

Colonial/Imperial Discourses in a First-Contact Narrative: Terry Bisson's "They're Made of Meat" (1991)

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Abstract: This article explores the intersection of colonial/imperial discourse inherent in the genre of science fiction using the example of a first-contact narrative – Terry Bisson's short story, "They're Made of Meat" (1991). As a first-contact narrative, the story is analysed in the context of Mary Louise Pratt's (1992) theory on transculturation: contact zone, anti-conquest narrative and autoethnography. First, the paper considers the historical development of the first-contact trope, then the narrative is interpreted as establishing and reproducing several functions of colonialism/imperialism. The distinctively colonial character of the hegemonic discourse informs the dynamics of the contact. However, what sets Bisson's story apart is not only the subversive nature of the narration, but its seemingly philosophical implications presented in the figure of an alien. The ethnographic framework of the contact zone emulates cognitive appropriation as a function of colonial/imperial discourse; simultaneously, it legitimises the dominant culture while being permeated by discourses such as primitivism and racism. Yet, the narration itself functions as a projection that does not offer space for the marginalised other to actively construct their own identities.

Keywords: Terry Bisson, They're Made of Meat, first-contact narrative, colonialism

Introduction

Examining the genesis of science fiction (SF) during the height of the colonial project and the dogmatic scientific positivism of modernity, John Rieder advocates making a "connection between the early history of the genre of English-language science fiction and the history and discourses of colonialism" (2008, 1). Following Rieder's analysis of colonial discourse in early SF as a "part

of the genre's texture [and] a persistent, important component of its displaced references to history" (2008, 15), Jessica Langer states that

the figure of the alien – extraterrestrial, technological, human hybrid or otherwise – and the figure of the far-away planet ripe for the taking are deep and abiding twin signifiers in science fiction, are perhaps the central myths of the genre. ... These two signifiers are, in fact, the very same twin myths of colonialism. The Stranger, or the Other, and the Strange Land" – whether actually empty or filled with those others, savages whose lives are considered forfeit and whose culture is seen as abbreviated and misshapen but who are nevertheless compelling in their very strangeness (2011, 3–4).

The concepts are references to Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961, manuscript 1991). The novel introduced the word "grok," which denotes "to understand so thoroughly that the observer becomes a part of the observed – to merge, to blend, to intermarry, to lose personal identity in group experience" (305)¹ Thus, the novel, its title and the concepts themselves point to a quintessential problem of SF and colonialism – the knowability of radical difference. This preoccupation with difference extends to such academic discourses as otherness, alterity and subalternity.

Within the entire canon of SF – dystopian/utopian literature, eco-fiction, future-war stories, alien contact narratives and several others – Terry Bisson's short story, "They're Made of Meat" (1991), is a humorous example of the inherent presence of colonial discourse in the genre. Here, he also made marked forays into the exploration of themes, motifs and style that would become his trademarks. Seemingly an amusing story of casual surfaces, "They're Made of Meat" deals with the same venerable SF cliché as the earliest travel narratives of the colonial era: first contact. It allows the writer to explore subjugation, dominance, primitivism, racism and other anthropological issues embodied by the extraterrestrial beings and manifested in the dynamics of the narration's cultural exchange.

¹ The novel revolves around the terrestrial adventures of Valentine Michael Smith; born on Mars, he is a human by nature and a Martian by nurture. His quest for humanity culminates in the establishment of a peace-and-love cult, his self-immolation in a mob lynching and a conclusive messianic resurrection.

In this sense, the paper engages with the recent interest in SF and its intersection with colonial/imperial discourses.²As for the question of the presence of colonial/imperial discourse, which resurfaces throughout this article, how this question is answered depends mainly on how SF engages with such discourse in first-contact narratives in general, and with the story in particular. Thus, the article begins by exploring the trope's relationship with colonial ideology. Then, the analysis turns towards a critical reading of Bisson's story from the perspective of Mary Louise Pratt's theory on transculturation and her critique of travel narratives introduced in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). Pratt's interpretation of the genre of travel writing belongs to the domain of literary criticism. It simultaneously operates as a critique of the political and economic ideologies that motivated colonialism/imperialism. Her analyses of colonial relationships have been consistent with other scholars' conclusions grounded in centre-periphery relations.³Borrowing the term "contact zone," this paper argues, firstly, that the colonial/imperial framework of the hegemonic discourse is defined by the ethnographic nature of the contact. The paper also considers the employment of subversion in the narration and the construction of the hegemonic discourse. Continuing with Pratt's reconsideration of the term "anti-conquest narrative" – a concept integral to her work and understanding of first-contact narratives – the story can be perceived as not engaging with the empire's *la mission civilisatrice*, despite the fact that it establishes ethnography as an extension of empire, and despite the narration's evident obligations of power. Returning to Pratt for the last time, the paper employs the concept of "autoethnography" and considers the reciprocal dimension implied by the story.

First-Contact Narratives

According to Rieder, "no informed reader can doubt that allusions to colonial history and situations are ubiquitous features of early science fiction motifs

2 The concepts of colonialism/imperialism are employed interchangeably and in the broadest historical sense, including early exploration, Victorian ethnography and anthropology, economic exploitation and land appropriation, human trafficking for slavery, centre-periphery relations between an empire and its satellite settlements, American westward expansion and interventionism, transatlantic imperialism and its collapse, the rise of continental imperialism and totalitarian regimes, the post-war economic and ideological division of the world embodied by the Cold War, the post-colonial constitution of the world, and neocolonial and capitalistic globalisation.

3 See, for example, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "Third Space" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007).

and plots" (2008, 2–3). He adds that scholars generally agree that SF emerged and expanded in the second half of the 19th century, in "the period of the most fervid imperialist expansion" (Reider2008, 2–3). In fact, Gregory Benford (1980) compares the British Empire to the SF motif of a "galactic empire," and Patricia Kerslake (2007, 191) concludes that the themes, attributes and purposes of empire and science fiction are entirely intertwined.⁴ The genre is preoccupied not only with history, but also a generic set of tropes, themes, motifs, narratives and forms emerging from (post)colonial history and the problems arising from the whole context, as well as historical forces reflected in its discourses, such as otherness, primitivism, racism, colonialism, imperialism and many others.⁵

The wide variety of texts regarded by scholars as SF calls into the question how is SF defined; however, systematic study of SF – one that would include classic and modern texts, from both the American pulp and European traditions and would exclude the growing body of post-genre and slipstream genres – has been declared impossible. According to Paul Kincaid's definition, SF is several things:

a future setting, a marvelous device, an ideal society, an alien creature, a twist in time, an interstellar journey, a satirical perspective, a particular approach to the matter of the story, ... here more overt, here more subtle (2003, 417–418).

Rather than seeking a singular answer, this definition corresponds with what Samuel R. Delany (2012) labelled SF's historical, theoretical, stylistic and valuative plurality. Following this orientation, it is difficult to achieve a precise definition, as it includes a variety of traditions/subgenres, and this complexity of SF is best understood rather as a mode, not a definitive genre. The trope of first contact should be recognised as marked by this generic variability/permeability; in fact, the trope functions as a vehicle for plot of several SF subgenres. .

The historical origins of the first-contact narratives are connected with the early modern travel narratives from the Age of Exploration. The narrators

4 See also Patrick Parrinder's *Shadows of the Future: H.G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy* (1995), or Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's "Science Fiction and Empire" (2003).

5 Samuel R. Delany (1994, 152–157) disagrees: His insistence that the history of science fiction does not date back further than 1910 is directed against the academic constructions of the genre that have sought to connect it to the long-established tradition of satire, utopia and marvellous journeys. Delany, in contrast, points to the genre's subcultural character and low/pulp profile.

of these texts were not only educated explorers, but also representatives of political power and administrators of the lands being discovered. As opposition to the medieval romance and quest narratives, the texts – best exemplified by early modern travel writers such as Columbus, Vespucci, Cortez, Oviedo and Las Casas – stressed the political, ethical and philosophical discourses emerging from direct contact with the Other. However, Joseph Levine points out that the first texts were composed at a time when fiction and history, both the invented and the discovered, were only beginning to be distinguished (1997, 69). For example, there was a boom of legends and fantastic tales connected with the discovery and exploration of the Americas. Unfortunately, these narratives contained plenty of “monsters”: including implausible references to cannibals, giants and fantastic beasts and places such as the Fountain of Youth or El Dorado.⁶ As the subsequent centuries of exploration, expansion and exploitation named, mapped and ascribed their own cartographic reality onto the entire world, the cyan width of the oceans was eventually replaced by the cold interplanetary void of space in SF and travel narratives metamorphosed into first-contact narratives.

First-contact stories are crucial scenarios to SF. According to Landon, they explore a fictional *novum* – “the existence of other intelligent life forms in the universe” (2002, 80). Considering the history of SF, it is necessary to distinguish between its phase of emergence and the later, more mature self-awareness of the mode. The early European tradition established both “positive” and “negative” narratives (ibid., 80). Ursula LeGuin – a prolific theorist and SF author – also congruently points to contradictory ways in which American pulp SF constructs its alien figures either as irredeemably evil or as “wise and kindly beings” who occupy “a pedestal in a white nightgown and a virtuous smirk – exactly as the ‘good woman’ did in the Victorian Age” (1993, 95).

The positive stories can be traced back to Camille Flammarion's *Real and Imaginary Worlds* (1865) and *Lumen* (1887), while it was H. G. Wells who introduced the Darwinian view of a technologically superior alien race conquering our planet, in *War of the Worlds* (1898). According to Rieder, “the Wellsian strategy operates within the framework of colonial discourse on several levels with a critical reversion of positions” (2008, 10). Rieder ranges widely across SF, discussing the lost world motif, satirical fantastic voyage narratives, time-travel

6 See Gomez-Galisteo's *Discovering Florida: First-Contact Narratives from Spanish Expeditions Along the Lower Gulf Coast* (2015).

stories, artificially constructed humans, invasion literature and (post)apocalyptic fiction. Among the texts he selects is Jack London's first-contact short story, "The Red One" (1918); he states that "no early science fiction story more effectively engages the problem of understanding the exotic other" (2008, 91). The narrative, which is told from the perspective of Bassett – a butterfly collector on an expedition in Guadalcanal who is captured by headhunters – revolves around the titular "Red One": a red spherical extraterrestrial artefact "worshipped by ape-like, man-eating and head-hunting savages...as if Jehovah's Commandments had been presented on carved stone to the monkeys of the monkey cage at the Zoo" (London 2021, 39).

The late 1930s and early 1940s established an innovation on the plot of invasion literature which, according to Rieder, "points toward a postcolonial framework of imagining imperial hegemony and cultural difference" (2008, 147). Following the collapse of the colonial world, combined with subsequent international anxieties of the Cold War, the new postcolonial perspective of hegemony involved more secretive and pervasive means of control through infiltration, manipulation and ideological occupation, as in John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There" (1938). Campbell's plot of alien contagion among an isolated group of American researchers in Antarctica is a re-enactment of replacing an ideological agenda. The alien's desire to assimilate the whole of humanity via infiltration leaves the world familiar externally yet alienated internally while the character of the contact is rendered as conspiratorial.

Rieder states that one of the evident dichotomies in SF is the "radical difference as an intellectual and philosophical exercise and exploiting the exotic as a spectacular opportunity for wish fulfilment" (2008, 75). American pulp magazines through the forties, fifties and sixties were dominated by the self-reflexive aspects of SF, thus destabilising and relativising the tension created by the persistent permeation of colonial discourse into the genre. Murray Leinster's novella "First Contact" (1945) not only epitomised the term, but also introduced the first usage of the concept of a universal translator. As a variation on the subject of radical difference, the story of the terrestrial ship *Llanvabon* and its crew's encounter with a technologically equal yet biological different strain of aliens produced a humorous comedy of errors built upon mutual failure of communication and militaristic paranoia polarised with erasure of the anthropological difference and desire for cognition. The narrative culminates with a successful exchange of knowledge, technology and optimistically advancing further contact.

When analysing SF's engagement with its impossible facts, Rieder argues that the analogy to the real world and the *novum* engages one of "the central problems of colonial discourse...the exotic other is...understood only as a distorted projection of the observer" (2008, 68). While this engagement is a concern of Leinster's narrative, it thematically occupies the work of Stanisław Lem, who managed to fuse together the stronger sides of "the Soviet and American SF traditions" (Landon 2002, 83). In *Solaris* (1961), the narration revolves around the attempts of a group of scientists to communicate with an extraterrestrial life form that manifests as the vast ocean of the titular planet. The ocean's responses take the form of materialised simulacra of familiar *doppelgängers*, exposing hidden aspects of the human scientists while revealing nothing of the ocean's nature itself. Even the scientists eventually conclude:

We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds.
 We need mirrors. We don't know what to do with other worlds.
 A single world, our own, suffices us; but we can't accept it for what
 it is (Lem 1971, 81).

This quotation points to a framework where an insurmountable epistemological problem limits the impossibility of cognitive appropriation. However, unlike Leinster, Lem deemed such scenarios pessimistic, inherently biased and self-absorbed, thus condemned to failure.

In conclusion, first-contact stories can take many forms, ranging from the discovery of an ancient artefact that reveals a previous presence of intelligent life, through an interception of messages and actual first-hand contact, to full-scale military invasions. Furthermore, their interrogation of the Other happens in narratives that have themselves been othered by many writers. The alien other allows writers to meditate upon such issues as racism and xenophobia, to simulate contact between higher and lower cultures and to investigate such aspects of communication as linguistics and translation by adapting the anthropological theory to contact with extraterrestrial cultures. A desire for cognition operates as a form of appropriation in the modern texts, replacing the previous exploitation of the exotic other through the appropriation of land, resources and inhabitants. Thus, anthropocentrism is not necessarily predicated on imperialism or colonialism, and the narratives do not ultimately imply ethnocentrism. However, Patrick Parrinder (1995, 65) extends the relationship of colonial ideology

and SF to Ursula Le Guin's work from 1969, which brings into question even more recent texts, such as Terry Bisson's story, "They're Made of Meat."

Contact Zone

Originally published in *OMNI*⁷ and then appearing in the collection *Bears Discover Fire* (1993) – the collection and the story marked the culmination of Bisson's second serious effort in the short-story genre, which began as "an eighteen hundred dollar sale," which revived his "interest in short story fiction" (Bisson 1995, 251). According to Bisson (1995), the title was inspired by Allen Ginsberg's reply to an interviewer who kept prattling on about their souls communing. The poet corrected him: "We're just meat talking to meat" (251). Without worrying about Ginsberg's ironical use of the word "meat," Bisson directs his reader to the area where the story's complexities come into focus.

Before approaching the analysis of the short story, it is necessary to introduce Mary Louis Pratt's (1992, 8) concept of "contact zone" – a social space where two or more disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple in asymmetrical relationships of dominance and subordination, such as colonialism, slavery and their postcolonial heritage. In the case of the story in question, two interplanetary explorers are on a mission, and they discuss the recent discovery of a carbon-based sentient life form, which represents the only sentient species in the sector. According to Jessica Carducci (2016), not only is a figure of alien conceptualised "corporeally," but *the aliens are also* physically and literally "branded" (145). The narration begins as one traveller informs his incredulous companion about the existence of sentient life in the form of "meat." The encounter was initiated by a radio signal they had received, the transmission having been broadcasted "for almost a hundred of their years" (Bisson 1995, 35). The first direct speech acts set the tone of the whole dialogue as they advance a critical awareness of the Other:

"They're made out of meat."

"Meat?"

"Meat. They're made out of meat."

7 *OMNI* (1978–1997) was a science fiction magazine published in the UK and the US. The publication's abrupt end followed the death of its co-founder, Kathy Keeton.

"Meat?"

"There's no doubt about it. We picked several from different parts of the planet, took them aboard our recon vessels, probed them all the way through. They're completely meat." (ibid., 34)

The story immediately establishes – with respect to Said's dichotomy (1978) – a binary separation of the "us" and "them," and as the story progresses, asserts the naturalness and dominance of the "us-culture" in the hegemonic discourse, constituting the internal divisions of the narration. Thus, the quotation does entail the colonial discourse of "the Other." To be othered, this interplanetary endemite is homogenised into a collective "they," which is distilled even further into an iconic *substantivum*: "meat." Though the name says nothing about it while constructing its identity as an object – a mass noun of uncountable, syntactic quality of an undifferentiated unit rather than something with discreet subsets – it does not necessarily entail the violent and reductive exploits of colonial trafficking and human commodification in slavery. Returning to the story, its subtleties of narration and meaning reveal that the new life form is, in fact, humankind:

"Just one. They can travel to other planets in special meat containers, but they can't live on them. And being meat, they only travel through C space. Which limits them to the speed of light and makes the possibility of their ever making contact pretty slim. Infinitesimal, in fact." (Bisson 1995, 36).

The contact – in the story initiated by radio transmission – implicitly references the programme Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence and the first broadcast beamed into space with the intention of contacting extraterrestrial life, organised at the Arecibo Radio Telescope in Puerto Rico on 16 November 1974; thus, the narration is firmly grounded in the history of America's political platform of the "new frontier."⁸ While the dialogue manifests internal divisions, it does not constitute the actual contact, nor does "the messages to the stars." Apart from its

8 With a particular interest in technology and space exploration, the term "new frontier" was employed during the 1960 acceptance speech by Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy. He explicitly invoked the metaphor of the American frontier and Manifest Destiny in order to raise America's eyes towards the stars through NASA's space programme, thus reconstructing its rhetorical ties to American expansionism (White and Limerick 1994, 81).

inevitability in travel, memoir and ethnographic writing, a first contact takes on more physical and violent forms than verbal abuse, especially when derived from the first-hand encounter in the story, and an attentive reader does recognise the shared space of this cultural exchange in generic alien abductions:

“There’s no doubt about it. We picked several from different parts of the planet, took them aboard our recon vessels, probed them all the way through. They’re completely meat.”

...

“Nope. They’re born meat and they die meat. We studied them for several of their life spans, which didn’t take too long. Do you have any idea the life span of meat?” (Bisson 1995, 34–35).

Although the concept of abduction does not necessarily signify a colonial relationship, of the many variations of first contact, this phenomenon calls to attention a wide variety of epistemological concerns with the colonial/imperial framework. One of the most vital elements the story shares with colonial discourse is the prevalence of scientist characters. Not only does the story mention a zoological acquisitiveness and centre the narration around the gathering of biological specimens, but it suggests a more profound study and even experimentation. The entire narrative can be read as abounding with ethnographic passages providing a curious *melange* that documents minute details about language, technology, culture and biology. It seems necessary to introduce at this point of analysis Rieder’s term “colonial gaze.” The gaze distributes knowledge and power to the subject who looks, while denying or minimising access to power for its object, the one looked at (2008, 7). As the aliens make their declarations – and through the explanation – they are installed in command of the contact zone, and what constitutes the imperial/colonial framework of the relationship is the ethnographic and scientific nature of the story. Thus, the story is ultimately a discussion on dominance and subjugation through the authority of language. Formally naming the new species they have discovered, they quickly transform the language of discovery into the language of legal dominance. However, the narration suggests more profound confrontations and opens up the possibility to view the contact in a greater, more philosophical dimension.

The duo of explorers – presumably unrestrained by the limitations of the Newtonian universe and possibly capable of traveling faster than light – are

presented only through their respective direct speech acts.⁹ They have no frame of reference; there is no way to judge their position, shape or size. The whole story consists of their dialogue without implying anything about the appearance, setting, names or actions involved during the dialogue; Bisson completely truncates the introductory clauses while keeping the quotation marks. Unlike the "meat," they are not reducible to something one can perceive, name and subsequently understand by one's ordinary senses, thus, cognitively appropriate eventually. While with the traditional "bug-eyed alien," a proper image is formed and cannot fall apart, Bisson's creation cannot be contained, comprehended and encompassed. However, the use of quotation marks might be indicative of present tense; the enclosure of the voices within the frame of quotation marks is a possible demonstration of the orality and audibility of their utterances. Seemingly, then, they occupy a different space, one that does not intersect with ours – a realm where life forms are not necessarily biological. Thus, Bisson's portrayal of his characters resolves the dilemma of SF, which according to Sara Ahmed, underlines the dichotomy of the alien in popular culture: both "over-represented" and "beyond representation" (2000, 1). On both sides, the stereotyping is not dependent on visual cues, but on the essentialisation of the subjects, except that the text involved establishes not only an opposition between two elements but a more complex relationship between the entities. The discourse of otherness, which accompanies the colonial implications of the encounter, simultaneously interrogates the immortal philosophical dispute about the prominence of essence over substance.

Summarising the character of the contact zone, Bisson's strategy is to reverse the constitution of internal divisions; he transposes the positions of coloniser and colonised as the aliens impose their dominance upon humanity's explorative efforts. He also reverses the epistemological framework of relationships in the hegemonic discourse. The hegemonic discourse is initially constituted in the abductions; the dominance is established through the ethnographic character of their epistemological framework, which resides within the framework of colonial/imperial ideology. It operates within the same Foucauldian differentials of the "power-knowledge discourse" (1990) as colonial ideology, where power derives from and uses knowledge; on the other hand, power reproduces

9 Bisson's stage directions represent them as "two lights moving like fireflies among the stars" on a projection screen (Bisson 2008).

knowledge in accordance with its anonymous intentions. At the same time, *Bison* excels at immediately establishing and maintaining a sort of philosophical dispute that does not deter the characters in the business of creating the Other and delineating that opposition which must exist in order that they might define themselves by the Other.

Anti-Conquest Narrative

According to Ursula Le Guin (1993, 94), no scholar can ignore SF as a reconstruction of “[t]he white man’s burden all over again,” and Landon states that first-contact narratives go a long way toward justifying the missionary fervour and sense of purpose found in much SF (2002, 81). When the aliens discover a new species, they name it, thereby establishing it in a new relationship with the quasi-empire they represent. This relationship is marked by unenforceable obligations of power. Initially, the aliens carry out their official mission as they “are required to contact, welcome, and log in any and all sentient races or multibeings in the quadrant, without prejudice, fear, or favor” (Bisson 1995, 36). So the cognitive appropriation is established and operates as a function of empire, a tremendous ideological project which Thomas Richards (1993, 6) dubbed “the imperial archive”: “The great Victorian projects of knowledge all had their center the dream of knowledge driven into present”¹⁰ This agenda represents, to borrow a term from Kelz (2016), their “responsibility to otherness.” Their responsibility is to be attentive to that which lies beyond the margins of their identity, their concepts and their projects – that which is other. So this principle is a profoundly human condition. Important here is the overall process of othering; otherness might include race, class, and gender, but does responsibility cross the borders of species? The story’s representatives are not complicit with their ideological obligations. “Unofficially,” they decide to “erase the records and forget the whole thing” (Bisson 1995, 36), and after a further conversation, they both conclude – with their sense of ethics – that communication with conscious meat would be altogether bizarre, so they “marked the entire sector *unoccupied*” (ibid., 37) and resolved to “just pretend there’s no one home in the universe” (ibid., 37).

10 Richards states that “the new disciplines of geography, biology, and thermodynamics all took as their imperium the world as a whole, and worked out paradigms of knowledge which seemed to solve the problem of imperial control at a distance” (1993, 6).

Survival in both modes – SF and colonial – secures the innocence and legitimisation of the coloniser in the narratives set in the strange land, even as he executes his complicity with the ideology of dominant culture – a strategy which Mary Louise Pratt (1992, 9) calls “anti-conquest narrative.”¹¹ Since the story does emulate contact between higher and lower cultures, the aliens justify their actions on the colonial discourse of primitivism; however, the discrimination here is not based on the popular figuration of technology or the lack of access to it as an indicator of primitivism and inferiority:

“That’s impossible. What about the radio signals? The messages to the stars.”

“They use the radio waves to talk, but the signals don’t come from them. The signals come from machines.”

“So who made the machines? That’s who we want to contact.”

“They made the machines. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Meat made the machines.”

“That’s ridiculous. How can meat make a machine? You’re asking me to believe in sentient meat.” (Bisson 1995, 34)

According to Langer (2011), parallels between SF and colonial fiction have much to do with race: “an invented sink category that infers intellectual, emotional, cultural and other differences based on relatively minor human phenotypical variation” (82). The interstellar duo of explorers instead deals with the new species accordingly – as being burdened with a radical biological difference – and their descriptive language bears racial overtones, seemingly eradicating the anthropological difference in the process of othering:

“Oh, there is a brain all right. It’s just that the brain is made out of meat!”

“So... what does the thinking?”

“You’re not understanding, are you? The brain does the thinking. The meat.”

“Thinking meat! You’re asking me to believe in thinking meat!”

11 Pratt offers a radically different theorisation of the concept than Edward Said (1978), who refers this way to the postcolonial texts of native resistance. Here, Pratt employs the term auto-ethnography, which is discussed later.

“Yes, thinking meat! Conscious meat! Loving meat. Dreaming meat. The meat is the whole deal! Are you getting the picture?”

“They actually do talk, then. They use words, ideas, concepts?”

“Oh, yes. Except they do it with meat.”

“I thought you just told me they used radio.”

“They do, but what do you think is on the radio? Meat sounds. You know how when you slap or flap meat it makes a noise? They talk by flapping their meat at each other. They can even sing by squirting air through their meat.” (ibid. 35–37)

The newly discovered beings are stripped of their identity and cognitively conquered mostly due to the reductive, totalising character of the verbal abuse. However, considering Carl Thompsons’ (2011, 5) assertion that the travel genre contributes to “racist belief and ideologies that were so common in the high imperial period, for example, its role in promoting racial and cultural supremacism,” the manner in which the beings are described repeatedly and the insistence on their substance bears racist aspects: the nickname “meat” carries racial overtones. The word could be compared to employing racial slurs since the term “meat” is not only possibly abusive, but also biologically inaccurate. The word then justifies the escalating objectification, abuse and violence against the humans, a tendency which the story shares with other SF texts: for example, Michel Faber’s *Under the Skin* (2000).¹² Both Faber’s and Bisson’s extraterrestrials acknowledge the anthropomorphic nature and traits of humanity, in a sense that they share traits with their respective races. However, Faber’s aliens treat humanity as an intergalactic livestock, whereas Bisson’s travellers discuss them as mere victims of their biological functions.

Unlike language and culture (two of three mediating terms of the colonial triangle), race cannot be changed; unlike a diaspora, it cannot be escaped. “Meat,” characterised through the discourse of primitivism, is confluent with a popular colonial figuration of racism. Thus, the narration references colonial situations, racial ideology and, furthermore, the discourse of racial divisions. The entanglement of the fictional motifs and colonial ideology come into focus upon the contradictions that emerge when their anatomies and actual social scripts are combined.

12 The protagonist is an extraterrestrial who kidnaps hitchhikers and delivers them to his planet. There, they are referred to as “Vodsels” and considered a rare delicacy.

They perceive humans and their language and technology to be as unadorned as the bodies of those who produce them. In such ways, the indifferent rhetoric of the aliens is not that of adventurous travel narrators or curious scientists who encounter amazing people. The story makes this clear in the last few lines, when the aliens instead decide to contact "a rather shy but sweet hydrogen-core cluster intelligence in a class-nine star in G445 zone, who "was in contact two galactic rotations ago [and] wants to be friendly again" (Bisson 1995, 37).

While their intelligence suggests the possibility of compassion, it is met with inordinate rationality. Thus, the aliens' disregard for humanity places it in an unjustifiably lower status in relation to others. These references to the effects and conditions of cultural exchange correspond with the term "relational injustice" (Wong, 2019). While the alien explorers consider different instances of alterity as acceptable – "a carbon-based intelligence that goes through a meat stage, "or "[a] meat head with an electron plasma brain inside" (Bisson 1995, 35) –the whole idea of recognising humankind seems absurd to them: "Singing meat. This is altogether too much" (ibid., 36). So when the aliens discover humanity, they name it and eventually ignore it, thereby establishing it in a new relationship with the quasi-empire of intergalactic beings they represent. Christopher Columbus revealed a similar process in action in a letter that was widely distributed across Europe:

I discovered many islands, thickly peopled, of which I took possession without resistance in the name of our most illustrious Monarch, by public proclamation and with unfurled banners. To the first of these islands, which is called by the Indians Guanahani, I gave the name of the blessed Saviour (San Salvador), relying upon whose protection I had reached this as well as the other islands; to each of these I also gave a name, ordering that one should be called Santa María de Concepción, another Fernandina, the third Isabella, the fourth Juana, and so with all the rest respectively (1493, 1).

Bisson's story evidently mocks such an approach to intercultural contact while stressing the ignorance of judging the cultural practices of other peoples as being physiologically determined. However, the contact zone operates within the same differentials of ideology and innocence as colonial travel narratives.

In conclusion, the prominent mark of colonial/imperial ideology in Jack London's "Red One "is the overriding ambivalence that makes itself felt at every

level at which one attempts to approach the text" (Rieder 2008, 94). While London constructs the story's ambivalence as an exotic/demonic dichotomy, Bisson emulates ambivalence between ideology and innocence, while ascribing to other cultures the structural impositions of knowledge and frames of reference based on the self-centred construction of a coherent reality. Akin to imperialism, the ideological encumbrance imposed renders the whole communication not only as merely impossible, but also as strongly undesired.

Autoethnography

Le Guin (1993, 102) accused the SF genre of failing to develop complex characters, settling instead for a prescribed set of characters such as "captains and troopers, and aliens and maidens and scientists, and emperors and robots and monsters - all signs, all symbols, statements, effigies, allegories, everything between the Stereotypes and the Archetypes" - but never with unknowable characters. So while the individual images differ, the composite image is almost totalised. In the years following WWII, Emmanuel Levinas reconsidered the concept of "totality." As a characteristic of the whole Western continental philosophy and ideology, he identified totality as a form of imperialism, associating it with "the whole Western civilization of property, exploitation, political tyranny, and war" (1987, 53).¹³

Bisson's totalization of "the Other" reveals the unethical orientations where the Other is deprived of its alterity, dissolving into a single concept - conquered cognitively, visiting violence upon the otherness of the Other. Regarded as nothing more than primitives bound by their flesh, this balance and cogency can be equalled with colonial imperialism. The aliens' disregard for difference and shallow acceptance of the material world resembles superior colonial thinking and supremacy. However, humans - whose lives are considered forfeit and whose culture is seen as abbreviated and misshapen in their very strangeness - are at the very heart of the colonial project; its dispelling is at the heart of the

13 Levinas (1969, 1987) extends his assumptions and regards totality as foundational to fascist ideology as well. Thus, his views are in line with Hannah Arendt's (1973) argument about the rise of totalitarian regimes and continental imperialism in post-WWI Central and Eastern Europe. According to Levinas, German fascism and Soviet communism were strongly influenced by Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism, "continental imperialism, therefore, started with a much closer affinity to race concepts, enthusiastically absorbed the tradition of race-thinking, and relied very little on specific experiences" (224).

postcolonial one. It is crucial to note here that the most interesting feature of using the language in postcolonial literature may refer to how it constructs not difference, separation and absence from the norm, but a form of resistance.

According to Pratt (1992, 8), "the term 'contact' foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimension of imperial encounters so easily suppressed or ignored by accounts of conquest and domination told from the invaders' perspective." If noticing the general configuration of the constituents of the contact zone, which exists as a complex system of polarisations, it begins to undermine images with ethnographic significance and calls into attention the discourse of agency. Recasting this in the words of Emmanuel Levinas' blistering critique of totality, "to approach the other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it" (1969, 51).¹⁴ However, the narration does not offer a voice and space for the marginalised, subjugated and exploited, leading to a curtailment of their agency – not only by depriving the contact zone of control over the character, but also through the inability to recollect the encounter:

"Cruel. But you said it yourself, who wants to meet meat? And the ones who have been aboard our vessels, the ones you have probed? You're sure they won't remember?"

"They'll be considered crackpots if they do. We went into their heads and smoothed out their meat so that we're just a dream to them."

"A dream to meat! How strangely appropriate, that we should be meat's dream" (Bisson 1995, 36–37).

As subalterns, to borrow Gayatri Spivak's (Young, 2003) term referring to marginalised groups without human agency – as defined by the social status that denies access to both mimetic and political forms established in the structures of political representation – humanity is excluded from the hegemonic discourse. Nevertheless, if they could approach it, address themselves to the audience, what would happen if one rearranges the positions of the colonial gaze and consider

14 He argues that a "face-to-face" encounter with the Other is disruptive to totality and represents a gateway to more abstract Otherness, beyond the capacity of "the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity" (1969, 51).

the humans' reciprocal gaze? The generic conventions would switch from those of the ethnographic image to what Pratt (1999) calls "autoethnography" – a text which "people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (35). The reversal of perspective would yield an absolutely different narrative, reconstructed from their point of view.

The aliens decipher the communication, and they recognise that humanity "wants to explore the Universe, contact other sentients, swap ideas and information. The usual. ... That's the idea. That's the message they're sending out by radio. 'Hello. Anyone out there. Anybody home.' That sort of thing" (Bisson 1995, 35–36). Humanity's message, beamed across the cold void of space by SETI, was a mind-expanding accomplishment so complicated it required a great deal of room for human imagination and creative sensibility. While applauded by many, the event was advocated by the same noble cause as the mission of the scientists in Lem's *Solaris*: "We are humanitarian and chivalrous; we don't want to enslave other races, we simply want to bequeath them our values and take over their heritage in exchange. We think of ourselves as the Knights of the Holy Contact" (Lem 1971, 81).

On the other hand, several conspiratorial objectors deterred; "some actually suggested that sending such a message was dangerous because it might attract the attention of hostile aliens" (It's the 25th anniversary, 1999). While this perspective exhibits notions of paranoia, the ambivalent nature of the event concurs with Peter's analysis of actual contact narratives, where he establishes a commonly perceived dichotomy (1995, 199). He differentiates between contactee narratives that engage with "mysticism," where aliens exist as reflecting divine natural order, presumably perceived as Columbus described himself upon his encounters with the natives of Caribbean: "Come, come and look upon beings of a celestial race. Come! and see the people from heaven!" (Columbus 1930, 3).¹⁵ On the other hand, abductee narratives, unlike contactee ones, function by developing an objective and scientific discourse. Abductee narratives indicate a fear of technology coupled with the fear of a loss of individuality. The real-life abductee narrations depict the extraterrestrial as emotionless and potentially psychopathic – exhibiting no depth or feelings (Peter 1995, 199).

15 The concept of beneficial contact/invasion was occasionally explored in fiction, with aliens spreading their culture to "civilise" the "barbaric" earthlings or to protect them. This variation on the plot is akin to combining invasion literature's theme of occupation with a parental framework (Fitting 2001, 143).

While Peter discusses actual narratives, Bisson's confrontation between cultures manifests the potential for a similar confluence of concerns. Using Rieder's (2008, 5) term "anthropological difference" – in the way Victorian anthropology conceptualised the play of identity and the difference between scientific subject and object of observation as different moments of history congregating at the same time – the autoethnographic narration would depict anthropological anachronism with a scene of an imperceptible, futuristic and invasive alien.

While alien-abduction narratives could be described as generic, the experience of the abductee is depressingly singular. It is ironic that, according to Mack, the confrontation of an actual abductee narrative (each completely interchangeable) has become a way of reconstructing personhood and identity (2000, 241). As a discussion on alterity and agency, the point of constituting an abductee narrative effort is to give plausible meaning to his personal myth. According to Pratt (1999, 40), the Other, "on the one hand, one must produce oneself as a self for oneself. That is survival. At the same time the system also requires that you produce yourself as an 'other' for the colonizer." Their constant negotiation requires "living in a bifracted universe of meaning," and the burden of producing oneself is laid upon the other. This could serve as the marginalised group's point of entry into hegemonic discourse, but not of the dominant linguistic culture's social domains. The traditionally marginalised are not co-present with the dominant in the narration, shaping and influencing their respective representations through resistance, and participation providing them with a measure of agency. The idea of antithesis is reflected in the narration in the sense that the humans involved are not only at odds with aliens – for not recognising their subjectivity – but also with humanity itself. This calls to attention themes such as the construction of identity through reaffirmation of voice, a common theme in post-colonial literature. This issue generates more discussion than the story actually answers and limits the conceptual framework of transculturation.

The first contact is without any transformation that would be possible as a function of reciprocity through the agency of appropriation; based on this, it is impossible to construct the subjects of the narration without placing them outside the possibility of communicating the knowledge. This is indicative of a framework similar to "the unknowability thesis" in SF as described by the Marxist critic, Frederic Jameson (2005). In his study of *Solaris* (1961), he explores "the impossibility of understanding the Other" – an assumption he considers "implacably negative and skeptical" (107–108).

In conclusion, Gregory Benford (1980) describes SF as unimaginative; he believes that there are “no true aliens,” only the retelling of our own history. However, he is unable to conclude whether it is a “simple lack of imagination” or “unconsciousness need to return repeatedly to the problem” (55). Bisson’s figure of an alien – constructed with every aspect of their speech in contrast with humans, who are denied active participation or a voice in the contact – functions as a displacement of the negative aspects of humanity onto the aliens. This calls to mind Fanon’s argument that it imitates the way Europeans repudiate their “most immoral impulses” and “most shameful desires” by projecting and transferring them onto the colonial others (1986, 190). Thus, it is ironic that the experience of the abductee during the initial rendezvous has become so dehumanisingly biased: “And why not? Imagine how unbearably, how unutterably cold the Universe would be if one were all alone” (Bisson 1995, 37).

Conclusions

To summarise the paper, Bisson’s story, “They’re Made of Meat” (1995), effectively engages with the problem of understanding the Other in the intricacies of colonial/imperial ideology, science and even the history of exploration. Simultaneously, this paper demonstrates and proves how the notions of the contact zone, anti-conquest narrative and autoethnography can be a point of analysis of first-contact narratives. Furthermore, if one considers Bassnett’s (2002, 239) assumption that in travel writing the lines become blurred between the autobiographical, the anecdotal and the ethnographic, then the story’s confluence of exploration, scientific examination and objective factuality with subjective fallacy suddenly become far more powerful.

Terry Bisson imitates how the colonial/imperial discourses construct their others in order to confirm their understanding of reality. The Other here is dehumanised and subjugated to a finite, knowable concept, both politically and pragmatically. The distinction between us and them functions as a method of control and dominance in this power hierarchy predicated on ethnography, primitivism and racism; thus, the dynamics of contact are contested on the enforced differentials of power and knowledge. However, what sets Bisson’s story apart are the philosophical and ethical dimensions of the contact. It is a story of an interstellar failure of communication of disastrous proportions, where the author combines an ethical and philosophical consciousness with a commitment

to the story as a work of colonial science fiction. If one allows oneself an instance of anthropomorphism, the ignorance, prejudice and audacity that constitute the erasure of alterity in the act of communication depict an innocent account permeated by imperial ideology. Humans occupy the position of victims in the narration, and their marginalised selves simultaneously exist in the form of actual marginalised people, which is not nearly so romantic a formulation; on the other hand, the aliens' attempt to impose their transcendent meaning upon a different life form operates as a type of projection.

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