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Feminist Philosophy and Science Fiction: Utopias and Dystopias edited by Judith A. Little

Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction by Sherryl Vint

Galactic Suburbia: Recovering Women's Science Fiction by Lisa Yaszek

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Feminist Philosophy and Science Fiction: Utopias and Dystopias. Edited by Judith A. Little. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007.

Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction. By Sherryl Vint. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.

Galactic Suburbia: Recovering Women's Science Fiction. By Lisa Yaszek. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008.

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The opportunity to review this assembly of recently published texts is testament to a growing readership for scholarly engagement with science fiction (SF) as well as to the rich resource that science fiction offers to both women's studies and to feminists working within longer-established academic disciplines.¹ The collection edited by Marleen S. Barr is a somewhat idiosyncratic but nonetheless lively assemblage of fiction, critique, and personal essay that claims to "chart science fiction's newest new-wave trajectory" (ix), while the anthology edited by Judith A. Little collects over twenty pieces of short fiction and novel extracts to provide resources for thinking through philosophical issues in the context of gendered utopias and dystopias. Sherryl Vint's *Bodies of Tomorrow* draws on feminist philosophy and literary scholarship in close readings of key SF texts published in the last twenty years to make a plea for an ethical posthumanism that takes full account of human embodiment, and Lisa Yaszek's *Galactic Suburbia* is a deceptively clear reevaluation of the contribution made to both feminism and science fiction by women writing

¹ In *Primate Visions*, Donna Haraway notes that "In the late 1960s science fiction anthropologist and critic Judith Merrill idiosyncratically began using the signifier SF to designate a complex emerging narrative field in which boundaries between science fiction (conventionally, sf) and fantasy became highly permeable in confusing ways, commercially and linguistically" (Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* [London: Verso, 1992], 5). Merrill was also a writer of science fiction, and her body of work is one of Lisa Yaszek's key historical case studies, while one of her short stories is included in Judith Little's edited collection. I draw attention to this intertextuality as just one example of the interdisciplinary conversations between feminist science studies, feminist literary studies, and feminist philosophy. Other examples would reveal intersections between other arenas of feminist scholarship.

science fiction after the Second World War and before the women's liberation movement.

The variety of approaches to the genre that these texts embody demonstrates the polymorphous openness to interdisciplinarity and critical thinking that science fiction makes available. Philosophy, literary studies, and science and technology studies are drawn on both discretely and in conversation with one another to investigate the history and future of women, science and technology, and the genre itself, with embodiment, language (or discourse), and the utopia-dystopia nexus as significant features. Feminist SF scholarship is not a novel phenomenon—Yaszek, for example, acknowledges three decades of work preceding her own—but in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the critical mass of creative and passionate feminist engagement with SF is an eloquent rebuttal to claims that either feminism or SF has had its day.

Science fiction is frequently misunderstood or misrepresented by those resistant to its charms as being shallow, thoughtlessly technophilic or even technofetishist, and of primary appeal to adolescent boys, a social group cast by such detractors as an abject category, emotionally and intellectually immature and lacking in distinction. While such descriptions might capture some (para)literary and media SF texts, such as blockbuster movies or television series, they fail to account for the hopeful and critical possibilities that women and feminists—writers and readers both—have seized upon for decades at least. In 1988, Sarah Lefanu argued: “the plasticity of science fiction and its openness to other literary genres allow an apparent contradiction, but one that is potentially of enormous importance to contemporary women writers: it makes possible, and encourages (despite its colonization by male writers), the inscription of women as subjects free from the constraints of mundane fiction; and it also offers the possibility of interrogating that very inscription, questioning the basis of gendered subjectivity.”²

Science fiction is a heterogeneous field with porous boundaries; as noted in *Galactic Suburbia*, “women writing for the postwar SF community were inspired by a surprising range of literary traditions, including feminist utopian writing, commercial magazine fiction, and postmodern literature . . . in relation to a century-old tradition of speculative fiction about science, technology, and the home” (25). Feminist science fictional preoccupation with embodiment and the social implications of science can be dated back even further if we go along with Brian Aldiss and claim

² Sarah Lefanu, *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (London: Women's Press, 1988), 9.

Mary Shelley's creation *Frankenstein* as the prototypical science fiction text.³ This diversity of literary influence as well as the projects of social justice and the critical gaze on science in society with which SF authors and readers identify is well represented in the body of work under review here. I use the phrase "body of work" self-consciously, since embodiment is a central topic for discussion, whether it is the representation and discussion of material embodiment as it is and might be lived in technoscientific presents and futures or whether it is embodiment as a concept for philosophical investigation. In what follows, I can give only brief overviews of the individual publications before going on to draw out a few threads in the larger web that they weave.

As Yaszek herself points out, "*Galactic Suburbia* fulfils one of the oldest and arguably still most important dictates of feminist scholarship: to recover women's history in all its forms" (5). But it is also in implicit and sometimes explicit debate with earlier feminist approaches to this period that were less sympathetic to fictions set in the eponymous galactic suburbia as well as with historical amnesia in the field itself (23). Yaszek situates her project "in relation to three areas of feminist inquiry: SF studies, science and literature studies, and cultural histories of women's work" (5). Her project explicitly extends and elaborates debates on the character and scope of women's and feminist SF. While the other books reviewed here are also clearly informed by those debates and the overlapping interpretive communities in which they take place, they are quite different in form.

Barr's *Afro-Future Females*, for example, is structured much more like a sample of the contemporary moment, although it reprints Mark Dery's "Black to the Future" essay, first published in 1994 in *Flame Wars*, which "launched the discourse of Afro-Futurism" (in Barr, 6). Its combination of essays, stories, and commentaries is likely to inspire its reader with a sense of a lively and burgeoning community of writers, readers, and critics that will hopefully encourage further and wider reading of the work of "Afro-Future Females"; Barr cites, for example, the *Dark Matter* anthologies edited by Sheree R. Thomas. It also functions, in part, as an epitaph for Octavia Butler, whose sudden death in 2006 sent shock waves through all the imagined communities who claimed her for their own. The collection is uneven, however; despite Barr's justification in the preface, the inclusion of commentaries by Steven Barnes, Samuel R. Delany, and Kevin Wilmott seems unwarranted since they veer off the focus of the collection.

³ Ibid., 2.

Judith Little's themed anthology, *Feminist Philosophy and Science Fiction*, is a beautifully designed undergraduate teaching resource for women's and gender studies, science fiction studies, and philosophy. As a reader with no formal training in philosophy, I really appreciated her use, first, of Isaac Asimov's three laws of robotics to explore philosophical theories of ethics and then of extracts from Nancy Kress's *Beggars in Spain* to introduce key political theories. In this introductory section Little in effect models the textual practice that she is making available to her readers—that of the close interrogation of fictional narratives to illuminate a range of perspectives on perplexing and crucial philosophical and political issues. This practice is further facilitated by the use of introductory paragraphs that set the context for reading each piece of fiction and by the provision of discussion questions that are designed to provoke the reader to reach her own conclusions on the key questions or issues in relation to which Little frames the fictions, such as “Why Is Language Important?” (185) or “The Concepts of ‘Woman’ and ‘Nature’” (155).

Sherryl Vint's work is probably better suited to a postgraduate audience and to those who read theory for pleasure. However, this is no mere feat of intellectual gymnastics or postmodern wordplay. Her book embodies a passionate commitment to “strange reading,” a term Yaszek coins for the mode of reading that SF offers, to intervene critically in contemporary public discourse. Her call for ethical posthumanism and the texts she unpacks to exemplify her approach are a valuable counter to the rampant technophilia of those libertarian philosophers who pontificate about the transcendent possibilities of the posthuman. *Bodies of Tomorrow* is a very clearly written book that rigorously explores the concept of the posthuman in an attempt to disaggregate it from liberal humanist assumptions of universality and individuality. Vint argues instead for an “embodied posthumanism, one that remains focused on a subjectivity embedded in material reality and that seeks to be responsible for the social consequences of the worlds it creates” (182). As she notes astutely, “the challenge for an ethical, embodied posthumanism, then, is how to retain a notion that the body is integral to subjectivity without falling into the trap of validating an essential and reified body morphology and identity at the same time” (184).

As suggested above, the textual practices of reading and writing science fiction have been invested with great hope by feminists, among others, and this theme recurs often in the books reviewed here. The liberatory possibilities offered by the practice of reading science fiction that form its lure for many feminist readers are neatly captured in the figure of strange reading that Yaszek uses to introduce her cultural history, drawing on a

1952 short story by Helen Reid Chase to elucidate the hopes that women and feminists have attached to their reading and writing practices. In the story, morally superior aliens spirit away the few humans “who have adhered to the principles of rational and benevolent behaviour, leaving behind a scorched earth for the very same religious fanatics who prophesied apocalypse in the first place” (1). Yaszek notes that “Chase celebrates the possibility that women in the home . . . might contribute to a new technocultural order” (2) by engaging in the same practice remarked upon by one of the husbands left behind by the aliens: “I know [my wife] did some strange reading. Well, maybe it was along science lines. I didn’t notice much. As long as she took care of the house right, that’s all I cared about. I don’t know how she’d find out about anything big though. But I know she’s gone” (2).

Vint makes a similar point about the relationship between text and reader, using the language of cultural theory, in the introduction to *Bodies of Tomorrow*: “SF, like all cultural productions, forms a part of the world of available subject positions, of possible models for identification. This notion of subject formation explains the centrality of texts and representations in many arguments, including my own, focused on changing the social. If we can change the representations that are available for identification, we can change the subjects who are so produced” (20). Little provides yet another variant on this theme, framing the science fiction she has selected as utopian literature: “Writers of utopian and dystopian fiction call for social and political action: in utopias, by describing a world in which we want to live, and in dystopias by warning us of the consequences of current social and political trends. Utopian works claim that certain changes in social and political institutions will produce just societies where readers can live the good life, and thereby support specific political convictions” (14).

The black feminist science fiction author Octavia E. Butler, notoriously suspicious as she was of utopian possibility, is prominent in three out of the four books under review. “The Book of Martha”—an ironic exploration of the intended and unintended consequences of social transformation as well as a mortal blow to the *deus ex machina* trope—is reprinted in *Afro-Future Females*; “Bloodchild” and “Speech Sounds” are reprinted in *Feminist Philosophy and Science Fiction*; and a full chapter is devoted to reading her *Xenogenesis* trilogy in relation to contemporary genetics discourse in *Bodies of Tomorrow*. Karen Joy Fowler, another of the authors featured in *Feminist Philosophy*, has said of Butler: “Her work is all about the body—about disease, about reproduction, about the horrible realities

of the food chain.”⁴ While that is indeed the case, her work is also about the communicative and transformative power of language and the risky business of myth making. Butler’s oeuvre is widely understood as groundbreaking—Donna Haraway is just one prominent feminist academic who has found her work profoundly useful for thinking through “the biopolitics of postmodern bodies”—and she has served as an inspirational role model to many black women writers.⁵

Butler’s acknowledged centrality to the genre is in marked contrast to the postwar authors reviewed in *Galactic Suburbia*, including, for example, Judith Merrill, Margaret St. Clair, and Zenna Henderson who, Yaszek suggests, were “relegated to the margins of literary history by artists and critics who wished to distinguish older modes of women’s speculative fiction from the more overtly feminist SF that developed in the 1970s and that continues to flourish today” (197). These postwar authors did not use gender-obscuring pen names or topics but “published sf under their own, decidedly feminine, names [and] wrote about the relations of science, society, and gender more systematically than did their foremothers” (22). Yaszek’s careful recontextualization of their work, which she situates as part of a larger collective project through rigorous citation of contemporary feminist critics making related arguments, obliquely and elegantly alludes to and intervenes in some painful conflicts in feminism, such as those over the valuation of care and “maternalist politics” (113). As such, it is an excellent example of the kind of twenty-first-century feminist scholarship that attempts to acknowledge the contributions of the broadest spectrum of feminisms.

Readers who place themselves firmly in the interpretive community of feminist science fiction scholarship will value each of these texts as additions to the field, but it is important to note that they speak to a wide range of interlocutors. *Galactic Suburbia*, for example, is an extremely useful survey of the literature and culture of a particular historical period interwoven with Yaszek’s close readings of the literature and will thus appeal to those who seek a broad overview of a cultural moment, to those who refer to her bibliography as a resource for tracking down out-of-print women’s science fiction, and to those who receive her work as the latest gambit in a long-running conversation about feminism and science fiction

⁴ Karen Joy Fowler, “Remembering Octavia Butler,” *Salon*, March 17, 2006. <http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2006/03/17/butler/>.

⁵ Donna J. Haraway, “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse,” in her *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Press, 1991), 203–30.

that seeks to widen and deepen understanding about their intersections.⁶ In addition, with its specific focus on cultural histories of women's work in the postwar era, it will appeal to feminist scholars of science and technology. Similarly, *Bodies of Tomorrow* will excite those readers enthused by critical readings of prominent SF authors like Butler and Gwyneth Jones as well as those stimulated by counterhegemonic critiques of the promise of contemporary technoscience. Little's major contribution is that she provides readers not yet interpellated by any of these interpretive communities with the tools and raw materials to construct their own engagement with feminism, science fiction, and critique. With *Afro-Future Females*, Barr hails literary scholars and SF fans alike with a project that questions the problematic exclusion of black writers from the genre and of the genre from contemporary American literature at the same time as it pushes the boundaries of formal expression. In sum, each of the titles reviewed here is a noteworthy contribution to feminist SF scholarship. The modes in which they contribute will be appropriate for different readers, depending on their existing level of engagement with feminism and SF. Little's volume is an excellent primer for developing the critical reading practices that make Vint's sophisticated theoretical approach intelligible, while both Yaszek and Barr expand the boundaries of what might be read as feminist SF in the ways in which they respectively (re)constitute the past and future of the genre. ■

⁶ Other contributors to this conversation include, e.g., Marleen S. Barr, Sarah Lefanu, Jenny Wolmark, Brian Attetbery, and Justine Larbalestier.

The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference. By Christine Battersby. London: Routledge, 2007.

Cornelia Klinger, Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen

The three concepts in the title of Christine Battersby's new book refer to its three main subjects. Battersby begins by retracing the history of the concept of the sublime. She does not go all the way back to its origins in antiquity but to the eighteenth century, that is, to the era when the sublime was coined as a major term of the new philosophical discipline of aesthetics by authors like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. This was (not merely incidentally) the same age when this time-honored technical term of classical rhetoric acquired a distinctly gendered con-