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Becoming Alien(ated): A case study examining intimacy and loneliness in *The Sentients of Orion* by Marianne de Pierres

A textual analysis of physical and emotional intimacy (both positive and negative) in the science fiction series *The Sentients of Orion* by Australian author Marianne de Pierres reveals a link between loneliness and character motivation, and also between a lack of intimacy and the perceived level of threat posed to humanity by different alien races. This theme could initially be perceived as coincidental, but de Pierres develops the underlying thread of loneliness and social isolation in a way that is central to the plot. The paper sets out to demonstrate that de Pierres consciously and consistently focuses on the social, emotional and physical effects that loneliness or a lack of intimacy may have on different characters. Taking the four novels of *The Sentients of Orion* as a case study representing contemporary science fiction, this paper further aims to show how loneliness as a social phenomenon is increasingly being integrated into and explored through this popular genre.

Keywords: loneliness, science fiction, Marianne de Pierres, gender

“In the public’s view, SF has become a popular, fashionable and influential literary genre, playing a dominant role in current cultural perceptions and expectations”.¹ Sean Redmond, Professor of Screen and Design at Deakin university says:

If you want to know what fears and concerns are pulsating away at the red heart of contemporary life, look to those art forms where the future is being explosively

¹ Grech, V, “Infertility in Star Trek,” *World Future Review* (2012), 19.

re-imagined... if you want to know what are [sic] the political concerns of our times look not to the dour documentary, nor to social realism, but to the liquid, silvery profundity of science fiction.²

Science fiction opens up a “metaphorical double-space between real and framed space” which, according to Barber, “helps to shape reality even as it seeks to reflect it.” Science fiction here is seen to present “a vision of humanity’s future”.³ This vision depends heavily on some form of alienation, and “attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss”.⁴ Based on this particular aspect of science fiction, and the increasing level of loneliness in western society, seen by Perlman and Peplau as “a painful warning signal that a person’s social relations are deficient in some important way,” it can be expected that loneliness will be addressed in science fiction.⁵

Social isolation of a situational nature is indeed often the focus in science fiction, as recently seen in *I am Legend*, *The Martian*, *Solaris*, *Passengers* and *Interstellar*, all big budget sci-fi movies with a ‘lone man in space’ or ‘last man on earth’ theme.

I was, however, interested to see whether the theme of loneliness would also be present in the more space operatic type of science fiction, closer resembling the pulp origins of the genre. To that end, I chose to focus on a series of novels, *The Sentients of Orion*, by Marianne de Pierres, a relatively unknown but well-established author in which I

² Redmond, S, “The Loneliness of Science Fiction”, accessed November 18 2019, <https://disruptr.deakin.edu.au/society/the-loneliness-of-science-fiction/>.

³ Barber, J, “Star Trek and the Anthropological Machine: Eliding Difference to Stay Human”. *The Geographical Bulletin*, 58 (2017), 41.

⁴ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the literature of subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981), 2.

⁵ Daniel, Perlman and Peplau, L. A. “Loneliness research: A survey of empirical findings,” in *Preventing the harmful consequences of severe and persistent loneliness*, ed. L. A. Peplau and S. Goldston (National Institute of Mental Health. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), 14.

expected to find a nod, but a perfunctory one, to the type of situational loneliness mentioned above.⁶

In my analysis of the novels, I did come across loneliness, not as incidental, but as recurring theme. Being alone is, however, not the same as being lonely, and it can be argued that the loneliness incorporated by De Pierres into *The Sentients of Orion* is different, as it is of a “chronic” nature, and based on alienation or alienness.⁷ Instead of focusing on situational social isolation (although that is also present), the loneliness in *The Sentients of Orion* is caused by a marked and prolonged lack of intimacy. This type of loneliness correlates to the level of othering experienced by a number of alien characters, to their gender non-conformity, and to the threat that this holds for the status quo.

As intimacy is central to the discussion, it is important to delineate and provide a working definition for it. Intimacy here does not refer to a modernist portrayal of intimacy as a sense of interpersonal understanding and unspoken communication; this article deals with sexual intercourse as a specific subset of intimate behaviour. Sexual intimacy is a deeply nuanced and even nebulous concept, dealing with every aspect of how people act in sexually intimate situations. The same nuances that inflect

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- ⁶ Marianne de Pierres, *Dark space* (London: Orbit, 2007).
Marianne de Pierres, *Chaos space* (London: Orbit, 2008).
Marianne de Pierres, *Mirror space* (London: Orbit, 2009).
Marianne de Pierres, *Transformation space* (London: Orbit, 2010). *Hereafter referred to as *Dark Space*, *Chaos Space*, *Mirror Space* and *Transformation Space* for ease of reading.
- ⁷ Cutrona, C. E., “Transition to college: Loneliness and the process of social adjustment,” in *Loneliness: A sourcebook of current theory, research and therapy*, ed. L. A. Peplau and D. Perlman (New York: Wiley Interscience, 1982), 291–301.
Paloutzian, R. F., and Janigan, A. S., “Models and methods in loneliness research: Their status and direction,” *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, no. 2 (1987), 31–36.
Perlman, D., and Peplau, L. A., “Theoretical approaches to loneliness” in *Loneliness: A sourcebook of current theory, research and therapy*, ed. L. A. Peplau and D. Perlman (New York: Wiley Interscience, 1982), 123–134.
Russell, D., “The measurement of loneliness” in *Loneliness: A sourcebook of current theory, research, and therapy*, ed. L. A. Peplau and D. Perlman (New York: Wiley Interscience, 1982), 81–104.
Perlman and Peplau, “Loneliness research”, 17.

general intimacy are pronounced in sexual intimacy. While focusing on intimate acts and thoughts related to sexual intercourse, I will also include acts or thoughts in which there is *symbolic* reference or allusion to sexual intercourse, such as pleasing, emotional warmth, violence, emotional blackmail, enabling, suppression or fulfilment.⁸ Thus, while the focus is on sexual intimacy, I also take cognisance of the impact of emotional intimacy (both during sexual intercourse and on its own).

Intimacy in this discussion also encompasses negative intimacy, which includes ‘negative affect in relationships, negative dialogue, rejection of commitment or concern for others, interpersonal disharmony, nonreciprocated friendliness, and escape from or avoidance of intimacy’.⁹ Isolina Ricci provides an even more detailed list of negative intimacies, including concepts such as anger, hate, victimisation, emotional abuse, humiliation, violence, bullying and fear.¹⁰

To begin, I provide a short outline of the plot as it applies. Mira Fedor is a noble woman and the pilot of a sentient biozoon spaceship called *Insignia*. The Saqr, an insectlike alien species unexpectedly invade their planet, Araldis. Trin sends Mira away on *Insignia*, 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’s mission is waylaid when the Extropists, an advanced group of post-species aliens, imprison her and experiment on her and her unborn child. She escapes with the help of one of her goalers, Wanton-Poda, and goes on to, in space opera fashion, save the universe.

The aliens in *The Sentients of Orion*, as in science fiction in general, represent various aspects of ‘the other’. This examination of gender and intimacy (or loneliness as brought about by a lack of intimacy) will focus not only aliens, but also alienation, as the basis of othering.

⁸ Isolina Ricci. “DETOX Negative intimacy.” Accessed May 22, 2015. <http://collaborativedivorceoptions.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/detox-negative-intimacy.pdf>, 1994.

⁹ Peter Suedfeld, Kasia, E. Wilk, and Lindi Cassel. “Flying with strangers: postmission reflections of multinational space crews.” In Douglas A. Vakoch (Ed.), *On orbit and beyond: psychological perspectives on human spaceflight*. New York: Springer, (2013),195.

¹⁰ Ricci, “DETOX Negative intimacy”, no pagination.

According to Kaye and Hunter “[O]therness and alienation are states of existence not only for imaginary ETs but for all who have been excluded from dominant categories of the human, the natural and the native”.¹¹

Of relevance is that with one or two possible exceptions all characters in *The Sentients of Orion* are all, strictly speaking, depicted as ‘non-human’. There are “humanesques,” but even the Latinos, like Mira and Trin, are vividly red coloured and not considered human. The non-humanesque aliens include the invading Saqr; Djes, the half-breed consort of the crown prince; the biozoons, who are a species of sentient space ship; the genetically engineered and very evolved Post-Species Extropists; Sole, the Entity known as God and Nova, Mira’s ‘daughter’.

These aliens will be discussed in turn to ascertain how the intimacies they are involved in, in their role as ‘other’, reflect on the level of loneliness experienced by them, and on the level of threat to society they correspondingly pose. I aim to show that the attention given to loneliness is more than a mere nod to the science fiction tradition and that loneliness, which in many ways is the antithesis of intimacy, is consistently manifest in the alien characters of *The Sentients of Orion*.

Attebery’s ‘alien invasion trope’ is central to the manner in which the Saqr invade Araldis.¹² They are insect-like, creatures, which attack using “thin, needle-like stylets” protruding from their mouths (much like Attanasio’s zotls in *Last Legends of Earth*).¹³ These creatures are so alien and so hostile that proximity to them inadvertently leads to death. Their sentience is debatable, and humanesques refer to them as “primitive as fuck”.¹⁴ They are referred to using the gender-neutral pronoun ‘it’.

¹¹ Heide Kaye and Hunter, I.Q., “Introduction” in *Alien identities: exploring difference in film and fiction*, ed. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 1.

¹² Brian Attebery, “The conquest of Gernsback: Leslie F. Stone and the subversion of science fiction tropes,” in *Daughters of earth: feminist science fiction in the twentieth century*, ed. J. Larbalestier (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 50.

¹³ *Dark Space*, 215–216.

A.A. Attanasio, *The Last Legends of Earth* (New York: Doubleday), 54.

¹⁴ Transformation Space, 26.

The Saqr are so very alien that they are considered hive animals (reminiscent of the ‘insectlike’ Buggers in *Ender’s Game*¹⁵ and the assimilating Borg in *Star Trek*.¹⁶ This leaves them not only devoid of intimacy and gender, but devoid of feeling altogether. It might be worth considering this ‘togetherness’ of the Saqr as a refined form of loneliness where individuality is moot. The fact that the Saqr are genetically modified, might then be interpreted as a warning by de Pierres of the ultimate threat posed to human society by unchecked technology.

With the Saqr, the biozoons, Post-Species and Sole all having gender matrixes different from humanesques, Djes, who is half alien and half humanesque, is the only heterosexual female alien in *The Sentients of Orion*.

According to Roberts, science fiction authors use ‘the figure of the female alien’ to “affirm the essential otherness of Woman and the threat that she poses to patriarchal society”.¹⁷ Djes is subject to isolation and loneliness by her adherence to Roberts’ depiction of female aliens as often being “nonhumanoid” but having “specifically feminine traits, such as mothering, nurturing, passivity, and sexual attractiveness to human males”.¹⁸ Another trait common to alien females is the use of magic and psychic abilities, 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 – all qualities associated with the feminine.¹⁹ These powers, along with the ability to reproduce, are seen as a direct threat to male dominance.²⁰ De Pierres thus codes Djes, in her role as the lone traditional female alien in *The Sentients of Orion*, to powerfully embody Roberts’ posited threat to patriarchy.²¹

¹⁵ Orson Scott Card. *Ender’s game* (New York: Tor Books, 1985), 191.

¹⁶ Frakes, Jonathan, (Dir.) *Star Trek: First Contact* (Hollywood: Paramount, 1996).

¹⁷ Robin Roberts. *A new species: gender and science in science fiction* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 9.

¹⁸ Roberts, *A new species*, 9.

¹⁹ Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of symbols* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 123.

²⁰ Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of symbols*, 123.

²¹ Roberts, *A new species*, 9.

The first alien group falling outside the established gender binary of current society is the biozoon pod, a species of sentient spaceship of no specified gender.²² *Insignia* is Mira's biozoon. In the first conversation between them, *Insignia* significantly acknowledges to Mira that it has been lonely for a long time.²³ Biozoons "do not have a clear distinction between male and female".²⁴ They are not "hermaphrodites" either, needing "several of their own kind to reproduce," yet they travel the universe alone and rarely engage in this group intimacy.²⁵ Bornstein says in *Gender Outlaw* that having a particular identity along with "the need to belong to a group of people with a similar identity – these are driving forces in our culture and nowhere is this more evident than in the areas of gender and sexuality".²⁶ De Pierres applies the alien view of intimacy to put forth the possibility that not only are human perceptions of gender and sexuality weak and limiting, but it might, if taking Bernstein's view into account, contribute to the loneliness experienced by many.

The biozoons are not emotional at all and this detachment might tie in with the melancholy felt by members of the species. It is also this very detachment that poses a threat to humanesque society.²⁷ The biozoons can save the universe but choose not to.²⁸ They do eventually intervene when it becomes obvious that doom is imminent without them. "*We have reconsidered*," is how their leader explains their sudden choice to become involved.²⁹ They are depicted as aloof and pragmatic, but when it truly matters the biozoons conform to human(esque) standards of compassion, reason and intimacy. While the biozoons do pose a threat to humanity based on their lack of emotional involvement and their pragmatism, their differences from humanesques are rendered

²² *Chaos Space*, 51.

²³ *Dark Space*, 7.

²⁴ *Chaos Space*, 51.

²⁵ *Chaos Space*, 51.

²⁶ Bornstein, Kate, *Gender outlaw: on men, women, and the rest of us* (London: Routledge, 1994), 3-4.

²⁷ *Chaos Space*, 19, 198, 242.

²⁸ *Chaos Space*, 242 and *Mirror Space*, 305.

²⁹ *Mirror Space*, 389.

comprehensible both in terms of their physical differences and their gender differences.

More alien, however, than the biozoons, and further removed from humanesque in their physical appearances and their gender representations, are the Extropists, or Post-Species.

The Extropists are a technologically advanced “multi-species group that opposes” the belief in evolution as “a natural process that should not be interfered with”.³⁰ They believe they are “destined to control and shape their own evolution” by using extreme measures of “genetic manipulation”.³¹ These beings, which randomly inhabit bodies and are intent on the evolution of their minds, with casual disregard for their host bodies, fit into what Hollinger refers to as the “neo-Cartesian future”.³²

Hayles posits that our interaction with and level of dependency on technology has already led humanity to a new state of ‘post-humanism’.³³ Pertinent to the gender landscape in *The Sentients of Orion*, posthumanism or Post-Species holds implications of a post-gender state and, in line with the pattern woven by de Pierres, a lack of intimate connection with each other and with other species.

The Post-Species have separated consciousness completely from their bodies, and even from their brains, in what Joan Haran refers to as an ‘extreme version of Cartesian dualism’.³⁴ They are even more alien than aliens; totally different from humanesques in their appearance, their logic, their corporeal bodies, their gender and their complete lack of intimate connection.³⁵ Intimacy, in their case, gave way to experiment and functionality. If there is social interaction between Extropists (which

³⁰ *Chaos Space*, 237.

³¹ *Chaos Space*, 237.

³² Veronica Hollinger, “Posthumanism and cyborg theory,” in *The Routledge companion to science fiction*, eds. M. Bould, A. M. Butler, A. Roberts and A. Vint (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 272.

³³ Katherine, N. Hayles, *How we became posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), xiv.

³⁴ Joan Haran, “Simians, cyborgs, and women in ‘Rachel in love’,” in *Daughters of Earth: feminist science fiction in the twentieth century*, ed. J. Larbalestier (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 253.

³⁵ *Chaos Space*, 337, 340–341.

there doesn't seem to be), it would not be with intimacy as end goal as here too, individuality is sacrificed before the good of the species.

Throughout Mira's captivity, the Post-Species appear merciless and pitiless toward humanesque problems in general, and to Mira in particular. The threat they pose along with their physical alienness leads to extreme defamiliarisation, which is countered by the introduction of Mira's gaoler, Wanton-poda. In contrast to the other Post-Species, Wanton-poda is made accessible by its small size, its having a name and the intimate relationship it, as individual, establishes with Mira. Using intimacy, de Pierres personalises the impersonal, removes the implied loneliness, and thus lessens the threat posed by the Post-Species. In this, de Pierres echoes other alien invasion texts, which 'champion the individual over the collective, and mourn the loss of individual space' and by implication, the opportunity for individual intimacy.³⁶

Mira and Wanton-poda manage to escape, but Wanton-poda loses its 'host' body 'poda' and becomes Wanton only, thereby embodying the questions regarding the role of the body in consciousness.³⁷ A sentient being losing its body while continuing to exist as itself is of interest to Body Theory, in the same way that the post-body state of the Extropists is.³⁸ What is it that remains when the body disappears? '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?'³⁹ We can add, what might happen to intimacy, and how would our levels of loneliness be affected by these issues? In modern-day developed societies, technological advances have already affected human health, age, physical performance, and reproductive issues. Technological

³⁶ Liz Hedgecock, "'The Martians are coming!': civilisation v. invasion in *The War of the Worlds* and *Mars Attacks!*," in *Alien identities: exploring difference in film and fiction*, eds. Deborah Cartmell, I. Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 104.

³⁷ *Mirror Space*, 105.

³⁸ See Butler, Judith. *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

³⁹ Hollinger, "Posthumanism and cyborg theory," 268.

advances also affect our interaction with others and will have therefore impacted on the nature of loneliness experienced in these societies.

Only one thing threatens the Extropists as a species, and that is Sole, also known as the Entity, or God. The Post-Species '*wish to destroy the Entity, so that they may control their own evolution*'.⁴⁰

Sole, unlike the Extropists, is only a presence – it has no body, gender or compassion and it ultimately lacks intimacy. When the Extropist attacks all over the universe begin, Sole disappears without bothering 'to warn' the other species 'of the danger'.⁴¹ This shows that '[w]hatever the nature of its sentience, compassion surely did not feature'.⁴²

Nova, Mira's genetically modified, ungendered daughter, is the only character able to easily communicate with Sole. She establishes rapport with the Entity and guides it to reveal a 'grave melancholia'.⁴³ The Entity admits to her that it feels lonely and is seeking its origins. It transpires that it is causing the destruction of the Orion Universe in order to battle its own isolation and melancholy. Using Sole's destructive efforts to gain intimacy, de Pierres strengthens the theme of intimacy as counter to isolation and loneliness.

In conclusion, it would appear that the level of threat to humanesque society posed by the different alien species increases exponentially with their level of 'otherness' (isolation/loneliness) and the level of gender fluidity they project.

Djes, while alien, is half-humanesque, female and wholly benign. The gender-neutral biozoons, who share quite a few humanesque values, are shown to be indifferent to humanesques, with their indifference bordering on threat but their commonalities neutralizing it.⁴⁴ The Saqr are completely alien and lack gender. Accordingly, they pose a huge threat to the survival of the humanesques on Araldis. The very highly developed Extropists are post-species and also post-gender. They are also the ones who, by using science to transcend gender, pose the most

⁴⁰ *Transformation Space*, 385.

⁴¹ *Transformation Space*, 195.

⁴² *Transformation Space*, 195.

⁴³ *Transformation Space*, 388.

⁴⁴ *Chaos Space*, 242.

immediate threat to the continuation of humanesque society. The Entity, on the other hand, belongs to no species. It has no body, has no gender ascribed to it (in spite of its sometimes masculine performance) and might even be post-technology. Significantly, the threat it holds for humanesque society lies in its loneliness, its emotional isolation, and a marked lack of intimacy.

De Pierres' interrogation of being othered is buttressed by belonging, or emotional intimacy. From the genderless *Insignia* revealing to Mira that it has been lonely in the first chapters of *Dark Space* to the denouement in *Transformation Space*, which reveals the gender-evolved god entity to be suffering from crippling loneliness, the need of all beings of all species, races and genders to *belong* and to be loved is a deeply embedded thread through *The Sentients of Orion*.⁴⁵ This 'theme of solitude' surrounding 'the alienated figure', of chronic loneliness and lack of intimacy, is deeply woven into the fabric of *The Sentients of Orion*.⁴⁶ According to Nancy Gray Diaz, the counter to alienation, 'the theme that stands in opposition to it, is reconciliation'.⁴⁷ In *The Sentients of Orion*, de Pierres shows that science fiction, even space opera, indeed comments on the state of current society. As a vision of the future, she places the creation of intimacy with others (and Others) as central counterfoil to loneliness and the threat loneliness holds to our society.

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⁴⁵ *Dark Space*, 7.

Transformation Space, 388.

Dorothea Boshoff, "Crafting Positions: Representations of Intimacy and Gender in *The Sentients of Orion*" (DLitt et Phil diss., University of South Africa, 2017), 252.

⁴⁶ Nancy Gray Diaz, "Alienation," in *Dictionary of literary themes and motifs, volume 1*, ed. Jean-Charles Seigneuret (London: Greenwood Press, 1988), 31.

⁴⁷ Gray Diaz, "Alienation," 31.

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