

Encountering the animal-alien: interspecies communication in octavia butler's daw...



Scholar Carl Malmgren describes the common science fiction trope of alien encounters as “inevitably broach[ing] the question of the Self and the Other...The reader recuperates this type of fiction by comparing human and alien entities, trying to understand what it means to be human” (15). The alien can represent humanity’s fears of scientific and political cruelty (oftentimes entanglements of both), a symbol of various marginalized groups, and/or a metaphor for oppressive power (either as a human victim or a nonhuman agent of violence). As Heather Atwell and Elain O’Quinn write, “aliens have become the scientific and technological avatars of a modern world,” acting as humanoid mirrors through which inter-human relationships are scrutinized (45). In light of irreversible man-made environmental disaster and growing numbers of mass species extinction, perhaps it is necessary to revisit the SF alien not just as a stand-in for humanity, but also as a representative of human-animal relationships. Despite cohabitating Earth and sometimes bearing biological similarities, the human view of animals has always been one of presumed superiority from the natural world. Stacy Alaimo notes that “one English word, one Western concept—‘animal’—somehow encompasses a vast array of creatures...but it rarely contains humans” (9). Viewing the SF alien as an animal, a new species integrating itself into Earthen ecologies, opens the possibility of bridging these troubled human/animal distinctions through new relationships where humanity is more conscious of their position within the environment and the impact their actions have on nonhuman others.

Octavia Butler’s 1988 novel, *Dawn*, and Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1971 novel, *The Lathe of Heaven*, each present human-alien relationships that disrupt

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anthropocentric hierarchies by inserting themselves their nonhuman selves into human social spaces (both as agents and byproducts of manmade change). While most discussions of SF aliens focus on physical appearance, the estranging ‘alien-ness’ in both texts come from the aliens’ use of species-specific languages in the form of chemical exchanges and machine-produced translations. Language is one of the key tools humanity uses to differentiate itself from the rest of the animal kingdom, asserting their world-building identities through the categorizing (and subsequent other-ing) of human and nonhuman subjects alike. As Sherryl Vint explains, “language has the power to create the perceptual and experiential world...Structures that are imbued with power relations [emerge] from the difference between those who have the power to name and those who must speak in another’s discourse” (71). But what happens when our anthropocentric, hierarchical perception of language-use is unsettled by the presence of the alien subject and its own arsenal of communication tools? By analyzing the modes of primarily non-verbal communication Butler and Le Guin’s aliens use to interact with human beings, one can re-examine the alien figure as a embodiment of reflections on humanity’s historical treatment of animals, challenging presumptions of anthropocentric exceptionalism through the aliens’ biotechnological linguistic strategies and opening up the possibility of healing human-animal interspecies communication.

When Octavia Butler’s human protagonist, Lilith, sees one of her alien captors for the first time, she can’t help but be horrified at Jdahya’s nearly featureless “flat gray skin” and the “darker gray hair on its head...down around its eyes and ears and at its throat,” later revealed to be rippling <https://assignbuster.com/encountering-the-animal-alien-interspecies-communication-in-octavia-butlers-dawn-and-ursula-k-le-guins-the-lathe-of-heaven/>

sensory organs that “ move in response to [Jdahya’s] wishes or emotion or to outside stimuli” (Butler 11-12). As grotesque as these sea creature-like tentacles are to humans, the Oankali need them to “ experience all of the world through their bodies,” acting as their primary source of perceiving and communicating with the world around them (Belk 374). The Oankali are driven to Earth not by the impulse to destroy (like Lilith’s generation of nuclear-annihilated humans), but rather the biological imperative to rebuild human life through the reformation of Earth’s ecologies and the genetic ‘ correcting’ of the surviving humans in order to reproduce and further the growth of their own kind (Butler 26). While Jdahya speaks to Lilith in English at first, this is an early strategy meant to help ease Lilith into the Oankali world (Butler 156). Ultimately, the Oankali are fluent in biochemistry. “ By pushing the right electrochemical buttons,” Lilith tries to explain to her fellow humans, “ it’s like a language that they have a special gift for” (Butler 169). Amongst themselves, although they can communicate verbally, the Oankali can send “ messages from one to another almost at the speed of thought...controlled multisensory stimulation” (Butler 105). Their symbiotic relationship with their living ship-organism, which “ can be chemically induced” to perform functions and produce foods, can be likened to that of a human and a domesticated animal, one species bred and altered to fit the needs of the other (Butler 33). The Oankali experience the world differently than us—as seen in their chemosensory expressions which parallel insect secretions and other therolinguistic forms of “ collective kinesthetic semiotics” mostly inaccessible to humans—but that does not mean that the way they move through the world is less ‘ intelligent’ than humans, who rely

on spoken and written language to articulate their experiences (Haraway 122). Through her depiction of the Oankali's advanced language system, Butler destabilizes our measurements of nonhuman 'intelligence' (oftentimes based on how similar or different animal actions mimic human ones) by presenting the Oankali's animal-like approach to communication as a different, yet not inherently inferior, approach to humanity's ways of comprehending the world.

In order to 'speak' Oankali, Lilith must submit to biochemical changes. Until Nikanj shares the characteristic of chemical marker communication with her, Lilith is unable to open walls, form rooms, and feed herself since "there were no signs she could read...Each time they opened a wall, they enhanced they enhanced the local scent markers" (Butler 65). She's aware of her own vulnerability, how she has to rely on the Oankali for physical and emotional sustenance, and even calls herself "Nikanj's new pet" (Butler 55). This disorientation, this shift in power dynamics as Lilith finds herself among a community she doesn't fully understand who want to use her genes and repopulate the Earth, bears unfortunate similarities to animals held captive by humans—an analogy which Butler, through Lilith, repeatedly returns to. When fighting off Paul Titus, Lilith says, "Animals get treated like this. Put a stallion and a mare together until they mate, then send them back to their owners" (Butler 93). She questions her own position in relation to the Oankali: "Experimental animal, parent to domestic animals? Or...nearly extinct animal, part of a captive breeding program? Human biologists had done that before the war—used a few captive members of an endangered animal species to breed more for the wild population" (Butler 58). Lilith is no

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longer able to speak for herself in a traditionally human way. The Oankali-given eidetic memories and chemical secretions eliminate the need for reading or writing. Rather than fully adapt to human structures of communication, they alter the humans' brain chemistry to fit into their own species-specific subjectivity. As Patricia Melzer explains, "the other becomes the norm, becomes the position from which decisions are made and from which control over others is exerted...placing 'us' into the other" (74). No longer the 'dominant animal,' Lilith finds herself repeatedly 'mis-read' in a language that is not her own. The Oankali, like humans imposing their own behavioral norms onto animals, choose to 'listen' to Lilith's biological changes over what she speaks, leading to a loss in her personal agency at the benefit of the Oankali's highly controlled genetic breeding practices. One such 'miscommunication' occurs when Nikanj impregnates Lilith at the end of the novel with a half-human, half-Oankali child. Despite Lilith's pleas that "I'm not ready! I'll never be ready!", Nikanj appears to 'know' that she wanted to be pregnant with some of Joseph's offspring after his death, telling her that "You're ready now to have Joseph's child," effectively making Lilith's decision for her (Butler 248). Like humans breeding animals, the Oankali, for the most part, only read the humans' uncontrollable biological outputs, leading to miscalculations of human behavior and lapses in equal exchange between human and alien. In the Oankali's embodied consciousness, Lilith's body, not her voice, now speak for her.

Le Guin's aliens, known as the Aldebaranians, come to Earth from the far-flung corners of outer space as "natives of a methane-atmosphere planet"

(Le Guin 132-133). When they encounter Dr. Haber for the first time, he
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notices that they are “ encased in a [vapor-filled] suit...which gave it a bulky, greenish, armored, inexpressive look like a giant sea turtle” and one of them speaks to him by raising “ its left arm, pointing at him with a metallic nozzle instrument” through which English words (translated from the original Aldebaranian language) are emitted (Le Guin 121). While Butler’s humanoid Oankali have been analyzed by scholars in great detail, these sea turtle-like creatures “ remain enigmatic black boxes” due to their refusal to be neatly interpreted as “ human stand-ins, subsumed into and judged within the human moral framework” (Lichfield 375). Unlike the Oankali’s clearly stated biological imperative, Orr notes that “ they had not yet made clear what they hoped for in return, why they had come to Earth. They seemed simply to like it here” (Le Guin 133). This confusion over the Aldebaranians’ reasons for arriving to Earth is not so surprising when we recall that this alien species is the two-fold product of George Orr’s effective dreaming. The aliens first appear on the Moon after Haber tells Orr to dream about world peace and Orr generates this alien threat to “ to give us something to fight” (Le Guin 99). Then, in Lelache’s attempt to get rid of them by telling him to “ dream that the Aliens are no longer on the Moon,” they peacefully land on Earth (Le Guin 111). Over time, the Aldebaranians take on the roles of shop owners, collecting “ floatsam of the affluent years of America,” with no typical desire for world domination or biological human alterations (Butler 153). The Aldebaranians, technologically adapted to integrate into human society, fill the role of the Other previously vacated by Haber’s attempts to ‘ fix’ and homogenize markers of human difference (like race) through effective dream manipulation. This allows readers to consider “ alternative forms of social

organization” where interspecies coexistence can uproot norms of human control over the environment (Malgrem 313).

Since this species originates from a human subconscious, Le Guin’s human-alien relationship is one that is more harmonious than in most other SF works. As Orr notes, “ It’s not surprising that the Aliens are on my side. In a sense, I invented them...They definitely weren’t around until I dreamed they were, until I let them be. So that there is—there always was—a connection between us” (Le Guin 155). While one would expect that the aliens would speak English, look and act more human than they do in their bulky encasements, the Aldebaranians rely on technological systems in the form of vocal nozzles in their turtle suits and their redistribution of human tools and technologies to translate their experience of the world into phrases humans can understand. This inevitably results in moments of alien-to-human miscommunication. When the aliens do speak, their messages take the form of ambiguous truisms, as seen in their first encounter with Dr. Haber: “ Do not do to others what you wish others not to do with you,” or in their talks with George Orr: “ Speech is silver, silence is gold. Self is universe” (Le Guin 121-142). When Tiua’k Ennbe Ennbe tries to tell George how control his ability to iahklu’ (effective dream), it gives him a copy of the Beatles record, “ With a Little Help from My Friends” in an attempt to bridge their communication gap through allegory (Butler 154). Since the aliens retain their native tongue, certain words, concepts, and worldviews remain untranslatable. Orr tries to ask Ennbe Ennbe the literal meaning of iahklu’, but it replies, “ Incommunicable. Language used for communication with individual-persons will not contain other forms of relationship” (Butler 153). <https://assignbuster.com/encountering-the-animal-alien-interspecies-communication-in-octavia-butlers-dawn-and-ursula-k-le-guins-the-lathe-of-heaven/>

Le Guin likens these differences of perception and expression to those between human and animals: “[Orr] was not even sure that they could see, that they had any sense organ for the visible spectrum. There were vast areas over which no communication was possible: the dolphin problem, only enormously more difficult” (133). Dr. Haber (who embodies an anthropocentric worldview of environmental and social transformation) has doubts about whether the Aldebaranians even have conscious dreaming abilities since human-based forms of measuring such activity prove indeterminate: “ We simply haven’t licked the communications problem there. They’re intelligent but Irchevsky, our best xenobiologist, thinks they may not be relational at all, and that what looks like socially integrative behavior among humans is nothing but a kind of instinctual adaptive mimicry” (Le Guin 166-167). While Haber takes these failed tests as a sign that the aliens are psychologically inferior, Orr embraces their untranslatable qualities, finding a connection within the two species’ different views of the world: “ They’re a lot more experienced than we are at all this...They are of dream time. I don’t understand it, I can’t say it in words. Everything dreams” (Le Guin 167). Orr’s new approach to understanding the Aldebaranians marks a shift in how humanity locates itself within the environment: “ A conscious mind must be part of the whole, intentionally and carefully—as the rock is part of the whole unconsciously” (Le Guin 168). As seen with his retention of the phrase “ Er’ perrhne” to control his dreams, Orr finds himself in a harmonious relationship where one species does not try to fully translate each other, but rather just listen to and adapt to each other’s unique point of view. While Haber succumbs to his own inability to

manipulate George's dreams and completely 'repair' humanity's problems by forcing his selfish will onto the environment, "Orr stays sane because he respects the existence and integrity of the Other" (Malgrem 316). After Orr mends the unravelling fabric of reality with his enlightened dream-intervention, he exchanges words with one of the aliens, mimicking their curious, technologically-mediated manner: "'Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,' it said. 'To sleep, perchance to dream; aye, there's the rub,' Orr replied" (Le Guin 178). By learning to speak the language of the Aldebaranians, Orr positions himself not as above them, as seen in humanity's traditional interactions with animals, choosing more wholistic multi-species environmental networks instead.

In both stories, set in worlds decimated by man-made environmental destruction, Le Guin and Butler use alien communication and its non-normative modes of consciousness, expression, and subjectivity to challenge humanity's presumed hierarchical position over other species. As Gordon Litchfield writes of animal-aliens, "these scenarios force us to question whether we could encounter a species with whom communication is in principle impossible. If in more conventional sci-fi the aliens challenge our moral precepts, here they challenge our philosophical ones, asking us whether concepts we consider universal truly are so" (375). Both protagonists are confronted with forms of intelligence and expression that are physically (through the aliens' uncanny lack of 'mouths') and socially (as they have to integrate these strangers into their respective altered worlds) non-normative. By shifting power relations to where mankind now finds itself at the will of the Oankali and their biological literacy, Butler "undermines the <https://assignbuster.com/encountering-the-animal-alien-interspecies-communication-in-octavia-butlers-dawn-and-ursula-k-le-guins-the-lathe-of-heaven/>

privileged position of humans,” causing Lilith to reflect on how animals have been historically treated as tools and test subjects within human society (Melzer 71). While the arrival of Le Guin’s aliens are less violent (and not actually from outer space), they too integrate themselves into human life through unusual means. Speaking through mechanized suits that both sustain their bodies and translate their words, the Aldebaranians offer their services both as new economic contributors to help rebuild Earthen society and as guides to George Orr as he seizes control over his effective dreaming by learning some of their native language. Through his interactions with them, Orr is forced to reexamine ruinous human assertions of dominance over non-human entities which take the shape of Haber’s anthropocentric reality-bending.

Perhaps it is not so surprising that many ‘miscommunications’ occur over course of each novel. Moments where agency is lost (like Lilith’s forced impregnation) and where barriers of difference arise from misunderstandings (like Haber’s disavowal of alien intelligence due to inconclusive testing), come from a refusal to listen and adapt to the animal-alien’s special approach to the world. Animal studies scholar Sherryl Vint scrutinizes this sense of human-animal alienation by pointing out “that it is not that animals cannot or are not speaking, but rather that they do so in a language that is so alien to humans that we cannot understand it. This is because language is integrally tied to a form of life, produced by concrete and embodied experience that varies among species” (68). Technological advancements that try to conform one species’ ‘speech’ into the norms of another—like the fictional Aldebaranian translating suits and the Oankali’s biological

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manipulations to give Lilith access to their living ship—can only unite humans and nonhumans together so much as any embodied context of the animal-alien's ' language' is lost in this mechanized act of translation. To prevent further lapses in understanding and possible loss of agency, Butler and Le Guin's alien presences suggest that one must listen to not only what these Others have to say, but how they say it.

All the miscommunications among the humans and aliens within these novels, and these extrapolations onto human-animal relationships, leads to the inevitable question: What might human-animal interconnectedness look like? Is multi-species coexistence even attainable in our anthropocentric society? Through the creation of the Oankali and the Aldebaranians, Le Guin and Butler offer us two varying blueprints for how to proceed with healing the troubled divisions between man and animal. The Oankali demonstrate a form of "storying [which] cannot any longer be put into the box of human exceptionalism" as they articulate new human-alien hybrid worlds through gene manipulation techniques which parallel modern-day scientific practices (Haraway 39). As innovative as their bio-language is, it's important to remember that Butler's human-alien relationship is not always an equal, mutually-beneficial. Lilith's inability to regain control over own body and depravity of familiar forms of verbal communication among the Oankali speaks to the violent loss of animals' agency when humans impose their will onto the landscape for anthropocentric gain. The Aldebaranians' behavior is reminiscent of something Vint notes, that "the recognition of communication in others is one of the key ways that we might begin to rethink and change our relationships with other species and thus produce a more ethical world"

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(71). Humanity relies on animals to grow and sustain local and global, environmental and socioeconomic ecosystems, yet we have difficulty acknowledging these other species as fellow subjects with their own stories to tell through nonhuman languages. George Orr's interaction with the Aldebaranians prove that technological innovation is not enough to bridge gaps in communication. One must embrace perspectives of the world that cannot be translated by human means to create a sense of unity that is strengthened by interspecies difference. By presenting their alien subjects in their own native languages, where humanity must adapt physically and mentally to meet these new conditions, Le Guin and Butler complicate the persistence of authoritative anthropocentrism. Yes, these moments of interspecies communication and translation are sometimes difficult and oftentimes far from perfect. But in a time when humanity can no longer escape the consequences of its ongoing destructive transformation of the planet's landscape for selfish gain, these speculative stories of human and alien encounters unsettle historical hierarchies and signal a healing movement forward.

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