

Lewis Call

“This Wondrous Death”: Erotic Power in the Science Fiction of James Tiptree, Jr.

I know goddam well what's out there, under all those masks. Beauty and Power and Terror and Love.—James Tiptree, Jr., *Meet Me at Infinity*, 197

1. **James Tiptree, Jr.**, is surely one of the most controversial figures in the sf field, a field that is rife with controversy. The controversy surrounding Tiptree begins with the very question of his identity. In his introduction to Tiptree's 1975 short-story collection *Warm Worlds and Otherwise*, sf author and critic Robert Silverberg asked the questions that were on the minds of many in the sf community: “Who Is Tiptree? What Is He?” Silverberg infamously concluded that “there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree's writing” (xii). But during the winter of 1976-77, the sf world learned that “James Tiptree, Jr.” was in fact a pseudonym of Dr. Alice B. Sheldon. The remarkable Dr. Sheldon had served as a photo-intelligence officer in the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II, eventually rising to the rank of Major. After the war, she had gone on to work for the Central Intelligence Agency. Dissatisfied with her work at the C.I.A., she had re-invented herself at least twice: first as an experimental psychologist, then (perhaps more radically) as a “male” author of sf stories. When he learned of Tiptree's secret identity, Silverberg was a good sport about it. “I suppose I will eat some crow over that, but I'm not at all annoyed with you,” he wrote to Alice Sheldon. “*You* didn't fool me; *I* fooled myself, and so be it” (qtd. Phillips 360).

In his landmark 1969 essay “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault anticipated the trap into which Silverberg fell. Foucault argued that “the author's name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse” (*Aesthetics* 211). By the time Tiptree's identity was revealed in the late 1970s, the name Tiptree had indeed come to characterize a discourse that dealt with topics that were certainly not coded as feminine, according to the cultural standards of the time. Tiptree liked to explore the subtle dynamics of power. He¹ liked to examine the operations of dominance/submission structures. Rape was a common theme in his stories, as was incest. Many of Tiptree's stories emphasized the connection between sexuality and violence—a link that was also vital, of course, in Freud's later work. The most striking of Tiptree's stories went even further, to argue for a direct connection between sexuality and death itself. In the twentieth century, such themes were typically gendered male.² And so perhaps Robert Silverberg was not entirely wrong when he described Tiptree's work as “ineluctably masculine.”

In her excellent new biography of Alice Sheldon, Julie Phillips argues that Tiptree “wasn't a deliberate plan; yet he wasn't a complete accident either” (213). I believe that James Tiptree was a distinct masculine persona that

developed at the intersection of Alice Sheldon's body and a certain blue-ribboned typewriter. Dr. Sheldon may not have planned that persona. Indeed, she later reflected that Tiptree seemed to create himself (Phillips 216). And she may not have understood Tiptree's significance, especially at the beginning. But whether she knew what she was doing or not, Sheldon ended up using Tiptree to say things that, within the cultural and epistemological system that surrounded her, women were not authorized to say. In a rare interview conducted for *Contemporary Authors* after Tiptree's identity was revealed, Sheldon observed that "a woman writing of the joy and terror of furious combat, or of the lust of torture and killing, or of the violent forms of evil—isn't taken quite seriously" (*Meet Me at Infinity* 351). Before she could speak about these crucial topics, then, Alice Sheldon had to become James Tiptree. And this involved much more than simply writing a few stories under an assumed name. Tiptree acquired his own mailing address and his own bank account. Sheldon began to speak of him in the third person. James Tiptree eventually became an entirely separate persona, quite distinct from Alice Sheldon. And Sheldon found this new identity liberating. When the world learned the secret that she and Tiptree shared, Alice Sheldon mourned Tiptree's inevitable demise. "As Tiptree, I had an unspoken classificatory bond to the world of male action; Tiptree's existence opened to unknown possibilities of power. And, let us pry deeper—to the potential of evil" (*Meet Me at Infinity* 381). The question that the sf community should have been asking, then, was not Silverberg's "Who Is Tiptree?" but rather "Why Is Tiptree?" The answer, it seems, is that Tiptree had to come into existence so that Alice Sheldon could express certain impermissible thoughts about power, violence, and sexuality.

Any ideas explosive enough to produce an entirely new authorial persona deserve serious attention. Tiptree's topics—the problem of power, the nature of dominance/submission structures, the complex relationship between death and sexuality—get right to the heart of the human condition, as critics such as Veronica Hollinger have noted ("The Most Grisly Truth"). Tiptree's stories are gripping precisely because he is unflinching in his portrayal of a tormented Eros. Tiptree stares into the abyss that lies at the very center of human relations, and he does not blink.

Not surprisingly, Tiptree's work has generated a fair amount of critical interest, especially among feminists. During the 1980s, the tendency among feminist critics was to interpret Tiptree's tales of violent sexuality as a radical critique of the gender relations that obtain in patriarchal society. In 1980, for example, Joanna Russ read Tiptree's work in terms of a discourse that she called "the Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction" (*Amor Vincit Foeminam*). For Russ and many other feminist critics, Tiptree's work was significant because it explored the frequently violent, sometimes fatal, possibly inevitable conflict between men and women. Russ's reading was very influential; other prominent feminist sf critics continued to develop her model throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Certainly Russ's interpretation has much to recommend it. Tiptree undoubtedly does speak in a critical way about patriarchy—and also about class

structures and other forms of oppression. But although this particular feminist reading of Tiptree, which I call “sex-war” feminism, is valid and valuable, it tells us only half the story. The major limitation of this reading is that it cannot provide a satisfactory account of Tiptree’s biological determinism. Throughout his written work, Tiptree argues consistently that humans are unable to resist the drives and demands of biology. Biology, for Tiptree, is destiny. This places sex-war feminism in a difficult position. If Tiptree’s equation of sex and violence is to be understood *solely* as a critique of masculine sexuality and/or patriarchy, and if this equation is predetermined at a biological level, then the implications for women are clear—and deeply disturbing. In this reading, women are essentially doomed. “Tiptree seems to see no hope for feminist equality, no release from the bondage of violent sex, and no hope for the human race,” Lillian Heldreth lamented in 1982 (28). The obvious danger of this reading, of course, is that it can easily generate apathy and undermine the incentives for political action and resistance.

I wish to promote a different reading of Tiptree, one that will acknowledge, expand, and (I hope) improve upon the “battle of the sexes” interpretation of his fiction. I believe that for Tiptree, violence and power are neither entirely masculine nor entirely negative phenomena. Recent criticism—influenced, perhaps, by the postmodern rejection of moral absolutes—has recognized that the violence in Tiptree’s stories can be read positively. Inez van der Spek is right to contrast the anger that Tiptree undeniably feels about women’s suffering with the fascination for violence that is also quite clearly present in Tiptree’s writing (15). It is imperative for us to recognize that in Tiptree’s worlds as in our own, violence and power come in various forms, each of which carries its own unique ethical and political status. Some forms of violence and power are inherently unethical and oppressive. Others are seductive, erotic, perhaps even liberating. The crucial tension in Tiptree’s fiction, then, is not between violent men and victimized women. Rather, it is between those forms of power and violence that are consensual, ethical, and necessary and those that are not. The primary example of a profoundly necessary ethical violence is the violence inherent in all erotic activity. Unnecessary, unethical violence includes the political violence of war, the economic violence of exploitation, and, above all, the cultural violence of patriarchy. Tiptree’s argument is that *both* men and women must acknowledge the essential bonds among power, sexuality, and violence. Furthermore, Tiptree’s fiction argues that men and women must join together in the quest to distinguish the ethical and erotic forms of power/violence from those that reject both ethics and Eros. Tiptree firmly insists that we must embrace the former while rejecting the latter. I would therefore like to queer the sex-war hypothesis slightly, by arguing that Tiptree’s texts produce not just one but (at least) two powerful forms of feminist discourse. The first is the critique of patriarchy and its heteronormative gender relations, which has been duly noted by sex-war feminists. The second is a form of feminism that has largely been overlooked, which I call “power-conscious feminism.”

This variety of feminism accepts Foucault's insight that power is inevitable and omnipresent. Foucault has argued "(i) that power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network; (ii) that relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations (production, kinship, family, sexuality)" (*Power/Knowledge* 142). For Foucault, then, power flows through each and every social relation, and no such relation can remain immune to power's effects. The realm of the sexual, which is that part of the social terrain where human relationships reach maximum complexity and intensity, is especially susceptible to the workings of power. Yet power-conscious feminism also remembers the crucial—but frequently overlooked—second half of Foucault's equation: "if there are relations of power in every social field, that is because there is freedom everywhere" (*Ethics* 292). Tiptree's Foucauldian recognition of the omnipresence of power is no abandonment of hope, no cry of despair. Instead, the recognition that both power *and* freedom flow through every social relationship demonstrates that it is urgently necessary to describe the tremendous diversity that exists in the field of power/freedom. If every social relation—even the most loving, even the most caring—operates within the field of power/freedom, then we clearly cannot dismiss the operations of power as unethical in advance, for this would imply that *all* human relations are inherently unethical. Foucault is unusually direct and adamant on this point: "Power is not evil. Power is games of strategy. We all know that power is not evil! For example, let us take sexual or amorous relationships: to wield power over the other in a sort of open-ended strategic game where the situation may be reversed is not evil; it's a part of love, of passion and sexual pleasure" (*Ethics* 298). To be sure, there is a certain kind of determinism at work in Foucault, for his theory suggests that the elimination of power from erotic relations is not an option for us. Yet that does not mean that we have no choices to make, for power relations are always also relations of freedom.

In the Foucauldian schematic, strategic power relations inevitably surround sex. But these relations can work themselves out in radically diverse ways. Foucault uses the intriguing example of sadomasochism to illustrate this diversity. In the case of mainstream "vanilla" heterosexuality, the strategic relations are outside of sex, and are used in order to obtain sex. But with S/M, "those strategic relations are inside sex, as a convention of pleasure within a particular situation" (*Ethics* 170). By incorporating the power relations, and by making them explicit and negotiated, S/M raises the ironic possibility of an erotic practice that is actually much more consensual than many "normal" sexual relationships. Foucault describes S/M as "a kind of creation, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure" (*Ethics* 165). Foucault provocatively but persuasively suggests that erotic power exchange is not only non-violent and ethically permissible; it is also, in his view, a kind of artistic enterprise. And Foucault is right to distinguish the erotic from the sexual. What is pleasurable and erotic is not necessarily the same as what is sexual, and Foucault—like Tiptree—deploys a very broad concept of the erotic.

The clear connections that both Foucault and Tiptree draw between power and the erotic might lead us to question the political implications of power-conscious feminism. After all, some of the most ethically bankrupt political regimes of the twentieth century have also been known to make troubling links between Eros and power. The best known example is fascism. The fetishistic aspects of fascism—and especially its embrace of sadomasochism—have been well documented, for example, by members of the Frankfurt School. Is it possible, then, that Tiptree's equation of Eros and power implicitly serves a fascist agenda? This would be a great tragedy, for the same readers who might embrace Tiptree's broad, libertarian concept of the erotic would probably find any fascist themes profoundly distasteful, or even repulsive.

Tiptree may have been aware of this danger; in a 1983 profile in *Asimov's*, he identified his political philosophy as fascism's polar opposite: "I'm an anarchist if anything" (qtd. Galef 211). In his interviews as well as in his stories, Tiptree consistently draws careful distinctions between political power (unethical) and erotic power (ethical, perhaps even liberating). This suggests that Tiptree's position is similar to that of Samuel Delany, who has argued that sexual and political forms of torture are dramatically different both in terms of their structures of organization and in terms of the power relations that obtain in each situation (*Silent Interviews* 140). It is ethics, of course, that separates the two situations. For Tiptree as for Delany, erotic power cannot degenerate into power's ethically impermissible political form. These two forms of power are too different, in their structure and in their content, to permit such a degeneration. Unlike the Frankfurt School, Tiptree recognizes that erotic sadomasochism and sadomasochistic fascism are two entirely different projects, with different goals, agendas, and practices. As Delany has pointed out, the Frankfurt School created an uncritical association between sadism as a sexual practice and the cruelty of political oppression, thus blinding an entire generation of thinkers to the actual operations of erotic life (*Silent Interviews* 202).

These careful ethical and political distinctions—which Delany makes explicit—are to be found implicitly in Tiptree. And this is precisely how Tiptree is able to address issues of erotic power. If he could not articulate a definite boundary between the two major forms of power—the political and the erotic—then it is unlikely, given his clear revulsion for all things fascist, that he would have been able to speak about power's erotic forms. Certainly he would not have been able to speak about those forms as sympathetically as he did. By rejecting any claim of equivalence between power's unethical and ethical aspects, Tiptree is able to articulate a power-conscious feminism that acknowledges the elements of power present in all erotic relations—and indeed, if we believe Foucault, in *all* social relations. The basic question of power-conscious feminism is this: *how can men and women who accept the inevitability of power nonetheless lead ethical lives?* Tiptree clearly understands the importance of this question, and his stories provide us with a plausible provisional answer. Men and women (plus aliens) can lead ethical lives by not

only accepting but embracing the inevitability of power, and insisting on the vital distinction between power's unethical, non-consensual, political form on the one hand, and its ethical, consensual, erotic form on the other. These two types of power have been mistaken for each other so frequently that the boundary between them has become somewhat hazy. Tiptree's stories reinforce and reinscribe that boundary, and in this way Tiptree makes a major contribution to the philosophy of power. By illustrating the great diversity of power in the modern world, Tiptree creates and preserves a space for the articulation of power's erotic aspect. Tiptree thus recuperates power in the worlds of science fiction, much as Foucault has tried to recuperate it in the realms of history and philosophy.

The power-conscious reading of Tiptree is facilitated by the queer turn that sf criticism took at the end of the twentieth century. In her 1999 essay "Alien Cryptographies: The View from Queer," Wendy Pearson argues that when we queer certain texts, "we can recognize within the texts the traces of an alternative or dissident sexual subjectivity that may be revealed through close and careful reading within both a historical context and a theoretical framework" (10). I believe that this approach is appropriate for an author such as Tiptree, whose articulation of erotic power is subtle and frequently subterranean. The argument for erotic power that emerges from Tiptree's texts is implicit rather than explicit. This distinguishes Tiptree from the sf community's more overt advocates of erotic power, such as Delany.³ And yet the subtlety of Tiptree's writing is also its strength. While Delany's explicit philosophical discussions of erotic power have appealed mainly to queer critics and radical gender theorists, Tiptree's implicit account of such power can find a broader audience. Tiptree's theory of the erotic is able to fly "under the radar"—much as Tiptree himself did. Tiptree's subtle invocations of erotic power can extend beyond the realm of radical criticism, perhaps even reaching the Robert Silverbergs of the world.

In her queer reading of Tiptree's "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" Pearson suggests that "the story's assertion that heteronormative relationships are irredeemable argues not so much for a feminist uprising in which all men will be slaughtered as for a rethinking of the ideological and sociocultural presuppositions that make it impossible to imagine relationships across the sexes outside the limited regime of what one might call the 'heterosexual imaginary'" (12). Here Pearson has hit upon a very effective and powerful strategy for reading Tiptree, one that may be applied to his work in general. I believe that Tiptree's *oeuvre* does contain a persistent argument that heteronormative relationships are irredeemable. However, I wish to emphasize that for Tiptree such relationships are unsustainable not because they are *hetero*, but because they are *normative*. The issue for Tiptree is not heterosexuality *per se*, as some versions of the sex-war hypothesis would have it, but rather our culture's persistent inability to recognize the unique and intriguing possibilities that erotic power has to offer. Modifying Pearson's formulation slightly, I would argue that Tiptree's texts provide us with a way to transcend the "vanilla imaginary." And

yet they do so with such subtlety and grace that they are able to avoid alienating the more traditional elements of Tiptree's audience.

2. Provocative meditations on power are to be found even in Tiptree's earliest stories, such as "Mama Come Home" (1968). Like many of his tales, this one takes an sf cliché and adds a subversive twist. In this case, the theme is alien invasion, the venerable subject of pulps and B-movies. This time, however, the invaders are gigantic women from Capella who have a penchant for raping human males. This radical reversal of the gender roles that obtain within a typical rape scene produces what Darko Suvin might call a cognitive estrangement effect.⁴ Presented with a cognitive framework so radically different from that of the "real world," the reader is forced to reflect upon the often unexamined power dynamics that govern gender relations. But Tiptree is not done yet. The humans eventually thwart the Capellan invaders by means of an elaborate hoax. A human woman named Tillie, who was once the victim of an especially egregious rape, agrees to impersonate a Capellan for a special video broadcast. Tillie undergoes simulated rape at the hands of an enormous man, in order to convince the Capellans that there is a race of men even larger, more powerful, and more sexually violent than they are. The Capellans flee and earth is saved.

In "*Amor Vincit Foeminam*," Russ treats this story as an example of what she calls "the Sex War scenario," a genre of which she is strongly critical (56). She does grudgingly admit, however, that "Mama" is "one of the few attempts to write thoughtfully about the Sex War" (54). Still, Russ finds "Mama" frustrating, which is not surprising, since the story does not fit neatly into the theoretical framework of sex-war feminism. Russ admits that "the story treats the Sex War scenario oddly, both inverting some of its elements and commenting critically on others" (56). She observes that Tiptree's story divides women into two camps—Capellan and human—and pits these two camps against one another. For Russ, then, the "real conflict," that is to say, the conflict between men and women, is evaded (56). The "real conflict" in "Mama," however, is not between men and women. Rather, it is between the ethical and unethical uses of sexual violence. Tiptree is unsparing in his description of the rape that Tillie underwent as a teenager: "Tillie at fifteen had caught the full treatment from a street gang. Fought against knives, left for dead—an old story. They'd fixed her up as good as new, except for a few interesting white hairlines in her tan, and a six-inch layer of ice between her and everybody who shaved" (62-63). The meaning of this rape is clear: it is an ethical catastrophe, an abhorrent act of violence that has left Tillie with deep emotional scars. But Tillie's second rape has a profoundly different ethical status. First and foremost, she undergoes this "rape" voluntarily. It is an act of simulated violence with a clear and noble purpose. Within the framework of ethical choices available to Tillie, this rape is legitimate and necessary, even heroic.

Tillie does not openly discuss her feelings about these two rapes—our epistemological system does not encourage women to speak of such things. At the end of the story, however, she does give us a clue as to how she might

understand the various forms of sexual violence: “‘It’s all relative, isn’t it?’ she said to the avocados” (85). Tillie has learned to read violence according to the ethical criteria appropriate for the circumstances. In these particular (albeit rather unusual) circumstances, it is appropriate for Tillie to draw a contrast between rape—an ethically abominable form of sexual assault—and “rape”—simulated sexual violence carried out with the consent of the “victim.” Of course, in a different epistemological environment—especially one in which the level of simulation was not quite so high—Tillie might well construct her ethical categories in a different way. Nonetheless, she has learned an important existential lesson. Specifically, Tillie has discovered that she has the right and the power to create ethical boundaries and to make ethical decisions according to her own criteria. With the irony that is his trademark, Tiptree thus presents Tillie’s decision to undergo “rape” as a profoundly empowering one.

Another Tiptree story that has drawn the attention of sex-war feminism is “The Women Men Don’t See” (1973). Stranded in the Quintana Roo by a plane crash, Ruth Parsons and her twenty-something daughter Althea decide to hitchhike a ride with some passing aliens rather than allow themselves to be “rescued” by well-meaning, entirely clueless human men. In a widely cited passage, Ruth tells one of these men why they are leaving: “Women have no rights, Don, except what men allow us. Men are more aggressive and powerful, and they run the world.... What women do is survive. We live by ones and twos in the chinks of your world-machine” (154). Sex-war feminism correctly identifies this story as a major critique of patriarchy; indeed, by the mid-1970s, Tiptree’s critique was becoming remarkably explicit. The story’s argument—that women who live within patriarchal societies are so profoundly alienated that they might as well go live with real aliens—is simple, straightforward, and strikingly effective. But Tiptree’s argument is actually more radical than this. Marleen Barr has suggested that Ruth “leaves because known male monsters have prevented her from calling her own world home” (32). This interpretation assumes that patriarchal power is coterminous with male power, and it fails to account for the real possibilities of resolution contained in Tiptree’s text. Barr hopes that Althea, who is possibly pregnant, may give birth to a daughter who will not be invisible, as girls and women are on earth. This does not, however, offer real women a strategy against patriarchy.

The sex-war reading tends to focus on the figure of Don Fenton, Tiptree’s unsympathetic male narrator. There is, however, another model of masculinity available to readers of this story. This is the figure of Captain Estéban, the Mayan aircraft pilot. Captain Estéban is the man some women do not see. Readers perceive Captain Estéban through the eyes of Tiptree’s typically unreliable narrator. Don is horrified when he realizes that Ruth has deliberately left Althea back at the plane with the Mayan pilot, where the two are undoubtedly having sex. He is even more horrified when he realizes why:

Just as I am about to suggest that Mrs. Parsons might care to share my rain shelter, she remarks serenely, “The Mayas seem to be a very fine type of people. I believe you said so to Althea.” The implications fall on me with the rain. *Type*.

As in breeding, bloodline, sire. Am I supposed to have certified Estéban not only as a stud but as a genetic donor? (150)

Of course, Don cannot accept the idea that Ruth and Althea have devised a perfectly sensible strategy for fulfilling their reproductive imperatives before they depart for the stars. Such an idea, after all, is entirely at odds with one of the basic foundations of patriarchy, namely the eternal and all-consuming importance of the Father. "Hold them, Estéban!" Don cries as Ruth and Althea prepare to depart. "Don't let her go" (162). Don is the very voice of patriarchy here: a white, middle-class American male who refuses to allow women any escape from the "world-machine." Estéban's response, however, is extremely instructive: "He gives me one slit-eyed glance over his shoulder, and I recognize his total uninvolvedness" (162). Not all men, it seems, participate in patriarchy. The Mayan Captain Estéban, who lacks Don's training in authoritarian power structures, is perfectly happy to impregnate young Althea and wish her *bon voyage* as she begins her new life among the aliens. He makes no attempt to trap her or her mother within the non-consensual power structures that Don understands as women's natural habitat. The problem of power has at least as much to do with race here as it does with gender.

Tiptree continues to explore this problem in his first novel, *Up the Walls of the World* (1978). The cast of this novel includes Dr. Margaret Omali, a human woman who has been the victim of the worst kind of sexual violence. As a girl in Africa, she suffered cliterectomy. "For so long she lived in lacerated shame, her body an aching agony without release. Her only desire was to hold the psychic wound quiet, to escape to levels of the mind beyond its reach" (188). Escape she does, for Margaret Omali and the other human characters in *Up the Walls* are suddenly thrown into telepathic contact with aliens. This contact is so strong that the humans are actually able to transfer their minds into alien bodies. As they do so, they discover that some things truly are universal. During one interstellar body-switching session, Margaret becomes a "white deerlike creature." Her would-be human lover, Dr. Daniel Dann, reaches for her, but "to his horror he hears himself uttering a fanged roar, and feels his carnivore's muscles exploding him into a murderous leap. His huge talons are unsheathed, descending on her! He screams, trying to wrench himself aside in midair as her white head comes up" (140). Sex, apparently, is still intrinsically violent, even on alien worlds, even when neither party is wearing a human body.

Like most of Tiptree's work, *Up the Walls* argues in favor of a system of erotic relations in which power is flexible, fluid, and always reversible. The straight, vanilla Daniel Dann ponders a lesbian relationship: "His notion of their relationship somersaults. Who is the strong one here? Or must there be a strong one, do their small strengths complement each other?" (55). Dann is unable to grasp the full complexities of this relationship, because it does not fit into the tidy, orderly categories of power that his patriarchal culture sanctions. Val and Frodo, the lesbian lovers, are *both* strong, *both* on top. It is this, and not just their homosexuality, that radicalizes their relationship. Indeed, Tiptree takes pains to normalize their lesbianism:

“That’s why we’re so glad you’re with us,” Val says quietly. “People like us, we’re vulnerable. They don’t like us.”

For an instant Dann thinks she’s telling him they’re lesbians, which he had rather assumed.... But then he realizes her glance had summed up the whole table.

She means, he sees, people like Noah’s subjects. People who are supposed to be telepathic, to read minds. (55)

What does it mean that Val identifies mainly as a telepath, rather than a lesbian? It means she understands that she is involved not in a war between the sexes, but rather a debate about the meaning of power. As telepathic lovers, she and Frodo have a clear understanding of what is at stake in this debate. Strength and power flow back and forth between them in a way that is fully consensual, ethical, and erotic. Such a relationship is of course terrifying to a patriarchal society that endorses only non-consensual forms of power; for this reason, Val and Frodo must be constantly on their guard.

Nor are Val and Frodo the only women who possess erotic power in *Up the Walls*. As the narrative unfolds, Margaret Omali transfers her consciousness into a vast living alien starship. The interface is difficult at first: “A silent tide of power seems to rise against her, cold, cold and enormous. But she has power too” (193). Because she *does* have power, Margaret is able to enter into her new existence consciously, with her eyes open: “She has come through dangers and blackness to this place of power and now she has some mental desires to fulfill. Before assenting further, she will know where she is and among what powers and conditions this strange life is set” (195). Essentially, Margaret is negotiating with the alien entity, establishing the conditions under which she will consent to a full merger. Her fears allayed, Margaret agrees to merge with the alien: “The strange symbiosis holds, the improbable interfaces mesh and spread. From spaceborne vastness through a small unliving energy-organization to the residual structure of a human mind with an odd relation to matter, information cycles. And power” (246). What is Margaret’s odd relation to information cycles? Somehow she is able to access an earthly computer network called TOTAL, though she does not understand how this is possible: “She merely accepts it as one more aspect of this wondrous death and feels her soul smile” (197). Margaret interprets her strange otherworldly existence as a kind of death, and she embraces it. This death gives her a long sought opportunity to escape from a body ruined by patriarchy. By abandoning her earthly body, Margaret is able to die and be reborn as a vast, posthuman interstellar entity: a wondrous death, indeed.

Margaret’s extraterrestrial experience stands in sharp contrast to that of Daniel Dann. In her new configuration as the control center of an immense alien starship, Margaret becomes a powerful, dominant persona. Dann, on the other hand, becomes the essence of submission. Transferred into an alien body that can physically experience the emotions and sensations of others, Dann finds his physician’s empathy amplified. “Oh Christ,” Dann thinks, “can I really make myself take that much pain again—and again and again? But even as he cringes,

there is obscure satisfaction. At least he hadn't been crazy. His joke about being a receiver; apparently true. Specialized to pain, I'm pain's toy" (224). Why does Dann feel "obscure satisfaction" at the thought that he is "pain's toy"? Perhaps it is because Dann, who is ridden with guilt for escaping the fire that killed his wife and baby, *is* specialized to pain, and feels that he *deserves* to be pain's toy. Dann uses his newfound hyperempathy to heal a burn victim; as he does so, the source of his satisfaction becomes less obscure. Now at last he can feel the burning pain that he believes he should have felt when his family died. Better yet, he can use that pain to heal wounds much like those that claimed his wife and child. Dann has learned to distinguish "bad pain," such as endless guilt, from "good pain," such as pain that is willingly accepted as a form of service. This is a defining moment in the creation of a new submissive masochist.

In his new alien body, Dann is free to let his previously repressed masochistic side run wild. Late in the narrative, Dann uses his healer's powers to aid Margaret: "Abruptly he encounters the one thing he knows—a human wound of pain and need. *Here!* And his arms seem to grip a straining waist, in a rush he knows he can exert his own small gift, can take to himself her pain and fear and send her out his strength. It is dizzying, transcendent, transsexual" (273). Transsexual, yes—and also deeply erotic. Dann longs to give his "small gift" to the woman he worships. He is powerful here—but his is the power that comes from submission and service. He suffers for his lover, taking her pain with pride and satisfaction. Power-conscious feminism offers an effective way to understand the relationship between this submissive masochistic male and this dominant posthuman woman. Daniel Dann and Margaret Omali have confronted the realities of power together, as lovers should. They have negotiated a solution to the problems of power and pain. It is a conscious, consensual solution that satisfies their mutual emotional and erotic needs.

Clearly, Tiptree recognizes that erotic power flows across the gender spectrum in multiple directions. While this Foucauldian concept of power is present in Tiptree's interviews and throughout his fictional corpus, it emerges most clearly in his explicitly erotic stories. In "Trey of Hearts" (1985), a human woman provides erotic instruction to a pair of shape-shifting aliens who have recently assumed the form of human males. As part of their erotic play, she introduces the aliens to "an informal sex game called Discover the Sleeper" (104). As she explains, "the object of the game is for you to try to remain still and passive as long as possible" (104). So here we have an active, sexually dominant woman and a passive, submissive (alien) "man." "I am the Discoverer," Sheila continues. "I can do whatever I like." Having just emphasized her role as a dominant woman, Sheila immediately subverts that role. "I'll start by kneeling at your other side," she says, ostensibly "so Myr Loomis can see." But she is careful to conclude with this: "And by the way, this game can be played with the sexes reversed, it works beautifully" (104).

This fascinating passage sheds a good deal of light on Tiptree's theory of erotic power. First and foremost, Tiptree makes it abundantly clear in "Trey of Hearts" that consensual erotic power exchange—*game-playing*—has an ethical

status that is fundamentally different from that of non-consensual power relations. This is true, at least in part, because for Tiptree as for Foucault, *erotic* relations are always reversible. Categories of dominance and submission are rarely absolute. Indeed, one frequently flows into the other.⁵

If this is the case, then it seems evident that the orthodox sex-war hypothesis cannot give us a complete understanding of the ways in which power operates in Tiptree's texts. The figure of Sheila—a human woman who is both dominant and submissive and who is happy to have sex with two provisionally male aliens—shatters conventional models of gender and power. Such a figure places us in a new ethical and epistemological world. In this new world, the exchange of power by consenting, switching adults of either or both genders stands as a bold, dramatic alternative to the brutal forms of non-consensual power and violence that are too typically deployed by men against women.

3. My hypothesis—that Tiptree distinguishes the consensual and purposeful forms of power from the non-consensual, purposeless forms—can even help to explain the darkest and most disturbing aspect of Tiptree's erotic universe: his relentless equation of sex and death. Inez van der Spek has suggested that “sex” in Tiptree's sex/death equation refers to a particular model of male sexuality (83). I wish to argue, however, that Tiptree's understanding of things is actually much broader and deeper than that. For Tiptree, the sex/death equation is a fundamental problem that should be of profound concern to both men and women. Nor should women's interest in this problem be seen merely as the interest of the passive victim, for this interpretation plays directly into some very debilitating models of gender and power. If Tiptree were indeed merely arguing that male sex equals female death, then women would be left in the position of victims, doomed by the biological imperatives of reproduction. If, however, he is arguing that sex equals death *in general*, then the situation is very different. In this interpretation, men and women are not victimizer and victim; rather, they are, out of strict necessity, partners in an endless quest to confront the sex/death equation, understand its elusive meaning, and discover modes of joyous being within the framework that it establishes.

Veronica Hollinger noted in 1989 that “tragic fate ... provides Tiptree with the opportunity to valorize all that is still ‘good’ in the human race. If love is complicit with death, then death can be (to some extent) recuperated as an act of love” (“‘The Most Grisly Truth’” 120). Tiptree *begins* with the observation that love and death are intimately linked aspects of humanity's biological condition, but Tiptree's work exceeds a simple biological determinism. His determinism gives Tiptree the opportunity to set aside that which cannot be changed and to concentrate on that which certainly *can* be contested, namely the meaning and value of our biological destiny. As Hollinger observes, “Tiptree deconstructs the conventional conflict between love and death, one variation of the binary opposition ‘good/evil’ which has been identified by Fredric Jameson as the ‘ethical axis’ of the romance form” (119). Tiptree's work thus constitutes an elaborate, ambitious attempt to break free of the reductionist ethical

formulations that characterize much previous science fiction (and indeed, much fiction in general). For Tiptree, love is not simply good and death is not simply evil. Rather, love and death participate in a complex, interlocking spiral relationship, the *meaning* of which is a matter of human choice.

To be sure, Tiptree does describe the inevitable connection between love and death in almost clinical scientific terms. But the effect of this description is to create a moment of remarkable existential possibility. What meanings will we create—and what ethical choices will we make—once we recognize that love and death are the two major components of our biological and ontological condition? David Galef remarked recently that “it would be tempting to conclude that Tiptree is a technologically advanced Hobbesian, writing at the intersection of behaviorism and genetics. Yet such a label would misrepresent a countervailing combative spirit” (217). Again, Tiptree’s vision is basically Foucauldian. In this case, omnipresent power takes the form of genetic and environmental destiny. There can, of course, be no escape from such destiny. Yet resistance and freedom are, as always, also omnipresent. The equation between love and death may be determined or even overdetermined. But the way in which we confront that equation is very much open to debate. The descent into deterministic apathy may be the most obvious response to this equation, but it is clearly not the option that Tiptree endorses.

The exploration of the love/death equation so dominated Tiptree’s thinking during the late 1960s and early 1970s that he began to find it tedious. Writing about his writing in 1972, Tiptree noted that “I’ve handwritten a couple quite different bits, but am bored with them. (Love, death ♀.)” (*Meet Me at Infinity* 221). Note how the equation is framed here. Tiptree speaks not of male sex or even sex in general but rather love, or what I call the erotic. The third component of the equation is not ♂ but ♀. This emphasizes the fact that the equation is an aspect of women’s being, at least as much as men’s. The symbol “♀” may be a simple shorthand, or it may be a hint of things that cannot easily be said with words. If such things can be said at all, they can surely be said only within the cognitive space of a paraliterature like science fiction.⁶ “Ever since things got serious,” Tiptree argued in 1973, “ever since we realized that we really are in danger of killing ourselves ... of killing our own humanity by fascist tyranny or simple overbreeding, science fiction has been the only place we could talk about it” (*Meet Me at Infinity* 240).

And talk about it Tiptree did. Tiptree is a master of titles; perhaps the most explicit statement of his argument is to be found in “Love is the Plan, the Plan is Death” (1973). Moggadeet, the protagonist of this bizarre but beautiful alien love story, keeps his lover Lilliloo bound throughout most of the story. He cares for her, bringing her food and whispering alien pillow talk written in what Tiptree described as “the style of 1920 porno” (*Meet Me at Infinity* 202).⁷ As if all of this weren’t outrageous enough, Tiptree concludes the story by revealing the terrifying reason for this extended non-human bondage session. Moggadeet is a slave to the Plan, and so he tells Lilliloo that “each dawn it grew hard and harder for me to replace the silken bonds around your limbs” (191). One day he

lets her go free and she eats him alive, so that she can grow strong and bear their children.

Early criticism typically read this story as a fine example of Tiptree's biological determinism. Lowry Pei describes "Love" as "a peculiarly poignant story of an individual intelligence trying to achieve conscious choice while living in a mind and body controlled by drives" (272). Similarly, Mark Siegel describes "Love" as Tiptree's ultimate statement on our inability to alter physiological destiny (167). Such readings imply that the sexual violence of "Love" is to be read largely in negative or critical terms. Under this interpretation, "Love" is meant to instill in us the sobering thought that we are all slaves to biology and desire, doomed to die in the service of evolutionary Plans too vast and terrifying for us to comprehend. Yet there is more to the story than this. The Plan is, undeniably, Death. But the Plan is also Love. When Moggadeet describes the way in which he binds Lilliloo, his language is loving: "I wound among your darling little limbs, into your inmost delicate recesses, gently swathing and soothing you, winding and binding until you became a shining jewel" (177). The care he provides Lilliloo when she is bound is equally loving:

And all the warm nights long, how I cared for your helpless little body, carefully releasing each infant limb, flexing and stretching it, cleaning every scarlet morsel of you with my giant tongue, nibbling your baby claws with my terrible teeth, reveling in your baby hum, pretending to devour you while you shrieked with glee. (178)

The erotic power relations that enmesh Moggadeet and Lilliloo undergo a remarkable reversal in the course of the narrative. At the beginning of the story, Lilliloo appears to be completely helpless. She is entirely dependent upon her lover for care. Although Moggadeet's obvious dedication to service suggests submission, the structure of the situation places Lilliloo in a more thoroughly submissive position. As the demands of alien biology make themselves felt, however, the power relations gradually shift. As the two lovers approach the moment of "unbinding," Lilliloo accumulates power while Moggadeet loses his. By the end of the story, all power resides with the female Lilliloo, none with the male Moggadeet. Such a configuration exceeds the parameters of the conventional sex-war hypothesis; a power-conscious reading is indicated. Moggadeet's account of his own emotional state as he releases Lilliloo confirms the validity of this approach. When Moggadeet finally unbinds his lover, thus ensuring his own death, he feels only joy: "I ripped them away, the strong silk strands. Mad with love I slashed them all at once, rushing from each limb to the next until all your glorious body lay exposed" (192). These are not the actions of a desperate, doomed creature. They are the acts of a lover—and an expectant father—who accepts his destiny and revels in it. "Great is the Plan," declares Moggadeet at the very end of his life. "I felt only joy as your jaws took me" (192). Moggadeet's death may have been predetermined by his and Lilliloo's biological drives, but it is Moggadeet who finds existential meaning in that

death. He accepts his death without fear, knowing that it serves a greater purpose.

Tiptree developed this theme further in his 1975 novella "A Momentary Taste of Being." This is the tale of *Centaur*, an exploration ship dispatched by a desperately overpopulated earth for the purpose of locating worlds suitable for human colonization. The expedition discovers strange alien "eggs" that have, it seems, been sitting calmly on a distant world for billions of years, awaiting fertilization. Humans themselves, as it turns out, are "nothing but gametes ... half of the germ-plasm of ... something. Not complete beings at all. Half of the gametes of some ... creatures, some race" (158). Seduced by the hypnotic power of the alien eggs, the humans fertilize these eggs with their energy or life essence and gradually begin to die, their reproductive function finally fulfilled. The sex/death equation could not be more explicit here. But Tiptree's text offers us two very different ways to understand that equation. The ship's commander, Captain Yellaston, recognizes the equation and is terrified by it. The story's male narrator, Dr. Aaron Kaye, shares his Captain's fear: "Sex equals death. How right you are, old man. Funny, I used to treat patients for thinking that. Therapy—of course, it was a different, let's say order of sex" (158). Indeed, Aaron Kaye is so frightened by the equation that he actually manages to resist the powerful bio-psychological allure of the alien eggs to become the last living human on the ship.

But "A Momentary Taste of Being" also describes a very different response to the alien eggs. Aaron Kaye's sister, Lory, enthusiastically embraces her destiny as a gamete for some unimaginable alien life form. This is consistent with Tiptree's overall argument: death can be understood as a positive, even erotic phenomenon, when it operates in the service of a noble project. In this case, that project is the creation of an entirely new form of life. Clearly, Tiptree feels that the creation of new life is one of the few projects important enough to justify such a deadly Eros. Lory recognizes this. "No more hurting any more, never," Lory says to Aaron. "It's waiting for us, Arn, see? It wants to deliver us. We'll be truly human at last. ... Oh, I wanted so much to go, too" (149). It is easy to dismiss Lory's views, because her brother does so. But Tiptree's narrators are notoriously unreliable and Aaron Kaye is no exception. The narrative casts serious doubts on his sanity. We should therefore not rush to dismiss Lory's viewpoint. What Tiptree is really describing here is an encounter between two interpretations of the sex/death equation: the fearful response of Aaron Kaye and the erotic response of Lory Kaye. Since Aaron Kaye's response represents the dominant logic of our own culture, Tiptree must give that view narrative priority. But it is Lory's wholehearted embrace of sex/death that haunts "A Momentary Taste of Being."

Clearly Tiptree was fascinated by what he viewed as the basic, primal link between sex and death. And he was not the only one. "The Screwfly Solution" (1977) is a story so strikingly brutal that it could not be published even under the name Tiptree, but required the use of yet another literary persona: Raccoona Sheldon. The story depicts an attack by alien "real estate agents" who wish to

render humanity extinct so that they may colonize the earth. Rather than waste time with a direct assault, these aliens make a subtle but fundamental alteration in the bio-chemical system that controls human reproductive behavior. As one human scientist reports, “a potential difficulty for our species has always been implicit in the close linkage between the behavioral expression of aggression/predation and sexual reproduction in the male” (69). The aliens simply remove the behavioral “safety feature” that generally turns aggressive or violent behavior into copulatory behavior in sexual situations. The result is a worldwide orgy of sexual murder. In one region after another, the men of the world begin to kill the women. Alan Alstein, the story’s protagonist, realizes that “the sex was there, but it was driving some engine of death” (68).

This almost unbearably dark story has generated a remarkable amount of debate and criticism. Understandably, “Screwfly” is often read as an extremely bleak and pessimistic story. In a sex-war analysis from the late 1980s, for example, Sarah Lefanu argues that “it is not simply human sexuality, but specifically the male sexual drive, that Tiptree associates with violence and death; the stories that explore this theme are deeply pessimistic and have a deterministic slant that is not present throughout her work” (110). More recently, Hollinger has argued in a similar vein that

the unremitting pessimism in these stories arises, at least in part, from Tiptree’s determination to follow the implications of gender difference to their grimly logical conclusions.... Perhaps this is most dramatically demonstrated in “The Screwfly Solution,” a story that literalizes the “war between the sexes” as an alien inspired holocaust that will end only when there are no more women left alive. (“[Re]reading Queerly” 201)

For Lefanu, Hollinger, and others, “The Screwfly Solution” is Tiptree’s ultimate statement of the tragic and lethal conflict between men and women. According to this reading, the violent impulses that lie at the heart of masculine sexuality represent a fundamental threat to women, and thus to humanity in general.

There are, however, two major limitations to this interpretation of the story. First, the text makes it quite clear that the link between sex and violence is not to be found exclusively in heterosexual males, but is in fact a species characteristic. The scientific analysis of the “femicide” epidemic is provided by a Professor MacIntyre, who emphasizes that this behavior is to be found exclusively in human males. Interestingly, Professor MacIntyre concludes his discussion by insisting that the bio-sexual behavior of females is “of a different nature” (70). He cites the lordotic reflex as an example. Lordosis is a copulatory behavior that is found in certain mammals such as mice and cats, whereby the female assumes a submissive posture and arches the spine in preparation for intercourse. Lordosis is not, however, an intrinsic characteristic of human or primate sexual behavior (Pfaus and Everitt). This suggests that MacIntyre’s account is unreliable. MacIntyre seems quite determined to establish the idea that human males are biologically aggressive and dominant, while human females are passive and submissive. Yet to make this argument, he must rely on

evidence from non-human species, because accounts of human biology and psychology do not support this position.

Dr. Anne Alstein is probably the most sympathetic character in “The Screwfly Solution.” At the end of the story, her voice receives narrative priority and hers are the last words we read. Dr. Alstein suspects that she may be the last living woman on earth, and she knows that she will not be alive much longer. She composes her own epitaph: “HERE LIES THE SECOND MEANEST PRIMATE ON EARTH” (74). At the end of her life, Anne Alstein appears to attain a moment of clarity. While she clearly recognizes the horror of unleashed male sexual aggression, she also understands that violent, destructive impulses are by no means exclusive to the human male. At the conclusion of the story, Dr. Alstein comes to understand the inherently savage nature of human sexual relations. For a billion years, the two meanest primates on earth have been dancing a dance of death and desire. Aliens have now distorted that dance for their own sinister purposes, but the dance itself is something beautiful, a profound experience that men and women have consented to share.

Anne Alstein’s relationship with her husband Alan provides a perfect example of this. Alan admits that “much of their loveplay could be viewed as genitalized, sexually gentled savagery. Play-predation” (70). But it is crucial to note that Alan’s relationship with Anne is depicted as a very loving one. Hers is “the only body he longed for. His girl, his magic Anne” (53). Alan fights valiantly to keep himself away from Anne, because he knows he is likely to kill her. The story draws careful ethical distinctions between sexual violence and play. The former is depicted as a force so terrifyingly dangerous that it can bring about an apocalypse that renders the human race extinct. But *play* is something very different. That is an ethical choice, a way of living and loving in a world where sex and death are tightly linked. It is a choice that Alan and Anne have made together. In an ethical sense, then, Alan’s relationship with Anne is not entirely different from that of Moggadeet and Lilliloo.

It is also important for us to remember that women are not the only targets of aggression and violence in “The Screwfly Solution.” In an airport men’s room, Alan finds corpses of a different sort. And then it hits him: “Of course. Any sexual drive. Boys, men, too” (70). Anne confirms that the imprecisely named “femicide” epidemic has affected boys as well as women and girls: “after the first rush, only a trickle are coming out of what they call ‘the affected areas.’ Not many children, even little boys” (61). Toward the end of the story, Anne cuts her hair short, puts on men’s clothing, and tries to present herself as a boy. Yet even this dramatic alteration of her gender presentation is not enough to save her. She is pursued by murderous men and barely escapes. In a recent queer analysis, Hollinger argues that in stories like “Screwfly,” “heterosexuality is constructed as both inevitable and fatal” (“[Re]reading Queerly,” 201). But heterosexuality is not the problem in “Screwfly.” The problem is power; more specifically, it is the basic, fundamental connection between violence and the

erotic that is to be found in *every* sexual relationship, whether the relationship in question is heterosexual, homosexual, or transhuman.

To assess “Screwfly” strictly in terms of the war between the sexes is to miss the story’s more radical argument: that violence is a part of sexuality at the deepest structural level, regardless of the gender configurations involved. Julie Phillips is quite right to point out that “Raccoona [Sheldon] neither condemns men (several individual men try to protect women) nor exempts women from the human burden of violence” (357). Indeed, “Screwfly” seems to argue that violence—properly channeled and ethically focused, in the absence of alien realtors—may be a precondition for the erotic. Here are Alan Alstein’s last words, written just before he kills his daughter and himself: “*The bonds of our humanity have broken, we are finished. I love—*” (72; emphasis in original). It is a fascinating choice of words. This passage suggests that humanity is an organism that *binds* its dark and deadly desire. (Again, one is reminded of Moggadeet and Lilliloo.) As long as the bonds hold, everything is possible: life, love, erotic power. When the bonds break, everything ends. Alan can only say “I love—,” but the sentence cannot be completed, for the alien epidemic has stripped power of its erotic component. In the absence of the erotic, there can be no “you.”

The second problem with a conventional sex-war reading of this story has to do with the fact that James Tiptree, Jr. is not the author of “The Screwfly Solution.” Although “Screwfly” appears in an anthology of stories by Tiptree entitled *Out of the Everywhere*, the story was originally published under the pseudonym Raccoona Sheldon. Raccoona was Alice Sheldon’s “other” pseudonym, but like Tiptree, Raccoona was something much more than a mere *nom de plume*. Criticism—again, possibly under the influence of the postmodern—has recently become aware of this complexity. In an excellent discussion of Sheldon’s many personas, Justine Larbalestier points out that it is, ironically, feminist critics who frequently conflate James Tiptree with Raccoona Sheldon (201). Perhaps they do so because they hope that in this way Raccoona’s stories may be shown to re-enforce the sex-war themes that they find in Tiptree’s writing. I wish to argue, however, that Raccoona produces an author-effect—to borrow a term from Foucault—that is very different from that of Tiptree. Alice Sheldon clearly understood this. She describes the origin of Raccoona: “Tiptree in fact began to take on a peculiar, eerie, vitality of his own, while the author yearned more and more to write at least a few things as a woman. Hence, in 1974 ‘Raccoona Sheldon’ appeared” (Tiptree, *Meet Me at Infinity* 344).

Alice Sheldon’s multiple personalities constitute a perfect example of a postmodern identity structure. We are talking about an entity consisting of at least one male persona (James Tiptree, Jr.) and at least two female personas (Alice B. Sheldon and Raccoona Sheldon). Furthermore, it appears that each new persona emerged in direct response to the demands of a particular discursive situation. To be sure, Alice Sheldon wrote in her journal that Raccoona “has to be me. I can’t afford another pseudo-personality” (qtd.

Phillips 283). She immediately went on, however, to undermine that position in the same entry: “‘I’ am not a writer. ‘I’ am what is left over from J. T. Jr.” She placed the first person pronoun in scare quotes throughout this passage, and finally asked this provocative question: “Does the described ‘I’ have any interest for anybody, even any self?” Clearly we cannot simply say that Raccoona *was* Alice, because at this point in her brilliant but troubled life, Alice Sheldon did not have any “self” to spare for her new alter ego. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that Raccoona represented the emergence of a new discursive structure. Raccoona had her own typewriter and a signature quite different from Tip’s “flowing, confident hand” (Phillips 283).⁸

I would argue that Raccoona permitted the expression of things that neither Alice Sheldon nor James Tiptree could say. In the case of “Screwfly,” that meant saying that sex and violence are fundamentally linked not only for straight men but also for homosexual men and yes, even for women. Such an explosive idea could not be expressed by the male Tiptree, nor could it be uttered by mild-mannered Dr. Alice Sheldon. It was a job for Raccoona. If Tiptree had tried to express such an idea, he would have been roundly denounced for it—as indeed he was when, in the 1975 *Khatru* symposium on “Women in Science Fiction,” he dared to oppose the dualistic concept of gender, arguing that the problem was not male sexuality *per se* but rather a particular pattern of sexual behavior that is to be found in humans of various genders and sexual orientations (Lefanu 112-13). “*Down with yin and yang thinking!*” cried Tiptree (*Meet Me at Infinity* 274). Arguing along lines quite similar to those explored by Theodore Sturgeon in *Venus Plus X* (1960), Tiptree insisted that men and women are more alike than different. In response to strong criticism, especially from Samuel Delany and Joanna Russ, Tiptree attempted to clarify and defend his position: “What I’ve been mulling over, partly in relation to men, is something about power. Authority. Dominance-submission structures, whether statewide or confined to a pair” (*Meet Me at Infinity* 287). The “partly” that appears in the above quotation may well be the most important adverb that Tiptree ever wrote, yet previous criticism has largely overlooked statements such as this.

Alice and Tip let Raccoona explore some of the most extreme implications of the sex-death equation. Raccoona wrote “The Earth Doth Like a Snake Renew” in 1973, although it was posthumously published under Tiptree’s name in 1988. The protagonist of this story is a young woman called “P.” who is in love with the Earth. Not content to express this love in an abstract way, P. seeks the impossible. She desires nothing less than the physical consummation of her relationship with the planet. The very thought of this impossibility fills her with fear, yet she thrives on this fear:

Warmth surged within her, her limbs were heavy with deliciousness. HIS presence, HIS slightest touch would be bliss so acute as to be almost pain. Even pain would be bliss ... a tiny thought pricked her: HE was so huge. HE—the very Earth—how, actually, would HE take her? What if it REALLY hurt? (303)

Naturally, the thought of pain is not enough to dissuade a submissive masochist like P. More frightening is this thought: “What if HE was not loving at all?”

What if HE was cruel? Or totally alien?" (304). And yet even this does not discourage her, for P. is a true submissive, more than willing to accept and even embrace her lover's cruelty. P. gives everything to her lover, happily and without hesitation. In this way she discovers "the sweet terror of sacrifice" (306). Her relationship with the Earth is constructed in terms of absolute submission. And this is precisely what gives the relationship its erotic character. Thus P. finds herself "thrilling with sexual submissiveness" (314).

"The Earth" has a tragic ending—for it is always Raccoona who explores the most heart-breaking aspects of the sex-death equation. The Earth brings P. to the North Pole. There she finds her first human lover, Hadley Morton, waiting for her. Believing that the Earth will come to her through Hadley's body, P. has sex with him. The Earth leaves its orbit and heads out into the cold, uncaring void:

She whimpered in torment, as her back slid on the freezing plastic. Hadley's assault was slowing now, her own dreadful zombie jerks were slowing down. Like dying toys. Her tears had frozen against Hadley's flesh. They were dying. As the realization came to her, a long agonizing spasm rose and gripped her sex and shuddered out through their joined bellies. GOOOOOD, said the inhuman void. And with that her last illusion fell away. HE had never loved her, HE did not want her at all. (317)

The tragedy of this story, then, derives neither from P.'s submission nor from her sacrifice. Rather, this story is tragic because it is a tale of unrequited love. The Earth, it seems, is in love not with P. but with another planet, and has left orbit to pursue this love. P.'s erotic submission is of the most dangerous sort: one-sided, imbalanced, unequal. Between P. and the Earth, power flows in one direction only. The result is predictably disastrous.

Raccoona's tragic take on the sex-death equation was hardly the last word, however. Tiptree offered a far more positive interpretation of this equation in "The Color of Neanderthal Eyes," a novella written in 1986 and published, ironically, in May 1988, just as *Asimov's* was running "The Earth." As the story opens, Tiptree's standard-issue clueless male narrator is exploring an ocean world called, appropriately enough, Wet. The narrator, Tom Jared, meets and falls in love with an amphibious alien called Kamir. He meets Kamir's people, the Mnerrin, and is astonished by their peaceful nature: "In my life of traveling and learning of travels, I have never encountered a race who so hated killing. You have not even the words for what is the daily occupation of many peoples—war, aggression, fighting, invasion, attack" (143). In a clever poststructuralist move, Tiptree imagines what the world might be like if the vocabulary of violence were deleted from language. What happens, it seems, is that violence is translated into other terms. Against all odds, Kamir becomes pregnant, and Tom Jared is forced to confront the fact that reproduction is lethal for Mnerrin women. "I shudder away from the mounting evidence that somehow this birthing will mean her death," says Tom (155). Tom's shudder is laughable, for two reasons. First, he refuses to take his lover's word for what is happening to her, preferring instead to rely only upon scientific evidence. Second, and more seriously, he refuses to accept Kamir's *attitude* toward her fate. The

conversations that Tom and Kamir share on this topic are notable for their complete lack of communication.

“Kamir, I don’t know what you’re saying. What is wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong. When you love, you die. The woman dies. The man lives, to feed the babies. Is it not so?” (129)

Tom is right about one thing. He does not know what Kamir is saying, because he cannot know. Her position simply cannot be expressed in his linguistic world.

Once again Tiptree has given us a tale told by a colonial human male who is entirely unable to grapple with the reality of the truly alien. Tiptree’s text practically begs its readers to do what Tom Jared could not: take Kamir’s interpretation of the situation seriously. Nothing is wrong, Kamir says. The woman dies. She does so willingly, even joyfully, sacrificing herself so that the next generation of Mnerrin may live. The birth process is pure terror for Tom, sheer beauty for Kamir: “Suddenly, with a dreadful caving-in feeling, her whole belly, containing the fetuses, starts to *separate* from the rest of her body!” (166) Once the separation is complete, Kamir seems happy and relieved: “‘Whew! That feels better’” (166). Tom’s reaction is very different: “I have a horrifying look at the shell of her body left after the fetal mass tore loose. From diaphragm to hips it is *empty*” (166, emphasis in original). Kamir must die, for her digestive apparatus is no longer connected to the rest of her body. She must starve to death. Tom tries to understand: “Dimly I am realizing that this is not catastrophe, but a natural process of parturition. Or rather, it is a catastrophic process, deadly to the mother” (167). Tom is still using entirely inappropriate scientific language here, and so of course he fails to reach an understanding of what is happening. He tries again, this time contrasting his emotions with those of his doomed lover, and has slightly better results. Tom and Kamir gaze at the separated abdomen that contains their babies: “To me it is a monster, which has mutilated and killed my mer-maiden, my girl. But Kamir is gazing at it with fond eyes. Her babies” (167). Tom still cannot reconcile her feelings with his, but at least here he acknowledges that she does *have* those feelings. On her penultimate day of life, “Kamir is excited; her eyes glow, she seems to be keeping herself alive on sheer will” (180). The next day her babies emerge from their disembodied fetal sac and Kamir dies. Even Tom Jared’s unreliable narration is not enough to keep us from seeing that Kamir is no victim. Rather, she is a willing participant in a process that she regards as natural, inevitable, and beautiful. Hers is a death born of Eros, experienced in the service of life, and she consents to it eagerly.

Again and again, Tiptree depicts the beauty of a death that serves some higher purpose, a death with meaning. In the novella “Collision” (1986), Tiptree tells the tale of *Rift-Runner One*, a human exploration vessel sent to investigate a vast empty quadrant of space. The human crew begin to pick up the psychic transmissions of an alien race. They even begin to emulate the behavior of the aliens. When they reach the alien home world, a female crewmember drowns herself as she attempts to complete an alien ritual. The ship’s captain reports her death:

“Lieutenant Ekaterina Ku is dead,” Asch says stiffly. “Dead by drowning.... When she jumped into the water-pond, she first attempted to drown herself by holding herself facedown in the relatively shallow tank. When she failed in this she called to us to help her by holding her under water. Some of her words were, ‘Help me, I must die so the Ritual will be right! It’s my chance!’ She seemed to feel some good end would be served by her death.

“We on the contrary attempted to pull her out, or at least hold her head out. But in the crowded quarters and the slippery tank, and the clumsiness of our actions—and not helped by Kathy’s—by the lieutenant’s”—his voice chokes—“long dark hair, we somehow pressed her upper body farther into the water, facedown. The influence of the alien music on our perceptions and actions was very great. I consider we were temporarily deranged by it.” (193)

Asch could almost be describing a clumsy sexual encounter. Although he refuses to acknowledge the erotic dimension of the scene, he nonetheless uses erotic language to depict it. This unreliable male narrator fails to understand the choice a woman is making. Captain Asch does not consider that Lieutenant Ku may have deliberately chosen to die what she regarded as a beautiful death, because he cannot consider this possibility. Within the patriarchal belief system that he represents, women are to be protected from harm at all costs, and women have no right to refuse that protection or to choose their own destinies. Captain Asch can therefore only assume that Lieutenant Ku must have been the victim of some kind of alien brainwashing. But Tiptree does not let his readers get away with such an assumption. Instead, he uses a clever framing device to remind readers that Asch’s patriarchy is a hermetically sealed system, a closed belief structure that is only one of billions of possible systems. In the framing sequence, a mated pair of aliens checks “Collision” out from the Great Central Library of Deneb University. They then read the story and comment on it when they return it to the library. Here is what the alien critic has to say about Lieutenant Ku’s death: “It was thrilling—actually hearing the splashing and shouts when the human girl Kathy was dying, so many centuries ago” (*The Starry Rift* 249). Unencumbered by a patriarchal human belief system, the aliens are able to read this as a beautiful death.

Tiptree’s ultimate statement of the multi-faceted relationships among pain, power, Eros, and death is to be found in his last novel, *Brightness Falls From the Air* (1985). Tiptree uses two fictional substances to explore these relationships: Stars Tears and algotoxin. The former is produced through torture; the latter is an instrument of torture. Both substances present the novel’s characters—as well as its readers—with crucial ethical choices.

Stars Tears is a profoundly powerful intoxicant that comes from the enzymatic excretions of the alien Dameii. Tragically, the quality of the drug varies with the emotional state of the Dameii who produce it, with the most potent forms emerging when the Dameii are in agony. As a result, the Dameii have been tortured and murdered nearly to extinction.⁹ “Those terrible, priceless, scented juices ... have cost the Dameii so much agony and nearly ended their race” (59). The Dameii have been declared an endangered species

by the well-meaning liberal government that runs Tiptree's galaxy. And yet the officers of that government, who are the likable protagonists of *Brightness*, seem woefully incapable of defending the Dameii against the "Black World" criminals who continue to hunt them for their juices. The message is clear. Within a society that defines power in terms of exchange value, ethical concerns are trumped by economic imperatives. As a former Guardian of the Dameii warns,

All over this Galaxy, for as long as you live, there will be big crooks and little crooks and lonesome weirdos, Human and otherwise, dreaming up ways to get their hands on Stars Tears stuff. Too abhorrent? Don't you believe it. On the Black Worlds there are Human beasts who salivate over the prospect of torturing children. And passing in any crowd are secret people whose hidden response to beauty is the desire to tear it into bleeding meat. (185)

His experience protecting the Dameii from the constant threat of torture and death has allowed this man to hit upon a dark and primal truth. Violence is a common response to beauty. The Guardians must confront this terrifying truth every day, and it changes them. But Tiptree does not allow this point to remain safely confined within the realms of fiction and fantasy. He is not that gentle with his readers. Ironically it is Gridworld's Zannez, master of mass-media simulations, who realizes the horrible reality of things:

The beautiful, totally vulnerable wing-people are real, not just exquisite makeup jobs. The dreadful story he heard that afternoon really happened; it isn't just a storyline that can be changed, it's real. The real tortured and dead do not get up again. And the wealth that was gained from bloody atrocity was real—riches that some men would dream of, and work for, take ultimate risks for. Lay elaborate criminal plans for. All real. (92)

Why does Tiptree insist in such uncompromising terms upon the distinction between reality and simulation here? Perhaps it is because he understands that this boundary represents the border between two radically different ethical realms. And perhaps it is to remind us that Stars Tears is no mere morbid fairy tale. It is a bitter allegory that describes the terrible truth of all market economies: any crime, even the most horrific imaginable, can be justified as part of the all-consuming quest for wealth. Nor are the victims of this process immune from the overwhelming economic impulses that drive the system. Toward the end of the novel, the Dameii express their desire to manufacture and export Stars Tears themselves—just as real Third Worlders often want nothing more than to join the ranks of the world's wealthy.

Tiptree's narrative is greatly accelerated by the novel's second essential device: algotoxin. Ochter, the novel's primary villain, defines this mysterious substance: "Algo-toxin. From *algos*, pain. The poison whose sole function is to cause pain and death" (233). If narrative requires sadism, *Brightness* delivers. Ochter attempts to control the heroes of *Brightness* by implanting a remote-controlled hypodermic needle full of algotoxin into the neck of a young woman named Linnix. What results is a power struggle between Ochter and Dr. Baramji, the noble physician who loves Linnix. This struggle beautifully expresses the basic ethical distinction between non-consensual power and

consensual erotic power. Ochter begins with the upper hand, since he controls the hypo. But Baramji soon realizes that Ochter cannot actually afford to kill Linnix, because “the moment she dies, Ochter’s power is all gone” (244). Baram’s power is far greater, because his is consensual and loving. Indeed, Linnix grants Baram the ultimate power over her: “Bram, dear, do *you* understand that you may have to kill me?” (237). Baram is, of course, reluctant. But gradually he comes to accept the wisdom and beauty of her request. If Linnix must die, she would much rather die at the hands of the man who loves her than at the hands of the loathsome Ochter: “The best he can offer may be a clean death at loving hands. *To kill his girl* ... how fast she understood this, how sternly she made him know that she accepts it. Even welcomes it” (245). To his credit, Baramji acknowledges Linnix’s right to choose. He respects her choice and recognizes her right to select the manner in which her life will end. Baram realizes that if he does grant Linnix this mercy, Ochter will probably kill him. But his love for Linnix is powerful enough to overcome any fear he might have. He is “sure he can last long enough to get to Linnix and give her a better death” (269). As the person who holds consensual power over her, this is his primary responsibility. And so he boldly informs Ochter that “she and I will die quite soon of our own choosing, not yours” (272).¹⁰

Linnix, at least, confirms Baram’s prediction. Our heroes are forced to kill Ochter. As he dies, the “dead man switch” he holds activates the hypo, filling Linnix’s neck with algotoxin. She wrenches the hypodermic “scorpion” of algotoxin from her neck, knowing that the sinister device’s triple steel barbs will kill her, but preferring that death to the slow, agonizing one that the algotoxin will give her. Baram’s response is ethically flawless. He tries to stop the bleeding, realizes that he cannot. He takes a moment to direct his comrades to attack Ochter’s murderous henchman, Hiner, who is even then torturing a Dameii family to extract Stars Tears from them. Then, and only then, Baram “lets his eyes and heart go back to his dying girl” (279).

So Baram has done his best to save Linnix. He has allowed her to choose the manner of her death and he has shared that death. If Baram lived in our ethical world, he would have admirably fulfilled his ethical responsibilities as a wielder of consensual power. Baram, however, lives in Tiptree’s ethical world, and so things are somewhat more complex. As Linnix dies, the wavefront of a supernova is passing over the planet Damiem. The wavefront affects the flow of time and has the potential to turn time backwards. Baram takes advantage of this remarkable phenomenon, literally bringing Linnix back from the dead: “Then the Star’s retrograde time-pull was in flood. Swiftly it had borne Linnie back from death itself, through agony, to the near past, when the fatal artery was uncut, and blood filled her beating heart, and she lived again. She lived!” (294). Because Linnix has consented to give Baram the power of life and death over her, he is ethically permitted to perform this strange reverse torture upon her. Indeed, he is authorized to torture Linnix in precisely the way that Ochter was not. And so Linnix lives—or does she? The problem here is that the effects of the time eddy are uncertain. Baram begins to suspect that the other timeline,

the one in which his beloved Linnie died, has not been completely eradicated. He fears that “the force of that other reality is pressing on her, pressing her to know herself dead. And die again, for good, in his arms” (335). And so Baram must spirit Linnix off the planet. Beyond that, he must maintain a lifelong vigilance, to prevent the alternate timeline from reasserting itself. He is happy to perform this service, if it will maintain the dominance of a timeline in which he, the loving Baram, has power over Linnix—and the evil Ochter does not.

The choices made by Baram and Linnix are in every case consensual, loving, and deeply ethical. These choices represent the culmination of a theory of erotic power that is to be found throughout the works of James Tiptree and Raccoona Sheldon. This theory defines erotic power as a vibrant, viable ethical alternative to the non-consensual power that Tiptree and Raccoona so soundly reject. Tiptree is unsparing in his description of this non-consensual power, for two reasons. First and most obviously, Tiptree clearly believes that such power represents an ethical abomination that must be critiqued in the strongest possible terms. Second and more subtly, Tiptree’s account of unethical power relations provides a necessary contrast that helps give form to his model of consensual erotic power. The standard sex-war hypothesis, that acknowledges only one of the two major forms of power in Tiptree’s work, cannot provide us with a complete understanding of Tiptree’s views on power. The operations of power in Tiptree’s texts do not simply reveal an eternal struggle between men and women. Rather, these texts depict the struggle to overcome that struggle. Tiptree’s tales are about the attempt to deploy consensual erotic power relations so radical in their form and content that they may subvert the form of unethical sexual power that we call patriarchy. In Tiptree’s worlds, this radical project is carried out by women and men, lesbians and straights, humans and transgendered aliens. In our own world, perhaps a similar project will be carried out by male and female humans. But that will be possible only once we begin to move beyond the idea that power is merely something that is exercised by men at the expense of women. Tragically, that idea plays into the hands of the patriarchy that it purports to subvert. An effective critique of patriarchy requires not only an assessment of power’s negative modes, but also a positive, alternative vision of a system that might replace patriarchy. Tiptree provides this, and that is surely enough to earn him a prominent place in the history of power.

NOTES

1. My hypothesis is that each one of Alice Sheldon’s authorial identities constitutes a distinct persona. In the very postmodern epistemological space that Dr. Sheldon clearly inhabited, each one of these personas would, of course, have its own gender identity. Throughout this essay, I have therefore chosen to use masculine pronouns when referring to Dr. Sheldon’s male persona (James Tiptree, Jr.). I employ feminine pronouns when referring to Alice Sheldon, or to Dr. Sheldon’s female literary persona, Raccoona Sheldon.

2. Not surprisingly, these themes were typically addressed by male authors. In psychology, the problems were posed by Freud and his mostly male followers. In literature, they were described by authors such as William Faulkner and D.H. Lawrence.

3. For a discussion of Delany's views on erotic power, see my "Structures of Desire."

4. In Suvin's familiar construction, sf is "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (7-8; emphasis in original).

5. Or, in the language of the BDSM community, "everybody's a switch."

6. Samuel Delany uses the term "paraliterary" to refer to such automatically marginalized writing genres as sf, mysteries, and pornography. See, for example, "The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism."

7. Science fiction author and editor Gardner Dozois, on the other hand, describes the style of this story as "modified Sesame Street" (n.p.).

8. Phillips includes a photograph of a publishing contract "signed as all three personae"; the three signatures are notably different (plate facing 342).

9. Tiptree was so fascinated with this concept that he explored it twice, first in his 1978 short story, "We Who Stole the Dream" (*Out of the Everywhere*, 89-115) and then again in *Brightness Falls From the Air*.

10. Baram's decision is probably informed by the circumstances surrounding the end of Alice Sheldon's life. She had contemplated suicide for many years. In 1977, as her husband Ting was slowly going blind, Alice proposed that they enter into a suicide pact. Ting agreed to consider suicide in four or five years (Phillips 366). Alice wrote a suicide note dated September 1979 (Phillips 390), but did not act on her plans until 1987. In May of that year, as her health and Ting's continued to decline, Alice Sheldon shot and killed Ting, then herself. This move had been foreshadowed in a 1985 Tiptree tale, "The Only Neat Thing to Do" (*The Starry Rift* 5-74). In this late novella, an intrepid young explorer named Coati Cass finds her body inhabited by a sympathetic alien life form called Syllobene. Cass and Syl form an erotic friendship. But when they learn—in a classic Tiptree move—that Syl's reproductive process will prove deadly to Cass and to any human who finds her ship, they set the ship's controls for the heart of the local sun. This story suggests that Tiptree admired lovers who chose double suicide when faced with an ugly death. For Tiptree as for Alice Sheldon, such chosen deaths could be loving and beautiful.

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ABSTRACT

Feminist critics have correctly identified a radical critique of patriarchy in the science fiction of James Tiptree, Jr. According to the “sex-war” hypothesis developed by Joanna Russ and others, Tiptree’s work is important because it explores the frequently violent, sometimes fatal, possibly inevitable power struggle between men and women. But the sex-war hypothesis accounts for only half of Tiptree’s theory of power. For Tiptree, power and violence are neither entirely masculine nor entirely negative. Tiptree carefully distinguishes the ethical and erotic forms of power/violence from those that reject both ethics and Eros, insisting that we must embrace the former while rejecting the latter. Tiptree’s texts certainly do develop a provocative critique of patriarchy and heteronormativity, but they do much more than that. These texts also deploy a remarkable “power-conscious feminism” which acknowledges the elements of power present in all erotic relations. This feminism presents consensual erotic power as a vibrant, viable ethical alternative to the non-consensual forms of patriarchal power which Tiptree so soundly rejects. By creating and preserving a space for the articulation of power’s erotic aspect, Tiptree enables a strategy by which men and women may accept the inevitability of power and still lead ethical lives.