

Brittany Nelson: Out of the Everywhere*

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Donna Haraway once observed that “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.”¹ The liberation of women in its widest sense, she assessed, lies in the construction of a consciousness of oppression and the possibility to create world-changing fictions. The critters Haraway conjures in her writing for this purpose are chimeras, hybrids, optical illusions. Without claiming to refer to any original they refer to, these fabled creatures are utterly transformative.

Think of the image of a lake in a desert, conjured by glistening heat and desperate desire, which upon approach turns out to be a fata morgana. A beautiful one, manifesting its half-presence by the jerk of a muscle that quickens the legs, by saliva watering the mouth. Real and certainly effective in some ways, but always out of reach. A fata morgana appears when light passes through masses of warm air above cooler air, bending the rays and moving the image of a faraway object weirdly close. Light and apparitions.

Brittany Nelson’s work brings to mind such ghostly images, which appear to be referentially pointing toward a this-worldly here, yet at closer view waver toward an otherworldly there. Drawing on the history of abstraction and the way it has evaded capture by pictorial figurations and linguistic signifiers, in Nelson’s work, the boundaries between science fiction and reality turn out to be fickle lines of make-believe rather than actual divisions.

Her “Mordançage” (2010–ongoing) series is one example of such almost-referents. Distorting a process from photographic history, as she often does, Nelson creates square images consisting of dark gray, beige, and iris blue swirls and drippings. The analog originals are blown up digitally

¹ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto Science: Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

and printed as large-scale C-prints, making it difficult for the viewer to situate them entirely within the realms of the organic or the artificial. They could be close-ups of a foaming geyser formation, or toxic waste reacting violently as it comes into contact with air. As photographic hermaphrodites, they direct our attention toward the lifelike features of chemicals, and to what the writer and biochemist Isaac Asimov refers to as the possibility of otherworldly “life-not-as-we-know-it.”

Mordança is an alternative photographic process created in the 1960s, its psychedelic features resonating with the zeitgeist. The underlying technique is etch-bleach, a late-nineteenth-century method used to reverse film negatives into positives. Negative to positive, a few toxic drips to solubilize apparently fixed imagery. In suspending representation as pictorial ideal, Nelson breaks with the traditions of photography and technical mastery in the conventional sense. No more “perfect” pictures. Her unfettering of photography’s constraints of resemblance to real-world referents presses on with the legacies of feminist and queer abstraction. A body that is not depicted cannot be assaulted, cannot be made to fit “natural” categories. Apparent markers of difference in gender and sexuality, of non-compliance with heterosexual norms, have been exploited in the criminalization of homosexuality and the stigmatization of victims of the AIDS crisis. In abandoning claims of universalism and readability of gender and sexuality, queer abstraction sidesteps the violence inherent in this visual regime. Nelson’s chemical mordança applications call to mind Luciana Parisi’s cyberfeminist theory of particle-forces emerging from non-linear reactions between potential and actual desires, “composing and decomposing assemblages between the most unnatural bodies.”² Mutant desires intensify. They bring up what Jane Bennett calls “vibrant matter,” the forces and flows of materialities that are lively, signaling, and affective; a liveliness that is swerving, buzzing, and turbulent, in which everything affects everything else, without an a priori goal, and without being either, or, but always both and all at once.

All at once. Negative and positive. Here and there. Now and then. And all of the in-betweens of the wavering make-believe lines. Nelson’s “Tintype” (2016–ongoing) series is nothing less than

² Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Biotechnology and the Mutations of Desire* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 40.

an attempt to conflate time, past and future. A time machine? The works condense remote temporal moments and technologies within singular photographic plates, collating them to co-exist in two, no three, no, four dimensions. Tintype as a studio technique enjoyed its widest use in the 1860s and '70s, when it was applied to produce small-scale portraits for people to carry in their pockets: intimate companions, close, at hand, on the wearer's body. Tintype was also used to document the Civil War in the US. Light impregnated on metal plates, the depicted imagery has a depth that seems phantasmal, while its surface often ends up clouded over time. Like memory.

In recent years, the technique has seen revived interest. Makers of tintypes often choose portraits as their subject matter, capturing the image of people, their faces as distinct markers to be remembered. Between nostalgia and novelty, the resuscitation of this procedure could be said to forfeit approaches of abstraction in photography, reverting instead to aesthetics of classical representation. In her work, Nelson borrows the technique to turn it on its head. She first creates abstract geometric bodies in Photoshop, which then appear as positives on the metal sheets. The abstract shapes materialize on dark backgrounds, while the plates are mounted on triangular volumes that seem to have oozed out of a science fiction story. In one diptych titled *Map* (2016) one of two plates of the same size lays horizontally on the floor at an angle, supported by a metal wedge. Depicted on it are small square shapes surrounded by arrows pointing in different directions. Next to the first plate, mounted on a slab and leaning against the wall, is a second plate. On it is a large cloud of dark photographic texture, either in this atmosphere, or another galaxy. The imagery is derived from a 1970s book on space travel, indicating places in the universe considered most likely to host alien life. In combining the digitally made abstract shapes with analog photography, Nelson conflates their respective times—not only of their technological temporal mooring, but also of the conventions deeply embedded in them.

Those feeling asynchronous with their time often long for time machines. The misfits, the ostracized, those who prefer neither side of the line but who work toward dissolving it. A device to transport you to the elsewhere, out of the everywhere. The science fiction writer Alice B. Sheldon (1915–1987) wrote under the male pen name James Tiptree Jr., creating such a time

machine for herself. Sheldon often narrated her short stories in the voice of male protagonists, indulging in fantastical and dark cosmic journeys inspired by pulp tales. Her short stories are complex psychological and societal speculations turning gendered tropes on their head. In choosing a pseudonym and exploring difference through the characters in her texts, Sheldon was able to insulate her subjectivity, twice. She achieved freedom to discuss her lesbian desires under these terms. Desires that weren't considered right, no place for them then, when?

Nelson's *And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side* (2018) is a work comprising six gelatin silver prints created from scans of book pages of the eponymous short story by Sheldon. In the text from 1972, a reporter interviews the captain of a spaceport, who describes how sex with aliens has ruined his and everyone else's lives. He warns the reporter to leave immediately to avoid contracting the same addictive obsession with travelers from another world. Unacceptable desires; which addictions are deemed ok? In exposing the scanned pages as negatives in the darkroom, Nelson made the text on the back of the paper seep through to the front. Using a flashlight for exposure, with fast strokes of light caressing the photosensitive surfaces, the front and the back of the pages are revealed simultaneously, rendering the words illegible and conflating fore and rear, before and after. A light searching in the dark.

Photography as a medium seeking to capture the absent. An optical illusion that conjures an elsewhere. For *Tiptree's Dead Birds* (2019), Nelson created six holograms, each depicting one of six pages of hand-written annotations by Sheldon. In these, the author wrote about the women she secretly and not so secretly loved, but who rejected her, referring to them as her "dead birds." The handwritten notes protrude from the pictorial plane of the hologram to enter the space of the viewer. They come to be at hand, surpassing distance to be present in the here and now. As if floating in from a different dimension, they emerge from a struggle between the private and the public, between Tiptree, the writer's life behind a concealed identity, and Alice, the person, and her feelings and desires. Nelson's use of holograms positions them as part of the history of photography. An image-making technique. An optical illusion. Yet, in resurrecting holograms from their recent 1980s past of fascinating make-believe and granting their mirage-like depth to text rather than figures, Nelson summons other possible uses for the medium. Different time and space: the letters appear to be messages sent from the future rather than

from the past.

Tiptree's writing was celebrated for its direct tone, ardency, and fearlessness. In 1975, the writer Robert Silverberg wrote an introduction to an edition of the short story collection *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* praising Tiptree's language as one which could never be achieved by a woman. Tiptree's identity was largely unknown, yet Silverberg asserted that any speculations that the person behind the pen name might be a woman—that Tiptree could be a woman (!)—were absurd. The writing was “ineluctably masculine.”³ What might have inspired Sheldon to allow for the insulting foreword to be printed in her book? Was it a trick to pass, a humorous act, did she not have a choice? In choosing to write herself out of the here and now, perhaps she was able to achieve a piece of arduous freedom, a glimpse of a some-time when things might be different.

In 2004, NASA launched a mission of two rovers to prospect the surface of Mars. The twin vehicles, named Spirit and Opportunity, were designed to roam the planet for ninety sols (each Martian sol, or solar day, equals twenty-four hours and forty minutes), collect data on the planet, and search for clues of ancient life and water and other findings that might support hypotheses of future habitability. Spirit fulfilled its mission and ceased functioning in 2011, outliving its estimated lifespan by seven years, while Opportunity kept wandering the planet until late 2018. Able to clean its solar panels from dust swirled up during Martian storms, the rover was assigned new scientific missions originally unintended and unforeseen. What to do with all this gifted time? Among the outcomes of these new assignments are multiple images taken by Opportunity as it looked back over its path and photographed its own tracks. Auspicious and pioneering as future visions of life on Mars may seem, the images of a lonely rover roaming the surface of this faraway planet, long after completing its mission and abandoned by its twin, evoke a sense of almost unbearable anthropomorphic solitude. Fascinated with its prolonged lifespan and the solitude on the faraway planet, in numerous online forums, Opportunity is being anthropomorphized and given a female pronoun. Perhaps a queer teenager growing up in rural Montana can identify herself in the alien-like other-life,

³ Robert Silverberg, “Who is Tiptree, What is He?” introduction to James Tiptree Jr., *Warm Worlds and Otherwise* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), xii.

isolated and searching.

For the series titled “Opportunity Rover” (2019), Nelson chose images taken by Opportunity, which are held in NASA’s publicly accessible archives. She transferred the photographs between various mediums and sizes, compressing a file, blowing it up, printing a negative, conjuring a positive. The result is a series of large-scale photographs in bromoil, a nineteenth-century technique which became popularized by the pictorialist movement. As photographers were pushing for their medium to be accepted as a visual art form equivalent to painting, which prevailed at the time—not any painting, but Impressionism: Painting with a capital *P*—with bromoil they integrated painterly techniques into the photographic process. The imagery is soft, picturesque, utterly aesthetic. Landscapes that appear to have been touched by a brush.

After enlarging the digital files of Martian landscapes to create gelatin silver prints, Nelson brushed the developed paper with lithographic ink, creating a soft, painterly image. A bromoil in the pictorialist sense. Only, it wasn’t an image of a landscape found on this planet—a favorite subject during the nineteenth-century heyday of the technique, rays of light in the outdoors—but an otherworldly desert, an other world. Depicting the blank Martian landscape, the works evoke both the nostalgia for hand-made, rather than recorded, bromoil photographs, and futuristic endeavors to make this barren planet inhabitable. Looking at the black-and-white soft-contoured image brought out by Nelson’s ink brush touching the photographic surface, one may think of humans longing to touch, and eventually inhabit, this extraterrestrial landscape of craters and sand dunes—a longing harnessed by the “pioneers” attempting to create a new habitat for those adventurous and wealthy enough to partake. And yet, there is more. A desire to reach out to that faraway creature—the human-made, anthropomorphized rover, to tell her she will be ok, send her a postcard from tomorrow. Opportunity was a woman.

In similar vein, Nelson’s series “Sol 4,999” (2018) references a picture taken by Opportunity as the sun rises for the 5000th time during its extended mission, long after the vehicle was to be defunct. Appropriating the image, Nelson created a series of halochrome prints, each repeating the same photograph. Bleaching and redeveloping gelatin silver paper, the halochrome process

tones black-and-white prints by fusing colloidal silver into solid silver. Liquids fixed. The chemical stabilizing process raises questions concerning permanence, both of human and other life, of boundaries, of lines, as well as of artifacts cast in rigid materials for future generations to find and marvel at.

The prints resemble alien objects. Or the way they are imagined widely across popular culture, as metal things with shiny surfaces. A convention, a fiction solidified in an image. In depicting images of the sun, “Sol 4,999” points to the nature of photography, the process of capturing light. The repeated images formally resemble a fragmentary calendar, an attempt to measure something as abstract as time passing on a desolate planet. For Opportunity, the sun rose and set 5000 times during fourteen years of solitude on Mars.

Nelson is a photographer who doesn’t take images, who is balancing the thin line of legibility. Language is evidently inappropriate for the attempt to describe something of which the main objective is to stay as far removed as possible from being represented. Abstraction. As Tim Ingold has shown, scripted words, typed on a keyboard, reduce the meshwork of life, its complexity and possibilities, into accounts of linearity stripped of gesture and experience. Images that bypass visual and linguistic referents. In zombifying historical photographic techniques—half resuscitating them, queering them—Nelson produces chimeras asking viewers to reconsider the aesthetics and politics of representation. At the same time, she proposes new images, perhaps brought here from another time-space, without original, a negative turned positive, and more. Oozing through boundaries. As such, in their search for the unknown, whether chemically or pictorially, Nelson’s works follow the desire to tap into other worlds. These are exercises in abstraction that elude preconceptions while sounding other possible futures. Clarice Lispector has called life oblique. A crooked reality. A sly crooked line covered by straight and parallel cuts. “Upon this unusually crooked life I have placed my heavy paw, causing existence to whither.”⁴ Her feverish cascades of text inundate containment, while Nelson etches it away. Acidic stains, intense half-presences, images to conjure something else, out of the everywhere.

⁴ Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva* (New York: New Directions, 2012), 61–62.

* *Out of the Everywhere and Other Extraordinary Visions* is the title of a collection of short stories by James Tiptree Jr. (New York: Del Rey Books, 1981).