

Radical Sexualities in *Lost Girl* and *Fledgling*: A Queer-Ecological Glimpse at the Feminist Human / Non-Human Female in Sci-fi

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Abstract

The present paper explores the connections between the radical sexual behavior of the main female characters in the TV show *Lost Girl* and Octavia Butler's novel *Fledgling*, Bo and Shori respectively. This analysis works from a queer-ecological feminist perspective that understands that science fiction as a genre presents rich opportunities for the development of feminist-queer sexual identities in female characters that in turn construct anti-patriarchal queer family structures that can truly transform the world.

Key words: *Lost Girl*, *Fledgling*, vampires, symbiont, Fae, succubus, queer families, feminist queer theory, female sexuality, science fiction

Resumen

Este artículo explora las conexiones entre el comportamiento sexual radical de los personajes femeninos principales del programa de televisión *Lost Girl* y la novela de Octavia Butler, *Fledgling*, Bo y Shori respectivamente. El presente análisis trabaja desde una perspectiva feminista *queer*-ecológica, la cual entiende que el género literario de ciencia ficción presenta enormes oportunidades para el desarrollo de identidades *queer* feministas que construyen a su vez estructuras familiares *queer* antipatriarcales que pueden verdaderamente transformar el mundo.

Palabras clave: *Lost Girl*, *Fledgling*, vampiras, siontante, Fae, súcuba, familias *queer*, teoría feminista *queer*, sexualidad femenina, ciencia ficción

In spite of the unfortunate fact that we still have to call a feminist female “radical” in her sexual identity, orientation and practices, I find it at least encouraging to find much more frequent examples in both literature and television shows. In this case, I have chosen the main character of sci-fi hit show *Lost Girl*, Bo (a Fae succubus), and Octavia Butler’s Shori (a hybrid vampire) from her acclaimed novel *Fledgling*. In worlds that are not real, but *science fiction*, these females inhabit a queer-ecological space that not only allows but encourages their sexual freedom and affirmation. What will happen when they move from the “supernatural” to the “natural”? As the history of the literary genre shows, science fiction is actually not that fictional; a society’s anxieties project into these diverse worlds of “un-reality.” As long as the context is a supernatural world that does not “really” exist, then the fears and / or desires can stay safely pinned down. Dystopias have been largely discussed in academia, but I feel that now is the time to move on to the future, so to speak. What are we afraid of *now*? What do we desire *now*? My point is that in the two specific cases that I will analyze in the present paper, *we desire female desire*. Specifically, I am referring to a female sexuality that empowers, strengthens, and helps set a high status within the social organization. My second point is that an analysis via a feminist queer ecology is peculiarly suited to this type of material. If queer ecologies center on various spaces and / or geographies that produce specific types of sexual identities¹, behaviors and acts, then I am sure that Earth as portrayed fantastically or supernaturally in *Lost Girl*

and *Fledgling* is the feminist queer world that nourishes radical female sexual identities, behaviors, and acts.

Sf² struggled to be considered a “serious” literary genre for years. From a traditionalist point of view, literature that depicted fantasy worlds and alien characters could only be a form of puerile escape. It took a long time of scholarly attention to earn sf a spot in academia and therefore “serious” criticism. At a certain point, academics came to agree that sf was in effect an excellent source of analysis into a particular society’s vision not only of the future, but of the present. In other words, what the alien character represented, to name just one example, varied greatly with the historical / economic context of the time when it was created.³ Not only does sf show the worldview of a society in its future projections; it serves an important transformative function as well. In many ways, sf aided social transformation. Again, I think it is important to understand that the relationship between reality and literature is not one-directional. Literature reflects reality (whatever that may be) but also changes it. Our work as critics consists precisely in learning to unravel the myriad ways in which this happens and to consider the implications both for literary / cultural theory and their application to texts and other human artifacts. As Hollinger explains,

representations of the future in science fiction, whatever else they are, are significant responses to the political, social, and cultural conditions of their production, but at the same time, science fiction has the capacity, as many experts have suggested, to actually change the present, notably via

“the dialectical interplay”—movements of reflexivity and feedback—between present and imagined futures. (23-24)

Considering female authorship of sf and female roles in sf are two ways we can illustrate the previous point. Did the roles of women in the fiction itself help inspire women writers to engage in sf or was it the other way around? ⁴ Regardless of the answer, which would require more in-depth analysis of the genealogy and history of the genre than is possible in the present study, I argue that in *Fledgling* and *Lost Girl*, sf becomes the queer-ecological space that offers transgressive female sexualities as socially transformative *now*, in our present.

Sf is rich terrain for queer explorations. Pearson explains how “queer remains, both within the academy and among gays and lesbians in general, very much a contested term. . . . Queer’s very slipperiness, however, its tendency towards instability, and its pleasure in resisting attempts to make sexuality signify in monolithic ways, are all parts of its appeal” (3). In this sense, precisely because queer resists definition, its fluidity and against-the-grain theory and methodology help us read transgressiveness more lucidly. Sf as a genre does practically the same thing to literature that queer does to theory. Its vast array of limitless possibilities becomes the multi-layered universe of worlds where dissident agencies can develop much more fully than in other types of literature. In effect, “queer, with its denaturalization of master narratives and its movements toward subcultural and subaltern understandings of texts, operates, by analogy, on some of the same levels as sf” (Pearson, 4).

Both Shori in *Fledgling* and Bo in *Lost Girl*, especially the queer female version, denaturalize the master narrative of patriarchy’s traditional heteronormative family. Sf is always potentially a queer-ecological space. Again, a queer female vampire and a queer female succubus inhabit a *body* that is in itself science fiction. Therefore, what I propose to complete the equation is that both Shori and Bo embody queerness in a way that only sf can afford. Furthermore, an even more useful way to think about the present study’s subject matter is to view my approach as what I earlier called “feminist queer ecological.” Queer ecology studies any critical reading that includes

challenges to notions of normalization/naturalization and redefinition of queerness and other sexualities; establishment of homes, spaces, and/or ecosystems as queer-friendly or at least productive of non-heteronormative lifestyles; highlighting of alternative family formations and reproductions; and rejection of “traditional”, normative, middle-class comprehension of life that include consumerism and unquestioned dominance of the natural world (Anderson 83-84)

Shori and Bo develop in the very specific non-normative space provided by sf as a genre. What is more, *Fledgling* and *Lost Girl* each carefully weave very specific (and peculiar) sf worlds that are conformed by ecosystems that house very queer females who then build non-heteronormative families that destroy the evil forces that threaten them. Bo’s world has multiple dimensions, based on different mythologies, which provide the only possible setting for the stages of her overarching journey to heroic

maturity. Shori's Ina (the name that the author gives to her particular vampires) inhabit only the countryside of their fictional Earth countries, for the cities over-stimulate their senses and place them in dangerous situations vis-à-vis the humans. Place becomes, then, medullar to the development of the characters and their ecological queer-ness in both works.⁵

The most basic of popular descriptions of *Lost Girl* characterize it as a Canadian show that

follows the journey of Bo, a woman with a painful past who learns that she's a succubus—a mythological being who uses sex to feed, heal and kill. She soon discovers she's part of an underground civilization of people called the Fae, filled with various creatures from legend and folklore who secretly predate humans in a variety of ways. Bo sets about trying to find her space among the dangerous Fae while searching for her true origins. Along the way, she created a new family out of her human best friend Kenzi, her lovers Dyson and Lauren, and her mentor Trick, while trying to use her gift to help others. (Weinman 1)

The show uses sf in an innovative way that shows the multiple ways in which the genre interacts with the real world in a multidimensional transactional manner. To illustrate, we can consider the "rules" that the original creator of the show, Michelle Lovretta, presented to the production company—and which, I think are followed through to the very end, for the most part, such as: sexual orientation is not discussed and never an issue; Bo can have sex outside of relationships; her

male and female characters are equally viable; Bo is capable of monogamy when desired; and both genders are equally objectified at times. The show's very origin, then, is deeply grounded in a strong political stance that could not be manifested in a space other than sf. Lovretta herself points out the genre factor time and time again in her interviews with critics and the media. The creators are aware of the fact that sf becomes, ironically, both a liberating and constricting space—thus, its richness for feminist queer-ecological exploration is clear.

In *Lost Girl*, Fae society is already much more liberal than human society, and the Fae are certainly very free sexual agents, but Bo, as an un-aligned female succubus, comes to transform the Fae's very foundations by means of her sexuality and un-Fae-like ethics, which lean towards a "radical" Fae-human symbiosis that de-stabilizes "the Fae ways" and proposes an inter-species relationship that challenges the most racist / speciesist of her kind. While Fae individuals have traditionally been allowed to "claim" a human, this has mostly meant the formalization of a master-slave liaison. Bo reluctantly "claims" her best friend Kenzi when it becomes inevitable, but their relationship is anything but traditional. They stand as equal agents, committed to each other without the usual sexual connotation of Fae-human relationships.⁶ Politically, Bo remains un-aligned through the majority of the show's five seasons. This means that she overtly refuses to choose a side from the two only available options to the Fae, the Light or the Dark. In this way, she unleashes a series of events by her staunch agency and her belief

that the truth lays “somewhere in the middle.” In like manner to Butler’s vampire Shori, she decides that “the way things have always been” is not a valid argument for the perpetration of injustice, and that she is precisely the one to change that reality into a more balanced, inter-species-oriented, queer-ecological sf world.

Octavia Butler’s last published novel, *Fledgling*, tells the story of a hybrid female vampire, Shori, whose narrative journey takes her from complete amnesia to finding her own place among a society of ancient Ina (a species that predates humans), which in her case means challenging notions of racial / species superiority and beginning to transform their culture in significant ways. Shori’s family was murdered and she is the only survivor of her female side of the family, as the Ina exist in gender segregation except for mating purposes. In terms of social and familial organizations, the Ina are already extremely non-normative, as they group themselves in Ina-symbiont family groups. To clarify a symbiont is a human from which the vampire feeds but whom she / he also takes care of and loves for their entire lifetime (which is extended beyond natural human years thanks to the routine substance exchange with the Ina). The trope of the vampire has functioned, in like manner to the genre of sf, as an indicator of particular society’s anxieties:

Previous manifestations of the vampire phenomenon reflected, for example, xenophobic concerns about foreign contagion, or the horrors of same-sex desire, among other things. Contemporary iterations, however, often underscore some of the anxieties mainstream culture

has with current multicultural and ‘postracial’ society by seeking to ‘reinstatate’ the supremacy of whiteness, often through such tropes as the triumph of the lily-white vampire slayer or through nostalgia for an all-powerful white man who is a vampire. (Morris 146)

Butler problematizes vampire literature in her writing from the margins of white society and brings disruptive elements that transform the genre and suggests social transformation as well, a function of sf that I already discussed in the introduction. The conflict arises when Shori’s Ina parents begin to experiment with their children’s DNA, mixing it with black humans’ in order to improve the natural strength of their species, insofar as in spite of their great power they remain white and therefore extremely vulnerable to the sunlight during the day. Several racist / speciesist Ina find this miscegenation unacceptable and start the murder rampage that Shori manages to survive in the end.⁷ Indeed, as Morris explains, “the Afrofuturist feminism of the text illuminates epistemologies that do not suggest utopian panaceas but instead underscore the importance of transgressive manifestations of family and intimacy, epistemologies that ultimately present possibilities for our own decidedly unenchanted world” (147). This inter-weaving between sf and our world is the connecting thread that runs through this entire comparative endeavor, and it interconnects with Bo’s transgressive power of transformation of Fae society in *Lost Girl*.

One of the most intriguing aspects in both *Fledgling* and *Lost Girl* is the way in which the female characters are leaders that bring individuals together

and join them in non-normative queer families from which they can fight evil (in both cases evil is injustice, racism / speciesism, the desire for absolute patriarchal power) *without* presenting them as perfect social units. The nuclear heterosexual family has failed in its attempt to present itself as the one true model of social model precisely because of its rigidity and its foundational dependence of the virtual sexual / domestic slavery of women and its adult-centered, racist, classist, speciesist, naturist, deeply misogynist anti-values.⁸ Bo and Shori, in their respective sf ecosystems, become the center of queer inter-species families that, in their daily struggles with negotiation, provide an alternative to monolithic social imperatives.

As Morris comments, "*Fledgling* radically reimagines identity, kinship, and intimacy through nonmonogamous queer human-vampire hybrid families that have a variety of configurations, yet it also troubles any easy notions of a vampire utopia by ambivalently regarding the concepts of free will and symbiosis" (147). Shori's male symbiont, for example, experiences violent sexual jealousy before agreeing to give up his male privilege of sexual possession willingly (although not consistently at first). In the case of *Lost Girl*, Bo lives with her human best friend and sidekick Kenzi while her lovers Dyson and Lauren rotate as they constantly negotiate their love triangle for the most part of the first four seasons. In season five, she lives with Tamsin for a few weeks while they work through their friends-then lovers-then roommates relationship status. Whatever their living arrangement, Bo's partners / friends / lovers remain a tightly-

knitted family unit. The multiple ways in which they interact with one another, the various ways in which they engage with each other, be it sexually or emotionally make Bo's and Shori's families stronger rather than weaker.⁹ This radical revision of nuclear, hetero / homo-normative capitalist nuclear family units is truly revolutionary and transformative.¹⁰ It necessarily echoes into all and any other forms of cultural systems and institutions. It changes the dominant ways in which we have sadly learned to exist in the world. These strong females' families challenge the very structures of male-dominated societies (in sf queer ecosystems *and* the real world). In other words, they are imperfect groups that are in constant self-revision and therefore encourage an alternative to traditionalist, vertical-hierarchical social relations in any patriarchal society.

Radical female sexuality (in ethos and practice) in Bo's and Shori's families becomes the fertile ground from which innovative, queer relationships and inter-relationships can emerge, evolve and transform both the individual members, the family units themselves, and the society that they belong to.¹¹ Bo and Shori are the heart of their families, but they in turn could never possibly exist without them. This reciprocity becomes the motor of social and cultural transformation (perceived at first as transgression and dealt with in typical patriarchal ways) that begins in the multiplicity of ways in which the inter-species individual members love and interact with each other. "In *Fledgling*," says Morris, "mutualism not only recalibrates intimacy and family, however, but also becomes an ideal, though imperfect, futurist social

model, one that is fundamentally at odds with racism, sexism, and sectarian violence” (156). This critic highlights the imperfectness that I referred to earlier, remarking on this trait as a positive one struggling against the destructive forces in society. Shori partakes in the sexual freedom already practiced by her people; she does not discriminate humans because of their gender identity, sexual orientation, age, or ethnicity.

In the novel, the reluctance of her first chosen symbiont, Wright, allows for narrative scrutiny of the ways in which sexual prescriptions have become monolithic super-structures that hinder personal and communal development. Iosif, Shori’s Ina father, discusses this issue particularly when he tells her:

Treat your people well, Shori. Let them see that you trust them and let them solve their own problems, make their own decisions. Do that and they will willingly commit their lives to you. Bully them, control them out of fear or malice or just for your own convenience, and . . . you’ll have to spend all your time thinking for them, controlling them, and stifling their resentment. (Butler 73)¹²

The family begins with Shori’s immense sexual need for her symbionts—she not only feeds off of their blood, she requires the sexual and intimate connection to survive. Bo is a succubus, which in reality is the literary equivalent of the vampire. She also feeds off humans and Fae’s “chi” (read blood, or any other bodily fluid) and her feeding, healing, and basic survival depends on her sexual connections to people, non-normative connections. Bo sleeps with males, females, humans and Fae,

individually and in groups, and in and outside of relationships, much like Shori.¹³ Their “hunger” is sexual first and foremost. It is the undeniable source of their power, yet they refuse to use it destructively: “Having power does not necessarily mean using it to dominate, and Butler’s protagonists [just as in *Lost Girl*] work to creative alternative relations based on cooperation rather than subjugation” (Lacey 382). In essence, then, both female characters exist very much in and from their sexuality, and in order to do so, they cooperate with other beings in loving, intimate queer relationships that function at a non-normative level. Therein lays their strength, in themselves and with others. The power that they both accumulate is then used for constructive and creative purposes rather than destructive projects of traditional patriarchal domination of other beings and of the land.¹⁴

Michelle Lovretta says that she does not expect her little show to be “serious” or world-altering. I beg to differ. It is very serious, and it has already altered the viewers and their societies in probably innumerable ways. I see infinite possibilities after *Lost Girl*, just as after *Fledgling*—which Butler critics all agree was only the first child of one more brilliant literary saga.¹⁵ These two works highlight the discussions that can center around powerful female protagonists in a queer-ecological space when issues like race and species are brought to the frontline. For instance, “Shori’s hybrid identity implies that binaries are no longer sufficient because they rely on fixed boundaries. Shori’s existence forces readers into the ambivalent realm of the hybrid Third Space

where one must rearticulate the conversation about identity beyond fixed racial categories” (Brox 395). Shori’s DNA becomes the contested site of cultural (and “natural”) change. In spite of certain Ina’s reluctance to deal with their inherent racism / speciesism, the society finally decides to move past fear of blood contamination and walk into the future. In Bo’s case, she navigates through the Fae and human world in search for her identity, supported and loved by her inter-species family to the end. As the Chosen One, the responsibility of the future of the world lays in her and she refuses to follow directives from anyone. She finally ascends to power without resorting to the traditional patriarchal weapons of war and destruction, to lead people and Fae alike in an era of justice and queer-ecological balance. Ultimately, instead of offering simple “solutions” that resolve ambiguity, both Shori and Bo courageously (and comfortably) stay in the realm of ambiguity. There is no “truth,” no “one way,” other than constant flux and transformation.

Notes

1. Very generally speaking, queer ecology problematizes the already deeply complex relationships between the social construction of sexualities and nature, which are indubitably mediated by power.
2. From now on “sf” will be used as an abbreviation of “science fiction.”
3. Exactly like the vampire, as we will discuss later on.
4. For example, yes, “the technological utopia of the nineteenth century invited women to write because they could re-imagine their lives rather than recording their oppressions” (Donawerth 197), but my guess is that, precisely in those re-imaginings of the world, these authors also created fictional characters that in turn inspired more writers... therefore feeding a cyclical, transactional process of creation.
5. In terms of place, and specifically, possibly landscape ecology, more could be easily explored from a focused queer-ecological perspective. In this sense, the (natural and cultural) landscape of both novel and T.V. show are peculiar manifestations of their cultural production of queer identities and queer family formations.
6. Even if Kenzi struggles with her human-ness through the entire show, she never becomes Fae, and in spite of her clear physical / magical disadvantage, she constantly ends up saving not only Bo, but the entire Fae civilization. This is a hugely important modification of the way in which Fae society views human beings as imperfect and inferior and inferior and challenges their racist / speciesist beliefs to the core.
7. These are the same Ina who view their symbionts as slaves or, in the best of cases, pets, to be used and abused and disposed of without a second thought. This particular aspect resonates loudly with the way the Fae view humans in *Lost Girl*, and the transgressiveness of Bo’s relationships with humans—and Shori’s deeply intimate, respectful relationships with her symbionts. Both works trace parallels between racism / speciesism and the destructive forces in their societies in illuminating ways.
8. Conservative Ina literally burn Shori’s family compound to the ground. That is the violent extreme to which they are willing to go to avoid “species contamination.” In the end, the Ina

- council dissolves the killers' family and rules in favor of the DNA experimentation that has proven to make Shori stronger rather than weaker.
9. This runs counter to the traditional "pop culture" portrayal of dissident subjectivities as inevitably doomed to self-destruction. There is no self-destruction in either of the two works. There is actually the opposite: creative, mutually-nourishing construction of brave new queer ecosystems.
 10. In season five, episode seven, a heart-broken Tamsin struggles to deal with Bo's recurrent need to go back to her ex-lover Lauren and negotiate her place in the family regardless. Bo's first monogamous lover, Dyson, tells her with kindness: "Bo is a succubus. There will always be other people. It is her nature." Bo's sexuality and her affection are uncontainable.
 11. I am not talking about macho Mormon polygamy, which is based on deplorable religious principles to oppress and dominate women and children for men to exploit and profit from that exploitation. I am talking about two narratives that foreground collaborative, loving, compassionate, multi-layered, nonmonogamous relationships as the basis for changing the world, no mean feat. But behold the brave women imagining these liberating spaces and writing them (and producing them) into existence, available for hundreds of thousands of readers and viewers. This is queer realness. This is revolutionarily feminist. This is the future if we are to survive as a species.
 12. This sounds like an accurate description of traditional monogamous relationships in patriarchy, which is then mirrored in larger structures such as the institutions that support nation-states and their myth of nationality and patriotism. The Ina that treat their symbionts as slaves are the vicious speciesist, racist ones.
 13. In Season 05, episode 2, after Kenzi and Lauren bring Bo back from the realm of the underworld where she has been looking for her father, Hades, Bo loses her sex drive. She is emotionally unstable after Kenzi decided to leave their home to "do human things." Bo understands that it is her choice to leave and respects that, but is left heartbroken. She is injured, and if she does not feed, she will not heal. Dyson, Lauren, Trick and Tamsin, especially come together to show her that they are her family and that she will never be alone. Bo comes back to her succubus nature and asks everyone but Dyson to leave the room. They have vigorous sex for hours, to the relief of both Lauren and Tamsin, who are in love with her, but understand her sexuality and refuse to challenge the very nature that keeps her alive and powerful. In this sense, *Lost Girl* shows how radical female sexuality is accepted and uncontested, something extremely rare in television for mass consumption.
 14. Indeed, as Lacey affirms, "Butler's emphases on her characters' ability to adapt to changing conditions, their capacity to create new kinds of symbiotic communities, and their potential for gaining and using power in ways that do not repeat old patterns of domination reveal a strategy of confronting power with becoming" (392).
 15. It is unfortunate that Butler died leaving this "fledgling" on its own, as her critics all agree her favorite way to tell stories was always in several books in a series. I cannot help but wonder if this fact only makes more poetic sense. The door is open to limitless possibility.

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