

Loving the Other in Science Fiction by Women

By: Karma Waltonen, Ph.D.

Abstract:

This essay interprets fantasy and mythology as the precursor/twin to science fiction, thus arguing societies have long told stories of gender bending, extraterrestrial impregnation, and the problematic eroticization of the “other”. By examining the works of several contemporary female science fiction writers, this essay asks the questions once considered taboo: How does inter-species sex stand in for interracial encounters? Is cyborg sex a logical extension of current cyber-sex practices and the automation of our lives? If power differentials exist in sexual encounters, are the relationships always exploitative, or can they be viewed as symbiotic? Do our traditional family arrangements and sexual taboos still make sense?

Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It* (1991), Johanna Sinisalo’s *Troll: A Love Story* (2000/2003), and Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild” (1984/2005) and *Fledgling* (2005) probe these and other questions. The stories feature both men and women in non-traditional relationships with various “others”—androids, trolls, aliens, and vampires. In doing so, they undermine our preconceived notions of sex, challenging taboos and encouraging us to find new definitions and “norms” as we move further into the new century. As we get swept up in the stories, we find ourselves falling for machines, finding the erotic charge from another species, wondering how much age should matter (on both ends of the spectrum), preparing to carry the eggs of someone we love, overcoming jealousies, rejecting monogamy, and losing ourselves in the forest of the unknown.

Keywords: inter-species sex, relationships, gender, interracial encounters, power, taboo

Ellen Datlow, in the introduction to *Off Limits: Tales of Alien Sex* (2012), argues that science fiction “has traditionally been a bit hesitant about dealing with sexual and gender themes.” If we see fantasy and mythology as the historical precursor and current sibling to science fiction, however, we know that societies have long told stories of gender bending, extraterrestrial impregnation, and the problematic eroticization of the “other”. Contemporary science fiction and fantasy seems finally to be embracing this aspect of the taboo. (Of course, the era of pulp science fiction, largely written and consumed by men, featured alien sex, but these works were not often interested in testing the limits of desire or allegorical discussions of non-heteronormative sexualities.) By examining the works of several contemporary female science fiction writers, we can start asking the questions pertinent to our time: How does inter-species sex stand in for interracial encounters? Is cyborg sex a logical extension of current cyber-sex practices and the automation of our lives? If power differentials exist in sexual encounters, are the relationships always exploitative, or can they be viewed as symbiotic? Do our traditional family arrangements and sexual taboos still make sense?

Four contemporary works probe these and other questions—Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991), Johanna Sinisalo's *Troll: A Love Story* (2003), and Octavia Butler's "*Bloodchild*" (2005a) and *Fledgling* (2005b). The stories feature both men and women in non-traditional relationships with various "others"—androids, trolls, aliens, and vampires. In doing so, they undermine our preconceived notions of sex, encouraging us to find new definitions and "norms" as we move further into the new century.

He, She and It

David Levy, author of *Love and Sex with Robots* (2008), described the history of our understanding of attachment, which includes Bowlby's early theory of maternal deprivation as well as Hazan and Shaver's 1987 connection of romantic love to the attachment process between mother and child. Theorists postulate that attachment history with the mother is reflected in later attachment capacity; Levy uses attachment theory to argue that we will be able to grow romantically attached to our technology as adults if we are surrounded by it as children (Levy, 2008, p. 30). This tendency towards love is perhaps why it is against the law to build a humanoid robot in the world of Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991).

The protagonist of *He, She and It*, Shira, begins the novel by losing a custody battle to a husband she wishes she could have reprogrammed. In this dystopian future, what was once America is now a corpocracy, in which a war is being conducted between corporations and between corporations and townships that wish to remain "free." Shira retreats to her hometown, a Jewish free city, where she is courted by the first successful (and illegal) sentient cyborg, Yod. Although Shira and her grandmother work to socialize Yod, his original creator intended to craft a weapon and orders Yod to kill himself in a suicide attack against a threatening corporation. Yod goes on his mission reluctantly and leaves behind a bomb that kills his creator. At the end of the novel, Shira mourns her one perfect "man" because although she discovered notes that would allow her to resurrect him, she chooses not to do so because she feels the desire "to make a living being who belongs to me as a child never does and never should" (Piercy, 1991, p. 429). The text artfully weaves the futuristic tale with the golem legend of early modern Prague¹ and references Frankenstein's monster, illustrating that human inventions are closely interwoven with the desire to create and the responsibility for one's creation.

Through Shira's growing acceptance of Yod as her lover and partner, we see how attachment theory may work in future applications. Shira acknowledges that, as a child, her talking, sensing, protective house was as real to her as a person. As an adult, she must question the difference between her childhood affection for the house and her adult desire for Yod. Her acceptance of Yod is signaled by her changing pronoun use—first "it," then "him," then "mine." As Levy (2008) explains:

Attachment to a material possession can develop into a stronger relationship as a result of the possession's repeated use and the owner's interaction with it. This phenomenon is known as 'material possession attachment' [...] The computer is no longer simply *a* computer, it quickly becomes *my* computer. Not so much 'my' in the sense of its being

¹ According to folklore, a Jewish Rabbi created a humanoid creature of clay and gave it life by inserting a tablet with a written magic phrase into its mouth. The golem worked tirelessly and never needed to rest, eat, or drink. The rabbi had to deactivate it by removing the tablet from its mouth every Sabbath day or else it would go berserk.

owned by me, but more in the sense of its being the particular computer with which I associate myself, the one that I feel is part of my being (p. 28).

Levy would likely argue that Shira is predisposed to accept Yod as a romantic partner, despite her initial reservations, due to her attachment to technology during childhood. Her grandmother's home has a house computer that monitors its residents, talks, plays games with children, delivers messages, etc. As Shira's grandmother is a programmer, her house computer has even more personality than most, leading to a greater sense of identity. The house is even able to display a bias against Yod—it frequently reminds Shira that Yod is not human and should not be allowed to look human, act human, or engage in human activities.

These kinds of arguments encourage the audience to consider one of the primary themes of the book—freedom. Shira's town wants to remain free just as Prague's Jews wanted to be free of persecution. Shira wants to be free to see her son even a corporation has the power to take him from her. Yod wants to be free to choose not to be a weapon.

In the first moment Shira sees a prototype of a humanoid robot as a young girl, she makes a distinction between worker-robots and this new being:

Robots cleaned streets and the houses of those who could afford them, fixed everything from pipes to vehicles, did the general dirty work. Middle-class kids grew up with at least one toy robot, and rich kids had fancy ones to ride on or play with, but this was a strange humanoid robot. (Piercy, 1991, p. 46)

In *He, She, and It*, Yod hears a story about a golem who also wants the freedom to love women and to choose a destiny that its makers have denied it. Sentience distinguishes the golem in the story and Yod from other tools. Yod sees sentience as the reason why he must destroy himself and his creator: "A weapon should not be conscious. A weapon should not have the capacity to suffer for what it does, to regret, to feel guilt" (Piercy, 1991, p. 415).

The distinction between Yod and the other robots is not clear, however. He is humanoid in appearance and has biological components, but he is not alone in having sentience, since Shira's grandmother's house is also sentient. Yod's form is illegal, and because corporations want him as their own cyborg, he becomes a danger to his home city. In fact, the corporations want him so badly that they orchestrate Shira's custody problems and her return home so that they can try to take him. Shira also notes that Yod is not that different from the humans in the book, who, due to their numerous implants, could all arguably be called cyborgs (although they are less programmable).

Yod is weapon, lover, and would-be stepfather, but the message in the book is that no one should be controlled by another. Shira, though tempted, does not make a new Yod: "She could not manufacture a being to serve her, even in love" (Piercy, 1991, p. 428); "She had set him free" (Piercy, 1991, p. 429).

The theme of freedom is also reinforced by Shira's sexual release with Yod. Shira experienced a passionate first love, but has since felt disinterested. This relationship with a cyborg changes her:

Making love with Yod made her feel strong [...] He pleased her. She no longer ever doubted he would. She seemed to please him. He was not changeable. He would not tomorrow decide she was not good enough or that he wanted someone else instead. He had the reliability of a well-designed machine that, as long as it worked, would do what it was supposed to. But that was unfair, because he was far more sensitive to her

desires and responses than any man she had been with, the most unmechanical in his lovemaking. (Piercy, 1991, p. 322)

Although the central problem of *He, She, and It* is whether Shira can love Yod (and then whether their relationship can withstand the corporate onslaught), the book also raises other issues of sexuality. Shira's mother is a lesbian who conceived via artificial insemination.² In learning more about her mother, Shira must come to terms with family secrets and with what our relationships with our family mean about us. She must also resolve her haunting childhood love with a close childhood friend, which ended badly many years earlier, as well as the lingering jealousies it created in her.

Shira must also accept that Yod's first lover was her own grandmother, Malkah. Malkah, in fact, is the most sexually intriguing character in the book. While she did not fall *in* love with Yod, she does love Yod and never seemed to have the reservations Shira did about seeing him as a person. Malkah is open about her sexual past and present—having taken many lovers—and refuses to tie herself to any one person. As she is now older, we are treated to the way she still flirts via her various avatars on the net, gender-bending at will. She also discusses sex as an older woman, providing a nice complement to the frank discussion of the frenetic teenage sex Shira enjoyed as a young woman.

In his interview on *The Colbert Report* (Hoskinson, 2008), David Levy predicted that we would be having sex with robots within five years and that love will come later. As far as I know, this has not yet truly happened, though the concept appears in many science fiction pieces, including the television series *Humans* (2015). However, the world Piercy creates seems closer to our own every day. Perhaps one day we will see the logical progression of our attachment to technology, leading to a new social catchphrase—once you go bot, you never go back.

Troll: A Love Story

We return to the present in Johanna Sinisalo's *Troll: A Love Story* (2003), in which Mikael (nicknamed Angel), falls in love with a young troll.³ Angel rescues and cares for the troll he names Pessi, a name originating from an old Finnish fairy tale. He loves the animal like a pet and is surprised when he has an erotic reaction to its touch. Angel resists the eroticism, first trying to free Pessi and then sublimating this desire through sex with two human males who pursue Angel's affections. Angel discovers that Pessi emits powerful pheromones and that he (Angel) is prepared to choose Pessi over his former heart's desire, the elusive, heterosexual Martes. This conflict of interests, however, does not come to a head until Pessi becomes lethally violent while defending their home from "strange males." Angel takes the troll into the forest to protect them both, but there he discovers a larger troll community. Through a combination of Pessi's pheromones and the larger trolls' mastery of stolen human weapons, Angel becomes a figurative and literal prisoner of the troll community.

Issues of exploitation and power suffuse the book. Angel's fears about the inappropriate nature of his desire underline the possible exploitative nature of the relationship with Pessi, though the ending shows that the power has always been unbalanced in the other direction.

² Within the world of the book, homosexuality and polyamory are common, but we should remember that 1991 was a long time ago in terms of the social sexual history of the United States and thus that the future world of the book was more shocking at the time of publication.

³ Within the world of *He, She, and It*, trolls are a rare, endangered species.

The reader, however, understands why Angel is so reluctant to acknowledge his attraction to Pessi. His first sexual encounter is unintentional and is immediately followed by regret and shame:

He bounces straight onto my lap on the sofa and wraps himself into a ball on my knees [...] He's lazily cleaning the blood from the corners of his mouth, when, hardly knowing what I'm doing, I draw him a little closer to me, just a little and ever so cautiously—and the moment his hot back touches my belly I ejaculate like a volcano. (Sinisalo, 2003, pp. 135-136)

However, when Angel tries to send Pessi back into the forest, he realizes that life in his heated apartment has caused Pessi to lose his winter coat, leaving him too vulnerable to the elements. Angel's solution is then to transfer his desire to the men pursuing him, although he knows he's using them: "Just now I want something so badly it hurts, and so I don't care whom I harm or how much" (Sinisalo, 2003, p. 124).

Thus, both the inter-species and intra-species relationships in this text are exposed as inherently exploitative, as love is defined as possession rather than connection. Both of Angel's lovers express their desire for him in much the same way he expresses it for Pessi. Martes also uses his knowledge of Angel's attraction to him to manipulate Angel in their business relationship (and seems to receive an erotic stimulation from his power over Angel).

Exploitative relationships are also seen with Angel's neighbor, Palomita, who is a mail-order bride to a possessive, abusive husband. Palomita is from the Philippines and left her home believing she was going to be a nurse. Trafficked into marriage, she lives locked in her new home in a country whose language she does not understand, forced to use contraception because her husband does not want children, and forced to engage in sadomasochistic play because that her husband's whim. Palomita at one point comes across the advertisement that portrayed her and led her husband to buy her. This somewhat parallels Pessi's experience, as Angel uses Pessi in an advertisement, taking pictures of Pessi in jeans in order to sell the denim. While the ad campaign is a success, Pessi reacts badly to the pictures, and Angel is aware that he exploited the creature.

Angel's understanding of Pessi's intelligence grows. Pessi builds cairns and paints on the wall. Our ultimate understanding of the trolls is that they are arming themselves against humans—and taking Angel prisoner—as a reaction to human encroachment of their territories. As one character notes earlier in the text, "we won't recognize the chimpanzee as a person until it rises up against us in rebellion" (Sinisalo, 2003, p. 225). Notably, on the very next page, Palomita says, "And I can't rise up against Pentti. It's impossible. It's forbidden. A woman doesn't abandon" (Sinisalo, 2003, p. 226). Palomita, as an immigrant and a woman, is contrasted with other species, illustrating significant power imbalances.

The majority of the characters, as we've seen, are marginalized figures—endangered species, trafficked immigrants, and gay men. By focusing on these characters, the author both normalizes the world of those who are usually submissive (and ignored) and allows us to consider their position relative to those who usually occupy the more powerful and central position. One character, when commenting on a straight woman at a gay bar, notes the gay men avoid her:

Someone might argue we're zoo animals for her. But I've another theory. For her, we're noble savages, a kind of gray area outside the respectable, minutely organized

community, an untamed wilderness it takes a lot of guts to step into. (Sinisalo, 2003, p. 107)

The gay bar, then, is a “neutral zone” where straight and gay might meet.

Troll: A Love Story manifests these spaces, switching not only between different points of view, but also including parts of Finnish histories and fairy tales. The novel even directs readers to a made-up entry on a real Finnish website about the natural world, which explains that trolls were discovered in 1907: “Before then [they were] assumed to be a mythical creature of folklore and fairy tale” (Sinisalo, 2003, p. 10). While this text could easily play on folklore positing that trolls are closely related to humans, it reminds us several times that the “real” trolls in this world are actually closer to cats. However, the majority of the imagery in both the main narrative and the intertexts emphasizes the demonic association with trolls. For example, we have a passage from Iivari Kemppinen’s *Finnish Mythology* (1960), which discusses “demonized animals” like trolls (cited in Sinisalo, 2003, p. 20).

It is not coincidental, of course, that Mikael is our Angel, and Pessi is our Demon. Nor is it a coincidence, according to one character, that one kind of relationship to animals has been demonized: “As soon as the god of Israel took over the reins, animals were no longer permitted to serve as gods, and all other ritualistic connections between the species, including sex, were excised” (Sinisalo, 2003, p. 225). As the book questions the binary between Angel and Pessi, human and troll, civilized and not, subject and abject, we find ourselves at the edge of the forest, in a liminal space where all obsession is problematic, where power is the determining factor, where love seems to be missing, and where pheromones might destroy us. Angel is right to worry: “I’ve locked him in here. I’ve tried to capture part of the forest, and now the forest has captured me” (Sinisalo, 2003, p. 166).

Bloodchild

Octavia Butler’s award winning short story “Bloodchild” can also be read as an exploration of exploitation. A group of humans has traveled across the galaxy and colonized an alien planet ruled by a species of large insects. The humans barter for the opportunity to stay by allowing their bodies to serve as hosts for the grubs of the aliens. To protect the breeding potential of the human women, human males are typically “impregnated” and suffer the same dangers of birth that women do. This particular story is about a human, Gan, who has been promised to an alien, T’Gatoi, by his mother. T’Gatoi has been a part of his life since birth, and he develops an attachment to her, but he is reluctant to put his body in danger.

Many critics read the story as a slavery parable, but Butler disagrees, calling this her “pregnant man story [...] I wanted to see if I could write a dramatic story of a man becoming pregnant as an act of love—choosing pregnancy in spite of as well as because of surrounding difficulties” (Butler, 2005a, p. 30). Indeed, the male pregnancy story provides an opportunity to look at male/female relationships anew. To what extent have women “chosen” or been promised in marriage to protect themselves, even though the relationship carries risk? How many of us could mirror Gan’s thoughts about watching a violent birth? “The whole procedure was wrong, alien. I wouldn’t have thought anything about her could seem alien to me” (Butler, 2005a, p. 17).

Gan sees a birth that goes wrong and fears his looming future as a mate. This fear is common enough for anyone who might one day give birth, but the story emphasizes that there is great danger in a birth that goes wrong for these humans, as the grubs would begin to eat

their human host to escape. Gan, however, understands better than most how things work on their new planet. T'Gatoi is a politician. She is on the side of the humans—wanting them to be able to “choose” to procreate and to live on preserves as a subclass of species rather than as simple breeding animals. Humans enjoy the longevity given by unfertilized eggs, but they are not permitted to have weapons in their preserves. Gan is not only “promised” to T'Gatoi, we might also see them as related—she was taken out of his father’s body, making them somewhat siblings. However, T'Gatoi is his mother’s friend and is more like an aunt or a mother:

sometime before my older sister was born, my mother promised T'Gatoi one of her children. She would have to give one of us to someone, and she preferred T'Gatoi to some stranger[...] I was first caged in within T'Gatoi’s many limbs only three minutes after my birth. (Butler, 2005a, p. 8)

After seeing the violent birth, Gan gets the gun the family keeps hidden and considers using it on himself. He also considers having T'Gatoi impregnate his sister instead of himself. Yet Gan ultimately chooses to keep his promise to his intended, after she agrees to let him keep his gun, displaying mutual trust in each other:

“But you came to me [...] to save [your sister.]”

“Yes [...] And to keep you for myself,” I said. It was so. I didn’t understand it, but it was so.

She made a soft hum of contentment. “I couldn’t believe I had made such a mistake with you,” she said. “I chose you. I believed you had grown to choose me.” (Butler, 2005a, p. 28)

It is here that “motherhood” has become a “choice” and this is where we explore the line between choice and coercion.

Fledgling

Butler’s last novel, *Fledgling* (2005b), explores the terrain of choice in more detail. A vampire, Shori, wakes from a violent attack of amnesia. In exploring why her family was killed, she discovers what it means to be a vampire, a separate species living in relative secrecy separate from the human majority. Although Shori will one day propagate with a group of vampire brothers, to survive, she needs to form a community of at least eight human symbionts to sustain herself. The humans will live longer and be healthier due to her saliva, but they also become physically addicted to it. Shori is careful to ask her would-be symbionts to choose this relationship before they are unable to leave her. Humans entering into the relationship are confronted with not only an alien relationship with Shori, but with each other, as they are in a polyamorous relationship and jealousies must be overcome. The book also interrogates heteronormative and ageist assumptions, as Shori is polysexual and blind to the notion that partners should be of a common age.

The text has been criticized because Shori, although over fifty years old, looks like a child. Thus, the “visible,” though not actual “precociousness”, has led some to see this book as child pornography. Shori, however, is not a child. She is intelligent, mature, sexual, and very much stronger than those around her. Her physical form does nothing to detract from the power she has over her symbionts. Although Shori is adamant about respecting her “family,” the relationship is unbalanced because she is the matriarch.

Shori is also part African-American and faces prejudice at the hands of older, more “traditional” vampires, who see her as an aberration. As they attempt to eradicate her, she must fight against racism and rankism masked as “tradition”, in favor of a postmodern identity rooted in scientific understandings of biological evolution, equality, and multicultural pluralism. Shori is a constructed vampire—her genes have been spliced with those of another species—humans. Specifically, Shori was made black in an attempt to allow her to withstand the sun and to be able to be awake at day. Those sympathetic to her family see her as a miracle and as an evolutionary advantage, especially after she saves them from daytime attacks. Another family is disgusted by Shori, believing her to be a “mongrel,” both for the small part of her that is human and for the visible blackness of her skin. This is why they attempted to kill her entire family, leaving her wounded and without memories. A modern audience is unlikely to find Shori’s race or humanity disturbing because one can easily side against the racist and species-ist vampires in the novel. The novel, however, also explores issues that are likely to make modern audiences squeamish and to force them to question the other –isms that are, at present, more socially acceptable than racism: ageism, rankism, deeply rooted sexism, heternormativity, etc.

Shori, as I’ve noted, appears to be much younger than she is. When she wakes and meets her first partner, Wright, he thinks she is an eight-year old child. She bites him and seduces him, even though he protests that something doesn’t seem right about her adult desires: “You’re a vampire, you know [...] And you’re way too young [...] Jailbait. Super jailbait” (Butler, 2005b, p. 18). The first sex scene comes before the reader is assured that Shori is actually in her fifties, and that although she is on the edge of vampire-timed fertility, she has had sex with her human symbionts for decades. Shori’s age is not much of an issue as the novel progresses. Her father reassures Wright: “Once you’re living with us, there will be no need to hide. And to us, there is nothing improper about your relationship” (Butler, 2005b, p. 74). When characters who live in the vampire world note her appearance, they most often comment on her height. Perhaps due to her human DNA, she is very short for a vampire her age. However, age becomes an issue again when Shori chooses her second partner, a much older woman with grown children. Shori and her new lover are probably the same age, but many other vampires and symbionts note that an older woman is an odd choice for a young vampire—for any vampire, really. Symbionts are usually chosen when they’re relatively young and then enjoy a very long life with their host vampires.

Shori also breaks the bounds of human propriety when she takes her father’s lovers and symbionts as her own. She does so not because she wants them (they don’t want her either), but because the two women, who escaped from the massacre by being out of town during the attack, will literally die without the vampire saliva their bodies now need to survive. Her decision to take the women as her own, while distasteful even to her (though not for the same reasons it might disturb us), is to save their lives and to care for them as her father would have done.

As Shori tries to learn what it means to be a vampire, she hears different theories about how her species came to be, ways to exist in a mostly human world, and her responsibilities in her relationships with humans and other vampires. She must relearn what it means to be a matriarch. In the vampire world, the sexes must live separately, especially once adulthood is reached. Shori thus lived with her mother before the massacre. Females and males will meet to mate, but their mating hormones are too powerful and distracting for day to day life. Thus,

Shori's adult community will always be a matriarchy and after the massacre, she must find a way to build another female-run community.

Female vampires more powerful than males in this world because their venom is stronger. Once Shori bites a male vampire, he will never be able to mate with another female vampire. Shori's living situation will always ultimately be a reverse harem. Her human symbionts are allowed to have other human partners, but they *belong* to Shori. The set of brothers who will choose to mate with her must settle for her alone because her sisters are dead.⁴ Unless Shori can "adopt" sisters from families with too many girls, the set of brothers in her "harem" must place all the hope for their lineage in her youth-like, small frame.

Shori, like all female vampires in her world, is cast in the traditionally male role—she must protect and provide for her family. As one woman explains, "among the [vampire species], the females competed. It's like the way males have competed among humans" (Butler, 2005b, p. 115). However, they understand the rules of the larger world: "female [vampire] families had passed for human for thousands of years by marrying male symbionts and organizing their communities to look like human villages" (Butler, 2005b, p. 240). The analogy becomes clearer as the book vilifies those who mistreat their symbionts, just as women have sometimes been mistreated in human heterosexual relationships. Instead, Shori and the more progressive vampire respect their human partners, who must be given choice, sexual freedom, and the ability to seek pleasure and fulfillment outside of their primary relationship.

Shori's symbionts must also learn to embrace polyamory because it is impossible for Shori to survive in a monogamous relationship. Her first new symbiont is especially unwilling to accept this arrangement because, unlike the other symbionts, he was not already a part of the vampire community. When he begins his relationship with Shori, he does not know that her venom is addictive, nor does he realize she will partner with so many others—old, young, male, female, vampire, human—as a matter of course. When Shori discovers the power of her venom, she tries to release this man while he can still live without her, to give him the choice, but she explains neither the addiction nor the necessity for polyamory. Her failure to do so stems, in part, from her amnesia-induced ignorance as well as from her desperation to have him. Still, when he learns about the tradeoff inherent in being a symbiont and grows enraged about trade-off, the reader tends to sympathize with him because he did not receive the fully-informed choice Shori promises the rest of her family.

As we've seen, social arrangements in Shori's world are designed to preserve one's own survival and bloodline. This means relationships must be non-monogamous, matriarchal, polysexual, slightly incestuous, communistic, and arranged, with no prior courtship before the arrangement. No one partners for love, which all assume will come later as a byproduct of the hormones released by biting and the ensuing chemical and material co-dependency. Vampires do not appear to place taboos on many types of partnership, though they only rarely mate with siblings; instead, new relationships are formed based on logical decisions. While contemporary humans would like to believe our choices are at least a bit logical, when confronted with Butler's text, we must accept how arbitrary our taboos and love/community arrangements actually are.

⁴ In *Fledgeling*, sets of brother vampires customarily mate with sets of sister vampires.

Conclusion

“Only hatred shocks me. If we can love a date palm or a puppy or a cyborg, perhaps we can love each other better also” (Piercy, 1991, p. 421).

Many collections of science fiction by women reference the authors as Cassandras, as prophets whose warnings, though valid, are not heard. This comparison to the Greek heroine is perhaps more profound than we might expect. Cassandra is not simply a prophet of doom, but also a woman punished for daring to deny a god’s sexual advances. Not only is she unable to warn her fellow Trojans, but she is raped by the conquering army when her prophecy is fulfilled.

Female science-fiction writers are in a similar position. They often go unheard as they write literature of social protest in an undervalued genre; they are also frequently overlooked as writers in their genre because they are female. While many of their works draw special attention to the complex matrix of sex, class, race, and power, they are routinely dismissed as simply writing about gender issues if sex/gender systems are included in the story matrix at all.

The issues that all these texts have in common are profound; science fiction attempts to make sense of the world around us through storytelling, and these texts about relationships are, of course, about *our* relationships. Their foci on power highlight the problematic power differentials inherent in our couplings, which are unlikely to feature people who are completely equal in the sex/gender system and whose power relationships are further complicated by issues of education, class, income, nationality, race, etc. As we struggle to move forward in the 21st century toward a future with less oppression we cannot ignore how many religions and cultures expect one partner to have power over the other.

In each of the relationships discussed in this essay, there is an element of violence. Yod, Pessi, and Shori are deadly to people who threaten (or appear to threaten) their partners. Yet Pessi, T’Gatoi, and Shori are also potentially dangerous to their own partners. Pessi traps Angel, T’Gatoi endangers Gan through pregnancy, and Shori cannot outlive every symbiont she will ever have possess, and the ones left behind will die without her.

Each of these relationships challenges taboos. As we get swept up in these stories, we find ourselves falling for machines, finding the erotic charge from another species, wondering how much age should matter (on both ends of the spectrum), preparing to carry the eggs of someone we love, overcoming jealousies, rejecting monogamy, and losing ourselves in the forest of the unknown.

These relationships, despite all the challenges they face, also feature eroticism and the possibility of love. They remind us that a relationship with the other is possible: “We look at each other, me and the troll. The lamplight’s casting a pale halo around my head, and at my side Pessi is a dark silhouette. We look at each other and then at the mirror and then back at each other” (Sinisalo, 2003, p. 141). As Robert Silverberg notes, in his Preface to *Off Limits: Tales of Alien Sex* (2012), every human relationship is just as complicated and alien as those we find in science fiction:

There is only one of me on this planet, and only one of you, because nobody else has my particular mix of genes, and nobody else has yours, and therefore we are really alien beings in respect to each other. Yet we each have something the other wants; and so we come together, in trepidation and hope, attempting to transcend the boundaries that

separate us from each other. Sometimes the effort is successful, sometimes not. In any case, it remains fundamentally true that all sexual encounters are meetings between aliens who must transcend the barriers of their alienness if they are going to attain any kind of union.

I was once asked why feminist theorists were so often drawn to science fiction. I answered that science fiction has traditionally been the genre that allowed us to imagine different worlds. Science fiction gave us the first inter-racial kiss on television on *Star Trek*, a show that also gave us a female officer working with a multi-racial crew. Its dystopias show us what can go wrong; its utopias show us how we might get it right someday. Because we can imagine alternate worlds and alternate futures through science fiction, the genre allows us to see societies and relationships arranged differently from our own. Reflecting on alternate futures encourages us to wonder why we have arranged our lives the way we have and whether we want to change them.

Our Cassandras, then, may be heard after all.

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