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Queering Nature: Close Encounters with the Alien in Feminist Science Fiction

‘[Q]ueering what counts as nature is my categorical imperative....’—Donna Haraway, ‘Cats Cradle’, 60

‘Queering nature’ seems an appropriate theme for enquiries into sexuality in science fiction, especially from the perspective of feminist and queer theories. Whilst it may not immediately suggest an overt comment on sexualities, it is inarguable that ‘nature’ as well as ‘culture’ is heavily implicated in our understandings and performances of sexuality.¹ Indeed, just as our constructions of sexuality (and the strictures of normative heterosexism) infuse every aspect of our culture/s, so too do sexualized assumptions underpin our constructions of ‘nature’. And further, the ways we think about ‘nature’ impact upon and constrain our notions of sexuality. Wendy Pearson observes that science fiction has the potential to ‘interrogate the ways in which sexual subjectivities are created as effects of the system that sustains them’ (‘Alien Cryptographies’ 18). I want to further her argument to suggest that the variety of discourses and ‘knowledges’ that have come to stand for (or take the place of) ‘nature’ are one such system.

Attention to nature is an important facet of critical considerations of sexuality, particularly considering the pre-eminence of the biological sciences in (over)determining the category/ies of ‘sex’, and the fact that ‘for many people ... sexuality—and particularly heterosexuality—can be envisioned only within the category of the “natural”’ (Pearson, ‘Science Fiction’ 149). I want to re-visit the loaded space of ‘the natural’ and consider how ‘queering nature’ might further question normative notions of sexuality and gender. Whilst queer theory obviously engages with ‘nature’ on the level of regulatory discourses around notions of biology, feminist science studies and ecofeminist theory have a particular (and different) investment in the discursive positioning and uses of nature. Such theories are engaged in critiquing a broad

range of biological and life sciences in which the construction of ‘human nature’ and ‘nature’ are implicated in often unstable and contradictory ways. Similarly, feminist sf texts may reflect on the ways in which we constitute and reproduce ‘human’ and ‘nature’, most strikingly through the familiar sf figure of the alien. In this essay, I focus on sf stories which feature a central (and often sexualized) female/alien encounter; I explore, in particular, how an ‘othering’ of the human might ‘queer’ nature through a close reading of Amy Thomson’s *The Color of Distance* (1995). In concluding, I consider how certain notions of ‘kinship’ (as recently deployed by Donna Haraway and Judith Butler) might help advance the challenges to heteronormativity that are implicated in ‘queering nature’.

Queering ecofeminism

The notion of kinship is also a useful way of reconceptualizing the relations among the three theoretical threads informing my reading of ‘queered nature’. Ecofeminism might appear unlikely ‘kin’ to feminist science studies and queer theory, not least because many within the academy continue to view ecofeminism with some suspicion as being overly ‘essentialist’ (Sandilands, ‘Mother Earth’; Soper). And although ecofeminism and feminist science studies arguably both stem from Carolyn Merchant’s classic *The Death of Nature* (1980), they have developed along divergent discursive and political paths.² Yet, partly in reaction to tensions between ecofeminisms’ cultural and constructivist trends, critics such as Greta Gaard and Catriona Sandilands have argued the need for a ‘queered’ ecofeminism. An important driver for cross-fertilization between ecofeminism and queer theory has been the failure of much ecofeminist and environmental politics to recognize its heterosexism—not least in its figuration of ‘a nature that is both actively de-eroticized and monolithically heterosexual’ (Sandilands, ‘Unnatural Passions’ 33).

A queer ecofeminist perspective, in contrast, argues that ‘the naturalization of heterosexuality has been historically accompanied by the heterosexualization of nature’ (Sandilands, ‘Unnatural Passions’ 34); the very nature/culture relation itself, which is mapped as feminine/masculine, ‘becomes one of compulsory heterosexuality’ (‘Toward a Queer’ 131). When nature is feminized it is also, Gaard notes, eroticized, an argument that appears to contradict Sandiland’s characterization of nature as ‘de-eroticized’; this tension highlights the internal contradictions and instabilities of such regulatory discursive regimes. That is, our ‘knowing’ of nature is de-eroticized through the mediation of the mechanized, objective, ‘disembodied’ discourses of traditional western sciences, even as the ‘domination’ and subjugation of nature allowed (even encouraged) through such knowledge puts it in the realm of the (eroticized) feminine half of the nature/culture binary. Not surprisingly, such tensions are constantly evoked and expressed through sf, most famously in what many consider its founding text, *Frankenstein* (1817): true to its Romantic influences, the text sets Victor’s pursuit of technoscientific dominion against an ideological commitment to the ‘natural sublime’.³

The work of Gaard and Sandilands (among others) suggests an ecofeminist approach that aligns with queer theory on a number of levels, particularly in the need to move beyond the restrictive binaries of feminine/masculine and hetero/homosexual. As with queer theory, ‘gender’ is not situated in ecofeminist theories as the ‘privileged’ category of oppression. Rather, ecofeminism calls for a non-reductionist, interdisciplinary, and synthesizing understanding of a whole series of interlocking relations, from gender to race, sexuality, economics, globalism, and, of course, the environment. Both queer theory and ecofeminism have as political goal and analytical method the assumption that (gender) identity is not fixed, but is unstable, mutable, and fluid. Sandilands, for example, identifies the importance of what she terms ‘performative

affinity' for a political project such as ecofeminism, where material ecological goals, and an emphasis on a multiplicity of political affinities with numerous 'others', results in a recognition of the failure of the term 'woman' to act as a 'content-filled subject position' (Sandilands, 'Mother Earth' 29). A queered ecofeminist 'performative affinity' relies, Sandilands argues, 'on the insertion of a strongly parodic understanding of nature and its discourses' ('Mother Earth' 33). Such 'performative affinities' between women and nature—which 'allow[s] for the possibility of each to disrupt the other' (Sandilands, 'Mother Earth' 36)—recall the kinds of 'subversive repetition' that Butler suggests might 'call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself' (*Gender Trouble* 32). Subverting or disrupting gendered and sexed identity and the category 'woman' thus requires, in a queer ecofeminism, a disruption—or queering—of nature: 'To queer nature, in this context, is to question its normative use, to interrogate relations of knowledge and power by which certain truths about ourselves have been allowed to pass without question' (Sandilands, 'Mother Earth' 37).

At the heart of a queer-ecofeminist reading, then, is a sustained attention to the ongoing re/inscriptions of the nature/culture binary in our understandings of sexed and gendered subjectivities (and embodiment), particularly as regulated and constrained through the narratives of western scientific discourse.

Constructing nature, regulating (the) human

One of the many paradoxes inherent in our use of 'natures' is emphasized by a queer ecofeminist view: that in any series of binary oppressions, 'each characteristic of the other is seen as "closer to nature" in the dualisms and ideology of Western culture. Yet queer sexualities are frequently devalued for being "against nature"' (Gaard, 'Toward a Queer' 119). As Gaard points out, the (ab)use of natural/unnatural in regulating queer sexualities stems from the fact

that 'natural' is invariably associated with 'procreative' ('Toward a Queer' 120). The difficulty with picking apart such notions is that the 'natural' is on the one hand used to enforce normative social strictures dressed up as self-evident imperatives; whilst on the other hand, 'nature' is a subjugated object that is dominated by 'culture' and western science.⁴

'Nature' is, of course, a very slippery term, which shades from descriptions of the world to symbols of 'wilderness', homilies on 'natural' (pre-given, normalized) behaviour, or a way of signifying that which is 'outside' culture. The 'human' figures in a strange and shifting relation with these series of signifiers. It is at once a part of 'nature' (the organic) and what is 'natural' (god- or biology-ordained), but is also apparently separate from it as the purveyor and originator of 'culture' and discourse. The ways in which we define 'human' are obviously complexly intertwined with our definitions and codifications of 'nature' and how we separate the 'human' from non-human/other. Human/other boundaries are also, of course, prime sites for contestations and reinforcements of notions of sexuality.

Kate Soper usefully distinguishes among three differing uses of nature: as a metaphysical concept used to signify humanity's 'difference and specificity', which can either signal human continuity with the non-human or its irreducible difference; as the realist concept of the physical structures and processes studied by the natural sciences; and finally as the 'lay' reference to the non-urban environment or 'wilderness' (Soper). Of most relevance here are the first and second uses, which tend, however—even within the sciences—to blur at the edges. This is partly due to the way the relatedness of human/non-human is either confirmed or sharply delineated. The appearance of this contradictory impulse in even the 'realist' concept of nature becomes clearer if we look to Bruno Latour's characterization of scientific modernity, which has at its heart a paradoxical dynamic generated by two opposing practices:

The first set of practices, by 'translation' creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by 'purification', creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other. (Latour 10-11)

That is, much of the work of the life sciences (and, recently, of biotechnologies) produces continuity between humans and other organisms (through, for example, DNA or genetically modified products) whilst the distinctiveness and 'purity' of 'human' as ontological category continues to be enforced in other discourses. Thus despite the force of this human/other opposition, which is normalized through reference to both 'nature' and 'culture', it is at heart inherently unstable. If the very category of 'human' is open to question, with what authority can this fictive genus continue to substantiate and regulate the excision of 'human'-generated culture from its other, nature?

Just as sf in general has the potential to escape the 'reincorporation' of the 'Cartesian subject of realist fiction' (Pearson, 'Alien' 4), I want to explore the possibility that ecofeminist and feminist science studies might resist the re-inscription of mechanistic scientific narratives around 'nature/s' by destabilizing the traditional 'subject' of both 'science' and 'nature': the paradoxically 'translated yet purified' human. In order to unpack discourses around 'nature/s' it is helpful to turn to fictions and narratives where—if only momentarily—'the human' (like the 'straight' or 'masculine') perspective is neither centralized nor normalized. Such fictions may be found, I suggest, in feminist sf texts which involve close encounters with 'alien ontologies', where questions about 'nature' and 'human' are brought to the fore, including how both are variously sexualized.

Queer bodies: 'doing' the alien

Alien encounters are of course a very charged trope in sf history. As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay observes, '[a]nxiety over sexual power and purity underlies most articulations of alien-human contacts'; significantly, the alien 'has always disturbed the deep-lying connection between biology and human culture' (228-29). Even if it is ultimately defused or recontained, the science fictional alien is immanently disruptive: suggestive of the multiple sexualized and racialized binaries which inflect the category 'human', inevitably invoking the other, even as it may be registered as undesirable. However, it is when the alien is deployed as tool for thinking through both (human) nature/s and culture/s that such binaries might be destabilized. If the alien differs from us 'only' in terms of its biology, it potentially does little to advance us beyond the realms of the metaphysical anti/pro-naturalist differentiation between human and non-human. That is, to recall Csicsery-Ronay again, if the alien figures primarily as biologically rather than ontologically Other, then (as when dealing with racial difference) it is often too easy to 'conflat[e] cultural difference with putative natural difference' (Csicsery-Ronay 229).

I want to turn now to some sf examples that are open to readings that 'queer nature'. Of course many sf texts lend themselves to a queered understanding of nature in one aspect or another, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Ursula K. Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand* (1984) and *Triton* (1976), John Varley's GAEAN trilogy (1979-84), and more recently, Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* (2000) and *The Salt Roads* (2003). In this essay I have deliberately chosen to focus on a number of lesser known authors, for two reasons. Firstly, I believe it is important to widen the scope of our reading beyond the usual canon, to explore the different forms of 'feminism' that might be recognized or produced through ecofeminist and queered readings, and to recognize the potential for 'queered' readings of what might appear fairly traditional sf treatments. Secondly, I want to

look specifically at female-alien encounters, which are less easily mapped as masculinized culture versus feminized nature, or as an (heterosexually) eroticized colonialist 'tourism'.

The texts discussed below share a central concern with the environment and human relations to 'nature' which encompass the ways we represent nature. Concomitantly, these texts are concerned with alternate understandings of 'being in' and knowing 'nature', which demand the construction of different scientific discourses and often imagine new biotechnologies, usually represented through an alien culture. One way of encapsulating these themes is through the notion of 'alien biologies', which signify not just biologically different species (and ontology), but also different practices and systems of knowledges (alien biological technosciences), and finally the intersections (too easily dissolved in the 'human-nature/human-culture split) between physical being/matter and sociocultural discourses. Unlike more traditional sf readings which parallel the human/alien with a gendered dichotomy, in these texts the problematics of difference and otherness are located around the dualism of human/non-human, thus suggesting the possibility of escaping the heterosexual bind. For as Hollinger warns, 'An emphasis on gender risks the continuous reinscription of sexual binarism', that is, the 'reinscription of an institutionalized heterosexual binary' (24). In these stories, gender is not the most significant marker of the human/alien relation. Rather, the tensions in human-alien relations reflect the 'purifying' practices of scientific (and colonialist) discourses which contribute to the delineation of human from other.

In Marti Steussy's *Dreams of Dawn* (1988), the survival of a sentient alien race, the Kargans, is threatened by human colonization of their home planet. The crisis on Karg has been precipitated by the presence of a human colony which has co-existed with the Kargans for years by ignoring their existence. However the humans' non-native husbandry, agriculture, and

imported foods are poisoning the Kargan young. Eventual resolution is brought about, primarily through the actions of the human girl Disa, who has grown up with Kargans (as part of her survey-team family) and is both fluent in their language and at home in their damp cave environs. Ultimately, the solution arrived at by Disa and the Kargans is to change human biochemistry so they can survive on native Kargan proteins. Overturning the xenophobic speciesism of humans thus effects a radical change in the human/nature relation, where instead of changing the world to suit humans, human biological and environmental practices are altered to suit their new environment.

Such interventions into scientific and cultural discourses around nature and human are intensified in texts where the boundaries between human and alien are destabilized through a much more intimate encounter: where ‘acting like’ the alien, ‘performing’ an ‘other’ subjectivity equates—as in queer theory—with ‘being’ the alien. Intimate and eroticized encounters with alien others are a recurring motif in Naomi Mitchison’s classic *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1976), which tells of the space-faring communications expert and xenobiologist, Mary. The world of *Memoirs* is a tolerant one, and acceptance of others encompasses race, species, fauna and animals. All life, even only potentially sentient life, is routinely treated with respect (to the extent that scientists communicate with and obtain permission from animals such as dogs who consent to cooperate in experiments) (31). *Memoirs* may be read very productively through a queer/ecofeminist lens: not only does the spacewoman Mary have a ‘sexualized’ relation with a Martian, she also twice becomes ‘pregnant’ through alien encounters. As part of an experiment with self-generating alien tissue to test for potential intelligence, Mary offers to host a graft of this particular alien. Her body responds as if she were pregnant, and she perceives the graft (which she calls Ariel) in very intimate terms, as ‘flesh of [her] flesh’; she receives sensual

enjoyment from their interactions: ‘It liked to be as close as possible over the median line reaching now to my mouth and inserting a pseudopodium delicately between my lips and elsewhere’ (54). Her second alien ‘pregnancy’ is ‘activated’ by the Martian, Vly, producing the haploid ‘not entirely human’ child Viola (67). Viola is a ‘queer’ progeny indeed; ‘fathered’ by a hermaphrodite alien (who later becomes a mother herself [143]) through a primarily communicative act—the standard sexed and gendered heteronormative system is certainly ‘skewed’ in this particularly unfaithful re-productive event.

These intimate encounters with other natures also significantly contaminate the boundaries between human and non-human. Other intimate and ‘impure’ alien encounters are found in Octavia Butler’s *XENOGENESIS* trilogy, *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). Unlike Mitchison’s text, becoming other in these novels is not really a matter of choice, although the resulting symbiosis of human and alien is much more extensive. Having rescued humans from an Earth which they have finally destroyed, the alien Oankali become midwives to a new hybrid human/non-human species. From the ‘organic’ and embodied nature of Oankali biotechnology with which they effect this transformation, to the nature of the Oankali-human relation itself, *Xenogenesis* exemplifies the destabilization of Latour’s transforming/purifying practices signaled by hybrids, cross-species confusions, and ‘monstrous’ bodies. As a species, the Oankali are, as Haraway notes, compelled to cross and blur boundaries, engaging in ‘dangerous intimacy across the boundaries of self and other’ (*Simians* 227). On the surface, this boundary-crossing narrative seems to remain rigidly wedded to a procreative heterosexuality, with no evidence of either human or alien homosexual relations. However, the Oankali interventions into human reproduction, survival, and indeed human subjectivity (as both individuals and species) constitute an overt critique of the ‘othering’ tendency encapsulated by

our human/nature/culture distinctions. In this way, the *XENOGENESIS* trilogy suggests the contours of a 'queered nature': the 'naturalness' of human dominion over its world is revealed as a nonsense when there is no world left (only an Oankali re-construction to return to); whilst the product of a 'natural' human reproduction has been replaced (through what initially resembles a 'breeding experiment') by a literal 'construct' of human and alien. In this alien encounter (at least for those that remain on Earth), future survival necessitates both (sexually) 'being with' and becoming the 'Other'.

Othering (the) Human

Traditionally, sf narratives have been part of the 'proliferation' of cultural narratives which have 'demonized the Other' (Pearson, 'Alien' 6). In contrast, many eco/feminist sf texts turn this narrative on its head, utilizing the alien as a way of normalizing the other and, conversely, 'demonizing' the human. Amy Thomson's *The Color of Distance* (1995) is one such text that invites us to take an 'othered' perspective. It opens with the discovery of what appear to be two strange-looking animals in the forest by one of the central characters, Ani:

underneath the masklike head-covering was a flat, uninteresting face with a fleshy nose like a bird's beak, and a small mouth with fat, swollen lips.... [S]tripped the creature was ugly and clumsy-looking.... Its thick, awkward feet had tiny, weak toes, useless for climbing.... It lay there, laboring for breath like a dying fish. How could such a poorly adapted animal manage to survive?' (2)

We quickly realize that this ugly creature is in fact a human, Juna, and that our viewpoint is that of the alien 'Tendu'. Within the context of Tendu 'nature', the human is immediately 'othered' as useless, 'poorly adapted' and 'unnatural'. Humans cannot survive exposure to this alien environment and so in order to save Juna, the Tendu make changes to her body to bring it into

alignment with what they perceive as right and ‘natural’. Ani’s teacher, Ilto, changes Juna’s body to enable her to live as the Tendu do—growing a protective ‘skin’ over her whole body, which undergoes other physiological alterations such as to the colour of her skin (now a ‘brilliant orange’), the replacement of fingernails by claws, and the growth of fleshy spurs on her fore-arms. The Tendu are expert healers and also, as Juna comes to realize, have highly advanced skills in bio-manipulation, using their own bodies rather than external technologies to monitor and effect changes on a cellular level.

Juna’s transformation—and her initial fears—clearly recall demonized ‘alien invasion’ narratives. As Pearson observes of John Campbell’s story, ‘Who Goes There?’, the ‘conversion from human to alien is figured in bodily terms that are reminiscent of the sexual act’, with the takeover ‘figured in terms of both consumption and consummation’ (‘Alien’ 7). Although Juna is not initially aware of it, the Tendu’s means of healing and transformation involve processes that reflect a similar consumption/consummation. They penetrate her body with their ‘fleshy red spurs’ in the process of ‘linking’ or ‘allu-a’, the form of intense communication used by the Tendu both with each other and to explore other genetic and cellular beings and information. Not surprisingly, Juna’s first conscious experience of allu-a terrifies her:

Then its wrist spur pricked her arm, and she was unable to move.... She could feel a presence moving through her like a chill in the blood. It felt as if slimy hands were fingering her flesh from the inside. Enmeshed in a cocoon of passivity, she could only sit in paralyzed terror as an alien presence took over her body. (25)

The resonances with sexualized penetration/consumption are reinforced as Juna immediately links this ‘alien violation’ to a childhood memory of being raped, the whole experience made even more abhorrent to her as the Tendu subsume her fears and replace them with feelings of

euphoria. Juna's perceptions of allu-a change gradually throughout the book, as she becomes more attuned to Tendu culture and world. Whilst the sexualized undertones remain, they come to signify more a 'becoming alien', rather than invasion.

This process of 'becoming alien' is highlighted by Thomson's use of alternating narrative voices: Anito refers to Juna continually as 'the new creature' and is initially hostile and dismissive of her clumsiness and lack of intelligence, while from Juna's perspective the need to survive by living in trees, eating raw food, and sleeping in leaf 'nests' signals the dissolution of her humanity. From her changed body to the daily rhythms of her new life, the narrative charts a progressive and increasing alienation as Juna sheds (or loses) her 'humanness'. To survive, understand, and participate in this world, she must become part of it, must become 'alien'. But from the perspective of the Tendu's world, this is a 'reverse' othering—Juna moves from a state of 'otherness' and disharmony as human to that of 'oneness' and harmony.⁵ The rendering of Juna as alien is made explicit when the human 'Survey' finally returns for her after four years, and she is mistaken for one of the aliens.

An ecofeminist perspective on this process of alienation emphasizes the fact that it functions not just to reveal or privilege the 'other', but to recognize and indeed valorize a very different way of 'being in the world'—specifically, a non-hierarchical and non-colonizing way of thinking about 'nature'. Gaard argues that a primary thread linking ecofeminism and queer theory is 'the observation that dominant Western culture's devaluation of the erotic parallels its devaluations of women and of nature' (Gaard, 'Toward a Queer' 115). That is, a queer ecofeminist perspective alerts us to both the gendered and 'natured' character of the reason/eroticism binary. In eco/feminist sf, 'alien ontologies' often suggest more eroticized, involved, and non-differentiated understandings of nature—and thus different 'life' or biological

technosciences.

For the Tendu, knowledge is enacted through—and in—the body: they literally ‘write’ on their bodies (communicating through ‘skin speech’), and ‘taste’ and communicate cellular and genetic information within their bodies. Their biotechnology is embodied, intimate, tactile—indeed sensual. Because of the way they know their world or apprehend the ‘natural’ (in both its metaphysical and realist senses), the Tendu do not employ ‘purifying practices’ to delineate themselves from other species or ‘actors’ in their world. They live in a carefully managed system of environmental sustainability and responsibility, with themselves as only one part of a system that must exist in balance. Indeed this managerial responsibility extends to severe self-correction in their own species: at some time in their past, as their numbers threatened the environment, they released a bio-engineered virus which eliminated half the Tendu population(336). The Tendu’s responsibilities to the ecosystem are formalized through the central cultural notion of ‘atwa’. Every adult Tendu must choose a portion of their world—whether it be a group of plants or animals, or a particular tree-based ecosystem—to be their atwa, and must ‘make sure that their part of the world is in harmony and balance with all of the other parts’ (206).

Anito/Ani’s atwa becomes Juna and the other humans, which gives rise to an exchange which dramatizes the still-lingering differences between human and Tendu notions of self/other and culture/nature. Juna does not understand how she can be the subject of an atwa: ‘I’m not a plant, or animal. I’m a person’. Anito replies:

‘What you say is impossible! You eat, you drink, you shit. How can you say that you’re not an animal?’

‘Yes,’ Eerin [Juna] told her, ‘I am an animal, my people are animals, but we are different from other animals. We change the world we live in. We make things.’

Anito's ears spread even wider. The new creature seemed to believe that it was separate from the world it lived in. (206)

This exchange clearly dramatizes the difference between traditional scientific objectivity—the belief that ‘we know reality because we are separated from it’—and the Tendu perspective, which answers N. Katherine Hayles question, ‘What happens if we begin from the opposite premise, that we know the world because we are connected to it?’ (Hayles 16).⁶ Thomson's critique of this differentiating, externalized, and dominating approach to nature is stated even more overtly in the sequel to *The Color of Distance, Through Alien Eyes* (1999), as Ukatonen compares his people's worldview to ours: ‘How strange to look at the world as humans did, as a thing to fight against, to alter, as though it were made of clay and could be molded without consequences’ (360).

Alien sex?

So what are the consequences of this ‘othering’ of humans and the move towards more intimate, ‘eroticized’ encounters with others and nature? As noted above, allu-a—the process of linking—is one of the most sexualized encounters between human and alien in Thomson's two novels: ‘The link made her feel incredibly vulnerable, as though there were no boundaries between herself and the aliens.... Her loins throbbed with sexual heat’ (*Color* 197). In all her years on the alien planet Tiangi, Juna's only physical, sensual, and emotive connections come through allu-a with the Tendu; thus allu-a substitutes for or functions as the only form of sexuality available to her. As linking most often incorporates her friend/‘mentor’ Anito, the enkar male Ukatonen, and her bami/adopted ‘son’ Moki, it escapes and confounds any easy hetero/homo divide. These intimate encounters with ‘nature’ (in the form of both Tiangi and the Tendu) are thus far from being ‘de-eroticized and monolithically heterosexual’ (Sandilands,

‘Unnatural Passions’ 33). Crucially, the ‘eroticization’ that takes place here is not the objectivist subjugation of ‘nature’ by the masculinized (heterosexist) ‘culture’ criticized by Gaard (131). In becoming the ‘other’, Juna’s perceptions, understandings, and very physiology challenge traditional notions of what counts as ‘human’ and what counts as ‘nature’.

Indeed the intimate, multiple, and non-heterosexual links Juna shares with the Tendu are contrasted unfavourably with human heterosexual acts: Juna reflects that while she enjoys sex with (human) Bruce, she wished ‘they could have linked so she could share how good it felt’ (*Through Alien Eyes* 447). We are left with the strong impression that Juna’s emotional and physical linking with the Tendu is more intense and ultimately more satisfying than (human heterosexual) copulation. And whilst the Tendu are two-sexed, intimacy and sensuality are disconnected from reproduction, producing very different familial and social ties. Juna’s own experiences when with the Tendu in many ways renders her gender irrelevant in terms of her status as othered /alien human (although there is subtext that her male equivalents, especially male alien-contact specialists, would not have been as able to take on a sufficiently non-normative subjectivity to integrate into and understand Tendu society).

In the sequel, however, Juna returns to earth (with her bami Moki and the enkar Ukatonen) and both she and the narrative appear to be reinscribed into dominant heteronormative, rational, mechanistic, and patriarchal norms. This is most evident in the changed relationship between Juna and Bruce. In *Color*, Bruce is an empathetic character, who does not react in a xenophobic way either to Juna’s alien body or to the Tendu themselves; he provides some ‘good sex’, but also and more importantly he provides comfort and support. In the sequel, he becomes one of the more xenophobic, removed, and unlikable of the characters. Back on Earth, Juna’s only human sexual encounters are with Bruce and, indeed, beyond examples of

strong homosocial bonds between women, only heterosexuality seems in evidence. It appears that the ‘othering’ of the human and renegotiated relation with nature cannot be sustained once Juna (and perhaps the author herself) leaves Tiangi: in traveling back to Earth the narrative is constrained and reincorporated into a (straight, male, scientific) human-centric perspective on nature, sex, and sexuality.

However, there are still possibilities in the text for reading against the traditional heterosexual grain of the narrative, if we turn our attention to the intersections of gendered sexuality with relations of sociality, specifically with ideas and structures of family and kinship.

Alien Kin? Queered kinship and companion species

I tend to think in terms of kinship systems more than oppositions. It is a kinship system that does damage to our notions of nature, surely, but also to our notions of culture, so that neither nature nor culture emerges unscathed from our meditations on these modes of being (Haraway, ‘Birth of the Kennel’)

In this final section, I want to consider briefly the idea of ‘queered kinship’, and how it might function as a metaphor for thinking through a queered ecofeminist perspective on ‘naturecultures’ (in Haraway’s words [**from “Birth of the Kennel”?** give title, even if no page number]). Certainly from both an ecofeminist as well as a queer perspective it seems more appropriate to think in terms of the ‘translation’ mode of kinship, rather than the ‘purifying’ mode of oppositions, to recall Latour’s distinction.

Recently, spurred by heated and difficult debates over gay marriage and childrearing, Judith Butler has argued that it is politically and theoretically necessary to attend to notions of kinship as we negotiate contemporary changes in family structures away from the ‘heterosexual norm’ toward what she describes as ‘post-Oedipal kinship’ (cited in Campbell 645). As Butler notes, debates on gay marriage and kinship ‘have become sites of intense displacement for other

political fears ... fears that feminism ... has effectively opened up kinship outside the family, opened it to strangers' ('Kinship'21). Indeed, drawing on Haraway and ecofeminist theorists [such as whom?], we might reflect that certain feminists have indeed opened up 'kinship' to include even non-human strangers.

Butler traces the radical changes in contemporary anthropological practice and resulting theories of kinship, which have moved from the concept of a 'natural' relation to the more performative notion that 'kinship is itself a kind of doing', a practice of self-conscious assemblage:

Debates about the distinction between nature and culture, which are clearly heightened when the distinctions between animal, human, machine, hybrid, and cyborg remain unsettled, become figured at the site of kinship, for even a theory of kinship that is radically culturalist frames itself against a discredited 'nature' and so remains in a constitutive and definitional relation to that which it claims to transcend. (Butler, 'Kinship' 37)

There are obvious resonances here with Haraway's more recent approach to such questions, which she figures under the rubric 'companion species'; this is her replacement for the cyborg as figure for telling her 'story of co-habitation, co-evolution, and embodied cross-species sociality' (*Companion Species* 4).⁷

A narrative for 'cross-species sociality' which might result in 'queered kin' seems a highly appropriate aid for re-reading and potentially destabilizing the heteronormative surface of ecofeminist stories of alien-human encounters. From this perspective, even those texts where the 'demands' of reproduction produce reinscriptions of heteronormativity might offer alternatives to, or a break in [in what sense "a break"?], 'oedipal' heterosexual kinship patterns, especially

where they cross species boundaries. For, as Butler notes, the breakdown of traditional kinship 'not only displaces the central place of biological and sexual relations from its definition, but gives sexuality a separate domain from that of kinship' ('Kinship' 37).

Alternative kinship patterns are of course a familiar theme in sf, featuring in the well-known work of Le Guin, Delany, and Octavia Butler, among many others.⁸ In *Color and Through Alien Eyes* (1999), extended kinship patterns amongst humans are evident: group marriages of at least six people (and often more) are apparently the norm in Thomson's future and are not confined to internal monogamous male/female partnerships. By the close of *Through Alien Eyes*, Juna's daughter Mariam is emerging into a very queer set of kin indeed. As well as numerous human parents, there are her alien 'brother' Moki and Tendu 'uncle' Ukatonen, a kinship which is formalized when Juna, Mariam, and the Tendu are accepted into a group marriage (that includes Juna's brother). And while she is purely human born, Mariam certainly does not recreate the 'image of her father'; having been linked with the Tendu since the womb, she is, if not 'some half-alien thing' as her father fears (161), certainly not 'just' human. Group marriages blending different species are also a common feature of the society depicted in Steussy's *Dreams of Dawn*, which can include pairs and single humans of either sex, and in the specific case of 'Dawn circle' a non-gendered alien 'sheppie' and two female Kargans plus their 'groundlings'. In *Dawn*, companionable and even loving relations between human and alien are seen as a normal consequence of such 'queered' families: 'such attachments weren't unusual for children raised in the multispecies kinship of a First-In circle' (Steussy 2).

Thinking about queered notions of 'kinship' that involve human and non-human others also provides different perspectives on Octavia Butler's *XENOGENESIS* series. Not for nothing are the ooloi, the Oankali third sex, known as 'treasured strangers' (104). One crucial function of the

Oankali 'third sex' in the reproductive/genetic mixing of Oankali young is to ensure that sufficient diversity emerges from the very close male/female dyad who are often siblings. A strangely compounded two-sex system this may be, but even in this small fact it challenges familial notions of kinship and sexuality; even more so when humans are added to form the five person, three-sexed, two species 'construct' family. Quite apart from the very different conjugal or reproductive functioning of this queer family, traditional social and emotive relations are also disrupted. For the human couples, as for the Oankali, the intense emotional and psychological male-female relation enabled and mediated by the ooloi essentially disallows heterosexual intercourse—or indeed any kind of touching. In an interesting homosocial spin on human/Oankali kinship, the only people one can in fact touch each other are children or same-sex relatives. Pearson's reading of the figure of the hermaphrodite as a Derridean 'supplement' to the two-sex system in a number of sf texts is of interest here ('Sex/uality'). Even when dealing with texts where the primacy of apparent reproductive need drives a reinforcement of a biologically 'necessary' heterosexuality, the introduction of 'supplements'—in the case of Butler's trilogy, the ooloi—as necessary to complete or bridge the reproductive heterosexual system might, as Pearson notes, invite us to question 'whether the apparent plenitude of the two-sex system ... does not also need supplementation ... in the so-called real world' ('Sex/uality' 118).

Indeed, when the relations that bind are no longer traced to heterosexual procreation, the very homology between nature and culture ... tends to become undermined. (Butler, 'Kinship' 39)

What might these 'alien biologies' and encounters suggest about the potential for undermining or destabilizing the 'naturalized' reinscription of heterosexual bio-social systems?

Most of the texts I have discussed do not seem to upset significantly the conventional sexualized binaries for their human characters, who are ultimately reinscribed into the heterosexual code. However, the possibility of different forms—both biological and cultural—of sexed and gendered structures and societies are developed through the figure/s of the alien. Thus, even if not entirely successful, the conjunction of alien possibilities with human re-containment perhaps literalizes or figures the difficulty of escaping this binary within our current human forms of thought, codes, social forms, and sciences.

Science fiction has, in a sense, always occupied the fault line between the ‘two cultures’. Its potential for queered eco/feminist disruptions offers ways of telling new stories about nature, humans, and others that might disrupt traditional and restrictive binaries of thought infecting our notions of nature/culture, human/non-human, epistemology, and ontology. Feminist and sf stories of ‘queer nature’ might, if nothing else, help progress our ‘difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure’ (Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 241).

NOTES

1. The use of the ‘natural world’ to justify heterosexism has of course been under challenge from research which emphasises diversity and difference in the mating behaviour and social groupings observed in nature. Such critiques emerge not only from queer and feminist theorists, but also from within the sciences in what Bagemihl calls the ‘quiet revolution’ in biology, which challenges traditional biology by documenting ‘the diverse range of sex “differences,” and sexual activities in strong species and ecosystems’ (Hird 14). See, for example, Bagemihl; Roughgarden; Lancaster; Short and Balaban; and Margulis and Sagan. My thanks to Wendy Pearson for drawing my attention to some of these key texts.

2. See Sturgeon for a brief overview of this issue; for further discussion of the

intersections between the two, see my 'Alienating Naturecultures'.

3. Thanks to Veronica Hollinger for bringing the importance of this connection to my attention.

4. This is, of course a very long-standing paradox in western thought; as Haraway notes, in the West nature

has been the key operator in foundational, grounding discourses for a very long time.... [N]ature is the zone of constraints, of the given, and of matter as resource; nature is the necessary raw material for human action, the field for the imposition of choice, and the corollary of mind. Nature has also served as the model for human action; nature has been a potent ground for moral discourse.'

(Modest_Witness 102)

5. Indeed, the success of *Color's* alienating positioning for Juna and the reader is highlighted by the sequel, which, being situated on Earth and centred in human culture, loses much of the cognitive dissonance provided by this radically alternative perspective.

6. This approach is also a central concern in many of Joan Slonczewski's stories, one of the few feminist sf authors who is also a practising scientist (in molecular biology). See, for instance, *A Door into Ocean* (1986), and *The Children Star* (1998).

7. As Hird points out, findings from non-linear biology itself challenges traditional cultural understandings of kinship, along with the 'new materialist' feminist studies of science, which have 'expanded analyses of the ways in which culture influences biological notions of kinship' (79)

8. See, for example, Le Guin's Ekumen and Hainish stories (such as those in *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*), Delany's *Triton*, Butler's 'Bloodchild', and Russ's *The Female*

Man (1976). Group-type marriages were also famously explored by Robert A. Heinlein, although unlike many of the feminist reworkings, they demonstrate that not all alternative kinship systems work to destabilize heteronormativity.

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