it was always a struggle financially, and you saw the cycle of coming up with ideas then having them be mass produced on a larger scale by some major store you couldn't compete with. While it was a great experience and I met a lot of people, since pretty much everyone came through the store at one time or another, after seven years I became burned out, and needed the security of a regular job, so I started working in marketing, doing ads for a major bank. Actually that was a real challenge because you had to be really conservative, but on the other hand I was able to sneak some fun things into it, so it was okay. And from there I moved into events and ultimately ended up managing their philanthropy programme.

During that period I started a project that ran for the three years before I left for Iran, when I was commuting every day. I went to work, for three years and the first year the work documented my commute to work, and then something that happened during the day at work, and then commute home. All of my work has to do with documenting, and what I wanted to do was to capture some kind of experience that happened that day. Those were oil paintings and it was a big challenge, it was exhausting, every day I'd have to come home from work, and I would have to paint something that had happened that day—and sometimes you'd have ten things that were exciting, and some days you'd have nothing. But what I really wanted to see over time was my experience as a woman working in the corporate world, I was interested in repetition and how these paintings would translate over time.

But yes, fabric is a medium I feel particularly comfortable with, I've used it throughout my life, and it also comes out in *XYZT*.

RM: While in Iran you also worked on several visual art projects in Iran using fabrics.

KA: My purpose when I left the US was to work full time on artistic projects, but in Iran I quickly learned that traditional Western materials such as oil paints or whatever were not really available. And so I started to look at what other kinds of materials were available that I could use, and that's how I got interested in chador fabric and nomadic fabric, starting to think about these things from a material perspective. I was doing a lot of photography, then using fabrics, and I also became interested in using ink, calligraphy.



Abjad 9 no. 4, 2008

The *Nomadic Chador* and *Spell Chador* projects were thinking about how these garments could be utilized for different kinds of structures. Should all women just suddenly decide, not to reject it, but to change the way they were wearing the garment, should they take it off or restructure it in some way other than what's normal in the current social environment, then what could this do to the social and political structure of the country? For Iranian women these veils and these fabrics have such a traditional, ingrained purpose and place in the culture,

Nomadic Chador Orange and Green, 2008

Nomadic Chador Pink, 2007

Nonad *solo exhibition, Azad Gallery, Tehran, 2008*

Spell Chador, 2008

that when you start to shift them, to utilise the materials in a different way, no one knows what the ramifications might be.

The *Nomadic Chadors* were made in a structure of nine, in a different structure than the way they're regularly produced, and using the kinds of nomadic fabric described in that chapter of *XYZT*, material that is colourful and sequinned and inherently womanly, instead of the state's plain black fabric. So what kind of catalyst could these altered structures be? What would it feel like for a woman to wear one of these as opposed to the traditional chador, or if a group of women did that together, how that would work within the environment and also socially?

For the *Spell Chadors* I took scraps of black fabric collected from the shops that sew chadors in the bazaars and created talismans on them—some with paint, some stitched, and others with slashes or holes. Each of those chadors consisted of around 100 spells that were all sewn together into a garment. I was playing around with the idea that talismans could act as accelerating components short-circuiting the natural or ordinary system of causation and possibly be vehicles for departing from the established order or cause.

It was really interesting to show the work in Tehran. The way the chadors were shown there was very loose and open, making it possible to walk around them. I really would have liked to have seen them worn as well but it remained at the conceptual level. I didn't quite know what the response would be from individuals, the art community, the general community, and the Iranian authorities, but the response was one of curiosity and interest. What was really weird was that the main government news channel in Iran put out a positive release about the show, which I thought was exciting!

RM: While avoiding heavy-handed political commentary, at several points *XYZT* touches on the question of the veil and women's position in the culture in Iran. What was your experience of that, from interactions and conversations you had with women in Iran?

KA: I was interested in learning about the 'veil', and it was a question a lot of people asked me before I left. I'm a person who needs to experience something to really understand it, and I went into it with an open mind, knowing that was going to be something I would have to deal with there. I did wear the veil in public. I learned that it is not usually worn in private. I remember one time when my veil had fallen off when I was out in public, I was just walking around for a long time and people were looking at me, but no one said anything!

The veil has so many connotations in terms of politics and women's rights, but from the perspective of a physical garment, it actually proved helpful in terms of being out in the hot environment. I wouldn't have worn it if I didn't have to, and I was certainly thrilled to no longer have to wear it when I left Iran. But I learned personally how I dealt with it and I also learned from many women there about their choices in terms of why they would or would not wear it if they had a choice.

For Iranian women these veils and these fabrics have such a traditional, ingrained purpose and place in the culture, that when you start to shift them, to utilise the materials in a different way, no one knows what the ramifications might be

RM: It wasn't always the case that they would choose *not*?

KA: Exactly. You might wonder why, but that's what I found—it's a layered and complex situation, and it is ultimately a choice that is partly personal, but also has to do with the individual's level of religion and their upbringing. And so for some women it's not a big deal, but for others it is an enforced law, and hence a form of subjugation. On many levels it had to do with families and the kind of situations that women were in there in their home environments. All I can say is that if the choice of wearing the veil was given to women in Iran, some would definitely wear it and some wouldn't. Of course, in the past and in recent history, the prohibition on wearing a veil and then the mandating of it has always come from the government. Women had no choice in the matter.

My preconceptions of what the veil is were tied obviously to feminism and to all sorts of pre-existing notions. But the reality is, when you're there you're interacting in a one-on-one situation, you are trying to understand where everyone is within their own reality.

RM: You mentioned how others reacted to your plans to move to Iran—tell us a little about that decision, about the expectations and the reality.

KA: As I said, I had been in this corporate job, and the job was all-encompassing, I was working long hours, I didn't have time to do what I wanted to do personally—and then the opportunity came out of the blue for me to leave that and to work on my art and the writing and to explore things and experiences that I hadn't before. I had been to Turkey multiple times to meet with Reza, and I wanted Reza to come to the US but that wasn't going to happen quickly. And so in order to be with him this was the only way. But it's really an opportunity that no one can turn down, or I can't imagine anyone wanting to

turn it down. For me it was, as it would probably be for anyone, a frightening proposition, when you quit your job and sell all of your things and your house and you leave...and there was a definite extra level of risk, or at least perceived risk, because I was going to Iran, which everyone told me was a very scary place. And then even after making the decision I had to work extensively to get a visa to get into Iran, when I had already quit my job, so basically my whole life was on the line because I had made the commitment, but actually getting access wasn't that simple.

The thing is, I'm a risk taker, and it was something I felt I needed to experience, the opportunity to be able to expand myself and my work was too great for me to turn down. When I left the US I wasn't just going off for a tour, I was going to live there permanently. But in the end it just was not conducive for either of us to stay. I went to Iran with the intention to settle there, to buy a house and live there permanently. Eventually Reza and I made the decision not to stay because of the political turbulence. Then we were in Malaysia, but the political situation and instability there were actually probably worse than in Iran. And that didn't make sense either.

I had only positive experiences. But before I left everyone thought I was crazy

My overriding impression of Iran is just how wonderful the country is, the culture, and the people there especially, extremely generous and very curious and open to foreigners. I had only positive experiences. But before I left everyone thought I was crazy, someone said I should go to Beirut instead... others said I'd be coming back in a body bag! But the Iranians always treated me very well. The whole time I was there, I knew without a doubt that if I ever needed anything all I needed to do was ask. If I was lost or hungry or needed a place to stay, a simple ask on the street was all that was needed. I would be invited into a total stranger's home and cared for by the family. In fact, Iranians would go out of their way to make me comfortable at any cost. I always wondered if it would be the same if an Iranian knocked on a door in the US in need of help. I don't think the response would always be so favourable.

There is always the question of the government and, for me, a feeling that there was some kind of erraticness or potential threat, in terms of not knowing what might happen, that something could happen at any moment—not necessarily in terms of my safety but more in terms of the government in general. That was always 'there' but I never really felt it was personally threatening to me.

RM: In *XYZT* there's a strong sensory element, with the fabrics, food, colour, and moments of sensory overload that occur throughout the stories, giving an impression of how it is to experience a culture that's very different to your own. Was it an overwhelming experience or did you quickly find familiar reference points?

KA: It was obviously really overwhelming at first, and the thing about my experience in Iran was that many things are the opposite of what they are in the States, many things are very similar—and you could never tell which would be the case, so you could never take anything for what you thought it might be. It was as if I was a child, just learning how things operated.

I wasn't always very good at 'behaving', and of course every American has their opinions! But the people I interacted with were invariably as curious about me as I was about them, and when I observed differences I always tried to share my observations, I always tried to be open, and I quickly started to feel at home and at ease in that environment. And in *XYZT* I really wanted to share these subtleties, not only the differences but also the strange similarities or unexpected connections. That's why, in *XYZT*, as a chapter begins you aren't always sure where you are, because sometimes in Iran things can be deceptively similar to the US, radically different, or connected in unexpected ways, far more complex than the us vs. them scenario.

RM: Many parts of *XYZT* explore this strange fabric of common references: elements of stories that are familiar to both cultures, from folk tale tropes to *Grand Theft Auto*, along with Western products, from Axe deodorant to Happy Meals—albeit there is more cross-cultural awareness on the Iranian side, since most Americans know very little of Iran.

That brings us to the perhaps inevitable question of the representation of other cultures. As well as unexpectedly diverging from them at points, *XYZT* plays quite freely with cultural stereotypes and expectations, or at least it doesn't studiously avoid them. There are irresistible comparisons between *XYZT* and some of the great treasuries of exoticism—you already mentioned the *Thousand and One Nights*—and there is certainly no attempt to downplay those elements or apologise for them.

KA: Sure, I would agree that it's not a PC book! And I can't really worry about it because I can only relay the experiences I had, and I was there for a lengthy amount of time. It's not as if I was just there for a short time to get the exotic tourist experience and then leave.

Many of the experiences I had were totally strange to me. But, you know, I could easily have gone to France and had similar kinds of encounters. And as a person you can only relay your experience. This is no different than, say, when an Iranian comes to the West. I mean, Reza told me that he had always thought that America was a great cradle of civilization where everyone is a philosopher, but when he finally made it here he soon realized that was a fantasy. Having these fantasies is all right, so long as you're willing to accept the reality behind them.

RM: This is reflected in the book too: the idea that in some sense, because there's a barrier, because there's a difficulty of access, both sides dream each other as counterfactuals, as possibilities for change. There could be two questions here: firstly, exoticism, the perception of a culture as distant, its fictionalising as a site rich in mystery and otherness, and the suspicion that these fictions reflecting more about the writer's crypto-colonialist impulses than about the reality. But you've already described how rather than radical otherness you saw a complex mesh of similarities and differences, and *XYZT* seems more about cross-contamination.

The other question would be orientalism, making 'Eastern' cultures the subject of some kind of scholarly study in order to deliver them to a Western gaze. And indeed *XYZT* could be described as a kind of non-standard anthropology or ethnography.

There is plenty exotic about Iranian culture—and it's not as if Iranians will go out of their way to deny it

KA: There is plenty exotic about Iranian culture—and it's not as if Iranians will go out of their way to deny it. On many occasions, when I talked to my Iranian friends they defended the idea of exoticism as way to bring about mutual recognition. All the things I include in *XYZT* are compelling for them too, it comes from their long history, they're proud to tell you about their demons, about druj-nasu, and all of that. So when you communicate with people, straight away you're entangled with this kind of collective experience.

And you know, what's really interesting is that, being in Iran and experiencing it and talking with people there, these were not questions we even had to worry about because we were just living our daily life. It wasn't until we come back to the States that I'm sharing this with groups or individuals and they're very quick to point these things out or to call something orientalist.

RM: Not to mention that *XYZT* also contains the perspectives of many other beings apart from Americans and Iranians, including deathstalker scorpions, Lulubians, deavs, and boars....

KA: Right! Like *Panchatantra*, everyone gets a voice at the end of the day.

RM: Most Urbanomic readers will probably already know that Reza, the original reason for your departing the US for Iran, is none other than Reza Negarestani, author of *Cyclonopedia*, a book for which you wrote a fictional introduction. One question that has inevitably cropped up already has been whether there are links between *XYZT* and your contribution to *Cyclonopedia*.

KA: For *Cyclonopedia* I was working with Reza and we wanted to introduce another malfunctioning author or unreliable narrator into the book, so that's how the introduction came to be. There may be some connections, apart from the fact that they are both tied to the Middle East, but it's really up to the reader to find them....

RM: I do remember that in *Cyclonopedia*, inside the box in the hotel room there's an inventory: 'A thick piece of writing titled *Cyclonopedia* [...] Business card for a computer repair shop [...] Box with bracelet inside....'!

KA: It's not the same kind of bracelet! But we planted so many clues in *Cyclonopedia*; there's a bigger aspect to this that we didn't share, people still haven't discovered them. I've also heard that some people think that Reza's the writer of *XYZT*!

RM: Well, at one time I seem to remember the great rumour was that Reza was actually me; I've also seen it mentioned in print that so-called 'Kristen Alvanson' may in fact be the real author of *Cyclonopedia*, so who knows.... Do you imagine *XYZT* having any particular overall effect now it is out there in the world?

My work is documentary, and the reason to share this was to give people a better understanding of individuals in the two countries and to describe these nuances

KA: Well, the whole aim of this book from the very beginning was to be able to share information. Again, my work is documentary, and the reason to share this was to give people a better understanding of individuals in the two countries and to describe these nuances that people don't know about. But I didn't want to do something like a CNN documentary or a piece of literary fiction about my life or the life of others. I wanted to create a situation where I could bring out these subtleties through commonplace and even sometimes mundane cultural elements that are already there. And I felt like I should do this because I was placed in a situation—I placed myself in a situation—where I had an access to information and experiences that not many people get.

RM: And how do you anticipate individual readers reacting to the book?

KA: One thing I learned from *Cyclonopedia*, and also from people reading *XYZT* before it was published, is that readers take components of the book and they relate and make connections themselves and they can utilise it, it's fascinating to me to see how different people pick up on different aspects. For me that means the book's working in the way I'm hoping in terms of being valuable to readers in whatever way they want.