

### Beyond the Binary: Queer Feminist Science Fiction Art



Smin Smith

This is what we think of science fiction: We think that it could do better [...] We have looked beyond the binary, beyond Nature, beyond gender. We have looked for SF that is trans-inclusive, that is anti-essentialist, that adopts an intersectional lens [...] And we have found wonderful things [...] BUT NOT ENOUGH. Nor prominently enough, not unapologetically enough (Beyond Gender Collective)

As a provocation to the 2019 manifesto by *Beyond Gender*, a London based collective of SF researchers, this paper proposes that narratives “beyond the binary, beyond Nature [and] beyond gender” are thriving in *science fiction art*. I will be pointing towards a selection of queer feminist artworks with a relationship to this theme. To contextualize this research, I have been curating, photographing, and styling science fiction now for around six years, particularly within the zine I coordinate, *Vagina Dentata*. This publication includes still-image science fiction produced by LGBTQIA+ and otherwise marginalized creatives.

I’ve thus been interested for some time in why myself, the artists I collaborate with in my creative practice, and the university students I teach frequently refer to our practices as “inspired by science fiction,” rather than simply as “science fiction,” particularly when science fiction has a fine art history. I am therefore interested in science fiction as a visual practice found both within and beyond popular film and television shows, and particularly what this means in terms of material accessibility. This is something the Beyond Gender Collective have also critiqued: “*Who writes science fiction, and why? Who owns the means of publishing and distribution? What excludes those voices that could truly move us beyond into the better?*” I think these questions about material accessibility are also incredibly important to ask of visual science fiction: If we move beyond expensive film formats, for example, could more people produce visual science fiction? Could more people “write [themselves] into the future”? (Imarisha & Brown 1)



Vagina Dentata Zine. "Issue 001 and Issue 002." Vagina Dentata Zine, Aoi Itoh, Natalie Baxter, Smin Smith, Bex Ilsley, Jeleza Rose, Andrey Onufrienko, Olin Brannigan, Aleksandra Klicka, Munachi Osegbu, Dana Trippe, Yannick Lalardy, Anna Fearon, Vagina Dentata Zine, 2018, <https://vaginadentatazine.bigcartel.com/products>. Accessed 10 Jan 2021

### Queerness and Science Fiction

As the theorist José Estaban Muñoz writes “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now.” (1) To be queer is to speculate beyond the harm of the present. To move beyond the *here and now*, to a potential *then and there*; to imagine another way of life. As Muñoz goes on to describe, queerness can “enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds”. (1) In this sense, queerness has always been a form of science fiction, something echoed in the following quote from *Queer Universes: Sexualities and Science Fiction*: “If we then take as the central task of queer theory the work of imagining a world in which all lives are livable, we understand queer theory as being both utopian and science fictional.” (Pearson et al. 5)

But popular science fiction has consistently reproduced oppression in its depictions of queerness. Thus, nearly every queer or feminist study of science fiction concludes that there are not enough transformational case studies; literature or films that counter misogyny, white supremacy, homophobia and transphobia. As bell hooks puts it, “we can deconstruct the images in mainstream white supremacist capitalist patriarchal cinema for days and it will not lead to cultural revolution.” (107) Having been involved in queer, feminist zine publishing for a number of years

now, I regularly witness transformational science fiction practices, in mediums far beyond the “mainstream white supremacist capitalist patriarchal cinema” construct. Through this paper and the research project upon which it draws, I aim to highlight these practices, creating a model for queer and/or feminist science fiction art criticism.

The case studies highlighted by this paper will stem from traditionally “deemphasized” visual and conceptual science fiction mediums including fashion design, digital collage, drag, and interdisciplinary art practices. Specifically, I will be highlighting case studies that take pleasure in what Donna Haraway terms “the confusion of boundaries”, (150) *fictioning* worlds beyond the borders of gender and species into being.

The examples I have included in this paper are spaces where I see “cultural revolution,” as bell hooks puts it, forming. Where science fiction and queer feminisms are melding, to propagate new worlds into being, spaces of political resistance. I encourage you to find science fiction artworks that connect with what you wish to politically propagate into the world. To collect together a “carrier bag” (as Ursula K. Le Guin puts it) of science fiction art that shapes you; to identify yourselves within these traditions and lineages, and forge new worlds off the backs of them.

### **The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction**

In applying The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction as a method here, I posit that science fiction art criticism might productively be defined as a container or “cultural carrier bag”. (Le Guin 36) Here the origins, understandings and the limitations of a genre are forged and reinforced, through a process of selection and juxtaposition. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger proposes that “the meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it.” (21) The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction could be applied in a similar way. Placing multiple artworks together encourages juxtaposition. Perhaps this carrier bag process might inspire different readings. Similarly, how does the words queer, feminist or science fiction being contained beside these artists affect your responses?

In other words, if, as Samuel R. Delany proposes, “we read words differently when we read them as science fiction”. (153) How might we read art differently when we view it as science fiction?

#### **Victoria Sin (@sinforvictory)**

It feels apt to begin this “carrier bag” with an artist who frequently references the words of Ursula K. Le Guin. Victoria Sin’s science fiction practice encompasses performance, moving image, writing and print, where science fiction is defined specifically by them as “a practice of rewriting patriarchal and colonial narratives naturalized by scientific and historical discourses on states of sexed, gendered and raced bodies”. (Sin) Here, Sin builds upon feminist science fiction writing from the twentieth century, “critiquing scientific thought and especially scientific constructions of gender”. (Debra Benita Shaw, quoted in Donawerth 222-223) Science fiction is particularly attuned to moving beyond sex and gender binaries in this way. (Donawerth 222-223) In fact, as de Lauretis

proposes, “the various technologies of gender” (18) production and promotion could be said to include science fiction.

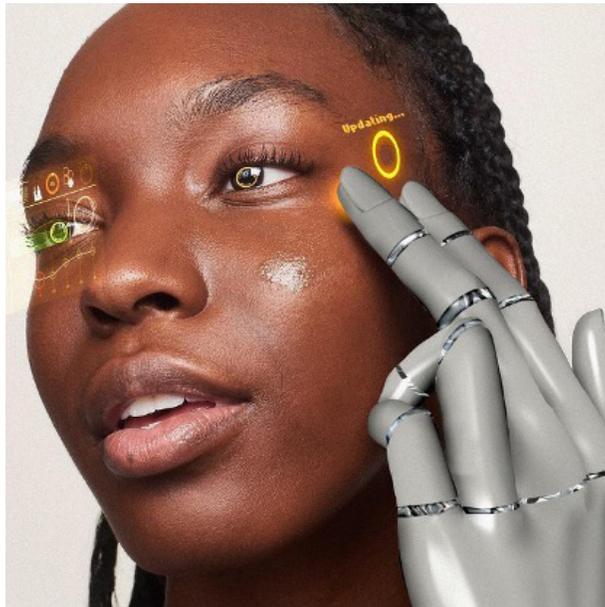
In an essay for *Auto Italia*, Sin uses Le Guin’s Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction to highlight the intrinsic “hero” narratives found in xenophobia, colonialism, Brexit, transphobic feminism and white saviorism. Sin and Sophia Al-Maria then take this essay as the inspiration for *BCE*, a video work exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2019. The piece combines an historic story from the Wayuu tribe in Northern Colombia with a new myth set in the distant future, written and produced by the pair.

In the latter myth, Sin finds themselves surrounded by what they term the “infinite sky”, with accompanying dialogue asking “how many stars, how many worlds, how many ways of being alive?” Here, the rewriting of gender through science fiction enacts what the writer Bridget Crone calls “a form of hyperbolic fictioning such that gender itself is highlighted as a series of rules, experiences and productions *that could be otherwise* and that are themselves formed under duress” (xiii) In other words, science fiction art can propagate worlds beyond gender into being. It’s a far cry from the gender essentialism that popular science fiction frequently enforces, and an example of the kinds of transformative science fiction that exist when we reject genre limitations and borders. I’d like to propose that science fiction artworks like these provide a critical apparatus for denaturalizing gender, and a methodology for ways in which we might propagate *beyond*.

The *Beyond Gender* Manifesto has similarly named science fiction as a “key means for fictioning the otherwise” with an ethical obligation to bring about “emancipatory futures, futures which multiply, rather than reduce, our ways of being in (and beyond) the world(s)”. (*Beyond Gender* Collective) Multiplying our ways of being *otherwise* for cyberfeminists, Xenofeminists and many queer creators involves a reengineering, “to widen our aperture of freedom, extending to gender and the human”. (*Laboria Cuboniks*) *Laboria Cuboniks* in 2015 extended the hybridity found in 1990s cyberfeminism, to pose that “nothing is sacred, that nothing is transcendent or protected from the will to know, to tinker and to hack.”

#### Christian McKoy (@bbychakra92)

This is something that many artists are visualizing today, including Christian McKoy. McKoy’s practice takes the form of digital collage and retouching, editing found imagery to incorporate futuristic and mythological elements. She uses these methods to turn Black trans and cis women into deities and cyborgs, in her own words: “I love the idea of Black people, women especially, shown as divine beings ... more specifically dark skinned femmes both cis and trans, in a fantasy setting ... We exist and should see ourselves in art despite what the general population may think and feel” (Rasmussen & McKoy). McKoy is calling here for more representation within art, and in her practice we see what Bart Fitzgerald names an “ethical” gaze in this representation. In McKoy’s artworks, those most impacted by transmisogynoir are pictured thriving and exceeding the limitations of the human construct.



McKoy, Christian. "New Skin Software Available!" @bbychakra92, Christian McKoy, 2020, [https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_-Z9VWjFdX/?igshid=trj15sqiway8](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_-Z9VWjFdX/?igshid=trj15sqiway8). Accessed 10 Jan 2020

I now want to look at another tinkering and hacking practice in more detail, to consider how science fiction art also incorporates mutation. In a paper at last year's LSFRC conference, "Towards 'Inhuman Perception': Hyperobjects and the Nonhuman in Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation*", Dan Bird pointed towards the drag artist Hungry for visualizing the inhuman. Bird referred to Hungry's practice as a *drag of species*, as opposed to a *drag of gender*. Hungry names this practice distorted drag, for its Haraway-like "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" (Haraway 150) and the mutation "of human and animal". (152)

#### Fecal Matter (@matieresfecales)

The inhuman is similarly visualized in the work of the creative duo Fecal Matter. In an article for *Interview Magazine*, Steven Raj Bhaskaran (one half of Fecal Matter) declares "we're pushing the boundaries of what is a human body [...] We love to live the fantasy" (Macias et al.). Fecal Matter's practice is interdisciplinary, spanning photography, fashion design, curation and music. Their fleshy, prosthetic garments expose and visualize the constructed nature of nature itself.

I like to engage with these kinds of fashion practices, by containing them alongside the words of Susan Stryker, who in 1994 declared that "[...] the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie [...] I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine". (240-241. We might call these science fiction practices another form of hyperbolic fictioning, such that nature and species here can also be "highlighted as a series of rules, experiences and productions *that could be otherwise*". (Crone xiii)

Fictioning beyond nature is something I think fashion practices are particularly attuned to, and something that I see being popularized in the rise of elf ear prosthetics for example as a fashion accessory, especially within queer communities. In aligning SFX with fashion, queer artists visualize and normalize the constructed nature of species, that which "might previously have been

viewed as untouchable”. (Hester 13) Here, I should note that I am especially interested in what fashion could be *beyond* capitalism.

As a fashion stylist, my practice has frequently been confined to the category of “visual culture,” and so blurring the boundaries of “art” here feels especially productive, particularly as this separation is frequently used to both mask how capital shapes other artworks, and to exclude queer publishing practices. Thus, I’d like to propose that science fiction artworks, including the fashion practices of Fecal Matter, can provide a critical apparatus for critiquing nature. These artworks provide a methodology for the ways in which we might propagate beyond this construct.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed that narratives “beyond the binary, beyond Nature, beyond gender” (Beyond Gender Collective) are thriving in science fiction art. I have presented my current carrier bag, a small selection of artists and artworks I am thinking through and with, as a means to fiction worlds beyond gender and species into being.

I’d like to conclude with a line from *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, which reads “still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars”. (37) For me, those seeds are the queer feminist artworks being produced on the fringes, and there’s definitely room for them in the “bag of stars” that we call science fiction. It’s a hopeful line, one that encourages multiple narratives, multiple origin stories and multiple ways of being in the world(s). Because science fiction, as Le Guin stresses, can reshape reality.

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