Feminist Science Fiction Art

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Abstract

Feminist science fiction is a category most frequently associated with literature, film, and

television. This chapter challenges these associations, theorizing SF art as a space for queer /

trans / feminist resistance. Specifically, SF artworks by Sophia Al-Maria, Sin Wai Kin, Tai

Shani, and Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley are read as feminist theory—a method drawn from

speculative and repro-utopian feminisms—which seeks to locate theoretical knowledge both

within and beyond academic writing. Subsequently feminist SF artworks are contextualised

within wider feminist and/or science fiction traditions, communities, and discourses. Feminist

SF art is framed then not as a genre populated by individual auteurs, but as a community of

artists engaged in co-authorship. This chapter focusses specifically on artists working with

collaborative worldbuilding, a range of artistic strategies which further embed co-authorship

and recursivity into SF art production.

Bio

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Introduction

The term science fiction (SF), as critic Adam Roberts puts it, "resists easy definition [...] it is always possible to point to texts consensually called SF that fall outside the usual definitions" (2006 1). The history of feminist SF then, especially queer feminist and trans feminist texts, could be described as a history of interventions. Creating feminist SF has often necessarily involved a process of critically intervening in and bending the SF genre. Nowhere is this more apparent than in examples of feminist SF operating as theory. Here I draw on the scholarship of speculative feminists including the Beyond Gender Research Collective, Sophie Lewis, Donna Haraway, Simon O'Sullivan and David Burrows, all of whom read SF texts as theoretical interventions into conventional understandings of gender, family and/or temporality. SF theorist Katie Stone takes this one step further when she posits that "the boundaries of SF extend beyond the borders of fiction" (Stone 32). SF then can be feminist theory, feminist theory can be SF, and feminist praxis can also be SF. Here Stone is merging the theorisations of Donna Haraway and the editors of *Octavia's Brood* (2015), who argue activism is SF and SF is political theory. Reading SF as feminist theory exposes the urgent role it plays in contemporary understandings of science, society, and subjectivity.

In this chapter I will focus on another genre-bending intervention in the communities and cultures named SF. SF art is a broad subculture, defined by Dan Byrne-Smith as "forms of practice, complex networks, or a set of sensibilities" (12). Byrne-Smith's expansive definition opens SF art to new disciplinary scrutiny beyond its more traditional framing as illustration accompanying the "real" SF of the print story itself. This critical shift in the landscape of SF and its associated mediums leaves space for the many inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary artists already self-defining their practices as SF. Feminist SF artists, like authors and creators before them, are at the centre of this intervention. I argue that these artists extend the critical impulses which motivate feminist SF literature to produce work

which not only challenges SF's content, style and themes, but additionally rewrites the disciplines, mediums and processes termed SF. SF is thus transformed by feminist SF artists, and we are challenged once again to rethink those usual definitions.

When choosing case studies to address in this chapter, I reflected upon those feminist SF narratives which have been read as theory, including Frankenstein (1818), The Left Hand of Darkness (1969), Woman on the Edge of Time (1976), Xenogenesis (1987 – 1989), Bloodchild (1995) and The Deep (2019). One could argue there is a novelty to the ideas in these texts in that they provide new arguments for abolishing conventional gender, family, and temporal relations. However, the "newness" celebrated in readings such as these frequently relies upon myths of the lone genius or auteur working outside any communal literary, artistic, or intellectual tradition. Critics have historically reproduced this tendency when framing individual SF illustrators as exceptional, deemphasizing the broader landscape and cultures of SF art. Instead, I build on the writing of feminist theorist Sophie Lewis, who posits that "authorship is always coauthorship" (157). Feminist SF, then, is always produced in collaboration. I argue it is this collaborative spirit that leads authors like Ursula K. Le Guin to write SF in conversation with feminist theory. This technique is also used in many of the SF stories previously listed. As such, in this essay I examine a group of artworks in conversation with feminist theory, which provide speculative interventions into pre-existing discourses on gender, temporality, and science.

My aim in this chapter is to position feminist SF art as a space productively engaged in recursivity, in the collective production and re-writing of worlds. I argue that collaborative worldbuilding is both a common production process and a necessary intervention in how we understand and read SF more generally. In doing so, I build upon the work of repro-utopian feminist and SF theorist Katie Stone, who argues for "a reading of SF creators as involved in the decidedly utopian process of deliberate inheritance" (246). Stone reads projects like

Octavia's Brood (2015), a collection of short SF stories written by feminist activists and inspired by Octavia Butler, as examples of deliberate inheritance. In this chapter I apply this framework to feminist SF art, extending Stone's argument to show that collaborative worldbuilding is also a "queer kinmaking practice" (44). The SF artists I reference then both radically recombine techniques like sculpture, painting, video, performance, and gaming, whilst framing these projects as collaborative worldbuilding exercises.

Collaborative Worldbuilding

Collaborative worldbuilding is defined in this chapter as a range of processes through which worlds are produced recursively, using mediums, strategies, and formats which encourage viewers to extend the story. Collaborative worldbuilding then might be understood as an expansion of what theorist Dan Hassler-Forest terms *transmedia world-building*, such that it becomes applicable to the processes of (feminist) SF art. In *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Politics* Hassler-Forest summarises transmedia world-building as follows:

- 1) Transmedia world-building takes place across media;
- 2) Transmedia world-building involves audience participation; and
- 3) Transmedia world-building is a process that *defers narrative closure*. (5) Hassler-Forest lists "television series, comic books and pulp literature" as examples of deferred narrative closures, whilst videogames that engage with "spatial exploration, collaborative interaction, and kinetic immersion" (8) are tied to audience participation. Equally vital to this type of worldbuilding is the production of narratives which operate *across* media, where worlds are created across multiple outputs. These techniques certainly can be found in SF art, especially in outputs by inter—, multi— and transdisciplinary artists. Installations necessitate audience participation; artist series produce narratives across media; and deferred narrative closure remains central in fashion design, where the story is extended

with each collection, campaign and catwalk. However, there is frequently less consensus in SF art, where collaborative worldbuilding artworks often employ just one or two of these techniques.

Hassler-Forest argues that these transmedia worldbuilding strategies, when employed together, produce recursive spaces with "political potential" (6). My use of "collaborative worldbuilding" in this chapter allows me to engage with artists employing all, some, or no transmedia worldbuilding techniques whilst still producing spaces of feminist potential. Some of the artists in this chapter use declarations of deliberate inheritance, including Sin Wai Kin and Sophia Al-Maria, who frame both their practices and their artistic investigations of gender as the inheritance of Ursula K. Le Guin. Elsewhere, feminist artists such as Tai Shani rewrite pre-existing SF to challenge conventional ideas about temporality. This is a process we might also term collaborative worldbuilding, as narratives are produced in conversation with other SF authors and viewers are frequently encouraged to write the story again. Finally, I examine how Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley uses immersion and gameplay in physical and digital spaces as a form of collaborative worldbuilding that commemorates the history of Black trans people through stories that effortlessly blend scientific and fantastic tropes.

Deliberate Inheritance in BCE (2019)

Within SF communities, Sophia Al-Maria is perhaps most well-known for the term "Gulf Futurism," which she coined with collaborator Fatima Al Qadiri. In this section however I focus on *BCE*, an artwork produced by Al-Maria as Whitechapel Gallery's Writer in Residence, 2018. *BCE* includes two videos: "Wayuu Creation Myth," featuring Ziruma Jayut, and an unnamed video written in collaboration with fellow SF artist Sin Wai Kin. These videos were exhibited together at the Whitechapel Gallery (2019). Al-Maria's practice then provides a clear example of how audience participation in SF art takes place, specifically

engagement in audio-visual installations. *BCE* also shows how artist series or connected videoworks tell narratives across outputs. These videos were installed with the intention of encouraging connections and comparisons between each output.

As The Whitechapel Gallery described in a press release for this installation, "over the course of her residency, Al-Maria has taken inspiration from the late speculative fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin." This isn't the first time Al-Maria has put her practice in conversation with Le Guin. She opens *Sad Sack* (2018), a book of collected writing and found imagery, by quoting the closing line of Le Guin's *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986): "still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars" (5). This essay looks to the carrier bag as a tool predating weapons, and considers how technology, science and by extension SF might be re-defined through this origin story. Le Guin emphasises that the origin stories SF authors repeat can either entangle or disentangle science from the "techno-heroic" (36), a narrative Al-Maria's collaborator Sin Wai Kin also identifies in cultures of white supremacist, heteropatriarchal capitalism. *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* is also explicitly referenced by Al-Maria in *BCE*, which includes "one ancient [and] one new" alternate creation myth.

I'd like to primarily focus on Al-Maria's unnamed myth, which places the artist Sin Wai Kin in a distant future. Sin is themselves an interdisciplinary artist, who both wrote the script and performed in this video. They also frame their own practice as SF, where SF is defined specifically as "a practice of rewriting patriarchal and colonial narratives naturalized by scientific and historical discourses on states of sexed, gendered and raced bodies" (Sin). Sin, like Al-Maria, places their art into relation with Le Guin frequently across a multitude of projects, interviews, and panel talks. These include but are not limited to sonic fiction produced for Ignota Press's *Carrier Bag Music* (2021), a DG galleries group exhibition titled *Seized by the Left Hand* (2019 – 2020), and a blog entry for *Auto Italia* titled "On Ursula Le

Guin." In the latter, Sin looks at the continued relevance of *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*'s critical interventions. Towards the end of this essay, Sin describes how they "returned [from *The Left Hand of Darkness*] with an image of a different social context, which while imperfect, was something which I could use to refigure my own attitudes towards gender and sexuality."

Both Sophia Al-Maria and Sin Wai Kin then position their practices as forms of deliberate inheritance from Le Guin. In doing so they evoke the theorisations of Katie Stone, who observes that "contemporary authors have framed themselves as the inheritors, or indeed children, of their literary forebears" (*Strange Children* 44). I argue that deliberate inheritance strategies also exist within SF art, with feminist artists in particular frequently placing their practices into relation with other SF artists, authors, and creators. Stone poses that deliberate inheritance provides a "utopian reworking of inheritance, no longer tied to essentialised constructions of biological heredity or the strictures of the capitalist family" (244). Deliberate inheritance then is both "an act of care" (244) and a "queer kinmaking practice" (44), and artists like Al-Maria and Sin who use this technique are critically intervening in relational structures like the family.

In BCE's unnamed myth Sin speaks directly to the audience, surrounded by what they term the "infinite sky." This takes the form of a star-filled backdrop in the videowork which pulses, sometimes pushing through Sin's body and evoking the opening sequence of *Dune* (1984). Sin's dialogue describes a dystopian world where bodies and beliefs were placed into hierarchies, where the existence of these ranking systems was simultaneously denied. But this violence is historicised in the script and juxtaposed with what the critic Kit Edwards has described as "an infinite way of being" in the narrative's present. Edwards points to a passage in the video which echoes Octavia Butler's writing, with Sin and Al-Maria's phrasing "Gxd is Infinite" mirroring Butler's "God is Change" refrain as featured across the *Parable* series

(1993 – 1998). Edwards argues that infinity, as a mode of being, is "spoken into existence" by Al-Maria and Sin here, challenging chronological narratives of time. *BCE* might therefore be understood as a collaborative worldbuilding exercise, critically intervening in discourses on temporality.

In the centre of this unnamed video, Sin asks the audience "How many stars? How many worlds? How many ways of being alive?". Here Sin and Al-Maria's dialogue enacts what the writer Bridget Crone names "hyperbolic fictioning such that [hierarchical categories are] highlighted as a series of rules, experiences, and productions *that could be otherwise*" (xiii). When contextualised within Sin's artistic practice of "rewriting patriarchal and colonial narratives", these questions specifically pose a challenge to heterocisnormativity. After all, "how many ways of being alive" could there be beyond the gender binary? Subsequently, I read *BCE* as an SF artwork engaged in a "liberatory reworking of sexual and gender relations" (Gabriel). *BCE* uses collaborative worldbuilding to theoretically intervene in discourses surrounding gender and sexuality. It makes sense then that Al-Maria and Sin place this project in deliberate inheritance with Ursula K. Le Guin, whose SF also critically intervened in these areas of feminist theory.

Rewriting in *DC Productions* (2014 – 2019)

Tai Shani is a multidisciplinary artist whose transmedia project *DC Productions* operates across installation, text, film, sculpture, and performance. The *DC Productions* series (2014 – 2019) included installations at The Tetley (2018) and Turner Contemporary Margate (2019); a film titled *Dark Continent: The Vampyre* (2017); five performances titled "Dark Continent: Semeramis," "Dark Continent: Phantasmagoregasm," "Dark Continent: Mnemesoid 2," "Dark Continent: Mnemesoid" and "Dark Continent Productions 1" (2015 – 2018); and a collection of short feminist SF stories titled *Our Fatal Magic* (2019). These

outputs tell the stories of twelve characters who exist in a temporal but not spatial city. This project could therefore be described as a collective worldbuilding practice that produces "a space-time that is both mythical and historical, a world built by and for women" (Crone xii-xiii) and is engaged with by audiences across outputs. *DC Productions*' characters are "diverse and self-defined – trans*, differently abled, of different ages, sizes and shapes" (Crone viii-x). In an interview with Turner Contemporary, Shani explains that "it's just a city that is for anyone that wants to live outside a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy [...] I'm not interested in women, I'm interested in femininity and what can be salvaged from a history of femininity, to think about ways out of where we are now." If SF is feminist theory, *DC Productions* then could be read as a critical intervention within conventional understandings of gender. The city provides a conceptual space for critiquing and reimagining gender relations.

Shani's artistic practice includes rewriting, which she applies in *DC Productions* to a wide range of pre-existing SF and utopian texts. Shani explicitly names the SF stories and proto-feminist utopias *DC Productions* rewrites in *Our Fatal Magic*, with Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) as the most drawn-upon source. Shani also acknowledges the influence of empath characters found in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993). This rewriting process could equally be described as remixing. In *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, Legacy Russell argues that "materials ... can be reclaimed, rearranged, repurposed, and rebirthed" (133) to forge new feminist technologies for survival. In doing so, Russell echoes Afrofuturist remixing practices, including "digging the future out of the archive" (Gunkel 19). *DC Productions* should be contextualised within these wider speculative cultures of rewriting, salvaging, and remixing. For Shani specifically, collaborative worldbuilding (or to use their term "world-making") provides a means for moving "out of where we are now." I

argue that artworks like *DC Productions* actively invite further rewrites through this remixing process, with audiences pushed to recursively transform Pizan's world again. Shani's practice then explicitly engages in collaborative worldbuilding, such that "authorship is [presented as] always coauthorship" (Lewis 157), which encourages more coauthorship, which encourages further coauthorship, and so forth.

DC Productions also provides critical interventions in feminist theories of temporality. Through rewriting and combining texts from different periods, Shani explicitly disengages with chronological narratives of time. The city in the narrative is specifically described by Shani as a temporal but not spatial city, and DC Productions combines references from contemporary SF and proto-feminist sources to create a world populated by both historical figures and software. DC Productions might therefore be read in conversation with chronopolitics, as the text "pushes against the dictates of capitalist time and its mode of capture" (Lewis et al.), which include the chronological narratives of progress often reproduced in feminist theory. Shani instead looks to salvage and rewrite outside these narratives of time and progress, to repurpose texts across temporalities with feminist aims.

This method, I argue, could also be read as a critical intervention in the history of SF. *DC Productions* includes texts written long before the temporal emergence of "science as we understand the term today" (Roberts 2011 4), which are framed as SF through this process. Shani's practice then draws upon feminist, queer and indigenous studies by critiquing cultural understandings of science as a stable, universal and empirical ideal. Science is instead understood as a situated knowledge, one frequently melded with spiritualism in various temporalities, geographies and communities. This is perhaps most explicit in *DC Productions*' character list, which includes mythical figures like mystics, sirens, psychics, and vampyres, alongside an AI programme named Mnemosyne. Read alongside Shani's SF, these figures serve as critical interventions in chronopolitical narratives of science,

transforming SF in the process. In the world of *DC Productions*, science is contiguous with, rather than opposed to, the fantastic and the magical.

Immersion in WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT (2020)

My final case study in this chapter is Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT. Brathwaite-Shirley is an artist working with animation, sound, performance, and video games. WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT specifically is an online archive, accessible at blacktransarchive.com, that aims to counter the erasure of Black queer and trans people from both historical and artistic archives (American Artist et al.). The project includes multidisciplinary collaborations across animation, sound art, and gaming. When accessing the site through Brathwaite-Shirley's portfolio, the audience encounters the following introduction:

WELCOME TO THE PRO BLACK PRO TRANS ARCHIVE

THIS INTERACTIVE ARCHIVE WAS MADE TO STORE AND CENTRE

BLACK TRANS PEOPLE

TO PRESERVE OUR EXPERIENCES OUR THOUGHTS OUR FEELINGS OUR LIVES

TO REMEMBER US EVEN WHEN WE ARE AT RISK OF BEING ERASED
YOUR OWN IDENTITY WILL DETERMINE HOW YOU CAN INTERACT
WITH THE ARCHIVE AS WELL AS WHAT YOU WILL BE ABLE TO ACCESS
BE HONEST WITH THE ARCHIVE

This introduction frames the archive within wider queer, trans and black feminist worldbuilding histories, where queer culture for example is defined as a world-making project. Brathwaite-Shirley focuses specifically on Black trans world-making in this archive,

building an immersive world from the preserved daily experiences, thoughts and feelings of Black trans people.

Audiences' experience different versions of the archive. Specifically, participants are asked if they identify as 1) Black and trans, 2) trans, or 3) cis upon entry; this chapter was written after an encounter having selected option 2, "I identify as trans". Throughout the archive these multiple-choice questions encourage audiences to become active contributors to the worldbuilding, in contexts which foster accountability and responsibility. After an encounter with Brathwaite-Shirley's *SHE KEEPS ME DAMN ALIVE* (2022), art critic Zarina Muhammad similarly described how "the game let me in, offered me a chance to help, gave me very clear instructions [...] made every single one of my choices heavy with accountability and consequence". This strategy is also employed throughout *WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT*, where audiences are denied the role of passive spectator. The archive therefore employs collaborative worldbuilding strategies including collective production and immersive gameplay.

Brathwaite-Shirley's practice, like Tai Shani's, can also be read as a critical intervention into mainstream conceptions of scientific realism. WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT draws upon magic and spirituality, featuring a Trans Temple, anxiety reduction spells, and the resurrection of trans ancestors. These components are presented in a virtual landscape, where she includes both digital aesthetics and frequent references to software. Magic, spirituality and science are therefore merged in Brathwaite-Shirley's speculative world. In this manner, her practice rejects what Hortense Spillers terms "the official point of view" (Lewis et al.). This official point of view, I argue, includes the wholesale embrace of empiricism and realism at the expense of all other ways of knowing the world. WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT then collaboratively worldbuilds, providing critical interventions in science and SF studies.

I am particularly drawn to readings of *WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT* that specifically frame this archive as both SF and an abolitionist project. The archive is, after all, produced with the aim of altering recorded histories where trans people "ARE AT RISK OF BEING ERASED" (Brathwaite-Shirley). Brathwaite-Shirley is then engaged in what Christina Sharpe terms the work of a "feminist abolitionist, to both destroy the world as it is, and imagine, make possible, and make present [...] the kinds of worlds that we want to inhabit" (Hartman, *et al.*). Counter-archiving is used throughout this artwork to destroy, imagine and rewrite. Additionally, *WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT* builds or "make[s] present" a pro-Black and pro-trans space, a world or digital "room," to use Brathwaite-Shirley's terminology, in which Black and/or trans participants can mourn, rest, relax and heal. The archive then utilizes immersive gameplay to counter cultures of heterocisnormativity and white supremacy, collaboratively building worlds by and for trans people.

Feminist SF Art

To conclude, the feminist SF artworks in this chapter all use collaborative worldbuilding, either collective production processes or the re-production of science fictional and historical worlds. Through case studies I have identified three collaborative worldbuilding strategies employed by feminist SF artists: deliberate inheritance, rewriting, and immersion. These techniques allow artists such as Sophia Al-Maria, Sin Wai Kin, Tai Shani and Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley to make important interventions into conventional understandings of gender, temporality, and science. Taken together, their art dramatizes SF writer Samuel R. Delany's insight that "we read words differently when we read them as SF" (153). Similarly, in this chapter I have explored how contemporary feminist artworks can be read as theory when categorised as SF. In the words of Sophie Lewis, feminists need more

than written theory; they also "have need of fictions, artworks, and dreams to help us train our minds" (157). SF art, like feminist theory, is "lighting the way" (Lewis 157).

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