

# Feminist Science Fiction

*Ritch Calvin*

*The fantastist, whether he uses the ancient archetypes of myth and legend or the younger ones of science and technology, may be talking as seriously as any sociologist – and a good deal more directly – about human life as it is lived, and as it might be lived, and as it ought to be lived. For after all, as great scientists have said and as all children know, it is above all by the imagination that we achieve perception, and compassion, and hope.*

Ursula K. Le Guin, "National Books Award Acceptance Speech"

I would like to begin by thanking the editor for the invitation and for the opportunity to be part of the Virtual Science Fiction project. I am truly honored to be included in the company of these great scholars who have defined science fiction scholarship over the last years. It is, of course, only too fitting that this project takes place by means of what would have once been considered in the realm of science fiction. When science fiction writers imagine and/or predict future technologies and future sociological developments, one of the things we have discovered is that they are more often than not too conservative in their predictions. That is to say that the changes they envision often appear sooner than they predict.

However, historically, science fiction writers have been particularly behind the curve in terms of sex, gender, race and sexuality.

At the risk of committing an act of hubris, I would like to begin rather as Virginia Woolf does at the beginning of her book, *A Room of One's Own* (1929). When contemplating the task in front of her, namely, discussing the topic of "women in fiction," Woolf pauses to consider the implications and variations of that phrase. She thinks about the two terms – women and fiction – and the permutations thereof. For us today, we face a similar task – what do we mean by "feminist" and by "science fiction." But since Prof. Rieder already provided some answers to the question, "what is SF?" in his lecture at the VSF, I will then focus on "feminism" and "feminist science fiction." However, as Ursula K. Le Guin tells us, science fiction – like feminism – is a powerful and useful tool for both social analysis and social change.

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MLA Citation of this article:

Calvin, Ritch. "Feminist Science Fiction." *A Virtual Introduction to Science Fiction*. Ed. Lars Schmeink. Web. 2012. <[http://virtual-sf.com/?page\\_id=368](http://virtual-sf.com/?page_id=368)>. 1-14.

## 1. What Is Feminism?

Defining feminism is a particularly challenging task. For one, the term (as political movement, as analytical category, as everyday lived experience) is far from fixed. "Feminism" means something different for someone in the United States than it might for someone in Pakistan; "feminism" meant something far different for Charlotte Perkins Gilman (US) and Rosa Luxemburg (Russia/Poland/Germany) or Clara Zetkin (Germany) in the early 20th century than it does today for Rebecca Walker (US) and Petra Joy (Germany/England) and Birgitte Riebe (Germany). In different periods of time and within different cultures, the feminist beliefs and practices vary widely.

Although the term itself dates from France in the 1880s, its use spread throughout Europe in the 1890s, and then appeared in the US for the first time in 1910. Within four years, the term had become commonly used in newspapers, political discourse, and everyday parlance (Freedman 17). Over the past one hundred years, though, countless definitions have been offered, from the trivial to the profound. However, in her history of US feminism entitled *No Turning Back*, Estelle Freedman defines feminism as a belief that "women and men are inherently of equal worth" (7). However, although feminism as a political movement and as an ideology initially addressed the social, political, and economic condition of women specifically, over time, the term has taken on a much broader significance. Consequently, Freedman acknowledges that gender "always intersects with other social hierarchies," including race, class, and sexuality (7). One of the goals of feminism, then, is to work toward a community, society, or world (or, in our case, I suppose, *universe*) free from those intersecting oppressions. Feminism, then, is not limited to considerations of sex and gender but includes all heretofore marginalized groups and individuals.

## 2. The Possibilities of SF

Although Darko Suvin's work is by no means universally accepted (indeed, John Rieder has written an award-winning article challenging the usefulness of Suvin's definition), it has been remarkably influential within SF criticism. Despite its shortcoming or pitfalls, I would like to mention it here briefly in order to point out some of the ways in which science fiction as a form of literature holds possibilities for feminists.

For Suvin, science fiction is characterized by "cognitive estrangement" (12). In other words, while non-genre fiction represents (or purports to represent) a recognizable world, science fiction introduces some 'new' element that seems out of place, or that creates a sense in the reader that 'something is not quite

right, here.' Suvin calls this the "novum" (63), the 'new thing.' The novum can appear in one (or more) of several different areas or fields, including the actant, the social order, the topology, or the natural laws.

When the dominant novum is in the realm of the actant, the narrative tends to ask questions about humans, humanity, and humanness. Or, put another way, the narrative asks questions about the Other and otherness. Science fiction often renders the metaphor of the Other/alien as *literal*. Historically, the Other/alien has taken the form of the racial or cultural Other, from Africans, to indigenous populations, to the Roma, to *die Gastarbeiter*, to women, to the LGBTQ communities. Ancient texts and ancient philosophers questioned the very humanness of women; Enlightenment thinkers spent vast amounts of ink on the "Woman question," including whether or not women were human, were citizens, were capable of education and thought, and so on. If the literal alien of science fiction, in fact, represents the social, cultural, political 'alien' of society, then it only makes sense that science fiction, and science fiction writers, should consider the role and status of women within society. For example, Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984) (and sequels) closely aligns women and aliens. The men within the community of linguists consider the women as inscrutable as the alien species for which they interpret. Or, in Melissa Scott's *Shadow Man* (1987), the hermaphrodites on the planet Hara do not fit into the social and legal definitions of human, and they are considered aliens.

If, however, the dominant novum is in the realm of the social order, then the narrative tends to ask questions about the social and political world in which we live, and examines the relationship of the individual subject and that society. If we are raised into a democracy, or social democracy, or socialist state, then we have a tendency to take that form of social structure as the norm – and, in some respects, as inevitable. However, the anarchist world in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) is meant to illuminate and critique the capitalist/patriarchal world – which bears a great deal of resemblance to the United States at the time Le Guin was writing. Or, the Oankali of Octavia E. Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy represent a non-hierarchical, non-binary social order – and illuminates the human attitudes and practices that lead to mutual self-destruction.

When the dominant novum is in the realm of the topology, then the narrative either asks questions regarding the relationship of the self to the environment, or it examines the ways in which technology shapes and determines our attitudes and practices. For example, Amy Thomson's *The Color of Distance* (1995) illustrates the ways in which the beings on the planet Tendu have adapted, physically and socially, to the environment in which they live. The human scientist who finds herself stranded among the Tendu, Dr. Juna Saari, learns over time the ways

in which the planet has shaped the Tendu, and the ways in which they shape the planet.

Suvin also castigates the possibilities of the novum in the realm of the natural laws, calling the resultant narrative a mutated form, the "science fantasy" (68). However, both feminist and global science fiction writers have shed light on this valuation and limitation of the realms of science. Many writers reject the limited forms of Western science because they negate and invalidate the traditions and beliefs endemic to their cultures. Feminist scientists and feminist science fiction writers have demonstrated the ways in which Western conceptions of science are grounded in a very specific masculinist perspective (Sandra Harding, Evelyn Fox Keller, Donna Haraway, Vandana Shiva, etc.) and have offered narratives grounded in other ideologies. Right now, science fiction from Native American writers, South American writers, Indian writers, African writers, and Canadian writers are all challenging the tenets, practices, and limitations of so-called Western science.

So, in sum, the very foundation of the science fiction narrative renders itself amenable to examining and imagining other worlds, other societies, other beings, in which the inequalities and prejudices of our own histories are gone (or altered) – or, at the very least, differently structured. Science fiction as a form allows the possibility to imagine worlds in which women are full participants. Science fiction as a form allows the possibility to construct worlds/societies in which the wealthy few at the top do not exploit the racial, ethnic, religious Others at the bottom. One of the questions that has struck many of the feminist writers and critics of SF has been, if that is true, then why has science fiction been so slow to actually address questions of sex, gender, and sexuality? As at least a partial answer, Brian Attebery writes that, "Until the 1960s, gender was one of those elements most often transcribed unthinkingly into SF's hypothetical worlds. Even if an author was interested in revising the gender code, the conservatism of a primarily male audience – and the editors, publishers, and distributors who were trying to outguess that audience – kept gender exploration to a minimum" (5).

### 3. What Is Feminist SF?

In her monograph entitled *In the Chinks of the World Machine*, Sarah Lefanu argues that feminist science fiction draws upon the literary traditions of the "female Gothic" and "feminist utopian writing" (3). Lefanu also contends that – more recently – feminist science fiction draws from the "feminist, socialist, and radical politics" of the 1960s and 1970s (3). In the Introduction to her 1974 collection, *Women of Wonder*, Pamela Sargent contends that science fiction and

fantasy are the only genres that enable the author to envision women in new, different, or alternative surroundings and social structures (lx). Many critics, including Kingsley Amis in 1960, have noted that, although science fiction texts frequently speculate about technological innovation, they have not speculated about social innovation with the same frequency. In her 1985 essay, entitled "Yes, Virginia, There's Always Been Women's Science Fiction ... Feminist, Even," Diane Cook defines feminist science fiction as SF that articulates an "awareness of [women's] place in a political system and their connectedness to other women" or "which has a primary and feminist focus on women's status" (134). Lefanu suggests that feminism and science fiction are well suited because feminism "questions a given order in political terms," and "science fiction questions it in imaginative terms" (100). In "New Worlds, New Words," Pamela J. Annas writes that SF, in general, and feminist SF, in particular, is "more useful than 'mainstream' fiction for exploring possibilities for social change precisely because it allows idea to become flesh, abstraction to become concrete, imaginative extrapolation to become aesthetic reality" (145).

Within such working definitions, feminist science fiction authors have explored patriarchal, matriarchal, and egalitarian social orders; constructed alternative governmental and organizational systems; re-imagined gender roles (and the very idea of gender roles); undermined the naturalized sex-gender relationship; posited varied means of reproduction (female, male, alien, and mechanical); illustrated varied sexualities (human, animal, alien, and mechanical); and considered the ramifications of both masculine science and feminist science (which sometimes incorporates radically different notions of science, including "magic"). As a consequence of the spectrum of topics and the large number of feminist science fiction authors now producing work, Veronica Hollinger has argued that the field of feminist science fiction has become so large and varied that feminist science fiction is "no longer well served by criticism that reads it as a unified undertaking" (229). In other words, there are more things in the feminist science fiction heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.

Even so, in a 2006 post to the Internet Review of Science Fiction, Ruth Nestvold and Jay Lake write "Who Needs Feminist Science Fiction." For one they argue that feminist science fiction is both necessary for male writers/readers and every bit as accessible to male writers/readers as to female readers. In addition, in a 2007 post to a feminist SF publisher's blog (Aqueduct Press), Nancy Jane Moore sees a "resurgence" of feminist science fiction. Although some have claimed that the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s has done its job – after all, women have made tremendous strides across all aspects of society – Moore contends that three social factors have contributed to this resurgence: 1) the confusion over what all the changes of the past thirty years have meant – they're best worked

out in fiction; 2) ground-breaking discoveries in the sciences; and 3) the rise of religious fundamentalism (cf. Moore). To these three, I would add – at the very least – one of the points I began with: feminism is NOT a fixed entity; it shifts continually, and for many individuals today, what constitutes feminism would be anathema to women and men working in the field twenty years ago.

#### 4. Pre-cursors, or the Ground Work

Although the common wisdom has long been that feminist science fiction emerged full force in the 1960s, a growing body of work has examined the ways and the extent to which science fiction from the past has been, even if not always overtly, feminist. Arguably, if science fiction begins with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), then feminist SF begins there as well (though some critics, including Gwyneth Jones, locate the genesis of feminist science fiction with Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-World* [1666]). Susan Gubar calls *Frankenstein* the origin of "a humanist and feminist heritage" within the genre (qtd. in Cook 133). Although written well before the term "feminism" existed, the novel *does* critique the male usurpation of (pro)creative power and the silencing of women. However, I suggest that the claims for *Frankenstein* as a feminist text must remain limited. The novel offers very few female characters; as with so much of non-feminist SF, the females here are largely props for the male characters. They are the grounds for action by men (or inaction, as is often the case with Victor). They are property exchanged between men or beloved objects to be lost to death. As Gwyneth Jones points out, "it has nothing overt to say about the rights of women" (484) – perhaps all the more shocking considering Mary Shelley's lineage.

Some sixty years later, Mary E. Bradley Lane, a Cincinnati housewife, published her novel *Mizora* (1881), anonymously. She did not want her husband to know that she was writing – let alone that she was writing about an all-female utopia. Unlike Shelley's novel that says little about women's rights, *Mizora* is a utopian tale of a new matriarchal state that emphasizes woman's "subjective experience of public history in terms of relationships, interpretation, and fantasy [...] Further, her acquisition of a language solely for women alludes to the possibility of a new symbolic order" (Pfaelzer xxxvi). The world of *Mizora* offers technological marvels, though one of the uses of the technology is to produce a pure race of Aryans.

Twenty-four years later (and halfway around the world), Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Muslim woman born in Bangladesh, produced "Sultana's Dream" (1905), a "feminist utopia" (Jahan 1) which posits a world in which gender roles

are reversed: women have taken over the public realm and men are confined to *purdah*. The social order that Hossain constructs is, like Lane's, a world of technological marvels. Unlike Lane, who creates an all-female society, Hossain simply reverses the gender roles of contemporary Bangladesh – men are sequestered in *purdah* and women run society – much more efficiently than the men ever did. Clearly, both Lane and Hossain employ the novum in the social order to illustrate the disparities and inequities in their own world.

A few years later, Inez Haynes Gillmore produced *Angel Island* (1914) (a much less well-known text), which Patrick Sharp suggests is a feminist novel that critiques the "scientific masculinity" of Darwin and others. In the lost race novel, the winged baby reflects the ideal of better men and women as suggested by feminists (Sharp).

Finally, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's iconic *Herland* (1915) she, like Hossain, reverses the traditional gender roles, and the Mother – not the politician or warrior – transforms society. *Herland* offers a "world in which humane social values have been achieved by women in the interest of us all" (Lane xxiii). However, Jones dismisses the novel as "little more than the naked description of a 'feminine' but sexless and doctrinaire totalitarian state" (484). Even so, each of these early progenitors of feminist science fiction were responding to scientific, social, and/or political conditions around them, and each of them was shaped and affected by whatever version of feminism was available to her in her time and place. And with the exception of Shelley, they specifically used the novum in the social order in order to highlight the existing social order (and to advocate for) social change.<sup>1</sup>

## 5. Galactic Suburbia

Apart from the late-19th and early-20th century novels that draw upon the gothic and utopian traditions, women also began to work within the realm of science fiction, nearly from the beginning. This claim flies in the face of the common assertion that women just were not that involved in science fiction. By the 1930s, the practice of publishing science fiction in book/novel form had been supplanted by the emergence of the short story published in magazines. In *New Eves*, Janrae Frank, Jean Stine and Forrest J. Ackerman argue that women writers were published relatively frequently in the very earliest magazines, but the practice

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1 There are many, many others. A quick search of Google books reveals dozens of free copies of early feminist SF (mostly utopias). L. Timmel Duchamp has created a list of early feminist SF and utopias. I have edited and formatted that list, and I have uploaded it to the Virtual Science Fiction website.

was changed in 1930 when the focus shifted toward "men's adventure fiction" (ix). However, by the "end of the forties," women writers were returning to science fiction magazines, and the 1950s saw "an explosion of women writers" (x). Furthermore, in *Galactic Suburbia*, Lisa Yaszek notes that many women experienced the technologization of society "through the industrialization of the home" (8). Housewives became "domestic scientists" (98) and "efficiency experts" (12). As Yaszek notes, some "300 women began publishing in the SF community after World War II" (3), and although she describes their work as "women's SF," and not necessarily feminist SF, they were "progenitors" of feminist science fiction (195-209).

Although Joanna Russ originally offered the term "galactic suburbia" as a pejorative term for the work of (some) women SF writers who seemed to replicate the tradition of "ladies' magazine fiction," Yaszek reclaims the term to demonstrate how the women who were writing domestic science fiction were, in fact, very much a part of the science fiction tradition, very much a part of the valorization of science and technology, and very much invested in staking a claim for women in the "American future imaginary" (*Galactic* 3).

Examples of writers and stories of this type would be Judith Merrill's "That Only a Mother" (1948) offers a strong critique of US military policy and the effects of radiation testing. The story highlights both fathers' attitudes toward children born with birth defects as a result of radiation and mothers' attitudes toward their children and toward politics. However, the story is told entirely from the mother's perspective and from within the confines of the home.

Another example would be Ann Warren Griffith's "Captive Audience" (1953). Also told entirely from the wife/mother's perspective and from (almost entirely) within the home, the protagonist stays at home and manages the household and the children while her husband works for a prestigious advertising agency. In this world, ads have become pervasive, and every product speaks directly to the consumer – all day long.

As a final example of Galactic Suburbia, Carol Emshwiller's story "Adapted" (1961) tells the story of a female alien on planet Earth. In order to survive, the narrator passes herself off as an ordinary girl and then as a housewife. However, she illustrates keenly the "feminine mystique" that Betty Friedan would make a household name just two years later. The narrator understands that she has alienated herself from her own nature, and the possibilities that were closed down to her, but reassures her daughter that she need not do the same thing to herself.



## 6. The Boom

If the "industrialization of the home" (Yaszek, *Galactic* 8) brought many women writers into the field, then Pamela J. Annas suggests that the *failures* of technology to solve social ills and produce a utopian society lead many, including women, to question the suppositions regarding the role and the possibilities of technology. Furthermore, the "personal is political" Zeitgeist within 1960s feminism (from C. Wright Mills through Carol Hanisch) prompted women to re-examine their social position and to imagine alternative possibilities. That is to say, if the social structures are responsible for the injustices and inequalities, then the social structures must change – or be differently organized.

Joanna Russ suggests that writers of Galactic Suburbia tended to examine the effects of technology and patriarchy upon women in contemporary society while feminist science fiction writers tended to examine the effects of technology and patriarchy upon what women might be in the future (qtd. in Yaszek, *Galactic* 200). While the "boom" in feminist science fiction of the 1970s drew upon a "history of ideas" from "women's sf since *Frankenstein*" (Cook 140), the "boom" was also in response to contemporary conditions, including the move toward "social sf" and the emergence of the second wave of feminism (Cook 140). Frank, Stine and Ackerman note that feminism was just becoming a part of the popular discourse in the 1960s, but between 1969 and 1972, feminism "became the main subject of discourse within the world of science fiction" (xiii). The ways in which, and the extent to which, feminism dominated science fiction in the late 1960s and early 1970s is well documented in Helen Merrick's study, *The Secret Feminist Cabal*. While variation exists, many of the boom feminist science fiction texts tend to be grounded in a liberal, humanist perspective of the self and in a conception of society found in first and second wave feminism.

For example, a number of the feminist science fiction texts of the 1970s and 1980s utilize the utopia/dystopia form in order to either critique the extant social conditions or posit the conditions of possibility of another way to be. Among the utopian/dystopian novels are Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1969), Naomi Mitchison's *Solution Three* (1975), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Shattered Chain* (1976), Sally Miller Gearheart's *The Wanderground* (1979), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). As Lane, Hossain, Gillmore, and Gilman did before them, these writers of feminist science fiction argue for a society in which subjects occupy a place within society, and they either illustrate the ways in which women have been excluded, or they reverse the old hierarchies.

Traditional gender roles are challenged in Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* (1962), which undoubtedly relies on NASA's original plans to use

women as astronauts (also noted in Yaszek's book). Pamela Zoline's "Heat Death of the Universe" (1967) equates the stifling confines of gender with the entropic winding down of the universe. Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1969) suggests that masculinity is destructive; the women of the new society create a new history and eschew all things masculine.

Of course, one of the gender roles that has long shaped women's lives and experiences has been that of childbirth and motherhood. Shulamith Firestone argues in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1969) that the reproductive function keeps women trapped in patriarchy; according to Firestone, liberation for women lies in technological (or cybernetic, as she calls it) birth. For example, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) posits a world in which each person spends 5/6 of its life without a sex, as a sexual potential. However, when *kemmer* occurs (a form of oestrus), that person might become *either* male or female, and, therefore, that person can fulfill the male or female role in reproduction. Consequently, discrimination based on gender is obsolete. In Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), all children have three genetic parents, all children are gestated in mechanical wombs, all children are breastfed by all three parents, and (what we recognize as) gender roles are subverted in her future world of Mattapoisett. Piercy, like Firestone, suggests that mechanization is the key to equality. In Sherri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988), she argues that gender can be altered via a genetic engineering program in which male aggression is deselected.

Many of the boom writers of feminist science fiction argue that language is tied to constructions of the self and of gender – and this certainly makes sense given some of the contemporary arguments by both postmodernists and poststructuralists. Wittig's *Les Guérillères* argues that language must be re-made for a new society; in writing the novel Wittig creates a feminine form of the word for warrior and employs the non-existent feminine plural form "*elles*" throughout. Similarly, in Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984), Elgin operates from a strong form of "linguistic determinism" suggested by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. In the novel, the female linguists create a "woman's language" called Láadan that can represent the reality of women's lives. Interestingly, Elgin has actually created this language, and a grammar, dictionary, and website are all available (cf. [www.ladaanlanguage.org](http://www.ladaanlanguage.org)). In Piercy's non-gendered society of Mattapoisett, they use the personal pronoun "per" (for "person"), regardless of the sex or gender of the individual. Infamously, Le Guin utilizes the masculine pronoun to refer to the non-sexed Gethenians in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, a strategy that she later suggests was flawed because of the ways in which it overdetermined the reader's response to the gender of the character Estraven.

## 7. The Fallout

Since the boom of feminist science fiction in the 1970s, the field has grown dramatically, both in terms of the number of feminist science fiction writers, but more importantly, in terms of their ideological foundations, assumptions, and approaches to feminist science fiction. While boom feminist science fiction writers tended to explicitly foreground questions of sex, gender, and sexuality, many post-boom writers of feminist science fiction do not. If the boom feminist science fiction writers assume a liberal, humanist self, then post-boom feminist science fiction writers often assume a Haraway-ian cyborg self. In other words, they are more likely to posit a world in which gender equality is a functional given, in which sexualities are fluid and multiple, in which all categories of identity (male/female/hermaphrodite, woman/man/androgynous, hetero/homo/bi/di/omni, racial/ethnic/national, human/animal/machine) are fluid. The old boundaries will no longer hold. Certainly, signs of this can be seen in earlier feminist science fiction texts. For example, Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) radically undermines the notion of a unified self, and Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton* (1976) offers a multiplicity of genders and sexualities. Also, in Naomi Mitchison's *Solution Three* (1975), she posits a future Earth in which homosexuality has been engineered to be the norm, and gender roles are largely irrelevant. Mitchison, however, goes to great length to explain how this transformation took place. On the other hand, Mary Gentle suggests that some of the newer feminist science fiction writers, "felt able [...] to take 'a feminist background for granted, and [go] from there'" (cit. in Jones 487). As another example, in Melissa Scott's *Shadow Man* (1995), she posits a society that recognizes five sexes (linguistically and legally) and nine sexualities. Despite the multiplication of sexes, the premise still rests upon a liberal notion of the self. On the other hand, in Raphael Carter's "Congenital Agenesis of Gender Ideation" (1998), s/he examines and complicates the relationship among language, cognition, and gender identity.

## 8. Intersectionality

While many of the progenitors and the boom writers foregrounded questions of sex and gender, they were frequently either remiss – or, worse, regressive – in their racial and ethnic politics: e.g. Wollstonecraft, Lane, Gilman.

Octavia Estelle Butler was one of the few African Americans writing science fiction in the 1980 and 1990s – though the number of African Americans writing SF has increased in the recent years. While Butler was a feminist, and her narratives offer strong female protagonists and raise issues surrounding sex and gender, those issues are always complicated by questions of race, ethnicity, and/or class.

For example, in her novel *Dawn* (1987; originally serialized in *Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact*, 1981), the first of the Xenogenesis trilogy, Lilith Iyapo is a black woman who is selected by the Oankali to help prepare her fellow humans to interbreed with the Oankali and to repopulate the Earth. Her status as a woman and as black complicates her authority among the humans; her heritage as a black woman complicates her own responses to her role as "Judas goat." In the short story "Bloodchild" (1984), humans are maintained and nurtured in captivity by the T'lic so that the humans can help the T'lic breed. While the humans certainly seem to be held in a sort of benevolent slavery, Butler denies that the story is about slavery, at all. Instead, for her, "Bloodchild" is a love story (as she mentions herself in the afterword to her short story collection).

Larissa Lai is a Chinese Canadian activist, professor, and writer. Both of her novels, *When Fox Is a Thousand* (2004) and *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), combine Chinese folk tales with the themes and tropes of science fiction to create hybrid texts. In *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai retells and subverts Chinese creation stories, and creates a near-future dystopia Canada to emphasize the ways in which women of color, in particular, are (negatively) affected by global capital and transnational pharmaceutical companies. Nevertheless, Lai simultaneously demonstrates some of the ways in which women negotiate the spaces of oppression and marginalization for their own benefit.

Kameron Hurley is one of the new writers in the field; her debut novel appeared in 2011, quickly followed by two sequels. Her debut, *God's War*, has been shortlisted for the Nebula Award, and it has generated a lot of internet chatter. So far, I have been explicitly and consciously not using the term "post-feminist." The term generally takes one of two meanings, neither of which are all that useful, in my opinion. As Lisa Yaszek writes in her article of the same title: "I'll be a postfeminist in a postpatriarchy." However, *God's War* does, in some ways, fit into one of the definitions of postfeminism. The novel takes place on another planet that seems, in overt ways, to have descended from Islam. The novel features a strong, well-armed female protagonist, Nyxnissa, who is a hired assassin. The narrative centers heavily on fight scenes and violence, and the narrative expressly state that women can do everything that men have done, all of which, in Maureen Kincaid Speller's words, seems a bit "old-fashioned." Although Hurley features some interesting bug-based technology (she calls her work "bugpunk"), and although she creates a world that draws from several different Earth cultures, the gender politics do seem postfeminist in the sense that she never considers the

conditions or structures that might hinder women; rather, she behaves as if they were never there.<sup>2</sup>

## 9. Conclusion

Many feminist science fiction writers continue to critique the social constructions of identity, including sex, gender, class, race, and sexuality; they argue for societies in which individuals and groups are not marginalized or oppressed based on one or more aspect of their identity, and they challenge readers to question their own assumptions regarding identity. However, many post-boom writers challenge the very categories of identity, represent all boundaries of identity as fluid and permeable, or assume a society in which these issues have been resolved. Nevertheless, these strategies do not suggest that feminist science fiction has become obsolete; rather, it has "just been born" (Jones 487).

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2 Due to length, I've skipped the burgeoning field of YA feminist SF – an extremely large and vital field at the moment deserving of a lecture all of its own. These texts include *The Hunger Games* and sequels by Suzanne Collins and the *Matched* series by Ally Condie.

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