Axiom 1: People are different from each other.

It is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact. A tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought: gender, race, class, nationality, sexual orientation are pretty much the available distinctions.

(Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, The Epistemology of the Closet)1

'We have to hide,' the other said gently. 'You still kill anything that's . . .different'.

(Theodore Sturgeon, 'The Sex Opposite')2

Science fiction and the idea of sexuality

Knowing sf's potential for using the future to explore contemporary reality and its alternatives, one might think the genre ideal for the examination of alternative sexualities. Critics of sf have generally agreed that science fiction is a 'literature of ideas'. Indeed, for many people, it is the ideational content of sf that is its primary characteristic. Sexuality is also an idea. In this sense, one might well expect to find an intrinsic compatibility between sf as a genre and the exploration of human sexuality. For many people, however, sexuality - and particularly heterosexuality - can be envisioned only within the category of the 'natural'. To these people, sexuality is quite specifically not an idea; it is the very reverse of the ideational - instinctive, sensate, animalistic. It is at once both 'common sense', as in the apparent logic of procreative sex, and unthinkable, since even apparently procreative sex calls into play emotions, positions, actions and desires whose potential for perversity, even if it is merely the perversity of pleasure, are too frightening to contemplate. And yet, even for these people, sex is an idea because it is, after all, an ideology and one which contemporary Western societies have tried very hard indeed both to propagate and to control.

This is one argument about the potential of sf to depict sexualities, whether normative or alternative. It is an argument that stems from the approaches to sexuality studies that have come to be collected under the rubric of 'queer theory'.3 Before going on to examine what queer theory can tell us about how sexuality is explored in sf, however, it is useful to look also at another, related argument about the depiction of alternative sexuality in sf. In the 1980s, when the topic of sexuality in sf began to receive critical attention, it was not uncommon for critics to decry the absence of positive depictions of alternative sexualities in sf. One of the questions the student of sexualities in sf needs to consider then is whether or not sf is or has been a field in which the full range of human imagination can be brought to bear not merely on the technologies of human existence, but on human sociality in all its complexity. In other words, we might ask whether sf has traditionally been better at imagining machines and their conjunctions than it has been at imagining bodies and their possible relationships.

The answer to this question is probably ambivalent. Although there have always been some sf stories which have touched on issues of sexuality in imaginative ways, often allegorically, these have until recently been vastly outweighed by the number of stories which take for granted the continued prevalence of heteronormative institutional practices - dating, marriage, the nuclear family and so on. It is worth noting that the portrayal of sexuality is not absent in much early sf (despite claims that there was no sex in sf prior to the 1960s),4 merely an unreflective reproduction of contemporary norms. Merely to give the hero a fiancee, as E. E. 'Doc' Smith does, for example, is to make suppositions about the naturalness of contemporary Western
sexual customs. Thus, looking at issues of sexuality in sf is not simply a matter of looking for positive or negative portrayals of homosexuality, but also of understanding the discourses that inform the depiction of sexual relationships in sf. Indeed, stories which are sympathetic to homosexuality do not necessarily involve any sort of unsettling of a heteronormative regime; at the same time, stories which interrogate alternative possibilities for sexual/social structures are not necessarily sympathetic to alternative sexualities. Robert Heinlein's work provides excellent examples of both types of narrative. In *Friday* (1982), the beautiful female protagonist sleeps with both women and men without disrupting the heteronormative structure of her society in the slightest; in addition, the novel makes pejorative references to 'real' homosexuals, who are identified primarily by their unwillingness to perform their gender roles. *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1964) exemplifies the latter type of narrative, as Lunar society permits a variety of options for marriage beyond the basic one-male-one-female model that is acceptable in most contemporary Western cultures - but only so long as these arrangements, whether between three people or twenty, remain exclusively heterosexual.

If attitudes towards sexuality in sf are ambivalent, critical attention to the issue has been close to non-existent. The one exception is the extent of criticism on the sub-genre of the lesbian feminist utopia, but even there the focus has often not been primarily on sexuality per se. A search on the term 'science fiction' on the MLA database yields 4,019 results, yet there are only thirty-four results for sf + 'sexuality'. A similar search yields 2,081 results for 'homosexuality', but when combined with sf results in citations for only eight articles, of which only two were published before 1990. The only anthologies on sexuality in sf remain Donald Palumbo's *Erotic Universe* and *Eros in the Mind's Eye* (both 1986). James Riemer's contribution to *Erotic Universe* is also the first serious critical analysis of the treatment of homosexuality in sf, other than the introduction to the first edition of Eric Garber and Lyn Paleo's annotated bibliography of alternative sexualities in sf, fantasy and horror, *Uranian Worlds* (1986). The entry for 'sex' in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993) gives a brief overview of historical attitudes towards the depiction of sexuality in sf; however, the one paragraph that deals with homosexuality mentions only Samuel Delany, Thomas Disch, Uranian Worlds and the Gaylactic Network. The most notable omissions here are women writers such as Joanna Russ and Marion Zimmer Bradley.

If sf is indeed the literature of ideas, then it is worth asking why it has taken so long for critics to begin to consider what sf has done with ideas about sexuality, particularly since the history of gender in sf demonstrates quite clearly that sf has been a potent field for thinking about some social, rather than technological, issues. The same could be said for race issues, as sf has had a relatively long history of attempting, no matter how inadequately, to depict a differently racialized future. The same cannot, however, be said for depictions of sexuality. While there are an ever increasing number of gay, lesbian and bisexual authors of sf, it is still relatively uncommon to encounter queer protagonists in the works of sf writers who do not identify themselves as queer. It may be possible to argue that this situation is also starting to change: for instance, Maureen McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang* (1992) has a gay protagonist and Ursula Le Guin's *The Telling* (2000) features a woman who loves women, both in novels that are not predominantly about issues of sexuality. Nevertheless, there is an interesting historical divergence between the treatment of race and gender in sf, and the treatment of sexuality.

There are thus a number of important questions that can be asked, using queer theory as a guide, about representations of sexuality and especially of alternative sexuality in sf. We might ask what sorts of sexualities have been depicted in sf and how have these depictions been constructed - are they allegorical, expository, extrapolative and so on. We might also interrogate whether depictions of heteronormative sexualities are indeed conscious extrapolations of the future or failures to imagine a world with a different social set-up at the basic level of sex. We might investigate the relationships between sexuality, sociality and biology. Additionally, we might consider in which directions contemporary sf is headed in its portrayals of sexuality. Finally we might ask how academic and critical work on sf might potentially address the question of sexuality through queer theory.
The sexual science(s)

When we speak about the representation of alternative sexualities in sf, we are generally referring to depictions of homosexuality. The very terminology by which we describe sexualities can be problematic. One of the quintessential arguments of queer theory is that homosexuality and heterosexuality are seen as natural oppositions in a binary epistemology of sexuality that is specific to a particular cultural moment. In making this argument, queer theory follows the famous assertion by Michel Foucault that our understanding of homosexuality, indeed our very ability to name certain people as homosexuals, is the result of a specific and radical shift in historical conceptions of human sexuality. Foucault says that,

[as defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.

In saying that 'the sodomite had been a temporary aberration[,] the homosexual was now a species', Foucault has sometimes been understood as arguing that no one in the past had a sense of themselves as different from those around them. In fact, there is an important distinction to be made here between cultural and subcultural epistemologies; when Foucault speaks of the homosexual becoming a species, he is referring not to the self-understanding of a gay minority culture, but to the dominant discourses by which the larger culture as a whole has understood human sexuality. Eve Sedgwick extends Foucault’s position here when she highlights the extraordinary particularity of this move towards a new categorization not just of what bodies can do, but of what type of bodies are capable of what sorts of actions. As Sedgwick points out, it is a peculiarity of nineteenth-century history that it was the homo/heterosexual binary that became the way in which we understand 'sexual orientation', despite the range of alternative possibilities for describing how people’s sexual practices and desires differ. The consequences of this new categorization were manifold; as homosexuals were named as a category, both the bodies and psyches of this new species became objects to be studied, regulated, treated and punished. By 1870, homosexuality had already begun to be constituted as a subject for medicine, psychiatry and the criminal law; male homosexuality was criminalized in England in 1885. The categorization of homosexuals as a species of person who were sick, perverted or criminal has had effects which have lasted well into the twenty-first century. Portrayals of homosexuals and bisexuals in sf during this period have unsurprisingly tended to reflect societal attitudes towards sexual dissidence. Garber and Paleo note that 'whether a "soul-sick lesbian", an effeminate caricature, a man-hating amazon, or a bloodthirsty vampire, the image of the homosexual was overwhelmingly stereotypical and one-dimensional'. Attempts to represent homosexuality in a sympathetic or non-stereotypical fashion often met with hostility; in the 1950s when Theodore Sturgeon first attempted to sell 'The World Well Lost', one sf editor 'not only rejected the story, but called up every other magazine editor in the field to tell them not to accept the story either'.

Homosexuality was not decriminalized in England until 1967, while in the USA criminal law affecting homosexuals varies from state to state, with many states still using sodomy statutes to criminalize homosexuals. Both the UK and the USA have legislation aimed at prohibiting the 'promotion' of homosexuality. The American Psychiatric Association classified homosexuality as a mental illness until 1973 and remnants of that categorization remain in the contemporary diagnosis of 'gender identity disorder', particularly when applied to children. While medicine has largely ceased to attempt to cure homosexuality through castration, hormone treatments and other such interventions, the initial association of AIDS with gay men in the early 1980s allowed some medical, religious and public discourses to reinscribe the notion that homosexuals are inherently diseased. Perhaps most pertinently for sf as a genre, medical and scientific research aimed at finding an etiology of homosexuality has focused on hormones, brain structure and the search for a 'gay gene'.

It is precisely this last situation that is explored in Keith Hartman's 'Sex, Guns and Baptists' (1998). An in utero test for the gene has been invented, and a world has come into being in which many queer fetuses are aborted, while existing queer children are abandoned to government camps. Catholicism becomes a code for gayness because, as gay Private Investigator Drew Parker explains to his homophobic Baptist client, 'there haven't been a lot of gay Baptists born in the last 23 years . . . Or Methodists. Or Mormons. Or Presbyterians. You all make a lot of noise about being pro-life, but in the clinch . . . you make "exceptions". Not the Catholics though.'

The near future USA that Hartman imagines in this story is an extrapolation from both contemporary science and contemporary sociopolitical discourses: fundamentalist Christians exert considerable influence on the political process, particularly as it affects issues related to sexuality (homosexuality, abortion, prostitution, pornography and the meaning of 'family'). The negative consequences of identifying a genetic component to homosexuality in such a political climate are hardly unforeseen. Some geneticists have themselves argued that a foetal test would be one of the first practical results of such a development. Hartman's story neatly illuminates the fact that were there to be hard scientific evidence of a particular etiology of homosexuality, the consequences of this discovery would not be met with neutrality; on the one hand, a 'gay gene' might be used, as in this story, in an attempt to eliminate gayness, while, on the other hand, it could equally well be mobilized to support claims that gayness is a natural inborn trait, like eye colour or handedness, that should simply be accepted by society and protected under human rights law.

While Hartman's work looks at the confluence of the search for a genetic cause of homosexuality and a right-wing political climate, 'Eat Reecebread' (1998) by Graham Joyce and Peter Hamilton explores the consequences of changing basic human sexual biology. More and more 'hermaphrodite' births are taking place and society becomes increasingly fearful and intolerant of those who are neither male nor female, but both. Anti-hermaphrodite laws are passed, 'Hermie' bashings increase and some police officers are actively conspiring to obstruct police intervention into crimes against hermaphrodites. Like Hartman's story, 'Eat Reecebread' is an extrapolation from contemporary scientific inquiry, based this time on reports of increasing incidences of intersex births amongst fish. The hermaphrodite response in 'Eat Reecebread' is to turn genetic science back on their tormentors, releasing the genes that cause hermaphroditism in plasmid-carrying viruses via Reecebread, the story's equivalent of the Big Mac. Hermaphrodites in 'Eat Reecebread' are treated very much as homosexuals have been - queer bashing and even murder are, for example, still prevalent - so that the story works to examine our cultural assumptions about the binary nature of sexed bodies (almost all cultural discourses naturalize the idea that humans come in only two sexes, despite the known incidence - about 1.7 per cent - of intersex births), and also metonymically to explore the societal difficulties confronting queer people.

This twofold attack on contemporary discourses of bodily sex and sexual orientation also serves to foreground the extent to which historical and cultural understandings of sexuality are often linked to ideas of gender. In many cases, sexual orientation is seen less as a type of desire or sexual practice than as a mismatch between sex and gender. In its more extreme forms, this conflation of sexuality with gender can take the form of seeing queer people as betraying their gender. Eleanor Arnason's Ring of Swords (1993), one of the decade's most intelligent explorations of gender and sexuality, depicts an alien society for whom homosexuality is normal. By depicting one of the two human protagonists, Nicky Sanders, as a traitor who has gone over to the hwarhath side, the novel also reminds the reader of the long history of conflating homosexuality both with gender treachery and with literal treachery - a conflation that was made, for example, both by the Nazis in Germany and by the House Un-American Activities Committee in the USA. However, unlike the two previous examples, both of which assume a biological foundation for difference, Ring of Swords sees sexuality as constructed through society's expectations, even though members of both societies see their own sexualities as innate and natural. In particular, the other humans are hard put to understand how Sanders, given that 'he was a perfectly ordinary heterosexual male twenty years ago', could possibly be enjoying not only a long-term homosexual relationship with a particular hwarhath, but also a series of promiscuous encounters
with other males. How does a 'normal' heterosexual human come to be queer for furry grey aliens? The depiction of sexuality in Ring of Swords thus raises many of the same questions that have gone into the debate between essentialists (who believe that people are born either gay or straight) and constructivists (who think that the meaning and expression of human sexuality is predominantly a result of culture); the novel depicts both human and alien sexualities as complex and difficult to explain, especially from within a given culture. In Sanders's attempt to name his own sexuality as 'homeosexual' instead of 'homosexual' - homeo means 'like' and homo 'same' - Arnason also pays attention to the importance of language in articulating differing conceptions of sexuality at different cultural and historical moments.

Queering sf

The very word 'homosexual' was only invented in 1868 and first used publicly in 1869, while the first use of the word 'heterosexual' occurred in 1880. However, although the word itself did not exist prior to the 1870s, it is certain that people in the past practised sex with members of their own sex. Queer theory has generally attempted to avoid historical anachronism and to signal that the homo/heterosexual binary is a cultural construct by finding alternative terminologies for historical 'gays' and 'lesbians'. Thus, terms like 'same-sex sex', 'alternative sexualities' and 'sexual dissidence' have been used to attempt to name a broad range of sexual practices that would now be categorized under 'gay' or 'lesbian' or 'queer'. Both the semantic and cultural specificity of ideas of gayness, queerness and so on, suggest that anyone genuinely interested in depicting the ways in which sexuality might be conceived in the future needs to think about epistemologies and terminologies as well as actual practices. The range of possibilities is constrained only by the logic of extrapolation and the limits of the author's imagination. Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time (1976), for example, depicts a future in which all humans are naturally bisexual, and societal and biological distinctions between men and women have become irrelevant, while Samuel Delany's Trouble on Triton (1976) offers the reader a world in which it is normal to believe that humans have multiple sexes, genders and sexualities and that children are best raised by at least five adults 'preferably with five different sexes'.

As mentioned above, the relatively few portrayals of alternative sexualities in sf until the 1960s were generally negative. The transition to positive representations of homosexuality, if not of challenges to heteronormativity itself, has traditionally been attributed to Theodore Sturgeon's 'The World Well Lost' (1952). Garber and Paleo speak of Sturgeon as having 'single-handedly opened the science-fiction field to explicit gay images'. Most synopses of this story describe the alien couple, who had initially charmed those on Earth, as being deported when it is discovered that they are the same sex. In fact, however, Earth authorities decide to honour the planet Dirbanu's wish to reclaim its refugees in the hope of facilitating trade with a society that has refused to have anything to do with humans. The loverbirds' secret is only discovered by one of the two human crewmembers, Grunty, when they are already en route back to Dirbanu. Indeed, the story is in many ways more about Grunty and his unrequited hidden love for his captain, Rootes, than it is about the loverbirds. The story is thus not only about tolerance (the loverbirds flee from homophobic Dirbanu to homophobic Earth), but also about desire, even if the relatively sympathetic portrayal of Grunty's sexuality is still figured as impossible either to satisfy or to speak aloud. It is also, perhaps ironically, about mutually sympathetic alliances between different types of queers, as Grunty sets the loverbirds free in the ship's lifeboat rather than leaving them to their doom. And finally, it is about the long-reaching ironies of making assumptions about which forms of sexuality are normal and which disgusting, as Dirbanu irrevocably rejects all contact with humans because the physical similarity of human males and females leads them to see humans as a queer race. In many respects, this story is both queerer and more contemplative about issues of sexuality than the canonical history of sf would suggest.

If there has then been a slowly burgeoning interest in the question of alternative sexualities within sf over the course of the last half century, it still remains for us to ask how queer theory, in particular, can illuminate the work being done in this area. One point needs to be made here:
the purpose of applying queer theory to sf is not primarily to recuperate a gay and lesbian history of the field, although that is an important basis for any comprehensive study of sexuality in sf, so much as to examine the conceptual bases of all possible depictions of sexualities within sf. Queer theory also tends to be sceptical about epistemologies which see sexual orientation as a fixed identity, so that sf which describes bodies, genders, sexualities as fluid is much more in harmony with approaches that celebrate fluidity, liminality and other radical tactics for deconstructing the rigidity of binary identity categories. While some queer theorists recognize the strategic usefulness of identity politics for short-term legal and political gains, the real aim of queer theory is to make possible a future in which society is radically restructured in order to invalidate fixed identities and deconstruct the Cartesian binarisms which automatically value white over black, male over female and straight over gay.

John Varley is one sf writer who often imagines such a fluid future, one in which even the body becomes plastic and characteristics that we have traditionally believed to be fixed and immutable, such as biological sex, are as easily changed as one's hairstyle. 'Beatnik Bayou' (1980), for example, is partially about teen sexuality in a society where sexuality is subject to few regulations beyond consent and is as malleable and variable as the body itself. The same sociosexual discourses inform another of Varley's Luna stories, 'Picnic on Nearside' (1974), only in this case the teenaged Lunarians meet a very old man, a survivor of old Earth who has chosen to exile himself from Luna society. The revelation that the old man has never been a woman is as shocking to the teenagers as his obsession with incest - a word they have to look up - is incomprehensible.15 Sexual and gender identities in Varley's stories are no longer a matter of discursive categories, but have become so fluid as to be almost purely performative, a notion supported by the exaggerated performances of femininity or masculinity amongst first-time sex changers.

Sexuality is also constructed as performative in Melissa Scott's queer cyberpunk novel, Trouble and her Friends (1994), where Trouble's ex-lover, Cerise, finds herself on the Net having virtual sex with a woman named Silk, who turns out to be the avatar of a teenaged boy. In this case, it is not the plasticity of the body but the limitless potential of virtual reality that breaks down the idea of fixed identity as a necessary or even as a desirable characteristic. In Trouble, the freedom of virtuality is emphasized by its contrast to the 'real' world, in which Trouble has 'always been on the outside, not quite of the community that polices the net, set apart by the brainworm, gender, and her choice of lovers'.16 The rigidities of Trouble's reality have their echoes in the virtual world, but at the same time virtuality provides a place beyond identities based in our apprehensions of the physical body, of skin colour, biological sex and the unstable bodily markers that are expected to identify sexual orientation. Unlike Varley's celebration of the body's potentialities, however, cyberpunk's relationship to the physical body is notoriously troubled. The body is 'meat', yet even this disdain for corporeality can only work by envisaging a meeting place between body and mind, reality and virtuality. In this liminal space, subjectivities multiply and a teenage hacker can become beautiful leather-clad Silk, the sex between 'her' and Cerise as real as it is illusionary, a performance that lasts only as long as the machine code that translates and enables it.

The idea of performativity is one of the most useful analytical tools of queer theory for postmodern forms of sf, including cyberpunk. The theory of performativity draws predominantly on Judith Butler's assertion that all gender is a performance that is both involuntary and always to some extent imperfect, as we fail to live up to the discursive ideals of 'male' and 'female'. The same can be said to apply to sexuality. Having a notion of what 'gay' means, those subjects who identify as gay inevitably perform a type of gayness that is regulated by the discourses surrounding homosexuality. Although one can change the specifics of a given performance of sexual orientation, sexual orientation itself remains immutably something that one is constrained to perform. As a tool for the analysis of sexuality and gender in cyberpunk, performativity is perhaps obvious; however, it may be as useful to apply it to such richly textured postmodern works as Geoff Ryman's The Child Garden (1989), where performance itself, particularly of music
and holographic opera, is highlighted at the same time that the protagonist, Milena, is unable to perform as an actor in pre-digested versions of Shakespeare. Ryman shows the limits of performativity in a world where only one interpretation of anything is possible, an interpretation that is already pre-programmed into every citizen's head by educational viruses. Ryman uses sf's ability to literalize metaphor to show performativity functioning at a level so extreme that it cannot help but be visible. The Child Garden is a world without options until Milena, the uninflectable, impossible lesbian, comes along to infect it with the possibility of getting the performance wrong.

Queer theory has only just started to provide new ways of looking at sf, one which suggests that sexuality is not merely peripheral, but absolutely central to the potential futures we may invent, as well as to our reflections on the present. In this sense, the application of queer theory to sf might take as its guideline Sedgwick's contention that 'an understanding of virtually any aspect of Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition'.17 Indeed, given the coincidence between the history of sf and the history of modern sexuality, sf can hardly escape the influence of a culture in which epistemologies of sexuality have become so naturalized as to be invisible. Science fiction's task, often, is to make visible to us the unthinking assumptions that limit human potentiality; epistemologies of sexuality are just as blinding and just as important to the construction of any future society as are epistemologies of science. It is scarcely surprising then to find that sf and queer theory frequently share both a dystopian view of the present and a utopian hope for the future, a hope that it will be, at the very least, a place where we do not automatically kill what is different.

NOTES


3. The term 'queer theory' was first used by Teresa de Lauretis for a conference at the University of California in 1989; for a useful overview, see Annamarie Jagose's Queer Theory: An Introduction (New York: New York University Press, 1996).


5. For a discussion of the various ways in which alternative sexuality may be introduced as a subject, see my 'Alien Cryptographies: The View from Queer', Science-Fiction Studies 26 (1999), pp. 1-22, at pp. 4-5.


14. Garber and Paleo, Uranian Worlds, p. x. 'The World Well Lost' is to be found in Sturgeon's E Pluribus Unicorn, pp. 53-68.


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