Lesbian Potentiality & Feminist Media in the 1970s,
by Rox Samer

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Rox Samer’s Lesbian Potentiality & Feminist Media in the 1970s opens a window in time. A mix of literary, cultural, and material history gives this book a uniquely solid structure—reading it, I felt as though I could write a letter to Joanna Russ, and she would answer. I imagined James Tiptree, Jr./Alice B. Sheldon moving between typewriters and crafting a gendered persona beyond the narrow categories of male and female. These impulses stay with me, months after a first read. Lesbian Potentiality vibrates with energy, reminding us that the feminist passion of the past is not lost—but it is being recalibrated.

This ability to draw together diverse histories rests in Samer’s construction of “lesbian potentiality,” or the way the lesbian in the 1970s signaled “the potential that gendered and sexual life could and would someday be substantially different, that heteropatriarchy may topple, and that women would be the ones to topple it” (4). This potentiality, Samer argues, gives us a way to draw critical tools from a “too-close past, the 1970s and its liberation movements [that] are not queer enough to get us to the queerness that is not yet here” (8). The lesbian, then, became a symbol for a reconstructed future, in which women could move beyond definition in male terms, and restriction by male edicts. In an era of theory that attempts to transcend these gendered categories, Samer’s construction makes such a symbol relevant, while acknowledging that for some, it has lost some of its applicability and weight.

Samer brings many threads of “lesbian potentiality” into conversation in their expansive chapters. The first examines the national women’s film circuit, which allowed feminist media workers in the 1970s to build connections amongst themselves, to “meet the media-making desires of their local feminist communities,” and to produce activist works covering vast ideological ground (40). Samer discusses the deconstructionist methods of these creators, who sought to “demystify” the male-dominated industry and form (42). This flows seamlessly into the next chapter, which focuses on the role of documentary in women’s prison activism; this consciousness-raising (CR) action “refused prison’s demands for gender-conforming passivity” by demanding freedom for imprisoned women and foregrounded an intersectional feminism that “contends that freedom for Black women would mean freedom for all” (92, 93). Chapter 3 moves...
to a similarly collaborative, but less inclusive form of CR: the explosion of feminist influence in science fiction and the creation of a “counterpublic” in feminist SF fandom which “has not survived new generations but adapted with them”—a vital element that Samer tracks specifically through the ways in which the feminist science fiction convention (Wiscon) has expanded since its founding (140, 178). Lastly, their fourth and final chapter takes another look at the complex and frankly titillating history of Tip/Alli, or James Tiptree, Jr./Alice B. Sheldon, the SF author who famously wrote with a male pseudonym, and was “outed” as a woman, to much general/generic astonishment. Samer seeks to expand our understanding of how the author’s gendered self-perception slips easy categorization and contemporary terminology, making Tip/Alli’s narrative a fitting last chapter in a book that searches for more gender-inclusive tools to examine a moment characterized by identity-based organizing.

A main thread running throughout Samer’s work is the need for activist thought to embrace variation. They note the sad irony that more traditional, rigid feminists run the “risk [of] missing their own generation’s broader contributions to feminist thought, including the sometimes profound influence their peers have had on queer, nonbinary, and transgender feminists,” because of their unwillingness to embrace a more open gender model (183). Rather than justifying or redeeming the exclusionary implementation of early feminist thought, Samer works to place the fervor of the 1970s in a longer genealogy that welcomes radical change, especially in anti-racism and gender-queer activism. Overall, the work attempts to expand a queer understanding of these more traditionally gendered moments and archives. They are careful to reject a common scholarly mistake: neglecting “the historian’s location-in-time quandary—namely, that an ‘ourselves’ both past and present might be impossible to delineate while holding on to terms such as women, the female social subject, or even women’s writing or women’s cinema” (220, emphasis in original).

Despite the varied topics, Samer writes from an inside view—but not in the traditionally academic, separatist voice; Samer’s narrative emerges from the archive, from a personal investment in SF fandom, and from the establishment and evolution of institutions surrounding that fandom, like Wiscon and the Otherwise Awards. Their connection to their subject and their ability to draw together manifold elements into a cohesive study reveal a powerful investment into the materials and communities they describe. Scholars interested in discovering how to bridge the often wide gap between research and praxis, academia and activism, will find conceptual models in Samer’s text.

Lastly, Samer’s work is, above all, accessible and attractive to a broader audience. This book was not written for a select few; it is a celebration of a specific and fruitful era of lesbian potentiality, and a cautionary look at the dangers of clinging too tightly to a specific mode in an evolving cultural framework. Their writing is direct and clear, making complex concepts easy to parse. Samer’s work is some of the most accessible, refreshing, and pressing scholarship I’ve ever read. As Samer states, “potentiality, no longer lesbian but still oriented toward freedom, regenerates” (215). Their book is a call both to remember the strength and passion of a feminist,
lesbian past, and to work toward an expanding, promising, and radical future in activism—toward a more open gendered future for all.

Sarah Nolan-Brueck is a PhD candidate at the University of Southern California, where she studies how science fiction interrogates gender. In particular, she examines the many ways SF authors question the medicolegal control of marginalized gendered groups in the United States, and how SF can support activism that refutes this control. Sarah is a graduate editorial assistant for Western American Literature. She has been previously published in Femspec, HuffPost, and has an article forthcoming in Orbit: A Journal of American Literature.