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SCIENCE FICTION

# 'HIS UNSPOKEN NATURAL CENTER'

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ARTICLE

## 'His Unspoken Natural

# Center': James Tiptree Jr as 'The Other I'

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout literary history, a number of women writers have taken on male *nom de plumes*. Critics and other observers have noted the ways in which these names have been adopted for pragmatic reasons: in order to provide women with avenues for publication that enhance their reputations as (male) writers, and protect their identities as (female) daughters, sisters, wives and mothers.

Alice B. Sheldon created James Tiptree, Jr in 1967. In this paper, I argue that Tiptree, or 'Tip' as he was known to his friends, was not merely a *nom de plume*. Rather, Tip was a fully realised identity—Alice's alter ego, or 'Other I'—a well-known and respected writer who maintained epistolary relationships with other writers, editors, publishers, and readers.

In Seymour Chatman's, *Coming to Terms*, he writes that the act of reading is "ultimately an exchange between real human beings, [which] entails two intermediate constructs" (Chatman, 75). This paper examines the ways Tip's identity, as revealed in his creative works and in his letters, disrupts the gender-normative structure of this 'exchange', particularly in terms of the assumed correlation between the gender of the Implied Author and that of the 'real human being' he is

(mis)recognised as being.

## KEYWORDS

Queer; Performance; Identity; Science Fiction; James Tiptree

## FULL TEXT

James Tiptree, Jr was a writer of science fiction. His works appeared in various high-profile science fiction magazines between 1968 and about 1980. During that time, he was nominated for ten Hugo awards, and won two of them; and was nominated for nine Nebula Awards, of which he won three.

His work was highly regarded for a range of reasons, including the ways it combined the familiar markers of 'good' science fiction, including—as Silverberg described Tip's work —'ineluctably masculine' writing, with an intelligent and considered engagement with race and, more particularly, gender. He often wrote from a female viewpoint.

Silverberg, describing Tiptree's work in an introduction to *Warm Worlds and Otherwise*, wrote that:

It has been suggested that Tiptree is female, a theory that I find absurd, for there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree's writing. I don't think the novels of Jane Austen could have been written by a man nor the stories of Ernest Hemingway by a woman, and in the same way I believe the author of the James Tiptree stories is male ... Hemingway was a deeper and trickier writer than he

pretended to be; so too with Tiptree, who conceals behind an aw-shucks artlessness an astonishing skill for shaping scenes and misdirecting readers into unexpected abysses of experience. And there is, too, that prevailing masculinity about both of them—that preoccupation with questions of courage, with absolute values, with the mysteries and passions of life and death as revealed by extreme physical tests, by pain and suffering and loss. (Silverberg 1975, xv)

Science fiction, though often cited as having its origins in Mary Shelley's iconic novel, *Frankenstein*, has a long history of considering itself a male, or at least masculine, genre. A genre written by and for men in a largely masculine style identified by, for example, an emphasis on action over characterisation or style, with science and rationality over emotion, and with speed and economy over beauty of expression.

Even when women do write and publish science fiction, its claim to belong within the genre has been often and loudly critiqued. Pat Murphy, for example, at a panel at the feminist science fiction convention WisCon in March 1991, ironically stated:

... that women don't write science fiction. Put a little more rudely, this rumbling says: 'Those damn women are ruining science fiction.' They are doing it by writing stuff that isn't 'real' science fiction; they are writing 'soft' science fiction and fantasy. (cited in Yant 2014)

In 2002, the publication of Karen Joy Fowler's short story 'What I Didn't See'—a story in conversation with Tiptree's short story 'The Women Men Don't See'—

on *SciFiction.com* sparked a long-running and heated debate about whether it actually was science fiction or not. Brenda Cooper was typical in applauding the story but remarking that it was “not science fiction” (Duchamp in Larbalestier 2006, 370).

More recently, in 2012, after the Arthur C Clarke judging panel put forward an all-male longlist, the judges published an article in *The Guardian* defending the outcome by insisting that women were, in general, not writing science fiction, even when they thought they were. As Walter writes:

Encoded into this strange divide between fantasy and science fiction is what Joanna Russ, author of *The Female Man*, called The Double Standard of Content. *How To Suppress Women's Writing*, Russ's satirical text on sexism in art, is 30 years old this year but its lessons are still largely unlearned. Women's writing is dismissed as fantasy, while the fantasies of men are granted some higher status as science fiction. (Walter 2013)

Women writers are commonly understood as interlopers in the field of science fiction; as writers who are largely incapable of writing 'real' aka 'hard' science fiction. A perception memorably hashtagged after the Clarke Award announcement, and in a special issue put together by *Lightspeed Magazine*, as #WomenDestroyScienceFiction.

Wendy Pearson writes, in an analysis of Tiptree's short story 'And I Woke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill Side', that women characters are “presented as aliens in a society in which men are assumed to be the norm” (cited in Larbalestier 2006, 183). I would argue that women writers, too, have been

consistently understood as aliens—as 'Others'—within the science fiction community, where male writers are assumed to be the norm.

By now, unless you're a regular reader of science fiction (or you've read the abstract for this paper) you're probably wondering what any of this has to do with James Tiptree, Jr. I'll try to explain.

Tip was a notorious recluse, but he was also an active and engaged member of the science fiction community who "had a voluminous correspondence with editors, other writers, and fans and took part in a variety of sf-related events, such as the symposium on women in science fiction printed in the fanzine *Khatru*" (Pearson in Larbalestier 2006, 171).

Tip, however, was ejected from the *Khatru* symposium because, as Lefanu (a fellow participant) has written, he was "the women found her male persona too irritating to deal with" (Pearson in Larbalestier 2006, 171). His good friend, Joanna Russ, told him that he had ideas "no woman could even think, or understand, let alone assent to" (Phillips 2006, 3).

His letters were littered with references to "fishing, duck hunting, and politics. He was courtly and flirtatious with women. When ... Robert Silverberg sent him a letter on his wife's stationery, Tip answered that he had 'shaved and applied lotion' before reading on" (Phillips 2006, 2).

Jeff Smith, a then very young sf-fan who later became Tip's literary executor, from quite early on in their correspondence,

urged Tip to attend cons and award ceremonies—to make physical his virtual interactions with the science fiction community. In 1974, just after winning the Nebula for 'The Girl Who Was Plugged In', Tip wrote to Jeff:

I can't explain it, really. Partly stubbornness, I fear. I don't see who I'm hurting, why can't I squat in my cave in peace? I'm just a plain old mortal, I don't see why I have to present the knobby flesh to be scanned in vain for what makes the words come out ... (cited in Phillips 2006, 323-324).

To Virginia Kidd, Tip wrote: "What could the metabolizing hunk that is me be but a disappointment?" (cited in Phillips 2006, 324).

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In 1976, Tiptree's mother passed away. Mary Bradley had been a published writer—she had won an O Henry Prize. A dashing, eccentric, inspiring and somewhat intimidating figure. As a child, Tip had travelled to Africa with Mary. During the first trip, when Tip was six years old:

After slaughtering five gorillas, they kept one of the babies under [Tip's] cot, causing the smell of formaldehyde to pervade everything. Mary killed a lion and posed next to it until it came back to life, not fully dead until she shot it in the heart. (Carnevale 2010)

Mary's passing was devastating. Tiptree wrote to Jeff Smith, passing on news of his mother's death and asking Jeff to arrange to have an obituary printed in *Khatru*, "so friends would know why they hadn't heard from him" (Phillips 2006,

357).

Jeff decided to do some research. He later wrote that he didn't expect to find anything very important. "I thought I was going to find out his name was really James Johnson, so what?" (cited in Philips 2006, 357). Instead what he found was an obituary in the *Chicago Tribune* that listed the author and explorer's only surviving relative as her daughter: Mrs Alice Hastings (Mrs Huntington) Sheldon. A 61-year-old woman.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Judith Butler writes that "all gender identity is a performance, an apparent substance that is an effect of a prior act of imitation" (Butler 1998, 677). So, too, all authorial identities are performances—effects—that include or enclose, or overlap with, gender performances.

The desire (on the part of the science fiction community) to penetrate the mystery of the author's (gender) identity can be understood as an expression of the desire to discover or excavate an essential or stable gender, even though there never was/is One to be found.

Gender, instead, as discussed by Butler, is always-already 'drag': "an imitation that regularly produces the ideal it attempts to approximate ... a performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it *produces* on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender representation), the illusion of inner depth" (Butler 1998, 728).

Except that, Tiptree's performance of his masculine gender

was not produced on the skin. It was not produced through 'the gesture, the move, the gait' or any other 'corporeal theatrics'. Tiptree's gender performance was entirely textual, or virtual. It was *produced* on the page, through science fiction stories, through articles, reviews and textual symposiums, and through letters that were 'ineluctably masculine', through tone, and word choice, and a signature—*that* array of authorial theatrics.

Tip's performance as a male science fiction author is, here, a *performance that does not imitate an original*, but only another imitation. It is, as Derrida describes mimesis, a 'reference without a referent, without any first or last unit, a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh' (Derrida 1981, 206).

Tip was doxed as a married, older, white woman in a series of communications over which he had no control. In fact, he feared being revealed in this way and had worked very hard, over almost ten years, to maintain his authorial identity and, alongside it, his right to privacy.

Doxing is the term used now—though it wasn't in use in 1976—to refer to the revealing of the 'real' identity behind a virtual—usually an online—personality. According to Wikipedia, doxing, may be carried out to "aid law enforcement", but is more often used, particularly within the science fiction community, "[to aid] coercion, harassment, public shaming, and other forms of vigilante justice" ("Doxing"). In this sense, it is very similar to the practice of outing.

Edelman has written about the ways in which outing, or publicly revealing the biological sex or sexual orientation of

closeted queers, is used to reinforce heterosexist ideology by insisting on the necessity of 'reading' the body as a signifier of gender orientation, and by insisting on the threat of the 'unnerving' capacity of queers to 'pass' (Edelman 1998, 722). Edelman writes that "Just as outing works to make visible a dimension of social reality effectively occluded by the assumptions of a heterosexist ideology, so that ideology, throughout the twentieth century, has insisted on the necessity of 'reading' the body as a signifier of sexual orientation," (Edelman 1998, 722). In a similar way, the doxing of an author, like Tiptree, who is 'passing' as a man both makes visible a dimension of the essentialist science fiction community otherwise rendered invisible, and exposes the ways in which the community insists on reading authorial identities as signifiers of sexual and gendered identities.

What Tiptree's doxing reveals (as do other more recent doxings, such as that of Benjanun Sriduangkaew) is that doxing operates, particularly within the science fiction community, in much the same way as outing functions within the hetero-patriarchy. That is, doxing arises in response to the fact that authorial gender identity remains, for conservative readers, troublingly indeterminate. It is too easy, for those who are uncomfortable with the idea that gender and sex are indivisible, and that it matters, for a woman to pass as a man, a man to pass as a woman, for a writer to inhabit an unknown, indeterminate or slippery gender identity. Authors, in such a hetero-patriarchal construct, must be either one gender, or another.

Just as doxing works to make visible a range of otherwise occluded aspects of the heteronormative/masculinist science

fiction writing, publishing and fan communities, so that same ideology has insisted on the necessity of 'reading' the gendered body of the author as a signifier of authorial worth and importance. A gendered authorial identity is read in particular ways. As Kelley Eskridge writes:

As readers, we look for the boundaries of the narrator and the values that those boundaries imply, based on our complicated social code for these things. A certain kind of behavior exhibited by someone we perceive to be acting as male means something different to us than precisely the same behavior performed by someone acting as female ... We've been trained as readers to believe these lines exist, and it's important to us to know which side of them the characters are on, so we know how to feel about their behaviour ... Gender is one of the big lines ... that you are not allowed to cross, at least not without a great deal of flashing headlights and beeping horns. (Eskridge, in Merrick & Williams 1999, 177)

Eskridge's observation applies equally, or in even more complicated ways, to reader's perceptions of works by authors we perceive to be male or female. This was explicit in the critical responses to Tiptree's work prior to his doxing, which often commented on the ways in which his authorial gender stood in relation to his authorial concerns, interests, and style. Silverberg's comments are most famous in this regard, both his description of Tip's work as 'ineluctably masculine' and comments about particular stories, such as his description of Tip's 'The Women Men Don't See' as a "profoundly feminist story told in an entirely masculine manner." (Silverberg 1975, xvi)

Butler writes that “compulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm that determines the real implies that ‘being’ lesbian is always a kind of miming” (Butler 1998, 722). Masculine science fiction writing has been able to maintain the status of its own authority as the ‘natural’ mode of the genre by defining male science fiction writing against the threat of an ‘unnatural’ feminine science fiction. Female science fiction is, like lesbianism in Butler’s analysis, a ‘kind of miming’ of male science fiction. A miming that is both always-already false, and a threat. This sense of the threat of women’s writing is effectively mobilized by generating anxiety and concern about women’s, and Others’, unnerving and strategically manipulatable capacity to ‘pass’ as straight, white, male science fiction writers. The anxiety produced by Tip’s queerness lies not only in his ability to effect a ‘kind of miming’, but in his capacity to undermine the authenticity of masculine writing, to make something unnatural appear natural.

Butler further argues that gender is a “*compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence” (Butler 1998, 725). Tip’s doxing resulted in the widespread revelation of his unnatural performance, his acting out of line with the heterosexist norms of the science fiction reading and writing communities. The consequences, for Tip, of being doxed were dramatic, immediate, ongoing, and, I think, horrifying. He was ostracized not only from his community, but in an even more troubling and violent sense, from himself. Tip no longer existed. Alice, if she were to write at all, would have to

write *as* Alli Sheldon, or *as* Alli-as-Raccoona, or even as *Alli-as-Tip*. Nobody would—nobody could—allow Tip to exist in his own right any longer.

Alice wrote several notes, in her diary, and in letters to her friends, about what she called Tip's death, and its impact on her both personally and professionally. She wrote in her diary that "writing was at, or coming to, an end" (cited in Philips, 363), and on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1977, she wrote in her journal:

I am [no longer] a man. I am not a do-er, the penetrator. And Tiptree was 'magical' manhood, his pen my prick. (cited in Philips, 363)

After her first in-person meeting with her primary doxxer, Jeff Smith, she wrote in a letter to Le Guin:

I could see vanishing shreds of Tiptree whirling through the suburban air, evaporating [...] I don't know if Jeff perceived that Tiptree was hiding somewhere underneath and slightly to the left of the matron, but I could feel it; I've spent so long not being Tiptree, which is to say, [not being] me, that it was strange to speak with someone who knows my real self [...] those 8 years in sf was the first time I could be *really* real [...] Now all that is gone, and I am back with the merry dumb-show as life, and it doesn't much suit (cited in Philips 2006, 366-7)

Alice Sheldon did write for a while, though, in a series of critical moments beyond the scope of this paper, her work was never received in the same way that Tip's was. Indeed, Tip's doxxing also intervened retrospectively in the ways his

work, too, is read, evaluated and understood. These days, very few people read Tip's work as it was read in 1976. Instead we read it through the lens he never wanted; we read it as Alli-being-Tip's work. As the work of a woman masquerading as a man.

On May 18, 1987, Tip wrote to Le Guin: "Life here is on the way down and out. Not to condole, it's been a great one for both. Love, yrs Tip/Alli". More than ten years after their doxing, Tip remained their primary literary/epistolary identity, albeit one that came increasingly, and increasingly ironically or self-deprecatingly, linked to their identity as Alli. Some time later that night, Tip shot first their husband, and then themselves/ves.

Ellen Moers once wrote, in *Literary Women*, that "women writers have women's bodies, which affect their senses and their imagery. They are raised as girls and thus have a special perception of the cultural imprinting of childhood. They are assigned roles in the family and in courtship, they are given or denied access to education and employment, they are regulated by laws of property and political representation which [...] differentiate women from men" (Moers 1976, xiv). The inference here is that women's bodies also always produce women writers, and, by extension, women's writing (a form of writing perhaps uncomfortably related to Irigaray's less essentialist notion of *écriture féminine*). Tiptree's very existence, and his doxing, reveal, of course, that the relationships between our bodies, our authorial identities, and our texts, is far more complex and interesting than any such flattening out suggests. Writers both do and do not have genders. Their authorial identities both do and do not have

genders. Their texts express complex and slippery relations to their bodily and authorial genders. Relations that change over time, and possibly even in response to the gendered performances of their characters and their readers.

In Tip's work, and in his extra-literary writings, men and women are often figuratively, or literally, aliens to themselves and to each other. In one letter, for example, Alice (writing after the doxing) says:

I see here the interesting question about whether it is man or woman who can be seen as the alien, the Other. Yet it seems obvious ... It is understandable that women could view themselves as alien to male society ... but if you take what you are as the normal Human ... then it is clear that to a woman writer men are very abnormal indeed (DuChamp in Larbalestier 2006, 358)

\*

Tiptree had travelled to Africa with his parents as a child, several times, at six, nine and twelve years of age so perhaps it was natural that he came up with the following, part of an unpublished essay:

Consider how odd it would be if all we knew about elephants had been written by elephants. Would we recognise one? What elephant author would describe — or perhaps even perceive — the features, which are common to all elephants? We would find ourselves detecting these from indirect clues; for instance, elephant-naturalists would surely tell us that all other animals suffer from noselessness, which obliges them

to use their paws in an unnatural way. So when the human male describes his world he maps its distances from *his unspoken natural center of reference, himself*. He calls a swamp "impenetrable," a dog "loyal" and a woman "short."

The only animal who can observe man from the outside is of course the human female: we women who live in his house, in his shadow, on his planet. And it is important that we do this. This incompletely known animal conditions every aspect of our individual lives and holds the destruction of Earth in his hands. (Tiptree n.d.)

Even more interestingly, in Tip's writing, aliens not only serve as metaphors for women in relation to men, or men in relation to women, but as a figuration of the alienated self. The queered self. In a sense, Tiptree's project, both in the work and in his authorial identity, was a performance of destabilised, decentred, de-unified identity. He worked to create and then occupy a space that honoured his sense that we are all divided, unknowable aliens, not just to each other, but also, more intimately and more properly, to ourselves. That is, to abuse Irigaray's phrase, Tip's work was a performance—a masterful performance—that called attention to the fact that we are all, always and already, this sex which is not one.

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