

The Secret Feminist Cabal:
A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms

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“Will the Real James Tiptree, Jr. Please Stand Up,” poster, 1978

“FIAWOL,” poster, 1977

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PREFACE

Confessions of a feminist science fiction reader

I don't scorn science fiction, any more than I scorn Afghanistan; I'm just one of those types who prefer to stay at home and mumble about the problems at hand... I believe that, if we wish to make new fictions of our lives, adumbrate new possibilities for experience and awareness, we must do it in the language life has given us... I think we must imagine, not a fantastic world, but how we might speak and act differently in this one... It is the utopian mode that separates science fiction from the other categories of popular feminist fiction... But I live here, where I must find the language to incarnate these things: whether through weakness of intellect or paucity of imagination, I am not content, nor even able, to dream them.

→ Carolyn Heilbrun (1984: 117-119)

Back in 1984, Carolyn Heilbrun explained why she didn't read science fiction (sf). This book is essentially a long and convoluted attempt to answer an apparently simple question. Why would feminists read sf? And more to the point, why do I read feminist sf?

The journey began (as it so often does with sf readers) with my adolescent self of the 1970s. I was your classic "square" kid: a bit of a geek who took maths and science subjects, always did my homework, liked *Omni* magazine, read all the sf and fantasy I could find, and argued about the existence of aliens with my friends (when we weren't trying to convince people they were just a construct of our imagination). Despite the signs, I didn't follow the science route, but with a short detour through music found myself eventually studying history at university. Up until this time I had still been avidly consuming the classics of sf, which came to an abrupt halt as I discovered feminist theory and, with growing horror, turned its lens on the Asimov, Clarke,

and Heinlein I was reading. Henceforth I officially foreswore sf (despite occasionally indulging in guilty binges in semester breaks).

And then, in 1992 I was rescued from my self-enforced abstinence. I was taking a class on the history of technology in which we read Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs." ([1985] 2004a). Here was a feminist theorist after my own heart. I must confess that on first reading, most of the theoretical revelations passed me by; I was too enthralled by the magic phrase Haraway conjured before me—the authors she called on to be her storytellers for cyborgs were writers of feminist science fiction. What wondrous beast was this? Was it possible that my politics and reading pleasures could be reconciled? Eagerly I set about tracking down and reading every author and story hidden in Haraway's footnotes and, as they say, the rest is history. Within a few years I had started a PhD on feminist SF, and more than fifteen years on from that "aha" moment, feminist sf is still my passion, my fiction of choice, the core around which most of my critical activities circulate.

From fairly early on, however, it became apparent that most other feminists and women I knew did not share this passion. Rather, they found it incomprehensible and more than a little strange. Increasingly in my research I was drawn to examine what to me was a conundrum. Others wondered why a feminist would read sf. I wondered, why wouldn't they?

For me, the pleasure I gained from reading women's and feminist sf was not just about a return to my own personal golden age of twelve, but was precisely animated by the particular archaeologies of feminism/s expressed in the texts. Various historical developments within feminist criticism and theory became much more vivid to me through my concurrent readings of sf texts. As I read more, including the critical work on feminist sf, the issue of why so many feminists were antagonistic towards, or ignorant of sf became ever more pressing. Why was this innovative and challenging body of feminist work so rarely acknowledged as a "legitimate" subject for feminist study? I was not the only feminist sf reader to ask such questions. Sf writer and editor Susanna Sturgis put it very neatly in the title of her essay "Why Does a Bright Feminist Like You Read That Stuff Anyway?" (1989, 1-9). Like me, Sturgis discovered feminist sf later in life, and perhaps for this reason she has also felt the proselytizing urge which generally

produces amazement, indifference, or outright scorn (see also Cook, 1985, 133-45).

It is this quest(ion) which initiated my desire to consider in the broadest sense, all of the commentaries on feminist sf I could find. My search led me beyond the normal confines of sf criticism, to audiences and readers outside academe. I discovered fandom, fanzines, and conventions. I started attending the local West Australian convention, Swancon and even managed to attend the feminist sf convention, WisCon in Madison Wisconsin. WisCon 20 was a pivotal moment for me. Not only did it introduce me to the global feminist sf fan and writerly community, but also gave me a sense of the history of feminist fandom including access to copies of some of their increasingly rare fanzines.

My particular journeys through feminist sf texts, academe and fandom inevitably inflect my account, producing a very particular and invested story of sf feminisms. My immersion in the sf texts and fandom together have led to a concern with the sf “field” as it is broadly constituted and thus I focus on fan writings as much as academic texts in telling this story. It is no accident that my narrative heads inexorably towards science studies, as this is what founded my engagement with feminist sf, and to me always appeared to be a part of the sf “field” as I encountered it.

Thus my opening confessions, intended to contextualize what is a necessarily partial, situated and invested account of the nexus of feminism and sf. If nothing else, this book might provide an answer to why I have found feminist sf so engaging. Hopefully it does much more, and reveals what all kinds of feminist readers might find illuminating, challenging and inspiring about the production of sf feminisms.

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Portions of some chapters have appeared elsewhere in earlier versions, including articles in the journals *Refractory* and *Women's Studies International Forum*, and as chapters in Helen Merrick and Tess Williams (eds), *Women of Other Worlds: Excursions through science fiction and feminism* (UWA Press, 1999); Andy Sawyer, et al. (eds), *Speaking Science Fiction* (Liverpool University Press, 2000); Margret Grebowicz (ed), *Sci-Fi in the Mind's Eye: Essays in science and technology studies* (Open Court, 2007); and Farah Mendlesohn (ed), *On Joanna Russ*, (Wesleyan University Press 2009).

Given the very long gestation period of this book, there are a lot of people I want to thank. From the beginning, the advice and friendship of Justine Larbalestier, Sylvia Kelso, Tess Williams and Joan Haran kept me sane and contributed immeasurably to the ways I thought and wrote about feminist sf. For their help in the very earliest stages of this project, I am indebted to Rob Stuart, Philippa Maddern, Charlie Fox, Maureen Perkins and Esta Ungar. Thanks also to Grant Stone, the Murdoch University Library, and Graham Stone. Thanks to Veronica Hollinger, Katie King and Terry Threadgold for their advice, comments, and ongoing support of my work.

None of this would have been possible without the help and enthusiasm of so many people in the sf community, in particular, those involved in Fem-SF and WisCon as well as many members of the UK fan community who helped me out through interviews, chats, provision of rare fan material or permission to cite their words; so thanks (in no particular order) to: Jeanne Gomoll, Amanda Bankier, Susanna Sturgis, Candas Jane Dorsey, Nicola Griffith, Karen Joy Fowler, Pat Murphy, Melissa Scott, Nalo Hopkinson, Rebecca Holden, Jane Donawerth, Sherryl Vint, Lisa Yaszek, Edward James, Farah Mendlesohn, Elizabeth Sourbut, Jenny Wolmark, Andy Sawyer, Maureen Kincaid Speller, Carol Anne Green, Elizabeth Billinger, Avedon Carol, Rob Hansen, Caroline Mullan, Brian Ameringen, and Mark Bould. And my thanks are due to the late Vincent (Vinø) Clark who so kindly answered all my questions, served me tea and gave me photocopies

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In recent years, I have been inspired and encouraged by the many wonderful women active in West Australian fandom and the fabulous institutions of Gynacon (the feminist guerilla programming track of our local convention, Swancon) and Femmecon. In particular, thanks to Sarah Parker and Sarah Xu for reminding me what feminist activism, community, and consciousness-raising is all about.

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INTRODUCTION: THE GENRE FEMINISM DOESN'T SEE

Who roams the galaxy, single-handedly fighting injustice, oppression, and outdated portrayals of gender roles in speculative fiction? Space Babe! Join her in her quest, and be recognized by her allies everywhere when you wear the sign of The Secret Feminist Cabal.

→ <http://www.tiptree.org/?see=spacebabe>

This book is a journey through the rich history of feminist activity within the literary genre of science fiction (sf). The title deliberately invokes a recent phase in this history: the not-so secret establishment of a self-proclaimed “feminist cabal” to promote feminism through sf awards, conventions, and publications. Borrowed (with kind permission) from the James Tiptree Jr. Award, the title seemed apt for a number of reasons. First, it serves to highlight the fact that a feminist presence within sf has often been considered unusual, if not unnatural. The phrase also hints at an unacknowledged or suppressed history, a secret record of deliberate, conspiratorial, and political action. The use of the term “cabal” to describe the diverse and shifting alliances of the feminist sf community is an ironic, performative move. In both this book and the community itself, the cabal is not meant to be taken literally. After all, what kind of self-respecting cabal would openly advertise its “secret” existence through websites and conventions, identify its members through the wearing of garish temporary tattoos, and fund itself by the sale of home-baked chocolate chip cookies? In other words, the secret feminist cabal is a joke. But a very serious joke. It is this particular understanding that makes the phrase so appropriate for my purposes. For, despite the seriousness of the issues at stake in this history, one of the most appealing yet overlooked aspects of sf feminisms is the humor and wit of its writers, critics, and fans. Science fiction may be a place where feminists go to dream of utopia or plot revolution, but it is also a source of *pleasure*—of individual reading pleasure, of emotional connection with like-minded folk—and at times a place to make life-long friends and allies.

Yet sf is often assumed to be an inappropriate or unlikely place to find feminist visions, debate, and theory. Many assumptions persist about the genre—including its exclusively adolescent (white) male appeal; its trashy, escapist nature; and its adherence to a technophile, gadget-oriented, scientific world view. Some of these assumptions hold true, at least in part, for at least some proportion of sf. But such a picture does not acknowledge the discursive and creative spaces that many feminist authors and readers have created within sf. In pursuing a history of sf feminisms, this book examines the cultural work that has been performed by and around “feminist sf.” That is, the sorts of feminist knowledge production and cultural activity that have taken place within sf, and the ways certain texts become collectively figured and represented in feminist critical and fan activity. I focus on a number of key discursive communities that have been central to the construction and reception of feminist sf from the 1930s to the present: namely, the early sf community of writers, fans, and readers; pre-feminist fandom; feminist fandom; academic feminist sf criticism; and feminist techno-science studies.

Borrowing from theorists Donna Haraway and Katie King, I situate feminist sf as an “object of knowledge” that functions as an “apparatus for the production of feminist culture” (Haraway 1991a: 162-3; see also K. King 1994: xv-xvi, 92). In particular, I am interested in the sociocultural, historically specific contexts that enable and inflect this process of “production.” My focus is on how feminist sf texts function not only as popular fiction but also as examples of feminist knowledge, as discourses of science and technology, and as the commerce for sociopolitical engagements between communities of readers, writers, fans, critics, and editors. Thus, unlike in many previous studies of feminist sf, I am not so much concerned with providing interpretations of fictional texts as with providing a cultural history of the readings and stories generated by the “object” feminist sf and the ways in which this object becomes a locus for feminist cultural production in sf.

Despite their culturally marginalized location, the feminist histories played out in the sf field are fascinating both for the insights they offer on sf historiography and for feminist theory and praxis more generally. The dialogues I examine (re)produce in microcosm the processes and trends of feminist knowledges and debate of the

last four decades, and indeed sometimes predate nascent feminist concerns in the “mainstream.” Whilst feminist sf in many ways reflects and parallels broader feminist theoretical and cultural journeys, there are marked specificities in the feminist engagements with the discourses and cultures of sf. An important and distinguishing context for this engagement is the nature of sf communities. In contrast to the production of feminist knowledge in the academy, which from the 1980s on has been criticized for becoming isolated and disengaged from non-academic discourse, the feminist sf community encompasses academics, authors, fans, and editors/publishers. The dialogues and interactions of these community participants actively contribute to the discursive formation and mediation of “feminist sf” and indeed “feminisms” in general.

Learning to tell stories

My approach in this book is indebted to the work of Haraway, the most obvious influence being my concern with science studies as an arena in which stories about feminist sf are re-told. Haraway’s insistence on the power of telling stories and emphasis on the “narrativity” of many modes of knowledge have influenced the ways I have thought about and tried to represent the conversations traced here. I also try to keep in mind her insistence on the power of evolutionary—especially Darwinian—stories that unconsciously inform any history we construct, especially when science, knowledge, nature, and gender are the major characters of our narrative. Following Haraway and King, I think about feminist sf—and feminist sf criticism—as “objects of knowledge”—that is, the end points of complicated historical processes and discursive battles rather than something obvious, static, and known—that are best fashioned as practices not things, as verbs not nouns.

I owe much to King’s approach to narrating a history of feminist theory. In the opening “story” of her *Theory in Its Feminist Travels* she comments: “I want to describe feminist theory as a politics of knowledge making. The kind of object I mean might be called an ‘object of knowledge.’ Theory too is such an object... We produce the things we know” (K. King 1994: xv). Acknowledging Haraway’s formulation of “objects of knowledge,” King employs this tool from science studies to shape her enquiry into what counts as feminist theory—one

motivated by clashes between her personal experiences as an activist and feminist academic with “canonical versions” of feminist theory (95). King’s description of her approach in looking for the object feminist theory resonates with my constructions of feminist sf:

What I look to, in considering what an object [of knowledge] is, are especially the moments and histories of its production over time, the contests for meanings within which it is embedded, the political contours that are the circumstances out of which it is fabricated, and the resources and costs of its making, contesting, and stabilizations, some lasting, some ephemeral. (xvi)

My story is inspired, too, by King’s approach to reconstructing and rehistoricizing feminist theory through the adoption of what she calls “writing technologies” such as “poem,” “story,” and “song” to construct an alternative to dominant notions of “cultural” and “radical feminism” as a site called “the apparatus for the production of feminist culture” (1994: 92). Finally I admire King’s admission of the historicity and thus “messiness” of her book, which does not try to smooth out inconsistencies (xiii). My book too has bumps and unresolved tensions, particularly obvious in my struggle to resist the pull of the singular object “feminist sf”—such a useful tool to smooth messy stories with; seductive, as its fashioning required so much effort, and tempting, because it signals an apparently clear identity, a way of thinking and being a (sf) feminist. A different perspective on the ways we have constructed stories of feminist theory is provided by Clare Hemmings; in a historiographical review she notes the importance of emotion in such constructions:

Feminist emotion...is central to the feminist stories we tell, and the way that we tell them...as a result, an account of ways of telling feminist stories needs to be attentive to the affective as well as technical ways in which our stories about the recent feminist past work. It hurts because it matters... (2005: 120)

In thinking about the sometimes challenging conversations that inform the making of feminist sf, I have found it useful to keep in mind the emotional investment of the various participants in these dialogues.

The importance of stories is also key to other works that have influenced my approach. L. Timmel Duchamp highlights the way readers of feminist sf imagine themselves into an ongoing dialogue and community, encapsulated by her notion of the “grand conversation” (2004b). My story is engaged in such a conversation with many academic and non-academic critics, from those pioneers who from the 1970s through to the '90s defined and consolidated feminist sf, as well as more recent work by critics like Brian Attebery, Justine Larbalestier, and Lisa Yaszek, which has expanded the texts and subjects of feminist sf criticism. Finally, I aspire to the kinds of interdisciplinary and historically situated studies that critics such as Roger Luckhurst call for. Luckhurst’s study *Science Fiction* aims to present a model of a cultural history of sf: one that “situates SF texts in a broad network of contexts and disciplinary knowledges” that “necessitates an ambitious stretch of contextual material, ranging from the history of science and technology, via the softer social sciences, to the rarefied world of aesthetic and critical theory” (2005: 3). While my scope here is much less ambitious in its contextual material, this book is intended as a contribution to the growing body of work that attempts such multi-disciplinary and historical approaches to the field.

All these influences help me to view my story of feminist sf as a necessarily partial, indebted, and very personal one. Like many other accounts of feminist sf, mine is very much focused on the North American community and almost entirely on Anglophone texts. This bias emerges partially from the fact that the majority of feminist activity in sf has emerged in the US as well as my inability to locate or read sources not written in English. There remain many stories to tell of the experiences of feminists engaged in sf in the UK, Australia, and other sites of significant feminist activity such as Eastern Europe, Japan, and South America (see for example, Agosin 1992: 5; Ginway 2004; Hauser 1997; Kotani 2007). I have been particularly drawn to charting the details of early conversations eddying around the emergence of feminist sf and its pre-history. Most intriguing for me are those moments where the meaning/s of feminist sf were emerging or contested. For, as King notes of her “object” feminist theory, the point is,

to heighten the local aspects of discourse, very much historically — at times almost “momentarily” — located, continually

rewritten or reinscribed with new meanings by feminist practitioners and to foreground how the terms, constituencies, and strategies of feminists shift and travel. (1994: xi)

Given the wealth of these details, I have also remained for the most part focused on the sf community—that is, the writers, readers, and critics who are located in and publish within the sf field. In consequence, there is an obvious omission of those dialogues carried out under the aegis of utopian studies. Initially, my aim was to chart the various feminist sf objects produced by different critical and popular communities, including utopian studies, mainstream literary criticism, and genre and cultural studies. I finally chose only to give a brief overview of these critical sites because although many texts recognized as feminist sf are discussed in these fields, the impetus of such discussion is not toward the construction of “feminist sf,” but the production of different kinds of objects—feminist utopias, feminist literature, or feminist popular fiction, for example. Utopian studies in particular is now such an enormous field, and the historical and formal relation between utopia and sf so complex, that to deal adequately with the topic would have required another book. Therefore, apart from a brief overview of such critical commentaries later in this chapter, the rest of this present book concentrates on those dialogues that are clearly about sf as a field and (eventually) feminist sf as its subject.

I trace a number of discursive communities that have contributed to the production of feminist sf: the sf field generally, proto-feminist and feminist fan communities, feminist sf critics, and feminist scholars of science and technology. With the exception of the latter, each of these communities overlaps with the others and with the broader sf field. The book is arranged roughly chronologically, with the early chapters providing a “pre-history” of sf feminisms, whereas later chapters trace various developments of sf feminisms from the 1970s onwards. Chapter Two, “Resistance Is Useless!: The Sex/Woman/Feminist Invasion” provides a context for the “arrival” of women in the field, as subjects, writers, and readers. Beginning with the letters and editorials of the pulp magazines from the 1920s and 1930s, I trace the overt and covert narratives around women, sex, and gender in the sf field prior to the emergence of feminist activity in the 1970s. Chapter Three offers a different kind of prehistory, attempting to uncover stories of women’s involvement in sf as readers and fans from the 1920s

to the 1960s. Entitled “Mothers of the Revolution: Femmefans Unite!” the chapter not only uncovers women’s presence in this period, but identifies moments of woman-identified and proto-feminist activity.

Starting with 1970s, my analysis becomes necessarily more synchronic and dialogic, as the sf field becomes larger, encompassing both expanded fan communities and the growing numbers of academic sf critics, who have increasingly become a distinct and often separate community themselves. “Birth of a Sub-Genre: Feminist SF and Its Criticism” (Chapter Four) traces the emergence of feminist sf criticism, from its beginnings in critiques by writers and fans to its establishment as an identifiable body of criticism. The same period is covered in Chapter Five, “FIAWOL: The Making of Fannish Feminisms.” As the title suggests, the focus here is on how sf feminisms developed in fandom. Chapters Six and Seven concentrate on two key issues that surfaced in feminist sf criticism from the mid-1980s through the 1990s and overlapped with the field of cultural studies of science and technology. “Cyborg Theorists: Feminist SF Criticism Meets Cybercultural Studies” traces the impact of cyberpunk and the cyborg on sf feminisms and the emergence of the body and the post-human as central concerns. Covering roughly the same period, a related but distinct cross-disciplinary dialogue is the subject of “Another Science ‘Fiction’? Feminist Stories of Science.” Concluding the book is “Beyond Gender?: Twenty-first Century SF Feminisms,” which summarizes some of the directions and contests that characterize contemporary sf feminisms. Fittingly, it also returns to a more holistic overview encompassing the stories of critics, writers, and fans, which together produce and re-produce a variety of feminisms within sf.

The remainder of this introductory chapter contextualizes the various elements of the sf field and bodies of criticism I survey in this book. Crucially, I begin by outlining what it is I mean by feminist sf. I then briefly introduce key moments in the establishment of the sf fan community, academic sf criticism, and feminist sf criticism. Finally, I address the often fraught relation of sf to mainstream literature and criticism and chart developments in feminist literary and genre criticism in the period when “feminist sf” was being formulated by sf fans, authors, and critics.

What does "feminist sf" stand for?

Integral to the feminist theorizing played out in engagements with feminist sf is a struggle over definitions—what *is* feminist science fiction? (Or sf? Or feminism?) My concern with multiple constructions means that the object feminist sf cannot be neatly pinned down, even if some consensus on feminism and sf could be reached.

A multiplicity of feminist theories, existing synchronously and diachronously, can be traced through the variety of objects classified as feminist sf. Indeed, the competing taxonomies of feminist sf now available reveal the escalating growth of feminist critical narratives in microcosm. Within the field, analysis of feminist sf has developed into a specialized feminist sf criticism, whose critical project, like its object of study, has now become large and diffuse enough not to be considered a singular, unified venture. As Veronica Hollinger observed as far back as 1990, the project of feminist sf criticism had concentrated on “the construction of the subject, whether this is the female subject/character at the center of feminist science fiction or feminist science fiction as a ‘subject,’ i.e., a unified body or field of study” (1990b: 235). Hollinger argues, however, that,

the large number of feminist science fiction texts produced over the last twenty years or so now comprises a body of work no longer well served by criticism that reads it as a unified undertaking, i.e., individual texts all grounded upon the same ideological foundations and all working together for the promotion of a single coherent feminism. (229)

My approach works to unravel this monolithic subject by paying attention to the multiplicity of historical and political positionings subsumed under the label “feminism/s.” The book also challenges unitary conceptions of feminist criticism by acknowledging critical commentary and productions outside institutional academic publishing. Much influential work on women, sf, and feminism is found not in journal articles, but in those paratextual spaces that have traditionally served in sf as forums for critical commentary and review: forewords, editorial columns, introductions to collections, and letters to fanzines. Such spaces are evidence and markers of the discursive communities that may overlap, but also exist independently of the academic field of sf criticism. In order to acknowledge such complexities, I refer often

to the term “sf feminisms” rather than “feminist sf” since the former does a more inclusive job of indicating a variety of communities and generations expressed through different kinds of cultural activity.

Talking of sf feminisms also avoids the tricky definitional problems that a term such as “feminist sf” immediately provokes. At the simplest level, feminist sf conjures up the problems noted by Paulina Palmer in relation to “lesbian writing”: “Does it denote writing by lesbians, for lesbians, or about lesbians?...none of these definitions is entirely satisfactory or foolproof” (Palmer 1993: 4). Feminist sf is most commonly used to denote “sf for feminists,” and (increasingly from the 1980s on) “sf by feminists,” but also sf by, or for, women. The slippage between women’s sf and feminist sf (also characteristic of feminist literary criticism) is a common occurrence in the narratives I trace. Despite the trend to deconstruct a unitary and universalizing category of “Woman,” a continuing and longstanding thread of criticism continues to oscillate freely between “women” and “feminism” as the definitional category.

Early criticism by feminists focused on women’s portrayal in sf and the neglect of female authors to support a critique of androcentric sf and its masculinist culture. Academic feminist sf criticism then developed from the championing of female authors and strong female characters (women’s sf) to a focus on overtly feminist texts and authors. In the process, what Sarah Lefanu termed “feminized sf” was, until very recently, increasingly abandoned by feminist sf critics (Lefanu 1988: 93). Authors whose work does not sit easily within a feminist framework, such as Marion Zimmer Bradley and Kate Wilhelm, have been neglected by academic critics despite their influence on later feminist readers. Many feminist sf authors have acknowledged the influence of writers such as C.L. Moore, Andre Norton, and Leigh Brackett on their early reading and writing of sf. Joan Vinge has written of the deep impression left on her by the discovery that Andre Norton was female:

In the early mid-Sixties, well before the women’s movement became widespread, I read her *Ordeal in Otherwhere*, the first book I’d ever read with an honest-to-God liberated woman as the protagonist. Not only were female protagonists extremely unusual at the time, but this character came from a world on which sexual equality was the norm. I never

forgot that, and in the late Sixties, when I began to see articles on feminism, something fell into place for me in a very profound way. (Vinge, quoted in Lefanu 1988: 93)

Thus, attempts to construct a female subject in sf were important predecessors to the more direct constructions of a *feminist* subject in sf. As Justine Larbalestier has observed:

While not all of the women who have been part of the field of science fiction would identify as feminists, the fact of their participation has become a feminist issue. The mere fact of their presence created a tradition that other women could then become a part of. (Larbalestier 2002: 2-3; see also Yaszek 2008)

Nevertheless, when considering a “pre-history” of feminisms in sf, it is important to be sensitive to generational differences, and indeed, the layering of different generations and histories present in any conversation about feminism. Texts that critics may identify (and thus judge and perhaps neglect) as representing humanist or liberal forms of feminism continue to have purchase in the exchanges between feminism and sf. These ideas not only juxtapose and interact with other developments in feminist thought, but are also part of the very development of other forms of feminist thought—both in theory and in fiction. In addition, every lineage of texts is produced to a certain extent through an individual’s reading experience, which rarely corresponds to their chronological production. Personal reading histories are central to the individual construction of feminisms; many younger readers will not have come across 1970s texts until decades after they were written, and thus may read them within a very different contextual sense of feminism. My reading of Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* in the 1990s, for example, provided a very different sense of the feminism of that time than did my readings of feminist history and theory, and brought the movement alive to me in a way no other text had done.

But one must be careful in these readings across time (and generation and geographical location), especially when trying to excavate marginalized or non-dominant stories. Duchamp points to the instability of discursive shifts in terms and their impact on our conversations. In particular she identifies the way that attempts by younger

critics (including myself) to “recover” certain texts variously labeled as “housewife” or “domestic” sf have underestimated the importance of the cultural context within which some feminists denigrated the sub-genre. In understanding this position, she argues, it is crucial to realize the extent to which the “feminine mystique” informs the figure of the housewife and the “ideological regime” it represented (Duchamp 2004b: 52-3). This is a telling point for, although I was theoretically aware of this history, it did not—could not—have the emotive or affective “truth” for me that it did for Duchamp (or Joanna Russ or Pamela Sargent). Thus, although I endeavor to foreground the affective as well as technical contexts in which discursive meanings shift and evolve, my account is always colored by my particular generational, geographic, and political locations. Part of this positioning also involves the ways in which I locate myself within the various discursive fields and communities that constitute both sf and feminism/s.

Introducing the sf field

The sf community is made up of sf writers, fans, editors, and publishers, who interact most visibly at sf conventions (“cons”), but also in various organizations, clubs, and through fanzines (amateur fan publications) and prozines (such as *Locus*, which began as a fanzine, and the *New York Review of Science Fiction*). As Edward James writes:

Since the late 1920s sf fandom—the body of enthusiastic and committed readers of sf—has had an appreciable and unique, if unmeasurable, impact on the evolution of sf, influencing writers, producing the genre’s historians, bibliographers, and many of its best critics, and, above all, producing many of the writers themselves. (1994: 130)

Although fans have been a vital part of the sf community,¹ their influence and even presence in sf has until recently been absent from many critical and feminist accounts of sf. A vast amount of research, documentation, and bibliographical work, however, has been carried out by fans themselves, for the most part focusing on the activities of “Big Name Fans” (BNFs) (Moskowitz 1954; Warner Jr. 1969). Since

1 Indeed, Edward James suggests that fans predated sf as a genre and helped bring it into being: “Sf fans existed before sf itself was named: in a sense readers had created a genre before publishers, or even writers, were clear what that genre was” (James 1994: 52; see also Hartwell 1984: 158).

the late '80s, very different accounts of “fandom” have also emerged from the growing body of academic work on media fandom (Bacon-Smith 1992; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Jenkins 1992; Penley 1990: 135-61; 1992: 479-500). And more recently works, such as those by Larbalestier (2002) and Camille Bacon-Smith (2000), have looked to fandom for more complete histories of the sf field.

From the beginnings of fandom in the 1920s and '30s (well before critical interest in popular culture and readers), fans proclaimed their own importance and influence in the field of sf (for example, signaling their superior knowledge and intelligence in the slogan “fans are slans”)² and, in some cases, saw sf as incidental, rather than central, to fandom as a community. A great deal of “Fanac” (fan activity) revolved around fandom itself—this interest in the community itself being dubbed “faandom.” Personalzines, APAs,³ and the partying interactions with friends at conventions (which for “faans” often takes precedence over the more “sercon” attendance of official programming) demonstrate the importance of the community in and of itself as a network of people who have an interest in sf but do not necessarily base all their communication around it or, indeed, even read sf texts any longer.⁴

It is hardly surprising, then, that a significant part of fanac has been the chronicling of fannish history and activity: the feuds, the hoaxes, the careers of BNFs, the fortunes of numerous fanzines and prozines, and of course, Conventions. Fan-authored books, articles in prozines and fanzines, encyclopedias, dictionaries, indexes, and bibliographies all attest to the vigor and diversity of fan culture, and these sources have established a sense of fannish history (marked by “epochs” of fandom, from “First fandom” through to the “phony

2 *Slan* (1940) was A.E. van Vogt's first novel, in which a superhuman mutant race is forced into hiding by the animosity of “normals.” Fans leapt on this image as an emblem of their own position within “mundane” society.

3 An APA (Amateur Publishing Association) is a compilation of mini-fanzines, each assembled by individuals, then collated and sent to all members of the APA group. It resembles a “paper version” of online communities such as blogs or LiveJournal. Personalzines are fanzines that are usually diary-like, relating to the writers' personal lives, and often with little reference to sf.

4 For a wonderful explication of fan culture (and the rather incidental role of sf texts in some portions of it), see Warren 1974.

Seventh”).⁵ While the sense of a long and significant history is well established in the fan community, debate continues over issues such as the first “real” fanzine, or whether the US or the UK held the first “official” convention. Many of these debates reveal tensions between various factions of fandom—or, more correctly, various communities, separated by generation, nation, politics, sexuality, and purpose (see for example, r. brown 1994; Warner Jr. 1994b).

Fans have constituted a vital reception community for feminist sf and have engaged in dialogues about feminism and sf amongst themselves in fanzines and letters as well as within the broader sf community, through convention programming. Alongside the development of feminist sf, fan responses and debates about texts and feminist issues played a key role in the recognition of sf as a legitimate arena for feminist thought and expression. From the 1970s on, feminist fandom has not only produced some of the earliest feminist sf criticism, but has also actively set out to change the environment in which sf was produced.

Critical attention to popular culture fans highlights the congruence between the “excessive” consumption of both the fan and critic. As Laura Stempel Mumford comments in her work on TV soap operas: “I am a fan, but not merely a fan; a critic, but never simply a critic” (1995: 5). Paying attention to fans involves recognizing and legitimating a source of knowledge and competency outside the domain of academic criticism. In feminist sf fandom, in particular, fans have from the outset engaged with readings that are informed by feminist theory. Feminist fanzines offered critical writings that placed sf texts in the context of feminist praxis and theorizing, and used sf as the starting point for political and theoretical arguments that roamed far from this culturally “debased” set of texts.

The transformation of critical writings on sf into a “scholarly” or academic pursuit began in the 1960s, when courses began to appear at US universities, a series of critical monographs were published,

5 Jack Speer, editor of the first *Fancylopedia* and an early fan historian, divided fandom into eras. His periodization was modified by Bob Silverberg, resulting in six periods, with a “seventh” added by a “group of brash young fans [who]...announced that Sixth fandom was dead, and that *they* were the new and magnificent Seventh” (Tucker 1976: 5). The eras are First Fandom, 1930-1936 (also known as “Eofandom”); Second Fandom, 1937-1938; Third Fandom, 1940-1944; Fourth Fandom, 1945-1947; Fifth Fandom, 1947-1949; Sixth Fandom, 1950-1953; The Phony Seventh, 1953. As Tucker notes, “Partly because of disinterest, no one has seriously attempted a continuation of the numbering system” (1976: 5).

and an academic sf journal (*Extrapolation*) dedicated to criticism was established. The institutionalization (or professionalization) of sf critique saw a shift in the locus of the production of sf criticism in terms of what Pierre Bourdieu calls “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1984)—a move from the “shadow economy” of the sf community of fans and authors to an (admittedly marginal) place in academe. However, the origins of sf criticism are to be found much earlier in the fan community. Fan commentary, reviews, and criticism of sf were a staple of sf fanzines, while the sf magazines contained critical commentary in editorials and review columns (James 1994: 136-7).⁶ The first sf course was taught by fan Sam Moskowitz at The City College of New York in 1953 (Parrinder 1979: xv-xvi). Author and anthologist Reginald Bretnor edited a collection of articles by sf authors in 1953 (*Modern Science Fiction, Its Meaning and Its Future*); author/critic Damon Knight’s critical essays appeared in book form in 1956 (*In Search of Wonder*); and in the 1960s, more books of critical writing followed from Moskowitz and William Atheling Jr. (pseudonym for the critical writings of Damon Knight and James Blish) (Atheling 1964; Bretnor 1953; Moskowitz 1966; Nicholls 1979: 146-7).⁷ *Extrapolation*, launched in 1959 by Thomas D. Clareson, was initially very much like a fanzine in appearance but, according to Patrick Parrinder, signified the appearance of a body of sf scholars (Parrinder 1979: xv-xvi).⁸

Feminist criticism of sf was first published in sf (and some women’s movement) academic journals in the 1970s by authors such as Joanna Russ and fans such as Beverly Friend (Friend 1972; Badami 1978; Le Guin 1975; Russ 1974b). Feminist criticism did not become an established presence in sf scholarship, however, until the 1980s, when it became more common in the sf journals, the first edited col-

6 James cites the fanzine by (male) Claire P. Beck, *Science Fiction Critic*, 1935-8, as a particularly serious critical review. Fans also provided an invaluable basis for later academic work through the compilation of bibliographical and reference works.

7 James considers Knight’s book as the first book of criticism of sf—“a milestone in the evolution of the serious evaluation of the genre, and an important lesson to fan reviewers of the then prevalent ‘gosh-wow’ school of criticism” (James 1994: 137).

8 In 1970 the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA) was founded in the US, and in 1973 R.D. Mullen and Darko Suvin co-founded *Science Fiction Studies*. In 1971 the British Science Fiction Foundation was formed, and its journal *Foundation* appeared in 1972. (See also James 1994: 88.)

lections on women in sf appeared, and the first two monographs on feminism and science fiction were published.⁹ As the following chapters suggest, within the “informal” publishing institutions of the sf fan community, there were more immediate responses to feminist critiques in the 1970s (and earlier) that constitute a crucial element in a history of feminist criticism within sf.

Although obviously part of the same critical impulse to challenge the literary malestream that marks the beginnings of feminist literary criticism, with common origins, critical approaches, and tools, feminist sf criticism developed apart from its mainstream sister, as a subgenre of sf studies, rather than a branch of feminist criticism.

But is it literature?

Indeed, a central tension haunting all critical studies of sf is its relation to the mainstream of literature and criticism. As Luckhurst points out, “[t]he complaint of those who read and study popular genres is that they are always regarded as inferior because a singular, high cultural definition of aesthetic value is used to judge them” (2005: 2).

Sf has a problematic profile for mainstream critics for a number of reasons, the most obvious being the persistent view of sf as mere technophilic fantasy. Sf, as an example of “genre” fiction, continues to be constructed within literary criticism as a conservative mode, a form of fiction somehow intrinsically more escapist than its elevated counterpart, “literature” or literary fiction. Not surprisingly, sf proves even more troublesome for feminist literary criticism, which rests on political as well as aesthetic judgments in crafting an appropriate canon of texts. And generally, the technophilic, masculinist stereotype of sf (in terms of both theme and authorship) has meant the genre is assumed to be antagonistic, rather than welcoming, to the expression of feminist politics.

9 Apart from those cited above, few feminist or woman-centered critiques were published in the journals in the 1970s. There were special issues on women and sf in *SFS* in 1980 and *Extrapolation* in 1982. The first edited collections were *Future Females* (1981), Barr (ed.), *The Feminine Eye: Science Fiction and the Women Who Write It* (1982), Tom Staicar (ed.), and *Women Worldwalkers: New Dimensions of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, (1985), Jane B. Weedman (ed.). Single-author studies included Marleen S. Barr’s *Alien To Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory* (1987), and the first to examine feminist sf, Lefanu’s *In the Chinks of the World Machine* (1988).

Thus, despite the increased interest in women's popular and contemporary fiction in the last couple of decades (see, for example, Hogeland 1998; Makinen 2001; Whelehan 2005), feminist sf texts have not been well represented in feminist literary studies, and indeed their very existence is often marginalized or obscured. Sf critics such as Marleen Barr and Robin Roberts have confronted what they see as mainstream feminist critics' neglect of sf. When critics from outside the field *do* examine feminist sf, it is usually re-situated as part of a different tradition (such as feminist, lesbian, or utopian fiction) as a way of making sf, in Roberts' words, "palatable to the academy" (1995: 186-7). Such readings detach the texts from the very community within which their feminist intervention generated specific political and aesthetic consequences, and thus obscure the political and historical import of writing within, against, or beyond the sf tradition.

It is clear why feminist critics like Roberts and Barr would protest this exclusion. Not only are they protesting the implied inferiority Luckhurst notes, but also what might be construed as a lack of political solidarity: why devalue or ignore texts that are clearly a product of feminist critique, written and read by feminists? For my purposes, this exclusion is also worth exploring for the insight it provides into the operation and constitution of feminist criticism—particularly in terms of the ways feminist literary studies, as a discipline, has negotiated and reproduced the hierarchies and legitimating practices inherent in the very critical tradition it emerged to contest. Thus from a broader perspective, the exclusion of sf is significant not for what it implies about the genre, but rather for what it might reveal about feminist criticism—in particular, about the processes of canon formation and how and why certain texts, forms, and ideas come to be valued over others.

Since the 1970s feminist critics, in their challenges to traditional disciplinary ideas about literature, have constructed canons counter to that of the androcentric tradition of great (white, male) literature. In most cases these new counter canons did not encompass sf, for despite their re-evaluation of texts previously excluded from literature, feminist literary criticism has confirmed some boundaries even as it transgresses others, and often fails to fulfill its potential to "speak from the border." Like sf criticism itself, although focused on an ob-

ject traditionally outside the respectable hierarchies of literature, the urge to argue for recognition of feminist texts often re-institutes the critical tools, hierarchies, and judgments that have arisen from the analysis of high culture. The operations of feminist criticism within the Anglo-American academy are marked by the hegemony of white, heterosexist texts, and the figuration of popular and genre texts as inherently conservative—characteristics that clearly point to the hierarchies of power and cultural values invested in critical processes. Some of the most trenchant critiques of the resulting lacuna in feminist critical canons and taxonomies have come from women of color and lesbian/queer critics.

The political implications of using a model of literary criticism and canon-making inherited from a white, androcentric, heterosexist critical and literary tradition have been most clearly pointed out by feminists of color (Holloway 1992; Hull, Scott, and Smith 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Pryse and Spillers 1985; Smith 1985).¹⁰ Since the 1970s, critics such as Barbara Christian have challenged Anglo-American feminists to reconsider their theoretical practices, and pointed to tensions in “criticism as usual,” which need to be confronted by all feminists:¹¹

Canon Formation has become one of the thorny dilemmas for the black feminist critic. Even as white women, blacks, people of color attempt to reconstruct that body of American literature considered to [be] *the* literature, we find ourselves confronted with the realization that we may be imitating the very structure that shut our literatures out in the first place. And that judgments we make about, for example, the BBBs (Big Black Books) are determined not only by “quality,” that elusive term, but by what we academicians value, what points of view, what genres and forms we privilege. (Christian 1990: 69-70)

Similarly, Katie King argues that feminist critics “themselves participate in valuing some forms of writing over others. Genres of writing

10 See also Paul Lauter, “Caste, Class, and Canon” (1991: 228-30): who describes literary canons as the product of training in a “male, white, bourgeois, cultural tradition” and, in particular, the “formal techniques of literary analysis.”

11 See also K. King (1994: 12-25) on the ways some white feminist stories obscure the history of black feminist critics and women’s movements.

are highly important in these debates, as objects of knowledge, as producers of knowledge, as the very kinds of knowledge themselves” (1994: 182n30). These genres include, of course, critical and theoretical writings, which through re-telling, circulation, and citation can come to stand in for feminist knowledge and arbitrate what King terms the “apparatus for the production of feminist culture” (92).

The values and canons thus constructed in feminist criticism emerge not only from this system of literary and critical values, but also from the historical inheritance of the Women’s Liberation Movement. From its beginnings, feminist literary criticism has had an uneasy relation with popular fiction. As a number of studies suggest, feminists at the time (and since) were often caustic in their appraisals of the success of what Lisa Hogeland terms the “consciousness-raising” novels of the 1970s such as Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973) and Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room* (1977) (Hogeland 1998; Lauret 1994; Whelehan 2005). These texts were problematic on two fronts. First, their commercial success could be seen as “selling out to the capitalist ‘malestream’” (Whelehan 2005: 13). Second, the focus on individual well-known authors worked counter to the ethic of collective action and authorship characterizing the more radical arm of the movement:

Authors of successful books will necessarily be individuated from other feminists and their alienation from the Movement became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Their stardom was going to be unpalatable to other feminists and their feminist credentials, fairly or not, criticized. (Whelehan 2005: 14)

This mistrust of media success would meet with the distaste for popular culture in the high aesthetics of traditional literary criticism to become a continuing avoidance of popular women’s writing in feminist criticism. As Imelda Whelehan notes, “feminist criticism was developing a methodology of reading women’s literature from the past and rescuing it from patriarchal obscurity, but it had no real interest in popular fiction and very little in contemporary literary fiction” (2005: 3). Thus, these popular, widely read texts “did not fit in with the broader project of literary rediscovery,” even as they evidenced “the contemporary health of feminist debate” (13). And if popular fiction was to be avoided, then it is not very surprising that genre fiction such as sf would be ignored. As I detail below, even when feminist criticism

comes to acknowledge or occasionally embrace more popular fiction and genres, sf still occupies an ambivalent position at best.

What counts as feminist fiction?

The influence of postmodernist and “French Feminist” critiques on the mainstream of feminist criticism brought a new focus on contemporary fiction (though, according to Rita Felski, only in the context of an “anti-realist aesthetics of textuality”) and more rigorous (and exclusionary) ideas about what constituted feminist fictions (1989: 2). For Maria Lauret, there is a key disjuncture in the history of feminist criticism, “between an early and rather unreflective celebration of women’s writing in general on the one hand, and subsequently a stringent and often dismissive critique of the literature of the Women’s Movement on the other” (1994: 3).¹² A similar disjuncture is not evident in feminist sf criticism, where the texts that are seen to have arisen most directly from the women’s liberation movement continue to be central to most feminist sf canons; indeed a number of texts such as Russ’s *The Female Man* and Wittig’s *Les Guérillères* are also central to canons constructed in the light of poststructuralist influences on feminist theory.¹³ Enmeshed in the contending critical narratives about which fictions embody “feminist politics” are judgments about what literary *forms* in themselves can express or explore feminist ideologies, with much debate centering on feminism’s relation to an aesthetics of “realism.”

Writing in 1992, Laura Marcus argued that feminist appraisals of literature assumed an “alleged opposition between ‘experimental writing’ and ‘realism’” (1992: 11). Reacting against this trend, a number of critics since the late 1980s have mounted a defense of the place of realist literature in feminist criticism. Distinguishing between an academic and “popular” form of feminism, Paulina Palmer champions a reader-identified realist fiction against a poststructuralist

12 More recent studies have begun to move beyond such a disjuncture by re-evaluating popular feminist fiction and contemporary third wave or “chick lit” forms (see Makinen 2001 and Whelehan 2005).

13 One aspect in which feminist sf criticism departs from the developmental model of mainstream criticism is that (apart from initial early critiques of masculinist sf) critics have always been concerned with contemporary fiction, since in most critical stories, “women’s sf” began with the women’s lib movement and texts from the late 1960s and early 1970s.

academic defense of anti-realist texts (1989: 7). Palmer stresses the importance for many women of identifying with a “women’s community” in reading, which she sees as “chiefly associated with the realist text” (7). But defenders of realist forms assume too easy a relation between realist texts and popular fiction, ignoring the appeal for at least some women of sf texts and the highly active community of feminist readers and authors that has formed the context for the development of feminist sf since the 1970s.

“Realism” figures in this debate in a slippery fashion. Bringing feminist sf into the debate reveals that the terms “realist” and “anti-realist” here have quite specific configurations, not necessarily related to generic form. In this particular opposition, from which sf seems to be excluded, “anti-realist” corresponds to a politically charged spectrum of avant-garde practices, “metafictions,” and poststructuralist and postmodernist forms (see for example, E. Rose 1993: 355; Watts 1992: 88). The terms of the struggle over the function of “realism” in feminist texts suggests a reductive relationship between literary form and social order/experience—an assumption highlighted by the case of sf, which, while “anti-realist” and thus free of many of the conservative confinements of the realist or mimetic text, does in fact employ a range of “realist” devices in its world construction and cognitive estrangement. The anti-realism of sf can in fact contain a range of political positions from the most reactionary to the most radical of feminist positions. As Penny Florence indicates, there is a closer relationship between mimetic fiction and feminist sf than might be supposed for a “non-realist” form. But to argue that sf is “closer to realism or to naturalism than to fantasy” for example, is, as Florence has argued, distracting: “The point is to move towards reconstructing the basis of these classifications. Thus though what may be termed ‘realist’ elements are appropriated [in sf], they are used to different ends” (1990: 70). As Lauret argues, “particular literary forms are not in and of themselves radical in the political sense” (1994: 9-10; see also Watts 1992: 88).

What is at stake here is, as Felski puts it, the “social function” of literature, the significance of which is obscured by “the assertion that experimental writing constitutes the only truly ‘subversive’...textual practice, and that more conventional forms such as realism are complicit with patriarchal systems of representation” (Felski, 1989:

7).¹⁴ For Rose, feminist critics were slow to adequately theorize this social function of literature, that is, “the relation of fiction to experience and social change” (E. Rose, 1993: 361). The view that radical style and politics must go together implies an ahistorical approach that ignores the motility of both critical trends and the forms and genres they study.

An invisible fiction?

Mainstream constitutions of feminist sf

The field of feminist criticism is not, of course, a monolith. There have been mainstream studies that acknowledge and even celebrate the potential of sf. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *No Man’s Land*, for example, avoids concentrating on a restrictive canon mainly because it provides a broad survey of the history of *women’s* writing (rather than “feminist fiction”) in the twentieth century (1988).¹⁵ It discusses sf texts by Joanna Russ, C.L. Moore, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and James Tiptree Jr. (Alice Sheldon), albeit briefly (116),¹⁶ as well as a number of masculinist “war between the sexes” novels, which are seen as being in dialogue with feminism (18).¹⁷ Gilbert and Gubar’s study situates sf along with writing by women of color as,

the most uncanonical of female-authored mid-century texts.

Specifically, both in the science fiction tradition and in the black tradition women writers seem to feel freest to express

14 Felski also argues against abstract conceptions of a feminine text, which “cannot cope with the heterogeneity and specificity of women’s cultural needs, including, for example, the development of a sustained analysis of black women’s or lesbian writing, which is necessarily linked to issues of representation and cannot be adequately addressed by simply arguing the ‘subversive’ nature of formal self-reflexivity” (6).

15 Their view of sf is probably influenced by the fact that Gubar has published a number of articles on C.L. Moore, such as “C.L. Moore and the Conventions of Women’s Science Fiction” (*SFS*, # 20, 1980, 16-27). Considering the length of *No Man’s Land*, however, the main discussion of sf is negligible, consisting of only five pages out of almost 300: pp. 116-7, 119-20, 245.

16 Briefly mentioned are Tiptree’s “Mama Come Home” and “The Women Men Don’t See,” Bradley’s *The Shattered Chain*, and Russ’s *The Female Man* (116-17).

17 Their argument here is similar to that of Robin Roberts in *A New Species* (1993: 40-65).

their fantasies about the inexorability of sexual battle as well as their fears of female defeat in that conflict. (1988: 101)¹⁸

Gilbert and Gubar also offer an alternative to the common narrative that plots a feminist movement from a '70s utopian to an '80s dystopian mode, through reference to Tiptree's often bleak and dark "fictions about female defeat," which they read as signs of "feminist rebellion" (119-20).¹⁹

Another unusual study is Olga Kenyon's *Writing Women: Contemporary Women Novelists*, which deviates from the canonical norm both through its reference to sf and its concentration on British writers, including marginalized groups such as Jewish women, Caribbean women, and Black British immigrants (1991).²⁰ Kenyon's chapter on Angela Carter's work is unambiguous about its connections with sf:

Carter breaks down academic (male) divisions between "good" and "bad" literature; popular forms of writing such as science fiction and detective stories are treated seriously. Both Carter and Lessing use science fiction, though in differing ways, to explore possible futures. (12)²¹

Kenyon also provides a useful way of conceptualizing Carter's eclectic and irreverent refusal of generic boundaries that confounds attempts to classify and "fix" her fiction into one form, by referring to readers—an absent factor in the majority of feminist literary criticism.

18 The examples given are Moore's *Shambleau* and Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946). This is an interesting view of possible similarities between marginalized but "freer" forms of literature, similar to Lefanu's statements about the freedoms offered by the doubly marginalized genre of sf. However, there are, I feel, dangers in too easily drawing commonalities between two very different experiences of marginalization.

19 A later chapter also mentions Elgin's "sequence of sf novels," *Native Tongue* and *Judas Rose* (245); this chapter (and the book) ends with analysis of Le Guin's "She Unnames Them," describing Le Guin as a speculative fiction writer (270-1). On the periodization of feminism from a utopian to dystopian mode (see E. Rose 1993: 358; Greene 1991; and Lauret 1994: 9-10).

20 There is a chapter each on Angela Carter, Jewish women writing in Britain, an introduction to Black Women novelists, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Caribbean women writers, and Buchi Emecheta and Black immigrant experience in Britain.

21 While Kenyon does not discuss any other writers of sf, her chapter on Jewish writers considers the eclectic range of Elaine Feinstein's novels, observing that Feinstein "values her science fiction novel, *The Ecstasy of Dr. Miriam Garner* (1976)" (40). Her chapter on Buchi Emecheta compares *The Rape of Shavi* (1983) ("a disquisition on the near future") with Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (121).

Her narrative tends to allow bizarre extravagances of plot. While this may alienate the more traditionally-minded reader, her work appeals to science fiction devotees who are accustomed to the extravagant as a means to study possible futures or to illuminate the complexities of the present. Many academic critics still fail to take science fiction seriously enough. Yet, as a genre, it allows writers the structural freedom to explore new concepts. Carter's best novels add elements of science fiction to a range of sources from the phantasmagoric to the naturalistic, to project both the inner life of her characters, and a critique of the social world. (15)²²

Such acknowledgment of sf as a genre open to feminist writers is not a characteristic of the majority of feminist literary studies, where, if sf texts (or more usually sf texts by mainstream authors) *are* discussed, they are not placed in the context of the genre, but instead firmly within the boundaries of a *feminist* fiction.

The most obvious way to draw the “unruly” texts of sf into feminist traditions is to link (and subordinate) them to “mainstream” authors.²³ The only genre sf writer to appear in feminist literary studies with any frequency is Joanna Russ. However, critics undertake some interesting negotiations to draw her work—more specifically *The Female Man*—out of the entanglement of genre and into the mainstream of feminist fiction. Many critics also cite Russ's criticism, especially “What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write,” even those who discuss no sf texts. In this essay, Russ outlined three options for feminist writers who do not want to follow traditional “female narratives”: non-narrative texts, a lyrical mode, *or*—Russ's favored

22 Sf readers are referred to again: “[s]cience fiction fans praised *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*” (17). Carter herself recognized that sf readers would form part of the audience for her works: “I'm not worried about alienating readers by all my allusions, as science fiction addicts are quite prepared to look up things they don't know.” Kenyon's private conversation with Carter, 3 Aug. 1985 (16).

23 Most of the studies I discuss here were published in the 1980s and 1990s, mainly because there remain, as Whelehan notes, surprisingly few studies of feminist popular fiction. Apart from Whelehan's own *The Feminist Bestseller* (2005), only a few texts have appeared since Lauret's 1994 study, including Hogeland's 1998 *Feminism and Its Fictions* (looking at consciousness-raising novels in particular, including feminist sf of the time) and Makinen's study, *Feminist Popular Fiction* (2001), which surveys feminist work within a number of genres, including sf along with detective fiction, romance, and the fairy tale.

approach—a turn to genre. Many feminist literary critics who approvingly cite Russ’s model, however, omit the third option of genre (Rubenstein 1987: 165). (Other writers of “canonical” status in feminist sf criticism, such as Tiptree and Charnas, rarely rate a mention, and, despite the common assumption that she is one of the few sf writers to receive critical appraisal outside the genre, Le Guin also receives very little attention in feminist literary studies.)²⁴

Attempts to co-opt sf texts for mainstream traditions often downplay the undesirable “genre” connections by situating sf as “elements” or “devices” of feminist literature, thus not condemning the whole work to a sub-literary genre. In Nancy Walker’s *Feminist Alternatives*, sf texts are discussed in the guise of “fantasy” or “speculative fiction.”²⁵ Situating “fantasy” in its broadest, rather than generic, sense, Walker’s emphasis on “realism” renders “fantasy” as a literary device.²⁶ Walker’s distinctions between fantasy “as an element in the plot” and as “fictions wholly constructed of fantasies” potentially blur the boundaries between genre and mainstream, but her reading of *The Female Man* in conjunction with texts such as Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*, Erica Jong’s *Serenissima*, and Fay Weldon’s *The Rules of Life* in the absence of other genre writing firmly occludes genre in favor of the mainstream, Russ having been elevated from the ghetto to become part of this “fantastic” tradition.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s “writing beyond the ending” provides a unifying motif for a tradition of women’s writing that encompasses novels dealing with “the issue of the future” that “may have speculative, fantasy, or ‘science fiction’ elements” (1985: 178-9). However, DuPlessis also extricates Russ from the genre, arguing that Whileaway (the “eutopia” of *The Female Man* and “When It Changed”) is presented “as if it were science fiction” (my emphases) (183). This com-

24 Out of a sample of over twenty book-length studies of contemporary women’s writing, only two mention Le Guin as an sf writer, but they do not discuss her work; Tiptree is discussed by Gilbert and Gubar, while both Tiptree’s and Charnas’s work are discussed in some studies of feminist utopias.

25 Walker writes of the “overwhelming need for fantasy” in women’s lives and notes that “[u]ltimately, the impulse towards alternative worlds takes some novelists into the realm of speculative fiction” (N. Walker 1990: 7, 8).

26 “The contemporary women’s novel employs fantasy in a number of ways to accomplish this subversion [of the social order] while at the same time maintaining an atmosphere of reality that speaks to women’s actual lives” (N. Walker 1990: 29).

ment appears directly after DuPlessis's discussion of Russ's "What Can a Heroine Do," outlining the options open to women writers (182). Sf becomes just a bit of decoration in *The Female Man*: "The sci-fi material, written as if on Russ's dare to herself, is presented to dress up... to camp up—the essential truth about Whileaway" (6).²⁷

Other critics refer obliquely to sf through the more palatable notion of "fantasy" as a mode of expression. One such critic is Patricia Waugh:

Given the acute contradictoriness [sic] of women's lives and sense of subjectivity, it is not surprising that many contemporary women writers have sought to "displace" their desires, seeking articulation not through the rational and metonymic structures of realism but through the associative and metaphorical modes of fantasy: romance, science fiction, gothic, utopia, horror. (1989: 171)²⁸

Like many other critics, Waugh admits the existence of sf but marginalizes it, chiefly by assimilating sf within a (largely psychoanalytic) general category of "fantasy," which then becomes just another mode used by mainstream authors, here figured as "anti-realist" and thus "postmodern." The use of umbrella terms such as "fantasy" or "the fantastic" not only obscures the specificity of writing within the sf genre, but also allows the juxtaposition of writers from widely divergent backgrounds, decontextualizing their cultural, historical, and social positioning. Continuities and links are created between writers who seem to have little more than their biological sex in common, regardless of whether the tradition under construction is "feminine," "female," or "feminist."

Supplementing (and often contradicting) the critical traditions of feminist or women's writing are competing narratives, such as those produced by lesbian critics. Most lesbian criticism of contemporary writing that deals with sf texts frames them in the context of utopian writing. In the 1990s, a few general surveys of lesbian fiction mentioned sf, such as Paulina Palmer's *Contemporary Lesbian Writing*.

27 In her 1985 book, DuPlessis is less dismissive of sf, commenting of *The Female Man* that "the sci-fi material is used to cover up the essential truth about Whileaway," that it is not about the future but the present (DuPlessis 1985: 183).

28 This is her only reference to sf; none of the texts are analyzed in terms of sf, but of fantasy and "utopian desire."

Unlike her first book (*Contemporary Women's Fiction*), which focuses on mainstream authors and does not mention genre writing, Palmer here casts her net much wider in order to argue for the strength and diversity of lesbian fiction. Her survey includes writers like Russ who, in Palmer's words, are "appropriating and reworking the popular genres of the thriller, science fiction and gothic [which are] widely read" (1989: 1). Palmer's chapters on genre fiction provide an overview of the mixed critical response to feminist and lesbian genre fiction. Alongside critics such as Maggie Humm and Sally Munt, Palmer situates lesbian experimentation with genre as a positive development, one which "promotes the recognition that, rather than there being a single text or canon of texts which reigns supreme and represents the pinnacle of lesbian writing, there is a variety of different kinds" (64).²⁹ Whilst positive about the value of genre fiction, including sf, Palmer's study does not directly address lesbian sf; the only sf text Palmer discusses is *The Wanderground*, which is referred to as a "utopian fantasy" in a chapter on "political fiction."³⁰

29 On feminist genre fiction in general, Palmer comments that "champions of post-modern developments in literature, such as Helen Carr, welcome it on the grounds that a focus on genre results in a recognition of the diversity of women's fiction and an emphasis on the contract between reader and writer" (H. Carr 1989: 5-10). For examples of positive treatments of lesbian genre fiction see Maggie Humm, *Border Traffic: Strategies of Contemporary Women's Fiction* (1991: 194-200) and Sally Munt, "The Investigators: Lesbian Crime Fiction" (1988). For an example of a critic who expresses reservations about lesbian genre fiction, see Bonnie Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969-1989* (1992: 211-12).

30 Along with Gearhart, Palmer cites other writers who have chosen to use the "utopian mode as a vehicle for ideas of lesbian feminist community" (54): Katherine V. Forrest, *Daughters of a Coral Dawn*, Russ, *Female Man*, and Anna Livia, *Bulldozer Rising*; (62n4)—not the usual list of utopian novels, with Livia's consisting more of a possible utopian community within a rather dystopian world, while Forrest's work is more a comic novel than utopia. Palmer divides her discussion of genre fiction into two chapters—the thriller and the comic novel, which has "unlike other forms of lesbian genre fiction such as the thriller and science fiction" received little critical attention (65). As well as Russ, this chapter discusses Suniti Namjoshi, *The Conversations of Cow* (London: Women's Press, 1985), which has been "claimed" as feminist sf by Penny Florence in "The Liberation of Utopia or Is Science Fiction the Ideal Contemporary Women's Form" (1990). At the end of this chapter Palmer also mentions the reworked images of vampires in the novels of Jody Scott (whose *I Vampire* and *Passing for Human* were published under the Women's Press sf imprint) and the stories of Jewelle Gomez (fantasy writer) (91). Interestingly, Palmer also points out the neglect of 1970s and 1980s lesbian fiction by Lesbian and Gay studies, arguing for a reclamation of the positive images

A much more detailed discussion of lesbian sf appears in Patricia Duncker's *Sisters and Strangers* in a chapter on genre fiction (1992: 89-131).³¹ This chapter covers a greater range of lesbian sf texts, though as Palmer observes, Duncker doubts the value of feminist appropriations of genre conventions (Palmer 1993: 63).³² Duncker does seem to be slightly more approving of lesbian appropriations of genre conventions, noting, with respect to feminist use of the thriller genre, that “[l]esbian crime fiction, is, necessarily more subversive, because the insertion of Lesbian meanings into any kind of genre fiction disrupts the heterosexist codes of desire” (1992: 99). For both Duncker and Palmer, then, the expression of lesbian politics immediately confers on the text—even if it is sf—a more “radical” political charge. And despite Duncker’s underlying assumptions about the conservative nature of genre and sf (discussed further below), she does admit the potential freedom sf affords lesbian writers:

The great advantage of science-fiction writing is, of course, that some things—in Livia’s case the passionate and erotic connection between women—can simply be taken for granted. That Lesbianism should be primary is neither argued for nor constrained by realism. (109)

Feminist genre writing

The emergence of the field of genre studies, with its focus on popular texts and audiences, appeared to provide a more appropriate critical approach to sf than that of mainstream literary studies. Feminist writing in genres from sf and romance to crime fiction attracted increasing interest from feminist critics from the 1980s on, coinciding with the legitimation of popular fictions as a focus for cultural study. Unlike most literary criticism, genre studies usually entail an awareness and analysis of the production, publication, and reception of, or audience for, texts. As Carr notes:

created by writers such as Piercy and other “utopian fantasists” such as Gearhart (39-40).

31 Duncker’s analysis provides a particularly useful and more forgiving reading of *The Wanderground* than do many other analyses.

32 See also below for further discussion on Duncker’s rather negative conclusions about feminist genre fiction.

Genres represent a set of conventions whose parameters are redrawn with each new book and each new reading. The concept involves a contract between reader and writer. Once we think of a text as an example of genre, we can no longer approach it only as an artefact to be analysed in some context-less critical purity. We need to ask who reads such books why and in what way, seeing them as...texts-in-use. (1989: 7)³³

In this framework, the significant context of the work becomes not the “relation to the ‘Great Tradition,’ but the consequences (both potential and actual) of the insertion of...[the text] into the domain of popular culture.”³⁴

A number of genre critics have challenged the more traditional literary and sociological approaches to popular fiction, approaches that adhere to formalist literary values, situate texts as commodities (and readers as consumers), and have often been based on “rescuing *other*, less enlightened readers from the predatory tentacles of the pleasures of popular fiction” (Longhurst 1989: 1).³⁵ In contrast, genre studies aim to challenge the literary canon as “given” and thus undermine the dichotomy of major and minor literature (3). Carr, for example, argues that “[l]ooking at genre is a way of escaping the pressure to construct an alternative canon of great women writers” (1989: 5-6).

The privileging of the popular, which would seem to be a central function of genre studies, is not, however, necessarily accompanied by disruption of traditional critical hierarchies of literary value (or of the critic’s “authority”).³⁶ A number of feminist critics who focus on genre revert to the argument that genre writing is essentially conser-

33 The term “texts-in-use” is from Helen Taylor’s essay in this collection, “Romantic Readers” (66; see also Cranny-Francis 1990: 21).

34 I have appropriated this quote, which specifically refers to *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, from Stuart Laing, “Authenticating Romantic Fiction: *Lady Chatterley’s Daughter*” in Gina Wisker (1994: 13).

35 An example of what Longhurst termed the “English Literature” approach is found in Maggie Humm’s statement that feminist work on genre “has too often refused any framework of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ representation aesthetically...[and] ignores the whole issue of literary value” (Humm 1986: 100).

36 This is due to the fact that the studies under consideration here remain focused on texts, reading popular fiction in the framework of literary criticism rather than a “cultural studies” approach. A more complex analysis of genre necessitates an examination of audience.

vative and automatically presents obstacles to feminists attempting to appropriate the form (see for example, Cranny-Francis 1990: 89-131). Often, it is assumed that a *successful* feminist subversion means that the genre form itself has been transcended—in other words, that it is no longer “genre fiction” but *feminist* fiction. In this formulation, genre fiction such as sf remains outside the sphere of feminist influence and transformation: you cannot have good feminist literature that is also sf; a truly feminist text will break the confines of genre conventions and pass over the literary border into the realm of “real” literature (see, for example, Duncker 1992: 99).

Just as the blockbuster consciousness-raising novels of the early 1970s were troubling to some in the Women’s Liberation Movement, the popularity of feminist genre fiction in the late 1980s and early ’90s obviously caused critics some misgivings.³⁷ As the cover blurb of Nicci Gerrard’s 1989 *Into the Mainstream* asked: “it is selling, but is it ‘selling out?’” (1989). According to Gerrard, genre forms were “eagerly” taken up by feminist publishers, writers, and readers and “heralded by some as the way out of a literary cul-de-sac” (115). But in Gerrard’s analysis, “accessibility slither[s] towards compromise,” and popularity is synonymous with conservatism and incompatible with “cutting edge” feminist theory and politics:

[C]an a novel that is popular entertainment and therefore confined by intrinsically conservative rules be converted to political ends?—if not, does that imply that radical ideas are the preserve of the elite, only to be diluted down into accessibility? (119)³⁸

Writing specifically of feminist sf, Gerrard argues that despite opportunities offered by the form, it lays a potential “trap for more dogmatic writers who become locked into empty rhetoric, banal theory

37 See Palmer (1989: 5), who notes the disagreement between those who believe the “boom” in women’s fiction popularizes feminist attitudes and those who see it as a “cashing-in” on feminism that produces books that are not really feminist.

38 She goes on: “in themselves, detective novels, science fictions, romances and sagas are not intellectual or literary developments. They are not usually on literature’s or feminism’s front line of change. They are the products and stimulants of clever packaging as well as the consequences of relieved acceptance by feminists of attitudes and pleasures previously policed by a sterner feminist ideology” (147).

and feminist cliché (142).³⁹ In other words, conservatism is inherent in the very form of “genre fiction,” which is distinguished from feminist-appropriate fiction by its popularity. Similarly, Anne Cranny-Francis, whilst generally positive about the feminist use of genre, warns that “the feminist text may be recovered for patriarchy by a narrative which contradicts discursively the story told by the narrative” (1990: 3, 195). And Duncker is even more overtly dismissive of popular genres:

All the women’s presses, in the last days of the 1980s and on into the 1990s, have been engaged in promoting women’s genre fiction because the combination of feminist textual noises and a brisk escapist read sells extremely well. It is clear . . . that I am not a convert to this kind of writing. (1992: 99)

Duncker’s interest is in more subversive fiction, which in her view can only occur in genre writing when the “form of the genre breaks down. And we are reading a new kind of political fiction: feminist fiction” (99).⁴⁰ Again, the “popular” is positioned as “apolitical” (as if conservatism is not “political”). For Duncker, feminist fiction and genre fiction constitute mutually exclusive categories, rendering “feminist genre fiction” an impossibility. A number of critics echo such views, which rest on unquestioned assumptions inherent in much literary criticism: that the popular is necessarily and intrinsically conservative,⁴¹ that genre “conventions” and codes are more constricting (and phallogentric) than the codes of “literature,”⁴² that genre fiction is predictable, and that the market for genre targets “consumers”

39 Gerrard goes on to describe sf as an arena for “hypothesising imagination” and hence “the quality of feminist science fiction is a useful if crude barometer for the current climate of feminist thought” and concludes that it points to “patchy weather.” There is also some discussion of “ghastly feminist utopias” that indulge in “wishful thinking,” biological determinism, and are “pious feminist fables” (144).

40 Additionally, Duncker argues that “all genre fiction must operate within textual expectations that are indeed clichés. To write well within a particular genre without disrupting or subverting the form is, I believe, impossible” (125).

41 Cranny-Francis observes that feminist genre texts sometimes “do not seem to function at all—as traditional generic texts; sometimes they exhibit a complexity supposedly inconsistent with popular fictional forms” (1990: 1).

42 Gerrard argues that “feminist novels that most rigidly adhere to the conventions of their genre face grave difficulties... It is when they are ruptured that genres become fascinating and challenging” (1989: 147-8).

rather than “readers.” To quote Duncker again: “Most of the consumers of genre fiction eat the novels like a favorite meal. They want to know what they are buying, even if it is junk food. Feminism, on the other hand, should always be disruptive, unsettling” (1992: 125). The message is clear: “Good” feminists don’t like junk food!

Even those who are more enthusiastic about feminist genre writing, such as Cranny-Francis, emphasize the “dangers” of conservatism and phallogentrism that lie “embedded” in the very forms and codes of genre. This is a familiar feminist dilemma, of course: the question of whether feminist discourse is constricted or even undermined by the very structures of the literary forms and language inherited from an androcentric tradition. It is not, however, a problem specific only to genre or “popular” fiction, but to *all* forms of writing. The tendency in mainstream feminist literary criticism of genre is to see such forms, including sf, as inherently restricting feminist deconstruction and revisioning of narrative. Of course, there are significant differences between the ways, for example, Joanna Russ and Anne McCaffrey each utilize sf, and some feminist interventions are more successful or destabilizing than others. The codes and conventions of genre, indeed of all writing, are not static. To ignore the fluidity of genre over time and cultures is to deny that feminist interventions have significantly transformed sf.

What's a nice feminist text doing in a genre like sf?

Despite the resistance to sf from many feminists, a number of critics have, nevertheless, seen sf as a particularly suitable medium for feminist theorizing and revisioning. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, privileges sf’s “capacity to deal with this historical reality of our age”:

In tracing cognitive paths through the physical and material reality of the contemporary technological landscape and designing new maps of social reality, sf is perhaps the most innovative fictional mode of our historical creativity. (1990: 168-9)

Similarly, the potential of sf to serve feminist needs has been outlined by Mary Catherine Harper:

[B]ecause sf is about a whole range of Subject/Other encounters, because sf often simultaneously exploits and critiques an

already gendered mind/body dichotomy, because sf marks technology and subjectivity with separate genders, the genre is easily adapted to the study of gender. (1995: 402)

And, in contrast to many of the general studies of feminist fiction or women's writing noted above, Lisa Maria Hogeland situates feminist sf as a key literary expression of consciousness-raising (CR) activity in the women's liberation movement (1998). Hogeland's study shows the benefit of taking an historical approach, situating the texts of feminist sf writers such as Russ and Charnas alongside other CR novels of the 1970s. Indeed, she privileges sf as the form better able to perform the "hard" or more radical aspects of CR—"in depicting both radical political analysis and substantive political change" (50). Ultimately, Hogeland argues that feminist sf and the CR novel "perform the same (counter) cultural work...both have 'designs' on their readers" (110). Drawing on Russ (1974b) Hogeland avers that "extrapolation itself is a fundamental part of the CR process...That is, asking 'what if?' is a central project for consciousness-raising," just as it is of feminist sf (110).

Despite the difficulties of operating within a traditionally masculinist genre, largely isolated from the feminist literary and critical establishment, feminist sf writers have produced a substantial body of innovative writing. Indeed, the very nature of this "doubly marginalized" fiction—on the periphery of both mainstream literature and the sf field—has allowed female authors more freedom to experiment, enhancing the play of their feminist imaginings (Lefanu 1988: 99). Other factors inherent in the genre lend themselves to feminist reworkings, in particular the convention of "estrangement," which allows feminist writers to construct a narrative that "denaturalises institutionalized modes of behavior, representation and self-representation in contemporary western society" (Cranny-Francis 1990: 74). In Sarah Lefanu's words, feminist sf can "defamiliarise the familiar and make familiar the new and strange...thus challenging normative ideas of gender roles" (1988: 21-2). Similarly, for science studies scholar Hilary Rose, feminist sf functions as "a sort of dream laboratory—where feminisms may try out wonderful and/or terrifying social projects" (1994: 228).

As Rose suggests, feminist sf not only reflects contemporary feminist concerns, but is also a site for the development and configuration

of feminist debates. Within the “male bastion” of the sf community, fans, authors, and critics have struggled over the meaning and manifestations of feminism—and in many ways kept alive a more fruitful atmosphere for CR activity than in other, more academic feminist communities. Arguments for “equi-sexism” can be found from the earliest issues of sf “pulp” magazines, and overt struggles over the meaning of feminism were played out between fans and authors in the prozines and fanzines of the 1970s. Debates about gender, sexuality, and (less often) race continue to engage different generations of authors, fans, and academics. The variety of forums in which these debates take place indicates feminist sf’s potential to “reach beyond the restricted public of the already politicized and speak to a wider audience” (Fitting 1985: 156). The feminist interventions into the traditionally masculinist areas of sf and science that feminist sf represents are not played out solely on a textual level but reach beyond the text, to the cultural ramifications of female readers gaining access to the ideas and language of science and technology and drawing from (and providing) the impetus for creating a feminist space within sf fandom, and so changing their community through feminist activity.