



# “Is there a Woman in this Space Opera?” A Gender Analysis of the Aliens of Orion

*Dorothea Boshoff & Deirdre C. Byrne*

*Abstract:* This article provides a textual analysis of *The Sentients of Orion*, a space-opera series by Australian feminist SF author Marianne de Pierres, with a view to investigating the series’s depiction of aliens as a reflection of contemporary views of human gender. This highlights the question of whether aliens are still used to reflect on the state of human gender roles now that society is moving past the simple black and white of the male/female binary. We undertake a qualitative exploration of selected aliens through the theoretical lenses of Judith Butler’s theory of gender as performative and queer theory. By drawing on these interpretive paradigms, we suggest that de Pierres’s aliens both register and reflect a significant broadening of the gender spectrum.

*Keywords:* Marianne de Pierres, *The Sentients of Orion*, non-humanoid aliens, gender, feminist science fiction, queer science fiction

## 1. Introduction

Aliens are part of the stock-in-trade of SF. In fact, they have been so pervasively woven into its métier that the early pulp magazines, such as *Astounding* and *Asimov's Science Fiction*, often featured stories about aliens, and the Bug-Eyed Monster was a regular cover image (Aylesworth 10). While SF does not always include aliens, they are a regular feature of the genre and symbolise otherness in all its many manifestations. As Helen Merrick argues, “Even if it is ultimately defused or recontained, the science-fictional alien is imminently 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” (“Queering” 220–21). This article will examine how the depiction of aliens in feminist SF author Marianne de Pierres’s *The Sentients of Orion*

series serves as a mirror reflecting contemporary views of humanity and, specifically, what it means to be a gendered human being.

The binary structure of Western thinking divides the world into Self and Non-Self, or other. The other is different from the self by virtue of one or more features, including age, sex, gender, race, class, religion, ability, language, ethnicity, profession, and geographical location. The initial reaction to an encounter with the other is usually aversion, leading to fear and/or hostility, as seen in the global history of wars and conflicts. These emotions underpin the representation of others as aliens in SF as “unlovable, imperialist and technologically superior” (Oldman 55). Elaine L. Graham observes that aliens are the SF equivalent of monsters as “representatives of the outcast, the marginal, and the abject” (59): in short, all that is not desirable in the human psyche and socius. Alienness also refers to alienation, which forms the basis of othering. Being the othered, or being alienated, are “states of existence not only for imaginary ETs [extraterrestrials] but for all who have been excluded from dominant categories of the human, the natural and the native” (Kaye and Hunter 1).

In this article, we explore one sub-group of terrestrial aliens: women. Many of the points of our exploration apply to other marginalised groups – particularly to racially excluded others – but here we confine ourselves to the fortunes and depictions of women in SF. According to Robin Roberts’s extended discussion of pulp SF magazines in *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction* (1993), SF authors use the “figure of the female alien” to “affirm the essential otherness of Woman and the threat that she poses to patriarchal society” (9). We take our conceptual entry point from Roberts’s description of the female alien as often being “nonhumanoid; nevertheless, her specifically feminine traits, such as mothering, nurturing, passivity, and sexual attractiveness to human males, suggests that this figure represents human women” (9).

The period covered by Roberts’s survey of pulp SF is roughly the 1950s and 1960s, which corresponds to second-wave feminism. Sarah Lefanu writes:

One of the major projects of the second wave of feminism is the investigation of gender and sexuality as social constructs, thus posing a challenge to notions of a natural law regulating feminine behaviour and an innate femaleness that describes and circumscribes “woman”. (4)

Second-wave feminism revolutionised accepted understandings of gender and sexuality, which goes some way towards explaining its wide-ranging influence on SF. Feminist theory has evolved and diversified considerably since the second wave, into areas such as Butler’s theory of performativity and queer theory. These approaches have shaped our thinking about de Pierres’s aliens in *The Sentients of Orion*.

As feminist theory and notions of social otherness have evolved, the aliens that have made their way into the pages of feminist SF have changed, too. Joanna Russ’s *Whileawayans* in “When it Changed” (1972), Sally Miller Gearhart’s *Hill Women* in *The Wanderground* (1975), and the *Shorans* in Joan Slonczewski’s *A Door into Ocean* (1986) are fairly standard-issue lesbian separatists, displaying the expected levels of anger and distrust towards men. These authors’ fictions are based on the assumption that men and women are

different species, although only Slonczewski explores imaginative ways in which the division can be bridged. By contrast, Ursula le Guin's androgynous Gethenians in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) queer gender and sexuality in significant ways. The text contrasts not having a fixed biological sex with the arrangements on Earth, where masculinity and femininity are core aspects of identity. The Gethenian blend of masculinity and femininity – if Le Guin's stubborn attachment to the masculine pronoun as “generic” is overlooked – encourages the reader to think about what a binary understanding of gender leaves out.

Aliens in later feminist SF have further queered the gender binary. Octavia Butler's Oankali in her *Lilith's Brood* trilogy (1987–1989) have three “sexes”: male, female, and ooloi. The Oankali wish to reproduce with human beings, but sexual union requires an ooloi to be present for conception to take place. The ooloi are an uber-sex, holding the power for life forms to reproduce. Sexual intercourse between humans and Oankali is distinctly queer, resembling human polyamory more than dyadic sexuality. Lilith Iyapo, the human being who first meets the Oankali, is black, thus introducing race into the queer dynamic of humans and Oankali.

Melissa Scott's SF, which appears in the *Paragons of Queer Speculative Fiction* series, conforms to Wendy Gay Pearson's description of “queer” as suggesting a “move not just towards a different conception of sexuality, but towards a different understanding of subjectivity and agency” (17). *The Shadow Man* (1995) is, in part, about the planet Hara, which is “alien” because of its insistence that there are only two sexes instead of the usual five. Regular mems, fems, and herms, who all have their own pronouns, are misgendered into the categories of male or female. In this way Scott models the painful struggles of many LGBTQIA+ people who have been forced to conform to a gender system that does not accommodate them. As this brief discussion shows, Wendy Gay Pearson, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon's overview of the way aliens in feminist SF have developed (5–7) can be extended into more recent writing. De Pierres's representation of gender-diverse beings in *The Sentients of Orion* fits into the trends that Pearson, Hollinger, and Gordon identify.

The polymorphous shapes, sizes, genders, and sexualities of aliens in feminist SF emphasise Judith Butler's point that gender is not what one *is*, but what one *does*. As early as 1988 Butler asserted, prefiguring her exploration of the performative nature of gender in *Gender Trouble*: gender is an “identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). With this and other discussions of the performativity of gender, such as in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler shifted feminist theory away from the second wave's view of gender as constructed towards a more sophisticated understanding of the discursive and iterative processes that construct it. In a Butlerian reading of aliens in SF, they do not so much possess gender – indeed, there is no such “thing” as gender – as create it through their performances. Octavia Butler's ooloi behave in ways that resonate with both a masculinised drive to conquer and a feminised ease with managing human and alien emotion. Thus, they exemplify a “both/and” performance of gender rather than an “either/or” view. In our reading of de Pierres's aliens in *Sentients of Orion*, we are not overly concerned with the innate gender of any alien, but, in

a Butlerian vein, more with their actions and what these reveal of their relationship with gender norms and conventions.

The body has been the focus of a long tradition of feminist debate and theory, much of which questions the association of women with the body and men with the mind. This thought-tradition begs the question of what happens to gender and sexuality when the body is modified, enhanced, or even absent. Such jettisoning of the body recalls the posthumanist moment, discussed by N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). For Hayles, the condition of the posthuman is characterised by three principles: posthumanism

privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, [it] considers consciousness ... as an epiphenomenon .... Third, the posthuman thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate .... (2–3)

An intimate part of being human, which is consistently represented in feminist SF, is sex and its social construction in gender systems. Being a man is no longer necessarily the measure of being human, as (white, heterosexual) masculinity has come under fire from feminist critiques of the so-called “generic” male in *mankind*. Humanity is no longer thought of as singular or monolithic, but as plural and diverse. In line with this trend, social understandings of gender have become more inclusive and much less binary. As images of the human change and become more inclusive of a gender continuum rather than a gender binary, the image of the alien in imaginative literature also shifts and develops, incorporating a growing awareness of gender as fluid and multiple. This is the shift we discern in *The Sentients of Orion*.

While the Golden Age of SF saw “the other”, the alien, posing a female threat to patriarchy (Roberts 9), we explore how Marianne de Pierres, writing in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, portrays aliens. We probe the ways in which de Pierres has extended the scope of alien gender and sexuality, and we speculate that her aliens reflect on the portrayal of a broad spectrum of humanity. Finally, we argue that de Pierres’s aliens may effectively represent human gender roles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We focus on *The Sentients of Orion*, comprising four volumes: *Dark Space*, *Chaos Space*, *Mirror Space*, and *Transformation Space*. *The Sentients of Orion* has been referred to as a “blockbuster space opera” (Suciu). De Pierres is an established Australian author; all the novels in the series were shortlisted for Aurealis awards, a prominent Australian speculative fiction award established in 1995, while the final novel, *Transformation Space*, won. Her work is the subject of a chapter on “Cyber Punk and Post-Humanism” in *Apocalypse in Australian Fiction and Film* (Weaver 159–85), and *The Sentients of Orion* has also served as the focus of a doctoral thesis (Boshoff). Before these academic texts, de Pierres’s writing, while popularly acclaimed, was largely ignored by the academy. (De Pierres has subsequently completed a PhD in Creative Writing.) Even within a populist genre such as SF, there is canon formation in the “process of inclusion or exclusion” of works deemed worthy of critical attention (Guillory 483). In our choice to focus on de Pierres’s work, we do not subscribe to the division between literary and popular fiction: in our view, de Pierres’s series

is possibly more influential by virtue of its large readership than many, more “highbrow” SF texts.

## 2. Plot Synopsis and Types of Aliens in *The Sentients of Orion*

*The Sentients of Orion* presents the reader with a dazzling plethora of aliens, which we will briefly describe here. We also provide an outline of key elements of the series’s plot to facilitate our discussion of the way gender is performed in the text.

Mira Fedor is a pilot who inherits from her father an innate gene that enables her to pilot a sentient biozoon – a race of sentient, biological spaceships – called *Insignia*. The Saqr, a water-based alien species, unexpectedly invade their planet Araldis. During Mira’s flight, she is raped by Trinder “Trin” Pellegrini, the Crown Prince, for the sake of the continuation of the royal line. Trin sends Mira away on *Insignia*,<sup>1</sup> on a mission to find help for Araldis elsewhere in their galaxy, while he leads the survivors of the attack to safety with the help of Djes, a half-alien girl. Mira travels with Jo-Jo Rasterovich, a space pilot, and Rast Randall, a female mercenary, but their mission is waylaid when Mira is captured and imprisoned by the Post-Species Extropists,<sup>2</sup> who experiment on her and her unborn child before she manages to escape with the help of one of her gaolers, a being called Wanton-poda, who, in the course of helping her to escape, loses its “body”.

As it turns out, with the possible exception of the protagonist Jo-Jo, every character in *The Sentients of Orion* is, strictly speaking, “non-human”. Jo-Jo’s ancestors originate from Earth, but taking into consideration that “his family hadn’t lived on that world, in that constellation, for a thousand years” (*Dark* 111), it can be concluded that there are no real humans in *The Sentients of Orion*. The closest are the “humanesques”, who possess humanoid bodies and recognisably human social structures. But, as Isiah Lavender III writes, “skin color matters in our visions of the future,” and the consciousness of repetitions of the color line can be “acquired only by exploring the possible worlds of SF and lifting blacks, indigenous peoples, and Latinos out from the background of this historically white genre” (3–4). Lavender’s mention of Latinos resonates with de Pierres’s main characters Mira and Trin, who are also Latinos. Their ethnic names and vivid red skins set them apart and, by implication, as inferior to the default race, which is (as we know) white. Apart from their red colour, the alienness of the Latino race is depicted through their method of procreation, in which women have absolutely no agency (other than carrying the baby) and men are fully in control of the procreative process. If not for their colouring and their method of procreation, the humanesque characters could be considered human. It is interesting (and probably not a coincidence) that these very features – the colour red and women’s lack of choice in procreation – are elements used by Edgar Rice Burroughs in *A Princess of Mars* to defamiliarise both the context and the inhabitants of his

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<sup>1</sup> De Pierres uses italics throughout the series to refer to *Insignia*.

<sup>2</sup> A group of aliens who have, through genetic engineering, developed beyond species, gender or body.

imaginary Martian world. For the purposes of this discussion, though, we will consider the red-skinned humanesques in Orion as human.

Several non-human aliens remain in Orion, and their sheer vertiginous diversity, as well as their ongoing struggles for dominance, both reflect and refract the importance of race in SF (cf. Lavender). These include the invading, insect-like Saqr; the biozoon spaceships; Sole, the Entity known as God; Nova, Mira’s “daughter”; Djeserit Ionil, the half-breed consort of the crown prince; and the genetically engineered and highly evolved Post-Species Extropists. We provide brief notes about the gender and gender implications of each type of alien below, as they each carry intriguing gender resonances. The sheer variety of gender permutations among the aliens implies a deliberate attempt by de Pierres to highlight the shortcomings of a binary approach to gender.

The “alien invasion trope” (Attebery 54) is central to the manner in which the Saqr invade Araldis and, in the process, catalyse the events of *The Sentients of Orion*. They are insect-like, “glistening, carapaced” creatures with “six fore-claws and two hind claws” (*Dark* 215). The Saqr are too primitive to have developed a sex or gender. They are notably neither gender-neutral nor have they evolved beyond gender – they are simply lacking in the biological and social qualities that give rise to gender. The Saqr attack with slashing claws, but mostly with “thin, needle-like stylets” protruding from their mouths (*Dark* 216). In this they are strongly reminiscent of A. A. Attanasio’s “zötls” (54), which puncture human brains with a “feeder tube” intending to cause pain or, in the case of the Saqr, death. They are depicted as non-sentient creatures, and are referred to using the gender-neutral pronoun “it”. Survivors of the attack find that the “[b]astards don’t even need each other to spawn” (*Transformation* 210). The Saqr were initially harmless water creatures, “Tardigrada giantus ... *relative of anthropods*”, but have been genetically altered “*to survive for decades in a dry state*” (168, original emphasis), which made them aggressive. The genetic alteration allows them to be active outside water, thus able to wreak destruction and death on the desert planet Araldis. Water, the natural habitat of the Saqr, is a symbol of the feminine (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 345); thus, de Pierres’s linkage of the Saqr’s loss of dependency on water with their lack of gender consideration and sexual procreation is pertinent, as it presents a catastrophic picture of a world that rejects the value of women and the values that have conventionally been coded as feminine: respect, nurturing, and kindness.

Another alien group outside the established gender binary of current society is the biozoon pod, a species of sentient spaceship of no specified gender. While biozoons “do not have a clear distinction between male and female”, they are not “hermaphrodites” either, needing “several of their own kind to reproduce. Two are not enough” (*Chaos* 51). The leader of the biozoon pod is the “Omniarch”, a title that stresses the genderless state of the biozoons, a highly developed species. The biozoons, like Doris Lessing’s highly evolved and androgynous Canopeans, consider that “having emotional or physical or psychological characteristics that are considered as appertaining to one sex rather than another ... is normal on the more backward planets” (*Chaos* 142). Through *Insignia*, the biozoons echo the implication that clinging to male/female gender assignments stands between humanesques and further evolution (*Mirror* 301). *Insignia* describes biozoon sexuality as “*diverse and subtle ... I need several of my own kind to reproduce. It is our way of keeping*

our species strong. Unlike you who have genetically limited yourselves to a single choice” (Chaos 19, original emphasis). By introducing this alien view of intimacy, de Pierres suggests that human perceptions of gender and sexuality might be weak and limiting. When humanesques try to come to grips with biozoon gender, they mostly try to assign either male or female gender to them, leaving no room for gender indeterminacy (51). Others, like Rast and the mercenaries, not understanding *Insignia* in terms of sex, gender, or sexuality, fall back on making crude jokes (51), which is an uncomfortable parallel to modern-day reality.

Sole, also known as “the Entity” or god, is only a presence: it has no body, gender, or compassion. When the Extropist attacks start, Sole disappears (*Transformation* 50). It does so without bothering to “warn the tyros of the danger. Whatever the nature of its sentience, compassion surely did not feature” (133). Tekton has been “afforded a glimpse into the Entity’s mysteries, and he’d not seen anything resembling compassion among the terrifying dizzying universe of knowledge and experiences he’d been plunged into” (195). Sole’s lack of caring is further evident in the painful manner it chooses to communicate with humanesques. Mira feels its presence enter her “mind like a shaft rammed along her backbone, a painful, stiffening jolt and a sense of invasion” (387). The description has overtones of rape, as if de Pierres places Sole as masculine aggressor against Mira’s feminine precarity. If emotional intimacy is based on affective warmth, closeness, and communication, it is doubtful that intimacy can exist between Sole and any other being in the series. Apart from the fact that their very contact is painful to Mira, there is a depth of miscommunication between them. What Sole sees as “*little problems, little things, little one*” is to Mira a “*cruel game*” played by the Entity (387, original emphasis). De Pierres uses this incident to point out the depth of miscommunication between genders, but also to highlight the conflict between gender fluidity and adherence to static gender norms. Sole, whose very name connotes singularity and one-dimensionality, is a caricature of conventional views of the deity as only masculine, lacking any form of “feminine” tenderness or concern for others.

Mira’s biological “daughter” Nova also poses a complex, queer challenge to the gender binary. Jo-Jo points out to Sole that the Post-Species Extropists’ experiments have caused “some changes” to Nova’s metabolism and that she is “not entirely” humanesque (*Mirror* 202). In spite of this, Mira insists on projecting humanesque qualities onto Nova (203), such as using the feminine pronoun and referring to Nova as her “daughter”. Even though Nova has no particular gender, being born “with no man’s tackle” (79) and without “reproductive organs of either sex” (148), even *Insignia* assigns her the pronoun “she” to help Mira negotiate the unfamiliar gender landscape (155). The use of “she” as Nova’s pronoun prefigures the contemporary trend of respecting pronoun choice as a signal of the individual’s gender affinity, irrespective of bodily configuration.

Baby Nova easily enters the “mind meld” between Mira and *Insignia* (*Transformation* 182) and acts as the deciding factor, “mediating” between Mira and *Insignia*, and later with Sole (200). This could simply be Nova’s nature, or the child could be performing what is expected of “her” dubiously assigned gender: the role of peacemaker. If Nova takes on this feminine characteristic, it is by choice, not by default, as “she” actively rejects other

stereotypically female traits, such as being in need of care (254), and “she” is beyond being assigned a specific gender (148–54).

In Italian, on which de Pierres’s Latino language is mostly modelled, Nova means “new”. Nova is not only a new being heralding a new beginning after the trauma of Mira’s rape; the child is also a new type of humanesque and embodies gender innovation. By ascribing gender-neutrality to Nova, who is benign (in contrast to the destructive Post-Species Extropists and the vindictive Sole), de Pierres portrays the positive aspects of gender fluidity as opposed to highlighting the threat it holds. This, too, is new. Finally, Nova represents hybridity as a new means to address the lack engendered by alienation (Kaye and Hunter 7).

The sheer range of differently gendered species supports our argument that de Pierres is deliberately attempting to show alternatives to binary models of self/other, human/alien. In order to explore in greater depth how de Pierres’s depiction of aliens reflect contemporary views of human gender, we have chosen to undertake an in-depth analysis of the two alien characters who occupy opposite poles on the continuum of embodied and disembodied gender: Djeserit Ionil (“Djes”) and the Post-Species Extropists. These two aliens hold particular resonances for our understanding of what it means to be human and SF’s capacity to interrogate gender through representing aliens.

### 3. Djeserit Ionil: Woman-Becoming-Water

All the non-humanesque aliens in *The Sentients of Orion* are, with one exception, gender-neutral or “evolved” beyond gender. Djes is racially mulatto – half alien and half humanesque – and therefore seen as inferior by both aliens and humanesques. She is also, as a heterosexual female, the only alien in *The Sentients of Orion* who is pointedly assigned a sex, sexuality, and gender. De Pierres’s deliberate coding of Djes in this manner is a good starting point, therefore, for examining the portrayal of gendered alienness in the series.

For Roberts, an alien is gendered as female by its otherness, regardless of its biology. As previously quoted, Roberts describes the (female) alien as often being “nonhumanoid; nevertheless, her specifically feminine traits, such as mothering, nurturing, passivity, and sexual attractiveness to human males, suggests that this figure represents human women” (9). All these traits, which allude to conventional constructions of femininity, are present in Djes, with whom the Crown Prince, Trin, has an illicit and abusive sexual relationship. Another trait common to alien females, according to Wendy Pearson, is the use of magic and psychic abilities (183), and while Djes shows no sign of telepathy or any other magical power, she is a water creature, symbolic of the unconscious and the intuitive, which are associated with the feminine (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 123). These powers, along with the ability to reproduce, are a direct threat to male dominance (Roberts 9). De Pierres thus specifically codes Djes as a traditional female alien and, as such, a threat to patriarchy.

Djes is initially presented as a “ragazza”, a child, but Trin’s perception of her is completely sexual. She is not depicted in the way a child would be, but in the way a woman would be (*Dark* 132), which further elucidates the role Djes is to play, as a child-woman and source of irresistible sexual fascination to the



young humanesque prince. As her character develops, Djes grows into her “*aqua*” species, becoming more water creature and more alien (133, original emphasis). She starts identifying more with the sea creatures than with the humanesque survivors (*Chaos* 362; *Mirror* 43). Trin’s “losing her to the sea” (*Chaos* 363) through her becoming more and more a water creature means she is growing in confidence in her sexuality. Djes’s femininity is signalled by her affinity with water, the element that symbolises the removal or dissolution of boundaries. As she matures, her growing agency in regard to her sexuality, rather than her alienness, becomes more and more threatening to Trin (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 123).

Djes completes her transformation from an abandoned child into a woman with a say in her own destiny, and that of others, when, after learning that Trin raped Mira, “in an oddly final gesture, she scooped water in her hands and splashed it over her face” (*Transformation* 370). Women’s bodies are often associated with liquids: blood, milk, and tears (Kristeva 143). Their psyche is often seen as fluid and watery (Byrne 2). In splashing water over her face, Djes acknowledges the importance of her femininity and takes ownership of it, but not as a force that will swallow her in an ocean of undifferentiation. The water she splashes over her face helps to clear her vision and to see Trin for what he is: a tyrant, a rapist, and a coward. To evoke another cultural archetype, her prince is an unenchanted and unenchanted frog.

After splashing water over her face, Djes leaves Trin (*Transformation* 375). In this act, she is more agential than reactive. She rejects Trin, but also takes up the mantle of leadership and becomes responsible for the future of the majority of the survivors (374). Her actions are conventionally feminine in that she becomes a nurturing, protective, maternal leader. Ultimately, de Pierres portrays Djes fully embracing her feminine qualities. These include, as second-wave feminists noted, the power to reject abusive men. In so doing, Djes brings down the patriarchal system to which Trin is heir. In this, Djes, as the only female alien in *The Sentients of Orion*, powerfully enacts Roberts’s posited threat to patriarchy (9).

#### 4. The Post-Species Extropists

In direct contrast to this positioning of the female alien, de Pierres presents the Extropists, or Post-Species Extropists: further removed from human than the red-skinned humanesques or the accessible, only half-alien Djes, and completely removed from any human quality in their physical appearances and their gender representations. Extropy is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (620) as the “pseudoscientific principle that life will expand indefinitely and in an orderly, progressive way throughout the entire universe by the means of human intelligence and technology”. The Post-Species Extropists in *The Sentients of Orion* are a technologically advanced “multi-species group that opposes” the belief in evolution as a “natural process that should not be interfered with” (*Chaos* 237).

The most striking feature of the Post-Species Extropists is that they have separated their selfhood from having bodies and, like the body-switching characters in *Schild’s Ladder* (Egan 3), occupy others’ bodies. In this way, they enact what Hollinger refers to as the “neo-Cartesian future” (272). Their name

signifies a nod to the term “PostHuman” even as it gestures towards their belief that they are beyond possessing a species. According to them, they are “destined to control and shape their own evolution” using extreme measures of “genetic manipulation” (*Chaos* 237). The evolution of their minds is prioritised over the needs or interests of their host bodies. In this way, they enact the phallogocentric privileging of cognition over embodiment. Their habit of invading others’ bodies recalls Bruce Sterling’s two central themes of cyberpunk:<sup>3</sup>

The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry – techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self. (xiii)

Sterling’s discussion has striking affinities with Hayles’s description of posthumanism as privileging information over corporeality and viewing bodies as mere prostheses, which are also features of de Pierres’s Post-Species Extropists’ behaviour. For them, consciousness is the supreme value.

As the Post-Species Extropists do not have bodies, they do not possess sex or gender. They are not androgynous; neither are they transgender, despite the fact that they swap bodies and (presumably) gender without any difficulty. However, their agender status is even more disruptive of conventional gender norms than their being transgender would have been: like Susan Stryker’s description of transgender theory, they possess a “tremendous utility, both political and theoretical, in the new concept of an antiessentialist, postidentitarian, strategically fluid ‘queerness’” (213). The fact that they perform conventional masculinity in their domineering and threatening actions towards others (*Chaos* 339, 369, 370) strengthens de Pierres’s choice to queer the representation of her most “alien” aliens.

The Post-Species Extropists represent the ultimate “transhumanist vision” in their mastery of “mind uploading” (Hook 2517; cf. More 1998). Kim Toffoletti perceives this “tension between the human and technological [as] indicative of the posthuman”, arguing that it “disrupts traditional understandings of selfhood, identity, the body and reality” (4). Gender is a crucial part of a traditional understanding of identity, and being without a fixed body troubles the ascription of gender. The Post-Species Extropists align with what Joan Haran refers to as an “extreme version of Cartesian dualism” (253). Haran further points out the difficulties that disembodiment might pose for feminist theorists, as it challenges the concepts of “woman” and of “body”: a grasp of both these concepts and of their entanglement is integral to feminism (254). A key aspect brought to the fore by posthumanism (and by de Pierres’s Post-Species Extropists) is a strong “anxiety about boundaries”, including procreative and gender boundaries. The “revolutionary potential of cybernetics to reconfigure bodies” brings with it the threat, if uncontained, to the “autonomy of the (male) liberal subject” (Hayles 113). While retaining the

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<sup>3</sup> Cyberpunk was, for several decades, a highly masculinist subgenre. Nevertheless, women authors such as Pat Cadigan, Mary Rosenblum, and Laura Mixon have made powerful inroads into the genre. Significantly, the gender and sexuality presented in these new authors’ writing are more queer than traditionally dyadic: for example, Allie in Cadigan’s *Mindplayers* has an ambiguously gendered name, while Rosenblum’s *Chimera* contains explicit homoeroticism.

element of the female alien as threatening to masculinity, the Post-Species Extropists further represent the threat of gender fluidity to the gender binary prescribed by patriarchy. The Post-Species Extropists can therefore be said to “queer the pitch” (Abraham 42) of embodied gender and, indeed, embodiment.

The “corporeal part of the Extropists takes many different forms” (*Chaos* 339). Toffoletti poses the question of whether “posthuman, post-gender images, like queer, bisexual and transgender bodies” can engender a “move beyond a dialectical way of thinking about, not only gender, but other social categories of difference” (82), a question which can be applied directly to the Extropists. While the texts do not elaborate about Post-Species Extropists’ reproduction, the reader may well question whether they change gender as they change bodies. Likewise, does the body they assume change its gender performance in line with that of the occupying Post-Species Extropist, or does the body they assume become gender-neutral in reflection of the occupier? The existence of beings without bodies prods the reader towards asking questions about a “different understanding of subjectivity and agency” (Pearson “Alien Cryptographies” 17).

Throughout Mira’s captivity, de Pierres personalises the impersonal aspects of the Post-Species Extropists by creating a close relationship between Mira and her Extropist gaoler, Wanton-poda, thus lessening the threat they pose to other species. Mira and Wanton-poda manage to escape (*Mirror* 105), but Wanton-poda loses its “host” body “poda” and becomes Wanton only, thereby further “embodying” questions regarding the role of the body in consciousness. The Post-Species Extropists’ post-body state is intriguing for feminist embodiment theory. What remains when the body disappears? How transient is the influence of society on the body if consciousness can exist without it? Would such consciousness still possess a gender/genders? Hollinger raises similar questions:

What might be in store for the human body as it becomes increasingly vulnerable to technological intervention and transformation? What might be its future as virtual experiences become increasingly accessible and increasingly difficult to distinguish from embodied ones? (268)

If disembodiment is one of humanity’s futures, is this not dangerously close to (androcentric) Cartesianism (Hayles 19), where a body is merely a vehicle for consciousness (Haran 253)? From this position “it is a small step to perceiving information as more mobile, more important, more essential than material forms” (Hayles 19) rather than seeing the body as crucial to the human experience, as most feminists do (Grosz 14; Bordo; Bartky; Butler; Young).

The Post-Species Extropists are much more technologically advanced than the other beings in *The Sentients of Orion*. In our society, technological advances have already affected human health, age, physical performance, and reproductive issues and, through gender-affirming surgery, have enabled transgender individuals to live in a way that biologically expresses their preferred gender. Hollinger refers to a tendency among feminists to disavow “technoscience” because of their “conventional identification with nature and the body” (274), but other feminists, such as Haraway, no longer see this kind of technological advancement of bodies (and maybe gender choices) as optional (35). We agree with Haraway that technology has become an inescapable part

of human *being* and becoming, although we realise that not all humans subscribe to this view. De Pierres’s Post-Species Extropists imply that, with the aid of technology, there could be a viable post-gender future for sentient beings.

## 5. Conclusion

There is a clear parallel between the status of aliens in SF and marginalised groups such as women, people of colour, and LGBTQIA+ people in consensus society. In Golden Age SF, these groups were consistently rendered inferior to the prototypical white (cisgendered) heterosexual man (Wolmark 3; Pearson “[Re]Reading” 183). Djes, as the only female alien in *The Sentients of Orion* series, and the Post-Species Extropists address different aspects of the development of aliens as feminised and sexualised others. Djes represents the threat of the female other to the patriarchal status quo. In her Post-Species Extropists, de Pierres’s aliens call the very meaning of humanity into question. In using these aliens to gesture towards gender-fluid identities and the possible threat they hold for the binary status quo, she also holds forth the tantalising possibility of gender hybridity and a post-gender humanity. Butler’s analysis of gender usurpation aptly describes the situation of many of de Pierres’s aliens in *The Sentients of Orion*: the “language of usurpation suggests a participation in the very categories from which s/he feels inevitably distanced, suggesting also the denaturalized and fluid possibilities of such categories once they are no longer linked causally or expressively to the presumed fixity of sex” (*Gender* 128). Instead of mere replication, de Pierres uses the traditional alien challenge to the patriarchy to question the very meaning of the male/female binary, and, by implication, the meaning of being human. If female aliens are representative of the threat women pose to patriarchy, as Roberts argues (9), the non-gendered aliens of *The Sentients of Orion* are representative of the threat that gender incoherence (Butler, *Bodies* 143–49) and gender fluidity hold for the heteronormative binary status quo.

*Biographies:* Dorothea Boshoff is a lecturer in English at the University of Mpumalanga in South Africa. Her research interests include speculative fiction, science fiction, feminist approaches to literature, as well as creative writing. Her most recent publication is “Becoming Alien(ated): A case study examining intimacy and loneliness in selected works by Marianne de Pierres”, *Dedalus – Portuguese Journal of Comparative Literature*, forthcoming.

Deirdre C. Byrne is a full professor of English Studies at the University of South Africa. She is one of the Co-Editors of the academic journal *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*. Her research interests include the writing of Ursula K. Le Guin, feminist approaches to literature, speculative fiction, and South African women’s poetry. Her most recent publication is *Entanglements and Weavings: Diffractive Approaches to Gender and Love*, published by Brill in 2021.

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