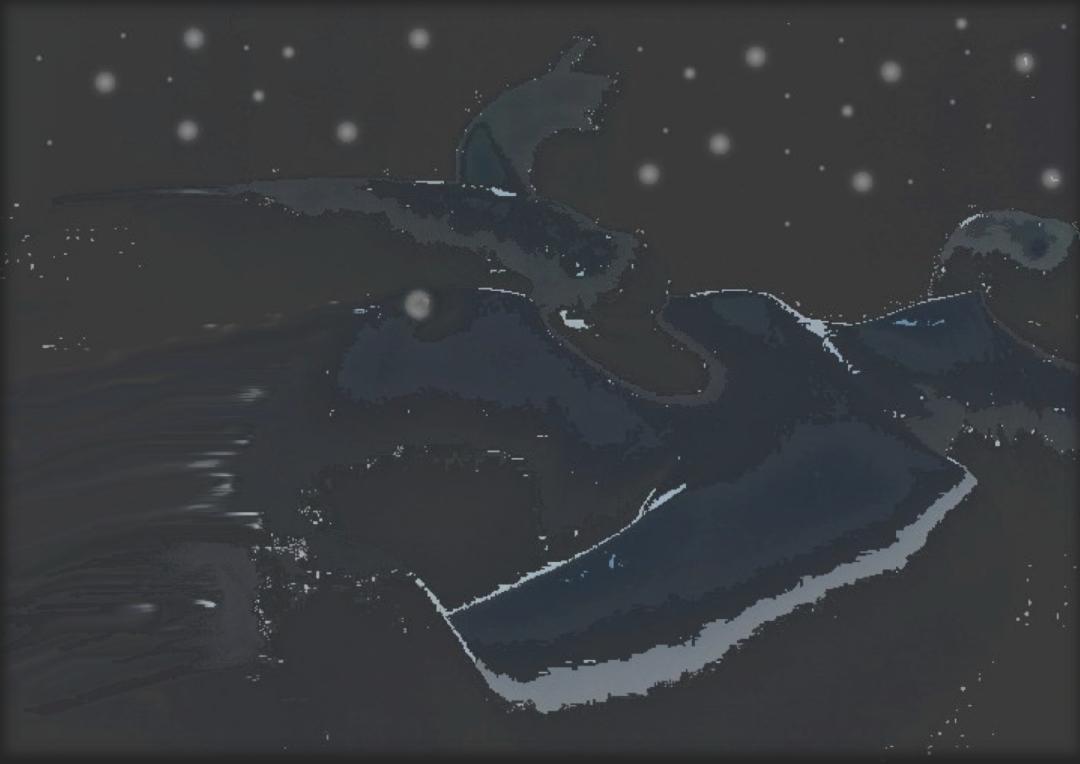


ALIENOCENE – THEORY/FICTION

ALIENS WITHOUT FORMS



SARAH ANN WELLS

Aliens without Forms

What can alien sex teach us? (And what is this “us,” anyway?)

I am interested in erotic, interspecies, extra-terrestrial encounters. These alien encounters often take place among creatures whose forms are difficult for the mind to grasp. The backdrop is often a disaster that has left this planet inhabitable: an extreme setting to explore the limits of sex.

My guides are feminist science fiction (SF) writers like Octavia Butler and James Tiptree, Jr. — and two stories, in particular, “Bloodchild” and “Love is the Plan the Plan is Death.” Since at least the 1970s, feminist SF has imagined mutant forms of kinship. It is particularly drawn to grotesque anomalies: bodies that seem unthinkable, resulting in encounters that nevertheless feel fleshy, graphic, and pungent. Through these bodies it traces the limits of identities — national, species, hetero — subtending a great deal of SF.¹ At times, it can also journey quite far from the erotophobia of the world from which it emerges, with its historically shifting but still chronic fear of impure bodies and mixed messages.

Erotic aliens provoke because they are both difficult to picture and somehow extraordinarily vivid. Their forms and physiognomies reach us through fragments; they cohere only with difficulty. The Tlic of Butler’s “Bloodchild” are “cool velvet, deceptively soft,” with “long, velvet undersides,” but also claws and stingers. Motion temporarily brings into focus their supple insect-/amphibian-/eel-like existence; the narrator’s (and reader’s) ability to apprehend the alien body as a unit, if a protean one. They “surge”: a verb that connotes liquid like waves or blood, but also electricity; they “flow.” We are told they were originally referred to by humans in derogatory fashion as “worms.” But they can rise up, make their

¹ Paradigmatically in the space opera, itself an offshoot of the Western’s macho homosociability. Or in technohorror’s anxious masculinity (the sex mutants of David Cronenberg or Harlan Ellison). Or as in the sadistic patriarch of Wells’ Dr. Moreau, stitching together his grotesque mutants from living animals.

bodies into hills and mounds: they seem to shape-shift before our eyes. (Their own eyes are yellow, and can see in the dark.) They have ovipositors for depositing eggs. They are multi-hued, depending on which animal hosts their larvae. And they have highly efficient and frequently deployed tongues. (As in her last book, *Fledgling*, Butler is interested in the tongues as vehicles for interspecies encounters.) We piece together the Tlic from what we know of earthly animals: here is a centipede, there a cat, an axolotl. But they are none of these exactly.

In Tiptree's "Love is the Plan," the first-person narrator is neither named nor human. He is a difficult-to-picture creature who falls in love with another, equally shape-shifting one. Like the Tlic of "Bloodchild," and like so many of our aliens, he resembles an insect, here exploded into B-movie size. Yet he is not an insect. Readers have alternately described him as "giant bug," an "alien," "a cross between a tarantula and a rhino." His species is large and black and marked by hyperbolic protuberances ("eye-turrets"; "purple-black throat sacs"; "horned and bossed"), spurs that "glitter" and "rattle"; and, perhaps most intriguingly, "special hands" that emerge only sometimes. As with the Tlic, we are dealing with a highly expressive body, as non-human animals tend to possess: extremities perk up and tremble, armor swivels; they swell, rattle, boom. It is also unclear where we are — on earth, another planet? — so he could be an alien, mutant, or extinct species. We encounter a vivid composite that leaves us guessing, our brain grasping to fill in the gaps.

Cinema must display its aliens, and labors intensively to do so. It may do so by indirection (e.g., off-screen space, fast cutting), but ultimately there is always a body made available to the viewer. This process of rendering tends to invite psychoanalytic readings, as though making a body visible and audible necessarily conscripted it into that narrow drama. Paradigmatically, the bad mother/*vagina dentata* of Giger/Ridley Scott's *Alien*. Or, more recently, the organic machine of slithering, penetrative tentacles in Amat Escalante's *La región salvaje* (*The Untamed*, Mexico, 2016). Escalante's stunning film offers twists on the family drama in designing an unforgettably obscene alien, equally given to hyperbolic pleasure and lacerating death. The images of these phallic/abject aliens burn themselves into our brains. In contrast, language's ability is to make

us see metaphorically, while impeding us from fully seeing. The language of alien sex is always self-consciously circumscribed. As language contorts, literature conveys with precision the challenge of imagining sex otherwise.

Tiptree plays with inserting the language of the bodice-ripper, dated soft-core, into the unknown alien bodies. Pushing the prose to an enflamed purple, they are clearly enjoying themselves, but not merely as condescending pastiche.² Part of the story's power comes from the pathos/bathos of a giant alien bug adopting the specific discourse of "bad" writing on sex. The kind of writing a woman might have hid in her bag or under the mattress, long before Kindle and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. But where the focalization/identification is a repulsive and hyperbolically receptive male. As their courtship unfolds, clichés and anomalies, irony and empathy, braid together inseparably. After love at first sight, he pursues her and she fights him off. He repeatedly binds her inside a tenuous love nest, keeping her body under wraps. A stammering, communal language emerges; the two merge into another hybrid form. The colossal alien feels his body move towards deliquescence: "I am all tender jelly."

In the story's last line, the title's meaning is revealed: "Love is the Plan the Plan is Death." The narrator is consumed by the alien he pursued and nurtured. "I am nearly devoured," he says, on the eclipse of his species. Exposing her now-altered body in its entirety — a long, drawn-out striptease — he has reached the denouement, the tipping point of his own destruction. She has grown huge in the process of capture and care; her body has become all gleaming protuberances and thick limbs. The last line is spoken from a sort of non-time of waning consciousness, as she feeds on him. (Maureen Barr's synthesis: "the story of how to be a female alien who murders her gentleman caller and gets away with it.")

In alien sex, long-familiar rites of initiation are turned on their heads: male narrators are 'deflowered' by female aliens and must navigate a mixture of pain, pleasure, and shame. But feminization is not equated with

² In the 1970s James Tiptree, Jr., emerged from the body of Alice Sheldon. This proper name, with its pointedly patrimonial "junior," was a ruse that gave the lie to SF's ostensibly transcendental, implicitly male producers and protagonists. But Tiptree was also a heteronym, a way of trying on different writing selves: Alice Sheldon, her given name; Tiptree, under which she wrote some of her most well-known works; and Raccoona Sheldon, an animal hybrid of her own name.

emasculated here, or with loss. Active/passive, if not radically reversed, operate differently in the alien kingdom. Love here is an infection, both “historical aberration and naturalcultural legacy,” per Haraway. And aberration is etymologically linked to wandering, roaming, deviating from the path, the Plan.

For alien sex writers like Butler and Tiptree, SF’s allure has less to do with identification than with these kinds of deviations, with sites of difficult connection. Butler imagines, for example, an externally-induced, blindingly painful empathy (*Parable of the Sower*); or the tender sadomasochism of interspecies polyamory through the eyes of an androgynous vampire (*Fledgling*). Policing cultural misappropriation or improper sexual alliances is not part of the picture here. This alien sex takes place on and, more precisely, roots within, the body: a site of inscription surfaces but also pockets, interiors, unexpected receptors.

Unusual Accommodations

It was Susan Sontag in “The Pornographic Imagination” (1967) who suggested intriguing parallels between SF and pornography (which she refused to distinguish from the erotic.) Throughout that essay, and often parenthetically, she draws connections between the two low genres. The SF she writes about is resolutely “trash” — we are prior to the genre-eclipsing moment of Kubric’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and prior to the ground-breaking works of a Le Guin or Butler. Her SF is a swaggering genre of “protuberant” spaceships, devoid of literary or cinematic craft. But she finds more interesting, less elitist, parallels, as well. Both SF and porn are denigrated, she says, because of a persistent tendency to equate the human with “round” realism. SF and porn flagrantly abandon this realism, and with it a certain fiction of the human. What ultimately links them for Sontag is their refusal to locate the human at their center, in the case of porn in particular, to opt in to the idea that certain sexual acts are natural or artificial. In their trafficking in “extreme states” and “disorientation, psychic dislocation,” both genres “are only contingently linked with concrete persons.”

The “extreme states” that Sontag locates in both SF and porn are constitutive of the alien encounter. Neither utopic nor dystopic, alien sex places violent injustice alongside the at times painful pleasures of sex. Structural violence and erotic love exist in pointed and queasily close proximity in interspecies love stories. After the graphic-yet-obscure description of an alien body, and before the sex scene, there is often a detailed horror show that moves us from the realm of the “hard to picture” to the “hard to watch”: from a cryptically composite alien to an almost unbearable spectacle of bodies torn apart. Narrators and readers discover the violence of the world they inhabit: a series of kill-rituals, the bloody underbelly of the mutual dependence between passive humans and agentic aliens. This violence is at once void, collective trauma, and portal to the pleasure of sexual coupling. Initially it may be flagged indirectly through euphemism, deixes, truncated hyphens, or ellipses. But it unfolds in unforgettable fragments.

In “Bloodchild,” after an unspecified disaster, humans (“Terrans”) have migrated to another planet where they act simultaneously as partners, surrogates, family members and subalterns to the Tlic. The Tlic depend on Terrans as hosts for their larvae, creatures that burrow inside the warm mammalian environment and will eat their way to the surface, poisoning the hosts if they are not surgically removed. The process involves intense pain and risk on the part of the human/host. In Butler’s imagined division of labor (“my pregnant man story”), men are favored as carriers for the larvae, and women give birth to these future carriers. On this new planet, all humans are now surrogates regardless of race or sex; all are also feminized: split open, precarious, vulnerable. What the narrator comes to know — what he cannot have known until he experiences it in the flesh — is that this lethal worm is also an iteration (the earlier version) of his Tlic partner. The fermenting larvae latent inside his partner; the animal inside himself as human; the larvae itself inside the human. Feminist SF traffics in alien obscenities: in the sense both of that which should not be viewed, but also in the sense of the outer limits of erotic experience, where the autonomous self cannot hold, where personhood and self-contained forms break down.

Alien sex can hold in intriguing abeyance the Hegelian and Oedipal dramas often found lurking in SF. Contrast, for example, Tiptree's narrator's "I am tender jelly" to the "I am a great soft jelly thing" at the end of Harlan Ellison's deservedly famous "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream." For Ellison's narrator there is only existential horror at the (masculine) self's abjection, whereas Tiptree's gives himself over to the form-shattering properties of alien eros.

Before his fatal end Tiptree's narrator is intent on offering an alternative to the drive towards extinction that he finds all around him. "We make our own Plan," he tells her. Can we read this "other Plan" as a *mise-en-abyme* of the possibilities and limits when imagining alien sex? These aliens are in constant search for strategies to mitigate the exploitation seemingly constitutive of interspecies contact, for other uses of the body. So they are interested in the queer imaginary, but they are also invested in its limits: the 'thud' back down to earth. In vulnerable bodies that must accommodate to alien forces but that also open up to that realm of the unusual, thinking from the anomaly.

Alien eros culls up as well problems of property and instrumentalization, of humans' use of themselves and others. These problems are encoded in detailed rituals of submission and subjection, as well as care. Interspecies sex can make us uneasy with its insistent queries, almost always left unanswered: how are we supposed to feel about fundamental asymmetries foregrounded in these relationships? Are they symbiotic, are they parasitic, are they exploitative? How can we ascribe agency or consent here? An alien carefully winds and unwinds his beloved until she devours him. Alien limbs are described as both embracing and encaging humans; probing becomes petting; narcotic eggs are fountains of youth, zones of pleasurable capture, transforming humans into deeply satisfied, and anesthetized, companions. When, in the last line of "Bloodchild," the alien tells the human, "I'll take care of you," we are left to wonder. Is this an invitation to a new, non-instrumentalizing, "useful" relationship among species; or is it merely a new, more finely-tuned means of subjection?

The obscure, anomalous alien body; the vulnerable, devoured male; pregnant patriarchs: Tiptree and Butler work at making sex otherwise, at

making their own plans. Yet it is striking that both stories adhere to clearly-defined pronouns: *he* and *she*. And that both are also deeply invested in depicting biological reproduction along this sex/gender binary. This investment is less a failure of imagination on their part, I think, than a visceral display of the ways in which gender has long persisted as intractable, even in our wildest fantasies. The project is to keep injustice in the frame while also querying its other forms, as Haraway (voracious reader of feminist SF) notes. If, in a phrase attributed to Jameson, it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, these alien encounters reveal that it is easier to imagine interspecies love (or cyborg sex), than a world without gender binaries. In them, biology rubs shoulders with destiny because of the wounds of history.

In his slender definition of the *informe* or formless, Bataille states that it is not merely an adjective but a concept charged with a particular “task”: one “that serves to bring things down in the world.” This is because the world “requires that each thing have a form.” In defiance of this obligation to form, the formless — which Bataille compares to a worm, spider, and spit — upends autonomous identity, as cast in specific shapes, of things and animals. Yve-Alain Bois thus defines the formless as an operation, a mode of circulation that produces given effects. The formless is neither form nor content, theme nor noun. It is rather a means of declassifying — despite efforts to press it into a figure, style, or theme.

What would it mean, then, to read the formless as an operation, rather than figure, in alien eros? We would read the aliens not only through their protean, hard-to-pin-down shapes (their suggestive “jelly”) but also in terms of how they declassify. Less an inversion of hierarchies or a privileging of certain tags of alterity — even especially memorable, imaginative ones like throat-sacs, narcotic stingers, “secret hands” — and more as how human bodies and human sex are defamiliarized here. Aliens are not only their anomalous forms but what they do to humans, how they “bring them down in the world.” In “Bloodchild,” the Tlic instrumentalize humans, who become “convenient, big, warm-blooded animals,” folded “like a coat” over one of the alien’s multiple limbs.

In her pithy “Afterword” to “Bloodchild,” Butler writes of her plan for the story: “Sooner or later, the humans would have to make some kind of accommodation with their um…their hosts. Chances are this would be an unusual accommodation.” It would be, she writes memorably, a tale about humans “paying the rent.” The formless alien that cannot be entirely apprehended is the operation that asks humans to finally pay the rent. At the same time, the alien declassifies human sex in order to allow a momentary glimpse into an unusual accommodation, into attempts (if only ultimately thwarted) to make our own plans.

Inspired By:

The works of Octavia Butler

The works of James Tiptree, Jr., Alice Sheldon, and Racoona Sheldon

And:

Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*

Marleen Barr “The Females do the Fathering!: James Tiptree's Male Matriarchs and Adult Human Gametes”

Georges Bataille, “The Formless”

— *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*

Yve-Alain Bois “To Introduce a User's Guide”

— and Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, Denis Hollier and Helen Molesworth. “The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the “Informe” and the Abject.”

Istvan Csisczery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*

Donna Haraway, “The Companion Species Manifesto”

Rosalind Krauss, “Informe Without Conclusion”

Brooks Landon, *The Aesthetics of Ambivalence: Rethinking Science Fiction Film in the Age of Electronic (Re)Production*

Dominic Pettman, *Creaturally Love: How Desire Makes Us More and Less Human*

Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination”

— “The Imagination of Disaster”

Claudia Springer, *Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Post-Industrial Age*

Darko Suvin, “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre”

Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible’*